



Chesapeake Notebook

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Critter Number 5 — The Beaver

Shall the year of the buck-toothed beaver be upon us soon?

Whitney Pipkin | December 21, 2015



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Beavers in the Bay are getting a little more leeway as ecosystem engineers. (Dave Harp)

Beavers in this country happen to have their own fan club. I've heard from a few of its members this past week after [my story about beavers](#) was posted online.

"We were so happy to see it here in Martinez, CA," Heidi Perryman, president and founder

of an organization called [Worth a Dam](#), wrote in an email. In her town, “we worked to coexist with beavers nearly 10 years ago by installing a flow device to control flooding. Now because of our safe, beaver-tended wetlands we regularly see otter, steelhead, wood duck and mink in our urban stream! And celebrate every year with an annual beaver festival.”

That’s right, folks, an annual beaver festival.

Perhaps we are entering into a new age, the age of the interminable beaver. These buck-toothed, fluffy (when dry), flat-tailed tumblers of trees and engineers of our ecosystems are beginning to get a little more recognition rather than sheer derision in neighborhoods where they were once considered a nuisance.

When I told our editor Karl Blankenship that I wanted to write this story about beavers – spurred by a study out of the Northeast that looked at the nitrogen removal attributes of their dams – he sent me a trove of notes he’d collected about the critters. We’ve been watching beavers for a while, waiting for the pendulum to swing back in their favor, I suppose. Other comments on the story indicate the Year of Beaver might not be far away for our Bay area as well:

“Let’s hear a cheer for the eager beavers and clean water!” writes one commenter.

“Thank you for spreading the word about the importance of the beaver to our ecosystems,” writes another.

And William R. Bey writes a longer ode to beavers in the comments section, calling beavers “beautiful, intelligent, industrious.” He hopes that “officials in Toms River, NJ, will read this article and change their minds about trapping and killing the beavers who are living on their Lake Placid.

I found in the beaver story an instructive tale for many other species. We should be a little more thoughtful before we cast a mammalian neighbor as strictly an annoyance rather than a partner in creating and maintaining an ecosystem from which we both reap benefits. For the article, I interviewed a hydrologist who does stream restoration projects throughout the watershed. He wondered aloud if fewer of them would be necessary if we’d just leave (some of that work) to beavers, let them do their thing where it makes sense for them to do their thing.

You heard it, straight from the professional ecosystem engineer – let’s leave some of that work to beaver.

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Wildlife + Habitat



About Whitney Pipkin

Whitney Pipkin writes at the intersection of food, agriculture and the environment from her home base in Northern Virginia. Her work for the Bay Journal often focuses on the Potomac and Anacostia rivers, and she is a fellow of the Institute for Journalism & Natural Resources. [Send Whitney an e-mail.](#)

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Comments

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Donald Molde on December 21, 2015:

The beaver is amazing for its ability to conserve water. One would think that in Nevada, the most arid state in the union, the beaver would be valued for such an ability. Unfortunately not the case. Fish and game management agencies are so far behind in their outlook and management strategy or lack of same.

Pat Russell on December 21, 2015:

Thank you for posting the story/commentary about our critical Eco-engineer, a "keystone" mammal species, the beaver. Here in the urban northwest beavers are not exactly protected nor respected as it should. But our friend is demonstrating to neighborhoods and local government that the floodplain is there for a reason...sort of the "pay me now or pay me later..." We can give the riparian habitat, water quality enhancing Eco-engineer a little room and food common to streamsides throughout the country, for very little. This habitat bring more greenery and stream life during the summer.

Jim Long on December 22, 2015:

Beavers once ruled. In precolonial times when when forest overwhelmingly covered the

Bay watershed, open successional beaver meadows increased habitat diversity. The numerous beaver ponds raised water tables in adjoining floodplain that probably better sustained wetlands and vernal pools for amphibian breeding. Concerning nitrogen dynamics, the story may be more complicated than the denitrification reported for ponds (and in the wetlands the ponds abetted): There has been at least one suggestion based sediment cores that beaver excretions actually made a low but measurable contribution of nitrogen to the Bay.

William R. Bey on December 22, 2015:

Ms. Pipkin, thank you for another wonderful article about our friends, the beavers!

Grant on December 29, 2015:

They are such amazing engineers and builders from a stream and wetland restoration stand point. They accomplish, in a few short nights, what has taken me weeks and even years in some cases to accomplish with plans, permits, and excavators (with much less impacts to boot)! I truly think they are an essential element to any flourishing watershed.

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