

The Cairngorms National Park Authority and the re-introduction of beavers to Speyside

Description

On 18th December two pairs of beavers were released on Speyside, one on the Rothiemurchus Estate and one on land belonging to Wildland Ltd ([see here](#)). This followed NatureScot's identification of Speyside as one of the priority areas for translocation of beavers from the Tay and the decision of the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) board in June 2022 ([see here](#) for paper) to assume the lead role under Scotland's Beaver Strategy. With that Strategy appearing to have been designed to hinder rather than facilitate the translocation of beavers ([see here](#)), getting from board decision to beaver release in 18 months is quite an achievement.

This post considers how they have done this, the specific arrangements they have put in place to support the return of beavers to Speyside and the implications for the future.

Addressing people's fears about the impacts of beavers

A significant proportion of the general public understand that beavers are ecosystem engineers and that their dams help reduce flooding and are good for wildlife. The result is there appears to be widespread popular support for the translocation of beavers.

The fears, however, start when people consider the potential consequences of beavers moving into ones backyard. The main failing with Scotland's Beaver Strategy is, as I put it in my post back in July, that it failed to provide adequate means to address the legitimate interests of landowners.

Unlike the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority (LLTNPA), which ignored the concerns of local people about the potential impacts that the release of beavers to the Loch Lomond National Nature Reserve could have on their lives, the CNPA has tackled these issues head on.

First the CNPA have made great efforts to inform local people about the environment benefits and potential financial/economic consequences of the return of beavers. This is best demonstrated on their excellent web pages on the beaver re-introduction ([see here](#)). These are highly recommended if you have not viewed but there have also been a host of consultation and engagement events. They include not just information about the translocation plans and answers to frequently answered questions, with several people speaking in explanatory videos, but contain a summary of the potential impacts of beavers ([see here](#)).

Second, the CNPA has set out ([see here](#)) how it will mitigate any potential adverse impacts from the reintroduction, for example:

Scenario	National mitigation scheme	Park Authority added resource
Individual tree protection using weldmesh	Some protection of high value trees will be supported by Mitigation Scheme. This excludes private gardens	Weldmesh provided and will be fitted by the Park Authority, if requested by the landowner, for a limited number of individual trees. Includes private gardens
Large-scale tree protection through fencing*	A limited set of circumstances where exclusion fencing is considered appropriate other than as a trial or demonstration	Support (materials and/or funding) for the installation of large-scale fencing will only be provided in exceptional circumstances
Dam identified within two weeks of it being built	Removal at the landowner's expense	Will remove the dam if requested to do so by the landowner
Dam identified after two weeks. Landowner does want that area dammed	Licence application by the land manager to NatureScot for dam removal. At the applicant's expense	Will apply for a licence on behalf of the landowner and if successful remove the dam, if requested to do so

This does not hide the fact that beavers can have adverse impacts which need to be managed (there is a whole industry dedicated to managing conflict between people and beavers in Canada [see here](#)) and goes well beyond the national mitigation scheme operated by NatureScot. That basically left landowners, big and small, to pick up many of the financial costs of managing beavers. The CNPA has stepped into the gap by committing to pick up the financial costs and employing a beaver project manager. That should have helped give local people on Speyside the confidence that support is available should they need it.

The contrast with how how Scotland's other National Park Authority, the LLTNPA, approached the translocation of beavers to the Loch Lomond Nature reserve could not be greater. The LLTNPA simply ignored the concerns of local people raised during the consultation there, for example the potential impact of beavers on septic tanks, and there is no information at all on their web pages about beavers or what people should do if they are experiencing problems. The LLTNPA left everything to the RSPB and their Board has never discussed whether they should be taking an active role in trying to resolve conflicts between people and beavers. The consequence, of course, is predictable and likely to be terrible for individual beavers. Without adequate support people will take the law into their own hands.

