

[Delete? Move to December/trapping season?]

I crossed Several chanel's of the river running through the bottom in defferent directions. I proceeded on about two miles crossing those defferent channels all of which was damed with beaver in Such a manner as to render the passage impracticable and after [being] Swamped as I may Say in this bottom of beaver I was compelled to turn Short about to the right and after Some difficuelty made my way good to an open low but firm plain....

Captain William Clark, July 14, 1806

Captain Clark did not understand that the beavers were turning Gallatin Lake into land. No one understood, in 1806. Not even Thomas Jefferson could have known that the earth was a work in progress.

I know, but I find it hard to picture Montana before the odyssey of Lewis and Clark. They wrote my soft acres into being with their pens. Much of the West has had to be re-invented, but at least it began with heroes.

They were also serious observers, and we learn from them that this valley was once a paradise -- for certain furry mammals. Beavers were busy as backhoes in 1806 and far more persistent, not tearing down mountains but catching their sediments and turning water into earth, glop by glop.

Then came the fur trade, which drove the economy of the northern Rockies till trappers exhausted their resource. When the

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mountain men left, beaver populations had been scraped down to bedrock, like a gold mine. And from then on, during most of what English-speaking Americans think of as the history of the west, humans replaced rodents as earth-movers.

Fast forward to 1946. Yellowstone Park was the only place in the region, at that time, where humans could count on seeing beavers from the road, and my family thought of them as fragile relics of paradise lost.

Leap again to 1968. In that year, the Park adopted a policy of "natural regulation" for wildlife. Natural regulation meant letting nature take its course -- which is not regulation as English-speakers normally use the word. (Look up "regulate.") But I sympathize with the Park's administrators, who came up with an oxymoron that would have got me promoted, back when I was speech-writing. Public servants must respond to elected leaders, who respond to their voters, most of whom have not seen what elk can do to chokecherry trees. *elephant how?*

Here on the home place, not far downstream from Yellowstone Park, we pick our chokecherries from a ladder leaned against a tree. I can remember when chokecherries grew on trees by one of my favorite fishing holes in the Park, too. Today, on the same spot, there are just shoots a foot or two high, still sprouting from the old roots and putting out an occasional blossom.

The chokecherry is not a charismatic species and is surely not missed by most of the Park's human visitors. But birds and bears no longer have the fruit to eat, and beavers no longer have

the chokecherry's bark for food nor its sticks for dams. I cite the chokecherry because, though inconspicuous, it is the most resilient of indicator-trees and the easiest to propagate.

(Robins take care of the job, eating cherries and excreting their pits, which are large, vigorous seeds.)

Willows, cottonwoods, and aspens are in more trouble on the Park's northern range, where ungulates -- elk and bison especially -- concentrate in winter and eat anything they can get. The ungulates have knocked down stream banks too. Fifty years ago, I learned to fly-fish in a stretch of the Gardner River that was deep and narrow. Now it is shallow and wide, separated in channels. And I have not seen a beaver on the northern range in years. Tourists, on the other hand, are naturally thrilled to see an unnatural concentration of large wildlife, even during daylight hours in high season.

A few miles downstream in Montana, the situation is quite different. Big-game populations are generally large, but within the carrying capacity of their habitat. Young deciduous trees are abundant. And beavers are following their food into streams where no beaver had been seen in this century.

Sometimes the beavers' dams show up in steep country at the edge of the valley, where they slow the runoff of snow and raise the water table. State trappers encourage this process by catching beavers when they flood a road, for example, and moving them into the hills. But beavers are turning into the equivalents of nuclear power plants -- admirable in somebody else's back

yard. If you would terrify a Montanan today, do not speak of the mad militias, hermit bomber, or June floods. Mention that a dam of willow cuttings has been sighted downstream.

[Use as transition from dogs?]

The gods curse you by giving you what you most desire.

[Unknown]

One morning, when dogs and I stepped out for our constitutional, I noticed that old cottonwoods and willows had been girdled where the spring creek runs through Earl Kraft's wheatfield, which is the one bordering us downstream. Twenty-four hours more and Earl's culvert had been plugged with branches. Water was climbing toward his granaries before a trapper caught the beaver.

