

Letters to the Editor

Community should be supporting Paul Lister all the way

Sir — Instead of knocking back the proposed plans for Alladale Wilderness Lodge I feel that we as a community should be supporting them all the way.

As someone who attended the public meeting on September 15th I believe that a majority of people had made their minds up before entering the hall, and nothing the panel would say could make them think otherwise.

I am of the belief that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but to have made up your mind before hearing all the facts is unfair.

What Mr Lister and the rest of the panel were trying to do, in my opinion, was to present us with the facts and let us know from the start what their plans are and not to keep us in the dark.

The mere mention of wolves and bears, and alarm bells start ringing, and to a certain extent they should. These animals are to be respected, but not feared. People seem to have the impression that they're going to be roaming about the village. This to me is a ludicrous notion, especially when you take into consideration all the security

measures that will be in place. How can any sensible person even entertain that idea?

As was said at the meeting, wolves and bears will not attack unless provoked, something I think you'll find is true of most animals. But more than that, the actual chances of seeing these animals are very slim. They are naturally shy of humans and can hear or smell your presence long before you might see them.

I don't in any way claim to be an expert on these animals, but I have read up on them — something I feel an awful lot more people should have done before attending the meeting.

There are one or two points that have been raised in the press since the meeting I feel should be addressed. Mrs Fay Thompson of Amat remarked upon the speed of workmen driving to Alladale. How, in any way, is Mr Lister accountable for the speed at which someone drives? I don't see how he as an individual is to blame.

Mr Robin Ashby of Edderton wrote of the dangers of elk on the roads in

Sweden. Whilst I understand that this is a problem, how are they any more of a hazard than our very own red and sika deer that behave in exactly the same way? Having said that, this holds no credence as the elk will be enclosed and the public will not be driving in Alladale.

It was also suggested at the meeting that only two locals were employed at Alladale. This was yet another case of someone getting their facts wrong. Alladale employs five full-time and two part-time workers — all locals. Shops and businesses in Ardgay and Bonar Bridge have also benefitted from Alladale's new owners.

I think that we as a community should recognise this as the fantastic opportunity that it is — the injection of life back into the area. Instead of sitting back and watching our village and the surrounding environment decline into somewhere that people say "Oh yes ... we passed through there", let's make them stop and stay for a while. — Blair Barnett and Rosemary Ross, Arnaboll, Ardgay.

Locals did not deal blow to laird's plan

Sir — I was disappointed to see the headline "Locals deal blow to laird's wildlife wilderness plan" on the front page last week.

I was disappointed because I do not believe that was the general consensus of those who attended the meeting. None of the "locals" I spoke to regarded this as something which should be thrown out in its entirety. Quite the reverse in fact. Most folk (and remember, over 300 people turned up for this presentation) are quietly hopeful that this Paul Lister is one of the few lairds in recent years who genuinely has his heart in the right place.

There were perhaps eight people in all who stood up to voice their concerns (as is proper), with the exception

of Mr Calder who demanded (for no apparent reason) that everyone back him with a vote to cast out the entire abomination. Where there had been smatterings of applause for speakers prior to this, Mr Calder's outburst was followed by nothing except the sound of the furious scribbling of a reporter's pencil.

There are reasonable objections to Mr Lister's plan, such as increased road traffic on the way to Alladale and genuine concerns about wild animals escaping and walkers' access rights. On the latter two points, anyone who has been walking in the Highlands and come across a red deer stag in the rutting season would have wished to have more than a map and a compass in their possession! Mr Ashby wrote to tell us he

lived for 30 years in Sweden and considers elk on the road dangerous. Well I have news for you Mr Ashby, most Highlanders are well used to deer and sheep wandering out in front of us, and to this day I haven't heard of a single one with a road tax disc.

Things have never been the same around these parts since the forced eviction of people from their homes to make way for sheep. I know, people will think "Not that old chestnut again" but we must regard the past if we are to learn anything at all about our future. Commercial salmon netting at one time was a great contributor to our local economy but sadly it is history now. The last big blow to our communities was the Dornoch Bridge. The

present brutality hammering at our fragile village foundations is coming from unfair supermarket prices, soaring fuel costs and deeply blinkered government centralisation. If this continues, our shops, hotels, garages and hospitals will all be shut.

Locals did *not* deal a blow to the plan. The locals are well aware that Mr Lister has a lot of hurdles to cross to implement it. The locals know if this plan to introduce species which were once naturally native to the Highlands is given a chance, and is properly organised, it has massive potential to breathe a little life back and halt the eradication of our communities. — David Catto, 2 Carron Place, Ardgay.

Wildlife reserve merits fair hearing

Sir — I refer to your report last week of the public meeting on 15th September to discuss Mr Paul Lister's plans for a wildlife wilderness reserve on his Alladale Estate.

I attended the public meeting in Ardgay Hall with a very open mind, and came away much impressed by the presentation of the proposed plans by the highly experienced platform party.

The capacity audience was cordially invited to ask

questions, but not (as I saw it) to approve or outrightly reject the scheme.

While I concur that everyone is entitled to an opinion, I equally believe that no self-appointed individual has the divine right to assume that everyone else shares his/her strongly expressed condemnation.

The planning authorities, through their governmental function, are surely more qualified to pass judgement.

With hundreds of native residents driven from our glens and straths in the mid-19th century, any feasible project which might help to redress that shameful period in our history merits a fair hearing and thoughtful consideration at the very least.

While on holiday in Canada, where wild animals roaming freely is not a novelty, I was privileged to visit a large "wildlife wilderness reserve" which I

imagine Alladale might resemble, albeit probably on a much smaller scale.

It was a unique experience, and the very high degree of safety and control applied fully convinces me that, in the prevailing climate in which we live, humans are much more open to danger and attack from bloodthirsty fellow bipeds than they ever would be from wild escaped quadrupeds. — J Gordon, Ben View, Lairg Road, Bonar Bridge.