Evaluating the Evolution of Historic Depictions of Beavers and Beaver Culture

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Introduction

Historically, humans have used storytelling—documented as folklore, myth, or legend—in order to make sense of their environment and society. Storytelling allows us to fill in knowledge gaps or persuade others to take action, often in the name of constructing a sense of place. In the more recent past we have used mass communication and research of specific species and ecosystems to support preservation of place. For instance, viewing the beaver as a symbol of place is an interesting case due to the existence of "ecological amnesia" (a term quoted by Biologist Greg Hood in Frances Backhouse's book *They Once Were Hats*, 2015 p. 176).

In other words, it is difficult to understand the true significance of the beaver when there is little documentation of Native American history of human and beaver interaction. Furthermore, initial Western attempts to understand the beaver's significance in human civilization were profoundly misguided. Through a preliminary evaluation of a variety of literature and research, it became clear that arguments for and against beaver conservation were driven by human conflict and intervention. The ways in which people have depicted the beaver through illustration and writing reveal the evolution of this opinion.

This paper first investigates the documentation of Northwest Native American beaver myths and legends; then moves past the fur trade era to observations made by early 20th century researchers and journalists; and finally compares these historic depictions to modern perceptions of beaver ecology. This approach seeks to shed light on the complicated relationship of beaver and humans, as well as the value of the beaver throughout North American history, ending with a reflection on the beaver's meaning in sense of place in the Pacific Northwest.

Beavers in Northwest Native American Culture

In many instances, an outsider attempting to make sense of a place or culture can successfully do so in an authentic way. Conversely, the documentation of Northwest Native American myths and legends is more difficult to parse, as Western depictions will never tell a complete story due to the damaging effects of colonialism on Native American cultures. For example, there is evidence that the beaver's teeth and tail were regarded as the most significant features of a beaver by Northwest Native American tribes. This is revealed in Northwest Native American art and artifact, as beaver incisors were used for carving and other tools (Stewart, 1973 and 1979). When attempting to understand the beaver's place in Northwest Native American cultures in myth and legend, however, the act of documentation through written record often diminishes the authenticity of oral storytelling practices.

An author's method of documenting Native American myth and legend is sometimes explained in the preface of a collection of stories. In *Myths and Legends of the Pacific Northwest, Especially of Washington and Oregon* by Katharine Berry Judson (1910), she offered this disclaimer in the preface:

> "No claim is made for original work in this volume, except with regard to the selection of the myths and the rewriting of several in which the Indian simplicity and directness had been destroyed by attempted witticisms, by philosophical remarks, or by wordy explanations. A consistent effort has been made to tell these stores as the Indians told them." (p. x-xi)

Judson attempted to preserve Pacific Northwest Native American myths and legends to the best of her ability—long after Western culture dominated the landscape. By contrast, Ella A. Clark (1953) took a different approach in *Indian Legends of the Pacific Northwest*, when she outlined her writing process:

> "My two criteria in the consideration of each tale have been inseparable: Is it authentic? And is it interesting? ... my chief purpose has been to prepare a collection of Pacific Northwest myths and legends that the general reader will enjoy, either as entertainment or as information about an American way of living strange to him." (p. 2)

Though Clark compiled her collection of stories about fifty years after Judson, her intent and approach were clearly different. Whether out of preservation or entertainment, it is important to note the author's intent of documentation. Still, the art of Native American storytelling was not in the precise documentation of myth and legend, but rather in the oral tradition. Any attempt by a Westerner to Native stories through written means ultimately diminished the authenticity of the original story.

