

EAGER FOR BEAVER

Is it time to help Oregon's state animal dam the wild?

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When June Cleaver said she was “worried about the Beaver,” she was talking about her son’s disconcerting tendency to rumple towels or his adolescent disdain for school. Most likely Mrs. Cleaver of *Leave It To Beaver* wasn’t expressing concern about a valuable rodent that was routinely being killed when it could have been used to subvert environmental disaster. But she could have been.

They flood streams, overwhelm irrigation ditches and plug culverts until roads wash away. They trim their front teeth (which never stop growing) on landowners’ favorite trees in a sort of steampunk orthodontia. Oregon defames them as nuisances and predators, allowing them to be destroyed with impunity. There is no mandate that humans make an effort to live with beaver.

And yet the beaver is Oregon’s state animal, and restoring their natural habitat promises to dampen the effects of climate change while also providing habitat for species like the Coho salmon. Government agencies and conservation groups are coming to realize that they can use beaver to save millions of dollars while accomplishing complex and detailed preservation work. Now, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) is rolling out official beaver relocation guidelines to improve the success of beaver transplants.

Despite the appearance of a black and white choice between convenience and conservation, Pendleton hydrologist Suzanne Fouty says that focusing on resolutions rather than conflicts can help Oregonians and beaver live together in harmony, with both sides reaping the rewards of beaver’s restorative habits. “There are very few problems that beaver create that cannot be creatively solved,” Fouty says. “There’s this huge benefit, we acknowledge the problems, and now we need to say ‘OK, I want them, there’s got to be a way to find a solution.’”

BEAVER ON THE MOVE

Oregon’s official wildlife policy classifies beaver as nuisances and predators (they are fierce vegetarians that prey on bark, twigs and leaves). Citizens who dislike sharing their land with beaver aren’t officially discouraged from killing them.

ODFW and the Forest Service have pointed out publicly that beaver perform desirable watershed restoration work by engineering the landscape to function in its natural state, the way it did before interference by humans drastically altered it.

In May the ODFW announced official guidelines for relocating nuisance beaver to forest areas where they can live happy and productive lives instead of being killed. Now no beaver may be captured and relocated without an application approved by the ODFW. District biologists must evaluate and approve all release sites, and relocations must take place between August and October.

Relocations in Oregon are still about 25 years behind Colorado, where one of the most successful live beaver trappers works as a hairdresser, not a mountain man. Sherri Tippie heard in 1985 about a golf course that planned on killing its resident beaver, and the rest is history. She volunteered to give the beaver a fighting chance by moving them to the forest. In 25 years, she says, only two adult beaver have died during her relocations. Her secret to success? Loving beaver.

“What we need are more hairdressers involved in wildlife,” Tippie jokes. “That’s almost true.” She worries that biologists assigned to live-trap beaver will have their compassion educated out of them, and describes in detail how she checks her traps daily, making certain the beaver don’t drown in submerged traps or go hungry.

To Tippie, restoring the environment with beaver is a pleasant benefit, but in her role of live-trapper it’s a secondary concern to the welfare of the animals. “You take all of the needs of the animal into consideration with

the utmost respect, care and compassion,” she says. “If they’re doing something for us, it’s up to us to minimize stress and anxiety.” Beaver love beaver, too. They mate for life, and become distressed when separated from their partner. Tippie says it’s important that they’re always moved in pairs.

Charlie Corrarino, fish conservation and recovery manager with ODFW, says the detailed list of requirements in Oregon’s new guidelines is meant to protect the beaver. “What we were trying to do was put out a set of conditions that would provide the highest likelihood of survival for relocated beavers,” Corrarino explains.

Armed with the ODFW’s “Healthy Beaver Checklist,” which recommends euthanizing beaver suffering hair loss or excessive drooling, trappers catch and move healthy nuisance beaver to an approved site. After relocation, beaver will be monitored by radio transmitters implanted in their tails (not joking) for at least a month while they embark on dam-building projects long absent from the Oregon landscape.

A VIOLENT BEAVER HISTORY

Europeans had already changed the ecology of the watersheds by the time pioneers began arriving in the Oregon Territory hundreds of years ago. It all started with beaver. Trappers intent on supplying the thick, bushy beaver pelts for hats popular in Europe significantly decreased the population within a short period of time, according to Fouty.

“When the Hudson Bay Company was finally convinced the Oregon territory was going to become part of the United States, they had a policy to go into the entire state and exterminate the beaver and kill ‘em all,” Stanley Petrowski, chair of the Douglas County Watershed Council, says.

Killing off so many beaver created a domino effect that rapidly (on a geographical scale) changed the landscape.

Fouty says that when dams began to fail due to natural causes, no beaver were there to engineer their repair. Broken dams meant that more water headed downstream more quickly, resulting in greater force and more damage at the next dam downstream.

Dam loss meant that large ponds drained, and by the time early land surveyors arrived Oregon had become “more of a channel-dominated system,” Fouty says. Without ponds regulating the flow of water, channels began to determine the characteristics of the watershed systems. Water moved faster and temperatures rose.

Settlers changed the rivers from their natural conformation, too, by straightening channels and through the effects of mining and heavy grazing. As a result of these changes, and with fewer beaver dams to slow the water, drainage sped up and the water table (the level at which the ground is saturated with water) dropped. The shape of the waterways also changed as a result of dam loss, and the faster flowing water caused more erosion and cut deeper channels.

Oregon’s riparian (creek and riverside) drainage has been unsustainable since its natural system of beaver dams was washed out. This has resulted in changes in water tables. “Normally the channel would fill up with water in the spring, it would flood the valley floor, water would sink into the ground, and water would come back to the river in the summertime,” Fouty says. “Because that’s not happening a lot except in *huge* flood events now, what you have is a very low water table, and if you go into a drought there’s nothing to feed the stream again.”

BEAVER BELIEVERS

Severe weather events would occur even without climate change, though climate change predicates that future water sources will be less reliable than they are now. In periods of both surge and scarcity, beaver have the potential to make water a little more predictable.

‘I think the question is: What animal doesn’t benefit from having beaver around?’

— SUZANNE FOUTY, HYDROLOGIST