There has been some criticism from farmers about the CNPA mitigation scheme which was given an airing in the Scottish Daily Express ([see here](#)). While the claims of some of the farmers claim to have been "unheard" are fairly predictable the nub of their criticism is about *who will pick up the bills for damage to riverbanks and for crop losses in the longer term once a [beaver damage mitigation plan](#) comes to an end in either 2026 or 2028*³. The response of CNPA officials is that they *are confident such costs will be covered nationally by agricultural grants once reforms come in during 2026 but farmers and crofters have said there are no guarantees*.

Apart from the funicular on Cairn Gorm, where HIE's business plan commits £73m in public subsidy over 30 years, it is difficult to think of any government funding scheme that is guaranteed for years ahead. The answer surely is for farmers to stop criticising the CNPA and get behind them. Local farmers could be asking that the mitigation scheme the CNPA has developed replaces the flawed National Beaver Mitigation Scheme and is extended to cover Tayside and the rest of Scotland sooner rather than later. They should also be supporting the CNPA's monitoring programme which will help establish more accurately the costs of resolving conflicts between beavers and people.

Showing how National Park Authorities can take a lead

Unlike the LLTNPA, which basically shrugged off taking any responsibility for the reintroduction of beavers on Loch Lomond, the CNPA Board explicitly agreed to take a leadership role in June 2022. Part of that involved accepting that they would need to find additional resources to support the re-introduction of beavers on Speyside, quite a brave decision given current financial constraints, but one that has resulted in the creation of the Project Manager Post and funding for the mitigation scheme.

This has been underpinned by the CNPA being prepared to speak the truth rather than ignoring the consequences of the beaver re-introduction: *the impacts of beavers depend on the habitats the locations that beavers decide to set up a territory in. The impacts can vary from negligible to unacceptable*. That openness is commendable and is the way to establish trust with local people and local interests.

CNPA Board Members, unlike those in the LLTNPA who are prevented from doing anything practical, have also been heavily involved in the translocation project. A good example is the video of Peter Cosgrove ([see here](#)), an ecologist, talking about the potential impact of beavers on the freshwater pearl mussels of the Spey. Behind the scenes Board Members have also been heavily involved in discussions with local interest groups.

The wider point is that both staff and board members have played a role in the re-introduction process, both are visible to the public (as the videos on the website show) and accessible too. This contrasts with the LLTNPA where the contact details of board members are kept secret: every CNPA Board Member has an email for public use and in my experience most have been very responsive to contact. That responsive approach has also been epitomised by the CNPA's offer to do site visits with anyone who is concerned about the potential impacts of beavers on their land.

The other key difference with the LLTNPA is that the CNPA has fostered and encouraged a range of interest groups in the National Park. There has been a Cairngorms Beaver Group since 2017 but also a host of other groups with whom the CNPA has worked, sometimes over many years (e.g the fisheries board). While there are serious questions to be asked about what difference such partnership working has made to nature conservation in the National Park in the past (e.g. there is very little evidence to show that partnerships with sporting estates has done anything to reduce deer numbers) in this case partnership working appears to have worked. Winning support from all the interest groups apart from the farmers and some angling interests is quite an achievement.

This leadership goes some way to explaining why two thirds of the respondents to the CNPA's beaver survey, including many landowners, strongly supported the reintroduction of the species onto Speyside.

Learning about and monitoring the impacts of beavers

We've carefully chosen the release locations to minimise potential negative impacts. Over time the beavers' territories and population will expand and will have greater impacts, both positive and negative, the magnitude of which will be site specific.

One criticism of the CNPA's approach to date is their hope the beavers will stay in the release sites chosen for them. At the beginning of December the RSPB announced they had translocated two more beavers to the initial release site by the River Endrick because the beavers released there in January had moved to another location in the National Nature Reserve ([see here](#)). The point is wild creatures don't necessarily do what humans expect them to do. We will see!

