Native beavers suffer in Tahoe as USFS protects non-native kokanee

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

To Sherry Guzzi, the beaver dam on Taylor Creek was more than a watery jungle of sticks and branches.

In that snarl of debris, she saw hope for a species long regarded as non-native in the Sierra but which new research claims has occupied the range for centuries and is key to ecosystem health.

Late last month, her hope was extinguished when the U.S. Forest Service tore down the dam to protect a tourist facility celebrating a non-native species: kokanee salmon.

“They are doing all this to showcase an introduced species,” said Guzzi, co-founder of the Sierra Wildlife Coalition, a local environmental group. “It’s a little nuts, isn’t it?”

The Forest Service, which is having its 23rd Kokanee Salmon Festival this weekend, defended the action. But spokeswoman Cheva Heck said the agency hopes to make its facilities and festival more beaver-friendly in the future.

“The Forest Service’s main interest is in promoting native species,” she said. “We are aware that over time our messages are going to need to change.”

What’s happening here is more than a flap over a furry, flat-tailed rodent with a penchant for gnawing down trees and damming up streams. It is part of a wider controversy over the role of beaver in nature and their provenance – native, non-native or both? – in the Sierra Nevada.

“A beaver can go 10 kilometers by land or 50 kilometers by water in a day. What would keep them out of the Sierra?” said Richard Lanman, a historical ecologist from Los Altos and co-author of two new studies concluding beaver occupied the range long before settlers arrived.

“Every mountain range from northern Mexico to the Arctic tundra, from the Atlantic to the Pacific” had beaver, Lanman said. “And they were supposedly never native to the Sierra? This makes no sense.”

Lanman and his colleagues also write that beavers help “fish abundance and diversity in the Sierra Nevada” and their dams “reduce (the) discharge of nitrogen, phosphorus and sediment loads into fragile water bodies such as Lake Tahoe.”

Their papers challenge long-held assumptions and have met with resistance in some quarters.

“I have learned to view beavers with great suspicion,” said Phil Pister, a retired fisheries biologist who believes the animals are not native to the southeast Sierra. “Beavers are remarkable creatures, but only where nature intended them to be.”

The conflict is muddied by a century of dramatic management swings – a story that begins with the near eradication of beaver by 19th century trappers and their subsequent protection from exploitation by the California Legislature in 1911.

One of the most colorful chapters played out in the 1930s and ’40s when the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Forest Service transplanted beaver to the Sierra, in some cases by air.

The idea was to conserve soil and water behind their dams and expand opportunities for trapping. As one Fish and Game publication at the time put it: “California’s busy beavers are

being transplanted, sometimes by parachute, to mountain areas where their industry and skills will benefit the state."

"Beaver dams in the mountains save water for fish, wildlife and agriculture," it added.

Thriving by the 1980s

By the 1980s, beavers were doing so well that Tahoe National Forest officials launched an effort to remove them – "by transplant or trapping" – north of Truckee, citing damage to trees, wetlands and campgrounds.

"Beaver populations are on the increase," one 1987 Sierraville Ranger District document reads. "This poses a direct threat to many of our riparian areas."

Some old beaver dams remain visible today – minus the beaver. "It was like you snapped your fingers. Aliens came and got them. They were just gone," said Tom Leavell, a cattle rancher who opposed the agency action.

He said beavers and their dams made great fishing on a stream he called Little Creek. "It was the best fishing I've ever had," Leavell said.

"I would take a hundred brook trout a season. And it replenished itself every year."

Now "you are lucky if you can catch 20 a year," he said.

Agencies still treat the species harshly.

When beaver flooded a Forest Service campground in Mono County in 2010, for example, the state Department of Fish and Game signed a depredation permit authorizing the agency to kill three animals. A hand-written note on the permit notes that a trapper did just that – taking two males and a female.

Elsewhere, the animals – which back up water behind dams to

protect themselves from predators and stockpile an aquatic pantry of nutritious sticks and branches – have been killed for toppling trees and damming culverts and waterways.

“They have a right to be here,” said Heidi Perryman, founder of Worth A Dam, a beaver conservation group in Martinez. “There is a way to manage their difficult behavior. And there is a reason why you should bother to do it.”

“Killing them is an extreme response to managing their behavior,” she added. “It’s like shooting all the cars that speed. It would work, but at what cost?”

Dam dates to Middle Ages

Perryman is one of the researchers whose articles in California Fish and Game, a peer-reviewed scientific journal, challenge the long-held view that beaver did not inhabit the Sierra above 1,000 feet on the west slope.

