



CASE STUDY 3

High profile beaver territory with extensive public access

KEY THEMES OF INTEREST
Socio-economics effects of visitors around Otterton village
Conflicts between river users
Incident with dog
Managing impacts on trees

Overview of site and beaver behaviour

The village of Otterton has been a focal point of beaver tourism since 2016 when a family of beavers living on the main river became very easy to watch from nearby public rights of way. This coincided with the beaver family group near Ottery St Mary moving upstream and away from public access. Local people were the first to enjoy the views offered by a pink tagged female feeding her kits. Word soon spread through the media, resulting in wildlife tourists visiting Otterton from much further afield.

The main river at this location is approximately 10m wide and flows into the tidal reaches of the estuary just south of the village. Public footpaths run along the west side of the river to the village of Colaton Raleigh and south to Budleigh Salterton and are some of the busiest footpaths in Devon.

The small picturesque village has a pub (the Kings Arms) and a busy riverside café and bakery (Otterton Mill) as well as a community shop. Parking in the village is limited and the village becomes very busy during the tourist season.



Beaver population

The original pair living here from ca. 2014 are thought to have successfully raised kits every year since 2015. In 2017 they had five kits, and in 2018 a further four, suggesting a thriving pair with ample food and habitat resources.



Photo: Nick Upton / naturepl.com

Five kits were born in 2017, which is well above the average litter size, suggesting healthy animals living in a suitable environment

Socio-economic effects of visitors around Otterton village

A resident's questionnaire was circulated in 2018, asking whether local people perceived a change in visitor numbers to the area. Of the 65 respondents who answered the question, 69% answered that there *had* been a change in the number of visitors, 9/10 of these stating that it was an increase. The change was directly attributed to the presence of beavers by 31%, with 56% partly attributing the change to beavers and 13% suggested other factors.



The impacts that businesses reported were largely positive and included: an increase in visitors leading to an increase in custom; beaver-related products and merchandise (such as postcards, bronze beavers and “Beaver Bitter”); holding beaver-related event days at local businesses; the use of beavers in their business marketing; the potential for future beaver-related initiatives (such as guided walks or interpretation).



‘Beaver-watching’ willingness-to-pay value estimates

The residents’ questionnaire asked what they would be willing-to-pay for a ‘typical’ beaver-watching experience on the river near to their village. From those who provided an answer to the question, the average value obtained per respondent was £7.74 (£5.78 to £9.70). These willingness-to-pay values have been obtained from residents; it is unknown whether this value would differ for visitors to the area which may include higher travel or accommodation costs.



Figure 6.7 This ‘word frequency’ analysis reveals how respondents from the resident’s questionnaire felt upon seeing beavers or signs of their activity.

Local business perspectives

The following quotes were from managers of businesses in the village.

“I think any opportunity that affords itself to us and promotes the business we could potentially use that as a vehicle to do that. With the wildlife, whether that be beavers or otters, then we would seize that opportunity. So as far as we’re concerned, wildlife tourism is a growing market and fundamentally if the river and the environment here promotes something along those lines then that suits us.”

“You do get a lot of people coming to see them and there’s a few people as well that check in not realising there’s beavers there as well so they will take the time to go and have a look.”

Incident with a dog

On 26th June 2017 an incident was reported regarding a beaver/dog conflict that had occurred in a pool not far from Otterton. The dog (a spaniel cross) was bitten by a beaver and was receiving veterinary treatment for an infected bite wound. The last week of June and first week of July are when kits are first seen emerging from the lodge, and it is surmised that the adult beavers were behaving particularly defensively during this period towards any perceived threats in the water.

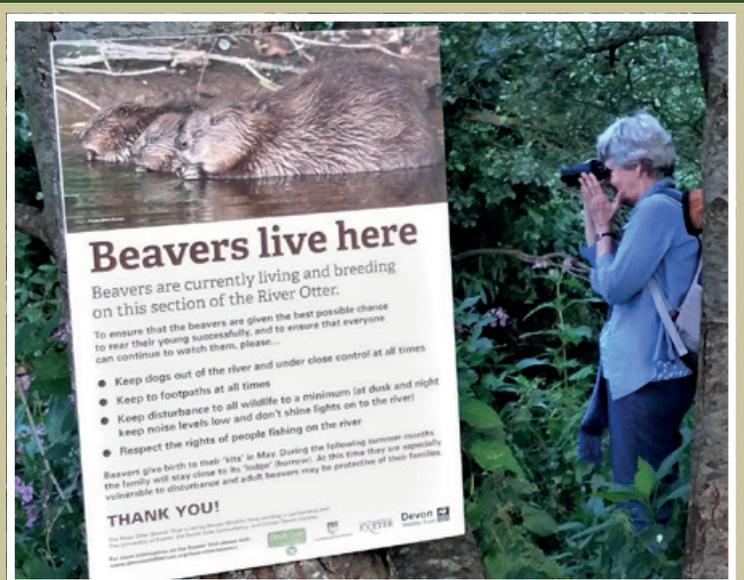
The owner of the dog was keen to ensure that other dog owners were informed of the presence of beaver lodges. The existing signage was revised and upgraded, asking people to avoid allowing their dogs to enter the water, especially in these locations, in line with the Countryside Code which asks dog owners to 'keep dogs under effective control'.



This stretch of footpath is widely used by dog walkers who commonly allow their dogs to enter the water.



Photo: David White



Signage is controversial, and the new signs have subsequently been vandalised on at least two occasions. There is also a balance that needs to be struck between the need to inform dog owners of a risk in an exact location, with a high visibility sign (as is used occasionally in mainland Europe), with the risk of increased disturbance of the beavers by beaver watchers.

Conflicts between river users

Up to 50 people were counted beaver watching on summer evenings in 2016 and 2017, and the riverside path leading north from the village to the lodge site was busier than normal in the evenings with beaver watchers from the village and further afield. Local dog walkers, runners and anglers continued to use the path and there were occasional conflicts reported between the different users. In particular, anglers (fly fishing) using one of the pools near the beaver lodge found themselves the focus of negative comments from a small number of the beaver watchers who were concerned that the anglers were causing disturbance. However, generally the atmosphere was positive and was largely 'self-policing' when it came to noise and disturbance.

Managing impacts on trees

In the Otterton area a number of trees have been impacted by beavers, especially willow trees which are a prime source of food, as well as leylandii and apple trees. In all cases, advice and support was provided to landowners who requested it, leading to the protection of vulnerable or important trees. In one case a tree with high sentimental value was felled by beavers.

Proactive protection of riverside apple trees around the village was necessary to avoid impacts. Apple trees (and windfall apples) are particularly desirable for beavers. In this case the existing sheep fencing around some of the trees was deterring the beavers from feeding on them.



Leylandii trees were the subject of beaver feeding in one garden in 2015.



A few of the trees in gardens backing onto the river have been impacted by beavers, and in one case the land owner expressed their concern about the beaver trial by putting up this poster. When asked about it, the owner explained "It was just a spindly little thing so we staked it and looked after it, but obviously there weren't any beavers in those days so we never thought of putting a cage round it."