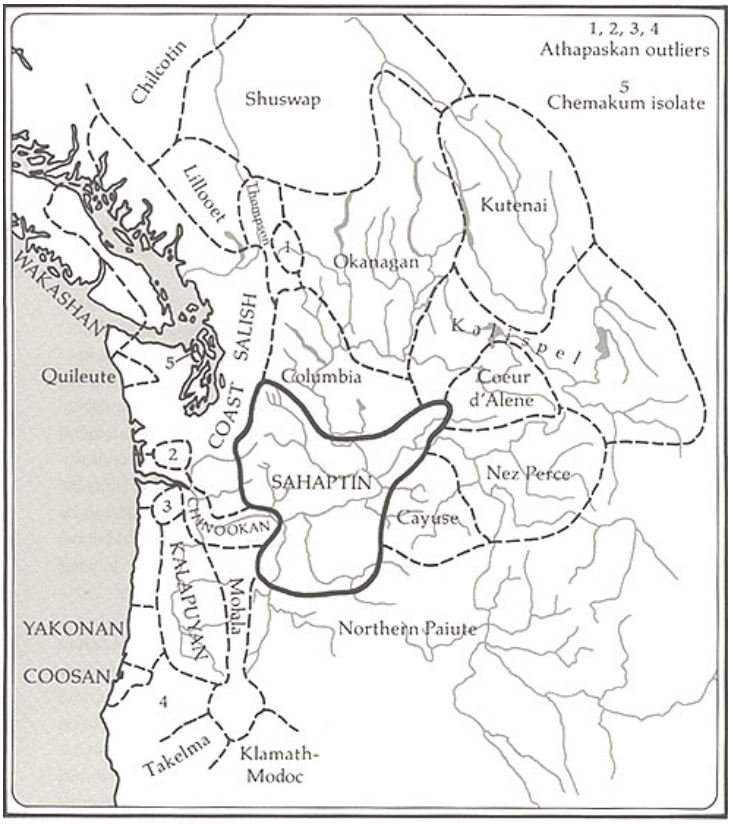

Figure 1. Languages of Pacific Northwest Tribes. National Park Service, Archeology Program, 2000.

The remainder of this section summarizes the depictions of the beaver in documented stories of Pacific Northwest Native American tribes. The purpose is to understand the information (or lack thereof) available about beaver myth and legend, specifically the significance of the beaver for Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest. The first and most common theme that emerged was the appearance of the beaver in origin stories. In many myths on the origin of fire, it is the beaver that steals fire. In the Nez Percés (or Nez Percé) version, "How Beaver Stole Fire" Beaver steals fire from the pine trees and gives fire to other trees (Judson, 1910, p. 42). In the Sanpoil version, "How Beaver Stole the Fire," (Clark, 1953, p.189) beaver steals fire from the humans and hides it under his fingernail. He brings it back to the other animals and also stores it in the trees, thus explaining why wood from trees makes fire. Other than the simple explanation of trees making fire, the Nez Percés tale also gives evidence to place. When beaver stole the fire from the pine trees, the trees chased him along the Grande Ronde River where beaver tried to trick them by running in a winding pattern, thus explaining why this river winds in certain places and why the trees are concentrated at the river's edge.

Other origin stories include the "Origin of the Tribes," (Bagley, 1930, p. 13) "Origin of Spokane and Palouse Falls," (Bagley, 1930, p. 133) and "The Beavers" (Spinden, 1908). The Nez Percés myth of "The Beavers," is particularly interesting for understanding sense of place in the Pacific Northwest. The story explains why muskrat and beaver are abundant, giving a vague clue that there was a significant beaver population living among the Nez Percés tribe. Over the course of study of the beaver, researchers have had difficulty in determining the population of beavers before the severe effects of the fur trade. While this story does not give scientific evidence or even an attempted count of the number of beavers that existed among Northwest Native American tribes, the fact that the Nez Percés told this myth to begin with shows significance in itself.

Another common depiction of beaver in Northwest Native American myth and legend is the beaver as a trickster, often in coordination or conflict with Coyote—a popular cunning character across Pacific Northwest Native American storytelling. The Coos tribe legend, "The Women Who Married the Beaver," (St. Clair and Frachtenberg, 1909) is perhaps an origin story of the beaver as a species, but it also depicts beaver seeking revenge on the women who married him, but quickly left when they realized they had married the wrong species. In "The Story of the Beaver" (from the generically titled "Oregon Folk-Lore" article from the Journal of American Folklore, Gatschet, 1891), Beaver seeks revenge on a wood rat, who wronged him at the beginning of the tale. Beaver burns down the wood rat's lodge, killing the wood rat and his mother. Finally, in "Coyote and Beaver," from Shasta and Athapascan legend (Farrand and Frachtenberg, 1915), Beaver again seeks revenge on Coyote who killed and ate Beaver's kits. In these myths, the beaver is depicted more as a revenge seeker than a trickster. He is cunning like Coyote, but only when necessary.

