

## **Beavers in Strathglass – Community Views**

### **A report on Trees for Life's initial round of engagement with local people**

#### **Introduction and Aims**

Trees for Life (TfL) is working to assess the potential to release beavers to the wild in the Highlands. We believe that the range of benefits beavers can bring to our environment would comfortably outweigh the costs of managing their potential impacts on land uses. We also believe that beavers can exist comfortably in much of the Scottish environment. For us, this means that people's attitudes to beavers are now the key factor in determining whether they should be returned to the Highlands. Do people agree with our views on beavers or are they opposed to the idea of beaver release? Our beaver work has therefore had three objectives:

1. Develop a case study of what a Highland beaver release would look like in practice.
2. Provide a balanced assessment of how beavers could affect people and their interests in Strathglass, with a particular focus on the possible pros and cons for farming, property, fishing, recreation and tourism.
3. To open a discussion with the local community about beavers and their potential effects. We particularly want to understand local people's views on the issues and the reasons behind these views. The ultimate question we hope to answer is can local people imagine living and working with beavers in the area and, if so, how?

#### **Summary of key findings**

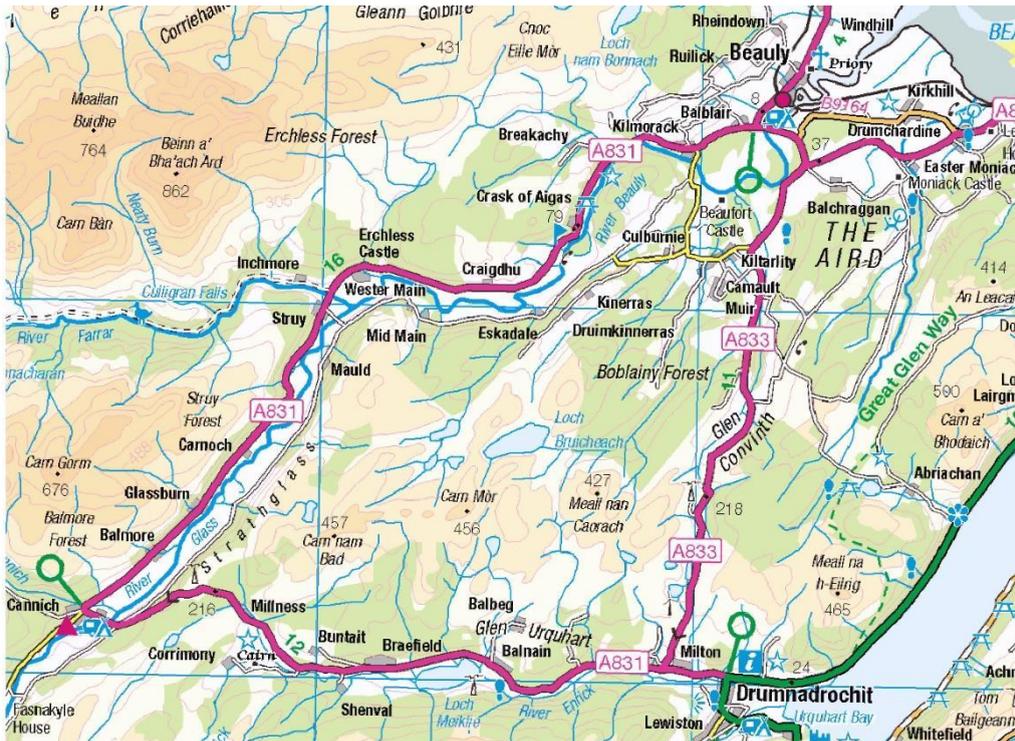
We have taken the following key learning points from this initial consultation:

- There is a range of views on the return of beavers to Strathglass, from strong support through wariness to opposition.
- A heavy majority of people who contributed to the consultation are in favour of beavers being in Strathglass, but there may be more opposition to the idea than we have engaged with as yet.
- A number of the farmers we spoke with were undecided but were either interested in the issues or just wanted to 'keep an eye on it'. One farmer was definitely opposed and there were others that we didn't manage to talk to.
- We did not manage to have the depth of conversation with fishing interests we would have liked to fully understand their views.
- The main concerns we have encountered are related to the potential for beavers to: exacerbate bank erosion; beaver dams and fish migration; and dams and localised flooding.
- While we usually found a cautious acceptance that the beaver management techniques used in Europe could work here, there must be reassurance that the resources needed to implement these techniques satisfactorily are in place.
- Most of those we have spoken to who are wary about beavers seem interested in finding out more about potential impacts and benefits, as well as beaver management, before coming to a view on whether the upsides outweigh the downsides or vice versa.
- The existing beaver presence on the river has not caused anyone any problems.

