

**National Species Reintroduction Forum.
Meeting - 24 August 2010**

DISCUSSION PAPER: CAPTIVE BEAVER COLLECTIONS AND ESCAPED ANIMALS.

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1. INTRODUCTION & ACTION REQUESTED

Over the last few years there have been a number of records of beavers living in the wild in the Tayside and the Inverness area. No licence was issued by the Scottish Government to permit the release of these animals. The responsibility for recapturing the animals rests with the original owners but, in most cases, it has not been possible to confirm their origin.

It is likely that the number of animals is still low, although there are now reports of breeding. If coordinated action is required to remove the animals from the wild, then action is needed soon while a window of opportunity remains. Alternatively, if the animals are allowed to remain, then appropriate management and monitoring will need to be put in place.

This summary note sets out the main issues and possible future options. It brings together the various concerns raised by a number of conservation and land use organisations, as well as private individuals directly affected by the animals. It should be noted that a number of organisations are referred to in the text but, due to the short timescale, it has not been possible to check the contents of this paper with them.

Action: The Forum members are invited to consider the issues and discuss what action, if any, might be appropriate and practical.

Action: The Forum members are invited to suggest what support, practical or otherwise, they may be able to provide if it is agreed that attempts should be made to remove the animals and limit further escapes.

2. BACKGROUND

Licensing under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, as amended: A licence is required from Scottish Government (SG) to release any species 'not ordinarily resident' to the wild. The release of European beaver *Castor fiber* requires such a licence since the species has been extinct in Scotland for several hundred years and is therefore classed as 'not ordinarily resident'.

Scottish Beaver Trial: The Scottish Beaver Trial therefore applied for, and received, a licence to permit the release of animals at Knapdale subject to various conditions. To date this is the only licensed release in Scotland. The Scottish Beaver Trial has also applied the 'best practice' approach set out in the IUCN Reintroduction Guidelines. This includes identifying the most appropriate provenance of beavers (Norwegian animals have been used based on Kitchener and Lynch 2000), ensuring appropriate veterinary and welfare measures are addressed, taking into account the views of local people etc.

Captive collections: There are also six known collections of European beaver in Scotland (there are others in England). Two of these are in the Inverness area, three in the Tayside area, plus the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) captive zoo animals at Kincaig. Some of these captive animals are in relatively large enclosures (over 20ha). The collections are fenced and have therefore not been considered as releases into the wild by the SG. Consequently they have not required a Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981 licence.

Animals in the wild: A first, confirmed record of a beaver in the wild was at Sandyknowes Fishery, Bridge of Earn. The animal was caught by the RZSS in 2007. Another animal was found in the Tentsmuir area, Fife, and caught through a joint SASA-RZSS operation in 2009. It was not possible to identify the original owners of these animals.

Despite further trapping attempts by SASA, with RZSS assistance, several animals currently remain in the wild in the Tayside and Inverness areas. It is difficult to judge how many but it is a minimum of five animals – in four distinct areas on Tayside and one area near Inverness. A recent press report quoted a wildlife photographer who estimated there are over 50 animals although this is probably a considerable over-estimate. There is some evidence that animals may be breeding at one of the Tayside sites. The original owners of these Tayside animals cannot be confirmed, and no individuals have come forward to take responsibility for recapture (the situation with the Inverness animals needs to be confirmed with the police).

Responsibilities: If an animal escapes from a collection, or is deliberately released, then it is the responsibility of the original owner to recapture it and return it to captivity. An offence is being committed under the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, as amended, if such a release is undertaken without a licence from Scottish Government. However, if it is not possible to identify the original owner then the responsibility for dealing with the animal is not clear.

The SG therefore asked Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA) in spring 2009 to assist in the recapture of these animals on a temporary basis. They have been assisted by the RZSS who offered to help in the recapture and re-housing of animals. The police have investigated reports of animals in the wild and spoken to owners of captive collections. SNH have provided advice on ecological, management and legal issues. SASA, SG, SNH, RZSS and the police have met on an informal basis to date to discuss possible ways forward. The resources required to recapture the animals, and to deal with associated enquiries etc. have been higher than anticipated, and the organisations involved are now looking for support and advice in developing an alternative approach.

Other relevant legislation – The Habitats Regulations: Amendments made to The Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 (The 'Habitats Regulations') mean that it is now an offence, under regulation 39 (3) & (4), to possess/ control/ transport European beaver which were wild caught, and originate from an EU country, subject to certain defences. However, animals born in captivity do not need to be licensed. This amendment to the Regulations came into force several years after most private beaver collections were already established in Scotland, but would still apply if original stock animals are still present, or new animals being added. Since the original stock animals in most 'private' collections of beavers came from Bavaria in Germany, then licences may be required under this legislation. The owners of private collections have yet to be approached about this licensing requirement.

