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Making the World Safe For Beaver

Can civilization and animals really coexist peacefully?

By PAULA SPAN

*Between the dark and the day-light,
When the dusk is beginning to lower,
Comes a pause in the day's occupation
Which is known as The Beaver Hour.*

*Then from the town and village,
And sometimes from cities afar,
The beaver-watchers come trek-king
By foot, by bike and by car.*

*They take their seat in the twilight
With a poplar twig in each hand*

*And quietly wait, eyes shining,
For the furry beaver band.*

— from *The Beaver Hour*, by Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci

In the annals of animal advocacy, there is an honor roll dotted here and there with persons whose efforts in behalf of a certain species, usually one under assault by human predators, have been so obsessive that the identities of those persons has begun to merge with their cause.

Certainly one of this messianic elite is Velma B. Johnson of Reno, Nev., who is somewhat more colorfully known as "Wild Horse Annie" because of her founding role in WHOA! (Wild Horse Organized Assistance), the organization behind the Wild Horse Act of 1971, which prohibits the hunting of wild mustangs for meat.

Beula Edmiston, the elderly California chairwoman of the Save the Tule Elk Committee, PAULA SPAN last wrote for Today about Larry Kane.

has worked fearlessly to establish an elk preserve. Bill Duncan is the renowned "Bluebird Man" of Kentucky.

And from her cabin headquarters on 300 isolated acres of swampy South Jersey woodland and meadow, Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci, the guiding spirit of the Beaver Defenders, directs a similarly relentless campaign for the protection of the furry beaver band.

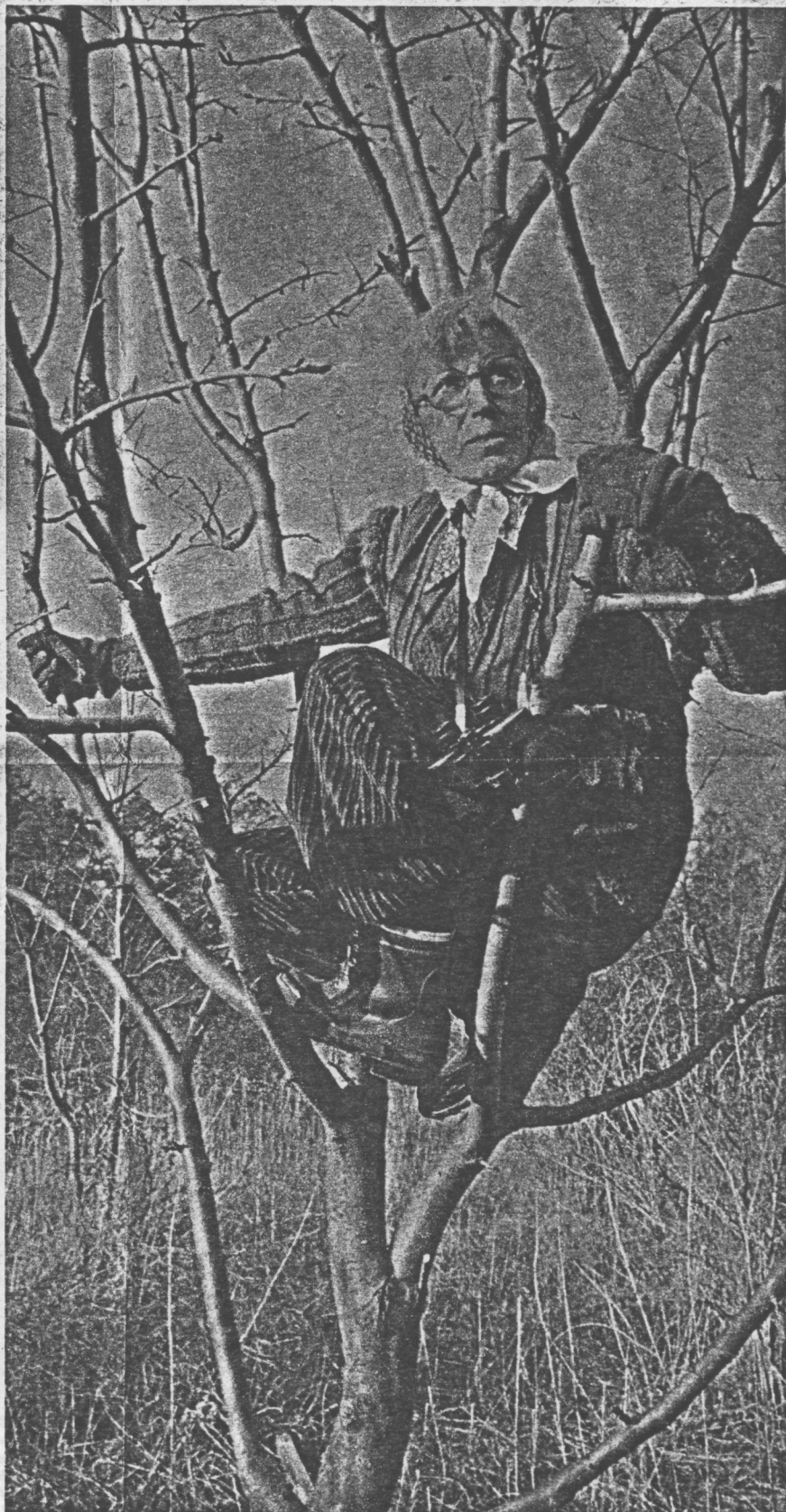
She raises funds by peddling beaver coloring books and note paper, "Beaver Defender" bumper stickers, "Bravo Beaver" buttons and sheet music to hymns such as "We Love You, Little Beaver" and "Away With Traps."

