



Scottish Beaver Trial: Project Update 18th June 2009

This update is intended to provide a brief overview of activity leading up to and shortly after the release of the beavers into the Knapdale Forest. A more detailed report on the first stages of the Scottish Beaver Trial will be available in the late summer 2009.

1. Background

The Scottish Beaver Trial is a partnership project between the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT) and host Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) to undertake a time-limited, five year long trial reintroduction of the European beavers (*Castor fiber*) to Knapdale, Mid-Argyll.

Following an application by SWT and RZSS in December 2007 the licence for the trial was granted by the Scottish Government in May 2008. The Scottish Government has asked Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) to coordinate the independent scientific monitoring of the trial, reporting on whether the conditions of the licence are being fully addressed on the ground. The trial is considered part of Scotland's Species Action Framework, which sets out a strategic approach to species management in Scotland.

The Scottish Beaver Trial has five main aims:

- Study the ecology and biology of the European beaver in the Scottish environment.
- Assess the effects of beaver activities on the natural and socio-economic environment.
- Generate information during the proposed trial release that will inform a potential further release of beavers at other sites with different habitat characteristics.
- Determine the extent and impact of any increased tourism generated through the presence of beaver.
- Explore the environmental education opportunities that may arise from the trial itself and the scope for a wider programme should the trial be successful

2. Release

- Three families of beavers (11 animals in total) were successfully released into three separate lochs within the Knapdale Forest, early in the mornings of 28th and 29th May 2009.
- All releases were monitored by SNH staff to ensure compliance with the Scottish Government licence conditions.
- The final family of animals released on the 29th May was completed with the help of the Minister for Environment, Roseanna Cunningham and a delegation of VIPs from Norway, the donor country of all the beavers.
- A media event for the trial, led by the Minister took place at the Barnluasgan Centre in Knapdale immediately following the release of the final family. All the main funders of the trial, as well as several stakeholding organisations had representatives present at this event.
- The release generated a significant amount of media interest with three national TV networks, two national radio networks and six national newspapers running the story on the 29th May. On this day alone it is estimated that the story reached approximately 10 million people in the UK. The 'beaver – salmon issue' still remains the main focus of negative press. Following release there continues to be sustained media interest, particularly from TV film crews.
- The whole process of capture, quarantine and release of the beavers has been captured on film by an SBT commissioned independent film maker. This short, documentary style film will soon be ready for viewing and wider use associated with the trial.

3. Liaison & Communication

- The third local Stakeholder Forum meeting is due to take place during the summer of 2009 and will include a field visit to the trial site to look at the effects the beavers are having to date.

- Three 'Beaver training days' for local people and stakeholders took place on 8th, 9th and 15th May. Led by SBT staff and supported by local SNH and FCS staff the days were designed to provide information on the ecology, behaviour and management of beavers, as well as discussing how the trial would proceed post release.
- Jenny Holden, the SBT Field Officer is in regular liaison with many local stakeholders and organisations regarding the trial.
- Jenny has started a 'Beaver Blog' about the trial which can be seen at <http://blog.scottishbeavers.org.uk/>

4. Quarantine & Mortality

- In total the trial used a pool of 25 Norwegian beavers for the purposes of the project. Due to the impact of mortality and loss of condition whilst in quarantine of beavers captured in autumn of 2008, it was necessary to use eight wild caught, but captive held animals from two families based at RZSS's Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park facilities. The quarantine of imported beavers is a legal requirement in the UK, covered by the Rabies (Importation of Cats, Dogs and Other Mammals) Order 1974.
- Of the total pool of 25 animals, eight beavers (32%) died either in quarantine or post release, which is disappointing but unfortunately not an uncommon occurrence, as seen in other beaver re-introduction projects elsewhere in Europe. All dead animals had post mortem examinations carried out by independent veterinary surgeons. Six animals (24%) died whilst in quarantine due to a variety of causes generally associated with poor body condition. A juvenile male animal died within 24 hours of release into Loch Linne and although not entirely conclusive the cause of the death was considered to be possibly stress related. Another male kit died on 4th June 2009 following transportation from quarantine to holding at Edinburgh Zoo. No results are available yet as to the cause of death of this animal.
- Seven beavers now remain in captivity. These animals will be held at Edinburgh Zoo and Highland Wildlife Park with the intention of improving their condition and the creation of new breeding pairs. Following future discussions with the Scottish Government and SNH, the SBT partners may wish to use some of these animals for subsequent release at Knapdale as part of the current trial.

5. Monitoring & Tracking

- Led by SNH, the majority of on-site, baseline monitoring associated with the trial has now been completed and post release tracking and monitoring work has begun.
- Post release there has been an intensive period of beaver tracking associated with the trial. Led by the SBT Field Officer, staff and volunteers have been regularly radio tracking all released animals and recording field signs in the important early stages post release as the beavers explore their new homes and begin to establish territories and build burrows and lodges.
- To date it has been 21 days since release. Of the 10 surviving animals that were released, two of the families (Loch Linne: adult pair + juvenile male and Loch Coille Bharr: adult pair + two juvenile females) have quickly settled. The third family released into Craig Mhor loch (adult pair and female kit) have regularly moved from the release loch to neighbouring burns and explored outwith the trial area as far as the Crinan Canal to the north. SBT are in regular liaison with British Waterways the owners of the canal regarding the situation and these animals are under close observation. The SBT partners will not allow beavers to settle in the canal and should this appear likely or any signs of potential damage occur to the canal then any animals will be trapped by field staff and relocated back to the trial area as soon as possible.
- As experienced in other beaver projects some radio transmitters attached to animals have been either lost or damaged and this has affected the accuracy of pin pointing the exact location of some animals. The observation of field signs, such as feeding remains, footprints and paths are therefore important elements to the continued tracking of the animals during the trial.

6. Interpretation & Education

- New interpretation and information facilities associated with the trial were opened at the Barnluasgan Centre and around the Loch Coille Bharr 'Beaver Detective Trail' by the Minister on the launch event on the 29th May 2009.
- The SBT Field Officer has now either visited or hosted trips by two local schools to explain the trial and run educational activities.

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