A Science Service Feature

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? WHY THE WEATHER ? Mailed March 1, 1930

By Charles Fitzhugh Talman,
Authority on Meteorology.

BEAVERS AND FOREST MOISTURE

William T. Cox, director of the Upper Mississippi Wild Life Refuge, is the champion of the interesting thesis that the widespread destruction of beavers for their pelts has had the effect of drying up the North American forests and has thus greatly added to the fire hazard. The forests of our continent were not always, he says, the plaything of the fire demon. Before the white man came fires occurred but rarely spread very far. The reason was, he claims, beaver dams. These existed on every stream the beavers could control, even to the tiniest creeks, holding the water back in ponds and flowage areas.

"Immediately after the beaver's disappearance, which left the country drier than it had been for a thousand years, conditions became exceedingly dangerous. Continuous forests extended for hundreds of miles. Fires originating from lightning, spontaneous combustion, or camp fires of Indian or trapper, then, for the first time, had abundant opportunity to spread and travel unchecked.

"The woodsman who knows the beaver, who has traveled through favored districts again stocked with these animals, while he may curse them for flooding trail and portage, will admit that they render the forest almost safe from fire. The feature that counts so strongly for safety is that fires cannot run far in a beaver country until they encounter streams well filled, flooded areas, or lakes full to the bank. Under such conditions it is little short of impossible for a serious forest fire to develop."

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