Rewilding Law Group:

Wild Beaver Reintroductions in England: the Purbeck Beaver Project

Photo: First licensed release of beavers, Little Sea, Purbeck, Dorset
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Thanks to everyone who joined us on **16 March 2026** to discuss wild beaver reintroductions in England, and particular thanks to our speaker, Gen Crisford. Below is a recap of what we discussed with some useful links. Gen's presentation slides are available here and the video recording here.

Relationship Building	
Connecting and knowledge-sharing	This call opened with a brief introduction from **Stephanie Smith**, Managing Lawyer of the Rewilding Law team at the Lifescape Project, who shared an overview of her work and current focus areas. We then spent time in small breakout groups so members could meet, exchange and **build our community of rewilding lawyers and practitioners**. If you would like an introduction to anyone you met, let us know. You'll find more information on rewilding law at Lifescape's Rewilding Law Hub which we created in partnership with Rewilding Europe and Rewilding Britain.
Background — Wild Beaver Reintroductions in England	
Setting the scene	The topic of discussion was the reintroduction of the Eurasian beaver (*Castor fiber*) to England as a wild, free-living species — and in particular the **Purbeck Beaver Project**, which led the first officially licensed wild release of beavers in England in

	March 2025, the culmination of over seven years of preparation by the National Trust in Dorset. Beavers were hunted to extinction in Britain around 400 years ago. Their return carries significant ecological potential: as ecosystem engineers, beavers create and maintain wetland habitats that benefit a wide range of species, improve water quality and retention, and build landscape resilience against both drought and flood. Around 90% of UK wetland habitats have been lost in the last 100 years, greatly contributing to losses in biodiversity. The legal and policy framework for wild beaver releases in England evolved gradually. In 2022, beavers received native and protected status in England and government management guidelines were published for beavers already present in the wild. This legal recognition of beavers' native status followed Scotland's recognition of beavers as a native species in 2019, while the Beavers (Wales) Order 2026 came into force on 4 March 2026. In 2022 Defra and Natural England also published guidelines for managing beavers in the wild. A licensing framework for new wild releases was then developed, with the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) and the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) forming the legal basis. The Purbeck project received its licence in February 2025 and released two pairs of beavers on 5 March 2025 at Little Sea, Studland, Dorset.

Speaker — Gen Crisford	
About Gen Crisford, Beaver Project Officer, National Trust Purbeck	Gen Crisford is Project Officer for beavers and wetlands at the National Trust Purbeck office in Dorset, where she led the first officially licensed wild release of Eurasian beavers in England in March 2025 — the culmination of more than seven years of work with Natural England. Originally from Dorset, Gen began her wildlife career in Malawi managing a wildlife reserve and working on species re-release and community engagement around human-wildlife conflict, which gives her a distinctive perspective on the coexistence challenges that come with bringing beavers back to England's landscapes.

Presentation	
Why beavers? Benefits to society and ecosystems	Gen opened by situating the project in the context of widespread wetland loss: around 90% of UK wetland habitats have disappeared over the past century, with significant consequences for biodiversity, water quality, and climate resilience. Beavers, as ecosystem engineers whose natural behaviour creates and maintains wetland habitat, are well placed to help reverse this decline. The core societal benefits of beavers fall into five categories: • **Benefits for nature**: beavers create wetland habitats that support a broad range of plant and animal species, including invertebrates, amphibians, birds, and fish. • **Resilience against climate extremes**: beaver ponds and dams slow water movement through catchments, reducing flood peaks downstream and maintaining water levels during drought.

