

Tayside Beaver Inaugural Meeting

Thursday 3 May 2012
SNH Battleby Office

Present:

David Bale (SNH) – Chair
Robin Guthrie (SEPA)
Andrew Taylor (SG – Wildlife Management Unit)
Hugh Dignon (SG – Wildlife Management Unit)
David Gemmell (Scottish Land & Estates)
Alan Ross (Scottish Wild Beaver Group)
Simon Jones (SWT)
James Scott (SNH)
David Summers (Tay District Salmon Fishery Board)

1. Apologies

Roisin Campbell-Palmer (Royal Zoological Society Scotland)
(NFUS had also been invited but we had not yet received a response)

2. Background

There is currently a breeding population of beavers living in Tayside. The Minister for the Environment has decided that these animals should be allowed to remain in place for the duration of the official trial beaver reintroduction in Knapdale in Argyll. At the end of the trial period in 2015, he will take a decision on the future of beavers in Scotland.

3. Agreement of procedure and protocols for conduct of group meetings

The group agreed the following:

- The chair must remain impartial
- While representing a range of organisations and opinions over the Tayside beavers, the group was not a forum to try to convince others of our individual points of view.
- Our work needs to be focused on working together to meet the Minister's requirements (as set out in the Terms of Reference) in an objective manner.
- Our discussions need to be undertaken in an atmosphere of openness, trust and respect, especially when there is disagreement.
- Information disclosed within the meetings will not be used to further any individual's own agenda.

The agreed minutes of meetings will be published on the SNH website.

The group will report to the Minister in early 2015, which leaves little time over which to make a difference. It was suggested that meetings should be used for decision-making with nominated person(s) taking forward action. E-mail exchange could facilitate information gathering and sharing to progress work between meetings.

It was agreed that there is likely to be a need to nominate experts outwith the group to report back on specific issues and that studies would need to be commissioned – either through group members' contacts or through tender.

There is a budget of up to £50,000 pa over the next 3 financial years to contribute to the costs of gathering additional information. The deliberations of the group will help inform SNH's decision as to how to deploy these resources. SNH is responsible for the use of these funds as needed to meet the Minister's objectives for the group.

Funding is not available as a source of compensation, but can be used in learning about the process of practical management mitigation. Funding could be used to trial a suite of measures to help resolve land management conflicts. It would be useful for Ministers if we could establish a cost effective way to resolve issues. They will wish to know how much cost any reintroduction is likely to incur.

Funds can also be used to gain more understanding of the benefits/disbenefits of beavers for a range of environmental and socio-economic interests.

4. Terms of Reference

The draft ToR were discussed and amended after discussion (see the finalised ToR attached)

It was agreed that the group has two principal aims:

- To gather additional information and monitor impacts of the Tayside beavers on other wildlife and land uses in the area, to help inform Ministers' decisions on the future of beavers in Scotland in 2015; and
- To help identify a variety of means to resolve any conflicts between beavers and land uses in the area and provide advice and practical help to land owners at a local level, and to consider how these can be used more widely in the future.

These will be achieved by identifying methods and ideas and learning about techniques used elsewhere in the world to manage the populations.

The long term legal status of beavers will depend on the decision made in 2015. At present the Scottish Government position is that beavers are not protected because, since their extinction circa 400 years ago, they are not normally resident in the UK. In the meantime, the group needs to look at the issues surrounding their presence in Tayside and identify practical options for management prior to a decision on re-introduction.

It was agreed that other interested parties should be contacted and invited to join the Group. The Chair would continue to pursue NFUS as it was important that their interests were represented.

AP1 – DB to contact NFUS again

It was also agreed that it would be beneficial to have a representative of the forestry industry. The SG members will liaise with FCS and represent their interests, so we agreed to invite a member of Confederation of Forest Industries to get a private sector perspective.

AP2 – DB to contact ConFor

Scottish & Southern Energy was discussed in connection with hydro schemes, but it was decided that there is unlikely to be a conflict owing to their requirement for steep gradients that are unsuitable for beavers.

The independent monitoring partners associated with Knapdale have a different remit, but our work will complement theirs in informing the Minister's decision. We need to stay in contact with them but do not need to duplicate membership.

It is important to have representatives who can look at the situation from a research point of view and it was suggested that Peter Collin of the Freshwater Fisheries Lab at Faskally be approached for advice. It was recognised that the lab was already represented on the Beaver-Salmonid Working Group (BSWG), and it was important that we collaborated rather than duplicated efforts. DB had attended the last meeting of the BSWG and at that meeting it had been agreed that both groups had a complementary role but that collaborations was essential. DB will continue to liaise with the BSWG by being an observer at their meetings.

AP3 - DB is to contact an SNH member on the BSWG to request papers.

It will be important for the Group to operate in line with the IUCN Guidelines on reintroductions (which are currently under review) when proposing any management solutions.

