

BEAVER CONTROL AND FURBEARER RESOURCES IN MISSISSIPPI

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Abstract: Mississippi has attempted to control its beaver population by paying bounties, hiring trappers, releasing alligators, and by providing trapper education. The trapper education program, coordinated with the state's fur industry has proven to be an effective beaver control system. Suggestions are given for maximizing the effectiveness of the fur industry in predator control.

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Many furbearers damage agricultural and forest interests and become classed as nuisance or predatory animals. For example, foxes, minks, bobcats, weasels, and raccoons catch poultry and game birds or destroy nests. Coyotes, foxes, and raccoons raid melon patches. Raccoons are pests in corn fields when the corn is in its "milk" stage. Otters have been known to eat the fish in commercial catfish ponds. Muskrats, nutrias, and beavers burrow into dams and dikes and feed on crops like rice and soybeans. Beavers and nutrias girdle trees. Beavers also flood crops and timber by building dams and plugging culverts.

Beavers are responsible for causing serious damage to Mississippi's economy. In 1978, Dr. Arner, Head of the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries at Mississippi State University, found that beavers have flooded 71,920 ac. of land and have destroyed \$22 million worth of crops and timber.

In 1962, the state legislature placed the beaver on the predatory animal list allowing it to be killed by any method throughout the year. This was followed in 1964 by a bill permitting the Board of Supervisors of each county to pay from county funds a \$5 bounty on beavers.

Several counties did place a bounty on beavers. But many problems developed because the counties paying the bounty found it hard to avoid paying bounties on beavers from adjoining counties where bounties were not being paid.

In 1972, another bill was passed by the state legislature establishing a statewide \$5 bounty on beavers and appropriating \$25,000 for this purpose. Since 1972, Mississippi has spent a total of \$485,000 on beaver bounties. The state, like the counties, has found it hard to avoid paying bounties on beaver tails brought in from adjoining states. The \$5 bounty has been popular with the trappers who have been fortunate enough to get it. But because the annual bounty appropriations have been too low to pay for all of the beavers being caught, there have been many complaints from trappers failing to receive bounty money for their beavers. Many trappers have stopped keeping the tails from the beavers they catch since they do not expect to receive the bounty.

In 1969, the Mississippi Forestry Association provided the State Forestry Commission with 1,118 beaver traps to be used by Forestry Commission and Game and Fish Commission employees. The Forestry Commission trapped beavers for private forestland owners for several years. During 1972, an audit was made of

the program, and it was found that Forestry Commission workers had trapped 3,018 beavers that year at a cost of \$99,866 or an average of \$33.09 per beaver. The Forestry Commission trapping program was gradually phased out and ended with the 1975 Fiscal Year.

In 1970, the Game and Fish Commission hired 5 beaver trapping experts to teach beaver trapping techniques to its employees and other interested groups. This early trapper training program ended after a few years. But this effort was renewed in 1976 when the Game and Fish Commission established the Predator Education and Control Section. I served as the supervisor of this program from 1976 until it ended in May, 1980. During this time, 4 other trapping specialists and I answered over 1,600 requests for assistance from landowners. Of these, 89% were beaver damage complaints.

During the 1970's, the Game and Fish Commission brought over 5,000 alligators from Louisiana and turned them loose in beaver ponds throughout Mississippi. The alligators were released for several reasons, one of which was for beaver-control.

At the request of the state legislature, Dr. Arner researched several new methods of beaver control. Chemosterilants, birth control drugs, were tried but did not work because there was no method to get the drugs into the wild beavers. Alligators were studied but were found to leave the shallow beaver ponds for deeper streams, ponds, and reservoirs. In these places, the alligators were less likely to find beavers to eat and were more likely to end up as targets. Dr. Arner's research is continuing, but for now trapping is still the best method to use for controlling beavers.

None of the State beaver control programs have been very successful. This brings me to the role of the Mississippi fur industry in beaver control.

The Mississippi Trappers Association, organized in 1970 has always cooperated with the various state agencies in their efforts to find an answer to the beaver problem. It has taught its members to skin, stretch, and dry their beaver pelts properly. It has long been accepted that better beaver pelt prices would mean more beavers being trapped. The Trappers Association holds a number of fur sales each year. Buyers from throughout the southeast attend these sales and bid on the trappers' fur. The competition is often stiff at these sales, and the trappers get more for their pelts.

In addition to promoting better pelt handling and better markets, the Trappers Association has cooperated with landowners in need of help with beaver problems by giving the landowners' names to members who live nearby. The Trappers Association supports the beaver control effort, but it does not have the resources to impact on the world beaver markets or to provide assistance to every landowner.

In 1977, the Beaver Cooperative Association was organized to promote the use of southern beaver pelts by the world fur markets, to provide a trapper referral service for landowners, and to process beaver pelts to insure the best quality for market. During its 1st fur season, the Co-op processed and marketed 2,100 Mississippi beaver pelts. The number of pelts marketed by the Co-op has increased each year, and during the 1980-81 season, it marketed over 8,000 beaver pelts. Unfortunately, the market price of beaver pelts has not shown much improvement. High interest rates and a shortage of dressing companies to tan the beavers have kept the price of beaver pelts down.

In January, 1980, several members of the Beaver Cooperative's Board of Directors and a few other interested investors financed a new company, BeCA Furs, to

manufacture fur products from the beavers produced by the Co-op. And in October, 1981, the Beaver Cooperative and BeCA Furs jointly opened a fur tanning operation in the Co-op building at Sturgis.

In addition to the Mississippi Trappers Association Fur Sales and the Beaver Cooperative, there are 69 licensed fur buyers competing for the state's 3,026 licensed trapper's fur. The importance of these small buyers and the role they play in the fur market should not be overlooked.

The 1979-80 Trapper Harvest Survey showed a total catch of 20,973 beavers. This was a record for Mississippi and shows how effective the state's fur industry has been in promoting beaver trapping.

In conclusion, I want to point out that our experiences in Mississippi have shown that the fur industry is still more effective in controlling predatory animals than are most types of state predator control programs. To get the most benefit, a state must develop a good working relationship with its trappers and fur dealers. The state should support its fur industry with trapping laws based on sound *wildlife management principles*. The state should establish *trapper training programs* to teach modern trapping techniques, fur handling methods, and trapping ethics. When wildlife damage occurs, the state can use its fur industry to control it by directing trappers to the problem areas and by promoting the increased use of the problem species fur in the fur market.

Mississippi has not done many of the things which I have suggested in this presentation. However, when some of these things have been done, the results have been impressive.