

The Beaver Man

This wandering man of the North Oregon Coast has made it his personal mission to advocate for the protection of beavers

He pulled his pickup truck next to mine in the graveled lot of a Seaside park overlooking an estuary. The truck was red and green, dented and ancient: a Ford from the Ford Administration.

The neatly painted white lettering on the truck read: SAVE THE BEAVERS. YOU NEED THEM. THEY NEED YOU. I instantly recognized this wasn't about big time college football, and for that I was thankful. I was also thankful because I live for these random encounters with people. You know what I want my epitaph to read? "He would have rather been dead than incurious."

A conversation with this man was imperative. How could it not be? I wrote something called the Beaver State Trilogy and the new logo for my publishing company is a bucktoothed beaver holding a microphone like some furry beatnik poet. I love informing people that Oregon has the only two-sided state flag in the nation and a golden beaver is on that other side. I once watched a beaver build a dam in a remote creek way up in a coastal watershed. It was probably the best silent hour I've ever spent in the woods. I think I may have derived my entire work ethic for creating a writing life from that transcendent experience.

I asked if I could take a photograph of him standing by the truck.

"Sure you can brother!" he said. "It's all for the beavers and getting the word out!"

The word?

We started talking. Five minutes into our conversation, I knew I had met the world's most passionate spiritual advocate for beavers and walked into one of the best Oregon stories of my life.

His name was James Murphy and he owned a romping tan lab named Marley. He had a house in outer southeast Portland but hated Portland now and rarely went back. He was a wandering man of the North Oregon Coast now, evangelizing for the protection of beavers.

James riffed with the most interesting and unconventional grammar, and I thought it the most beautiful stream-of-consciousness speechifying I'd heard in years. Who cares if it was almost impossible to quote him properly? Beavers don't care about conventional grammar or proper quoting! They just want to be left alone, eat wood, build dams, create marshes and salmon rearing habitat, and play their antediluvian role in the ecology of healthy watersheds. James understood this perfectly and wanted to educate others about the benefits of this maligned animal that was once nearly hunted to extinction because of a fashion trend.

This crusade began a year ago after

angels told him to take care of animals. "I've known for years about beavers," said James, "and it was time to start doing something for them. I had to."

James scouts the local creeks, wetlands and rivers for signs of beaver activity and also imagines their return to places where they are needed to restore damaged watersheds. He's documenting beavers and beaver dams in some way that doesn't involve conventional scientific documentation. He's seeking, finding, observing, and rhapsodizing. James is a "naturalist" of the very old school.

At one point in our conversation, James broke out a little book with a cork-like cover. "It's my Beaver Book," he said, handing it to me. He told me he's collecting names, telephone numbers and email addresses of people who will go to Wash-

ington D.C. and lobby for the protection of beavers. I happily signed it and provided my contact information. I was surprised by how many names were in there. He's been, well, busy as a beaver, and people are responding.

James exploded into a smile when I asked if it would be okay to write up his story and help spread the word. The Word.

"Yes brother!" he said. "Yes. Do whatever you can!"

"I'm calling you the Beaver Man," I said.

"Yes I am!"

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James Murphy is a passionate advocate for the protection of beavers.

Coastal Life

Story and photo by MATT LOVE