

Beavers in British History

British beavers were hunted to extinction for their meat, pelts and scent glands. The beaver pelt was highly prized because of the quality of the fur. The last beavers disappeared from England and Wales by the 12th Century, but populations in Scotland held on until the 16th Century.

The beaver is now set to be the first extinct mammal to be formally reintroduced into the wild in the UK, with four families to be released in Scotland early next year.

Beavers in European History

The beaver was persecuted throughout Europe and, by the 19th Century, faced extinction. Populations held on only in southern Norway, the Rhone Basin in France and the Elbe Basin in Germany. It was brought back from the brink during the 20th century, and successful beaver reintroductions have been carried out across the continent.

Why do we need the Beaver?

Beaver are considered to be a 'key-stone' species because they have the ability to create and maintain wetlands by building dams and digging ditches. They also create coppice, selectively felled areas of woodland. In doing this they provide essential habitat for many other species of plant and animal. Wetland areas and coppice must currently be maintained artificially, at significant cost to the public. Beaver damming activity has also been observed to filter pollutants out of the water, leaving streams cleaner.

Wetlands are not only considered to be one of the most valuable and fragile ecosystems, but they can also act as a flood defence and could protect homes across the country. After heavy rainfall, wetland areas and flood plains act as a sponge, holding excess water and releasing it slowly, preventing sudden rises in water level and flash floods.

British beavers were persecuted by man to extinction. They are a fundamental part of our natural heritage, and we have an ethical and moral responsibility to restore them to their natural range where possible.

Won't beaver damage property?

Beaver activity does have an impact on the land, and in some situations this can conflict with human activity. Agricultural land is likely to feel the greatest impact, suffering both from flooding and damage to crops. The overall cost of this damage should be very small, but may be costly to individual farmers. In many countries in Europe the state will pay farmers compensation for damage caused by wildlife. This compensation does not yet exist in Britain. It has been suggested that beavers could create enough revenue through eco-tourism to adequately compensate farmers.

Damming activity could very occasionally flood other problem areas, including roads and railways. This can be averted by piping water around beaver dams, allowing more water flow. Beavers can also cause damage in industrial areas, but this has

been avoided in Europe by careful control of the population. Problem animals are caught and translocated or culled.

Contrary to popular belief, beavers will not damage fences or other man-made wooden structures, they only fell live trees. Another common misconception is that beavers will completely destroy areas of woodland. Beavers are very selective about the species and location of the trees they fell. Only trees within reach of water are felled, as it acts as a transport system for the beavers, allowing them to easily move logs around.

Beavers have been reintroduced across Europe, and have not caused any serious ecological problems. Reintroductions have been extremely successful as long as the population density is low enough that the beavers do not come into conflict with human activity.

Beaver Reintroductions in Scotland

Scottish Natural Heritage has carried out extensive evaluations on proposed beaver reintroductions over many years. No other beaver reintroduction project in Europe has gone through such a long and thorough assessment process, but finally in spring 2008 the go ahead for a trial reintroduction was given. Four families of Norwegian beavers will be caught this autumn (2008) and released next spring (2009) in Knapdale, Argyll. The trial will be run by the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland, and will be carefully monitored by Scottish Natural Heritage. When the environmental and economical impact of the project has been assessed, a wider reintroduction may be considered.

What is Wildwood Doing?

Wildwood would like to see the beaver reintroduced not only to Scotland, but across the rest of the country as well. We are working with Kent Wildlife Trust on a trial reintroduction of beaver onto an enclosed nature reserve at Ham Fen. Here they are being used, alongside Konik horses, as a management tool to restore and maintain Kent's last remaining ancient semi-natural fenland habitat. Their impact on the landscape is being closely studied and, if the project is successful it will support the case for beaver reintroduction throughout the country.

Wildwood has quarantine facilities for two families of beavers. Beavers are imported from Germany and housed in our facilities for six months. After this they go through extensive vet checks before being released onto the reserve. Six beavers were released in 2002 and five in 2004 with mixed success. Wildwood has recently sent another family to the reserve. The family of four were put into a special pen with an artificial lodge and allowed to acclimatise before the fences were removed after a week. This family was released on September 29, and the animals have settled in well and started to build a lodge for themselves.

Wildwood will continue to exhibit a family of beavers with the hope of educating the public to their cause.