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Title: Coureurs de Bois, Backwoodsmen as Ecocritical Motif in Four Works of French Canadian Literature

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Abstract: The 17th-19th century French Canadian fur traders and interpreters called coureurs de bois and later voyageurs were known for their independence of spirit and connection to the wilds. They can also be seen as an ecocritical motif because, in addition to participating in the environmentally abusive fur trade, they also show the way forward through intercultural connections and business relationships with Amerindians. The four novels analyzed here--Taché's *Forestiers et voyageurs: Moeurs et légendes canadiennes* (1863); Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1916); Desrosiers' *Les Engagés du Grand Portage* (1938); and Maillet's *Pélagie-la-Charrette* (1979)--portray woodsmen operating in a collaborative mode within the realistic context of the need to make money. They participated in both ruthless capitalist exploitation and greater intercultural acceptance, as exemplified in Desrosiers' two opposing main characters. They entered folklore through the 19th century literary efforts of Taché and others to construct a distinct French Canadian national identity, then in an unstable and continually disrupted process of formation. Because coureurs linked the natural and human worlds as well as radically different human cultures, their entry into literature involved their Amerindian business partners, thus making intercultural connections an aspect of the national identity that Taché strove to construct and mirror. From a modern perspective, such cultural intersections pertain to the ecocritical acknowledgment of the need to respect global populations' widely varying modes of survival. Serres' *Contrat naturel* offers a broader proposal: that the human population, from the position of its diverse needs and power over the environment, should reach a silent contract with

the rest of the planet that also acknowledges and respects its needs. The coureurs de bois and voyageurs portrayed in the works studied here embody both the problem and the way forward. They and their Amerindian partners occupy the perhaps unique position of contributing to environmental damage as well as greater understanding of the cultural other, which holds the promise of collaboration and the joint search for realistic solutions. Thus, in ways both positive and negative, coureurs de bois and voyageurs, far from perfect models, continue to serve as guides, even in today's tremendously diverse field of ecocriticism.