

The Story of Cedar Beavers

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The proliferation of cedar (juniper) over the past 100 years had caused great alarm among the country's land managers. In some areas, cedar invaded grasslands and caused problems. As cedar became thick, forage for livestock was reduced, the value of wildlife habitat was diminished, and the flow of water into aquifers was impaired. Too much cedar where it did not belong hurt both the land and the people who used the land.

Many different ways were devised to control cedar, but most methods had two things in common: cedar control was both expensive and its effectiveness short-lived. No matter how completely it was removed, cedar quickly began to reappear.

In an effort to provide a more cost-effective and long-term control, a certain species of upland beaver was widely introduced. These beavers had a voracious appetite for browse and could actually kill woody plants by their browsing habits. Because old timers had seen them eating cedar, these animals got the nickname cedar beavers. Not only did they eat trees and shrubs, but their fur and meat were economically valuable. To those plagued by cedar, this sounded like a winning combination. Not only would cedar beavers help control the troublesome shrub, but it could generate income at the same time.

Some while after the cedar beaver had been stocked, it became evident that cedar was continuing to increase. Although the beavers would sometimes browse on cedar, especially in winter, it was learned that they preferred other shrubs much more than cedar. In fact, cedar was almost last on their list of foods. Researchers found that not only was cedar a poor quality food for beavers, but it contained chemicals which made it offensive to animals which ate it. These chemicals were even found to be toxic in large amounts. Apparently, the same substances which made cedar resistant to rot, decay and insects, also made it repulsive to cedar beavers as well.

Even though the beavers did not eat large amount of the intended shrub, they did well and increased in number. The income they produced was significant and soon nearly everyone kept a herd of cedar beavers on their land. They also became a favorite game animal, and hunters would pay good money to hunt beavers. Trophy beavers were especially valuable.

Beaver raisers realized that there were certain kinds of

shrubs the beavers really liked. These shrubs provided high quality nutrition and were very palatable to cedar beavers. As the number of cedar beavers grew, a few astute herders noticed that the favorite shrubs were slowly being eliminated. However, since the loss was so gradual, it caused no great concern. There were still plenty of other shrubs they could eat.

After their favorite shrubs were gone, cedar beavers would turn to second choice shrubs for food. Although these shrubs were lower in nutritional quality and palatability, the cedar beavers still fared pretty well. As time went on and the supply of desirable shrubs decreased, cedar beavers began to eat more cedar to satisfy their appetite.

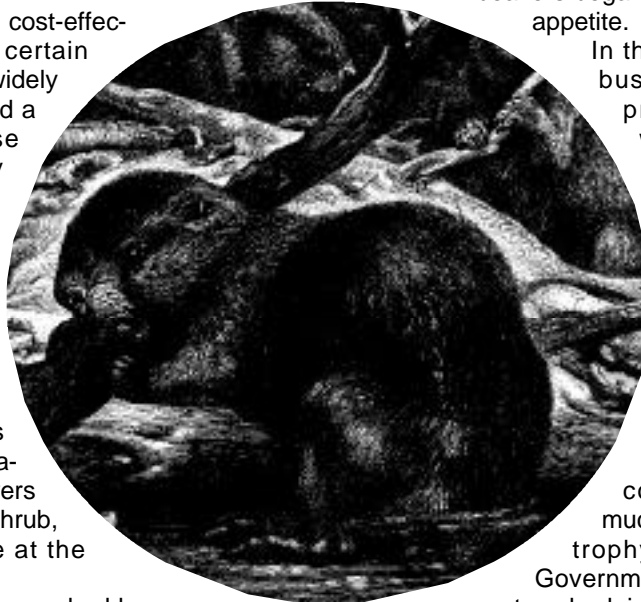
In the meantime, the cedar beaver business was good. Government predator eradication programs were implemented, and the number of beavers grew. Another government program was designed to keep fur prices high which encouraged even higher numbers of beavers. Genetic improvements were made to increase the meat production and improve fur quality. In fact, new and much larger strains of beavers were brought in from far places. As income from hunting increased, much work was done to improve the trophy value of cedar beavers. Government specialists would even come out and advise on the newest innovations in

beaver ranching.

All the while, cedar continued to increase, and other government programs were invented to help control it with more effective methods.

After many years, both the first and second choice shrubs were almost gone and the third choice shrubs were in decline in some areas. Against their instincts, beavers began to feed more and more on grasses and other kinds of vegetation.

Although the supply of good beaver shrubs had declined, beaver numbers remained high. There was still an abundance of cedar, and cedar beavers were now consuming large amounts of it. For those who disliked cedar the most, this was encouraging. Finally cedar beavers were eating enough of the troublesome shrub to actually control it. Strains of beavers were developed that could tolerate more of the toxic cedar chemicals. Some hailed the beaver as environmentally friendly, since they controlled the noxious shrub without the use of herbicides



The most enthusiastic beaver raisers continued full steam into their business of meat production, fur production and hunting. As the number of cedar beavers outstripped their food supply, cedar was brought under control in some areas. Cedar beavers increased their consumption of grasses and weeds. Gradually, the better grasses disappeared and the lesser grasses declined. What had happened to the shrubs and trees was happening to the grasses.

Ground cover became sparse and much precious topsoil was lost to erosion. Without a protective cover of vegetation, rainfall did not soak in well, and springs stopped flowing. Creeks flowed muddy after heavy rains, but otherwise only trickled or were dry. Fish life declined. Bird life declined. In desperation, beavers would jump fences and migrate to cropland fields, orchards, parks, roadsides or any other place to find forage.

Despite the new found success of biological cedar control, another group of beaver raisers began to realize what had happened. They read historical accounts of the land and talked to the old people. They learned that the land had once been productive, profitable and beautiful. Now, it was much less productive, hardly profitable, and rather ugly. Somewhere they had made mistakes which cost them dearly. They began to wonder what was worse, a proliferation of cedar, or the proliferation of cedar beavers?

In the process of finding a way to control cedar with a shrub eating animal, they had hurt the land. They all agreed that it had not been done intentionally, but rather out of a lack of knowledge and foresight. They sought to find out how they had erred, and the science and art of wise land management was born.

After much study, observation and critical thinking, they learned that the land was indeed good and that it could be used to produce food, clothing and enjoyment for mankind forever if it was used wisely and in moderation. The land had biological limits to its ability to produce desired products such as cedar beavers. If those limits were adhered to, the land remained healthy and productive. If those limits were exceeded, the land became sick and unproductive. Principles were developed to manage the land they had hurt.

The enlightened land managers sought to raise cedar beavers using their newly discovered knowledge. They learned the carrying capacity of the land and how to balance beaver numbers with beaver forage. They carefully and continuously managed their herds based on the principles of land restoration and sustainability. As they reduced the numbers of beavers, the land slowly began to improve. Although it took many years, plants began to appear which had not been seen in ages. Soil stopped washing away and gradually began to rebuild itself. Cedar also began to grow and cause problems just as it had before, but the managers chose more intelligent methods to control it.

Over time, the land continued to improve. A variety of grasses, wildflowers and birds returned. Preferred beaver shrubs began to re-establish. Springs and creeks began to flow again and aquatic life returned. What had been slowly lost was now being even more slowly regained. Cedar beavers were still considered a valuable animal and beaver raising once again became profitable and enjoyable.

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This essay on man's use of the land was written for parts of Texas where several kinds of cedar beavers are common. These include angora and spanish cedar beavers, white-tailed cedar beavers, and several kinds of wild exotic cedar beavers. Other kinds of cedar beavers exist in other parts of the country.

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