

ENVIRONMENT

Oregon tribes reintroduce beavers to the Beaver State



Above: Until the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation bought this land near Pendleton, the river flowed faster and more directly. Beavers helped create side channels that slowed the water and turned it into the biggest wetland in the Umatilla Basin. Kathy Aney



Lucy Sherriff - Underscore.news

The species creates important habitat for imperiled fish populations, but state laws don't always work in the animal's favor

C'waam and Koptu were once a staple meal for the Klamath Tribes. They're a rarity now — members are allowed to catch only two of the suckerfish a year. The ray-finned C'waam, with its long snout and the smaller white-bellied Koptu, with a large head and lower notched lip, are found only in the Upper Klamath basin.

Once fished in their thousands as one of the tribes' important First Foods, the fish populations were decimated when the health of their spawning grounds declined from a spate of dam building in the Upper Klamath Lake during the 1900s.

The lake has been plagued by toxic algae, which starve the fish of oxygen, and the tribes have seen suckerfish populations plummet from the tens of millions down to less than 45,000. They are now endangered. The C'waam, also known as Lost River sucker can grow up to almost 3 feet long, and weigh 10 pounds. The Koptu, also called the shortnose sucker, can reach 18 inches and live up to 30 years.

The tribal government has tried various tactics to restore fish populations: raising young fish to older ages before releasing them in the lakes, monitoring water quality, working with landowners to restore riparian habitat, and bringing a lawsuit, which was eventually dropped, against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to save the C'waam and Koptu. Now the tribes are turning to an unlikely hopeful savior: the beaver.

"Their activity is a driver for the productivity and diversity for the whole ecosystem," says Alex Gonyaw, senior fisheries biologist for the Klamath Tribes in Southern Oregon and Northern California.

Last fall Gonyaw oversaw the construction of a beaver dam analog, a manmade structure that mimics a natural beaver dam and is used to attract beaver families.

Oregon is The Beaver State. And yet, state law classifies beavers as predators, meaning they can be hunted and trapped on private land across Oregon with few

restrictions. Once an endemic species across the U.S. before the semi aquatic rodents were trapped into near-extinction during the 1800s fur trade, beavers are a vital component to the ecosystem, improving water quality and fish habitat. The animals are known to improve salmon habitat, but Gonyaw's venture is the first attempt to use beavers to stabilize the suckerfish populations.

Two bills currently moving through the Oregon state legislature would respectively prohibit the taking of beavers on federally managed public land and exclude beavers from being classified as predatory animals.

“We hope fish biodiversity would increase and we would have an opportunity for tribal fishing rights to return,” says Alex Gonyaw, senior fisheries biologist, the Klamath Tribes

“Our aim is to work with nature not against it,” Gonyaw explains. The tribal government, which hopes to establish a stable fish population as a food source, wanted to reshape the land to provide healthy fish habitats. But they didn’t want to use bulldozers to reshape the Williamson River. “We needed to hold the water back, and beavers do that naturally.”

Beavers, a keystone species, have been found to help mitigate the spread of wildfires, thanks to their water-damming habits.

Gonyaw hopes the tribes’ efforts at attracting beavers — by using natural posts and woven willows to give the animals a foothold to make dams — will start to hold back water and that the historic vegetation, of local lily pads and bulrushes, will return.

“And we’ll eventually have a shallow lake wetland system again,” Gonyaw says. “If there is continuous standing water here, we hope fish biodiversity would increase and we would have an opportunity for tribal fishing rights to return.”

No beavers have arrived — yet. “It’s a long way from the nearest beaver dam, but if we don’t see activity in the next year, we’ll work with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to move nuisance beavers,” he adds.

Relocating beavers on private land is allowed, but it’s an onerous process to gain a permit, which is issued through the state. Individuals must obtain signatures from every landowner within four miles of the proposed site testifying that the landowners have no objection to the beavers being moved in.

“They’re little engineers and they’re good at what they do, but there’s conflict. A lot of people don’t want them on their land.” says Tod Lum, a wildlife biologist with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife.

On public land, beavers are considered furbearers, so they can be hunted in season, and there are no limits on how many beavers hunters can trap. On private land, “you can kill as many as you want, whenever you want, however you want, and you don’t have to tell anyone about it,” explains Jakob Shockey,

executive director of The Beaver Coalition, a nonprofit working to increase public and private landowner support for beavers.

