

Beavers are still facing an uncertain future in Scotland

In early 2017, at the time of the launch issue of *The Ecological Citizen*, the future for the European beaver (*Castor fiber*) in Scotland looked bright, following the Scottish Government's acceptance of both the beavers at the trial reintroduction site at Knapdale in Argyll and the 'unofficial' population in the Tay River catchment as re-established native species (Watson Featherstone, 2017). Since then, however, there has sadly been very little progress in enabling this keystone species of fresh-water ecosystems to expand into other river catchments throughout Scotland.

At the time of the government announcement in November 2016, and under pressure from farming interests on Tayside whose lands had been affected by flooding from beaver dams, the Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, said that "while the species will be permitted to extend its range naturally, further unauthorized releases of beavers will be a criminal act. Swift action will be taken in such circumstances to prevent a repeat of the experience on Tayside" (Scottish Government, 2016).

The contrast between that statement and the Scottish government's attitude of unquestioning acceptance towards the unregulated annual release of millions of non-native 'game' birds such as pheasants and red-legged partridges by landowners for sporting purposes (i.e. shooting) illustrates starkly that the government is more concerned about not upsetting powerful landowning and farming interests than about seriously improving the parlous state of the country's depleted ecosystems.

For the beaver, the reality is that the isolation of the Knapdale population on the Kintyre peninsula and the geographic barriers of the Cairngorms massif to the

north of the Tay catchment and the densely populated Central Belt to the south, mean that the options for a natural expansion of its range are very limited, although there is much suitable habitat for the species elsewhere in Scotland.

In May 2017, a population of free-living beavers, including a lodge with young kits, was discovered on the Beaulay River, west of Inverness, with the weathered condition of beaver-felled trees nearby indicating that the animals had been there for at least five years. Most local people were unaware of the presence of the beavers and there had been no flooding damage reported to farmers' fields – unlike the Tay catchment, there is no arable farming on that section of the Beaulay River. Despite the absence of any problems or conflict with farming interests, the government conservation agency, Scottish Natural Heritage, acting on Roseanna Cunningham's order of 'swift action', immediately instigated a capture programme for these 'illegal' beavers. Three individuals were caught and taken into captivity, but within 24 hours two of the beavers had died, to the dismay and outrage of conservationists and wildlife enthusiasts.

That experience, plus the ongoing unresolved conflict on Tayside, increased the pressure for official protection for beavers, and in February 2019 the government finally announced that it was adding the European beaver to the list of European Protected Species of Animals protected under Scottish law, effective from 1 May 2019 (Scottish Government, 2019). However, the protection provided by this listing was tempered by a provision for licences to be issued by Scottish Natural Heritage (now rebranded as NatureScot) for culling of beavers that were causing problems for

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About Trees for Life

The mission of Trees for Life is "to rewild the Scottish Highlands by enabling the restoration of the globally unique Caledonian Forest." For more details, visit: <https://treesforlife.org.uk>.



A partially chewed aspen tree on the Beaully River in February 2017 (photo by Alan Watson Featherstone).

farmers, where there was no other viable method of control.

Although the stated intention was that shooting beavers was only to be used as a last resort, when all other alternatives had failed, in practice it soon became apparent that the reality was quite different. In May 2020, NatureScot reported that between May and December 2019 a total of 87 beavers (representing 20% of the country's population) were shot under licences the agency had issued, and only fifteen beavers were trapped and relocated, either to the population at Knapdale in Argyll, or to fenced trial reintroduction sites in England (NatureScot, 2020).

Alarmed at this officially sanctioned slaughter of a supposedly protected species, the Scottish Rewilding Alliance (a coalition of 24 conservation organizations and other groups) lodged a petition with the Scottish

Parliament in August 2020, calling on the government to initiate a programme of beaver translocations within Scotland that would minimize the need for culling, but so far that has been rebuffed. Subsequently, the conservation charity Trees for Life (one of the members of the Scottish Rewilding Alliance) initiated legal action in December 2020 calling for a judicial review of NatureScot over its failure to make the killing of Scotland's wild beavers a genuine last resort (Trees for Life, 2020).

Although it is the official government conservation agency in Scotland, NatureScot has had a long history of being undermined, re-organized, weakened and reduced in its effectiveness by successive governments. It was originally part of the UK-wide Nature Conservancy Council, which was broken up by the Thatcher government in 1990 – with its Scottish arm becoming the Nature

Conservancy Council for Scotland. However, that organization only existed for a year before it was merged with the landowner-dominated Countryside Commission for Scotland to form Scottish Natural Heritage in 1991. In due course, that agency was forced to withdraw its original objection to the funicular railway that was proposed and subsequently built in the heart of the Cairngorm Mountains, and also had its headquarters moved from Edinburgh to Inverness – decisions that prompted the departure of some of its best and most committed staff. Although there are still good people in the agency, successive budget cuts and the overriding of its objections to developments such as the Trump organization's Menie golf course that destroyed a Site of Special Scientific Interest north of Aberdeen, have left it demoralized and ineffective in standing up for nature in the face of government dictates and pressure from vested interests. Its inability to safeguard Scotland's fragile population of recovering beavers is just the latest example of this.

At the conference *Wild, Free and Coming Back?*, held in 2008 on the possible return of Scotland's extirpated mammal species, I gave a presentation in which I proposed a '20-20 Vision' for the beaver – of there being healthy, free-living beaver populations at 20 different sites throughout Scotland by 2020. The unfortunate reality is that today there are still only the two populations, and that landowners and local communities who have said they would welcome beavers in their areas are unable to receive any, whilst Scotland has become an exporter of live beavers to various fenced reintroduction sites in England. If that trend continues there will soon be beavers (albeit inside fenced enclosures) at a greater number and wider geographic range of sites in England than in Scotland. From having been in the forefront of beaver reintroductions in the UK, Scotland is at serious risk of being left behind, as England and also Wales welcome back the beaver.

This is despite the fact that there is so much suitable habitat in Scotland, strong support from the Scottish public

for the return of beavers to more of the country, and an urgent need to improve the ecological health of the country's rivers and freshwater ecosystems. All that is being overridden by the government's attempts to appease a small but vocal and politically powerful group of farming interests in one part of the country. It is symptomatic of so much of modern society, where the economic interests of the few take precedence over the ecological health of what is recognized widely as one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

On 14 December 2020, the Scottish Government announced new plans for tackling biodiversity loss in the country, and the Chief Executive of NatureScot stated: "We need nature for our survival – but our nature is in crisis. We have to work quickly and at a scale not seen before" (Scottish Government, 2020). For those not just to be more empty words, the government and NatureScot need to take meaningful practical action. Approving the translocation of beavers from Tayside to other catchments in Scotland, instead of further officially sanctioned killing of a species that is protected by law, would be a good place to start, and anyone in Scotland can help the cause by contacting their local Member of the Scottish Parliament to support this. ■

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