



IDEAS AFTERNOON


Rethinking the Beaver: Why beavers and humans have to learn to get along



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Can humans and beavers share the same landscape? (Shutterstock)

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Four centuries of fur-trade trapping nearly wiped beavers off the North American map. Now they're back, big time, and we're discovering that sharing the landscape with such tenacious ecosystem engineers isn't always easy. We're also learning that there are compelling reasons to try to coexist with this iconic species. Contributor Frances Backhouse explores how two control freaks — humans and beavers — can get along.

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“Why is it hard to live alongside beavers? Well, I like to say that you've got two control freaks that are trying to compete for the same resources.

- *Glynnis Hood*

In October 2011, Senator Nicole Eaton rose in the Red Chamber to speak about beavers. But rather than praising Canada's national animal, she disparaged *Castor canadensis* as a "toothy tyrant" and "a dentally defective rat" that should "step aside as a Canadian emblem." While Eaton's speech prompted many outraged citizens to rally to the beaver's defence, a significant minority agreed with her. That was no surprise to Glynnis Hood, a professor of environmental science at the University of Alberta who has been studying beavers for 20 years. She's found that "people either really love them or they really hate them."



Aspen trees wrapped with wire mesh to protect them from beavers in Calgary's Weaselhead Flats park. (Frances Backhouse)

Beavers have a roller-coaster history in North America. Long before

humans showed up, they colonized the continent, occupying almost every stream and lake from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from the Rio Grande to the northern treeline.

This ubiquitous animal was culturally significant in a wide range of ways to most of North America's First Peoples and appears in many legends that reflect careful observation of the beaver's vital ecological contributions. These include Blackfoot stories that tell how beavers helped create the world, and how they gave humans the gifts of tobacco and the beaver medicine bundle.

Glynnis Hood is the author of "The Beaver Manifesto". 0:48

When Europeans arrived in North America, they saw beavers as brown gold to be mined with the greatest possible expedience. By 1900, beavers were gone from most of their historic range and exceedingly rare in the few places where they still hung on. Many observers believed they were headed for oblivion.

But, as we all know, beavers didn't go extinct. Their comeback started in the early 21st century. Spurred on by advocates like Archibald Belaney, better known as [Grey Owl](#), governments started regulating trapping and reintroducing beavers back into their old haunts.



Beaver dam, Algonquin Provincial Park. (Frances Backhouse)

The beaver's rebound has not yet restored the species to its original abundance, but complaints about tree cutting and land flooding keep people like Massachusetts-based beaver management specialist Mike Callahan as busy as the dam-builders themselves. The problem isn't so much the number of beavers around today. It's that we've taken over much of their former domain and forgotten how things looked and functioned when they were present.

Sharing territory with an animal that rivals our ability to shape landscapes and direct water flow challenges our desire to be in control. But the beaver's supporters point to the many benefits this keystone species provides, from habitat creation to water stewardship. They say we need to shift our thinking — to see beavers not as trespassers and troublemakers, but as an integral part of how our hydrological and ecological systems work.

One of the beaver's ardent fans is Pierre Bolduc, who brought in a crew of the buck-toothed engineers to build a pond on his property. "What I want to do," Bolduc says, "is to get people to appreciate how lucky we are here in Canada to have this absolutely fantastic animal."



Frances Backhouse (Pierre Bolduc)

[Frances Backhouse](#) lives in Victoria and is an award-winning writer about science, nature and history. She is the author of six books, including [Once They Were Hats: In Search of the Mighty Beaver](#) (ECW Press, 2015).

Guests in this episode:

- [Glynnis Hood](#) is a professor of environmental science at the University of Alberta's Augustana Campus in Camrose and the author of [The Beaver Manifesto](#).
- Mike Callahan is a beaver management specialist based in Southampton, Massachusetts. He owns and operates [Beaver Solutions](#) and is the founding president of the [Beaver Institute](#).
- [Eldon Yellowhorn](#) is a professor at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, British Columbia, where he teaches in the Department of First Nations Studies and the Department of Archaeology. He is from the Piikani Nation in southern Alberta.
- Judy Taylor-Atkinson and Jim Atkinson live in Port Moody, British Columbia, and won the 2018 [Port Moody Environmental Award](#) for their advocacy work for beavers and other wildlife.
- Holly Kinas is a research assistant at the [Miistakis Institute](#) in

Calgary, Alberta, and works on the [Putting Beavers to Work for Watershed Resiliency and Restoration Project](#).

- Pierre Bolduc is a retired Canadian Forces pilot who has reintroduced beavers to his property near Bragg Creek, Alberta.
- Additional thanks to Donald B. Smith, Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Calgary and author of [From the Land of Shadows: The Making of Grey Owl](#) (Western Producer Prairie Books, 1990).

Related websites:

- [Hinterland Who's Who: The Beaver](#)
- [The Beaver Institute](#)
- The situation of the Port Moody beavers continues to develop. When the 2018 fall salmon run began in late October, the Department of Fisheries and Ocean breached the dams on Suterbrook Creek. For updates, see the [City of Port Moody's Beaver webpage](#).

***This episode was produced by Frances Backhouse and Dave Redel.*

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