

# Understanding Landowner Perspectives on Beavers and Their Behaviors in the Willamette Basin

By Jean-Paul Zagarola and Suzanne Teller

The Mid-Willamette Beaver Partnership (MWBP) has made significant strides on beaver habitat assessments and stakeholder engagement since the [June 2021 article](#) in Treeline. A few examples include partnering with an [Oregon State University program](#) that supports career and education pathways for college students who identify as Native American who surveyed sixteen stream kilometers for beaver habitat and dam building conditions; securing funding to test pilot a cutting edge community science based mobile app for collecting and inventorying beaver dam and stream characteristics data; working with a social research firm to conduct a series of interviews, focus groups and surveys to understand landowners and stakeholders' perceptions and values of beavers and beaver habitats. For this Treeline issue, we are going to take a deeper dive into the last example—the progress the MWBP is making in understanding the social dimensions of beaver based conservation and restoration.



Photo Credit: Jean-Paul Zagarola



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At its formation, the MWBP knew without authentically engaging landowners and stakeholders there was very little room to promote beaver based restoration at a scale that would make any significant impact. Much like other types of restoration, beaver based restoration is driven by social factors as much as ecological ones. This is especially true when it involves a rodent that is at once both controversial and beloved. As we begin to approach landowners, land managers, and the general public with the goal of expanding beaver populations and promoting their dam building where appropriate, we feel it is critical that we equip ourselves with the tools to address the concerns that might come up in that endeavor. Therefore, knowing what concerns stakeholders have ahead of time and how to most effectively deliver our message is key.

Once funding was secured to conduct social research and engage stakeholders, the MWBP was serendipitously introduced to a social science based approach that supports sustainable and positive behavior change called Community Based Social Marketing (CBSM). At its core, CBSM relies on collecting information about a target population through surveys, focus groups and interviews to understand the barriers and benefits that prohibit or encourage the population to adopt the beneficial behaviors, such as co-existence with beavers. That information is used to tailor messaging and outreach campaigns to address barriers and promote benefits. Different types of community members or stakeholders may view the barriers and benefits differently, so it's necessary to tailor the messaging accordingly. This approach has proven to be much more effective at fostering positive social behavior change than more traditional methods such as information-only campaigns. Members of the MWBP received training from the founder of this approach, Doug McKenzie-Mohr and contracted with the social research firm Action Research to facilitate and guide the efforts through implementation.

By early 2023, the MWBP in conjunction with Action Research, mailed out 1600 surveys to riparian landowners, held four focus groups with agriculture, timber and public works department participants and conducted 13 one-on-one interviews with a variety of critical stakeholders. The results from this effort will be used to develop and test a series of messaging strategies to support co-existing with beaver and promote dam building. In order to avoid the risk of interfering with the test-pilot, the MWBP can not release detailed results at this time but plans to in the near future. However, there are several high-level takeaways that we can report on.

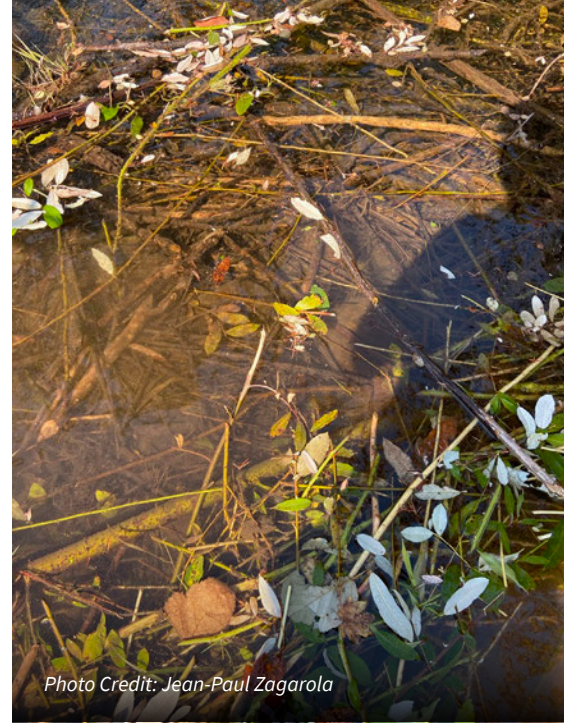


Photo Credit: Kathleen Westly

## Initial Takeaways from CBSM Stakeholder Engagement Process

- 1** Language matters! The MWBP uses the term co-existence to mean alternatives to lethal trapping or relocation that allow us to take advantage of their beneficial behaviors on-site while minimizing their impact. However, co-existence from the perspective of some of our participants means something different such as not proactively trapping beavers but trapping only when they cause problems. Trapping in this case typically meant lethal trapping. Therefore, future communications will need to be clearer in what co-existence means.
- 2** There is a fairly broad appreciation for beavers and the benefits they provide across stakeholders and riparian landowners even if they do cause problems in some areas. This presents a potential opportunity for practitioners to lean into what people appreciate and expand that support. Perhaps one of the region's favorite college team mascots is partially to thank for this.
- 3** There are generally few interactions with beavers occurring. We can speculate that beaver population numbers are still relatively low and the research also appears to point in this direction. Also, if our actions lead to healthier beaver populations it is critical that we have the tools in place to ensure increasing beaver interactions lead to positive outcomes both for landowners/managers and ecosystems.
- 4** In general, wildfire and drought that could potentially affect their property are the two biggest issues that riparian landowners are concerned about.
- 5** Finally, we have found that most people would prefer to have a “one-stop-shop” to get information about beavers—how to promote beavers and how to mitigate their impacts. We have since set up a new website which is currently under construction. We will be working with a design firm to add content and make significant stylistic improvements, so please stay tuned!

The results of our stakeholder engagement process have been eye opening. We feel strongly that lessons learned here will be applicable across the region and we are looking forward to sharing our work as it unfolds. The next step for stakeholder engagement is to develop and implement the test-pilot of our messaging strategies. We are also moving into our second year of habitat surveys that will inform our beaver dam capacity model. That model is also piloting a newly developed community science based data collection tool. Next year, we plan to work with our partners to develop beaver management plans for each of the MWBP Willamette sub-basins that integrate the results of the stakeholder engagement process and the beaver dam habitat assessments in order to prioritize areas for conservation that have the highest potential for success. Until then, don't forget to root for your favorite rodent—Go Beavs!



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