



Briefing for the Public Petitions Committee

Petition Number: [PE01601](#)

Main Petitioner: Andy Myles

Subject: European Beavers in Scotland

Calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to make an urgent decision about the legal status of the two populations of European beavers in Scotland, and to extend the full protection of law to the species.

Background

The European, or Eurasian, beaver (*Castor fiber*) is a semi-aquatic, strictly herbivorous rodent inhabiting freshwater and associated riparian habitats. They live in small colonies formed of family groups of up to 7 individuals, with each breeding pair producing between 1 and 6 offspring (kits) per year. Beavers are well known for the manipulation of their habitats, creating a range of structures including:

- **Lodges and burrows:** where the beavers live, lodges are constructed from cut branches, and burrows often have inconspicuous entrances underwater.
- **Food caches:** a collection of branches either anchored in the bed of a watercourse or entangled within a waterlogged raft.
- **Beaver canals:** formed by dragging branches to the water along foraging trails.
- **Dams:** generally less than 1.5m in height, these are constructed from logs, branches, mud, grass and stones. They provide the beavers with feeding areas, refuges, and facilitate travel and movement of logs/branches. This can lead to the creation of beaver ponds and meadows.

Consequently, beavers are regarded as ecosystem engineers, as these structures provide a variety of “services” including:

- increased groundwater storage
- flow stabilisation and flood prevention
- natural change and restoration of habitats
- increased biodiversity through the creation of new habitats.

European beavers are thought to have become extinct in Scotland during the 16th century due to over-hunting for fur, meat and castoreum (a secretion from

the scent glands, thought to have medicinal properties) in addition to habitat loss. Reintroduction projects have led to the establishment of populations in Spain, France, Scandinavia and Finland. The only parts of the beaver's former range no longer colonised by them are Portugal, Italy, the south Balkans (Greece, Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia) and Britain.

Scottish Beaver Trial

National consultation on the reintroduction of beavers to Scotland commenced in 1998, which resulted in [Scottish Natural Heritage](#) approving a trial reintroduction to Scotland in 2000. The first [Scottish Beaver Trial](#) at Knapdale Forest in Argyll began in May 2009, managed by the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS) under the approval of the Scottish Government. This project was subject to a five year monitoring period. During this period, a second beaver population appeared in Tayside. This was thought to have resulted from unauthorised escapes from private collections, although it is unclear whether this was done deliberately. Attempts to capture the Tayside beavers proved unsuccessful as the population was already too large, with around 39 beaver territories in the area. In 2012 the Scottish Government announced that it had decided to tolerate and monitor the Tayside beavers for the meantime.

Over the course of the 5 year trial, the beaver population at Knapdale remained stable, but did not increase. It was thought, however, that a number of beavers from the trial dispersed to other territories. The trial finished in 2014, with no decision made as to whether beavers will be officially reintroduced to Scotland.

Concerns regarding the reintroduction of beavers

There are a some concerns regarding the impact of beavers on forestry, agriculture, and infrastructure (roads, weirs, fish passes etc) due to their behaviours which include dam and canal building, burrowing, foraging of crops, and felling of trees, in particular aspen and Atlantic hazel may be negatively affected. Some people are worried about their impact on native fish populations and their potential to harbour diseases and parasites which may pose risks to humans. SNH commissioned independent studies into the impact of the reintroduction, including the [Tayside Beaver Study Group](#) (TBSG) and the [Beaver-Salmonid Working Group](#).

In February 2016, BBC News [reported](#) that both the RZSS and SWT had called on the Government to recognise the beaver as a resident species in Scotland, partially because of concern over their culling in Tayside. The TBSG [states](#): "based on legal advice received by SNH, beavers are not currently considered protected in Scotland".

Scottish Government Action

The Scottish Government commissioned SNH to produce a [report](#) on beavers in Scotland, which was published in June 2015. It provides detail on the Scottish Beaver Trial, including studies relating to environmental impact, natural heritage and legal issues. The report does not make a

recommendation to Ministers on what should be done regarding reintroduction; instead it presents four potential scenarios which:

[...] range from the full removal of beavers to the widespread reintroduction of beavers across Scotland. The scenarios are broad and a number of sub-options are possible. Few of the scenarios are discrete, so scenarios may be combined and there is the potential to change between different scenarios over time. There is a range of risks and benefits associated with each scenario; no scenario is risk or cost free.

Ministers are currently considering the report, with a final decision due in late 2016; however interim protection measures were [announced](#) in late March 2016, as follows:

- Providing information on the beaver breeding season to further address issues regarding the harm of pregnant or lactating beavers with dependent young
- The possible use of Nature Conservation Orders, where evidence emerges that welfare concerns are being ignored
- Continuing to advise on mitigation and alternatives to lethal control wherever possible
- When there are no other practicable options, making information available on the most humane methods of lethal control.

The Scottish Wild Beaver Group has [expressed](#) its “profound disappointment” at these measures, describing it as a “timid, toothless compromise”.

There have been a number of PQ’s relating to beavers, some of which are included below:

Question S4W-29155: Alison Johnstone, Lothian, Scottish Green Party, Date Lodged: 05/01/2016: To ask the Scottish Government what legal options land managers have had in dealing with European beaver on their land since 2010.

