

EXTENSION NOTES



OPTIONS FOR CONTROLLING BEAVER ON PRIVATE LAND

Dams and ponds created by beaver can sometimes be a nuisance on private land — flooding agricultural fields and forests, washing out roads and killing trees.

This Extension Note provides information about options for living with and controlling beaver activity on private land.

INTRODUCTION

The North American beaver (*Castor canadensis*) is native to Ontario. As a result of habitat changes, disease and the whims of fashion, its numbers have fluctuated dramatically over time. The craze for beaver hats in Europe in the 1700s was a driving force behind the exploration and settlement of Canada. During the height of the fur trade trend, over 200,000 beaver pelts a year were shipped across the ocean. This caused a decline in beaver populations, however, over the long term, settlement has helped beaver populations to rebound by providing new habitat.

Lands that were cleared for agriculture and later abandoned and allowed to return to forest cover produced an abundance of the beaver's favourite foods — young poplar, ash and birch. The deepening of streams to enhance the drainage of agricultural land and the creation of municipal water drains also improved beaver habitat by providing deeper sources of running water. As a

result of these and other changes, beaver are thriving and coming into conflict with landowners.

Landowners have two choices when it comes to dealing with beaver on their land: They can share their property with the visitors or they can take steps to remove them. Management of beaver on private land is the responsibility of landowners. The Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources provides advice to landowners on beaver problems, however, it does not participate in beaver control programs unless the source of the problem

is on land owned or managed by the Crown. An understanding of why beaver do what they do is important to the successful outcome of whichever option landowners choose.

WHY BEAVERS BUILD DAMS AND PONDS

Beaver are most comfortable in the water. On land, they are clumsy and vulnerable to predators. They build dams to create ponds so that they never have to stray far from

shore as they forage for food. The ponds also ensure that the water around their homes, which are called lodges and are





Beaver ponds provide excellent wetland habitat for wildlife.

separate from their dams, is deep enough to allow them to move freely under the ice in the winter.

Beaver usually build lodges in areas that can't be reached from the land, such as the middle of a pond. This reduces exposure to predators and allows them safe access to food. Sometimes they build lodges along the shorelines of lakes and rivers to take advantage of areas of deep water.

Beaver have three basic criteria for choosing a dam site. They need trees for food, a source of running water and the right topography for a pond. They usually go no farther than 50 metres from shore to cut trees for food

and building. When beaver exhaust food within this area, they either raise the depth of pond so that they can safely reach new sources of food or move to a new location.

Fall is the most active time for beaver as they gather and store their winter food supplies. They cut branches from trees, drag them into the water and anchor them in the mud near their lodge for later use. They prefer young trees that are easy to fell and move.

Beaver do not hibernate, and they need plenty of food to survive the winter. The average family needs an estimated one-half hectare of forest for its winter food supply.

THE BENEFITS AND THE HARMS OF BEAVER ACTIVITY

Beaver play an important role in our ecosystem by creating wetland habitat for many animals, birds and insects. In fact, beaver ponds are one of the best places to observe wildlife. Here, you are likely to see deer coming

to drink, birds such as herons and red-winged blackbirds feeding and nesting, and plant species such as narrow-leaved plantain or arrow arum. Wetlands created by beaver can also provide spawning, rearing and feeding

areas for fish. They also act as natural reservoirs, reducing flooding in the spring and increasing stream flow during the dry summer months.

Beaver become a nuisance when they interfere with our use of the land or create hazardous conditions. Beaver

dams and ponds can flood large areas of agricultural land and forest. They can wash out roads. Permanent flooding can kill trees. When beavers cut trees they can sometimes create hazards if branches get hung up in other trees rather than fall to the ground.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

WAIT AND ENJOY

In many situations the best way to manage beaver is to leave them alone and enjoy watching the natural cycle of a beaver pond and the wildlife that are dependent upon this wetland environment. The beavers will eventually eat all of the food that is available to them from the water and move on to other areas, leaving your property unattractive to beavers for a long time to come.

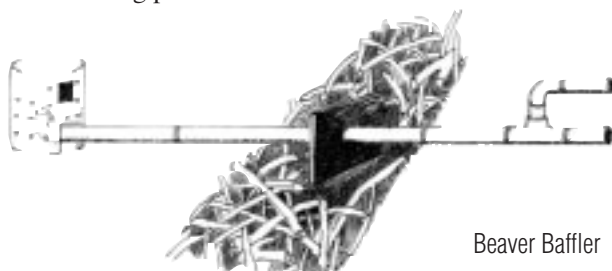
THE BEAVER BAFFLER

An effective method for discouraging beaver from using your property is the beaver baffler. Constructed of one or two large-diameter drain pipes (7.5 to 10 cm), the baffler is a long-term solution to beaver occupancy.

The drain pipes are installed through the dam, with one end in the deep part of the pond and the other downstream, far away from the dam. The distance between the dam and the drain outlet is important because beaver are attracted to the sound of running water and are compelled by instinct to dam it up. The farther the distance from the dam, the greater the success in confusing the beaver.

