

MUDDY WATERS

NOW AT THE END OF ITS FIRST FULL YEAR, THE SCOTTISH BEAVER TRIAL CONTINUES TO DIVIDE OPINION. **RICHARD ROWE** REPORTS ON A PROJECT THAT SPEAKS AS MUCH ABOUT PEOPLE AS THE ANIMALS THEMSELVES

AT THE END of a track leading off a minor road that snakes through Argyll's Knapdale Forest, there is change afoot – change that conservationists perhaps dared not imagine they would ever see in Scotland. All around, branches have been expertly lopped; trees felled; a footpath flooded; and a once modest lochan has almost doubled in size. For anyone wondering just how much one family of beavers can alter a small patch of Scottish landscape, the answer is clear: rather a lot.

Simon Jones, Project Manager for the Scottish Beaver Trial (SBT), readies his radio telemetry equipment before we slide the Canadian canoe from the roof of his van. We are going beaver tracking on Dubh Loch, one of three locations now settled by families of animals imported from Norway and released in this corner of Knapdale.

There is no denying it; I feel real excitement at the prospect of seeing an animal that has been absent from our shores for the best part of 400 years. Admittedly, these two-foot-long rodents are not the most exotic of creatures, but it's more about what the animal represents: a slice of wildness that so many of us have become distanced from. The fact that it's a clear, perfectly still evening – with no midges – and a magical setting only heightens the sense of anticipation.

We don't have far to go before putting in the canoe. The beavers have seen to that. This particular family started their new life on nearby Coille Bharr, a much larger body of water, but wasted little time in damming a drainage channel and hopping over to Dubh Loch where they have spent the past year making renovations.

Quietly, we step into the canoe and assume our positions – me paddling at the front, Simon steering from the back – and set off along one of the canals dug by the beavers. We pause before entering the main body of water and gaze across at the beavers' lodge – an expertly crafted collection of rowan, birch and willow branches, all pasted together with mud and debris.

Of course, being wild animals, beavers don't appear to order, but this evening we strike lucky; almost immediately, we freeze as an adult female glides soundlessly across the loch, leaving only ripples in her wake. The animal swims closer and closer until, just 10 metres away, it suddenly turns, dives and slaps the water with its broad tail. I turn





PHOTOGRAPHY: LORNE CULLS/NH; SCOTTISH BEAVER TRIAL; RICHARD ROWE

to Simon and grin, but he is already busy with his notes, recording the beaver's every move.

IN THE BEGINNING

The Scottish Beaver Trial (SBT) is a five-year project that is designed to explore the viability of the Eurasian beaver returning to the wild in Scotland. It is run in partnership by the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) and Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) together with Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS), on whose land the trial is being conducted. Monitoring of the project is being overseen by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) which, in turn, is working with a raft of independent organisations, including the Argyll Fisheries Trust, Macaulay Land Use Research Institute and various universities.

But why beavers – and why now? With more than 25 European countries having already reintroduced the animal – encouraged by a European Union (EU) Habitats Directive that called on member states to return lost species – those behind the trial argue that Scotland is simply making up for lost time.

Here in the UK, the animal's territory once spanned much of England and parts of Scotland, although there is no direct evidence that they ever inhabited this part of Argyll. Like so much of our native wildlife, beavers were hunted to extinction, victims of their many uses to man. The animal's fur provided warmth, while beaver felt was synonymous with hats for centuries. When Robert Burns penned his song 'Cock up your Beaver', we assume he was referring to wearing the hat at a jaunty angle.

The arrival of beavers in Knapdale has certainly not happened overnight. Having long studied the idea of a trial reintroduction, SNH saw an initial licence application rejected by the previous Scottish Government. However, when SWT and RZSS picked up the baton, using the EU Habitats Directive as a lever, the new SNP administration proved far more enthusiastic.

The project was approved in May 2008 with the conditions of the licence allowing for the release of up to four families – the minimum number with which to create a viable population of beavers and achieve meaningful data, says the project team. A year later the first

animals – three families, comprising 11 animals – were released at selected sites in Knapdale Forest.

