

## Beaver believers: Native Americans promote resurgence of 'nature's engineers'



A beaver is released on to a stretch of river in northern Washington that has been prepped for its arrival. Photograph: Morgan Heim

The rodents are often considered 'nuisance animals', but they can play a vital role in maintaining healthy landscapes

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**M**olly Alves steps down hard on the edge of a heavy wire trap,

forcing its sides open with her hands. With care she lays the poised trap, baited with twigs and branches, in a bracingly cold stream. Her target? A beaver.

Beavers are often considered "nuisance" animals on the US west coast and, if captured, are destroyed by animal control companies.

But the beaver picked up by Alves is to be transported to Alves' employers, the Tulalip Tribes, a nation in Washington's western corner. This Native American community, and others, are at the vanguard of the "beaver believer" movement, which holds that the rodents can play an essential role in maintaining healthy landscapes.

Beavers are known as nature's engineers, due to their dam-building habits. For decades they have been hated by landowners, who dislike the animals' tendency to fell trees and flood areas. However, their dams – although seen by

some as a nuisance – help control the quantity and quality of water flow, while their ponds create habitat for numerous plants and animal species, including fish.



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The Tulalip Tribes had to fight a lengthy legal battle in order to gain permission to relocate beavers on to their lands. Following a historic win, the tribes began bringing the animals back into their community in 2014.

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“It really was monumental,” says Alves, a biologist at the tribes’ wildlife agency who oversees the beaver program, which is renowned across the state.

“Now we get calls from landowners who have heard about our project,” she explains. “They have beavers on their property, flooding roads, felling trees, and are frustrated because they don’t understand how to deal with the problem.

Back in 2018, Washington’s Cowlitz Indian Tribe started on an ambitious project: to reintroduce beavers back into the Gifford Pinchot national forest, a wild region on the slopes of the Cascade mountains, as part of efforts to reclaim indigenous land management practices. The animals had not been in the region since the 1930s, after they were trapped into near-extinction in North America during the 1800s fur trade.

In partnership with the Cascade Forest Conservancy, the tribe has spent the last two years capturing beavers from private lands, where their dams are often dynamited, and relocating them on to tribal land.

The project has been such a success that the tribe was recently awarded a grant to survey beaver habitat, mapping the impact beavers have made on the land, in order to create a relocation model for other communities in the state – and perhaps further afield.



Beavers caught from around the Seattle area stay at the Tulalip, Washington, fish hatchery as a sort of halfway house between capture and relocation. Photograph: Morgan Heim

“Our culture and members depend upon a healthy ecosystem,” says Phil Harju, the chairman of the Cowlitz Indian Tribe. “Beaver are a key species that enable the ecosystem to function properly.”

The successes in Washington have been keenly followed by tribal nations further down the coast.

“Beavers are prominent in our village stories,” says Frankie Myers, the vice-chair of California’s Yurok Tribe. “He’s an architect, and they’ve gone through the same struggles against Europeans as us. The beavers were viewed as pests and driven off the land. We’re looking to bring the beaver back again, to help us manage the land like they used to.”

Interest has been spurred by California’s [most intense wildfire season on record](#) – in 2020 the state experienced five of its six largest-ever fires. [Research](#) published last year revealed beavers can be used to mitigate the spread of fire because beaver-inhabited land is simply too wet to burn. But tribes in California have their own legal battle to wage: relocation of beavers in the state is illegal, and so communities have turned to other strategies, such as building beaver analogues – manmade dams – in order to attract the animals to their watersheds.

“Doing a full beaver reintroduction is difficult, and so we just decided to build analogues to get them to come to us instead,” says Roger Boulby, the Yurok’s watershed restorationist, who is restoring the Klamath River by physically

moving the river's path, as well as trying to bring back beavers to help boost salmon populations.

“The first beaver pond we built was five years ago and we saw their presence helped with the fish populations. And so last summer we built another analogue, and now we've put in a few of them. They've changed the landscape into this lush environment, which is great for the fish. This little creek is now this huge, deep body of water.”

Until legislation changes in California, which classes beavers as a detrimental species, the tribe is limited to building suitable environments in the hopes of attracting beavers.

“It's unfortunate that the situation is so political but that is the case right now, given that the California department [of fish and wildlife] is reluctant to support beavers,” says Kate Lundquist, the director of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, a California organization that promotes biological and cultural diversity.

If projects in states like Washington go well, “it could open the door for future relocations,” says Lundquist. “We're using these projects as pilots to show that beaver rewilding can be done in a responsible way, and hopefully that will answer some of the concerns, and ideally make it available to those not on sovereign lands.”

Sarah Beesley, the Yurok Tribe's biologist, acknowledges that “there are huge stumbling blocks.” But “what's really cool,” she continues, “is that Tribal Nations are breaking through these barriers.”