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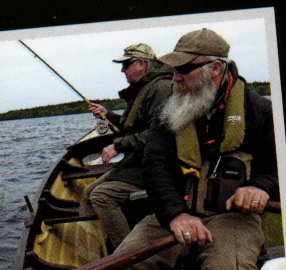
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CHALK TALK

The beaver dilemma

Should they stay or should they go?
asks **Simon Cooper**

I REGULARLY CRISS-CROSS THE country giving talks on chalkstreams; it has become my thing. One of my missions has been to explain that this unique ecosystem is very much the product of man. We have taken nature, and over many millennia, since Neolithic tribes roamed the land, incrementally bent and moulded the river valleys to what today we regard as normal. But it isn't really "normal" in any ecological sense. Should we all be struck from this earth tomorrow it would only be a few years before every chalkstream valley reverted to its pre-humankind state as a running-water swamp. And once again beavers would have their natural habitat back.

For there was a time when beavers roamed these fertile, alluvial plains, unhampered by people. But early man was always in search of an easy meal. Beavers provided precisely that: so many thousands of years ago they were hunted from the many to the few, not just for their food but to prevent them damming the streams our forebears were digging to create productive farmland.

I tell you all this because there could soon be a beaver in your neck of the woods. Enthusiasm for re-wilding is growing fast. People, for right or wrong, simply love beavers. They may even replace otters and water voles in the iconography of our native species. But we should be careful when bandying about the words native, rewild, or as commonly used in the context of beavers, re-introduction.

Ken Thompson in the title of his 2014 book *The Story and Science of Invasive Species* poses the question: where do camels belong? His first answer surprised me: North America, where the species evolved until becoming extinct 8,000 years ago. However, as most land mammals are wont to do, they spread first to South America and then into Asia when the Bering Strait was dry land. But in knowing that Thompson then challenges you to answer the question again. Should belonging be defined by a) where camels originated

and lived for the longest time (North America to both); b) where they retain their greatest diversity (South America); c) where the only truly wild population still exists (Australia); or d) where they seem culturally most appropriate (the Middle East)?

There is, of course, no definitive answer, which likewise applies to beavers. When we ask - do they "belong" in the here and now of the British landscape? - the simple answer based on their ability to survive must be - yes. The 12 released in Devon's Otter valley a decade ago now number somewhere in the low 20s and a group released on the River Tay in Scotland are similarly thriving. Are they true natives? Definitely not; they are all imported European hybrids because this is a re-introduction only in a very modern sense. You'll hear it said that beavers were in Britain as "recently" as the 16th Century. Which is true in that there were a few isolated populations but to all intents and purposes by the time William the Conqueror crossed the English Channel they were well on the way to extinction.

And that's the thing. The British landscape of 1066 will never return. Woodland coverage has halved. The population has risen from 1.5m to 65m. The tens of thousands of square miles of running-water swamp have been reduced to almost nothing. And over that thousand years, the flora, fauna and wildlife has adapted and evolved to what we know today; the greatest shocks and disruptions during that period caused by man rather than climate.

Which makes me ask: should we protect our current wildlife by treating beavers as an invasive species? Should we apply the precautionary principle and learn the lessons of mink, coypu, American signal crayfish, Japanese knotweed and grey squirrel, which show how, despite good intentions, meddling with what is now the natural order has a tendency to go horribly wrong?

We need to be clear: beaver releases are not re-wilding in any sense of the term. This is imposing a new inhabitant on a settled landscape. Beavers will be our biggest water mammal by some margin, two to three times heavier than an otter. They radically transform the landscape they choose to inhabit, improving it for themselves while often degrading it for others. Rivers, especially small streams, will suffer. Migratory fish, sea-trout in particular, will be impeded. Ecological niches for plants, invertebrates and wildlife will be destroyed.

You don't have to take my word for all this: a paper on the ecological impact of the beaver on Lithuanian trout streams, published in 2013, is unambiguous. But we can't uninvent the fact that beavers are here. As anglers we need to stand up for fish, because few others will. It is not that we don't love beavers, but rather that we love fish equally. We need to explain the downside of a spreading beaver population.

I don't have a silver bullet, but my feeling is that, at least for the next ten years, beavers should remain on probation as an invasive species with the presumption of control where they cause manifest damage in the opinion of river owners, clubs, associations and interested parties. There should be no more "introductions". If the current populations naturally spread, well then 21st Century beavers will have earned their place in our 21st Century landscape. **TRS**

■ Simon Cooper is managing director of Fishing Breaks (fishingbreaks.co.uk), the chalkstream fishing specialists. He is also author of the best-selling *Life of a Chalkstream* and *The Otters' Tale*.