Furthermore, the myths and legends about the beaver's presence in the Pacific Northwest (before Western expansion and exploration) reveal a different perception than the one observed by those who took over the landscape. In *Beaver*, Rachel Poliquin (2015) summed up this notion,

> "In a sense the beavers of North America myths are easy to see. They are creative, industrious, accomplished creatures with an integrated set of skills and talents. In contrast,

> most western myths arose from not knowing beavers, which partially explains why writers tore beavers into succulent tidbits and philosophical dainties. … If beavers had gone extinct long ago, their genuine endowments would read like medieval fancy to modern readers. But beavers survived, which is perhaps the most remarkable beaver tale of all." (p. 13-14)

Again, Westerners have become aware of the knowledge gap that exists in understanding Pacific Northwest Native American interactions with landscapes, our historic exploitation of those landscapes, and the later attempt to repair them. The remainder of this paper looks at these attempts to compile a better understanding of the beaver through researcher observations and mass communication mediums.

Western Depictions

In 1913, A. Radclyffe Dugmore, a wildlife photographer and illustrator, published *The Romance of the Beaver*. Dugmore intended for the book to both document beaver culture through detailed diagrams, illustrations, and photographs as well as advocate for wildlife conservation. He commented on the difficulty to observe and document beavers through photography, "The best pictures I have ever obtained of lions and other big and dangerous beasts were secured with far less difficulty than even the worst of my beaver studies" (Dugmore, 1913, p. 219). His work came shortly after President Theodore Roosevelt implemented conservation policies, and Dugmore was clearly influenced by the movement, even though his observations were largely made across the border in Canada. Dugmore (1913) somewhat succinctly took on the task of breaking down preconceived notions of the beaver and beaver culture through detailed documentation of beavers' daily activities:

> "The upsetting of pet beliefs is always a thankless task; but this is not a book of fairy tales. The truth, so far as possible, must be told even at the risk of being called to account for being too practical and not indulging sufficiently in romance." (Dugmore, p. 57)

With a number of similar passages scattered throughout the book, Dugmore successfully balanced scientific documentation and colorful commentary in order to achieve the conservation advocacy tone of his writing—without compromising legitimacy.

Revisiting Poliquin's book, *Beaver*, she approached the topic of the beaver in a similar way as Dugmore. Like Dugmore, she dissected myth and legend of the beaver by describing the beaver as a sum of its parts and how those parts have been exploited or celebrated throughout North American history. Though she did not take on the task of observing and photographing beavers in their wild habitats, as done by Dugmore, she documented the depiction of the beaver and its habits throughout time and many different forms. For example, a map of America made by Nicholas de Fer in 1698 included a detailed illustration of beavers building a dam at Niagara Falls. Poliquin (2015) noted that in addition to Fer depicting 52 beavers at work on one dam, his key describing the types of beavers is particularly revealing of his artistic license:

> "Each animal is identified by a letter keyed to a legend, which catalogues the beavers as: (a) lumberjacks who cut big trees with their teeth; (b) carpenters who cut the long branches; (c) bearers of wood for construction; (d) those who make the mortar; (e)

commandant or architect; (f) inspector of the disabled; (g) those who drag the mortar on their tails; (h) beaver with a disabled tail from having worked too hard; (i) masons who build the dam; and (l) those who tap with their tails to make the masonry firmer." (p. 126-127)

This depiction (Figure 2) further proves that humans have attempted to understand the work of the beaver, only to fail by equating the beavers' work to that of their own society. Fer's beaver depiction was even plagiarized by Heman Moll in 1715 (Figure 3).