Some of the most persuasive evidence in the articles comes from a beaver dam found buried along a creek in Plumas County. Samples sent to a laboratory for radio-carbon dating showed the structure was built at the dawn of the Middle Ages, around A.D. 580, and used and reused until around 1850.

“Personally, I think beaver were keystone species that helped form meadows in the Sierra by trapping sediment behind their dams,” said Mike Kossow, a Plumas County fisheries consultant who helped discover the dam.

Researchers turned up other supporting material, too, including historical accounts from famous California mountain man James “Grizzly” Adams and other 19th century fur trappers who reported finding beaver at widespread locations in the Sierra.

The researchers also searched official U.S. Geological Survey place names and found several locations in the Sierra named

for ‘Beaver,’ including four Beaver Creeks, one Little Beaver Creek and one Beaver Canyon Creek.

“Either there were a lot of people named Beaver who named those streams after themselves or they named them after beaver,” said Lanman.

The articles have caught the attention of the California Department of Fish and Game, which is re-examining its beaver policies in the Sierra, said Matt Meshiry, an environmental scientist with the department.

“If they are a native component, then we need to examine land use and species management … in terms of maintaining and preserving the ecosystem,” Meshiry said.

Pister, the retired fisheries biologist, is skeptical, saying beaver have harmed golden trout – the California state fish and a native species – in the Eastern Sierra.

“We found beaver dams prevent migration and genetic interchange between populations while silting in the best food-producing and spawning areas,” he said. “Trout would grow larger in beaver ponds, but at a biological price.”

Non-native fish festival

The conflict this fall at Lake Tahoe is not about golden trout but kokanee salmon, a non-native fish introduced to Lake Tahoe in 1944. Every fall, navies of the bright red fish surge up Taylor Creek to spawn.

And on the bank, armies of tourists gather to watch at a 23-year-old Forest Service salmon festival. For many, the highlight is strolling through a streamside corridor offering an aquarium-like view of the fish.

But this year, beavers built a dam not far from the facility, threatening to flood it and a trail. The Sierra Wildlife Coalition urged the Forest Service not to disturb the dam,

suggesting a piping system be installed to permit water to flow through the dam, preventing flooding and protecting beaver – or that the level of the pathway be raised.

On Sept. 26, Forest Service crews dismantled the dam instead. The beaver weren't harmed but Guzzi fears for their future.

"They have to stockpile food for the winter because they don't hibernate," she said. "So this is taking away their food. And they could starve."

"It's a strange corner for the Forest Service to be backed into because it's all artificial," Guzzi added. "It's a little ironic, to say the least."

Heck, the Forest Service spokeswoman, acknowledged the subject is challenging.

"There are a lot of complex issues," she said. "Are you dealing with two non-native species and balancing their needs? Are you balancing a native and a non-native? There has been quite a bit of conversation."

She also said dismantling the dam was the right decision.

"Essentially, we were hoping we could discourage them (the beaver) from rebuilding in that location while allowing downstream dams to persist."

"It's one thing to suggest things. It's another to be the entity that has to implement solutions," Heck added. "We have to look at what the maintenance load would be (and) whether it's actually going to work."

Also up for discussion is the focus of the popular fall festival on a non-native species.

"It does take some thought about how to shift an event like that," Heck said. "What would that new theme be? How are we going to talk about both the kokanee and native species?"

In recent days, the Taylor Creek beavers have been busy with matters of their own – gnawing down more aspen and willows to repair the dam the Forest Service tore down.

By Thursday, the dam had been rebuilt. But when Guzzi returned to the site Friday, she said it had been destroyed again.

“On some level, (the Forest Service) must realize how ludicrous a situation this is,” said Guzzi. “It’s so counterproductive. They are wasting tax dollars and harassing an animal that is good for the lake and its clarity.”

Second World Cup snowboarding event canceled

Money is impacting the snowsports world. The second event where snowboarders earn points to qualify for the Sochi Winter Olympics in February 2014 has been canceled.

Organizers in Stockholm have canceled the Nov. 17 Snowboard World Cup “due to economical reasons.”

An event scheduled for London later this month was nixed last month because of money issues.

This season is when athletes begin earning points for the next Winter Games.

Tahoe USFS sites to close for the season

The U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit annual closure of recreational facilities around the Lake Tahoe Basin has begun.

