Beaver reintroduction a golden opportunity for Scotland

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Allowing beavers to be reintroduced to Scotland would be a golden opportunity offering wide-ranging environmental, social and economic benefits, said award-winning conservation charity Trees for Life today.

With the Scottish Government due to decide on whether Eurasian beavers will be allowed to live freely in Scotland after an absence of some 500 years, Trees for Life is urging ministers to fully recognise the beaver as a resident, native species.

It is nine months since Scottish Natural Heritage reported to the Scottish Government on the Scottish Beaver Trial – a five-year trial reintroduction of beavers in Argyll's Knapdale Forest. Trees for Life is backing calls by the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and Scottish Wildlife Trust – lead partners in the Scottish Beaver Trial – for a positive decision by the government as soon as possible.

“Allowing this native species to return would offer Scotland huge benefits. Beavers are superb ecosystem engineers and could transform and greatly improve the health of our rivers and forest ecosystems, help restore our depleted wetlands and reduce flooding – while substantially boosting wildlife tourism,” said Alan Watson Featherstone, Trees for Life's Founder.

“We also have an ethical responsibility to allow the beaver to return at last, having caused its extinction in Scotland. The government has the opportunity now to take a far-sighted positive decision that will benefit our communities and landscapes, and will lead the way in the UK, at a time when England and Wales are also considering the possible reintroduction of beavers.”

Beavers play a crucial ecological role and provide a range of important benefits for other species. They coppice and fell trees – letting light into the forest, enabling other species to grow and stimulating new growth of the trees themselves. By damming watercourses they create wetland areas – providing habitats for amphibians, invertebrates and fish, which in turn attract birds and otters.

Scotland also has more than 250 wild beavers estimated to be in the River Tay catchment, following breeding by beavers that escaped captivity. Trees for Life is urging the government to allow the natural expansion of beavers from both Argyll and Tayside, and to authorise further licensed reintroductions in appropriate areas, accompanied by carefully considered management and monitoring, including to secure the genetic health and long-term viability of these colonies.

As part of its restoration of the Caledonian Forest in the Highlands (see www.treesforlife.org.uk), Trees for Life has been expanding stands of aspen in key areas – particularly at its Dundreggan Conservation Estate near Loch Ness and around Loch Beinn a'Mheadhoin in Glen Affric – to create better habitats for beavers in the future.

Beavers' burrows and dam building occasionally cause localised flooding and tree felling issues. Any concerns can and should be addressed, using simple, proven methods that work in other countries, and with inclusive stakeholder dialogue to find sustainable ways of managing any localised impacts.

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Notes to editors

1. In May 2009, following Scottish Government permission for the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland and Scottish Wildlife Trust to conduct a trial reintroduction of European beavers, beavers from Norway were released at Knapdale Forest in Britain's first legal reintroduction of a mammal species to the wild. Independent scientific monitoring, coordinated by Scottish Natural Heritage, ran until May 2014.

2. The UK has a responsibility under the European Commission's Habitats and Species Directive to consider reintroductions of extirpated native species such as the Eurasian beaver.

3. A majority of people in Scotland support the beavers' return. In a survey of 1,652 Scottish adults carried out by YouGov on behalf of the Scottish Beaver Trial in March 2014, 60% favoured the return of beavers to Scotland; just 5% opposed. Opinion surveys in mid-Argyll, where beavers have been resident for over five years, show public support at over 80%.

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4. In Europe, the UK is one of only seven countries still lacking an officially sanctioned wild beaver population. 25 other nations have already reintroduced the beaver, including some such as the Netherlands that have a much higher human population density. Sweden led the way as long ago as 1922.

5. The Eurasian beaver (Castor fiber) was present in the UK until hunted to extinction for its pelt, meat and musk oil. The exact date of the animal's disappearance from Scotland is unknown. Written records indicate that it may have survived in small numbers at a few locations until the 16th century.

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