“They’re so important for the environment that we can’t afford to have them trapped out,” Shockey says, particularly when it comes to wildfires, which in 2020 were the most destructive in the state’s history, burning more than 1 million acres.

Beaver dams create pockets of lush, saturated landscape that resists fires.

“If we could boost the health of (Oregon’s) creeks, we could have a shot at our cities not burning down again. And the answer is relocating animals — beavers, to be precise.”

The two proposed laws moving through the state legislature — HB 2843, which protect beavers on public lands, and HB 2844, which would take them off the predator list, would mean stricter policies around how, when, and where they can be killed — could make an “enormous” difference in improving the health of Oregon’s landscape and biodiversity, says Suzanne Fouty, a hydrologist who helped legislators craft the bills.

“It is really serious what we are faced with, and we have very little time left to create conditions that help our wild and human communities be somewhat buffered against the impacts of climate change,” Fouty said.

It is illegal to relocate a beaver without a permit, but one tribal program has been carrying out relocations in partnership with the state’s wildlife department discreetly for years. Tod Lum, wildlife biologist for the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, has been working with the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians to move nuisance beavers onto federal land for the past decade.

“We’re considered the Beaver State, for good reason,” he said. “They’re little engineers and they’re good at what they do but there’s conflict. A lot of people don’t want them on their land.”

Lum says most landowners are happy to have the beavers relocated rather than to have the animals undergo a lethal removal alternative, describing the trapping program, which is funded by the tribe, as an “intervention.”

Relocating beavers is no mean feat. The animals prefer low elevation with low gradient land: the water flow is easier to control. However, those areas are

usually heavily populated with people. Beavers are often considered a nuisance by landowners, as their dams disrupt water flow and can flood areas, and the animals particularly prefer felling alder, aspen and apple trees.

Beavers are also highly territorial and won't always stay where they're moved. There's a list of criteria when it comes to relocation, such as ensuring whole family groups are moved, and not just individuals; moving beavers in the right season; and staying within the same watershed. Lum sends contact information of landowners who wish to have beavers removed but not killed to the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians. The tribal government then works to establish a suitable new location and eventually moves the animals.

Other tribal governments in Oregon work on attracting beaver naturally, rather than utilizing relocation initiatives that require a vast amount of hoop-jumping to gain permission.

Although the Klamath Tribes' beaver projects are fairly new, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, situated in northeastern Oregon, are old hands at attracting beavers to their land.

The CTUIR's program, Umatilla River Vision, was conceived in 2008 and laid out plans to fulfill a mission to protect, restore and enhance First Foods — water, salmon, deer, cous, and huckleberry — for the tribe's members. The river plays a pivotal role, and therefore, inextricably, so do beavers. Carl Scheeler, wildlife program manager for CTUIR, has been working on restoring a healthy river system for more than 30 years, and often shares best practices with other Oregon Nations.

“Early on it was a challenge,” he recalls. “I remember putting together fish habitat restoration projects and spending a lot of money planting riparian species of plants only to find them mowed down by the beavers.” But now, he explains, it's a “different story” after his team began creating favorable habitats for the beavers, attracting the beavers to specific areas that were identified by wildlife managers.

“We now have a recovering beaver population. Our motto is ‘we build it and they will come.’ It's the ‘Field of Dreams’ for the beaver,” Scheeler adds, referencing the famous 1989 Kevin Costner movie quote. “They are a very very important part of that dynamic river system.”

Scheeler describes beavers as the “Indian Corps of Engineers,” holding the soil back during floods, creating an opportunity for water to stay longer in the system.

“They create habitats which support all other wildlife in the system,” Scheeler says. “When we’re talking about righting the wrong that has been done by past land management, we can reset things back to far enough where the beaver can then take over and recreate the habitat they used to create all over North America. We would not have the landscape that we have if it were not for beaver.”

And, he adds, the land is “without a doubt” in a better, healthier condition than neighboring land where there are no beavers.

Tribal governments are already leading by example when it comes to using beavers to heal the land; however there is still a long way to go until the animals are viewed as a necessary species rather than as pests.

“We need to stop killing beavers where they choose to live,” says Shockey.

“It’s vital (Oregonians) have the ability to make better beaver habitat and give landowners the tools they need to peacefully coexist with the animals. They’ll travel up to 100 kilometers (62 miles) to find new habitat, but it’s hard for them to start from scratch,” he adds.

“There’s a love/hate relationship with beavers in Oregon,” Lum says. “A constant push-pull. Beavers are running out of places to be, because man wants to live there too.”

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