	• **Water quality and nutrient mitigation**: beaver wetlands trap sediment and filter nutrients — a particular motivation for the Purbeck project, which began as a response to eutrophication affecting nearby Poole Harbour. • **Benefits for climate**: beaver wetlands support carbon sequestration through the accumulation of organic matter in waterlogged soils. • **Benefits for people**: improved landscape aesthetics, educational value, wildlife tourism, and reduced costs of artificial river management. These benefits arise as a result of beavers editing the landscape — the same actions that can create conflicts with adjacent land use. The project's ethos was therefore not to guarantee zero impact, but to help stakeholders to understand both the benefits as well as the things that could bother them, and to talk about how they were using the land, how close they were to the river and working through the available mitigations.
The Purbeck Heaths setting and project area	The project is centred on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset, to the south of Poole Harbour. The site at **Little Sea** — a freshwater lake behind the Studland dunes — was first identified as a suitable beaver habitat by Derek Gow as far back as 2011. The project area was defined following the designation in 2020 of the Purbeck Heaths National Nature Reserve (NNR), a 3,331-hectare landscape assembled through a decade of partnership working between the National Trust, RSPB, Dorset Wildlife Trust, Forestry England, Natural England and others. The project is structured in three phases: (1) Little Sea as a geographically contained, low-risk starting point; (2) the wider Purbeck Heaths NNR and surrounding land, including parts of the Corfe River catchment; and (3) the wider landscape beyond the NNR boundary.
Technical feasibility: habitat, hydrology and risk modelling	Starting in 2018–19, the project commissioned a detailed technical feasibility study in partnership with Derek Gow as consultant and the University of Exeter's hydrology team. The modelling covered: • **River networks and habitat suitability**: mapping all freshwater systems within the proposed project area and combining them with vegetation data to generate a Beaver Habitat Index (BHI) — a GIS-based scoring of preferred to unsuitable habitat. • **Beaver dam capacity**: modelling the likelihood and impact of dam-building in different watercourse types, based on stream power, slope, width, and contributing hydrological area. This identified where dam impacts on infrastructure and flooding were most likely to be felt. See this article for more information on "BDC". • **Dispersal modelling**: estimating how quickly and along which routes beavers released at Little Sea might migrate into adjacent catchments, providing a basis for phased stakeholder engagement. The feasibility report, finalised in 2022, also included detailed mapping of infrastructure (culverts, bridges, drains, roads, historic features), an assessment of impacts on protected habitats within the NNR, and a risk and management plan covering identified risks including damming, feeding damage, burrowing, excavating and salmonid migration impacts, with both pre-emptive and reactive management strategies identified for each.

Stakeholder consultation: building support and managing conflict	Stakeholder consultation ran for about 9-12 months (2019-2020), and was one of the most significant elements of the project's development. The project identified nine main stakeholder groups: farmers and landowners, residents, local councils and authorities, service providers, conservation groups, fishing clubs and businesses, visitors and land users, community groups, and schools. The process included: nine months of formal engagement; 20 task group partner organisations; presentations to eight external organisations and eight community information events; 84 official feedback forms; 200 local landowners contacted; 150 people signed up to mailing list updates; and an independent NFU member opinion poll. Study visits were made to beaver projects in Devon, Scotland and Bavaria to learn from experience. A deliberate shift in framing guided the consultation: rather than asking 'do you want beavers or not?', the team moved toward asking 'how can we make beavers coming back work more smoothly for you?'. This reframing generated more constructive conversations and — crucially — helped prevent stakeholder groups from being pitched against one another. Key feedback themes from the consultation were: (1) a preference for a **phased and gradual approach**; (2) a need for **practical and financial long-term support**; and (3) a desire for a **collaborative approach** in which communities could see that their concerns were being taken seriously. Nature lovers, Gen noted, were sometimes among the most anxious stakeholders, worried about impacts on other species they monitored — a reminder that even 'conservation-friendly' audiences need careful engagement.
The licence application process	The road to a licence was long. The project was ready to apply around 2020–21, but at that point government policy changed to require full enclosure for any beaver releases (following a partially enclosed release at Knepp where beavers bypassed the fence). A public consultation followed, and in 2022 beavers were formally given native and protected status in England, with management guidelines published for wild beavers already present. The Purbeck team submitted an initial trial application in 2023 to help Natural England refine the process, a second application in early 2024 (in case it prompted action), and finally a third and formal application in late 2024 — this time using a new, revised application format. The final application consisted of: 1. **A licence application form**: covering the licensee, ecologist, beaver officers, project governance, sites, and a formal declaration. 2. **A project plan**: setting out goals and objectives, governance, funding, catchment information, release numbers and locations, benefits and risks, stakeholder engagement approach, exit strategy, and monitoring and management plan. 3. **Benefits and risk assessment**: a detailed table of identified risks and management strategies. 4. **Supporting figures and photographs**: maps of the project area, photos of release sites etc. 5. **Supporting documents**: including the habitat regulations assessment (HRA) draft, species annex, technical feasibility report, stakeholder partnership summary, and individual site management plans.

