

the BEAVER believers



A FILM ABOUT PASSION AND PERSEVERANCE IN AN ERA OF CLIMATE CHANGE

produced and directed by PHIL BRICK and SARAH KOENIGSBERG

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A beaver kit relocated from urban Aurora, CO to private ranch land outside of Colorado Springs hungrily munches away on tender willow chutes.

SYNOPSIS

This inspiring yet whimsical film captures the vision, energy, and dedication of a half dozen activists who share a passion for restoring the North American Beaver (*Castor Canadensis*) to much of its former habitat and range. Although this goal might seem esoteric or eccentric, *The Beaver Believers* shows us how this humble creature can not only help us restore streams and watersheds damaged by decades of neglect, but can also show us how we can live more harmoniously with nature in an era of destabilizing climate change. By “thinking like a beaver,” we can create more bountiful ecosystems and more plentiful water resources, while providing for our own needs and enriching our human communities at the same time. Beavers can show us the way and do much of the work for us if we can just find the humility to trust in the restorative powers of nature and our own ability to play a positive role in it.



Two stream beds in Elko County, Nevada, one with beaver, one without.

THE STORY

Restoring beaver to watersheds across the American West has the potential to radically improve the ecological capacity of these watersheds, even amidst the stress of climate change. That's right: even in the hotter and drier West we can have more biodiversity, more complexity, and more resiliency. But we can't get there by treating our rivers and streams like drainage ditches; we will have to fundamentally re-conceptualize the nature of our watersheds. Beaver can help us do this.

We don't really know our watersheds, we only know a hollow shell of what once was. A keystone species, the loss of beaver to our watersheds has been incalculable – streams that once had water in them all year round now run dry. Waters that once meandered slowly across the landscape are now cut down into stream banks. Beaver were abundant throughout North America, but they were trapped nearly to extinction by the end of the 19th century. While the rich in Europe got felt beaver pelt hats, we got unraveling watersheds, no longer held together by beaver. In the 1950s, our scant beaver populations took another hit as the Army Corps of Engineers removed beaver dams and straightened stream channels to bring water down to multi-million dollar reservoirs more quickly. Now those reservoirs are filling with silt, and increasingly there is not even enough water to fill many of them, leaving farms and cities to fight over dwindling water supplies. In many places we have even further degraded our systems by allowing livestock to trample stream banks, causing additional erosion and down-cutting. Climate change promises to make all of these problems even worse.

Amid all of this, our Beaver Believers are encouraging us to think about a new paradigm for managing our watersheds, to work with nature instead of against it. And nature has the perfect foil for this task, *Castor Canadensis*, the North American beaver. Perhaps nature's most industrious and inventive creatures (aside from homo sapiens) beaver are truly remarkable creatures – they can quickly transform parched and degraded watersheds into lush, wet meadows that act as sponges, holding water underground, cooling it, and releasing it back into stream systems when it is needed most. Beaver did this important work for at least 10,000 years, and it's time we let them do their work once again.

In this film we take you to places where beaver have already begun to transform damaged watersheds, and we learn of the many challenges that stand in the way of larger scale efforts to use beaver as a restoration tool, including trapping, which is still legal in most states. Perhaps more importantly, we meet incredible people who, undaunted by climate change, are working tirelessly to get more beaver out on the landscape so they can show us the nearly miraculous work that beaver can do for us. All we have to do is let the beaver come home.

THE SETTING

The Beaver Believers is set in the American West, in the hearts of a half dozen activists who care deeply about our public lands and all the creatures that depend on them, our own species included. This is a film about people who are willing to devote much of their lives to something greater than themselves. We follow our intrepid Beaver Believers out into the field into some truly spectacular landscapes of the interior West, from the eastern slopes of the Cascade mountains in Washington to the Rockies in Colorado, from the parched red rock deserts of southern Utah across the border to Sonora, Mexico.



The dams on Bridge Creek in eastern Oregon have reconnected the stream to its floodplain.

THINKING LIKE A BEAVER

In the end, our film is about much more than beaver and the people who believe in them. It's about a new way of understanding our watersheds and our role in nature. We suggest that, in an era of destabilizing climate change, "thinking like a beaver" will be a good metaphor for living in what will almost certainly be more challenging conditions, especially in the arid West. Unless we begin to see our watersheds as living systems, with beaver as their keystone, we will be paying more for water and receiving less. Or, if we can "think like a beaver," we can give back more than we take. When beaver come into a watershed, they transform the stream system to meet their own need for food and security. But in so doing, their dams and ponds also create conditions for other species to thrive. It's a kind of generosity that is born of self-interest yet results in flourishing for all. What better philosophy to follow as we face the many challenges that climate change will put before us?