Article 12 (1) of the EC Habitats Directive states that 'Member States shall take the requisite measures to establish a system of strict protection for the animal species listed in Annex IV (a) in their natural range, prohibiting...'. It then sets out relevant offences such as deliberate capture or

killing, deliberate disturbance and destruction of resting places (which does not require deliberateness). Annex IV(a) includes the European beaver. However, European beaver is not included as a 'European protected species' (EPS) in Schedule 2 of our transposed domestic legislation, The Habitats Regulations. Our understanding is that beavers on Tayside and near Inverness are therefore not protected under this legislation.

Other relevant legislation – The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006: The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 is also relevant. Zoos are obliged to take account of the welfare of their captive animals, and we have been informed that the same would apply to 'private' collections. Since beavers are territorial, and live within family groups, then there is the potential for conflict between individual animals as numbers increase within the confines of a fenced enclosure, which therefore needs to be managed appropriately.

Other relevant legislation – The WaNE Bill: The WaNE Bill includes a no-release general presumption which includes former native species (including European beaver), unless under licence from SNH. While this, in effect, parallels the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, the Bill, as proposed, would simplify the issue of gaining access to a privately held colony to determine the status of the colony enclosure, where it is considered that escapes may have occurred or that the colony is not securely enclosed. It will also ensure that if there are any future releases of former native species, then they will be licensed only if SNH is satisfied that the IUCN Reintroduction Guidelines, and other relevant requirements, are addressed. There is also a proposal that beavers held in captivity are PIT-tagged to ensure that the ownership of any escapees can be identified.

3. ISSUES

The current situation has raised a number of issues which relate to conservation and land management interests.

Captive collections

- The structure and design of the enclosures of some captive collections does not appear to be adequate to prevent escapes.
- It is unclear how the numbers, health and welfare of animals within the captive collections are being monitored and managed. It is likely the animals are breeding in some of the captive collections and this would have a direct effect on the carrying capacity of the habitat within the enclosures and the extent to which dispersing animals may attempt to escape once they are two or more years old.

Animals in the wild

- It is not possible to confirm whether the animals are escapees from collections or deliberate releases.
- It is not possible to confirm the species of beaver in the wild. There is a risk, although probably small, that North American beaver *Castor canadensis* may be present. However, this can only be confirmed through the capture of animals and genetic testing. North American beavers have recently been found living in Germany and were only detected following genetic testing of dead/ trapped individuals.
- There are two main genetic forms of European beaver – a western form and an eastern form. Organisations and individuals leading on the potential for beaver reintroduction to

Scotland have, following a scientific assessment of potential donor populations, identified the western form (specifically Norwegian animals) as being appropriate for Scotland. To date, the two genetic forms have often been mixed across Europe as a result of translocations over many decades, so the isolated position of Britain provides an opportunity to ensure the conservation of the western form if a full reintroduction is ever approved by SG. However, it is highly likely that the beavers in the wild originally came from Bavaria. Unfortunately Bavarian animals are a mix of western and eastern forms originating from a range of populations across Europe, therefore jeopardising any future opportunities to maintain the western form.

- It seems likely that some of these animals are single individuals. Beavers normally live within family groups so these single animals are likely to be searching for mates, possibly with no hope of ever finding one, with consequent welfare implications.
- The best practice approach for reintroductions set out in the IUCN Guidelines has not been followed. The views of local individuals and organisations have not been sought over the Tayside and Inverness releases. Appropriate management has not been put in place. Consequently local landowners affected by beaver activity have been frustrated by the lack of help from the original owners, and the limited support that some bodies have provided to date.
- In the absence of the original owners taking responsibility for dealing with their animals, a number of public and non-public organisations have taken action. However, trapping has proved only partly successful, and the resourcing required has been significant. The RZSS collection is now at capacity and it is unlikely to be able to re-house many more recaptured animals.
- The public perception of the properly managed and legal reintroductions which follow best practice guidelines are likely to be undermined by the un-managed and un-monitored release/escape of beavers at Tayside and Inverness.

4. OPTIONS

The Forum membership is invited to discuss the options presented below. They have been separated into options relevant to the animals currently in the wild, and options for the captive collections. However, the two are closely linked and any action would need to be coordinated.

Animals in the wild:

There are a number of variations on possible options but they can be broadly categorised into two:

1. Animals are allowed to remain in the wild at the discretion of individual land owners.
2. A coordinated effort is made to remove all animals currently in the wild.

Both options require resources. The first requires resourcing for the long term, the second requires a short term input.

In the case of option 1, the implication of leaving animals in the wild is that a 'reintroduction' has therefore, in effect, started although unlicensed, uncoordinated and unmanaged. SG have not approved a full reintroduction of European beaver to Scotland to date, but have licensed the trial at Knapdale which has the role of informing any future decision. A decision not to deal with the

animals on Tayside would therefore mean the role of the Scottish Beaver Trial becomes questionable.