6. **Follow-up information**: as requested by Natural England during the review process.

The licence was issued in February 2025. Ongoing compliance requires notification before each release (5+ working days in advance), a post-release report within 6 weeks, and an annual report covering all activities, beaver welfare, population updates, conflicts, management interventions, stakeholder engagement, and funding and expenditure.

A Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) was also required given the proximity of designated Natura 2000 sites within the NNR. Some of its findings — for example, the risk of enriched water from beaver-dammed areas spilling onto nutrient-poor mire habitat — were incorporated as specific licence conditions requiring proactive monitoring and management in identified sensitive zones.

The release: what happened and what was unexpected

The official release took place on **5 March 2025**, with two pairs of beavers released into distinct territory areas at Little Sea. The project had aimed for a release in late 2024 but the licence was not issued until February 2025, leaving a very narrow window before the end of the permissible release period (outside breeding season). The decision to source beavers from Scotland gave a few additional days, enabling the March release to proceed.

A significant complication arose in **January 2024**, when the project area was "beaver-bombed" – i.e. beavers had appeared at Little Sea before any licensed release. The origin of these animals was not established. While this gave the team valuable early monitoring experience and an opportunity to develop a volunteer group, it caused difficulties: some stakeholders suspected the project had been responsible (which would not have been lawful), and the animals had already claimed part of the available territory, meaning the subsequent licensed releases had to accommodate an already-occupied site. Health checks were carried out to ensure these animals posed no disease risk before further releases proceeded.

Licence conditions

The licence contains 54 numbered conditions, covering: roles and responsibilities and project governance (conditions 1–12); release areas, beaver numbers, source and health requirements, and PIT tagging (13–24); trapping and translocation protocols and disease risk management (25–28); release procedures (29–30); monitoring requirements for distribution, numbers, health, and environmental and socio-economic impacts (35–38); beaver management (39–41); agreed communications and engagement requirements (42–44); project termination and exit strategy (45–47); dead beavers and post-mortem requirements (48); biosecurity and non-native species (49–50); and licensing reporting and compliance (51–54).

The project is licensed to release between 10 and 25 adult beavers over the 10-year licence term. Animals that migrate and are replaced count towards the total; animals replacing those that die in the first year do not. Project-specific conditions reflect the HRA findings, including monitoring requirements in sensitive habitat zones and commitments to keep the Environment Agency informed regarding infrastructure assets and flood risk monitoring around Corfe Castle village.

An **exit strategy** is a required licence condition, with funds set aside to implement it. For the Purbeck project, the exit strategy applies for the first few years of the project. The threshold for triggering an exit would be a pattern of serious and widespread failures with significant repercussions — a high bar that the project would hopefully have little chance of reaching.

