

Wolves, bears, lynx, boars and bison set to return in wildlife wilderness reserve

Restoring the past — and planning for the future

THE jury is out on one of Sutherland's newest landowners, Paul Lister, and his ambitious plans to set up Europe's first wildlife wilderness reserve, stocked with predators once native to the country, on his 23,000-acre Alladale Estate.

Is he a naive dreamer with the money to indulge a whim to turn back the clock to a time long gone, when the ancient Forest of Caledon clothed the Highlands and the Bog Five — the grey wolf, the European brown bear, the lynx, the wild boar and European bison — roamed free?

Or is he a visionary environmentalist who will single-handedly reverse the fortunes of this economically depressed and by-passed south-east corner of Sutherland which has suffered so badly from the building of the Dornoch Bridge?

Local people got the opportunity to make their own judgement at a public meeting where residents in the Ardgy, Bonar Bridge and Ladys area heard Mr Lister explain his plans for the long-term future of Alladale.

The son of MFI co-founder Noel Lister, the 46-year-old millionaire is under no illusion that his wilderness project has

been embraced wholeheartedly by the community. But he is keen to have the support of local people.

"We have already had so many positive responses and letters of support. I'm really encouraged that I haven't received one negative letter or e-mail out of about 150," he revealed.

He has travelled to 130 countries and seen many wildlife projects — but the seed for the Alladale project appears to have been sown when he was in his 20s and his father bought some bare hill ground in central Scotland for re-afforestation.

"I shot my first few deer there, before thinking 'What am I doing?' What has happened to nature that we have now got to cull deer? The answer is that we have eliminated the natural predators. From there I got interested in European species and the Carnapian Large Carnivore Project in Romania."

Lister, who has strong links with the Shannary and Sambona Game Reserves in Southern Africa, no longer hunts, shoots or fishes, although he does not oppose deer culling.

His acquisition of Alladale for £3.5 million in 2003 was neither a rash nor hasty decision and came after seven years of searching for the perfect location in which to establish a wilderness reserve.

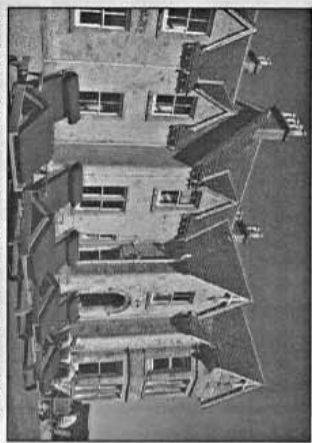
"I had looked for seven years for an area of ground to fit a certain set of criteria," he said. "If I had ten things I needed, Alladale had eight out of the ten. Everywhere else had three or four out of ten, so it was a no-brainer for me."

"It was within an hour and a half of the airport, and on the eastern side of the country, so had a slightly lower rainfall. Another reason for buying it is that there are no crofters or tenant farmers on the estate, which made for fewer complications. Also, there are no Munros, so we're not going to get too many hill

walkers. I had wanted around 50,000 acres, but was happy to settle for less.

"I have no public road access and few footpaths. It is really a very wild and remote area of land which I consider to have been relatively inexpensive for what I got."

He has spent some £300,000 in renovating to four-star standard the 128-year-old lodge, which can take parties of up to 16 and opened earlier this year. Rooms to the rear of the building have been converted into a spa and a beauty therapist has been employed. A total of 12 staff are now employed on the estate where previously there were only three. The two Shannary have been sent to Africa to learn more



about Paul's concept. Lister talks of upgrading the high-maintenance hill roads. He also plans a hydro-electric scheme which will meet 80 per cent of heating costs and an educational centre. "It will be a way of children learning core values and to treat people and the environment with respect," he explained. Gap-year students are also being encouraged to visit Alladale for an "eco-experience". Up to eight

student places are on offer. Mr Lister warned that he is not prepared to underwrite the estate indefinitely and that it will have to pay its way. "I've got to fill up the lodge 365 days a year," he said. "I'm not interested in running a lodge which will only open three months of the year. I want the place to be humming, even if it's the middle of winter and there's a blizzard out-

side. We need visitors to help us with our objectives. If we don't fill the house up, then I can't offer the jobs."

And he is bubbling over with enthusiasm and ideas as to exactly how to do that — ideas for business seminars and product launches, for pony trekking, "open house" parties, and three-night short breaks catering for special interests such as photography, painting, cooking, yoga,

health and fitness and traditional deerstrinking parties. He has already formed links with individuals and organisations. Celebrity chef Nick Nairn has been asked to host a cook school at Alladale. "Yogology", which runs and operates yoga retreats all over the world, are considering picking Alladale for its first UK destination. Outdoor wear manufacturers Carrymore have agreed to stock a small shop in

the lodge. His main aim, however, is to create the only large-scale wilderness wildlife reserve in the northern hemisphere — a 50,000-acre fenced area into which he will introduce the Big Five who will feed on the deer population. It will be, he says, not so much a safari park as a massive Kincraig Wildlife Park. Ecologists have recommended that Alladale can support two packs of wolves, with five or six animals

that there will be several obstacles to overcome, including the right to roam issue, before his plans come to fruition but he is confident he will get the green light, and also funding in the form of EU grants and corporate sponsorship.

He is also very aware that the main objection local people have to his plans is on safety grounds, but he insists that the £2 million, three-metre high electrified fence it is proposed to erect around the planned reserve will keep the predators inside.

□ Paul Lister on his estate at Alladale.

□ FAR LEFT: the restored Alladale Lodge.

In each pack, two pair of lynx, 15 to 20 bears, and 50 to 100 wild boar.

In the process he also plans to restore Scotland's native forests of Caledonian pine, juniper, hazel and round birch.

Some 20,000 broadleaf trees are due to be planted this year and a further 250,000 over the next three years.

"The reserve will be a huge attraction for Scotland and the Highlands. When you start talking about wolves and bears, people will want to come here from all over the world. It has been done in other parts of the world — people travel thousands of miles to see the Big Five of Africa."

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