

10 Environment

Eco Quotes

10.08.05

"I would require less than 1% of available land [in the countryside] to build enough homes for the next generation and beyond." **David Orr**, National Housing Federation chief executive.

"UK aviation is one of the country's most successful industries, contributing over £10bn to the economy ..."

"The environmental impact of airport expansion must weigh very heavily against any economic benefit." **Tom Brake** MP (right), Liberal Democrat shadow transport secretary.



Looking to the future: re-introduction of the European grey wolf could help restore ecological balance to the Highlands. Photo: Ann and Steve Toon/NHPA

Deer hunters

A plan to combat overgrazing could see grey wolves once again roaming the Highlands of Scotland along with lynx and bears. By Martin Hodgson



Dusk falls over Glen Alladale. The valley rings with the calls of swifs and meadow pipits. Soon, this Highland chorus may be joined by a sound not heard here for centuries: the howling of the European wolf.

Alladale's owner, businessman Paul Lister, has announced an ambitious plan to restore the original Highland ecology, transforming a 9,300 hectare (23,000 acre) hunting estate into a fenced wilderness reserve, where he hopes wolves, lynx and even brown bears will eventually roam free.

Legend says the last wolf in Scotland was killed in 1743. Three centuries of slow ecological ruin followed. By the start of the last century, gamekeepers had eradicated several of Scotland's birds of prey. More recently, hunting estates have encouraged an explosion in the deer population, which in turn has caused overgrazing and prevents forests from regenerating naturally.

Now, less than 1% remains of the Caledonian forest. Lister's proposal is for a wholesale restoration of the original Highland ecosystem by replanting the trees, culling the deer and controlling their population by introducing

wild grey wolves. "What we're trying to do is reagent the balance," says project manager Andy Harding.

Lister is careful to avoid any suggestion that he is advocating the release of any species to the wild. Roy Dennis, a consultant ecologist who played a key role in the reintroduction of the white-tailed eagle and the red kite, is advising the project. "[The project] will give people a chance to see a release work in a controlled situation," he says.

If the plan goes ahead, Alladale will become a commercially-run reserve ringed by a 50-mile electric fence; but instead of being kept in separate enclosures, the animals will have a free run of the estate. The model is based on the Shannari game reserve in South Africa, which rehabilitated a series of overgrazed cattle farms.

It will take several years before Alladale is ready to receive large mammals, but Lister has started preparations, commissioning an environmental impact study and culling deer. Over the next few years, he intends to halve the estate's red deer population to 600 animals, and eradicate a smaller group of Sika deer — an Asian species introduced in the 19th century. Simultaneously, some 250,000 trees will be planted, including Scots pines.

Initial efforts will concentrate on restoring a 1,000-acre area with smaller species such as red squirrels,

wildcat, Highland cattle, and boars. This first stage will be used to test the feasibility of the habitat recovery but, according to Christoph Promberger who spent 10 years studying wolves in Romania, a large-scale restoration will only be ecologically sustainable if it includes the larger carnivores: wolf, lynx and bear.

"Top predators control the deer, and the deer have a strong influence on the flora. The project will not work if the original fauna is not brought back," he says.

For that to happen, Lister hopes to convince neighbouring landowners to join forces with him, doubling the size of the reserve to some 50,000 acres — large enough, he believes, to house two packs of wolves (12-15 animals), three pairs of lynx and up to 30 bears.

The animals will be tagged with satellite tracking devices, enabling park rangers to monitor their movements — both to prevent escapes and to help visitors spot the animals.

As yet there is no legal provision for the kind of reserve that Lister plans — under current legislation, predators and their prey cannot be kept in the same enclosure. Meanwhile, the National Farmers Union in Scotland warns that an escape "could cause immediate danger to people and wildlife."

Those fears are unwarranted, says Lister, pointing out that many African reserves safely contain large popula-

tions of elephants and lions within their boundaries. According to Promberger, wolves are more likely to hide from humans than attack them.

A more serious challenge comes from those who oppose the idea of a fence. Lister says walkers could be given controlled access to the estate, but Dave Morris, director of the Ramblers Association in Scotland, believes that any kind of exception to the right to roam would set a dangerous precedent. "We'd be very unhappy with a large tract of land being excluded from the statutory right of access, and very unhappy at the concept of a huge fence to secure that exclusion," he says.

According to the EU habitats directive, however, member states are obliged to study ways of restoring species that are scarce or absent. Unsurprisingly, argues Lister, a compromise would be worth making. If it means wolves and bears can return to the area. But it's the financial argument that may ring loudest in the Highlands: deer stalking and salmon fishing no longer provide enough employment to keep local youngsters in the area, while ecotourism is the fastest growing sector of the tourist industry.

Although wolves have returned unaided to swaths of Europe, Lister says: "They are never going to swim the North Sea. They will never get back to Britain unless we give them a hand."