

## "Working the Environment" Essay from *The Goldfinch*, 1996

Many of Iowa's best-known industries are extractive. An extractive industry takes things out of the ground or water that cannot be replaced. Fur trading is one of Iowa's oldest extractive industries. Native Americans hunted deer and trapped beaver to trade with other groups. As European Americans increased the demand for furs in trade, overhunting eventually had a devastating effect on wildlife.

The lumber industry also changed Iowa's landscape. When Isaac Kramer moved to Linn County from Pennsylvania in 1838, linn trees grew everywhere. Soon, however, people cut and sold timber to build homes, furniture, fences, and barns, without replanting. By the time Isaac was an old man, the groves of his childhood were history. Iowa's coal mines boomed in the 19th and early 20th century.

Miners either tunneled to remove coal or "churned the earth," turning good soil underneath and leaving poor soil on top where nothing would grow. When coal companies quit because there was little coal left to mine, and better quality coal could be found elsewhere, miners had to find other work.

Farming can be considered an extractive industry. Crops take nutrients out of the soil and farmers use chemical fertilizers to restore them.

### **Movement and Markets**

Even the way we connect buyers and sellers changes the environment. In 1846, for example, there were few roads. Native American traders used rivers and footpaths to reach customers. Canoe and foot travel were easy on the environment.

European-American settlers, however, wanted to go where rivers didn't. They built roads to transport goods. Herds of cattle and wagons packed down the earth. The dust, smell, and noise drove away wild animals. To widen roads, people sometimes cut down trees. Without tree roots to hold it, soil eroded. Beaver furs were once made into hats, like the one pictured here.

By the 1870s, railroads crisscrossed Iowa, creating new jobs and connecting farms and factories across the nation. Engines burned smoky coal, polluting the air. Sparks started prairie fires. Railroads also promoted expansion of agriculture; because farmers could move more grain to Chicago easily, they farmed more land.

Today, trucks and cars speed down Interstate 80 and 35, moving workers and what they produce around Iowa and the nation. How do highways and automobiles transform our environment today?