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IT IS ALL MADNESS

The beaver cult can't be stopped, despairs Simon Cooper



AT THE WAKE OF A MUCH LOVED fishing guide (too many of those recently) I bumped into an old friend from Dorset who is in much the same line of work as me. Like two defeated soldiers we swapped war stories of our time in the trenches fighting the beaver believers. “Yes,” said my friend with a heavy sigh, “we’ve lost. Soon the chalkstream valleys will be overrun with beavers. But mark my words, in the medium to long term we will be proved right. It will be American signal crayfish, grey squirrels and coypu all over again.”

I am not sure how much comfort I take from that — I’ll probably be dead in the medium to long term. But, aside from my own mortality, what I am most trying to understand is the cult of the beaver. The whole thing has taken on a life of its own. I briefly tuned in during the spring to a conference run by the Beaver Trust at the University of Exeter that lasted a full three days. The lecture hall was packed with bright-eyed apostles to the Church of the Beaver, lapping up the words of the bureaucrats and academics who are their clergy.

They are cultlike in their belief that beavers are the silver bullet that will save our countryside from impending destruction, even though the real damage is from sewage pollution, abstraction and agriculture. No mission is too big for our rodent friends: climate change; global warming; flooding; river management; tree management. Every single living creature will benefit from beaver activities. You name it and beavers are the solution. I almost expected Greta Thunberg to pop up.

And now, to cap it all, beavers have been designated as a native species. Native? These are a different species of beaver to our original natives of a millennium ago and are no more “native” to Britain than rainbow trout, which have a similar classification. Twenty years on from the

first illegal releases, which incidentally carry on today with the tacit approval of the authorities, despite the fact we have a landscape that has evolved into something very different to when the original beavers lived, it is now considered suitable territory for one of the world’s largest and most destructive rodents. The result, among numerous other follies enacted by Defra at the behest of Natural England (the real power behind the throne), is that not only the beavers, but also their dams have total protection in law. You are more likely to go to jail for interfering with a beaver dam than a Grade I listed building.

Beavers have also spawned an industry. There is, of course, the Beaver Trust with 11 full-time employees plus the obligatory CEO. There is hardly a Wildlife Trust without a proud beaver person, and to cap it all I will soon be sending my riverkeepers on a Beaver Management Course. It is, inevitably, run by the Beaver Management Team at Natural England, who run the accreditation and CL 51 Beaver Management Licence courses.

The truth is, the more I try to understand it, the less I understand it. On my last visit to the guide at whose wake we were gathered, we talked of the future beyond us. How was it, we pondered, that the things we held so precious during our lifetimes, are being trashed by careless actions and misguided solutions. “It is all madness,” said Tony. I wish I could disagree. ■

Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks, the leading chalkstream fishing specialists. He is author of Life of a Chalkstream and The Otters’ Tale. Follow his fortnightly blog on saving our rivers at fishingbreaks.co.uk