

Tayside Beaver Group – 2nd Meeting

Thursday 14 June 2012
SNH Battleby Office

Present:

David Bale (SNH) – Chair
Danielle Casey (SNH)
Ian Lorimer (SEPA)
Andrew Taylor (SG – Wildlife Management Unit)
Hugh Dignon (SG – Wildlife Management Unit)
David Gemmell (Scottish Land & Estates)
Andrew Thompson (Scottish Wild Beaver Group)
Simon Jones (SWT)
James Scott (SNH)
David Summers (Tay District Salmon Fishery Board)
Roisin Campbell-Palmer (Royal Zoological Society Scotland)
Kate Maitland (NFUS)
Ian Mackintosh (NFUS)
Jamie Farquhar (ConFor)

1. Welcome and apologies

Welcome to Kate and Ian from NFUS, Jamie from ConFor and Roisin for her first attendance for RZSS. Andrew Thompson was also welcomed as deputy for Alan Ross, and Ian Lorimer deputising for Robin Guthrie.

Apologies from Alan Ross (SWBG) and Robin Guthrie (SEPA).

Thanks to James and David Gemmell for their part in organising the morning's site visit.

2. Note of last meeting / Action points

The note was agreed as accurate. Thanks to Ariane Johnston for taking the note.

AP1 – DB to contact NFUS again – **DISCHARGED**

AP2 – DB to contact ConFor – **DISCHARGED**

AP3 – DB is to contact an SNH member on the BSWG to request papers – **DISCHARGED** – contact has been made and papers will be circulated as and when available.

AP4 – JS will circulate the NSRF report to Group members as soon as it is ready – **CARRIED FORWARD** – report not yet published.

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 – **DISCHARGED**

AP6 - E-mail DB with ideas and suggestions to discuss at the next meeting – **DISCHARGED**

AP7 – JS to liaise with DH and AR to arrange site meeting for next meeting – **DISCHARGED**

3. Study / monitoring opportunities in Tayside

As a basis for our discussions, HD reminded us that the Minister, in 2015, wants to make a decision based on the answers to some basic questions concerning the existing population –

how many; where are they; how fast do they spread; are they European / North American; would they provide a genetically/healthily sound basis for any official reintroduction, etc?. He also wants us to take forward any opportunities to develop guidance and protocols for management and mitigation measures.

Genetics and health

The possibility of carrying out genetic and health studies was discussed at length. The Tayside population presents a good opportunity to carry out cost effective studies of both, as they could be done at the same time using the same statistically viable sample. RZSS could carry out some tests using their own staff, but, depending on the level of specialism required, this could become expensive if contractors are also needed. Trapping for health screening is fast and cheap but some genetic testing is expensive.

It was asked if there was merit in testing beavers to see if there was any possibility of them being a vector for domestic livestock diseases such as TB. Research could also answer questions about the potential consequences of beaver relationships with other wild animals and concerns over public health. The pre and post release tests applied to beavers brought into the country for the Knapdale trial are very robust and could be applied in Tayside. It was agreed that it is important to investigate a range of these questions as far as can be done usefully in the time available, to assist the Minister with his decision.

The ongoing study of the Tayside population being commissioned by SNH will give the Group a good idea of the number and range of beavers. The sample size used for testing for genetics and health, must be statistically representative of the whole population. Ideally, samples would be taken from the source (there was some discussion on whether any trace of the source still exists) and captive populations.

There was lengthy discussion about the practicalities of testing – trapping, tagging, tracking, holding pens, re-release, culling, translocation, etc. Decisions on methodology will be made once an options appraisal has been carried out. There were particular questions about the legal situation regarding any re-release of tested beavers.

AP2/1 – Roisin to provide 2 sides of A4 outlining priority diseases, methods, resources (money and time), sample size, IUCN guidelines and any other useful information related to health and genetic testing. She will use this to present a proposal for the necessary research work.

Concerning public opinions, the Group needs to think about how it will approach landowners once the population survey results are through. This presents an opportunity to gauge land owners opinions in particular. They could all be approached with the same questions – for example:- are you aware you have beavers on your land; are you happy to have beavers; do you have any concerns/problems relating to beavers; would you be content for beavers to be re-released back onto your land after capture? Alternatively, if we wished to be more selective, the Group could identify where it needs samples from and approach landowners in those areas. There are 80-100 beavers between Comrie and Forfar. A viable sample size would be from 10 to 20%.

The animals will be looked at 2 ways – i) finding out more about the population through testing and ii) testing mitigation measures. Some landowners may be willing to allow mitigation measures to be tested on their land. If landowners are controlling beavers on their land, it would be beneficial if the carcasses were provided for testing, and this was recorded (with some sensitivity to appropriate levels of confidentiality). It is of course much easier to do a more comprehensive range of tests on dead beavers than on live ones.

Political handling – justification would have to be provided to both the Minister and landowners if the decision is to re-release beavers caught for testing. Any re-release would have to be subject to a licence to comply with the law. We agreed that it was unlikely that many trapped beavers could be re-homed in captive collections as they do not appear to have any spare capacity. Furthermore, if caught beavers were killed this would provide more scope for a wide range of relevant tests. There could, however, be huge public resistance to killing beavers for this purpose. Culling may well have to be a management tool for managing an established beaver population in Scotland but that was considered to be a different issue. Ministers need to be enabled to deal with the potential high level of protest on this matter.

AP2/2 – James to liaise with SG over the politics of killing beavers for testing as compared to re-release (once Roisin has provided her note.)