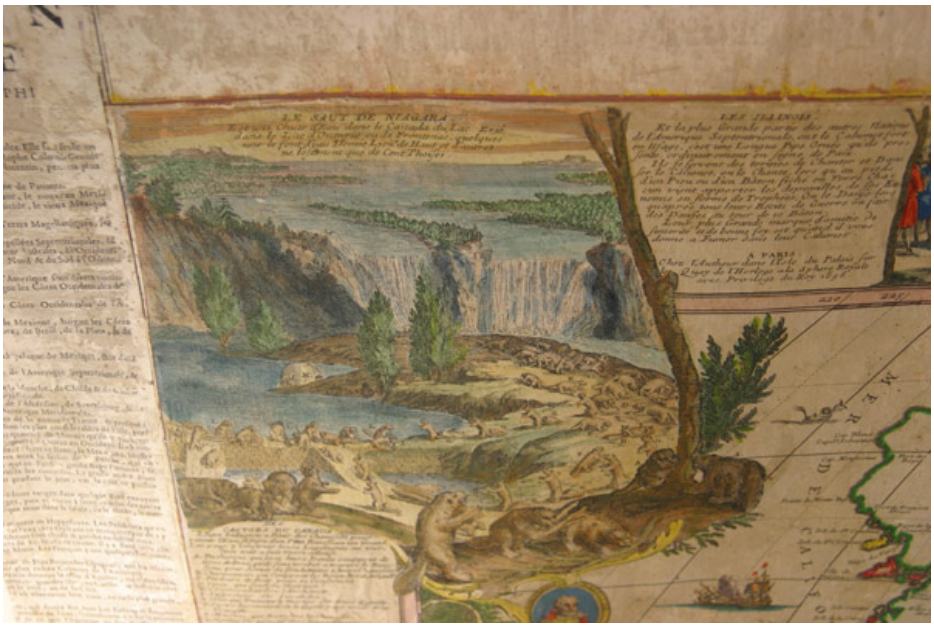

Figure 2. Nicholas de Fer's original beaver depiction, 1698. Source: Library and Archives Canada

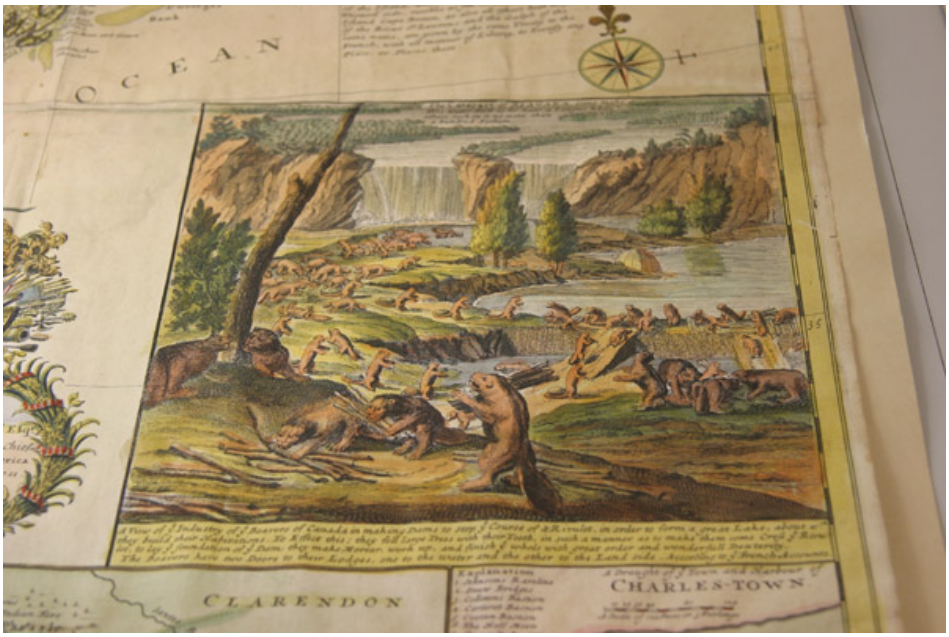

Figure 3. Herman Moll's imitation of Fer's beaver map, 1715. Source: Library and Archives Canada