Monitoring: beavers, habitats, and wider wildlife	The project has developed a tiered monitoring approach. Initial detection relies on field signs — particularly feeding signs such as tree felling and bark-nibbling — followed by trail cameras, and then a network of solar-powered WiFi cameras enabling remote viewing for extended periods with minimal site disturbance. A dedicated volunteer group reviews footage, enabling behaviour logs including mating, kit births, and territorial movements. Animals are identified using PIT (passive integrated transponder) tags — scannable only at close range — supplemented by individual physical features. One female was identified by a distinctive hole in her tail caused by an injury. Results to date include: confirmed mating and kits born; identification of a new 35-metre beaver dam creating a whole new wetland; and detection of other wildlife including otter family groups (with pups) which seem to follow the beavers around, a pine marten, and a swimming badger. Broader environmental monitoring continues in parallel, including annual shoreline plant surveys at Little Sea, water level and water quality monitoring, and target species surveys. Much of this monitoring was already under way due to the NNR designations and is not solely driven by the beaver licence.
Impacts and management interventions	The first year of the project demonstrated that even in a relatively low-conflict setting, active management is required. Gen described the principal interventions to date: • **Trapping and translocation**: one female swam approximately 7 km around a headland and arrived in Swanage, a nearby town outside the project area. She was identified by PIT tag scan, trapped (using some carrots and apples), and returned to Little Sea. She subsequently paired with her male partner, and the pair then moved into the local Wessex Water sewage treatment works which also needed intervention. • **Exclusion fencing**: Wessex Water cooperated closely with the National Trust in installing an exclusion fence around the treatment works lagoons to prevent repeated access. • **Culvert grilling and debris management**: pre-emptive culvert screens were installed on key road crossings to mitigate dam-induced flooding. These have already reduced naturally occurring debris blockages, with an unexpected co-benefit of reducing seasonal road flooding. • **Dam removal**: selective dam removal has been carried out where dams posed risks to sensitive habitats or infrastructure. • **Postponed peat restoration works** • **Post-mortem submission**: one released male died during the 2025 summer drought after migrating due to habitat drying at his territory, and apparently attempting the same sea swim to Swanage. He was able to be identified and submitted for post-mortem. • **Licenced training**: a large number of local practitioners were trained to CL51 beaver management licence level; Gen holds a CL50 licence enabling trapping.
Governance, funding and the wider Dorset	The project operates under a **Steering Group** with agreed Terms of Reference, drawing in key stakeholders including local landowners and community representatives, alongside the main partner organisations. Decisions including the

management framework	acceleration of phase two (following the phase one evaluation) are taken at steering group level. Funding has been drawn from a range of sources including philanthropic donations, private funding, local grants, and staff time supported by the National Trust. Ongoing staff time remains the most difficult cost to fund externally. Gen noted that the resource intensity of the current licensing process is likely to limit wild release applications to organisations with sufficient capacity, and that this is an evolving area of discussion within the Dorset beaver group. At county level, Gen sits on a Dorset Beaver Management Group, operating beneath the Dorset Catchment Partnerships structure. The group brings together trained personnel from partner organisations, with enquiries triaged via a dedicated email address managed by the Dorset Wildlife Trust (beavers@dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk). This provides an accessible route for landowners and other affected parties to access support from someone who is trained and licensed to assist and advise. Gen identified targeted use of Environmental Land Management (ELM) funding and Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI) schemes and similar agri-environment mechanisms as the most promising long-term route for supporting agricultural coexistence: paying farmers proactively to *make space for water* is likely to be more effective than compensation schemes tied to damage, which can encourage people to focus on problems rather than benefits. See the "Support for living alongside beavers" section of the Policy paper on Wild release and management of beavers in England for further links, as well as the new briefing to help farmers become beaver-ready published by the Beaver Trust and The Wildlife Trusts on 1 April 2026 (PDF available directly here), which provides more detailed guidance on how farmers who find themselves with beavers on their land can access funding.
Community engagement and public communications	Ongoing community engagement has been extensive and multi-faceted. The project runs educational trails at Studland for visitors, maintains on-site interpretation and signage, participates in community fairs and events (including with a taxidermy beaver — a reliable conversation-starter), and manages a 'BeaverCam Group' on social media that shares camera footage with a broad public audience. See also the live stream from the National Trust Holnicote Estate Beaver Lodge Camera here for another example. The National Trust also collaborated with Disney and Pixar around the release of the film *Hoppers*, a film featuring beaver characters, with the National Trust at Corfe Castle hosting a 'Hop into the Wild' activity trail (14 February – 22 March 2026). Gen emphasised that community engagement must be ongoing, not a one-off activity at project inception. Building familiarity — through education, transparent communication about both successes and challenges, and accessible support channels — is what makes coexistence durable. Reaching people *before* beavers spread into new areas is particularly valuable.

Discussion	
Funding and resource intensity	**Question:** The management of the licence and all associated requirements sounds expensive and resource-intensive. How is the project funded, and what implications does this have for accelerating wider releases across England?

