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Intermediate Student’s Book

Life

Before New York

By Peter Miller

Of all the visitors to New York City in recent years, one of the most surprising was a beaver which showed up one morning in 2007. Nobody knows exactly where the beaver came from and ecologist Eric Sanderson explains that, although beavers used to be common in the area in the 17th century, there haven’t been any for more than 200 years.

For Sanderson, the beaver’s appearance was symbolic. For ten years, he’s been leading a project to visualise what the area used to look like before the city transformed it. As Sanderson says, ‘There are views in this city where you cannot see, except for a person, another living thing. Not a tree or a plant. How did a place become like that?’

In fact, long before the skyscrapers came to dominate the view, this place was a pristine wilderness where animals like beavers, bears and turkeys would roam freely through forests, marshes and grassland. Its ecology was as diverse as Yellowstone or Yosemite today. There used to be sandy beaches along the coasts and 90 kilometres of fresh-water streams.

Sanderson’s project resulted in a 3-D computer model of the area. You can pick any spot in modern New York and see what used to be there. Take Fifth Avenue, for example. A family called Murray used to have a farm here and in 1782 (during the American War of Independence) the British troops landed near here. Legend has it that Mrs Murray offered the British officers tea while George Washington’s troops slipped past them, down what is now Broadway. ‘I’d like every New Yorker to know that they live in a place with amazing natural potential – even if you have to look a little harder to see it,’ says Sanderson.

pristine (adj) /ˈprɪstiːn/ pure, as new

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