Legality – JS was asked to explain the current legal situation regarding Beavers. They are listed on Annex 4(a) of the Habitats Directive. In accordance with the provisions of the Habitats Regulations and Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended), it is legal for landowners to kill beavers without a licence (because they are outwith their native range at this time) but it is not legal for anyone to possess, control or transport beavers, dead or alive, without a licence (a provision intended to prevent the trade in derivatives of protected species e.g. sporrans etc.).

Andrew Thompson described 2 cases in which dead beavers were reported to SWBG, only one of which came from the wild, – they collected the animals and then transported them to SAC for post mortem. Not only did both SWBG and SAC probably commit offences, there are issues over lack of consistency in post mortem methodology and results not being captured by this Group. James is the first point of contact for anyone with questions about what to do in this situation. It was agreed, however, that a procedure needs to be put in place for getting samples to the RZSS for post mortem and that Alan Ross (SWBG) should be permitted to act under James's licence.

AP2/3 – James to attend SWBG meetings to discuss further and agree the procedure for the legal handling of beaver samples.

We agreed that while in accordance with the Minister's decision we did not wish to encourage the killing of beavers, we did wish to make land managers aware that if they killed a beaver for any reason, it would be of benefit if they could make the carcass available to the Tayside Beaver Group for testing. The process for doing this could be considered as part of the above action point. Such an open approach would also help to allay the suspicions of a secret cull.

Socio-economic effects

The contract for the population survey was awarded to Ruaraidh Campbell (an established beaver ecologist) and Lauren Harrington (who is involved in the independent monitoring at Kanpdale). They have completed a survey of the Earn. Their results show there are 5 or 6 groups and they have spotted 4 separate individuals. Most of the survey was carried out by canoe and the contractors were left to satisfy themselves on access issues. They are due to report back in ~1 month.

Although not part of the contract, the Group suggested that the results of this survey should be used to carry out population modelling to look at what the situation could be like 5 – 10 – 15 years from now. Annual aerial surveying could then be used to monitor the expansion of range in practice.

AP2/4 – James to take forward the suggestion of forward population modelling using the results of the current survey as a baseline.

We have a duty to draw attention to other beaver populations that may be found outwith Tayside, but in accord with the Minister's requirement and our ToR, our remit is to study beavers in Tayside only.

4. Contributions in kind

The Group now has some good ideas of what to spend its funds on. It would, however, be great to extend the cost effectiveness of the Group through 'contributions in kind'. The RZSS has offered access to their genetics and veterinary teams as well as their trapping skills and personnel. SWT have offered to provide training on ecology, management, mitigation measures, etc. It was agreed that David G's land would be a good demonstration site for SWBG to install and develop mitigation measures. There are few dams in the wild. Funds could be provided for hardware and labour. Knowledge gleaned from ongoing work at Bamff could be applied. David's own estate team will lead on this but others from the Group, along with SWBG, will be involved – SWT, SNH and SEPA (may provide gauging posts) and TDSFB. The whole process needs to be well documented and could appear on the website (to be discussed later in the meeting).

AP2/5 – All to send details of their 'contributions in kind' to Danielle.

AP2/6 – James to set up the group taking forward the mitigation work to be carried out on David's land.

5. Conflict management – how do we deliver advice and support?

Website

A website is a good way to let people know we exist and that they can approach us for advice. It also shows we are being open and accountable. It will be a stand alone website managed by SNH. Content will include:

- What the Minister has said thus far
- ToR
- Membership
- Notes of meetings
- Current situation
- Legal situation
- Advice

AP2/7 – James/David to come up with an alternative name to the 'Tayside Beaver Group' as this could cause confusion with the 'Scottish Wild Beaver Group' website.

We need to reassure the Minister that we can deliver advice and support in a cost-effective manner. He also needs to know for sure, come 2015, what the issues are. At the moment, we don't know what the extent of the issues may be. There may be people out there with problems that don't know where to turn. The Group should be more proactive in finding out what and how big the issues are. The resource implications of this should not be underestimated. We also need to develop a consistent view on the advice we give out. An approach similar to that used by SNH for bat casework could be used. This utilises a group of trained volunteers who can be called upon as issues arise, but who also have recourse to other expert back up where needed. Roisin offered RZSS services for training of various groups to allow them to participate in providing consistent advice on beaver issues.

The Group agreed that the SEARS hotline should be used as a first point of contact as this gives people one place they can contact 24hrs a day.

AP2/8 – James to write an article for Farming Leader by 27th July that raises awareness of the Group and lets people know what to do.

AP2/9 – Kate to scope the possibility of James attending NFUS meetings to raise awareness.

There are mixed views throughout the Group on whether the Bavarian set up is a good one. They have a mixture of state-paid staff and volunteers. Landowners in Scotland would not be wholly content with volunteers advising them how to manage their land but, really this would depend on the knowledge and expertise of the volunteers. However, we need to establish a working model which is cost effective, wins the confidence of the land managers and the public, and can be used as a basis for a nationwide approach should the Minister agree to full reintroduction.

AP2/10 – Roisin to send to Danielle information on Bavarian beaver management for circulation to the Group.

AP2/11 – Simon and Roisin to confer about information available of similar experiences in Europe and pass to Danielle for circulation.

6. AOB

Possible agenda item for next meeting – Beaver Management DVD.

7. DONM

AP2/12 – Danielle to set up a Doodle poll for the next meeting sometime in August.