Reporting – DB will report annually on the Group's activities to the Minister for Environment, and provide briefings as necessary to the NSRF.

Resources – The work of the group will be primarily supported from the existing resources of its members, i.e. in time offered, and up to £50k pa to be spent on items relevant to the SG remit. This excludes:

- Promotional work designed to increase support for beaver reintroduction
- Compensation to land managers for any loss incurred from these beavers
- Monitoring and regulation of private collections
- Running or monitoring of the Scottish Beaver trial at Knapdale Investigation and management of any beavers found outwith the Tay and Earn river catchments
- Decision of any license applications for the release of beavers in Scotland
- Decisions relating to the appropriate genetic provenance of any future introduction stock for Scotland.

5. Existing/ongoing studies

A list on ongoing studies was circulated (see Appendix 1)

The Tayside Beaver survey, which included an initial helicopter survey to identify beaver signs in March 2012, was a good preliminary step to inform population and extent of range. A specification for a ground or river survey was put to tender on Monday 7 May, with a 14 day turn around. All current information is to be shared with the contractor, who is to provide data on the number and extent of territories and the key areas of impact (positive and negative). It is recognised by the group that it is difficult to identify territories due to the chemical boundary marking used by beavers.

JS distributed a map, based on an aerial survey, showing beaver signs within the Tayside catchment area.

DS offered to look into fish movement versus dams as an initial information-gathering action. There were already some studies going on looking at fish below and above dams in the beaver enclosures at Bamff.

It was suggested that the Group commission a study on the genetic make up of the wild population of beavers, and also assess their health. It is noted that there may be a need for trapping for experimental purposes, which would require a license for release. This needs to be fully explored before the animal based studies (genetics and health) can commence

SNH has commissioned a report on behalf of the National Species Re-Introduction Forum (NSRF). This is a group set up to consider potential species for reintroduction to Scotland and why. Land management and conservation organisations attend the forum at 6-monthly intervals to discuss a range of issues, in particular beavers and sea eagles and others less well known. A study on the use of derogations in other EU countries has been undertaken, covering the situations where a species has been introduced, been given legal protection and then started to cause problems. The report is in its pre-final draft and not yet published on the SNH website.

AP4 - JS will circulate the report to group members as soon as it is ready.

AP5 - – *All* – to look at the list of existing studies and think about what other studies would be valuable and what opportunities we can utilise.

AP6 - E-mail DB with ideas and suggestions to discuss at the next meeting.

6. Management of study contracts/contributions in kind

SNH has been given the role of budget holder and will have the final say in a situation where the Group has differing views. SNH is the contracting authority and is responsible for value for money and transparency of spend.

Representation on the group does not exclude the Group members' organisations or individuals from tendering for relevant contracts, as they will have no part in the decisions on the award of contracts.

SWBG is happy to contribute towards identifying mitigation measures – with an in-kind contribution of time.

SNH, together with Faskally, has mapped the potential habitat availability across Scotland, and determined where, within those catchments, beavers are likely to build dams. This gives an idea of the worst case scenario if beavers spread to all parts of their potential range.

7. Management of Conflict

There is a concern amongst farmers that land owners/managers will be unable to act quickly should the need arise to deal with a problem caused by beavers. We agreed that we would seek to identify a pragmatic approach, within the scope of the legislation, to avoid prolonged bureaucracy and allow swift action to cope with ongoing beaver damage. A humane practical set of solutions needs to be identified, including options such as “do nothing”, or dam management, translocation or shooting, with or without the need to apply for a licence for each specific situation. We wish to identify practical solutions to help resolve any conflicts between beavers and the interests of land managers including fisheries, agriculture, flood management and forestry.

It was agreed that the Tayside beaver colonies are in a very different land management context from Knapdale. Our area has a far more intensive level of land use and a much larger human population. This will provide a more ready opportunity to identify relevant and practical guidance on the legal options available to manage a wide range of potential conflicts.

We agreed that we wished to avoid a position that is too inflexible. We could learn from the Bavarian situation which seems to adopt a pragmatic approach in terms of derogation. It is noted that the Bavarian model includes two individuals who are employed to trouble-shoot, whereas SNH is more likely to seek lower cost, local solutions where possible. We will therefore endeavour to draw lessons from experience of conflict resolution and mitigation in other countries.

We agreed that it was important for all group members to see the impact of beavers for themselves. It was agreed that AR would organise for the group to meet some land owners on relevant sites with DG giving a tour of the beavers on his land as a precursor to the next meeting.

AP7 - JS to liaise with DH and AR to arrange site meeting for next meeting.

.AOB

There is an International Beaver Symposium in Croatia in September.

Date of Next Meeting

A doodle poll is to be set up for a site visit and meeting in the middle two weeks in June (11th-22nd).