	Answer: The largest cost to date has been staff time rather than direct expenditure. Funding has been drawn from philanthropy, private donations, local grants, and partial National Trust staff time support. The resource intensity of the licensing process, though well-intentioned, is likely to limit applications in the near term to larger organisations with the capacity to deliver comprehensive stakeholder engagement and documentation. There is an ongoing discussion within the Dorset Beaver Group about what sustainable funding looks like for wild beaver management — particularly managing wild beavers, not necessarily in line with applying for a licence to release beavers. This is an ongoing topic for discussion with present funding mostly coming from organisations who want to make this happen.
Stakeholder reception and opposition	**Question:** What has the overall stakeholder response been — broadly supportive or significant opposition? **Answer:** Strongly positive overall for this project, which benefits from being situated within a nature reserve with a wildlife-friendly landowning community. There will often be some individuals who remain unsupportive, and the approach is simply to continue offering information and support. The project team noted that opposition may be stronger in more productive agricultural catchments or on larger river systems with active fisheries, and that the Purbeck experience may not be fully transferable to such settings.
Dispersal beyond the project boundary and the Swanage sea swim	**Question / Comment:** Beavers dispersing into sea areas is a known issue — a participant shared that their group has developed a detailed protocol for rescuing and rehabilitating beavers that enter the sea and offered to share it. **Response:** The information would be welcome. The female that swam to Swanage had survived a 7 km open-sea swim around a challenging headland — a dispersal route not anticipated during risk modelling, which had assumed that sea-going beavers were unlikely to survive. She recovered well on carrots and apples and was returned to Little Sea. The project has since revised its planning for Little Sea occupancy to reduce pressures that may drive coastal dispersal.
Natural England licensing process: experience and pace of further releases	**Question:** How was the experience of the licence application process with Natural England? Why have there not been more wild releases since the Purbeck project? **Answer:** The Purbeck project probably went further than was strictly required, having assembled far more documentation than was ultimately needed (the criteria were not finalised when preparation began). The process is still in a 'quite thorough' phase, which is likely to ease as wild releases become more routine. This is understandable: it is important that the early projects go well, so that public confidence builds and the process becomes normalised. Two further releases have since taken place — at Holnicote Estate (Exmoor) and by Cornwall Wildlife Trust — both of which were identified as well-prepared. More are expected to follow. The bottleneck is principally the time required to prepare: a comprehensive stakeholder engagement process on a large catchment takes many months to do properly.
Liability and financial responsibility for damage	**Question:** What is the project's liability for damage caused by beavers once released, and how has this been built into project planning? **Answer:** Clarification on this point came relatively late in the process: the 2024 application forms made clear that licence-holders are *not* liable for the consequences of beaver behaviour once animals are released. The project

	nonetheless has a budget for beaver management interventions. On the question of compensation, the view is that it is preferable to incentivise land managers proactively through agri-environment schemes to make space for water, rather than paying compensation reactively for damage — which tends to encourage people to notice and monetise problems. In practice, this funding landscape probably needs further development, and the impact on businesses, for example, may be different for agricultural land managers where the SFI-type support is not available (e.g. in the Wessex Water case, the relevant body was able to fund the works themselves).
Climate change, drought and modelling limitations	**Question:** How is the project adapting its modelling and release site selection to account for increasingly unpredictable and extreme weather events? Does failure of modelling assumptions due to unforeseen weather events create any liability? **Answer:** The habitat modelling identified suitable sites based on current conditions but did not account for drought impacts. The 2025 summer drought was described as an extreme event — possibly the worst on record — and directly contributed to one mortality. From a welfare perspective, the project has responded by: reducing the number of animals released at Little Sea to avoid habitat stress; accelerating phase two releases into more resilient inland habitats; and applying a more stringent test to release sites (preferring sites that showed no signs of drying even in 2025). Climate-integrated modelling for beaver habitat suitability has not yet been developed by the research teams involved and could be something for the university teams to consider. More generally, the approach is to be able to demonstrate they have done due diligence based on the tools available.
The phased approach: public rationale and acceleration	**Question:** Why was a phased approach taken, and what conditions have allowed phase two to be accelerated? **Answer:** The phased approach reflected community feedback: the public wanted reassurance that the project would proceed gradually, with an opportunity to pause or adjust if serious problems emerged. Little Sea was chosen as phase one because it is geographically contained, low-conflict, and predominantly within land managed by a single owner (the National Trust). Phase two — covering the wider NNR and the Corfe River catchment — involves seven different landowners, tenanted farmland, businesses, roads, culverts, and more complex infrastructure. The steering group (which includes community and landowner representatives) recently reviewed the phase one results and, finding strong progress, decided to bring forward phase two releases to autumn 2026.
Access to wild beaver releases for smaller landholders	**Comment / Question:** A participant described repeated unsuccessful attempts to obtain a licence for a smaller-scale release on a private landholding with demonstrably suitable habitat. Natural England had twice declined, without providing adequate explanation. Is this approach fair, and should it not be Natural England's responsibility to coordinate releases rather than placing the burden on individual applicants? **Response:** Natural England appears currently to prioritise applications proposing releases at scale — larger areas, more animals, and a commitment to managing dispersal into the wider catchment. The concern is less about financial capacity than about the applicant's ability to take ownership of the coexistence process beyond their own boundary. Smaller individual releases do not preclude this, but the application needs to demonstrate it.