#### **Background**

##### *Case study fieldwork findings*

We decided to locate our case study in Strathglass because of reports that beavers had been present there as a result of animals escaping from private collections there.



The fieldwork phase of our work aimed to survey the riverbanks and create a map of the locations and quantity of beaver field sign like chewed tree stumps and timber. When we started however, we were very surprised to discover not just old field sign from previously escaped beavers, but signs of an ongoing presence still on the river. This turned to shock in June 2017 when we found that this presence included a lodge with an actively breeding family. Our camera traps provided evidence of a family with two adult beavers, two sub-adults born in 2016 and two beaver kits born 2-3 months earlier in spring 2017. We have since had reliable reports of two separate animals living singly on the river – one above and one below the large Aigas and Kilmorack hydro dams on the river.



Still from TFL camera trap in Strathglass, June 17

#### *Government instructs beaver trapping*

In the circumstances, we decided that the responsible thing to do was to report our discovery to Scottish Natural Heritage, the government agency responsible for beaver reintroduction and for managing the impacts of the illegally released population on Tayside. Given what has happened to

this beaver family since we reported their presence, we have been heavily criticised for this, including by some of our own supporters, and we understand where this is coming from. However, we also felt strongly that it would have been disingenuous to embark on a community consultation about beaver release while withholding information about an actively breeding family already present in the area.

A summary of the subsequent chain of events is that, having been informed of the presence of breeding beavers by SNH, the Scottish Government decided to trap and remove them from the wild. The logic for this decision was that the Strathglass beavers were the result of an unauthorised release and that Environment Secretary Roseanna Cunningham was therefore obliged to remain consistent with her November 2016 announcement about beavers in the wild in Scotland, which stated that 'Swift action will be taken in such circumstances to prevent a repeat of the experience on Tayside.'

We were very disappointed that the Minister's decision to trap and remove the beavers was made so quickly and without consulting either ourselves or any local community interests. Our view is that the situation in Strathglass is so different from Tayside that there is no prospect of the conflicts which have emerged there repeating themselves here. We are also clear that the beaver presence in Strathglass is all but certainly a result of animals inadvertently escaping from one or both of two private beaver collections close to the river. Given these circumstances, and the fact the beavers had gone all but unnoticed for a number of years, we believe that the Minister could and should have taken longer to assess the situation and the community's views on the matter before deciding to trap and remove the family from their home territory.

Trapping began in mid-September and three of the six beavers in the family were trapped close to the end of the trapping window in mid-October. Sadly, despite the expertise and professionalism of those involved in the trapping operation and the post-trapping veterinary checks, all three beavers died within a fortnight of being trapped. SNH have told us that the post-mortem results were inconclusive. As the organisation which started the chain of events that led to these deaths, this is a difficult outcome for us to come to terms with.

### **Community engagement**

We had begun talking to local people about the beaver presence in July, well before the trapping started. We began by seeking to identify and approach people whose property and livelihoods are directly affected by the river system and who we felt may have the strongest views about the presence of beavers there. We spoke to a number of people face to face and on the phone to discuss beavers, their potential effects and whether these would be seen as good or bad news from the point of view of the individual concerned.

In total, we contacted nine farmers and landowners, four angling-related groups, seven local residents and three local business people. We also contacted the Community Councils for Kilmorack, Kiltarlity and Beaully. The interactions with these groups and individuals were either face to face meetings or phone calls, although in a few instances, the exchanges were limited to email communication on the subject.

After this phase of talking to those closest to the river, we organised three public events and advertised these locally through email contact with the details of those we had already spoken with, by posters and by word of mouth. We decided against a broader approach to advertising through social media because we felt it was important to retain a local focus at this stage of the conversation. The three events were a drop-in information day in the Lovat Arms Hotel in Beaully and two evening meetings in the Phipps Hall in Beaully and in the Kilmorack Community Hall. Each event involved TfL

presenting some basic facts about beavers and the effects they can have on rivers and the land uses around them, followed by Q&A and discussion groups looking at four questions suggested by TFL to focus the conversations on the impacts beavers might have and whether or not people felt these could be manageable. A total of 52 people attended these events.