Campgrounds and day-use areas traditionally close around mid-October. Forest roads typically close around mid-November. The Taylor Creek Visitor Center will remain open through October.

Recreation sites in the basin are managed and operated by both concessionaires and the Forest Service. Tahoe Recreation (formerly California Land Management) sites will close Oct. 14. These sites include Nevada Beach, Fallen Leaf, Bayview, Meeks Bay, William Kent and Kaspian campgrounds and Nevada, Pope, Baldwin, Meeks Bay, William Kent and Kaspian beaches. Camp Richardson, Roundhill Pines and Zephyr Cove resorts remain open year-round.

For a complete list of facility closures, go online or call (530) 543.2694.

Attempt to be made to wipe-out Asian clams at Emerald Bay

The largest Asian clam control project at Lake Tahoe begins Oct. 15 at the mouth of Emerald Bay with the treatment of up to 5 acres.

The goal is to treat a small, isolated population of Asian clams before they spread to an unmanageable level. Clams live on a shallow, gravel sill that partially separates Emerald Bay from Lake Tahoe. Treatment will be accomplished by covering the infested lake bottom with thin rubber barriers, augmented with organic material, that reduce the available oxygen and smother the clams.

Asian clams have a variety of negative impacts. They could increase the potential for other species such as quagga mussels to establish in Lake Tahoe by increasing localized calcium concentrations. They also promote the growth of algae by releasing highly concentrated nutrients. Increases in algae impact the scenic beauty of the shoreline by changing the water color, reducing water quality, and washing rotting materials onto the beaches.

Asian clams also compete with native animals for habitat and food, which causes a disruption in the food web.

Bottom barriers are hand placed by divers over known populations of Asian clams on the bottom of the lake. Steel rebar on top of the barriers keep them in place and deny the clams oxygen. By adding thin, woven sheets of biodegradable organic material under the rubber mats the loss of oxygen can be accelerated to improve the effectiveness of the treatment method. Organic material that does not decompose during the project will be removed with the bottom barriers.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is the lead agency in the project.

Managing forests could boost water yields

By Kathleen Masterson, Capitol Public Radio

Here at the 4,000-acre Blodgett Forest Research Station in the Sierra Nevada foothills, researchers have ongoing projects testing different techniques like clear-cutting and selective harvesting and prescriptive burns.

And soon they might also look at what kinds of forest management produce more clean water.

Forest manager Rob York shows me a 12-acre plot where he's selectively removed individual trees. The sunlight is filtering in. It's a much more open space than the shady reserve of 100-year old trees we just came from.

"Water yield we would expect to increase, compared to the reserve, because we have reduced the amount of large trees that are constantly pumping water out of ground and releasing water into the atmosphere. And we've reduced the canopy cover, so that's more through-fall of snow," York said.

If more snow makes it through to the forest floor, it's more likely to percolate into groundwater supply.

About a third of California's water supply comes from mountain snowpack. If forestry managers can learn techniques that boost water yield from forests, even a small percentage increase could make a difference for the state.

The forest research could also offer lessons about how forests respond to climate change, that will likely bring stressors like drought and heat.

York says forests that haven't been thinned may have a tough time in a drought.

“If climate change causes drought stress, then we’re more likely to see the impacts on those high density forests,” York said. “So density management I think is something that we can focus in on as having a high potential to be useful, with respect to making forests more resilient.”

York says another worry with climate change is whether it may allow invasive species or pests to thrive in the Sierra. He says so far the Sierra hasn’t had extreme problems that some other forests have experienced.

Sierra-at-Tahoe recognized as a top terrain park resort

For 12 years *TransWorld Snowboarding* has been ranking the best overall resorts, parks and pipes in North America. This year the magazine ranked Sierra-at-Tahoe among the Top 10 Overall Resorts, Terrain Parks and received the editor’s pick for Best Value.

Sierra has been recognized six of the past 10 years in *TransWorld Snowboarding* and for the third year in a row has been ranked as one of the Top 10 Overall Resorts.

The resort poll ranks mountains based on mountain features such as parks and pipe, terrain, and other areas including vibe, snowfall, lodging, value, and food. Each year TransWorld readers are polled to rank their three favorite resorts based on their overall experience.

The 2013 resort poll ranked Sierra Resort as the sixth best overall mountain in North America and fifth best park.

Sierra was recognized as the fifth best terrain park in the nation, earned by scoring high in specific categories like jump and rail design, grooming, variety of features, overall vibe, and park challenge.

