



# Wild Illinois History

## Beaver, or not?

### Concepts:

- The presence of wildlife can have positive and negative effects on human activities.

### Objectives:

Students will be able to:

- Discuss the potential for wildlife benefits and conflicts.
- Understand that there may be variety of opinions addressing one issue.
- Simulate a town board meeting and discuss and decide on an issue related to the environment.

### IL Standards: 17C

### Materials:

- Print and cut out copies of the Roles/Opinion cards to distribute to the student groups.
- Print and distribute copies of the map of Beaverton.

### Space:

- A classroom

### Key Points:

- People make decisions that impact the environment.
- In democratic societies citizens have a voice in shaping resource and environmental management decisions.
- Wildlife management techniques can be used to reduce human-wildlife conflicts.

### Educator Background:

Beavers were common in Illinois through the early 1800s. Without laws to protect them, their numbers declined so much from hunting and trapping that they were no longer considered an important part of the fur trade by 1850. Only a few beaver colonies remained by 1900. When protective regulations were enacted in 1933, it was too late. It is not clear whether beaver were totally eliminated (extirpated) from the state for a period of time, but the population was not able to sustain itself.

According to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, the reintroduction of beavers began in 1929 when the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released an adult male and a female in JoDaviess and Carroll counties. Sixteen more were released at this location in 1936. The USDA Forest Service released beaver in southern Illinois starting in 1935, when 19 animals were stocked in Pope County. The last reintroduced beavers, one male

and two females, were obtained by the Illinois Department of Conservation in 1938 and released in Union County. Since neighboring states, such as Iowa and Indiana had similar reintroduction programs established, it is likely that beaver began to move into suitable Illinois habitats on their own.

From 1946 through 1951, beavers were live-trapped in areas with high populations and released in areas with low numbers. This program was so successful that the number of beavers available for relocation from sites where they were causing damage eventually outpaced the need for restocking efforts. During December 1951, a 15-day trapping season was opened to help curb complaints associated with flooding, tree damage, and crop loss. Longer seasons with fewer restrictions were put in place as the statewide population grew.

The benefits of replacing a native species back into a habitat are many. Bio-diversity is improved and the legacy of our natural heritage is restored. The action of flooding from beaver dam construction can provide wetland habitat for a wide range of species. Beaver can also present problems when their activities clash with human concerns. Beaver dams can create flooding on crop land or in housing areas. They can block navigable streams, making them inaccessible to boat traffic. Beaver chew and drop trees that humans might prefer to have standing. Near agricultural fields, beaver have been known to eat corn, causing crop loss. In some cases, damming can flood out already environmentally sensitive areas, even harming threatened or endangered species. Culverts and drainage ditches become inoperable when blocked by a beaver dam.

Today, to discourage beaver, trees can be wrapped with wire fencing. Dams under construction can be broken repeatedly to restore water flow. Beaver “pipes” or beaver pond levelers can be installed to regulate the water level and reduce flooding. Beaver that continue to be problematic are usually trapped.

This role playing scenario illustrates the issues that people may have faced in the 1930s and 1940s when beaver were being reintroduced in areas of Illinois. Today, the beaver population has been restored, and beavers move in and out of areas on their own, in some cases causing conflicts with human activity.

**Procedure:**

It’s 1945. The Beaverton (fictional town) Conservation Club is considering working with wildlife authorities from the U.S. Forest Service who wish to release beavers on the outskirts of town. Members of the community are divided about whether or not this is a good idea. It may be helpful if the students research beavers to learn how and where they live.

A town meeting has been called by the town board to hear concerns on all sides of the issue. During the board meeting they will listen to the arguments and after a short recess, they will make a ruling about whether or not beaver should be released outside Beaverton.

Read the attached proposal (or distribute copies) to the students. Share the map of Beaverton with the students, so they can see the proposed release site.

Assign the six roles described below. Students can work in small teams depending on the size of the class. Distribute the role cards so students can familiarize themselves with the issues that are important to the group they are portraying. Encourage students to put the arguments in their own words.

Explain to the students that role playing is a little like acting in a play. Sometimes the opinion they must share in their role playing differs from what they believe about an issue, but they must try to think and speak like the people they are portraying. If possible bring items such as hats, ties, and other props that set the tone.