She raises spirits with her quarterly newsletter, *The Beaver Defenders*, in which she gives detailed accounts of the flora and fauna around her cabin in what she calls Unexpected Wildlife Refuge. In one recent edition she described how she stitched lengths of mosquito net onto one of those umbrella hats hawked at the shore and, thus draped, sat all afternoon unmolested by insects as she observed black ducks and sketched the yellow-billed cuckoo. Readers frequently respond with their own enthusiastic letters and reports.

She raises the beaver consciousness of area literati by offering prizes for the best essays, fiction and poetry about beavers.

Buyukmihci (pronounced approximately BOO-yook-MUTCH-cha) insists that she did not seek out this role, that she'd much prefer to spend her days quietly photographing and sketching and making friends with the residents of

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Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci has found that constant vigilance is necessary to guard her wildlife refuge.

Photos by Richard M. Titley



Buyukmihci says that, to her, beavers are, among animals, "closest to people. Primates are supposed to be closer, but beavers are so intelligent, so talented . . . They know how to manage a waterway. They're so devoted to their families." She plays with them (left) and, in fact, once dug a tunnel from a beaver pond into her cellar so that a beaver named Chopper could join the family inside when he so chose. Chopper's death, brought about by a tragic case of mistaken intentions, is one of the reasons Buyukmihci fights for the rights of beavers everywhere (above) in the stories she writes for the columns of the Beaver Defenders newsletter.

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the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge, as a sort of Grizzly Adams crossed with Doctor Doolittle.

But the plight of beavers and their forest fellows has made her an admitted radical on the issue of animal rights. She hasn't yet tried civil disobedience in behalf of aquatic rodents, but her fervor suggests that she hasn't ruled it out either. She considers Rosa Parks, the black woman whose insistence on her right to sit in the front of the bus led to the Montgomery bus boycott, "a great inspiration. One day she decided she wasn't going to sit in the back of the bus and that opened up a whole new vista. So I'm hoping to hold on and do what I can. Who knows at what moment something will happen?"

Buyukmihci's involvement in the beaver cause began not long after she and her husband, Cavit, a metallurgist, returned to the United States in 1958, after a five-year stay in his native Turkey. At first they settled into an old farmhouse on three acres of land outside Vineland, which seemed ample room for three children, their pets and a garden. But after a few years they went scouting for more, and more secluded, acreage.

"Spray planes were spraying poisons everywhere, bulldozers were making room for more housing, hunters came right up to the border of the property and shot the very animals your children had become friends with," shudders Buyukmihci, remembering her introduction to southern New Jersey. "And one day my son said, 'What's a bluebird?' Imagine."

