The Cornwall Beaver Project: A case study of wetland creation that transforms landscapes and institutions for biodiversity conservation

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Abstract text: This case study applies a social-ecological systems framework to the story of an experiment to learn about use of beavers to create wetlands and reduce flood risk. Lessons learned from the project are interwoven with the accounts of similar work elsewhere in the UK and in Europe that show how innovation and social learning leads to changes in the relationship between humans and beavers, and institutional changes that provide a regulatory framework to support the large-scale reintroduction of beaver. Use of the social-ecological systems framework encourages a focus on the importance of geomorphological processes that regulate habitat for biodiversity conservation and the various social processes of scaling out, up and deep that lead to institutional change. In this regard, the case study serves as an example of the kinds of conservation practices and supporting research required to change the existing paradigms that currently favour over-exploitation of biodiversity to support economic growth. The emerging coevolution of beavers and humans illustrate how the paradigm of human domination of nature may be replaced with stewardship of nature. The use of the social-ecological framework illustrates how reductionist science and systems science can be used together to improve our understanding of ecosystem and landscape processes.

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