

BEAVERS



The industrious beaver can dam a small stream in a matter of hours

No animal would be more "Canadian" than the beaver, yet these thick-set furry rodents once existed widely not only in most of North America but also in Europe. For an animal which often serves as a national symbol, it rates very well. Who, after all, could really dislike a beaver? It is described by scientists as being "shy", "industrious" and "cooperative". A fourth, less positive epithet is "placid". However, in spite of these calming characteristics, recent research on the beaver shows that it is capable of deforestation on a vast scale through its dam-building activities. Scientists working on the Matamek River in the wilderness of eastern Quebec have found that this animal, which spends half its life below the water's surface and rarely sets foot on land, changes the physical, chemical, ecological, topographical and animal population characteristics of the areas it settles. If this is true today, it was even more true in prehistory when the beaver was a much bigger animal. Today's castor canadensis, which is found in North America, is on average, about 1.3 metres long, including its 0.3 metre long tail. But the prehistoric beaver, which roamed the Eocene swamps, castor ohioensis, was double the size.

Scientists believe that, given this size, plus its dam-building activity, the prehistoric beaver may have been responsible for the creation of some of the extensive prairies and wetlands which today dot North America. These topographical features may have occurred because as soon as beavers move into a new stream, they proceed to build a dam, create a pond, dig canals, and then, stock twigs for their winter feeding at the bottom of the pond.