

# Conservation Corner

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This week we'll pick up the dam story of the beavers living here in Pocahontas County and around the world. As a keystone species, beavers are second only to humans in their ability to manipulate and change the environment. Like elephants in Africa, beavers change the look of the landscape. Whether those changes are good or bad all depends on your point of view.

Beavers, of course, change the environment through their dam building as they cut down and place logs, branches, mud, and rocks across streams and drainage ditches to create ponds. The largest beaver dam in North America is located in Northern Alberta, Canada. At twice the length of the Hoover Dam, it may be seen from outer space. Closer to home, Beaver Creek, which runs through Des Moines Township, was named for a large beaver dam near its outlet at the Des Moines River.

From a conservationist point of view, beavers increase biodiversity by creating pond and wetland habitat. Their lodges even provide ready-made nesting sites for trumpeter swans and Canada geese.

From a farmer's point of view, beavers are a nuisance who wreck havoc with drainage projects and cause field flooding. Here in Iowa, bounties are still offered on beaver tails by local drainage districts.

From an environmentalist point of view, beavers are playing an unexpected role as a cleanup crew following the April, 1986, meltdown at the Soviet Chernobyl Nuclear Plant. As deadly radiation spread across Europe, scientists feared the 20-mile radius exclusion zone around the plant would become a desert for decades, if not centuries. Instead, 30 years later, the exclusion zone has been transformed into a lush wilderness and Europe's largest wildlife refuge. How did that happen?

Historically, the exclusion zone area along the Pripyat River, now part of the new countries of Belarus and Ukraine, was a forested marshland. The Pripyat Swamps are known for stopping the armies of Genghis Khan. In the 1920's, the area was deforested and an extensive canal system built to drain the marshes. Following the nuclear disaster, over 400,000 people living in 150 villages and cities left the area but the wildlife remained.

Leading the way and doing the heavy lifting was the indigenous beaver. They constructed dams on the canals which flooded the large collective farms and restored the land to its former marshy state. Like our wetlands, the marshes acted as a filter and sponge and helped clean up the nuclear fallout. Soon other wildlife returned and flourished, including amphibians, fish, songbirds, wading birds, eagles, deer, moose, brown bear, lynx, and more than 300 gray wolves, the highest density of wolves anywhere in the world. Recently the endangered European Bison and Przewalski's Horse have been re-introduced into the refuge, all thanks in large part to the beavers.



European Bison in the exclusion zone.

I'll close with Advice from a Beaver as presented by Your True Nature. Keep busy. Be constructive. Chew your food well. Work together. Be eager. Build on your dreams. Don't be a stick in the mud!