

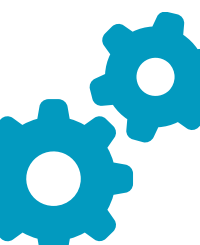
# HOW INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING ENCODES THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE NISHNABEK AND BEAVER

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## BACKGROUND

- The beaver population of North America was greatly exploited during the fur trade period, dropping from upwards of 400 million pre-contact to fewer than 100,000 by 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>
- Survivors of fur trade became nocturnal/crepuscular in response to extreme human predation.<sup>2</sup> **What was the ecocultural relationship like before this?**
- We know that ecological, social, & spiritual relationships are encoded in our storytelling<sup>3</sup>



## METHODS

- Learning about the behavior and ecological role of beaver, including historic texts regarding historic extent and activities of beaver during fur trade period
- **Exploration of Indigenous storytelling** of beaver & people relationships using Indigenous object relations theory
- Review of contemporary scholarship about these stories and their meaning



## KEY FINDINGS

1. Giant beaver, known as a world-builder, shaper of our lands, known to our ancestors before extinction at the end of last ice age
2. Beaver and Nishnabek were friends in the pre-contact world
3. We have protocols for maintaining relationships of reciprocity and respect
4. Beavers are keystone species, and their work is critical for the restoration of wetlands



## TAKE-AWAY

- Beavers, like Indigenous Americans, are survivors of colonization
- Ecological restoration will require healing of this relationship (and others like it)
- **Our stories tell us how**

## Our Stories Teach Us: Amik/Mek is a Builder of Worlds

Stories of Waub-Amik, Nokomis, Nanabush and Thunderbird<sup>4</sup> describe how the land was shaped by Giant Beaver (*Castoroides*), and show how this relationship extends many generations into our past

**Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) is essential to our landscapes in the past, present, and future.**



Painting by Norval Morrisseau; used with permission

## Further Discussion: We were friends

The story *The Woman Who Married a Beaver*<sup>4</sup> describes a relationship of friendship and family between the Nishnabek and beaver. This perspective is reinforced by the stories of fur trappers, who saw that beaver were unafraid of humans, played and sunned themselves in the daylight, and would readily interact with humans<sup>5</sup>.

**Pre-contact beavers were not afraid of humans, because we were friends.**

Stark (2010) explains that this and other stories, and the protocols they contain, are an example of how Anishinabek/Nishnabek peoples engaged in a kind of treaty-making with other nations<sup>6</sup>, creating familial ties with our more-than human relatives that were essential to our mutual well-being and persistence<sup>7</sup>.

## Why this matters: Beavers are essential for ecological restoration

Beaver-influenced streams are better able to manage flow velocity and sediment loads; can moderate temperature changes; and have increased nutrient cycling capacities, and are ideal habitats for other important species such as salmon<sup>8</sup>. Their impact goes far beyond foraging and nesting needs for their family, but benefits the entire ecosystem<sup>9</sup>.

Developing an Indigenous methodology for understanding this relationship provides a framework for future research, including how Indigenous stories help us perceive the relationships between beaver and other important species like salmon, and how that informs ecological restoration efforts.

Indigenous protocols are not mere myth or superstition. They encode the knowledge for how to live in right relationship with other living beings on our planet. How will *you* regain the trust of the beavers?

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