THE BELIEVERS

Suzanne Fouty works as a hydrologist in northeastern Oregon. While working on her Ph.D. dissertation, Suzanne had a life-changing epiphany, realizing that “everything we think we know about streams absent beaver is wrong.” Documenting the important role that beaver play in stream hydrology, Suzanne’s work demonstrates how beaver can be one of our most effective stream restoration tools. When not working long hours at her office, Suzanne can be found out in the field, gathering data on her restoration projects and camping out in her vintage travel trailer with her dogs.



Mary O’Brien is the Utah Forests Program Director for the Grand Canyon Trust, and arguably one of the most effective environmental activists in the West, best known for her tireless efforts for toxics reform and as a passionate defender of our public lands. Although Mary is not afraid to go to court to protect endangered lands and species, she much prefers to work collaboratively with ranchers, county commissioners, and other opponents who invariably both fear and respect her. When not in meetings or in the field with volunteers collecting the data she uses to support her conservation initiatives, Mary can be found planting native grasses and restoring the land around her straw bale home in Castle Valley, Utah.



Sherri Tippie is a self-described “city person” who doesn’t like camping (pooping outside? Yuk!), but she is a lover of all living things. For the past two decades she has been trapping unwanted beaver in the great Denver area and relocating them to happier homes in the mountains of Colorado. Nationally recognized for her expertise in trapping and re-locating beaver, Sherrie explains, “Hey, it’s not that hard. I’m a woman. I read the directions that came with the traps.” A haircutter for inmates in the Arapahoe County jail, Sherrie claims that “my guys at the prison know more about beaver than most people with fancy degrees.” She lives in Lakewood, Colorado.





Kent Woodruff has directed the Methow Valley Beaver Relocation Project since 2009. A U.S. Forest Service Wildlife Biologist, Kent and his tireless crews have established one of the most successful beaver relocation projects in the nation. A tinkerer and an innovator, Woodruff developed a new procedure to sex beavers quickly and humanely by testing beaver scent gland oils. Since most beaver mate for life, Kent firmly believes new beaver couples should actually like one another (imagine that!), so he developed the famed “beaver love shacks” for captured beavers awaiting re-location. He only re-locates established couples, which increases their chances of survival, though, as he states, “it is still likely they argue in the den about whose turn it is to take out the garbage.” Kent lives in Twisp, Washington.



Heidi Perryman is a child psychologist who resides in Martinez, California, east of San Francisco. Her life changed dramatically in 2006 when two beaver decided to take up residence in Alhambra Creek, right in the center of town. When the City decided to exterminate them, Heidi led a citizen’s revolt to keep them, and now she reports that, “we regularly see otter, steelhead, heron, kingfisher, and mink in our tiny urban stream.” She launched the annual Martinez Beaver Festival in 2008, and is now known as an online guru for beaver activists and urban wildlife preservation nationwide. Most evenings Heidi can be found, with many other local residents, on the bridge over Alhambra Creek, watching the beaver go about their evening rituals.

THE FILMMAKERS

Phil Brick

Producer/Director

Phil Brick is Miles C. Moore Professor of Politics and Director of Environmental Studies at Whitman College, an independent liberal arts college in Walla Walla, Washington, where he has taught since 1990. In 2002 he founded Semester in the West, an environmental studies field program focusing on the human and natural ecology of Western public lands in the interior American West. An award-winning professor and recognized expert on public lands and environmental policy, Phil has recently shifted his work to focus on climate change, with an emphasis on regional adaptations to expected changes. When he's not hunkered down in his office, you might find Phil floating a river or relaxing in a ponderosa forest. He appreciates the art of a quality latte, hiking through canyon country looking for rock art, and incorporating lines from *The Big Lebowski* into daily conversation.



Learn more about Semester in the West at www.semesterinthewest.org

Sarah Koenigsberg

Producer/Director/DP/Editor

Sarah Koenigsberg, owner and director of Tensegrity Productions in Walla Walla, WA, is a filmmaker, photographer, and educator whose work focuses on stories of art, environment, and community in the American West. Her commercial clients include Pacific Northwest National Laboratories, Horizon Wind Energy, the Walla Walla Valley Wine Alliance, Schoen Guitars, and The Grand Canyon Trust. As a cinematographer she has shot for Discovery Channel Canada, Scholastic children's book publishing, and The US Department of Energy. As an educator she has teamed up with Whitman College's field studies program Semester in the West, teaching the students audio recording, photography, and documentary video, and developing the curriculum for their comprehensive final project, an audio podcast. The Tensegrity Productions studio, nicknamed "BLDG 270," doubles as a community events venue, hosting everything from movie screenings to live music performances to dance parties. Sarah loves strong coffee, dark chocolate, organizing cupboards, and finding an excuse to climb up high things to "get the shot." She hates sticky jar lids and tangled power cords.



