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Picture: John Paul

30/11/04.

Call of the wild



IT IS more than 250 years since the lonely howl of the wolf has echoed in the farthest reaches of the Highlands, but if Paul Lister gets his way, that will soon change.

The millionaire businessman wants to transform his estate in Sutherland and Easter Ross into a home for not only the European grey wolf, but also the bear, lynx, boar and European bison which were once native to this land.

Lister's vision is a conservationist's dream and, in his own words, one of the "most sensational, inbound eco-tourism opportunities the Highlands have ever seen."

Others, less sympathetic, might dismiss it as a furry-animal Jurassic Park.

But whatever the objections Lister will face in bringing this cast of characters to a fenced

Paul Lister dreams of reintroducing wolves and other wild animals to the Highlands. But will public opinion allow his his vision ever to become a reality, asks **JIM GILCHRIST**

wilderness on his Alladale estate, nobody could accuse his project of smacking of the fly-by-night.

"I've been thinking about it for 15 years and looking for somewhere like Alladale for seven years," says Lister, who purchased the 153-square-mile estate last year.

As he sits in the lodge at Alladale, 12 miles west of Bonar Bridge, and within sight of some of the most northerly Caledonian pinewoods in the country, you sense Lister has waited long enough. "I'd like to think we could achieve something within the next five years,"

he says. "The habitat is perfect for these animals and we could do most of the reintroduction within a 12-month period, from the minute the perimeter fence went up."

Whether Lister will be allowed to forge ahead at this pace is in doubt - and he knows it. Scottish Natural Heritage's attempts of the past eight years to introduce the relatively "cuddly" European beaver to Scotland has been fraught with minority, but vocal, opposition from forestry and farming interests.

What the wider community will make of his plans to rein-

troduce Scotland's "big five" is not yet fully clear - but some commentators believe he faces a Herculean task in convincing all those with a legitimate interest that his dream is a good idea.

Aware of this, at the weekend, Lister held a conference at Alladale with those who might be affected by his plans. This included neighbouring landowners, deer management groups, local small farmers, estate workers other interested agencies - people he will need to convince if his dream is to be realised.

Speaking to *The Scotsman*

ahead of the event, he was resolutely upbeat, though realistic.

"The community seems to be adopting the idea, and that's even before I've had the chance explain it fully," he said. "Obviously, it would be silly of me to go ahead prematurely."

"So far there's been nothing negative, but I don't suppose it'll be too long before someone has something to say."

Lister is the son of Noel Lister, the co-founder of the MFI furniture empire, but at the age of 45, he has put the retail trade behind him. Although he maintains a family business based in Beaconsfield, Buckingham-

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The European grey wolf, below, the bear, lynx, boar and European bison, all once native to Scotland, could be reintroduced to these shores by Paul Lister, above