If students are working in teams to represent roles, have some of the students work on posters to illustrate their opinion about the issue. The signs can be hung or held during the town meeting. Posters can also be created as an extension activity after the board meeting. Before the advent of television, posters were a vital communication media to promote ideas. Students can research period posters

Let the students know that each “group” will have two minutes to explain their opinions to the board. To involve more students and get them to work together, more than one member of the group should help in the presentation to the board. Explain that board members won’t want to hear the same arguments repeated from each group member, but that they should think about who can present which points. To clarify the arguments, students can chart out the roles and talking points for their group.

Give the teams or groups about 15 to 20 minutes to decide what they will say and to create a poster. During this time, circulate to each group to see if they understand their role. After about 15 minutes, select three to five students from various groups to be the town board. Select another student to be the timekeeper.

The town board should be seated at the front of the room. They will read the proposal from the Conservation Club aloud and then hear arguments FOR and AGAINST the proposal. Presentations by each group should be limited to two minutes, and the time keeper will signal when time is up. *Optional:* Following the original arguments, you can choose to allow the groups to rebut arguments. These should be limited to one minute each.

After hearing the arguments, the town board will recess for five to ten minutes to come to a decision about whether or not beaver should be released on the Conservation Club land. While the board is making their decision, use the time with the remaining students to talk about how they feel about what should be done in Beaverton.

**Questions:**

- ❑ Is the decision easier or harder than they thought?
- ❑ Are there ways that a compromise can be made?
- ❑ Would it help to reduce the number of beaver released?
- ❑ Could they be released in a different area?
- ❑ Could, or should, a program be set up to manage or control the beaver population if it gets too large, or causes conflicts?
- ❑ Is there any wildlife today in your area that causes conflict with human activity?

**Extensions:**

- ❑ Students can research ways that beaver conflicts can be minimized today using methods such as beaver pond levelers.
- ❑ Students can research how the Illinois Department of Natural Resources manages the beaver population today through trapping seasons.
- ❑ Find out if there are licensed businesses in your area that provide nuisance wildlife control.

**Proposal:**

April, 1945

Dear Members of the Beaverton Town Board:

As members of the Beaverton Conservation Club, we have been approached by the U.S. Forest Service to release four pairs of beaver along Castor Creek outside of town. The Forest Service would like to release the beavers on Conservation Club property that has woods, fields and the creek to provide a good place for the beavers to live.

As you know beavers were once plentiful in our area. They were hunted and trapped almost to extinction. Now, in 1945 beavers are coming back thanks to the efforts by the Department of Conservation and the U.S. Forest Service who are relocating beavers to increase their population.

We will work with the Forest Service, who will obtain the beavers and would like to release them next month.

We feel the addition of beavers to our property will add to the natural beauty of the site and brings back one of Illinois' native animals to our area.

Sincerely,

Members of the Beaverton Conservation Club

## **Roles/Opinions:**

### **Castor Creek Canoe Livery**

We operate a canoe rental business on Castor Creek. We don't want beaver to be released in our area. We are worried that the beaver will drop trees on our canoes where they are being stored.

We are concerned that they will make dams and that people who rent our canoes won't be able to paddle up and down the creek any longer. People will stop renting canoes from us and we will have to close.

We started our business here because Castor Creek is a perfect place to canoe. People come from nearby towns to rent our canoes. Sometimes they eat at restaurants and purchase gasoline for their cars in our towns. If we have to close, it will hurt these businesses, too. The five people who work for us will lose their jobs.

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### **Beaverton Nature Club**

We hike many of the areas around Beaverton to watch birds. We think that by adding beaver to our area, they will create ponds around the creek that bring in ducks. Where the water floods the land, there will be new wetlands which will be good for many types of birds that we have seen here for many years. People will come to visit our area from other towns to look for birds with their binoculars.

In addition to the birds, the new ponds and wetlands that the beavers will create will provide habitat for endangered plants. The XXX orchid used to grow along Castor Creek in wet soil. But since the creek was straightened in areas in the late 1800s we only find a few of the orchids anymore.

Jobs and places for people to live are important to Beaverton. But so is nature. We think the beaver will help bring back some of the nature we have lost.

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### **Big Tooth Tree Farm**

We own a 50-acre tree farm upstream from the Conservation Club. We grow trees for lumber. We do not want beaver released. The beaver will flood our tree farm. This will kill our trees. Beaver will chew our trees and will knock them down. It costs us money to grow our trees and if the beaver destroy them we will lose our money.

We have been able to provide inexpensive lumber for the people of Beaverton to buy to build their houses. If we lose our trees, Beaverton people will have to travel far away to purchase wood to build their houses and businesses.