"As you would expect, the main driver for us is wildlife," explains Jones. Often described as a 'keystone species' – one that creates conditions for others to thrive – beavers are credited with helping increase biodiversity up and down the food chain. "It is well-studied overseas that the associated creation of ponds, the coppicing of woodland, and mosaic edge of wetland and woodland are all hugely important for other wildlife."

And as an animal that has always been here – the last 400 years aside – plants and trees have evolved to cope with having bits nibbled off them, he says. "They change shape, sprout up and keep growing in another form that creates niches for all sorts of life."

VALUE FOR MONEY

It is this expertise in wetland engineering that is used to defend a project cost – a little over £2 million – that is eye-watering in any financial climate. "There has to be proven benefit to bringing species back – it is costly and takes a lot of time," Jones admits. "It's not because beavers are a nice cuddly species, it's what they do that's the point. Let's not focus too much on the beaver, let's focus on the restoration of wetlands."

Jones certainly knows what he's talking about on this score. Having spent much of his career managing nature reserves, most recently Knapdale when it was a joint SWT/FCS site, he has spent hundreds of thousands of pounds digging ponds and thinning woodlands – work, he says, that beavers do on a much wider scale and in a more natural way.

The beaver then should be seen as part returning native and part management tool. "Wetlands are one of our hardest hit habitats, so if we are looking at a longer term programme to restore the beaver and value for money, we should also look at the economic benefits they bring," he argues.

This is a view shared by Paul Ramsay, a man with more experience **D**

Beaver heaven: a release site in Knapdale Forest (above); one of the animals enjoying a different kind of food



Dthan anyone of what it's like to live with beavers in a Scottish context. Eight years ago, he launched his own private reintroduction when he released two pairs onto his 1,300-acre estate at Bamff, Perthshire. A second private reintroduction followed at Aigas Field Centre near Beaully in 2006.

Today, Ramsay can't say for sure exactly how many beavers there are on his land, but the two families have certainly made their presence felt. Each has modified its surroundings to create conditions that Ramsay says now support a large population of trout, as well as benefiting water voles, otters, various waterfowl, dragonflies and eels – a species now in serious decline.

Such wetlands, he argues, are not just fantastic for wildlife but also a valuable resource for humans. This is particularly so in an agricultural landscape where they act as purifying sumps, holding and breaking up nitrates and phosphates contained in run-off from arable fields. "Healthy wetland management also ensures that during dry weather, water seeps away slowly and there is not a sudden drought, whereas in wetter conditions, the dams prevent flooding by creating a more moderate water flow," he explains.

And what of the moral argument about beavers – the one that says we drove them to extinction in this country, so we are morally obliged to bring them back? "I think a moral obligation is one part of it," believes Ramsay. "If we are not willing to bring back animals as innocuous as the beaver, what are we going to say to people elsewhere in the world who are about to lose tigers and other more exotic animals? What message does that send about conservation?"

SBT project officers prefer the more hard-nosed scientific argument that beavers benefit other wildlife, but Jones accepts what he calls the 'softer side'. "The moral argument is not one that we press, but if you ask people why they support the trial, it ranks quite highly."

Of course, beavers are much more palatable than top-of-the-line predators that are also often discussed as candidates for reintroduction, but for Jones the most important point is that conditions already exist for the animals to live sympathetically within our landscape.

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Both SWT and RZSS stress that beavers should not be seen as the 'thin end of the wedge' when it comes to reintroductions, but do see merit in returning native species that can exist with us in harmony – albeit with some kind of management. "It's not something we should talk around," comments Jones. "It's about having a longer-term vision for what we want for our countryside."

FERVENT OPPOSITION

At first glance, you might imagine that reintroducing a shy, largely nocturnal herbivore – one that poses no risk to sheep, the family pet or anyone's first born – would be straightforward enough. Not so. This is a project that has been dogged by difficulty and opposition from the very beginning.

While prior SBT consultation across mid-Argyll demonstrated that nearly three-quarters of respondents were in favour of the trial, in Knapdale itself Jones concedes that it is much closer to 50/50. Some locals I speak with take a view that the trial should be judged at the end of its five-year period, but others are less accommodating. Jane Allan lives on a smallholding at the head of Loch Sween and three of the burns that come from the nearest release site pass through her land. "You can't get much closer as neighbours," she says.

