



**Martha Otis**  
**University of Miami**  
**Florida, United States**

### Bringing Beavers Home—A New Vision for Civic Engagement in the Age of Habitat Restoration

My talk outlines some of the overlooked partners in habitat restoration to be found on college campuses. These include writing and journalism students as well as civic engagement faculty. I emphasize the game-changing role of visionary writing and savvy storytelling in raising public awareness. I teach creative writing and essay writing to college freshmen. Themes of nature and animal studies give focus to the course. Few of my students have had much contact with wild places or animals. Most lack understanding of even basic ecological concepts, such as the relationship between species diversity and ecological health. Most have, at best, a shallow understanding of why we must start reversing habitat loss.

Few remain indifferent, however, when they encounter great storytelling about nature or animals. A New Yorker article about entomophagy inspires a student to write about his two-week foray into eating insects (the new white meat!). Another becomes interested in alternative farming after reading Michael Pollan's Omnivore's Dilemma.

My course doesn't turn them all into nature lovers, but in the last two semesters I have turned every single one of them into beaver lovers and advocates. In over fifteen years, no material has inspired them so much as the PBS documentary Leave it to Beavers. This film introduces them to a history they did not know (the near-extinction of beavers from over trapping), a series of problems of which they are only faintly aware (the disappearance of wetlands), and an elegant solution to these problems, protagonized by that most admirable of rodents, the beaver.

It helps that the star of Leave it to Beavers is a cute orphan. Fiction writers, especially children's



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literature authors, know that it's always a good idea to make your protagonist an orphan. This documentary also delivers students a familiar plot: the orphan's search for home, family, purpose, and a place of belonging. And, like our favorite kidlit protagonist, Harry Potter, the orphan comes equipped with unbelievable superpowers, and was born to save the world. In other words, *Leave it to Beavers* tells a compelling story, and by the end, it's impossible not to care.

By the time they get to college, my students have been so inundated with depressing stories about climate change and the degradation of the natural world that they have barely been given a chance to know nature or love a wild place. But over and over again they demonstrate the desire to be part of solutions to the big problems. They want meaningful action. This, after all, is the Parkland generation.

I see these young people as a tremendous, underused resource of passion, energy, even volunteer labor in the growing movement of habitat restoration across the country. This talk proposes creating a myriad of opportunities for partnering with undergraduates of all majors, enlisting their skills and volunteer time in focused projects determined by professionals in wildlife and habitat restoration.