Rather than creating a pond upstream of the dam, the water flows through the dam and downstream. Because the drain is under the surface of the water, the beaver are unlikely to discover why they can't control the water level in the pond. Eventually they will become discouraged and move on, leaving behind a small pond. Over time new beaver may move in, but they will not stay long if they can't increase the depth of the pond.

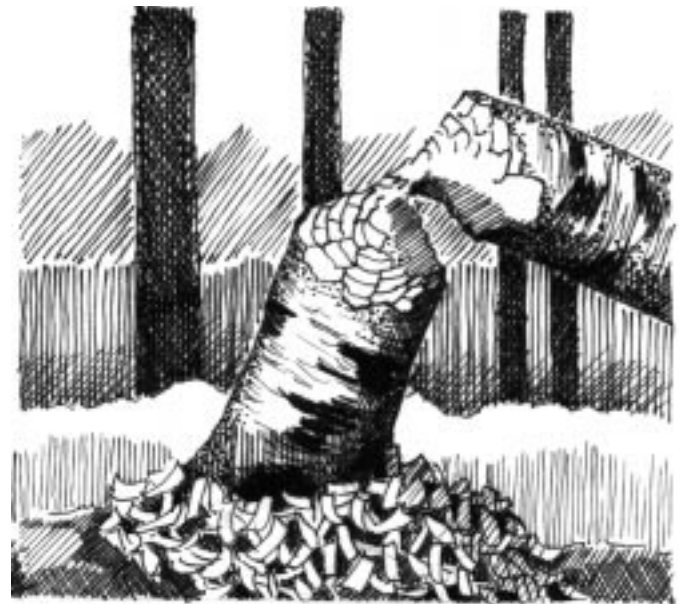
Periodic maintenance of the baffler is required. Installation is sometimes done with the help of local naturalist or hunter groups which have an interest in maintaining ponds as wildlife habitat.



TREE PROTECTION

Trees can be protected by wrapping heavy mesh hardware cloth, sheet metal or a few layers of chicken wire around the base of a tree to a height of one metre. Repellent chemicals can also be used. Repellents have an offensive smell or taste, and are available in stores.

Tree protection is useful for reducing beaver damage on residential or cottage properties, however it is not practical on a large scale.



TRAPPING

Trapping is a quick but temporary solution. As long as the attractive habitat remains, it won't take long before new beaver move in. If trapping is combined with dam destruction, beaver may be discouraged for only one or two seasons.

When trapping, landowners should consider humanely destroying beaver rather than relocating them. By relocating a beaver, you can give your problem to someone else. If you release a beaver in an area that seems like suitable habitat, the area is probably already occupied by beavers. The established beavers will attack the newcomer and may kill it.

Trapping during the open season (winter) is recommended so that the pelt can be used. Trapping during the closed season (spring, summer and fall) should only be considered if serious property damage is occurring.

Unless you are a farmer, trapping on private land must be done by a licensed trapper. Contact your local OMNR office for the names of licensed trappers in your area. Trappers may require a fee for their services.

SHOOTING

People are allowed to shoot beaver on their own property. The *Game and Fish Act* allows private landowners to destroy a nuisance animal if the animal is damaging their property. Check with your municipal office first to determine if the discharge of firearms is prohibited by local by-laws in your area.

As with trapping, shooting is a temporary measure. As long as there is suitable habitat, other beaver will quickly move in.

DAM DESTRUCTION

Destruction of beaver dams is not recommended. It does nothing to make the area unattractive for beaver. In addition, this action has significant legal consequences that must be considered.

If you destroy a dam without removing the beaver, they will rebuild the dam, often the same day, using new trees for the repairs. If you destroy a dam and remove the beaver, other beaver will soon move in to the attractive site.

Removing a dam releases the water that has been held back. This may cause flooding and siltation downstream.



This is an important consideration, particularly for your neighbours downstream.

When considering the removal of a dam that has been in place for more than three years, you should be aware of the potential to violate environmental legislation under the *Canada Fisheries Act*, the *Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act* or the *Public Lands Act*. Seek advice from your local OMNR office. You may need to take extra precautions to ensure public safety and protection of fish habitat.

Dams should not be destroyed in the winter because this may cause beaver to starve or freeze to death. Cruelty to animals is an offence under the Canadian Criminal Code.

PLANNING YOUR BEAVER CONTROL STRATEGY

Before taking any action to control beaver on your property, you are obliged by common law to take appropriate care to ensure that your activities will not cause any damage to your neighbours' property.

Also consult with the staff of your local OMNR office to ensure that your plans will not violate regulations under the *Canada Fisheries Act*, the *Lakes and Rivers*

Improvement Act, the *Public Lands Act* and the *Game and Fish Act*.

OMNR will provide information on planning and installing beaver bafflers, local naturalist and hunter organizations and licensed trappers. Please contact your local OMNR area office for more information.

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