However, the CNPA's monitoring programme ([see here](#)) means they should learn from the experience as well as the impacts both beneficial and negative that beavers have on people and other wildlife:

the annual beaver report that will be produced in December each year. This report will detail the mitigation that has been delivered in the last year, how successful it has been and what lessons have been learned from delivering the mitigation. In addition to the mitigation there will be a report on the released beavers, how they have settled into their territories, how far they have travelled, what behaviours they have been exhibiting etc. A final report would be produced 5 years after a licence was approved. It would contain details of all the mitigation that has been delivered in that time, a review of its effectiveness, lessons learned and recommendations for future.

The CNPA have also shown they are alive to the possibility of farmers taking advantage of the mitigation scheme. This winter they are undertaking surveys of flood defences along the River Spey to

ascertain their condition. This should enable them to avoid disputes in future about whether damage to embankments has been caused by beavers or something else.

Where next for the CNPA and beavers?

CNPA staff and board members should be congratulated for how they have handled the translocation of beavers to Speyside to date. It has involved lots of engagement and prodigious quantities of paperwork. One hopes that the CNPA will talk to both NatureScot and the Minister responsible, Lorna Slater, about how the process and the bureaucratic burden could be reduced in future. That would be possible if there was a comprehensive grant system available to mitigate the impacts of beaver re-introductions.

It does seem to me, however, that so far the CNPA has missed a trick on Speyside. There has been almost no mention of the likely impact that beavers will have on attracting tourists to the area or the beneficial economic consequences. Nor do there appear to be any plans to facilitate the public being given opportunities to experience the consequences of beaver activity or the opportunity (very small) to see them. It is of course too early at present to do things like construct beaver hides or install cameras but the CNPA should be developing a plan for the future. This could be financed through the Visitor Levy being proposed by the Scottish Government: in short use some of the income from this to provide the infrastructure to enable visitors to see what beavers do. It would be a massive draw and far outweigh any economic benefits that have been brought to Speyside by the funicular!

The bigger challenge, however, is the reintroduction of beavers on the eastern side of the National Park. Speyside, with its conservation landowners in Cairngorms Connect and large local population sympathetic to conservation, was the easy option. Ten years ago the CNPA's ecology adviser, David Hetherington, produced a report identifying two sites for beaver re-introduction to the Cairngorms, Insh Marshes on Speyside (where beavers are now due to be released) and Muir of Dinnet National Nature Reserve on Deeside ([see here](#)). Since then all talk of reintroducing beavers on Deeside has disappeared.

The explanation, I believe, lies in the power of the sporting estates, starting with King Charles at Balmoral. In October Balmoral announced it was backing the Riverwoods Initiative and would be placing dead trees in waterways to aid ecological restoration ([see here](#)). The fact that none of the voluntary organisations involved in the Riverwoods Initiative dared call on King Charles to go one step further and back the reintroduction of beavers on Deeside speaks volumes. Suitable habitat may be in short supply on Balmoral at present due to years of overgrazing by red deer but King Charles is close friends with the Salvesen Family, who own Dinnet, and patron of the National Trust for Scotland which owns Mar Lodge. One word from him and the door would be open to the CNPA to start planning for the reintroduction of beavers to Deeside.

After two years of pressure on King Charles to start rewilding royal land from campaigners like Wild Card and Chris Packham, at the beginning of December Balmoral announced a "pretendy" rewilding scheme. This involves the removal of rare breeds of domesticated animal from the estate ([see here](#)). As a contribution to tackling the levels of overgrazing at Balmoral the real problem is the number of red deer this was a sop. The initiative appears almost deliberately designed to

undermine local support for rewilding with the Times headline screaming about the jobs lost.

After almost ten years of blogging about Scotland's National Parks I am delighted to have been able to write this piece and state unreservedly that the way the CNPA has handled the reintroduction of beavers on Speyside has in my view been exemplary and demonstrates the potential of Scotland's National Parks. A bigger challenge now awaits. The CNPA should not be judged a success until they are prepared to take on King Charles and his like and change how they manage their land.

Category

1. Cairngorms

Tags

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2. conservation
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