



**Frances Backhouse**  
**Author**  
**British Columbia, Canada**

### 37 Million Years and Counting: A Brief History of Beavers

There's a lot of past behind our present-day dealings with *Castor canadensis*. The beaver conflicts that we're working to manage are in many ways a legacy of the colonial fur trade. And the beaver benefits that we're coming to better understand and appreciate are rooted in millennia of beaver presence on this continent.

This brief history of beavers will begin with the castorid debut, 37 million years ago. We'll fast forward through the rise and fall of the dozens of early species, pausing to consider standouts like *Dipoides*, whose four-million-year-old gnawed sticks offer the oldest known evidence of beaver dam building, and *Castoroides*, the awe-inspiring giant beaver. Then we'll zero in on what's happened to North American beavers since Europeans arrived on the scene: the centuries of mining "brown gold" for the hat trade; the continent-wide crash to near extinction; and the rebound that has been gaining momentum over the past few decades.

As our relationship with beavers continues to evolve, a historical perspective can help inform the future. It reminds us that beaver impacts on landscapes and habitats are an integral part of our natural world and gives us insights into the consequences of both banishing these incredible ecosystem engineers from the job site and welcoming them back.