USOC considers whether to bid for future Games

By John Powers, Boston Globe

To bid or not to bid? And if so, for the summer of 2024 or winter of 2026?

That’s the task for the U.S. Olympic Committee’s working group, which will make a report to the board in December.

The last two American bids for Games, for 2012 and 2016, were disasters, with New York going out in the second round and Chicago rejected before its mayor had entered the convention center for the vote.

Now that the USOC and the International Olympic Committee have resolved their revenue-sharing dispute with a long-term agreement, the major roadblock is gone.

The IOC clearly would love to have an American candidate, if only to jack up US television rights fees.

But with the cost of a bid around $50 million and trending higher, the USOC understandably is reluctant to put up another also-ran entry.

“If we don’t think we can win, we will not bid,” chief executive Scott Blackmun declared after the recent board meeting.

The Americans haven’t hosted the Summer Olympics since Atlanta in 1996 and haven’t bid for the Winter Games since Salt Lake City hosted in 2002.

With the next two winters slated for Europe (Sochi, Russia) and Asia (Pyeongchang, South Korea) and Munich and St. Moritz both possible candidates for the 2022 edition that will be awarded in 2015, the geopolitical rotation would favor a bid for 2026; and Salt Lake City, Denver, Lake Tahoe-Reno, and Bozeman, Mont., all have expressed interest.

More likely, though, would be a bid for the summer of 2024, especially if a European city (Madrid or Istanbul) gets the 2020 nod next year. Though the USOC could put up Chicago or New York again or the intriguing possibility of San Francisco, the competition would be stiffer, with Toronto, the next Pan American Games host, likely to be in the chase as well as 2012 runner-up Paris, which would be celebrating the centennial of hosting the 1924 version.

“It’s possible that we could come to the conclusion that a bid does not make sense for a variety of reasons,” observed USOC chairman Larry Probst.

Sugar Bowl taking over operations of Royal Gorge

Sugar Bowl Resort on Oct. 1 signed an agreement to operate Royal Gorge Cross Country Resort this winter.

The Truckee Donner Land Trust, the Trust for Public Land and the Northern Sierra Partnership put down a $500,000 non-refundable deposit on the property on Oct. 1, and plan to complete the $11.25 million purchase on Dec. 20.

The previous owners of Royal Gorge defaulted on their loan on the property, and Royal Gorge was taken over by the lender last summer.

Royal Gorge is America's largest cross country ski resort. Its 200 kilometers of trails and approximately 6,000 acres of terrain stretch from the open expanse of Van Norden Meadows to the foot of Devil's Peak. Sugar Bowl has trail leases with Donner Summit landowners, which will ensure the entire 6,000 acres of cross-country ski will be open for skiing this winter.

Sugar Bowl Resort and Royal Gorge are already connected by an "interconnect trail" that allows skiers to ski back and forth between the Donner Summit resorts, and plans are in the works to further enhance the connection with two additional beginner-friendly routes. Sugar Bowl is offering a season pass that allows holders to downhill ski at Sugar Bowl and cross country ski at Royal Gorge.

Sugar Bowl plans to invest $500,000 into Royal Gorge this season, including upgrades and renovations to Summit Station, the purchase of two grooming machines, enhanced wayfinding signs, a new website with comprehensive daily grooming report and more.

Private fish pond owners balk at more oversight by state

By Edward Ortiz, Sacramento Bee

Operators of private fish ponds and lakes around the state say a recent court ruling could saddle them with devastating costs and potentially force some out of business.

The Sept. 19 ruling by Sacramento Superior Court Judge Lloyd Connelly allows the state's Department of Fish and Game to proceed with plans to require fish pond owners to obtain permits for their operations. The permitting requirement would apply to 4,000 lakes and 20,000 ponds in California.

Pond and lake owners would have to pay an as-yet-undetermined fee to obtain a permit. Some would also have to conduct an environmental review to show that their fish would not invade other bodies of water and cause harm to native fish or animals. Fish and Game also proposes to require them to provide a certificate stating that their fish are pathogen free.

Fish pond operators say those requirements are too onerous.

"The (court) ruling is just not prudent," said Ken Beer, owner of the Fishery – a Galt-based fish farm that has four locations and grows sturgeon, catfish and carp. Beer supplies live fish to more than 60 Asian live markets as well as local restaurants in the Sacramento region.

He said the proposed requirement that fish be certified as disease-free would be particularly difficult to meet.