When I visit Allan at home, she has a thick file of correspondence on the table beside her. Having followed the trial closely since it was first mooted by SNH more than a decade ago, Allan is a particularly vocal member of a small group of locals that have opposed the project from the beginning. Articulate and informed, Allan knows almost as much about the trial as those actually involved; she has researched the experience of beavers in other European countries, blogs regularly on the subject and is always quick to call project officers to account if she senses any kind of misinformation.



Unashamedly undiplomatic in her language, Allan lists a catalogue of grievances, from a perceived lack of meaningful consultation with local people to the decision to site the trial in Knapdale – essentially because it’s on Forestry Commission land and nowhere else would have them, she contends.

“We have a fairly pragmatic view of wildlife and nature here. It’s a fantastic area. If beavers were here 400 years ago then fine, but they are not here now. To bring something back that alters things so dramatically ... why would you do that, apart from it being someone’s pet project?”

She is equally forthright on the cost of the project. “We don’t have many facilities in this area and £2 million would build a brilliant visitor centre to interpret what we’ve already got. All of this money is going into something pretty spurious. I mean, if they really wanted to help increase biodiversity they could have spent the money on eradicating mink.”

As we chat, the rancour about the trial focuses increasingly on the people involved rather than the animals themselves. “A lot of it [opposition] is about having something imposed on us where we don’t feel that we have any power to make any difference to what happens. In this area there is considerable mistrust of SNH itself.”

Jones acknowledges such mistrust and knows that any problems – and less than clear explanations – will be seized upon. There has already been scoffing at difficulties with the radio telemetry gadgetry being used to track the beavers; radio tags fitted to the backs of animals have fallen off, while the challenging ‘knap and dale’ terrain has proved adept at blocking radio signals.

Busy beavers: (clockwise from top left): beaver kits; an expertly felled tree; tracking the animals; Simon Jones takes to the water

It perhaps didn’t help that the project got off to such an unfortunate start. The beavers that were released came from a pool of 25 animals: 17 of which were imported as a batch of four families from Norway and went through quarantine together and another eight that were previously brought in by

RZSS, partly with contingency in mind. Sadly, eight animals died either at quarantine stage, or just after. “Beavers do not thrive in quarantine conditions, but it’s the law of the land,” says Jones. “For an animal that’s usually quite active, it’s six months in jail. We know this can happen, but it was a big blow.”

And for a time, things didn’t get much better. Of the 11 animals released, one died shortly after, while one family of three quickly disappeared outside the trial area. The adult male was found a couple of months later at a fish farm near Kilmartin – the owner was Norwegian, so the beaver was probably trying to get home, Allan comments later – but the female and offspring were never found.

“You have to remember that these are wild animals in a wild place,” says Jones. “The problem is that when they don’t behave in a way that we expect, never mind those people who are against it, then that’s perceived as us covering up the facts. That’s why it’s a trial ... it’s a learning process for us all.”

In May, project officers oversaw a fourth release, this time a pair of breeding-age beavers, and there could be more to come. For the trial to do its job, the project team says it needs four breeding pairs each producing kits that then disperse and create their own territories. With just three such families in place, the SBT has imported two new animals with the intention of them creating a family that would replace those that dispersed out of the trial area a year ago. The decision on whether to sanction what would be a fifth release now rests with the Scottish Government.

UNCONTROLLED SPREAD

As Jones and his team have discovered, keeping track of beavers is no easy task. And it is this tendency to roam that gives major concern from a fisheries perspective, says Nick Yonge, a fisheries biologist **D**

and Director of the Tweed Foundation. Yonge describes the Knapdale trial as “reintroduction via the back door”. “What happens at the end of the trial?” he asks. “Will they all be rounded up? They have already lost some and others will disperse. We will have a wild population and it will spread.”