Poliquin extended her analysis of the beaver through the 1930s, in which she explained, "beavers were icons of wilderness preservation, not wetland protection" (p. 177), and continued on to the present when humans have more frequently come into contact with beaver. She notes that these interactions draw from the sprawling settlement patterns of Americans, which at times encroach on beaver habitat (Poliquin, 2015, p. 186). This is not to say that Dugmore and other scholars of his time were not aware of the ecological impact of beaver culture, as Dugmore (1913) eluded to their greater impact, "No credit is given to them [beavers] for the thousands of floods … but that is not the subject of this book. Our interest is in the beaver" (p. 149). Dugmore's work provided a substantial basis for conservation and wildlife management, but many in the public interest of his time were still too close to the decline of the fur trade to fully appreciate the long-term effects of beaver habitat on ecosystems. The works of Poliquin and other contemporary researchers, such as Backhouse and Dietland Muller-Schwarze (*The Beaver: Its Life and Impact*, 2011), build upon the initial work of Dugmore and others of his time in attempting to reach a general population of readers.

Beavers in the News

Further illustrating the chorological evolution of North American perceptions and depictions of the beaver, reporting from news outlets such as the New York Times or The Oregonian provides significant evidence. While the previous examples draw from analysis of myths, legends, observations, and other cultural evidence, news articles can provide another angle and capture the public interest of the time. In conducting newspaper archive research (made available through digital connections to the New York Times and the Oregonian), major themes emerged paralleling the previous claims that perception of beaver management evolved from a wildlife conservation mindset to a broader ecological impact, largely made visible through increased beaver and human interaction.

Articles from the New York Times from 1889 to 1937 help to explain the dynamics of the debate for wildlife conservation, specifically the conservation of beaver populations. At a time closer to the effects of the early North American fur trade, it was difficult to ignore both the lasting effects on beaver populations as well as the concerns of the former trappers, who at times felt conservation efforts robbed them of their livelihood. In "The Nation's Wildlife" and "Wild Animals Increase" there was an emphasis on conservation efforts. Among the other results for beaver-related news during this time period, there were also a couple of book reviews, revealing some presence of public interest in the subject. Finally, these articles, often written for a national audience, also looked ahead to the future of beaver culture in American landscapes. Like Dugmore and others, it was clear to some that the beaver could have profound effects on ecological processes beyond wildlife conservation in parks or preserves.

The articles in the Oregonian during the early 20th century parallel the tone of the New York Times writing, but at a more local level. In "The Oregon Beaver" (1905) and "The Skill of the Beaver" (1922), there was more urgency to address the visible decrease in beaver population and some even speculated that the species was nonexistent in Oregon. There was also even

stronger evidence of the dynamics between human and beaver, specifically trappers who took on farming:

> "The old trappers made poor farmers at their best, for reasons inherent in the nature of two callings so utterly dissimilar, those who adopted agriculture when the disappearance of the beaver from old Oregon forced them to turn in another direction to make a living were not the type who developed the resources of the country and made it great." ("Re-establishing The Beaver," 1921).

The dynamic between beaver and farmer (whether the farmer was a former trapper or not) was referenced in Dugmore's *The Romance of the Beaver*, giving evidence to its relevance as a known conflict:

> "Do the farmers realise what debt they owe to the beaver? I fear not. Their one idea if a beaver is found anywhere within their property is to immediately ill it. For they regard its wretched skin, worth perhaps ten dollars at most as being the only value of the beaver, and so the wretched beast is caught and its skin saved, while the brains which have accomplished so much are thrown to the dogs … But a trip into any part of the county where the beaver still exists in its wild state will show how blind people are to their own interest in allowing these animals to be destroyed." (p. 145)

While conflict between humans and beaver was evident in the early 20th Century in Oregon, articles in the Oregonian also referenced the local compassion for beavers. From students taking in a rogue beaver on the University of Oregon campus in Eugene, to a lighthearted story about "Paddy Paddlewhisk, The Lazy Beaver," (Figure 4) it is clear that there was a public recognition for beaver culture and the presence of the beaver in Oregon. Still, the perception of the beaver was divided and it was not clear how the species would repopulate over the next century.

