‘Cowardly stalling’ on beavers by NatureScot slammed by famous family farm

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A famous family farm in Perthshire – to date Scotland’s only private site to have legally reintroduced beavers to the wild – has slammed a ‘failure of leadership’ by NatureScot after the government agency stalled a community-backed proposal to reintroduce beavers to Glen Affric in the Scottish Highlands.

The criticisms by Tom Bowser, author and owner of Argaty – a working farm on the Braes of Doune in central Scotland, which has featured on programmes such as BBC Springwatch – have been widely backed on social media by high-profile commentators and conservationists.

Earlier this month, NatureScot controversially delayed its decision to grant a licence application for the historic official release of beavers in Glen Affric, citing ‘concern among the local community and its representatives’.

Fellow government agency, Forestry and Land Scotland (FLS), had submitted the licence application in December 2024, following two years of extensive local engagement which senior NatureScot staff had previously described as ‘exemplary’. The consultations, which also involved leading charity Trees for Life, demonstrated that two-thirds of people involved support the release of beavers on FLS land in the glen.

“Something is very wrong at the heart of NatureScot. What more can there possibly be to consult on? This cowardly stalling is the latest in a string of examples where the agency has acted against the interests of wildlife and communities,” said Tom Bowser.

“Our family farm has seen first-hand just how beneficial beavers are for boosting biodiversity and reducing flooding. From schoolchildren to university groups, celebrities and politicians, so many people have come to Argaty to see the beavers and marvel at their ecological engineering.

“It’s incredibly sad that the people of Glen Affric are being denied the joy that beavers bring. Scotland is one of the world’s most nature-depleted countries, and the environmental crisis the greatest threat humankind faces, Scotland’s nature agency ought to be doing all it can to encourage the spread of beavers. Where on Earth is the leadership from those charged with restoring nature?”

High-profile backing for Bowser’s words has come from BBC Springwatch presenter Iolo Williams, who said: “NatureScot=not fit for purpose”.

Beavers create wetlands that benefit other wildlife, soak up carbon dioxide, purify water and reduce flooding. They can also bring economic benefits to communities through eco-tourism.

Argaty was Scotland’s first private site to legally reintroduce beavers to the wild. A first family of beavers, including three kits, was relocated to the farm in November 2021, saving the animals’ lives. They were moved from arable land in Tayside where NatureScot had issued beaver-killing licences to prevent damage.

This was a major moment of Scottish wildlife history – never before had beavers been moved from an unsuitable location to a new part of Scotland. A second family of beavers was relocated to the farm in February 2022.

In a forthcoming new book, Tom Bowser describes how challenging and difficult the beaver relocations had been made by bureaucratic resistance from NatureScot officials as well as behind-the-scenes maneuverings by representatives of landowner lobby groups.

“We have a government policy designed to grow our small beaver population by translocating these biodiversity-boosting animals to new parts of Scotland. Repeated surveys show that most Scots wish this to happen. We have the world’s most thorough official guidance, leading applicants through how to attempt such wildlife relocations.

“FLS and Trees for Life followed this guidance to the letter, running a gold-standard consultation and gaining overwhelming local backing. Now democracy has been defied and their bid has been blocked – that cannot be right,” said Tom Bowser.

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“NatureScot’s behaviour is stranger still given that Strathglass, where the proposal’s opponents reside, already has an established beaver population. If this first-rate, well thought-through application by another government agency is too controversial to proceed, what hope have we got of assisting the spread of beavers and allowing them to help us fight biodiversity loss and climate breakdown?

“This is not a nature agency Scots can be proud of – it’s one we should be embarrassed by.”

Tom added: “The fear is that NatureScot has been ‘collared’ by politicians. In a cynical attempt to win rural votes ahead of an election year, John Swinney seems hell-bent on throwing National Farmers Union lobbyists every bone he can, even if that means throwing biodiversity under the bus.

“We need an agency willing to champion coexistence with wildlife, brave enough to overcome resistance to vital change, humane enough to support everyone through that difficult process. The only people in NatureScot’s boardroom and upper echelons would be those with a proven record of defending nature, even if it means standing up to their political bosses. This is the agency Scotland needs.”

Argaty produces food in an environmentally sensitive manner while making a home for nature. The family farm is a popular visitor attraction including an award-winning red kite project.

Tom Bowser is author of *A Sky Full of Kites: A Rewilding Story* and the forthcoming *Waters of Life: Fighting for Scotland's Beavers.*

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