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### **Beaverton Historical Society**

We believe that releasing beaver into Castor Creek is a good idea. In the 1700s and early 1800s beaver were an important part of our history. Many people came to this area because of the beaver. Many of us in this room may have had grandparents and great-grandparents who worked in the fur trade, trapping and selling furs. Our town was started because it was an important place to trade furs. It got its name from the beaver.

Beaver have been part of our natural history, changing the landscape over time, and we have always changed with them. But now, there are no beaver left and we owe it to the beaver to bring them back.

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### **Wagner Farms**

We have a large farm near Castor Creek. We grow corn and soybeans upstream from the Conservation Club. We grow vegetables for the people that live in Beaverton. We do not want beaver released. The beaver will build dams that will flood our farmland and we will not be able to grow our crops. If the beaver can't find trees, they will come and eat our corn and soybeans. Who will pay us for the corn and soybeans the beaver eat?

The beavers will block our irrigation ditches, and make it hard for us to get water from Castor Creek to water our crops.

Beaver have two to four kits (babies) a year. Soon there will be too many beaver.

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### **DuBois Farms (Pronounced doo-BWAH)**

We hope the town board approves the release of beaver at the Conservation Club. Our family has lived in this area for 150 years. In the old days the creek was curved and crooked. It was beautiful. Now people have straightened the creek to make the water flow faster. The fast water causes erosion and carries good soil off our land. Beaver dams will slow the water so the soil does not wash away. They will create ponds that will help us get water for irrigation.

Our grandfathers used to take us hunting and trapping. We can't teach our children how to do this anymore, because there is so little wildlife left. It would be nice to teach our children about the beaver and how they live and how to trap them. We could trap and hunt the beavers if there were too many and sell their fur.

**References:**

Illinois Furbearer Guide. <http://dnr.state.il.us/orc/Wildlife/furbearers/beaver.htm>

Living with Beavers.

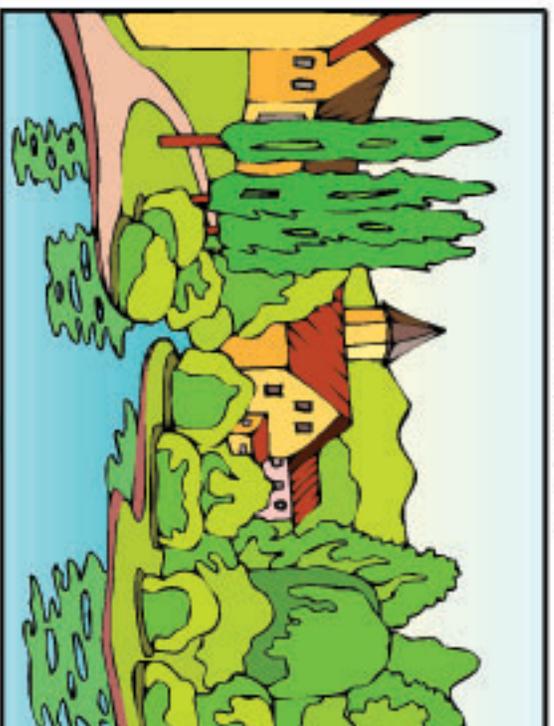
<http://www.entm.purdue.edu/wildlife/Living%20with%20Beavers.pdf>

*Mammals of the Great Lakes Region*, Allen Kurta

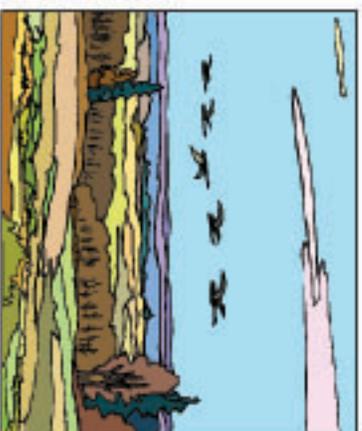
**Attachments:**

Map of Castor Creek and Beaverton.

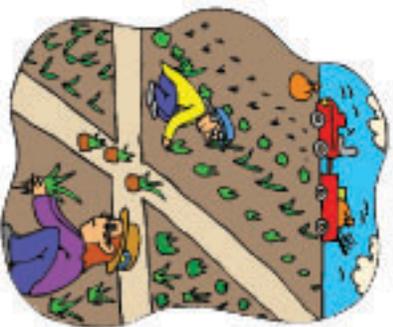
*Town of Beaverton*



*Beaverton  
Conservation  
Club*



*Wagner Farm*



*Castor Creek*



*Castor Creek  
Canoe Livery*



*DuBois Farm*



*Big Tooth Tree Farm*