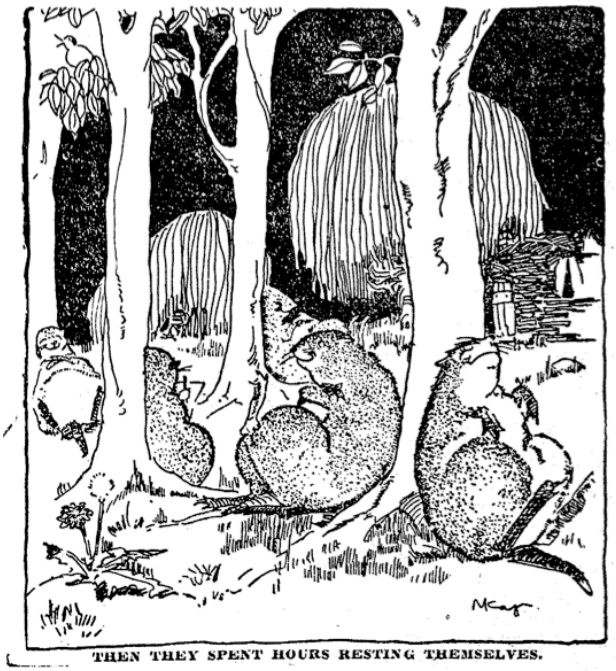

Figure 4. "Paddy Paddlewhisk the Lazy Beaver" as depicted in the Oregonian in 1917—a quite contrary illustration of the typical "busy beaver."

In news coverage of the New York Times from the late 20th century through today, there was a definite emphasis on the persistent conflict between human and beaver. Articles with headlines such as, "Beaver Damage Brings Complaint" or "Beaver Population Poses Some Problems," addressed the increasing issues that humans had with beaver habitats encroaching on their property. Many of these articles addressed the advantages of beaver habitat and even commented on the public reaction to beaver culture. For example, another beaver appeared in the Bronx River, "the first to be spotted in three years," in 2010. The Wildlife Conservation Society took a public poll to name the beaver, resulting in "Justin Beaver." In Oregon, specifically, there are action management plans and recommendations for addressing the human-beaver conflict. From "Living with American Beaver" by the City of Portland to "Landowner Incentives and Tolerances for Managing Beaver Impacts in Oregon" by affiliates of Oregon State University, there is a clear commitment to promoting coexistence among human and beaver populations.

Conclusion: Beavers and Sense of Place in the Pacific Northwest

In "Beavers, Firs, Salmon, and Falling Water," William Lang reflects on theories of regional identity, or sense of place. He argued that though the identity of the Pacific Northwest has evolved over time, the common thread that remains is an intense tie to environment as a way of life:

> "There is not one regional icon but several, among them beavers, firs, salmon, and falling water. Regional identity can be particularistic and collective, resonant with an individual or a group. What is significant in the construction of regional identity in the Pacific Northwest is its consistent environmental content, regardless of the era." (Lang, 2003, p.160)

This idea parallels much of the work evaluated above, in that the study of beavers and beavers' identity in North American culture is a fragmented collection of knowledge. Furthermore, the understanding of the beaver is in itself a study of sense of place. Per Gustafson's work, "Meanings of Place: Everyday Experience and Theoretical Conceptualizations," defined the triangulation of meaning of place as "self," "others," and "environment." Looking at the symbol of the beaver, and how the species is depicted in Pacific Northwest history and culture, humans have found meaning in all three. Through the fur trade, we have seen beaver in our sense of self as a social status symbol. The elusiveness of beaver culture can be categorized as "other," representing our knowledge that beavers belong in our place, but we are at times uncertain of the particular significance. Finally, we recognize the beaver as having meaning in environment, first recognizing that societies of the North American West would be much different without the symbol of the beaver and now, the recognition of the beaver's place in the ecosystem. As humans continually attempt to parse the complex nature of beaver culture, there will always be gaps in this species' history in North America. As Kim Stafford observed, we are often attempting to link stories in our search for meaning in place, "Someone young meets something old. The traveler meets the resident. Our prosperity is based on the meeting of these two stories, and we need to learn to carry out this meeting. If one story kills the other, we have nothing" (Stafford, 1999).

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Figure 2, Figure 3 Library and Archives Canada (2006, August 11). *ARCHIVED – Detecting the Truth. Fakes, Forgeries and Trickery: Map Imitations.* Retrieved from https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/forgery/002035-3000-e.html

Figure 4 Paddy Paddlewhisk, the Lazy Beaver. (1917, October 14). *The Oregonian*.