So in 1961 the Buyukmihcis bought a remote 85 acres of swampy South Jersey woodland near Newfield, accessible only by dirt road and containing a larger pond and a cabin they expanded and moved into. Bit by bit they remortgaged their property to buy more of the surrounding woods and fields until they had acquired 300 acres, home not only to the Buyukmihcis and the beavers, but to otters, deer, red and gray foxes, rabbits, opossums, raccoons, three kinds of squirrels (red, gray and flying), skunks, muskrats, shrews, moles and voles, Canada and snow geese, various species of ducks, whistling swans, myriad songbirds and, in fortunate years, bluebirds. There was also a beaver lodge.

A little beaver swims shoreward. And waddles up on the land,



Buyukmihci's enemies list reflects her broad view of what constitutes cruelty to animals. Both gun clubs and the Sierra Club are on it.

*To take with delicate fingers
A twig from a child's hand.*

"In some ways they're the closest to people," says Buyukmihci, attempting to explain her passion for the beaver. "Primates are supposed to be closer, but beavers are so intelligent, so talented. They know how to manage a waterway. They're devoted to their families. The mother beaver has breasts, like a woman, and..." She falters. "It's hard to tell why you like one animal more than another."

The first beavers who came to know and trust her, a process recounted at great length in her book *Hour of the Beaver*, were Whiskers and Greenbrier and their offspring, whom Buyukmihci christened Fluffy, Goldie, Brownie and Nippy. Not only did the family swim up nightly for apples and poplar branches, but the

beaver kittens also welcomed Hope Buyukmihci as a playmate when she put on a bathing suit and waded into their pool.

Matters might have continued comparatively idyllically had not Atlantic County decided in 1970 to widen the road that ran along the refuge, demolishing an old bridge and replacing it with an aluminum culvert that would surely interfere with the beavers' dam-building. Buyukmihci fought valiantly with township officials, county engineers, Trenton bureaucrats and even the bemused construction-crew foreman for a different bridge design that wouldn't disturb the beavers' habitat. But the culverts went in, marshes and pools drained, and the beavers left. The road, Buyukmihci notes in passing, has since been flooded out.

The bridge episode pushed Buyukmihci across the line

from animal lover to animal activist. With a batch of news releases, some letterhead and posters, and a bold motto — "They Shall Never Be Trapped Anymore" — the Beaver Defenders was born. As a result of her nature column in the Millville daily, talks to schoolchildren and nature groups, the newsletter and other proselytizing efforts, the ranks of the Beaver Defenders have swelled to 400 dues-paying members.

Subsequent events have further radicalized Hope Buyukmihci on the beaver issue. Perhaps the most profound episode involved Chopper, an orphan beaver who had the luck to be adopted by the Buyukmihcis in 1974.

Having long dreamed of sharing their home with a beaver, the couple excavated a subterranean passage from the pond into their cellar 60 feet away, then built a ramp from the cellar into their living room, which was equipped with a wading pool, so that Chopper could enjoy human comforts and companionship, occasionally gnaw furniture legs or a doorjamb, and still come and go freely.

The arrangement worked so beautifully that an elated Hope Buyukmihci devoted four pages of a Beaver Defenders newsletter to Chopper's story, including several sketches of Chopper — full-face, profile, rear and three-quarters views — and a poem.

In the end, though, Chopper's trusting nature proved to be his tragic flaw. He took to visiting a Girl Scout camp a few miles away, performing swimming stunts for an adoring female audience. But one day, in an ill-advised effort to expand his circle of friends, he climbed into a fisherman's boat, and the fisherman, misunderstanding Chopper's intentions, promptly clubbed the little beaver to death with an oar while the horrified campers shrieked on shore.

Another colony of beavers resides at Unexpected Refuge now, and Buyukmihci doesn't speak much of Chopper, though she does say that he will be eulogized in her next book.

*He pauses a grateful moment,
Then glides away with his prize,
Leaving a happy youngster
With sparkling, fun-filled eyes.*

The perimeter of the Unexpected Refuge is "posted" with signs forbidding trespassing and hunting, a legal stratum available to any property owner concerned about protecting his wildlife — or his children, dairy herd or pet Airedale. But in rural South

Jersey many hunters trappers have grown accustomed to prowling where they will, and don't appreciate such restrictions.