With several groups in England all working to obtain licences for a similar trial, the fear is that, in decades to come, the animal could become a dominant feature of the British landscape, threatening the ecological balance of world-class salmon rivers such as the Tweed. “The extent to which beavers impact fish is not yet known but we think

“GIVEN THAT BEAVERS TRAVEL, INTRODUCED ANIMALS WILL EVENTUALLY REACH THE TWEED”

it will be quite severe and until that has been proven otherwise that is the line we will take,” explains Yonge. “What is so frustrating is that the pro [beaver] people categorically deny that there is a risk to fisheries.”

Jones accepts that it’s a delicate issue, but without any salmon rivers in the trial area, it is not something that can be investigated further – at least, not as part of the current trial. For now, SBT project officers point to the two species having coexisted for millennia. In Norway, they say, there are lots of beavers and lots of salmon. Yonge is unconvinced. “Many species ‘coexist’ but one always impacts the other – the relevant point is the extent to which they do so and under what environmental conditions,” he says.

Here, Atlantic salmon are a named species for the Special Area of Conservation not just on the River Tweed, but elsewhere in Scotland. “The terms of the Habitats Directive put an imperative on all managing agencies not to do anything that could compromise them,” explains Yonge. “Given that beavers travel, introduced animals will eventually reach the Tweed.”

Another difference is that, in Norway, beavers are generally not found in areas also inhabited by Atlantic salmon. “All native Scottish fish are migratory, so it is a particular problem here. If we want to preserve native fish then we must have migration. Beavers have never been introduced into a prime North Atlantic salmon area.”

To date, studies into the impact of beaver populations on salmon are limited, although the Scottish Government recently commissioned research into the subject. “What we do have is categorical evidence from Estonia and Lithuania that beaver dams stop sea trout, which are much more agile,” notes Yonge. “If they stop sea trout, they will stop salmon.”

It is clear that if beavers are to make a return to modern-day Scotland, then some potentially uncomfortable decisions will have to be made. If a beaver dam floods a farmer’s field or is found to be a problem for migrating fish then it can be taken down. But there has to be an

acceptance that such action might be necessary and must be paid for.

“From day one, we have said this is a species that requires man-

agement,” says Jones. “It’s a bit like living with a wild deer population when they exist in any sort of numbers.”

Of course, there are different ways of approaching beaver management: in Scandinavia, it usually involves a gun, although whether that would prove acceptable in a UK context remains to be seen. “We shouldn’t be scared of that because it may be required in the future,” stresses Jones. “We are not talking about an animal that might come back and then we are not able to touch when the population gets to a certain size.”

Back out on the water, the politics and rancour seem a long way off as the rest of the beaver family emerges from the lodge to forage for tubers. As our ears tune in, the surrounding forest comes alive; we hear something moving high on one of the banks, a fish plops behind us and bats skim the water plucking insects from the air. And from somewhere amongst the trees, there is the unmistakable sound of gnawing as one of the animals gets to work on another tree, just doing what it does, unaware of the storm that rages around it.

When we return to dry land, Jones sums up the issue with precision. “Fundamentally, and this is my personal view, this trial is not about

beavers at all, it’s about people and whether we are willing to live with an animal again. At some point the politicians will have to decide whether the pros outweigh the cons.” ■

Home sweet home: beavers have settled in well, but will their presence be tolerated beyond the trial?



FURTHER INFO

BEAVER VIEWING

The Barnluasgan Visitor Centre near Bellanoch provides interpretation, plus information on trails and the best places to see the animals.

SCOTTISH BEAVER TRIAL

The official site of the Scottish Beaver Trial. www.scottishbeavers.org.uk

JANE ALLAN

For a rather different view on the trial. www.scottishbeaver.blogspot.com

SCOTTISH NATURAL HERITAGE

For details on monitoring of the trial. www.snh.org.uk/scottishbeavertrial

BAMFF ESTATE

Find out about day-to-day beaver life. www.beaversatbamffblogspot.com

AIGAS FIELD CENTRE

The site of a second private reintroduction of beavers. www.aigas.co.uk

TWEED FOUNDATION

A fisheries view, including a section detailing frequently asked questions about beavers and fish. www.tweedfoundation.org.uk