

A Word From the Watershed: Happy Beaver, Happy Watershed

By Corrie Aiuto

The beaver is a biodiversity engineer. Hoping to harness the power of this rodent to restore stream complexity and bolster habitat for Coho salmon, we at the Upper Nehalem Watershed Council (UNWC) are busy building and observing beaver playgrounds, otherwise known as Beaver Dam Analogues (BDAs), and a new report released in April shows promising results.

Beaver Basics

The North American beaver, *Castor canadensis*, is a nocturnal, semiaquatic rodent with a dense fur coat, webbed hind feet, enormous orange incisors, and a flat paddle of a tail. They are the second largest rodent in the world, growing continually throughout their life, averaging 50 to 60 pounds and three to four feet in length. They are



American Beaver, Wikimedia Commons

graceful swimmers, sporting goggle eyelids and a fur lining behind their teeth to seal out water. They can stay submerged for up to 15 minutes by slowing their heart rate, thereby avoiding predators

and navigating to submerged dens and lodges. When they are not cutting down trees for construction they are chopping vegetation for food; despite stories of beaver eating fish, they are entirely herbivores.

Males and females typically inhabit a space as a mated pair, often for life, and colonies include newest kits, which average four to a litter, and the one year old kits. Two year olds often leave the colony to build their own den. Together a colony will gather food, raise young, and studiously repair dams. So vigilant are they that removing a beaver dam is considered pointless, often being rebuilt overnight.

Many of us are familiar with the image of the beaver: a plump body resting on a river bank, front paws clutching a leafy twig, a large, flat tail propped behind, and out of a small round head,

beady eyes scrutinizing you through the thick, luscious brown fur that thousands of trappers so desired. Their fur is incredibly dense; a postage stamp size beaver fur has as many individual hairs as an entire human head. And surprisingly soft to the touch; underneath a layer of long, coarse guard hairs you feel a downy under coat, simultaneously silky and fluffy. European hat makers felted the pelts, formed them into fashion, and made beaver fur a coveted and valuable commodity.

The first fur trading in North America happened almost as soon as white people arrived, trading for furs with Native Americans in the 1500s, but major trapping and trade began in the 1600s. Throughout that century and the next, hundreds of millions of beaver were trapped and relieved of their coats. By the 1840s the species was nearly extinct.

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