

A fascinating history of beavers shows how the species shaped the U.S.

Review by Katrina Gulliver

December 13, 2022 at 6:00 a.m. EST

Leila Philip's fascination with beavers was unexpected. As she recounts in her new book, "Beaverland," it all began with a community of beavers near her home in Woodstock, Conn. She became intrigued by their "chunky and awkward" bodies, the meaning of their tails slapping against water and their ferocious work ethic. She and her dog became regular visitors to their pond.

"I felt almost uneasy about my obsession with the beavers, as if I had fallen into what was now a well-known trope in American nature writing," Philip writes, "a woman of a certain age journeying into the natural world to discover solace. But my beavers were so completely determined, how could I not fall for them?"

And so, she finds herself one of the converts, just the latest "American eccentric" to throw herself into the study of beavers. But Philip is not the average nature writer. She once moved to Japan to learn traditional pottery, and in "Beaverland" she again joins a new culture with an anthropologist's curiosity.

One of her guides is a trapper, who teaches her to skin a beaver. She also traces the old fur industry route as far as the Pacific, and meets conservationists trying to work with beavers on river preservation. Using historic maps and descriptions, she finds her way to a beaver pond that is centuries-old.

The world she introduces to the reader is fascinating, both on scientific and historical levels. Biologically speaking, beavers should be fairly dim based on their brain-to-body ratio, but their teamwork and focus, as well as knack for engineering, suggest otherwise.

Their instinct for building is so deeply ingrained, when they hear running water — even a recording of the sound — they run toward the source and start building a dam. Their dams protect the entrance to their lodges, and they will grab anything, from sticks and mud to hubcaps and pieces of cable, to patch a leak.

According to Philip, beavers are a “keystone species,” without which other species would surely perish. They help prevent catastrophic floods by damming rivers and tributaries, which in turn create wetlands that support a diverse ecosystem. And beaver meadows — the wetlands created by runoff from beaver ponds — help retain water in the soil, allowing plants to survive through droughts.

Philip also delves into the history of human-beaver relations in Europe and North America. The importance of beaver fur as a commodity in the 19th century is hard to overstate.

America’s first multimillionaire, Philip notes, was Johann Jacob Astor, who made his fortune by buying beaver skins in North America and selling them on the lucrative London market. (In honor of the source of Astor’s wealth, a beaver graces the Astor Place subway station tiles.)

Back then, beaver fur hats were worn everywhere and beaver castor — the wax from beaver glands — was in high demand. “The lure of the trap line was considerable; in the early 1800s a fur trapper made forty times the daily pay rate of the typical farm worker back east,” Philip writes. As a result, beavers were largely cleared out of many states, only to be reintroduced in the 20th century.

But the beavers came back to a different world.

Fur, once a major industry in North America, has become a quirky hobby. At one fur auction at a VFW in central New York, Philip sees pelts sold alongside taxidermied animals. “At the end of one table, several bobcats frozen whole seem to be prowling,” she writes. “And in the corner is the pile of winter mink that Henry VIII would have snatched if he were here, given his greed for fine ermine. A collective frisson fills the room; the air tastes electric. This is what remains of the historic North American fur trade.”

Pelts today sell for a fraction of what they would have decades ago, if they can find buyers at all.

Still, beavers continue to touch our lives in big and small ways we may not notice. You may have even eaten beaver castor. The ingredient, considered a “natural food additive,” can be found in foods ranging from vanilla pudding to strawberry Twizzlers.

Despite our long intertwined history, beavers remain mysterious creatures (since they don’t have necks, they can’t be fitted with radio collars to be tracked in the wild).

Philip explains that the Algonquin called beavers “the underwater people”: both like us and unlike us. “I thought of beavers as an enigma, a constant reminder that there was a world under that water I could never fully know.” This lyrical exploration is a portal for readers to enter into the mysteries of that world themselves.

Katrina Gulliver is a historian and writer.

Beaverland

How One Weird Rodent Made America

By Leila Philip

Twelve. 336 pp. \$30

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