Thus, on the night before the Buyukmihcis' first deer season at Unexpected Refuge, someone pulled down all the "no hunting" signs. Beaver traps have been found in the pond. Signs still disappear regularly or are found riddled with bullet holes; the Buyukmihcis' mailbox suffers similar abuse. "They come in over the barbed wire or cut the fence," Hope says with cold anger. "They shoot near us, purposely. They threaten to kill us. The first seven years, we asked them to leave."

No longer so polite, she and a cadre of volunteers now spend nearly half the year, from goose season in October through raccoon and fox season in March, on extended sentry duty. One volunteer sentinel circles the property in Buyukmihci's red pickup, another patrols where several roads converge, others wait concealed by trees and underbrush, all linked by CB radio to the cabin headquarters. Frequently, Hope Buyukmihci apprehends the miscreants personally.

The confrontations must be fascinating: a small, 65-year-old woman in glasses, with a flowered kerchief tied neatly over her gray hair, popping out from behind a tree to inform a group of men with loaded rifles that they have illegally set foot on the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge and had better skeedaddle before she uses her radio to call the game warden. But one oughtn't necessarily bet on the hunters. Trespassers, identified by their hunting-license numbers, are pounced on and prosecuted with relish, although lenient judges frequently decline to convict.

And sometimes, Hope Buyukmihci says, the intrepid hunters take off their jackets and roll them under one arm so that she cannot read their licenses. Then they laugh at her.

Buyukmihci tries to thwart the hunters by being wise to their ways, she said as she led a reporter through the forest she knew so intimately on a bright, clear afternoon recently. She pointed to an open area on the refuge's border and recalled that several seasons past an unscrupulous hunter was leaving lures of apples and sweet potatoes. (It is illegal to use bait during the season. However, it is lawful — if not terribly "sporting" — to set food out regularly before the season begins, and

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then, when the season begins, station oneself and one's rifle in a tree to blast the deer when it arrives for its accustomed dole.) In this case, however, the bait was removed not by a deer but by the watchful Buyukmihci.

At another stop on the tour, she indicated a spot where a man was insolent enough to pick the wild mushrooms she was saving for the animals — while she was watching. Buyukmihci lodged charges against the intruder, who had brazenly ignored her orders to desist, and who eventually was fined \$20 plus \$15 in costs. "Expensive mushrooms," she muttered with satisfaction.

The walk wound past the well-tended plantation of poplar saplings that provides the snacks for the beavers as well as the wild rice she had sown for the ducks, past wire cages in which she is sometimes forced to trap marauding dogs, past three small clumps of rare arbutus she had carefully marked off with stakes and whose roots she covers in winter with a warm blanket of compost.

She was pointing out other such landmarks when the far-off but unmistakable pop-pop-pop of rifle fire interrupted. "I think I know where that is!" Buyukmihci cried, and took off into the woods at a lope. "Can you run?" she yelled back.

The reporter became suddenly — and uncomfortably — aware that she was not wearing a single article of bright clothing. Moreover, beaver defense was somehow not a cause for which she'd previously envisioned giving her life. But there was no turning back. She followed.

Buyukmihci, wiry and fit from her outdoor guerrilla activities, cantered along secret trails and hopped from stump to stump through a frozen bog. The visitor, less than half her age, puffed along behind, frequently slipping into the icy, ankle-deep water.

After crossing the field where Buyukmihci had expected to find the culprits, she clambered up a small ladder-like pole obviously intended for such moments, scanned above the weeds with her binoculars — and, to her disappointment, saw no one.

But then there were more shots, sounding as if they were coming from a field behind her. Plunging on — but taking time to call back to the panting reporter when she passed the point where she'd first

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met Rusty the Red Squirrel, another woodland personality familiar to readers of her newsletter — she continued the chase.

Ultimately, though, the gunman (or gunmen) got away. Once she thought she had spotted the poachers, but a closer look revealed only a red-jacketed neighbor riding a horse.

"Sometimes I wish I could fly," she growled in frustration. "Of course," she reconsidered, "if we had individual flying machines, the hunters would have them, too."

