

## *Owens Foundation for Wildlife Conservation*

May 1999

Dear Everybody,

"Watch it! Stop!" Mark grabbed my arm. After many years of walking through lion country together, when either of us says 'stop,' we automatically freeze.

What, where?" I asked, turning my head slowly to look at Mark.

He was pointing at his boots. No more than two feet away from our toes, pushing its snout through the tall, wet grass was a small beaver. All business, as serious as he could be, the youngster was making his way to the creek, which whispered gently beside us. Clamped firmly in his jaws was a long grass stem. We watched as the beaver squirmed down the muddy bank, swam across the current, and worked the grass stem into a tiny bundle of twisted twigs and grass: a make-believe dam. He was playing house.

In one season his family had constructed several major dams upstream, which had backed up the creek into a series of five ponds. For sixty years every beaver that had reared its head here had been trapped or shot, but now they were free to go about their business. In that one season, moose, bears, Canada geese, mule deer, minks, wood ducks, mallards, and wild turkeys had begun visiting the ponds.

But this little ecosystem only lasted for one year. There were only a few trees remaining along the creek, and the beavers had to abandon their dams for lack of forage and engineering materials. All the other creatures left, too.

It is an old story, told all over our continent: Settlers came into the valleys, chopped the trees, ditched and drained the land, and channeled the streams and scrubbed out their trees and shrubs, so that all the water would flush quickly off the bottomland into the rivers. Where there were once, slow moving, meandering streams surrounded by lush wetland and forest microhabitats, now strait channels rush, cut and gouge through tender old marsh soils plowed and planted with monocultures. We, after all, had to feed ourselves. But what is really sad is that many of these marshy valleys never made good farm land, and were abandoned, but not restored. Instead of the slash and burn agriculture of the third world, we conducted drain and ruin agriculture. The wetlands of the world are more endangered than tropical forests, and once sustained almost as much life. Only 50% of Earth's wetlands remain.

So we are restoring a wetland! It started as just a little project with the two of us planting 7,000 trees for beavers, slowing down the creek, plugging up the drainage ditches. (We had to do something after the bears went to sleep for the winter, and before they awoke in spring!!) But because we had to get permits



from them, governmental agencies began noticing our plugging and planting. They got excited. So we said, "Let's save this whole valley!" Now we have the US Fish and Wildlife, Idaho Fish and Game, Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Forest Service, Corps of Engineers, and the Nature Conservancy all working together to restore this wetland. Even the ranchers and farmers nearby, who were understandably a bit nervous about all this, are pitching in. One farmer called the other morning to tell us that he had restored an old pond, and one hundred Canada geese had landed!

This is just one small valley, but we have big plans. As we have told you before, most of the spring range for grizzly bears has been developed as farms or ranches or parking lots. By restoring more of these valleys, we hope to give back to the bears, elk, mule deer, lynx, cougar and others, some of their spring and summer range. Eighty years ago the Kootenai River Valley of Idaho was a sprawling flood plain wetland with a mighty river flowing through it. Every spring, summer and fall, grizzly bears, black bears, moose and other flagship North American species fattened on its lush grasses. But today it is a sad checker-board of failing farms -- failing because the farmers have to maintain an expensive system of levees and pumps to keep the land dry. As agricultural subsidies dwindle, and grain prices fall, the river is winning back its flood plain, and the farmers want to sell. What if we could buy up all this land, and return it to the bears, moose, geese, ducks, minks, and beavers? It may sound impossible, but we are making a start. Let us know if you want to buy a valley -- or just a small part!

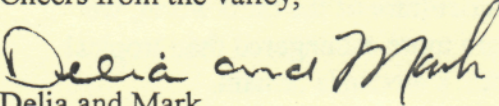
Every parcel we buy will be enrolled in a perpetual conservation easement, so that it can never, never be developed. The land will be re-sold to a conservation-minded buyer, someone who wants to wake up to goose music, and the sight of moose munching in the misty valley. (Any takers?) The original funds can be used in a revolving fund to purchase more bottom land. Someday, there could be grizzlies roaming these marshy meadows once more, as they did before man tried to grow wheat in a swamp.

Speaking of bears, we have never had a study subject who sleeps all winter!! But just last week they blundered out of their dens deep beneath the high elevation snow pack. Now, hungry and hung-over from sleep, they are headed down the mountains to find food. As you will remember, the berry crops failed last year, so many of the bears did not put on as much weight as usual. Some of the black bears came out of their dens a month early this spring.

In June we are going to go on an extended horse-packing trip into the mountainous back country to dart and collar more bears. This is a bit trickier than it sounds. First, of all, you have to make sure your horse is bear-wise. We grazed the horses in a meadow close to black bears all summer so they could get accustomed to them. But, of course, a small black bear foraging around in the clover, is quite different than a grizzly standing on his hind legs to catch your scent. You don't really know how your horse is going to react until you come around a bend in the track, and find yourself on eye level with a grizzly. I hope we do not have a horror story to share in our next letter!

Thank you very much for your donations, which are protecting the precious wilds of North America, and the wondrous creatures who live there.

Cheers from the valley;

  
Delia and Mark

(NOTE: If you would like to be on the OFWC email contact list, please email Mary Dykes at:  
<73130.3137@compuserve.com>