

Beaver colony could be a bonus in the fight against flooding

BY LYN BARTON



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A colony of beavers which it is hoped has been established in Devon could be a boon for the environment, preventing the type of flooding which afflicted Somerset last year and helping fish migrate upstream.

The colony in the River Otter – the country's first wild beavers in over 400 years – has not been seen for some weeks, but experts believe they are shyly keeping away from humans and still going strong.

According to a study just published in *New Scientist*, the characteristic dams built by the broad tailed member of the rodent family are a natural flood prevention measure.

The dams regulate the water flow both during heavy rains and droughts, said Richard Brazier of the University of Exeter who is heading the study of beavers in Devon.

"When it rains, more water gets stored in ponds behind the dams, and when it's drier, water is gently released to keep rivers flowing," he said.

He said that when the two founder beavers were released, the site was a tiny stream flowing through deserted woodland.

However, their action on the environment transformed it into a rich, wetland habitat.

"They've built 13 dams and had a profound effect on how

the water flows through the site," he said.

The creatures have created a "staircase of dams" that stored 650,000 litres – enough to quarter fill an Olympic sized swimming pool – during heavy rains in November last year.

It is thought this type of measure could have eased the impact of the 2014 floods.

When the colony was discovered it was feared that the creatures could have a neg-

ative impact on fish in the Otter impeding their movements and fragmenting important habitat.

However, scientists have suggested that so far this may not to be the case and brown trout populations at similar sites in Scotland have proven to be bigger and more abundant.

Professor Paul Kemp, from the University of Southampton and principal investigator on the project, said dams can block the movements of trout when flows are low, but the fish move past them when water levels rise after the rain.

The River Otter beavers are currently being monitored by Devon Wildlife Trust.





The dams the beaver colonies build might help prevent flash flooding according to experts

