

# Better Ways to Manage Utah's Beavers

By Brett Prettyman

Beaver Creek, Uinta Mountains  
»Trapped by the hundreds of thousands for more than a century, beavers nearly disappeared from the North American landscape. Trappers pursuing beaver fur for the European market were among the first explorers, other than American Indians, to visit the area of the American West now known as Utah.

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## “Dams change everything,” said Mary O’Brien....

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Now, beavers are in demand again, not for their fur but for their engineering expertise, and the water conservation and forest restoration that result from their dam-building skills.

“Dams change everything,” said Mary O’Brien, the Utah Forests program manager for Grand Canyon Trust. “Where water was once just passing through the landscape it is suddenly pausing there, recharging aquifers, creating a riparian area and making a place for all kinds of wildlife to live.”

It is that ability to replenish the land that spurred O’Brien to ask state wildlife biologists about relocating the



*A beaver forepaw track in the mud.*

mammals into areas where they once roamed.

“We don’t know the exact historical extent of beaver in the Southwest. They were mostly trapped out before settlers got here,” O’Brien said. “But now, as we enter into what is almost universally accepted as increasing drought, with earlier snow melt and more intense precipitation events, we need to look at the engineering miracle of beavers. We have friends at hand who are ready to jump back into historical habitat and help us with our water issues.”

The beavers may be ready to jump back into areas where their ancestors once felled aspen and willow, but catching live wild animals and hauling them around the state requires planning. That plan is being completed now by a committee formed by the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (DWR) and will be presented to the public in a series of Regional Advisory Council Meetings in December. If approved by the Utah Wildlife Board, it will become the state’s first management plan for beavers.



*Mary O’Brien on a dam in Utah’s Arches National Park.*

“The fact that we have some groups with an interest in using beaver as a watershed restoration tool is the driving force for the plan, but we recognize as an agency that we have not given a lot of effort to beaver management since the early 1980s,” said Justin Dolling, game mammals coordinator for the DWR. “This [committee] has laid out a possible course of action on how to deal with nuisance beavers, managing the population through sport harvest, setting rules for relocating them and encouraging a public education

component of the value of beavers.”

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### **The beavers may be ready to jump back into areas where their ancestors once felled aspen**

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Not everyone is excited about the idea of restoring beavers. That old saying “busy as a beaver” has a different meaning to landowners with expensive new trees decorating their property as fallen logs, farmers who open their irrigation gates to get just a trickle, and Forest Service employees trying to keep a road from flooding every other night.

“I get called out all the time to deal with a nuisance beaver,” said trapper Stan Bassett, a member of the DWR’s Beaver Management Plan committee. “People can get really mad. I tell them the beaver is just doing what it is supposed to do.”

Because he isn’t allowed to move a live beaver, Bassett has to kill the animals he captures. With the value of a beaver pelt so low -- averaging \$13.13 between 1982 and 2008 -- Bassett tans the hides and uses them in talks he gives to Boy Scout and church groups.

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### **“The fact that we have some groups with an interest in using beaver as a watershed restoration tool is the driving force for the beaver management plan.”**

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“I would rather relocate than kill those beaver. I’d relocate everything I caught if I could,” he said. “Some people think all I want to do is kill them. That could not be farther from the truth. When a beaver pond is established, everything comes there - deer, moose, muskrat, ducks. Beaver ponds are neat places to visit.”

Bassett, who has been trapping for 40 years, is among a small number of people in Utah who still pursue species like beaver, badger, fox, mink and bobcat during winter months. He has trapped some of the same areas for decades, taking between 20 and 100 beaver each season. Bassett has not noticed a change in population numbers, but has watched his fellow trapper numbers drop from a recorded high of just over 400 in the 1987-88 season to 133 last winter. Records show that 745 beavers were trapped in the winter of 2007-08.

There were probably that many trappers in Utah’s borders 200 years ago, and they likely trapped 10 times as many animals.

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### **“Dams slow the flow of water coming off the mountains. They act like speed bumps and spread the water out on the land.”**

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So many beavers were trapped in the West during the early and mid-1800s that by 1899, the species was considered rare and the Utah Legislature closed all trapping. All beavers killed between 1912 and 1957 were either illegally taken or taken by state-commissioned trappers.

A general statewide season with unlimited take opened again in 1957, but animals had to be checked with the state and tagged for commercial sale until 1974.

Utah’s only true effort to determine beaver populations in the state came in a 10-year study that ended in 1981. The study placed the number of beavers in Utah at that time around 30,000. Dolling said it is the best estimate out there and he feels comfortable stating that the number of beavers has not decreased in that time.

O’Brien likes to wonder what the forests of the Southwest looked like before the days when beavers

were trapped to such low numbers. She suspects most of the mountain valleys had meandering creeks with lush wetlands frequented by a vast range of wildlife. It is an image she would like to see for herself in places where streams have turned into raging straight-cut channels that erode the banks and carry the water to faraway places.

“Dams slow the flow of water coming off the mountains. They act like speed bumps and spread the water out on the land,” she said. “They create a dramatic change in the hydrology of the landscape, and that is a change that may serve us all.”

*Reprinted from the October 16, 2009 issue of The Salt Lake Tribune. Learn more about how O’Brien helped improve beaver management in Utah in the next Beaversprite.*

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## **A Great Day for Beavers**

Saturday, August 8th was a great day for Beavers— and for people too. The 3rd Annual Beaver Festival was celebrated in downtown Martinez, next to Alhambra Creek. A walk over the nearby pedestrian bridge that crosses the creek provided a superb view of the beaver dam. At one point, a green heron came to rest on the dam.

Beavers are nocturnal so there wasn’t an expectation of a sighting. What was stunning was the creek, the dam crossing it, the plant life on the creek’s banks, and the amazing quiet and feeling of peace when just several feet away a lively celebration was in full swing. It was like stepping from one world into another and then stepping back. The support for beaver conservation was community wide and very alive.

*From Susan Kirk’s Open Spaces, Natural Places Blog.*