

A 21ST-CENTURY FUR INDUSTRY

Trappers say demand for local products is on the rise

By Rhiannon Russell



Many Yukon trappers have a similar story. For years, they sold their furs at auctions in southern Canada. But auction prices have since plummeted. While a beaver pelt might have sold for \$76 in the 1990s, the average price at Ontario's Fur Harvesters Auction in September 2020 was less than \$17.

"Now, it's not even worth sending them [to auction]," says Minnie Clark, whose Tlingit name is *Kaghane*. She's a trapper and Teslin Tlingit Council citizen. "You can barely get anything for them."

While international demand at auctions has dropped, trappers are seeing greater interest in local fur products in the Yukon. As a result, many are choosing to keep their furs in the territory, either selling them to crafters or using the pelts to make garments themselves.

Clark now uses all her furs for her sewing projects, and her pieces are in demand. She sews moccasins, mukluks, scarves, hats, and earrings using fur from her family trapline on the Teslin River, then sells her products at retail locations in Whitehorse and Teslin and through the Yukon First Nations Arts online store. Last Christmas, Clark made 60 pairs of moccasins. When she posts a new item on her Facebook page—like one of her beautiful fur scarves, for instance—it quickly gets snapped up.

Kristen Trotter has witnessed something similar. The owner of Trapline 2 U, she's been making and selling colourful fabric toques with fur pom-poms from her family's trapline since 2017.

The family used to send their furs to auction, but, given the poor prices, they realized they needed another way to make trapping financially worthwhile. Trotter began locally selling the toques—which feature different types of fur, including lynx, coyote, wolf, and fox—at a retail store and craft market, as well as through the online marketplace Etsy.

"Each year I'm blown away by the support," she says. "Each year [sales] double or triple the amount I did the year before."

According to Brian Melanson, president of the Yukon Trappers Association (YTA), an event held in 2018 has driven interest in local fur.



Above: Scarf and beading by Minnie Clark.

Unfurled, hosted by the YTA and the North Yukon Renewable Resources Council, was a one-day public market where trappers and crafters sold their items. Over 1,000 people attended and \$65,000 of fur and fur products were sold.

"That helped quite a few people get a local market base for their furs so that they didn't have to count on the lottery at the auction house," says Melanson. (His family no longer sends furs to auction either; his wife makes art and garments from the fur they harvest on their trapline, about 200 km east of Mayo.)

Many Yukoners want a Yukon-fur product, he says, whether that's trim on their parka hood, a pair of mitts, or jewelry. "Having an authentic made-in-Yukon product gives an added value to that product."

For instance, Melanson says, a hat made of beaver from eastern Canada might sell for \$179 down south. But a Yukon-beaver trapper hat with smoke-tanned bison leather could go for \$350 locally.

The enthusiasm in the local fur market contrasts with Canada Goose's recent announcement that it would no longer use real fur on its parkas—a decision seen by many northerners as catering to its southern clientele for whom the coats' appeal may be more about style than warmth. But the company's spurning of fur might push more Yukoners to buy local.

Melanson says he promotes SKOOKUM-brand anoraks, which are made in Dawson City and feature Canadian wild fur, as well as some fur harvested within the Yukon specifically.

Megan Waterman, co-owner of Northern Garments, which produces SKOOKUM-brand, agrees that more people are aware of and wanting Yukon-fur products.

"There's a large demographic that is interested in fur, that is interested in bushcraft, that is interested in active outdoor lifestyles, who understands and appreciates the value of fur," she says. "I think some of the niche designers in the North will benefit from [the Canada Goose decision]."

If people still want to buy a Canada Goose parka but would rather have real fur on the hood, SKOOKUMbrand can customize ruffs specifically for Canada Goose coats. "We can work to find a solution there that's a northern fix," says Waterman.

What the southern discourse on fur often leaves out is trapping's connection to culture and tradition. Clark, for instance, grew up on her trapline with her parents and siblings. Her father taught her to identify wildlife tracks, while her mother taught her to snare rabbits and sew. Now, her grandson comes out on the trapline with her and her husband. "He helps cut firewood, break trail, and he helps me skin the animals," she says.

Clark is passing on her sewing and beading knowledge. She's taught at Yukon University's Teslin campus, and she leads workshops, too. She has a binder full of her mother's sewing patterns. "It's a traditional Tlingit way," she says. "My mother, she got all her patterns from her mother and her aunts ... so it's all passed down."

Trapping also has a deeper meaning to Trotter's husband—a Champagne and Aishihik First Nations citizen—and their three young sons. When Trotter asks the boys what wearing fur means to them, they tell her it makes them feel proud and self-reliant. "The trapline's been in [my husband's] family for at least 100 years," says Trotter. "Our boys are fourth-generation trappers."

Today, most Yukon trappers aren't earning a living from it, but the activity is about more than selling pelts.

"In the Yukon, this is our way of life," says Clark. "We have respect for the animals, and we're carrying on long-ago traditions and teaching our young people this is how their great-grandmothers were and this is what they did." **Y**

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