

Something wonderful is afoot in the Highlands. Businessman Paul Lister has announced plans to create a wildlife park based around the 23,000 acre Alladale estate, which he purchased last year. Mr Lister's aim is to reintroduce to Scotland species which were once indigenous to the country: species which include the wolf and the bear. Mr Lister, it seems, has been working hard to encourage his neighbours to throw in their lot with him – for his aim is for the park to finally embrace more than 50,000 acres.

Scotland is the last part of the United Kingdom to boast true wilderness, and Mr Lister's bold and ambitious plan deserves applause for attempting to endorse that status by supplying the true marker of wilderness diversity: the principal predators.

Paul Lister's father, Noel Lister, was the man who founded the furniture chain MFI. It is tempting to imagine that his son's current actions are driven by the desire to make a filial act of contrition. There cannot be many over the age of 45 who are unable to recall the bewildered helplessness that accompanied the first sight of a set of MFI assembly instructions – never mind the growing sense of impotent rage when confronted by the jigsaw of laminated chipboard and screws. But it seems that this is not a case of Mr Lister labouring under the sins of his father, but rather one of a man motivated by a desire to do something which, if successful, would be the most innovative and eye-catching conservation project ever undertaken in this country.

So you would think that anyone who cares about the outdoors, and who has silently shed a tear as one more

bit of the countryside has disappeared under tarmac or the shadow of a wind turbine would be overjoyed that here is someone prepared to put huge sums of the folding stuff into a project of this kind. A project which only private finance would or could ever bring about – government being big on conservation until the time comes to pay for it. Alas, you would be disappointed. And why? Well, you see, it's the fence.

Lister's plan is to re-establish the big five – European bison, lynx, boar, wolf and bear (and let's not forget a massive planting of up to 300,000 trees). Although attacks on humans by any of these five are extraordinarily rare, it would be a very foolish multi-millionaire who did not take precautions to protect the animals from the litigious ambulance-chasing compensation junkies who now comprise a large slice of the public. The way he intends to do that is by means of a 3m high fence. And that, of course, cuts across the great New Age shibboleth of open access.

Readers of this magazine will know that we take the view that much of the promotion of open access does not proceed from a genuine desire to see great numbers of the public taking advantage of it (indeed many open access campaigners hate the public), but rather from a deep-seated loathing of what those who support it regard as privilege. If you don't believe us, listen to Mike Sales of the Mountaineering Council of Scotland (quoted in the August issue of TGO): "[the scheme's about] protecting a core zone with an exclusive hotel or country club where the guy (Lister) can guarantee privacy to the Madonnas and Bushes of the world". Or this, from a correspondent to the same magazine a month

later: "I believe the main objective of this plan is to provide a private retreat for the wealthy. The fence is to keep the peasants out... we would be tolerated at the margins...". This kind of envious claptrap ('the Madonnas and Bushes of the world' and garbage about 'peasants', for God's sake) is a fact of life, but it should be confined to the sixth form debating chamber where it so clearly belongs – rather than in mature public debate over conservation and access.

It is true that Mr Lister plans to have lodges inside the park, which can be hired for sums of money which only the wealthy will be able to afford. But there will also be guided tours for the rest of us. What has got up the nose of the access Nazis, is the idea that anyone should, by dint of wealth, have better access than they. In their miserable little grey world, everyone travels economy class.

There have been no bears in Scotland for more than ten centuries; wolves were hunted to extinction 250 years ago. The bison vanished long before either of the former. In all cases it was the close proximity of man which accounted for their demise. The number of multi-millionaires willing to sink their cash into ambitious conservation projects such as this is also vanishingly small. Where once great herds of philanthropic rich guys roamed across the savannah, helping the poor and saving fallen women, their numbers have been reduced to an endangered few. Persecuted by drab socialists and chippy academics, where found they have become a rare delight. It is, alas, doubtful whether their numbers will ever recover and, accordingly, it is up to us to do whatever we can to foster and encourage the few that remain in the wild. ■ SB



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