For option 1 individual land owners could undertake management on their land as the see fit. Some owners may be content to retain beavers on their land, others may wish to remove them. Our understanding is that the beavers in the wild on Tayside and near Inverness are not protected under domestic wildlife conservation legislation and consequently the land owner could remove the animal(s) if they wish. This option may include consideration given to monitoring, and putting in place suitable management support.

The second option would involve a targeted and organised programme of work, with the clear aim of removing beavers from the wild in Tayside and near Inverness. Appropriate lead organisation(s) would need to be identified to coordinate the work, and the support of relevant land owners would be sought. Assistance could also be sought from the owners of private beaver collections. The removal of beavers could involve:

(i) Trapping – Cage traps would be the most appropriate method (the use of nets from boats, as used in Norway and Knapdale, would probably be unsuitable in most cases). The experience to date is that this would require significant resources if all animals were to be caught. Even then, the variation of beaver behaviour in relation to traps, and the difficulty in accessing some sites, means that trapping may not always be a feasible option. If animals are trapped, then they would still need to be re-housed but at the present time there is no obvious facility that could hold the animals.

(ii) Humane culling – The shooting of beavers is a common and efficient management tool used across Europe. Appropriate methods, which take welfare into account, are well established. This would be the least expensive option but is also likely to be less acceptable to the general public, particularly in light of the ongoing Scottish Beaver Trial publicity.

(iii) Combination of the above - If feasible, animals could be trapped and a suitable facility found to re-house them. However, if particular animals cannot be trapped or re-housed for any reason, then humane culling could be used.

Animals in captivity:

The two main options are:

1. Beaver collections continue to operate as present.
2. Owners are requested to maintain the collections and prevent further escapes.

The view of the police would be required in any decision made on which option, or variation of the above options, could be applied. Since it seems there may be some situations where conservation and animal welfare legislation is not being applied, option 1 may not be appropriate.

In relation to option 2, it is possible that the owners are not currently aware of all the relevant legislation. Therefore they need to be informed of the legislation that applies and asked to apply for a licence to hold beavers sourced from Bavaria, and that appropriate animal welfare requirements are addressed. They could be provided with beaver welfare and husbandry guidance which the RZSS is currently drafting as part of the zoo guidelines issued by the

European Association for Zoos and asked to implement best practice. The future requirements of the WaNE Bill can also be explained, including the need to PIT-tag all captive animals to ensure that any future escapees can be tracked to the original owners.

This would also provide an opportunity to discuss the issues that have arisen from escapee/released beavers, and their advice and assistance sought in removing them from the wild. Importers of beavers would also be contacted and informed about legal situation that applies in Scotland.

The excerpt from the note of the meeting which covers this item is as follows:

5.3 Animals in Tayside

The paper was introduced and discussed.

The issue of animals currently in the wild was examined first of all. It was felt that some aspects of the case for removal could be clarified further, and that there were other situations where the release/escape of non-native/unlicensed species had not been addressed to date. However, in light of the fact the releases/escapes were unplanned, unmanaged and unlicensed, there was agreement by the forum membership that the beavers should not be in the wild and should therefore be removed.

The SG confirmed that the beavers are not currently protected. Individual land owners are therefore entitled to remove animals if they wish. The pros and cons of the different methods for removal were discussed based on experience to date, and assistance was offered by several forum members.

Action point 3.3 – SNH and SG to discuss and agree how action can be implemented quickly for dealing with animals currently in the wild in Tayside and Inverness-shire. Then to liaise with other Forum members.

Captive collections of beavers were also discussed. It was explained that the WaNE Bill is currently going through Parliament and is scheduled to complete its passage by March 2011, and thereafter it may be possible to arrange orders designed to ensure the proper care and maintenance of beaver collections e.g. all captive beavers to be PIT-tagged.

In the meantime the owners should be approached to ensure they are aware of other relevant licensing requirements, and are provided with husbandry guidelines (based on the requirements of The Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006) being drafted by the RZSS. The police WLOs will also have a role, and further assistance has already been offered by Tayside police.

Action point 3.4 – SNH and SG to arrange for captive owners to be contacted and provided with relevant information (including RZSS husbandry guidance), in coordination with police WLOs.

Annex 1. Attendees

DELEGATE	ORGANISATION
Andrew Wallace	ASFB
Jamie Farquhar	ConFor
Colin Shedden	BASC
Gordon Patterson	FCS
Roy Dennis	HFW
Jamie Mellor	NFUS
Duncan Orr-Ewing	RSPB
Rob Thomas	RZSS
Ross Montague	SCA
Hugh Dignon	SG
Nick Halfhide [chair]	SNH

Martin Gaywood	SNH
Ron Macdonald	SNH
Doug McAdam	SRPBA
Simon Milne	SWT