### **Levels of engagement**

After this first stage of discussions with the community it is very likely that there are many voices yet to join the conversation. The publicity for the public events in October and November was kept local in focus so that the community nearest the rivers would be the most significant voices in the discussions. A small number of people from further afield heard about the meetings and came along. Their views were largely pro-beaver, but respectful of the fact that most of the effects of beavers would be felt in Strathglass.

#### *Farmers and landowners*

The farmers and landowners we have engaged with so far were either met face to face or spoken to on the phone. They expressed a range of responses to the idea of beavers being in the catchment, but all the conversations were engaged and constructive irrespective of how people felt about beavers. Feelings ranged from clear opposition to beavers to the feeling that any problems they might cause can be managed as long as they are monitored.

Most of the more in depth conversations however were more about people exploring the issues and beginning to consider the potential pros and cons rather than reaching a firm view. The farmers nearest to where we first found the beaver lodge were relaxed about their presence – ‘sure, we’ll just keep an eye on them’ said one. On the other hand, another was clear that he was against their return, citing his experience of rivers in Norway where beavers have cluttered the banks with felled timber. Overall, the commonest view we encountered in local land managers is that they are unsure about what beavers might mean for them. They would want to know more about the potential for negative impacts on their land and about the practical workability of managing these impacts.

#### *Fishing interests*

We have had contact with the local fishery board, fisheries trust, a syndicate of riverbank owners and an angling club. Our communication with each has been through a single point of contact who has relayed messages back to their members for discussion. The response from each of these groups has been wary about the potential impacts of beavers on fishery interests. Their engagement with the consultation has been limited so far and it may be that the government’s current intention to remove the beaver population from the river has reduced the incentive for fishermen to join the debate. We have not yet been able to open discussions about whether the specific concerns that fishery interests hold could be overcome if the right management were in place.

We spoke with a couple of fishermen who were interested in the potential of beavers to benefit fish populations. Both were aware that this involves a non-traditional approach to fishery management, but feel that there is growing interest in focusing more on the quality of river habitat for fish among river managers these days. At present however, our sense is that the majority of fishermen would be opposed to a reintroduction here until more is learned from trials on beaver populations elsewhere.

#### *Residents and local businesses*

There is a great deal of interest in the existing beaver population on the river and most of the people we spoke with directly who live near the river and use it for different forms of recreation (walking, canoeing, spending time in nature) welcome their presence and feel they should be left alone. The fact that the beavers are doing no harm is a key factor in why people feel strongly about this, while

the recent deaths in captivity of the three beavers trapped from the river has intensified feelings further.

This group seemed the most open to the potential benefits beavers could bring for other wildlife, water quality and tourism in the longer term. Some of the local business people we spoke with were interested in the way beavers could help boost the wildlife tourism appeal of the area. There were calls for awareness raising about the true nature of beaver impacts and a feeling that beavers, farming, fishing and people enjoying the river are all compatible if there is good dialogue and planning for managing beaver impacts. However, some were concerned about what beavers might come to mean for farmers on the river banks if their numbers grow in the years to come, especially when these farmers were people they knew directly. A couple of those we spoke with were more circumspect – concerned that any management plan for beavers would be drawn up in an office by people with no experience of how practical land management works from the point of view of a farmer or fisherman.

#### Four Questions

Part of each public event involved asking people four questions which we hoped would help people to think through the issues as a whole and express their views on the potential positive and negative aspects of a beaver presence. We tried to frame the questions to invite people to think broadly about the implications of a beaver population while leaving equal space for positive and negative views on the subject. We invited people to record their responses in writing. The questions and a summary of the answers given are shown in the table below.

Question	Summary of written responses
What do you most value about the rivers here?	Most of the answers to this were about the environment. Qualities like wildlife, biodiversity, naturalness, beauty, quiet, walking, fishing and canoeing all came through. A lot of people who came to the events know the river banks well and use the areas around the river and local streams for quiet recreation. A couple of the answers explicitly referred to the fact that flooding is something people want to avoid.
What do you think the benefits and potential issues might be if beavers continue to live here?	These are outlined in the following section on Key Consultation Issues.
Can you imagine a scenario where the community and beavers could live side by side to mutual benefit?	Not everyone engaged with this question, but those who did gave a consistent 'yes' in response. This was often qualified with recognition of the need to plan and communicate about the management of beavers in advance of any issues arising. Various people feel that the experience from both Europe and North America where beavers are successfully managed around land use needs can be used here to the same effect. While many people highlighted the fact that the presence of beavers on the river for 5-8 years had gone largely unnoticed, there was also an understanding that this would not necessarily remain the case if their numbers grew over time.
What would have to happen to make this possible?	The key steps people called for were: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Open dialogue about all the issues so that potential conflicts can be identified and resolved before they become issues.</li> <li>● A pragmatic, planned approach to management.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Further survey and consideration of how and where beavers could affect the river.</li> <li>• Monitoring of any beaver population to inform management decisions.</li> <li>• Explanations of how management techniques will work in practice.</li> <li>• Resources to implement beaver management, possibly through agri-environment support for riverine environments.</li> <li>• Community involvement.</li> </ul>
--	--

