

The beaver's instinct to build dams and houses and store food had a profound effect on the landscape. Its dams formed pools where fish and muskrats could live and waterfowl could feed. The impoundment of water prevented early spring floods from carrying away the soil. In time the dams filled up with silt and organic material and the beaver raised them higher and thus built up broad, fertile valleys. In these valleys the deciduous trees that formed the beaver's favourite food grew up, but were followed by the climax evergreen forest, where spruce and pine predominated. Such trees do not provide much food for any animals but the squirrel and spruce grouse; and the beaver died out or was forced to leave. Thus its own handiwork led to its undoing.

Recovery of the Beaver

When the era of lumbering began, great stands of spruce and pine fell before the woodsman's axe. Many forest fires started and burned over vast areas. The first step in forest regeneration after heavy cutting or fire is the growth of hardwoods, birch, aspen, poplar and willow -- all preferred beaver foods. Unfortunately, the beaver had been so heavily trapped by that time that its recovery in numbers was slow at first. Protective laws were passed and beaver were transferred on a considerable scale from areas where they were plentiful to other areas where they were scarce or absent. As a result the species has made an astonishing comeback in the past few decades. There are now believed to be more beaver in Canada than in 1530, when Jacques Cartier first reported the trade in their pelts. Indeed they have become so abundant that they are a nuisance in some areas. Their dam-building activities flood highways and fields and their sharp teeth are just as effective on ornamental trees as on the willows along a wilderness creek.

Another animal that has benefited from the same conditions is the moose. In primitive times the moose browsed in the evergreen forest on the willow and aspen of the forest openings or, in summer, by feeding in shallow water, where water-lilies abounded. Upon the destruction of the original forest the moose, too, was able to find an abundance of food and began to extend its range and increase rapidly in numbers.

The Western Moose

The Province of British Columbia provides an excellent example of what can happen under these circumstances. Before 1900 there were few, if any, moose in the Pacific province. But great forests of deciduous trees were springing up in the wake of intensive lumbering and wide-spread fires. A few moose migrated through the Rocky Mountains into this new habitat. By 1935 they had increased to thousands. In a few years there were many more than the land could produce food for. The result was starvation and an excellent opportunity for disease and parasites to strike. The moose began to die off. The decline was rapid although not complete. Today there is a stable population able to live on the food available and furnish excellent hunting. It may seem paradoxical, but it is true that, if more moose had been killed before 1935, the population might have been larger today and much of a wasted resource would have been salvaged. Man, the forest, and the moose would all have benefited.