

What Is in a Symbol?

A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else. Symbols are often used to represent an idea. They are also used to represent places, such as a city or a country. Most countries have national symbols. These symbols are chosen to show something important about a country. Countries can have more than one symbol. For example, a country may have a national animal, a national plant, and national colors.

Most animal symbols are easy to understand. The dragon is the national symbol of China. India has a tiger as its symbol. New Zealand has the kiwi bird. So how do national symbols such as these get chosen?

Eagle or Wild Turkey?

In 1787, the bald eagle was officially adopted by the United States as a national symbol. The bald eagle may seem to be a good choice. It was chosen because of its strength, long life, and majestic looks. It represents freedom, which is a strong belief of the country. But not everyone agreed with choosing the bald eagle.

Benjamin Franklin (a Founding Father of the United States) wrote: "I wish that the bald eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country; he is a bird of bad moral character; he does not get his living honestly; you may have seen him perched on some dead tree, where, too lazy to fish for himself, he watches the labor of the fishing-hawk; and, when that diligent bird has at length taken a fish,... the bald eagle pursues him, and takes it from him.... For in truth, the turkey is in comparison a much more respectable bird, and withal a true original native of America."

Beaver or...?

The beaver has been used as a symbol of Canada since the beginning of the fur trade. It has been used by companies, railroads, towns, and newspapers. The beaver, more than anything else, was responsible for the beginning and growth of Canada. The beaver was made an official symbol of Canada in 1975.

Some people think the beaver is a great symbol. David Morrison of the Canadian Museum of Civilization said: "I'm a big fan of the symbol of the beaver because I feel a country gets the animal it deserves. A beaver is an unaggressive, hard-working, waterproof, unassuming, wonderful animal and I think it speaks well of Canadians that we chose it."

Others think the beaver is too boring and would rather have an animal more majestic than a big rodent, such as a polar bear. Others think that the moose or the Canada goose is more of a symbol of Canada than the beaver.

