

# Pond Palace – Part 1

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*Welcome to Once Upon a Meadow. Our stories are written for the ear, so for those able, we recommend listening while reading along. Transcripts may contain minor errors; please check the audio before quoting.*

Once upon a time, there lived a community, who shared a meadow, with a stream running through it. There was Beaver, Rabbit, Trout, and Grandmother Turtle, along with the Trees.

Beaver lived in a lodge made of branches. The lodge was in the middle of a tranquil pond. And the pond had formed behind a dam that Beaver built. It was a marvelous feat of engineering. His work had provided him with a safe and comfortable home, and it had created a wetland. The wetland was a perfect habitat for many other animals and provided clean water for everyone.

But Beaver was feeling glum. He worried about what others thought of him. He didn't think they appreciated his contributions to the community. And he didn't impress anyone by being fast, or fierce, or brave. How could they respect an animal who waddled in the mud?

One day, Beaver took a long swim upstream to see if that might lift his spirits. Just like how a long walk can be good when you're feeling mopey. On the riverbank, he came upon a magnificent lodge built by a human from hundreds of logs. It was *ginormous*. There was a lively party on the deck, and people were saying things like: "What a gorgeous home you have!" and "This is an amazing place!"

'That's it!' Beaver said to himself. 'This must be how you gain the admiration of others.' He swam home and went to work.

A couple of weeks later, Rabbit came bounding through the grass, to edge of the pond.

"Beaver, there's a flood!" shouted Rabbit. "What *are* you doing?"

"I'm working on my project," said Beaver, sitting atop his dam. "It's coming along nicely, I think." He patted some mud in between the aspen and willow branches using his paws and chin, but not his tail. Only cartoon beavers do that.

"What is your *project*?" asked Rabbit, flicking their ears nervously.

"I've been chewing down lots of trees to make a bigger lodge," said Beaver, flashing his orange front teeth.

He explained that a bigger lodge needed a bigger pond. And that required a bigger dam.

Grandmother Turtle opened one eye and squinted at Beaver. She had been sunning herself on a rock. But the commotion was disturbing her nap.

"Why on earth," the ancient reptile said, "do you want a bigger lodge?"

"So everyone will be impressed!" said Beaver.

Trout had been listening underwater, but now she rose to the surface.

“You’re certainly industrious, Beaver,” she said. “But there’s a problem. Cutting down so many trees eliminated the shade. Now the water is becoming too warm for me to survive. I’m afraid that I’ll need to leave the pond.” Then Trout swam under a submerged log, which was the only cool and shady place left.

“Your project has created a problem for me, too,” Rabbit said. “Your bigger pond has flooded my wild carrot and clover patch. I’ll have to find another meadow. Otherwise, I’ll go hungry.” They rubbed their tummy with their furry paws.

“I fear that I will also need to leave,” said Grandmother Turtle. “Without trees, the streamside soil will bake in the sun. The ground will be too hard for me to dig a hole. So I’ll have no place to hibernate when winter comes.” She blinked slowly and sighed.

Beaver thought about what it would be like without his friends. No Trout to eat the pesky bugs, or to be a swimming companion. No Rabbit to nibble the plants and prevent the meadow from becoming overgrown, or to make him laugh with their bouncy energy. And no Turtle to dig burrows and keep the soil healthy, or to provide thoughtful advice. His flat tail hung sadly in the water.

“Where did I go wrong?” wondered Beaver aloud.

Grandmother Turtle turned her head slowly and blinked at Beaver. “Well,” she said, “when you decided to build a huge house, did you consider that it could harm others?”

Beaver paused and scratched his ear with his hind foot. “No,” he said.

“And when you chewed down the trees, did you take just half of them?” asked Grandmother Turtle.

“No,” said Beaver, “I cut down nearly all of them.”

“Did you thank each tree?” asked Grandmother Turtle.

“No,” said Beaver, “I was in a hurry.”

“And did you ask their permission to cut them down?” asked Grandmother Turtle.

“No,” said Beaver, “But how could they give me permission? Trees can’t talk!”

“They can, in their own way,” said Grandmother Turtle. “Plants are actually very good at telling us when something is out of balance in our environment. Some of them grow like weeds, while others disappear. Altogether they no longer provide for us. Soil becomes less fertile, water less clean, and food less abundant.”

Grandmother Turtle stretched out her neck and looked pointedly at Beaver. The animals knew a lesson was coming.

“We need to care for our plant friends,” she said. “That means we should always ask a tree’s permission before cutting it down. Then we should thank the tree. And we should never take more than half of what is there.”

The animals nodded. Turtle had reminded them of something they all knew deep inside. Beaver knew it as well. But he had gone astray when he tried to imitate the humans with their ginormous lodge.

The animals were all silent as they contemplated how things had gone wrong. Grandmother Turtle turned and began to walk away, ever so slowly along the stream bank.

“Please, don’t leave,” said Beaver. He realized he had been thinking only of what he desired, not what the community required. And what the community required was a thriving wetland and clean water. Which he had been providing all along.

He paused and slapped his tail on the water, “I need to make things whole again.”