Answered by Aileen McLeod (19/01/2016): Beavers are not currently legally protected in Scotland and lethal control with firearms is not prohibited. Legal options for management include protection and mitigation methods, such as the use of wire netting to protect trees, the installation of “beaver deceiver” flow devices to prevent flooding, as well as lethal control.

Question S4W-29154: Alison Johnstone, Lothian, Scottish Green Party, Date Lodged: 05/01/2016: To ask the Scottish Government what advice land managers have been given regarding management of European beaver on their land.

Answered by Aileen McLeod (19/01/2016): Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) and the Tay Beaver Study Group have advised land managers experiencing impacts from beavers to refrain from the use of lethal control and to seek advice on mitigation methods. The role of the Tay beaver project officer, funded by SNH, included advisory visits for this purpose. SNH staff and contractors have also provided advice on the choice of effective firearms and ammunition, where it was apparent that a land manager was intent on lethal control of beavers. The Scottish Environment Protection Agency have also

provided land managers with advice on managing the impacts of European beaver.

Question S4W-29151: Alison Johnstone, Lothian, Scottish Green Party, Date Lodged: 05/01/2016: To ask the Scottish Government what it estimates to be the size of the European beaver population in the Tay catchment area.

Answered by Aileen McLeod (19/01/2016): Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report Number 540: Distribution, Population Assessment and Activities of Beavers in Tayside reported on a 2012 survey which found 38-39 occupied territories at that time. The authors of the report suggest that this could equate to 106-187 animals. It is assumed that the population will have expanded since 2012, although we have no recent data to confirm the current population. A link to the report is below.

http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/540.pdf

Question S4W-29148: Alison Johnstone, Lothian, Scottish Green Party, Date Lodged: 05/01/2016: To ask the Scottish Government whether it considers that it has an obligation to apply legal protection to the European beaver under the terms of the habitats directive.

Answered by Aileen McLeod (19/01/2016): The Scottish Government does not believe there is an obligation to apply legal protection to the European beaver under the terms of the habitats directive at present, while beavers are still subject to a ministerial decision on whether they are to be reintroduced to Scotland. In the event that ministers decide that beavers should remain in Scotland it is expected that some form of legal protection will be applied.

Question S4W-25267: Claudia Beamish, South Scotland, Scottish Labour, Date Lodged: 10/04/2015: To ask the Scottish Government what steps it would need to take if the Scottish Beaver Trial led it to propose full-scale beaver reintroduction across Scotland.

Answered by Aileen McLeod (29/04/2015): Scottish Natural Heritage will, by the end of May 2015, provide a report to Scottish Ministers, drawing on the knowledge gained from the Scottish Beaver Trial, the Tayside Beaver Study Group and other relevant sources. Scottish Ministers will then consider a number of options relating to the future of beavers in Scotland. If Scottish Ministers decide to pursue any option that involves beavers remaining in Scotland, this will need to be accompanied by plans to ensure continuing compatibility with Council Directive 92/43/EEC (the Habitats Directive) as well as a framework to provide effective management of wild beavers.

Scottish Parliament Action

There have been two debates in the Scottish Parliament on the subject of reintroducing beavers to Scotland:

Motion S4M-09777: John Wilson, Central Scotland, Scottish National Party, Date Lodged: 22/04/2014: Scottish Wildlife Trust Celebrates its 50th Anniversary That the Parliament congratulates the Scottish Wildlife Trust on celebrating its 50th anniversary; thanks the trust's current and former volunteers and staff for their contribution toward protecting, restoring and

enhancing the country's wildlife and habitats and for inspiring people to engage with nature; understands that the trust is involved in many conservation activities, which include managing its network of 120 wildlife reserves, policy work that aims to influence decision makers to take biodiversity into account when developing plans and policies, natural capital work that tries to encourage businesses to lessen their impacts on the natural world, and work that seeks to inspire people of all ages through education, events, visitor centres and a Scotland-wide network of wildlife watch groups for children; notes what it sees as the important role that the trust has played in the **Scottish Beaver Trial** and the Saving Scotland's Red Squirrel project; considers that it has been innovative in developing a landscape-scale approach to conservation through its living landscape projects in Coigach–Assynt, Cumbernauld and Edinburgh, and applauds the Scottish Wildlife Trust on its continued hard work and its commitment to protecting the wildlife of Scotland.

The Official Report from this debate is available [here](#).

The first debate on the reintroduction of beavers to Scotland was held in 2005: **Motion S2M-02502: Nora Radcliffe, Gordon, Scottish Liberal Democrats, Date Lodged: 01/03/2005: Trial Reintroduction of the European Beaver:** That the Parliament notes Scottish Natural Heritage's proposal for a trial reintroduction of the European beaver, a proposal which follows the successful reintroduction of the species in 24 other countries, and considers that the Scottish Executive should give serious consideration to issuing a licence for the trial so that it can be determined, in a controlled and properly monitored way, whether the benefits to the environment and tourism observed after previous reintroductions elsewhere can be replicated in a Scottish context without significant adverse effects on existing land uses.

The Official Report can be found [here](#).

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SPICe
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