Beavers: Busy Conservationists

You can tell at a glance that North America’s largest rodent is ideally suited for life in the water. Their webbed feet and broad, flat tail allow them to slide through the water with ease. Their thick, waterproof fur acts as a wetsuit to insulate them from icy water in winter, but it also makes them a target when humans hunt them for their rich pelts.

Beavers were hunted extensively in the 1700’s when a fortune could be made on their pelts. In 1703, one pelt could be exchanged for the following items:

•1 shirt

•10 pounds of pork

•1.5 yards of cotton cloth

•5 pecks of Indian corn

•2 pints of gunpowder

•1 pint of shot

•2 small axes

•6 combs

•6 knives

The rise in popularity of the beaver hat in 1830 almost sealed their doom, and may well have done so if the hats hadn’t fallen out of fashion in 1840, when the silk top hat arrived on the scene. Fortunately, beavers have made an astounding comeback.

**Beavers and the Environment**

Probably no creature on earth, aside from man, has a more profound effect on the environment than the beaver. They build lodges of sticks and branches in the water that keep them safe from predators and provide shelter in winter. These lodges span streams and rivers to form dams that create wetland habitats that support a vast variety of wildlife. Everything from insects to bears finds food and shelter in the wetlands that result from beaver dams.

The dams not only create wetland habitats, but also help preserve the quality of the water. Dams act as filters, cleansing the water as it flows through the stalks and sticks used to build the dam. Every year the government spends millions of dollars to restore and maintain wetlands, while beavers are happy to provide this service free of charge! In today’s world where we are losing wetlands at an alarming rate, beavers are a blessing.

Still, there are some landowners and communities who aren’t happy with the results of the beaver’s efforts. Beavers sometimes create wetlands in areas where they aren’t wanted, reducing the amount of usable land and backing up septic tanks and wells. Roads are sometimes flooded or washed out when culverts are blocked, and the standing water can encourage undesirable wildlife such as mosquitoes. When a beaver’s interest collides with a landowner’s interest, it’s usually the beaver and the habitat he has created that lose the battle.

Building is in a beaver’s blood—he just can’t stop. Tear out a section of dam and it will be back in place within hours. Remove the dam completely and it will be back in days. We need to find a way to let the beavers do what they do so well without becoming a problem.

Beaver Deceiver

Beaver Deceivers are an inexpensive and workable solution to control the flow of water. It consists of large pipes to let the water through along with cages to prevent the beaver from blocking the pipes. They have a high success rate, although some beavers like to construct lodges upstream from a deceiver, where more deceivers will have to be installed. They also require a good bit of maintenance to keep the pipes free of grass and debris. The Humane Society of the United States has more information on beaver control methods here.

Joy or Nuisance?

When beaver dams become a problem, a person’s first reaction is often to destroy the beavers. The first step in overcoming this knee-jerk reaction is education—and when someone’s septic tank has backed up into his well he isn’t in the mood to listen to conservationists and environmentalists. Education has to come with workable solutions.