Monitoring obligations and proportionality	**Question:** Looking back, would you do anything differently? Were any elements of monitoring or application preparation unnecessary? **Answer:** The project probably went above and beyond what was strictly required, partly because it did not know what the criteria would be when it began. Some monitoring elements — particularly fish surveys on the Corfe River — are being conducted at a level of detail that reflects stakeholder interest and available expertise rather than baseline licence requirements, and Gen was keen not to inadvertently set a precedent that all projects must match. A key piece of advice for future applicants: many monitoring activities are being undertaken because the site already had baseline programmes in place; applicants should be clear about what additional monitoring is genuinely required by the licence versus what is pre-existing practice, to avoid over-committing. Regular dialogue with Natural England about what 'good enough' looks like is essential.

Resources for Further Reading

Resources for further reading

Legislation and licensing

Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended). The primary legislation under which beaver releases in England are licensed.

Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended). Relevant to species protection in the UK.

Natural England wildlife licences guidance. Guidance on applying for wildlife licences in England, including beaver release licences.

Beaver management and coexistence

Beaver Management (beavermanagement.org). A practical resource for land managers on managing beavers and resolving conflicts, including dam management, exclusion, and crop protection – designed by Devon Wildlife Trust and Beaver Trust with funding from Defra.

The Beaver Trust. National charity working to support the recovery of beavers in Britain, including guidance on coexistence and a national studbook.

Dorset Beaver Management Group (Dorset Wildlife Trust). Local support and advice for landowners and managers in Dorset.

Scientific literature

Campbell-Palmer, R., Gow, D., et al. (2016). *The Eurasian Beaver Handbook: Ecology and Management of* Castor fiber. Pelagic Publishing. A practical handbook on the ecology and management of the Eurasian beaver, covering biology, legislation, effects, impacts, survey and monitoring. Available here.

Brazier, R.E., Elliott, M., et al. (2020). *River Otter Beaver Trial: Science and Evidence Report.* Devon Wildlife Trust / University of Exeter. Five-year evidence report on the ecological and hydrological impacts of wild-living beavers on the River Otter catchment in Devon. Available here.

Puttock, A., Graham, H.A., Cunliffe, A.M., Elliott, M. & Brazier, R.E. (2017). Eurasian beaver activity increases water storage, attenuates flow and mitigates diffuse pollution from intensively-managed grasslands. *Science of the Total Environment*, 576, 430–443. Available here.

Puttock, A., Graham, H.A., Carless, D. & Brazier, R.E. (2018). Sediment and nutrient storage in a beaver engineered wetland. *Earth Surface Processes and Landforms*, 43(11), 2358–2370. Available here.

Rewilding Law Hub

More information on rewilding law is available at Lifescape's Rewilding Law Hub, created in partnership with Rewilding Europe and Rewilding Britain.