

# Beavers too eager for Argentina

*Imported from Canada, the rodents are chewing up Tierra del Fuego*

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In 1946, someone in Juan Peron's navy came up with the idea of colonizing Tierra del Fuego with 25 pairs of beavers from Canada to promote the local fur industry.

A half-century later, the innovation has taken a Malthusian twist. Today this snowy island group on the tip of South America is being overrun by the beavers.

These beavers are nothing if not eager. They have cut down hundreds of acres of forests to build dams hundreds of feet long. Their architectural wonders of branches and mud make fine tourist attractions, but they are also rerouting streams and rivers, thereby interrupting trout migrations to traditional spawning grounds. The beavers have created hundreds of artificial lakes that are flooding still more forests and roads, threatening the livelihoods of island cattlemen and farmers.

But what scientists fear most is the possibility that Tierra del Fuego's beavers may one day manage to swim — or be smuggled — across the Strait of Magellan and invade the South American mainland.

"They could take over the Andean forests," warned Alejandro Gonzalez, a government biologist. "They must be eliminated."

Of all the rodents in the world, beavers still have the best reputation. They are industrious, furry and among the very few species that are monogamous. Even in Tierra del Fuego, pictures of beavers appear on postcards.

But the beaver's good name has been tarnished.

"For us, the beaver isn't just some cute little creature," said Juan Manuel Harrington, 51, a strawberry farmer. "He's a plague whose dikes flood our forests and erode our land."

Juan Esteban Rivero, a 52-year-old hunter, said: "If I don't hunt down these beavers, the widow who lives next door will lose all her sheep and cattle from the floods created by these little animals."

The Peron government came up with many half-baked ideas that ruined the Argentine economy for decades. But its beaver policy seemed perfectly sensible at a time when



fashion-conscious women around the world draped themselves in pelts without thinking about animal rights.

The unintended consequences of the policy can be attributed to one simple fact: Tierra del Fuego does not have any of the beaver's natural predators, such as wolves and bears, found in their original home in the Canadian wilds. Consequently, beavers have thrived in Tierra del Fuego like nowhere else on earth.

Marta Lizaralde, a researcher at the Austral Centre for Scientific Studies in Ushuaia, the world's most southerly city, estimated that the original population of 50 beavers expanded to 2,500 by 1966, then to 30,000 by 1986, reaching an estimated 50,000 just on the Argentine side of the main island. There are tens of thousands more beavers on the Chilean side.

Having reached saturation point on the main island of the archipelago, the beavers have swum to several outlying islands, and that makes biologists worry about an eventual continental invasion.

The problem is barely known outside Tierra del Fuego, but several Argentine government scientists are pressing for a beaver eradication campaign. Government environmentalists have started training scores of local hunters in modern trapping techniques, and they are now distributing 1,100 new beaver traps to the local population. Meanwhile, the Argentine foreign ministry is pressing the European Union to

open its market to Argentine beavers as a way of raising pelt prices and providing incentives to trappers.

But the European market for furs has been circumscribed for years by activists pressing for more humane treatment of animals. European animal lovers have not specifically attacked Argentine beaver trapping methods — by global standards, the trapping of a few thousand beavers a year here is small potatoes. But their campaign against furs has had an impact here, according to Argentine government officials.

Since 1991, the United States, Canada, Russia and the European Union have been trying to negotiate an understanding on the humane trapping of animals. At the moment, the European Community has a list of 13 species — including lynx, sable and beaver — that can be imported into Europe only if caught in traps that immediately kill their prey.

Until very recently, Argentine hunters used restraining traps that broke the beavers' legs, a method prohibited by the European Community. To get around the ban, the Argentine government has spent more than \$50,000 to train and supply trappers so they will hunt with modern, Canadian-designed traps that reduce animal suffering by immediately crushing the heads and throats of the captured beavers.

But late last year, the European Union ruled that it still could not permit the importation of Argentine beaver pelts because Argentina's trap-replacement program was confined to Tierra del Fuego.

Argentina refused to apply a nationwide ban. For now, the beavers are found nowhere else in Argentina but Tierra del Fuego. And officials said they were reluctant to ban restraining traps nation-wide since those traps are still widely used in other provinces to hunt fox and coypu, which are not on Europe's restricted list and together represent up to \$80-million in annual exports.

That animal-rights activists in other countries would stand in the way of Argentina's campaign to halt the beaver scourge "is quite a stupid thing," said Victoria Lichtschein, director of forest fauna and flora in Argentina's natural-resources secretariat. "This is not a species that needs to be protected."