*Beaver Hour brings together
Creatures of different name;
Different looks and different
ways,
but love of life the same.*

"Anthropomorphic," the dictionary tells us, refers to the concept of applying human characteristics to nonhuman entities, and it can be said without fear of contradiction that as a group Beaver Defenders are highly anthropomorphic. Not only do they give their wild chums names, and illustrate their newsletter with drawings of cute beavers reading letters to the editor, and sending entries to the beaver-writing contest. They are anthropomorphic because it seems completely logical to them that beavers and other animals have constitutional rights — just like people. Buyukmihci declares serenely that "animals now are where black people were 100 years ago when 'scientific proof' was introduced to show that blacks were inferior to whites, and people accepted it because the monied interests were behind it," she said. "The few people who see and feel this are like the ones who tried to abolish slavery. They're looked down on, persecuted."

No doubt some readers will feel that that's going a bit too far. Does she want the vote for the beaver? Does she think that beavers should be allowed equal access to public accommodations and employment opportunities?

No, she doesn't. Like all zealots, Buyukmihci has a tendency to overstate her case. What she does believe is that animals do have a certain right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness — untrammelled by fear of being cruelly dealt with by people. And Buyukmihci takes the broadest possible view of what constitutes cruelty to and exploitation of animals. Those people and institutions who've secured her blessings, therefore, are few, while her

enemies list is very long. It includes:

- *All hunters and trappers.* "I think hunting is barbaric, bullying and so cruel," says Buyukmihci. "I've seen boys stuff wounded quail, still alive, into their game bags. They're growing up to be sadists, using their superior power against powerless victims."

- Buyukmihci doesn't buy the argument that hunting controls animal overpopulation or that hunting-license fees support conservation. Instead, she charges (and she has some allies, including many experts) that game commissions use those fees to release pheasants bred in captivity, encourage large deer herds and otherwise artificially build up animal populations to ensure enough trophies for the hunt.

- She also does not accept the explanation that animals will overbreed and starve unless "harvested," pointing out that animals have population controls of their own and manage well enough in national parks, where hunting is forbidden. She derides hunters' claims that they respect the animals they stalk, comparing their attitude to "a rapist's attraction to his victim." To Buyukmihci, no argument yet devised vindicates animal killing, and that includes killing them for food. Indeed, next on her list are...

- *Meat eaters.* Buyukmihci swore off meat the day a hunter she'd confronted called her a hypocrite because she had, up to that point, eaten meat. She eliminated eggs and dairy products from her diet as she learned about agribusiness. "Chickens!" she exclaims in sincere horror. "They're in a pitiful state, debeaked, crowded into little cages where they can't even stretch their wings..."

- Not all the members of Beaver Defenders have followed her example, but Buyukmihci and her family are now what is known as "vegans," meaning that they avoid all animal products, wear no wool or leather, use no honey or lanolin.

- Her hot lunch, on a recent cold day, consisted of steamed cauliflower, cooked beans and eggplant, imitation meatballs (made from soybeans), fruit and Goldenberger's Peanut Chews. "There's maple syrup for tea," Buyukmihci offered. "Or sugar, if you want to kill yourself."

- Her sole remaining vice, until Kodak finds some organic substitute, is the use of photographic paper that contains some gelatin that comes

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from animal hoofs.

• *The New Jersey Division of Fish and Game.* When one calls this agency and says that one is writing a story about Beaver Defenders, there is a discreet, but clearly audible, groan at the other end of the line. The Buyukmihci make annual sojourns north to lobby for legislation outlawing the use of leg traps in the Garden State. (This year the bill has actually gotten out of committee in the Assembly and could come up for a vote any day now.) The fish and game people, as a result, must sally forth each year to argue that trapping is essential to controlling fur animals' numbers in a densely populated state. They are growing weary of this duel, and clearly regard the Beaver Defenders as a nuisance.

"I guess they feel they're protecting the beaver, but they just don't understand the problems," sighs George Howard, chief of the state's Bureau of Wildlife Management. New Jersey's 80 active beaver colonies, which contain about 1,000 animals, already bring 100 complaints of flooding and property damage annually, according to state statistics. To keep them in check, the state issued beaver permits to 69 trappers last year, resulting in a legal "harvest" of 121 beavers during a month-long season.