Learn more at www.tensegrityproductions.com

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENTS

From Professor Phil Brick:

For the past twenty years I have been taking my environmental studies students on field trips to remote areas of the interior American West so they might begin to know and understand what I consider to be the greatest gift to the American people, our public lands. As one of our protagonists Mary O'Brien is fond of saying, "the broad, open landscapes of the West are beautiful, until you look down at the ground. Only then do you realize just how ecologically degraded our forests, grasslands, and streams have become." Mary is also fond of a passage from Aldo Leopold's *Round River*: "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to the layman." While I think it is important to educate people about the endangered state of our national forests, grasslands, and waterways, it is all too easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude and seeming intractability of our natural resource management problems. Living alone in a world of wounds, however, isn't a particularly positive way to live. When faced with long odds and a continuous barrage of bad news, most people tend to retreat into their private lives. But not everyone.

As the effects of climate change become increasingly apparent in the West – persistent drought, declining mountain snowpack, record heat waves, insect infestations, and record wildfires – something remarkable is happening: many activists are beginning to see climate change as an opportunity to put more creative, innovative, and ambitious conservation ideas on the agenda. These activists recognize that even if global emissions of greenhouse gasses could be halted today, the West would still be locked in to another two degrees of warming before temperatures would begin to decline. A warmer West means a drier West, which will transform many of our beloved landscapes and create new pressures on already taxed ecosystems that also provide us with fresh water, air, food, and forage.

So it has been particularly inspiring to find stories of people who see climate change more as an opportunity to do creative conservation work than as an existential threat to the places we love. There are more than enough depressing climate stories to go around; I am more interested in telling stories of people who are already thinking forward, and thinking outside the box.

The Beaver Believers is just such a story. The idea for the film came to me while reading the field journal of one of my students after three months in the field in the fall of 2012. The student wrote, "I find it interesting that the strongest, most inspiring activists we met this fall were all women who are interested in the same thing: beaver." This sentence just jumped off the page and stuck with me. I had been struggling for ways to tell positive climate change stories to a broader audience,

and now it seemed simple: find a way to bring these women together and let them tell their own stories in their own words.

As the West warms and dries, water will grow scarcer, especially late in the summer when our farms and cities need it most. Already there are proposals for multi-billion dollar dam projects to capture and store water, but these come with huge environmental costs and trade-offs. Recognizing an opportunity, our protagonists are seeking to demonstrate that the work of one of nature's most humble and industrious creatures, if given the opportunity to thrive, can help us save and store dwindling water supplies while at the same time providing new habitat for imperiled wildlife. It's an unlikely and inspiring story, one best told by taking the audience into the field, seeing and hearing these stories in first person.

As luck would have it, I was beginning to understand the power of new media and documentary storytelling to reach diverse audiences. Since 2008, filmmaker Sarah Koenigsberg has worked with our students to produce high-quality audio podcasts, and she had been encouraging me to let her introduce the students to video production as well. The rest of the story followed quickly: from the moment we decided to collaborate on this film, we have been encouraged by the incredible outpouring of support for and strong interest in the Beaver Believers project. We were able to raise the funds to begin our on-location filming in summer of 2013. Now, as we move into the post-production phase, I remain grateful that there has been so much enthusiasm for a film of this kind, and I look forward to sharing it soon at a venue near you!

Finally, I hope our film becomes a part of a new conversation that we need to have about climate change. We have to recognize that the coming changes are unstoppable at least in the short run (the next 100 years) and probably beyond that as well. This means we will have to get creative about new ways to grow our food, organize our communities, and create spaces for all the creatures of the earth who we will no doubt want as our companions.

– Phil Brick, April 2015

From Filmmaker Sarah Koenigsberg:

When my friend and colleague, Phil Brick, first approached me with his idea for this film in the winter of 2012, I thought it sounded like a fun project, but I had no idea how deeply it would come to impact my perception of our western landscapes. Just a couple hundred years ago beaver were plentiful in watersheds across the West, as they had been for tens of thousands of years. These systems evolved with beaver in them. And then in a geologic blink of an eye, we humans trapped them out, driving the species almost to extinction, inadvertently wreaking havoc on our waterways at the same time. Learning this history, traveling through eight western states, northern Mexico, and Canada, filming the passion and dedication of our Beaver Believers, witnessing how desperately we need to restore the ecosystem function of our watersheds, this project has captivated me, enveloped me. It means more to me than any other project ever has.

This spring, while working on our outline and paper edit, I've come to realize that I'm not just making this film for me any more. I'm making it for all of the Beaver Believers whose story I've been entrusted to tell; for all of the wildlife, watershed restoration, and climate change activists everywhere who continue to fight for a safer world; for my students, who've trusted my leadership in this journey and have worked so hard to bring this film to life; for my family, who gave me my first video camera fourteen years ago and have encouraged me in all that I've done since. And soon, I hope to be releasing this film to all of you, our supporters and fellow Believers.

– Sarah Koenigsberg, April 2015