

Beavers Friend or Foe?

Only a few centuries ago some Native Americans considered the beaver “big medicine” a spiritual animal to be treated with great respect and reverence. Early settlers and trappers saw the beaver as “living gold” with a high priced fur that could bring wealth and prestige.

Today our images have changed. Some view the beaver as a nuisance, a critter that plugs culverts, floods roads, or diverts water from where it is needed. Others see the beaver as keystone species that has not only lived in nature for millennia, but has helped form some of the landscapes in which they live providing valuable habitat for many other birds and animals.

The truth is beavers can be friend or foe and sometimes both. Traditionally nuisance beavers were removed through intensive trapping. This method also removed the positive influences beaver can have. Fortunately due to better understanding of this species and the development of new techniques it is possible to decrease or eliminate beaver related problems without removing or destroying the beaver, while still preserving the positive benefits that beaver provide.

Some of the positive benefits include: flood control, enhancement of wildlife habitat, water storage for later season release, ground water recharge, improved water quality by removing sediment, grade control, and reduced stream erosion by slowing water velocities.

Some of the negative aspects include: cutting of desirable trees, flooding roads or other improvements, clogging culverts, ditches, or diversions.

In many situations it is more cost effective to install protective collars around trees or use water flow devices to control water levels in dams or place protective devices on culverts, than the more expensive route of having to remove dams or trap beaver as they recolonize the area every few years. You can find further information on these solutions on the internet at www.wildlifedamagecontrol.com/beaverfloodcontrolbklet.htm and at www.agric.gov.ab.ca/agdex/600/681-1.html . For information regarding the regulation of beaver refer to the Idaho upland game proclamation at www.state.id.us/fishgame/regules.htm .

Where beaver and manmade structures do not interact there are no conflicts. Frequently these sites are on public lands that have been set aside to protect the watersheds and provide commodities for the benefit of the public. The most important of these commodities being clean water. The influence of beaver can be seen in many of the local drainages in the Teton Basin. The most prominent being Trail Creek as you drive up the Idaho side of the Teton Pass road.

Have you ever wondered why in the bottom of this steep sided canyon there is a wide flat expanse of willows from the Mike Harris road up to the Trail Creek campground. The engineer and designer of this feature on the landscape is *Castor canadensis* the beaver. Over centuries *Castor* has dammed the waters and caught fine gravels and nutrient rich sediments that otherwise would have polluted downstream waters. These trapped sediment have formed the soil on which the willows thrived and fed *Castor* enabling him to build bigger dams and trap more sediment making the valley bottom even wider.

This past summer the Forest Service surveyed this and many other streams in the Basin to determine where *Castor* might be our friend or foe. Along Trail Creek only two active dams within the channel were found. The absence of sufficient numbers of beavers and their dams in this drainage is allowing the stream to erode the stream bottom in some areas and cut down into the sediments that have been deposited by centuries of beaver activities. The most cost effective way to restore this area and others would be to allow the engineers that created these areas to once again thrive and maintain them and to allow controlled trapping to remove excess beaver before they can migrate to private lands where damage can occur. By learning to live with beavers we can reap their natural benefits and with a little patience outsmart them where they cause problems.

Other drainages on the Forest where an increase in beaver may be beneficial to the watershed are: Horseshoe, South Fork of Packsaddle, Mahogany, Little Pine, Patterson, and North Moody Creeks. Our next step in the process is to develop a plan of action with adjacent landowners, water users, and agencies to determine how to proceed.

Much of this article was adapted from Thomas Eveland's article "Living With Beavers" which can be found at www.blarg.net/~critter/WildSide/beavers.htm. Another source of information is www.beaversww.org. For questions regarding this article contact Lee Mabey at 557-5784 or email at lmabey@fs.fed.us.