With pelts selling for only \$14 each on the New York fur market, compared with \$35 for a raccoon skin or \$65 to \$100 for a fox, beaver trapping is difficult, wet and rather unprofitable work. Trappers who persist do so for sport, according to Steve Toth, state supervisor of wildlife control.

The Buyukmihci's accusations rankle particularly because New Jersey's beaver population was nearly extinct by the 1930s, Howard claims, and was revived through the 1950s and 1960s by the state's careful management and its temporary outlawing of trapping. Now, every wetlands area that can support a beaver colony does, the state insists. Toth thinks the Defenders would be more intelligent if they worked to protect the beavers' shrinking habitat, by pushing for interior wetlands legislation, instead of railing at trappers.

The Defenders, of course, think the biologists who set state quotas for hunting and trapping are "brain-washed" and charge that the regulators are in cahoots with the people they're supposed to regulate, the hunters and trappers whose fees help pay their salaries. "It's like a statewide club," scoffs Buyukmihci.

• *The Sierra Club, National Audubon Society, National Wildlife Federation and American Humane Association.* The problem with them, in Buyukmihci's view, is that, regardless of efforts they've made to help whales or whooping cranes, all either support sport hunting or refuse to condemn it. When combined with true hunting enthusiasts such as the National Rifle Association, these groups dwarf the few anti-hunting groups Buyukmihci approves of — the Humane Society of the United States, Cleveland Amory's Fund for Animals and two smaller groups, Friends of Animals and De-

fenders of Wildlife — in membership, money and clout.

But Buyukmihci accepts the fact — is rather proud of it, actually — that she's an uncompromising purist. "He's working for the possible," she says of one associate who opposes some but not all forms of hunting, "where I'm working for the impossible."

• *Most holidays.* "No matter how they dress it up, it's animal sacrifice. To butcher hogs and slit turkeys' throats — I don't believe God wants that kind of sacrifice."

• *Rodeos and race tracks.* For obvious reasons.

• *Euphemistic language.* Buyukmihci can't abide hearing hunting and trapping called sport. And game refuges that permit hunting, she says, should more properly be known as "slaughterhouses."

• *Beaver trappers.* They are, of course, her archenemies, and the feeling is more or less mutual. Jim Furlong, president of the 1,200-member South Jersey Fur Takers, says the accusations of Beaver Defenders are "a lot of garbage."

Furlong frequently gives lectures on the joys of trapping to combat what he calls the pernicious influence of Beaver Defenders and their ilk. He has been known to give much of his presentation with his finger in a leg-hold trap to demonstrate that the trap is neither painful nor cruel. He says that members of his association check their traps daily (as is required by law) and then humanely dispatch the trapped animals with a .22. For the most part, he says, New Jersey trappers are motivated by "economic need"; that is, they're low-income people trying to pick up a few extra bucks for their families.

"You have to understand their ideology," Furlong says of the Beaver Defenders. "They're going to trump up everything they can to make it look like 4,500 trappers are out there devastating the wildlife in New Jersey. They play on emotion and sympathy. They'll take a monster antique trap that hasn't been used in 50 years, and a raccoon that was killed on the highway, and take a picture of that" to hype their case against trapping.

Actually, Beaver Defenders are into subtler modes of persuasion — such as music. The winter issue of the newsletter featured in its centerfold a seven-verse song (*andante moderato*) called *Beaver Watching*.

In fact, the group's methods are low-key compared with those of some other conservation groups. Consider, for instance, the annual hullabaloo over the baby harp seal hunt, which began in January in Canada shortly after the Beaver Defenders had their first opportunity to begin humming their new anthem.

The big animal groups wheeled out the heavy artillery. The Fund for Animals, with the names of Mary Tyler Moore and Princess Grace adorning its letterhead, sent out tens of thousands of kits containing blood-chilling letters, appeals for funds and

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angry postcards to send to Pierre Trudeau and the Canadian travel industry association. Large and expensive ads appeared in the Sunday New York Times. A hapless Canadian delegation arrived in the States to defend the hunt, only to have a zealous U.S. inspector seize the sealskin jacket of one member of the group.

