

Belarus Beaver “Attack” was Self Defense, according to Beaver Expert Dietland Muller-Schwarze

Although an April 2013 news story about a Belarus man who was fatally bitten—after grabbing a wild beaver to pose for a photo—has gone viral, this case “is not really about a beaver killing a person,” according to Dietland Muller-Schwarze, who wrote the book *The Beaver, Its Life and Impact* and has researched the animal engineers for three decades. Instead, Dr. Muller-Schwarze, Professor Emeritus at the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, sees the Belarus case as “a perfect storm” of risky behavior and bad luck.

“Handling a non-sedated wild beaver is never recommended as you can expect the animal to defend itself,” Dr. Muller-Schwarze explains. Then the bad luck began when “the beaver’s teeth unfortunately hit an artery,” and continued when “neither the man, nor his companions, could stop the bleeding.” In comparison, many lives were saved at the Boston Marathon Bombing in April of 2013, when those present at the scene applied tourniquets to the victims’ legs.

“Really, the beaver did not “kill the man; it just defended itself,” states Dr. Muller-Schwarze. “In such a Perfect Storm, the man could have just as well suffered fatal injury from a dog, a snapping turtle, or for that matter, by barbed wire. Does barbed wire ‘kill a person’? The key is, you just don’t handle a wild (or even domestic) animal in that manner. You are asking for trouble. Especially in the wild, far from medical help, you don’t take unnecessary risks.”

Dr. Muller-Schwarze has never heard of a human fatality being blamed on a beaver before, and the rarity of the Belarus case probably led to all the media coverage. In addition, a photo of an otter—misabeled as a beaver—has appeared recently both online and in print. This raises the question of the true identity of the Belarus “beaver” that was never caught. Yet any animal that perceives its life to be in danger may bite.

Beavers are better known for building dams and restoring wetlands

that provide critical habitat for other wildlife as well as essential environmental services for humans. For example in *The Beaver*, Muller-Schwarze describes research by hydrologists that indicates restoring only 3% of former beaver wetlands in the upper Mississippi watershed would prevent devastating flood damage.

It would be a shame if a poorly documented, but widely disseminated story distorts the public's understanding of this species that can be our best ally against the ravages of climate change.

(More about so-called aggressive beavers will be in the Summer 2013 issue of *Beaversprite*.)