

HIGH DESERT MUSEUM

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***Dam It! Beavers and Us* Explores the Past and Present of Iconic American Mammal**

New, original exhibition opens at High Desert Museum in January

BEND, OR — In the Pleistocene era, a mammal that was up to eight feet long and 220 pounds roamed what is now the High Desert and beyond. One incisor tooth excavated from Oregon's South Yamhill River in 2017 measured three inches long. This massive creature, *Castoroides ohioensis*, was the giant beaver, ancestor of the modern North American beaver, *Castor canadensis*.

The giant beaver went extinct 10,000 years ago, and the modern beaver is now the largest rodent on the continent. Despite being smaller and once driven to the edge of extinction, it today has a mammoth-size impact on the American West.

A replica of the giant beaver, as well as the skull of a squirrel-sized Pleistocene relative, will begin the story of this iconic animal in a new, original Museum exhibit, *Dam It! Beavers and Us*, opening Saturday, January 30, 2021. The exhibition will explore this important member of the order Rodentia and explore the interrelationship of people, beavers and the landscape.

An estimated 60 to 400 million beavers once lived in North America, fulfilling a vital ecological role by creating valuable wetlands and ponds. The dams built by these "ecosystem engineers" slow streamflow, raise the water table and reduce downstream flooding and erosion. Plants and sediment in a beaver pond improve water quality. Beavers help birds, fish and other wildlife and native plants to thrive. Their habitats serve as emerald refuges during wildfire and also store carbon. Aside from humans, no other animal exerts such a far-reaching impact on the landscape.

Humans and beavers have coexisted for thousands of years. This exhibition examines our coexistence with this herbivorous rodent throughout history. Humans dramatically altered their population and habitats. The European demand for beaver pelts for clothing, most notably hats, almost drove the mammal to extinction by the mid-19th century.

Today in the West, people from many walks of life are reintroducing the beaver and mimicking its dam-building behavior in order to restore healthy High Desert ecosystems. While the beaver

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is found across the country, it supports many species that are endemic to the High Desert and can play a particularly important ecological role in arid and semi-arid areas.

“This exhibit takes a close look at a species that had a huge impact on Indigenous communities and Anglo-American settlers,” said Museum Executive Director Dana Whitelaw, Ph.D. “Through cultural history, science and art, visitors will find new ways to appreciate this oft-maligned rodent.”

Central Oregon residents and visitors will find the presence of the exhibit throughout the community. Four beaver sculptures, each 4 1/2- feet tall, have been transformed by High Desert artists and placed in community spaces around the region. Participants in the project are artist and educator [Andries Fourie](#), mixed-media artist [Sweet Pea Cole](#), Indigenous artist [Ellen Taylor](#) and artist and ceramicist [Jess Volk](#).

Dam It! Beavers and Us will feature immersive scenes and interactive experiences for all ages, inspiring new appreciation for this resourceful animal. Grownups and kids alike can marvel at how beavers were once parachuted from the sky in wooden crates in an attempt to relocate them in an Idaho wilderness. They will also be able to compare a riparian scene with and without a beaver’s presence, experiencing how a beaver colony can transform the landscape.

“This exhibit tells an inspiring story of turning around our relationship with the beaver,” said Louise Shirley, High Desert Museum curator of natural history and curator of *Dam It! Beavers and Us*. “It explores the surprising power of the humble beaver to help us combat some of the impacts of climate change, such as drought, wildfires and biodiversity loss.”

Dam It! Beavers and Us (highdesertmuseum.org/dam-it) opens Saturday, January 30, 2021 and will be on display through Sunday October 3, 2021. It is made possible by 107.7 FM The Beat and the Oregon Cultural Trust with support from Bend Magazine, Bespoke LLC, Oregon Public Broadcasting and the James F. and Marion L. Miller Foundation.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM:

THE HIGH DESERT MUSEUM opened in Bend, Oregon in 1982. It brings together wildlife, cultures, art, history and the natural world to convey the wonder of North America’s High Desert. The Museum uses indoor and outdoor exhibits, wildlife in natural habitats and living history demonstrations to help people discover and appreciate this diverse region. The Museum is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization accredited by the American Alliance of Museums, is a Smithsonian Affiliate, was a 2018 finalist for the National Medal for Museum and Library Services and is the 2019 recipient of the Western Museums Association’s Charles Redd Award for Exhibition Excellence. highdesertmuseum.org

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