That's the way animal-protection and conservation organizations have begun to operate lately, with computerized direct-mail campaigns, lots of publicity and hefty budgets. The Fund for Animals has offices in San Francisco, San Diego, Chicago, New York, Washington and Toronto, manned by a couple of dozen paid staff members, and operating with a budget of about \$1 million. Similarly, the Humane Society of the U.S. has 10 regional offices; 75 staffers, including several "governmental liaisons" (lobbyists); and a \$2 million annual budget.

The Beaver Defenders' group, by contrast, is tiny and impoverished, struggling along on the few thousand dollars Hope Buyukmihci earns by writing and lecturing. The organization has no real office, no computerized membership roll, very little access to government policymakers. It lacks the ecologically sophisticated approach, even the vocabulary, of the Washington groups. The members are simply animal lovers, the little old ladies in tennis shoes of the movement, who don't want to see charming, furry creatures harmed. Can they realistically hope to accomplish anything?

The Washington types say that, yes, small grass-roots organizations and even individuals have had their share of success stories. Wild Horse Annie and WHOA! are one example. Mary Anderson of Roanoke, Va. (there's a sociology thesis to be written explaining the preponderance of women in animal advocacy) scored a major hit when she, along with Humane Society lawyers, persuaded the Food and Drug Administration to stop the importation and sale of small pet turtles. Officially, the ban was imposed because turtles can carry disease-causing salmonella. Unofficially, it came about because Anderson is a turtle freak.

Massachusetts, moreover, has its own modern Mother Goose in the person of Dorothy Checchi O'Brien, adept lobbyist, organizer and tireless letter writer, who has trounced the gun-and-hunting lobby repeatedly in the Massachusetts legislature. Among her many accomplishments are a statewide ban of the leg-hold trap, a prohibition of sales of Easter chicks and ducks by pet stores and the outlawing of the use of live animals in field trials and the training of dogs.

Probably O'Brien's most famous exploit was her rescue of two shivering

Easter ducks from a frozen pond, accomplished by commandeering a fire department boat complete with firefighters and then inducing Eastern Airlines to fly Donald and Daphne south to the new home she'd arranged for them — at Disney World.

Buyukmihci, however, has a clear-eyed notion of the Beaver Defenders' deficiencies and the scope and intensity of the opposition. "I'm like a teacher who molds young minds and does her best to lay the foundation, but never knows what she's accomplished," she philosophizes.

She wishes she had the money to buy up more land around their refuge. The area is within commuting distance of Atlantic City, and new development there could mean more housing developments and shopping centers around Newfield.

And she particularly yearns to establish a humane education center for kids and teachers, having determined that "humane education can eventually save everything, if there's anything left to save." It happens that a very suitable old farmhouse and 51 acres adjacent to Unexpected Refuge are for sale — but the land costs \$1,200 an acre (as opposed to the \$40 an acre the Buyukmihcis paid in 1961) and is likely to get even more expensive.

Buyukmihci also frets about the future of the Unexpected Wildlife Refuge after she and Cavit die. Not that that seems an immediate prospect: She's 65, he's 55, and vegetarians have greater longevity, she asserts. But when it does happen? Buyukmihci would never consider willing Unexpected Refuge to the state or county government — either would surely open it to hunting, she says. Her brother in Georgia, who developed and manufactures log birdhouses that were much praised in Purple Martin News, and generally shares his sister's world view, is also past retirement age.

It's possible that one of the Buyukmihci children will come home and take on the responsibility. Their son is a veterinarian in Tennessee, and one of their two daughters is living on an organic farm near Pottstown; either one would seem to have the proper credentials. Or perhaps some other young people, sufficiently dedicated to patrolling, may yet be found.

In the meantime, Buyukmihci is able to persevere, despite the odds and obstacles, because she believes that animal liberation is one of those ideas whose time, though apparently delayed, inevitably will come. Buyukmihci's life is arguably in danger every time she waves her CB at a hunter, but, like other missionaries, she knows no fear. "I know things are going to change," she insists. "It won't come in my time, but I'm going to do what I can."

*All little woodland creatures
Want to be friends with man;
Kindness and patience are all it
takes —*

*If we want to be friends, we can.
— conclusion of The Beaver
Hour, by Hope Sawyer
Buyukmihci*