"We would have to go out and find the company to do that certification – and right now there are few labs that can do it," he said. "It would be like going to the city of Los

Angeles and certifying that everyone there is disease-free."

The permitting is meant to safeguard a list of 89 "decision" native animal species, each of which may come under threat depending on what kind of fish a landowner decides to stock in a pond or lake.

Fish and Game proposed the new regulations after environmental groups filed lawsuits arguing that the department was not adequately evaluating the potential impact on native fish species reared in its own hatcheries. The department responded with new rules for the hatcheries – and is now proposing new scrutiny for private lakes and ponds as well.

In a court filing, the department argues that protecting native fish and animals is of the "utmost public interest."

The department's proposed permitting program, which still must be approved by the state Fish and Game Commission, would apply to 37 counties, most of them in the Central Valley, including Sacramento County.

Lake and pond owners in those counties currently are not required to pay any permitting fee to stock fish.

Fish pond and lake operators in the state's remaining counties – mostly in the mountains and along the coast – already are required to obtain permits, which now cost $53. There is no environmental assessment required.

Fish pond owners in the Central Valley say they're worried that it will be expensive to comply with the proposed permitting requirements, because they may have to pay for an environmental assessment that could cost thousands of dollars.

The permitting process will likely be required every five years.

For some, the costs could run into six figures, predicted Marko Mlikotin, spokesman for the California Association for

Recreational Fishing.

To help make its case, the fishing industry group hired Pasadena-based Sapphos Environmental, a consulting firm, to gauge what such permitting would cost for four different-size lakes.

The firm concluded that conducting an environmental analysis would cost the owner of Dixon Lake, near San Diego, $181,086. Closer to home, 8-acre Knickerbocker Lake in Lincoln would incur costs of $46,515 to satisfy permitting requirements, the report said.

“This will have a devastating impact on recreational fishing and outdoor tourism, and on businesses as well as local government sales tax,” CARF’s Mlikotin said.

Fish and Game officials say the cost of permitting will not be as heavy as the industry contends, because only a portion of ponds and lakes will be required to conduct environmental reviews.

“The department disputes CARF’s estimate,” said Fish and Game spokesman Mike Taugher.

Beer, though, contends that the permitting requirement could eventually cause some fish farms to go out of business, and so reduce the amount of fresh fish available to diners in the Sacramento area.

“Most of the fish grown in private fish farms, except for trout, are sold for food – and almost all of it is sold and consumed locally,” he said.

Bicycle ridership increases when helmets not mandatory

By Elisabeth Rosenthal, New York Times

One spectacular Sunday in Paris last month, I decided to skip museums and shopping to partake of something even more captivating for an environment reporter: Vélib, arguably the most successful bike-sharing program in the world. In their short lives, Europe's bike-sharing systems have delivered myriad benefits, notably reducing traffic and its carbon emissions.

A number of American cities – including New York, where a bike-sharing program is to open next year – want to replicate that success.

So I bought a day pass online for about $2, entered my login information at one of the hundreds of docking stations that are scattered every few blocks around the city and selected one of Vélib's nearly 20,000 stodgy gray bikes, with their basic gears, upright handlebars and practical baskets.

Then I did something extraordinary, something I've not done in a quarter-century of regular bike riding in the United States: I rode off without a helmet.

I rode all day at a modest clip, on both sides of the Seine, in the Latin Quarter, past the Louvre and along the Champs-Élysées, feeling exhilarated, not fearful. And I had tons of bareheaded bicycling company amid the Parisian traffic. One common denominator of successful bike programs around the world – from Paris to Barcelona to Guangzhou – is that almost no one wears a helmet, and there is no pressure to do so.

In the United States the notion that bike helmets promote health and safety by preventing head injuries is taken as

pretty near God’s truth. Un-helmeted cyclists are regarded as irresponsible, like people who smoke. Cities are aggressive in helmet promotion.

But many European health experts have taken a very different view: Yes, there are studies that show that if you fall off a bicycle at a certain speed and hit your head, a helmet can reduce your risk of serious head injury. But such falls off bikes are rare – exceedingly so in mature urban cycling systems.

On the other hand, many researchers say, if you force or pressure people to wear helmets, you discourage them from riding bicycles. That means more obesity, heart disease and diabetes. And – Catch-22 – a result is fewer ordinary cyclists on the road, which makes it harder to develop a safe bicycling network. The safest biking cities are places like Amsterdam and Copenhagen, where middle-aged commuters are mainstay riders and the fraction of adults in helmets is minuscule.

Read the whole story