**Key Consultation Issues**

The consultation asked people what the potential impacts and benefits might be if beavers continued to be a presence in the area. We organised these potential impacts and benefits under seven headings and set them out below.

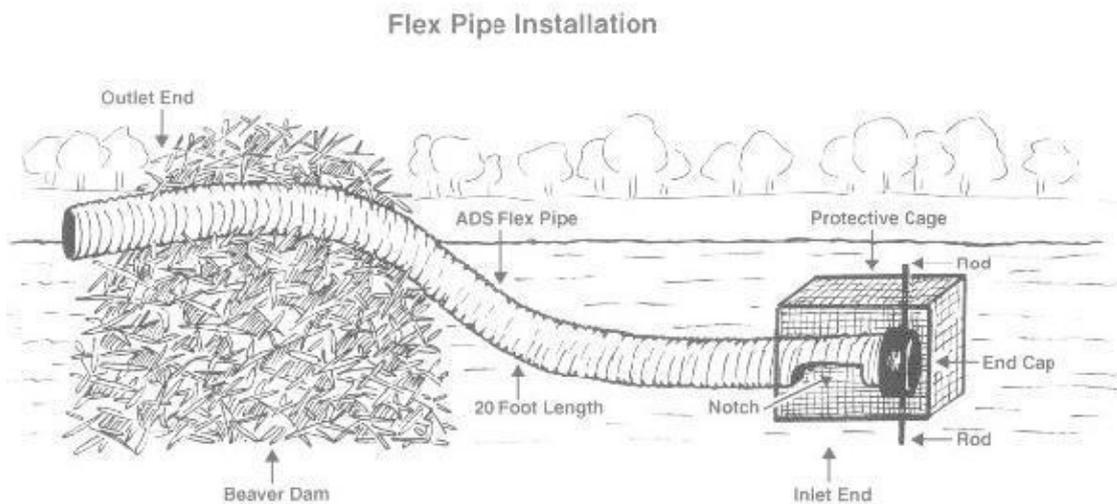
*1. Beaver Dams*

The consultation found two areas of potential concern and one opportunity for benefit around beaver damming. Depending on whether and where they are built, beaver dams can impede drainage and cause localised flooding, block or inhibit the access of salmon and trout to spawning grounds and have positive effects on river habitats for wildlife.

i. Beavers dams and impacts on drainage

Beaver dams in narrow drainage ditches in the lower, flatter part of the catchment could easily increase localised flooding of farmland or property close to drainage channels. This is a key concern for one landowner. In beaver areas in Europe and North America, this is commonly managed through the regular maintenance work needed to keep such channels clear, by lowering the beaver dam or by installing a flow pipe through the dam to limit the levels to which water can rise behind the dam. These techniques are widely accepted as effective in the countries where they are used, including in the USA and Canada where the North American beaver, a closely related species to our Eurasian beaver, builds much larger and more robust dams.

Example of a flow pipe design used in North America



ii. Beaver dams and impacts on fish migration

There are longstanding concerns about the long term health of Atlantic salmon and sea trout populations across the UK. As on many Scottish rivers, Anglers on the Beauly currently operate a conservation policy based on catch and release. If periods of low rainfall lead to reduced stream levels during the spring and autumn fish spawning runs, beaver dams can sometimes obstruct access to upstream spawning grounds for species like salmon and trout. This is clearly a key concern for anglers.

It would be useful to discuss this issue further with fishermen. Beavers and salmonid fish co-existed in Scotland for millennia and fishery management in beaver areas in Europe has shown that beaver dams can be compatible with fish migration, particularly in catchments like Strathglass where beaver damming is likely to be constrained by topography.

iii. *Beaver dams and benefits to wildlife*

Responses from local residents showed clear interest in the way beaver dams could benefit other wildlife by improving water quality and by creating shelter areas in streams which would increase the diversity of insect populations and provide more food for other amphibians, birds and mammals in and around the rivers and their banks. This included two fishermen who feel that beavers can improve habitat for fish populations through the same shelter and feeding effects. Both also feel that there is growing interest in focusing more on the quality of fish habitat among river managers these days. Further engagement with fishing interests would allow us to explore these issues and to understand their concerns more fully.