Suppose that there had been two beavers, in accordance with Noah's instructions, and that they had moved on upstream to our old growth. By now there might have been no cottonwoods left standing, and no eagles. Eagles like high perches with broad, scenic views of lunch.

For beavers, the scenery is the lunch. A nature program on television got this backward, recently, when it showed a panoramic view of a gorgeous mountain lake, then switched to beavers close-up. But beauty and the beavers did not appear in the same frame. All films must be edited; this one had been edited creatively.

[Clark Epigraph here?]

In the real world, which Captain Clark described accurately, beavers are rodents that don't know when to stop. Their program is to cut sticks, eat the bark, shove the rest into running water, then do the same with more sticks till the valley has been raised into a fertile mudland, one stick at a time. Beavers deserve credit for this uplifting work. In our valley, they were once a geologic force on the order of an earthquake.

But this story is not really about beavers. Our concern is for the big picture, though we see only a few of its pixels and nudge them gently. Nudging is not Nature's Way. Nature has no Way. She has fire, flood, famine, and hantavirus. She has trees too, and eagles that perch in trees, large rodents that chew on the trees, small rodents that eagles eat, and people who, for better or worse, live in the middle, take decisions wisely or rashly, by determination or default, and live with the consequences. We try to repair Nature's stream and hope for a shy kiss. She slobbers all over us and leaves us up to our barley in beavers.

I wish to make a modest proposal. Most Americans agree that their country's natural environment was in better condition when beavers were in charge. The obvious remedy, then, is to encourage beavers to recolonize their old territory. There will be some inconvenience, because humans and beavers are both wetland species and prefer to build in the same places. But this need not be a problem. Beavers can, in fact, provide a solution to poverty, crime, and urban decay.

The solution is perfectly equitable. Beavers will be trapped in Montana, not far downstream from my house, and re-introduced to all of America in order of settlement. It may be argued that this policy will be expensive -- but remember that the word "blight," which used to be associated with a famine in Ireland, is now applied to old American inner-cities. Billions of dollars will be saved by canceling urban-renewal projects, which seldom work anyhow, and allowing beavers to flood the blighted ghettos, plus a number of suburbs past their prime. In time, the worn-out buildings will crumble and be covered with fertile new soil. The process will, moreover, be far more telegenic than what is happening now.

Persons with cultural blinders may think that the oldest cities are on the east coast, from Boston down to Miami. And it is true that much of Manhattan Island, for example, will become a splendid fishery for brook trout, striped bass, and shad in season. But Los Angeles claims to be older than New York. Beavers will be encouraged to renovate both cities at the same time, maintaining regional balance.

MARCH NOTES

- (1) Montana Outdoors, May/June 1997, p.3.
- (2) William K. Stevens. New York Times, May 20, 1997. Other estimates run as high as six billion dollars.
- (3) Nature's Keepers. NY: Free Press, 1995. p. 20.
- (4) The Way of a Trout With a Fly. London: Black, 1928. p.ix.
- (5) Opening editorial, joint edition of 4/28 and 5/5, 1997.
- (6) In order of publication:
Hunter, Christopher J. Better Trout Habitat. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1991.
Hunt, Robert L. Trout Stream Therapy. Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1993.
- (7) From Huxley's introduction to Joy Adamson's Living Free. I borrowed this from a book review by Christopher Lehmann-Haupt in the New York Times 5/15/95.
- (8) Ambrose, Stephen E. Undaunted Courage. NY: Simon & Schuster, 1996. p.52.
- (9) NY: Scholastic, undated. p.117.
- (10) Meditations on Hunting. NY:Scribner's, 1972. p.67.
- (11) Wade, Nicholas. New York Times June 13, 1997. The report summarizes work led by two evolutionary biologists: Dr. Carlos Vilà and Dr. Robert K. Wayne.
- (12) Civilization magazine, November/December 1995. p.63.
- (13) NY: Free Press, 1994. p.118. This book would be useful to anyone looking for a puppy.
- (14) p.75.