

Back to the Beaver, by Hope Sawyer Buyukmihci, 1974

Eighteen years ago, my husband Cavit and I were headed for Washington State. We planned to raise our children there, on a mountainside farm where water fell musically over rocks; bears munched fallen apples in an old orchard; a white rose bloomed in the dooryard.

Our dream of living there had persisted through years of cramped living in Turkish cities. But when we arrived in Philadelphia with three children we had only a few dollars. A trip across the country was impossible. So we settled in southern New Jersey where our children grew up among bogs and slow moving streams, and we gave up hope of seeing bears.

Unexpected Wildlife Refuge began when we bought an old cranberry bog just off Unexpected Road. The water gate had collapsed long before, and the bog had been converted into a pond by a beaver dam. Fresh-peeled sticks proved that the beavers were still there. And often as we walked at night we heard the loud slap of their tails as they dived and swam for cover.

The beavers eventually became the bears of our private wilderness. Now, several generations of young have sat on my lap and taken food from my hand. And from our friendship The Beaver Defenders developed - a group dedicated to restoring beavers our nation's streams.

When the white man first came to America, 400,000 million beavers lived here, controlling the flow of streams with their dams and ponds. They were as much a part of the waterways as the water itself. Along the wooded streams, mother beavers cradled their young in their arms and corned to them while fathers worked to maintain their holdings. Regulating water levels for maximum protection of their homes, they unwittingly furnished ideal conditions for other creatures, with whom they lived in balance.

The white man, however, saw the beaver only as a pelt to be traded for a year. By 1900, only scattered beaver colonies remained. Fashion turned elsewhere for fur. Our beaverless rivers showed signs of the flood and drought which have plagued us increasingly since. And trapping, from being a full-time occupation, became a part-time hobby for those to whom killing an animal means some kind of fulfillment.

In New Jersey, beavers interfered with cranberry bogs and blueberry fields; industry and housing developments. Man, instead of accommodating himself to them, destroyed them – and got paid for their by-product, fur. Fish and Game commissions still take in a few dollars annually from beaver trapping permits, wherever a few beavers remain. Completely ignoring the benefits of living, working beavers, they are selling our children's heritage for a mess of pottage. Meanwhile, we pay billions for "disaster relief" for victims of flood and drought which in many instances beavers could have prevented.

Beavers are still officially regarded as pelts or nuisances. What we need most is a new attitude. If more people would protect beavers and get to know them, a fresh outlook would emerge. Beavers cut trees, but new sprouts grow. They dam up streams, but isn't that just what we need? (Why are our water tables dropping?) Beavers are big and ugly – and they're *rodents*. Why then have the “beautiful people” worn their fur as a status symbol?

Beaver kittens are usually born in May. For three days the mother stays in the lodge, gently caring for them, while her husband brings her “breakfast in bed”. Then for a couple of weeks, the parents take turns foraging for food, one always on guard at the lodge. By that time the kittens, who have practiced swimming in their indoor pool, have emerged into the outdoors and begun to explore.

They love to play together by wrestling and diving, or alone pushing a floating stick or leaf. Until the age of two months, they depend on their mother for milk, comfort and sometimes, entertainment. Often they approach her with a pleading voice, asking her to take them in her arms and roll with them underwater. She teaches them to comb and oil their fur, and to watch constantly for danger.

For twelve years I have been a beaver-watcher. One day last fall, seated by the stream at sunset, I was feeding apple slices to a mother beaver and her yearling offspring. From a tangle of water weeds a beaver kitten swam out. He looked not more than a month old. Born four months late, and an only child, this little postscript came swaggering out as if he owned the world. Yet he was duly cautious. By the third night, however, he came to my hand and after that, swam right to me with a mew of greeting, to rest his small black hand on my fingers and let me pet his wet fur while he ate slices of apple.

“Beavers turn wilderness into happiness”, wrote two fourth-grade children of Wisconsin. It is the aim of The Beaver Defenders to preserve beavers from persecution; for their own sakes and so that children may know them and love them. Beavers as friends and neighbors are a joy, and they are a vital part of our natural water systems. Concern for the beavers is not only concern for the land and for the waters that fed us all, but for the spiritual enrichment of the children who deserve streams alive with all those creatures who were made to dwell there.