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Fighting an Invasion: Mocksville ecologist helps fight a scourge of beavers in Chile

By Andrew Marra
SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

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BUENOS AIRES, Argentina

It must have seemed like a good idea at the time: In 1946, hoping to start a fur trade, the Argentine government released 50 North American beavers in the sub-Antarctic islands on South America's southern tip.

The fur trade flopped quickly. But 60 years later, the beaver has never had it better.

In the continent's vast Patagonia region, shared by Argentina and Chile, some of the most pristine but defenseless forest in existence is being eaten alive by dam-building rodents.

The original 50 have multiplied to over 50,000 and crossed over to mainland Chile. As they gnaw their way north, leaving miles of dead forest in their wake, the worried Chilean government is grasping for solutions.

Enter the man from Mocksville.

Chris Anderson, 30, an ecologist, found his way to Chilean Patagonia through a series of happenstances he never would have anticipated. Eight years

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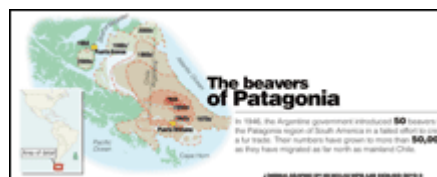
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(Photo courtesy of Chris Anderson)

JOURNAL GRAPHIC



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after first setting foot there, he has emerged as one of the country's leading experts on the beaver.

There was never a better time to be one. The Chilean government has started to pay hunters

by the pelt to kill beaver. Officials have gone as far as to encourage restaurants to serve them on their menu and are considering widespread poisoning efforts.

Chile has been hunting and trapping the beaver since 2003, but changes now being made to their tactics are based in large part on Anderson's research. Last year he published the first-ever study on the beaver's effects on freshwater wildlife - demonstrating for the first time that beaver dams significantly reduce the diversity of aquatic life around them. He sits on national and regional invasive-species advisory boards in Chile and is a fellow at one Chilean research institute and a researcher at another.

He lives practically at the end of the world these days, in a city called Punta Arenas. But it's still a bit north of his old haunt. Previously, he had spent years living in a wood cabin in Puerto Williams, the world's southernmost town, where he had to chop wood for heat and buy gas by the bottle for cooking.

As Chile battles the beaver's northward march, officials credit his input as an important factor in their counterattack.

Anderson said that while others have studied beavers' effects in South America, he is "really the only one who's taken it up as a primary topic of research."

"It wasn't until we started this work that it became a topic of



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conversation among politicians here," he said.

A lifelong outdoorsman, Anderson grew up on farmland outside Mocksville and was involved in environmental organizations and the 4-H Club at Davie County High School. He knew he wanted to be a biologist ever since he reached for a dictionary as a boy and found the word zoologist.

"I was always playing in the woods," he said. "And then I found out I could get paid to do it."

Anderson first came to Chile after graduating with a biology degree from UNC Chapel Hill in 1998. He had won a post-graduate scholarship that let him do research anywhere in the world, and he chose Chile.

He explains that as a college intern in New York state he had once met two Chilean scientists, and their descriptions of the Chilean Patagonia region had filled him with wonder.

Patagonia, a desolate region shared by Argentina and Chile, is a vast swath of pristine forests, deserts, ice-capped mountains and ancient glaciers of legendary beauty. Anderson arrived in 1999 to help track the migrations of birds and, in a sense, never left.

After his research trip to Chile, he began pursuing a doctorate in ecology at the University of Georgia, splitting his time between the Athens, Ga., campus and the tiny island town of Puerto Williams.

He graduated last year with a Ph.D. and returned to Chile once more. He continues working there today - both as a fellow for the Millennium Institute of Ecology and Biodiversity and as a researcher at the Omora Ethnobotanical Park-University of Magallanes.

His specialty of study has become invasive species - beavers in particular.

The beavers have been thriving on the forested islands in the southern tip of the continent ever since being introduced in 1946.

The beaver fur trade never took off, Anderson said. The Argentine government released the beavers but never followed up by creating incentives for hunters. The plans for a fur trade festered, and the beavers multiplied like rabbits, spreading throughout the islands in both the Argentine and Chilean parts of Patagonia.

With virtually no natural predators, the beavers roam free and gnaw nearly whatever they want. The trees in the Patagonian forests have not evolved natural defenses against beavers - such as bad-tasting wood or an ability to regrow from the trunk - like some of their North American counterparts have. The result is that "it's just a big vacation for the beavers," Anderson said. "The beaver eats them all."

While undertaking his invasive-species research, Anderson has also found time to start his own nonprofit organization: the Omora Sub-Antarctic Research Alliance, an American organization that helps facilitate new

research missions in Patagonia.

But his main purpose and passion is his own research. In Patagonia, where there are relatively few working ecologists, he has been able to carve out a niche quickly to become an expert in his field, nailing down the beaver's true damaging effects on stream wildlife and supervising researchers investigating the hunting practices of other invasive species such as the mink.

When he's not working, he spends free time with friends from his institute, whether it's barbecuing or simply hanging out. He has grown accustomed to speaking nearly always in Spanish, so when he does come back to North Carolina, it is a chore to readjust. He bumps into people at the airport and reflexively excuses himself in Spanish.

For now, he says, he plans to stay put in Chile for at least two more years while he wraps up research and finishes overseeing other student projects.

"The great thing is that it's an unexplored area here in terms of research," he said. "I'd like to consolidate the work I'm doing."