*2. Bank erosion impacts*

Landowners on the Glass are concerned about the potential of beavers to exacerbate river bank erosion through their burrowing activities. These owners currently spend very significant sums of money on repairing bank erosion, so anything which could make the river banks more vulnerable to erosion at times of high water flow would be a problem. At present, the extent to which the composition of the river banks is susceptible to being opened up to erosive flows by beaver burrowing is unclear, so learning more about how bank erosion works in the system will be valuable.

There are possible ways to address this concern, through river bank protection or fencing to prevent beavers gaining access to vulnerable stretches of river bank, but there appears to be scepticism about whether agri-environment funding could be used to mitigate any extra expense. How such management would work in practice is therefore a key area to explore further.

*3. Tree felling impacts*

To date, the consultation has found two stakeholders concerned about tree felling. The first of these related to the fact that beavers could fell mature trees that contribute to the character of the local landscape. Beavers tend to fell smaller diameter trees which have a higher ratio of digestible tissue to hard wood, but they can also fell quite large trees. Putting fencing around important trees, or groups of trees, is a simple way of preventing beavers from felling them, but this can look unsightly in some settings. The second concern was around the potential for beavers to fell so many trees on a river bank that walking along the banks becomes difficult.

*4. Potential hydro dam impacts*

One person recommended that we speak to Scottish and Southern Energy about the possibility that beavers could increase the amount of dead wood flowing into their intakes on the hydro dams in Strathglass – would this be a significant concern for them?

*5. Tourism business benefits*

The presence of beavers in the area was seen by many as likely to add to the visitor appeal of Strathglass, which would then be of benefit to local tourism businesses. One respondent questioned whether difficulty accessing the river in places could restrict the potential to increase wildlife tourism. Someone else asked how people would feel if beavers brought large crowds of tourists to the area.

#### *6. Benefits for local enjoyment*

A lot of local residents were excited by the prospect of beavers becoming part of the local wildlife and adding to the experience of walking or paddling on the river. A common feeling is that beavers would help enhance the beauty and enjoyment of the area, partly by restoring ecological processes and helping other wildlife.

#### *7. How will management be resourced?*

This is the key issue for most people. The fact that beaver impacts have been managed to widespread satisfaction in North American and countries to which beavers have been reintroduced across Europe has been widely accepted in the consultation to date. The pivotal question asked in Strathglass is therefore about where the resources will come from to ensure that management of beaver dams, river banks and riverside trees are implemented to the necessary, effective standards. Another question related to this asked by one person was about the group who would be involved in designing a management scheme and specifically whether this would include local people with practical knowledge and experience of managing land and 'not just a bunch of bureaucrats'.

#### **Questions to address next**

There is more to learn about how a wild beaver population might affect Strathglass. The conversations we had during the autumn identified eight key issues that people wanted to understand further. Some of these can be addressed by looking at case studies from European areas with beavers or consulting with fishery or beaver management specialists. Others can be dealt with by mapping or through local discussion.

#### *Understanding the impacts*

- What does a map of the areas where beaver damming is likely to occur in Strathglass look like?
- What do studies in Scotland and Europe tell us about the extent to which dams inhibit salmon and trout spawning runs?
- How widely do the riverbank characteristics (steepness, substrate) lend themselves to being burrowed into by beavers?

#### *Management effectiveness*

- How effective are the techniques used to manage beaver impacts in Europe?
- What does the management of beaver impacts look like in practice?
- How much ongoing work is involved in managing beaver dams to maintain drainage channels or protect fish spawning runs?

#### *Implementing management in practice*

- What is the scope for agri-environment or other sources of funding to provide resources for beaver management?
- What would be an appropriate balance of expertise to involve in designing a management approach for beavers in Strathglass?

**The next steps we propose to take are:**

- Report back to the community on what we took from the initial consultation and to check this against what people felt was discussed.
- Seek to engage with more of the community, particularly those who may have held back from voicing concerns about beavers to learn more about whether these can be addressed, or not.
- Address the 'next questions' listed above and discuss the findings with the community. Where people are willing, we will discuss issues directly with the most relevant groups, such as farmers, landowners and fishermen.
- Specifically explore people's views on the idea of a beaver release above the hydro dam in Glen Affric.