

Arkansas Democrat Gazette

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS EDITION

50,000 beavers dining on Patagonian forests

BY ANDREW MARRA COX NEWS SERVICE

Posted on Sunday, November 18, 2007

[Email this story](#) | [Printer-friendly version](#)

BUENOS AIRES,
Argentina — In

American culture the beaver is as benign a rodent as ever was, an amiable blue-collar vegetarian with a penchant for erecting public works and a protagonist of children's television shows.

But in southern Chile it's wanted dead or alive.

Some 60 years after 50 were introduced into South America's sub-Antarctic Patagonia region in a doomed effort to install a fur trade, the beaver population has exploded.

Today more than 50, 000 roam freely in southern Patagonia, a region shared by Chile and Argentina, gnawing their way with abandon through virgin forests unaccustomed to tree-eating predators.

Chilean conservation officials are sounding the alarm as the beaver population spreads north, leaving miles of dead forest in its wake. The government is paying trappers by the pelt and has gone so far as encouraging Patagonian restaurants to serve the foreign rodent on their menus.

They are also starting to consider more drastic measures, like widespread poisoning in some areas, to eradicate the beaver.

The ramped-up efforts at the south end of the world are being driven in part by research by the University of Georgia, which recently published the first-ever study documenting the animal's damaging effects on Chilean river wildlife.

The study's findings have deepened concerns about the beaver's threat and given more fuel to those who want its tail on a platter.

"The reason people are concerned is the landscape change," said Chris Anderson, a former doctoral student who spearheaded the university's research efforts in Chile. "If the beaver gets established on the mainland there's nothing to stop it from going

established on the mainland, there's nothing to stop it from going all the way to Santiago [the capital]." The North American beaver has been thriving for decades on a series of islands on the southern tip of South America, a spectacular region of forests and ancient glaciers considered one of the world's most pristine natural areas.

The problem is that the southern beech trees that dominate Patagonian forests in that region did not evolve the same tactics that many North American trees did to survive alongside beavers, such as badtasting wood or an ability to regrow from the trunk.

The result is that "it's just a big vacation for the beavers," said Anderson. "The beaver eats them all." The beaver is not the only invasive mammal creating problems in southern Chile. Foreign species like mink and rabbits are also spreading and wreaking havoc, preying on bird eggs and native plants.

But it is the beaver that has had the most dramatic effect on the landscape. As it mows down trees to build its dams and beaver ponds, it leaves large swaths of dead forest behind it.

Anderson said it is no understatement to call it "the largest thing that's happened here [ecologically] since the melting of the glaciers 10, 000 years ago." Conservationists are especially concerned given the region's iconic natural splendor. Its ruggedness attracts droves of tourists to the area and earns Patagonia its reputation for untouched beauty.