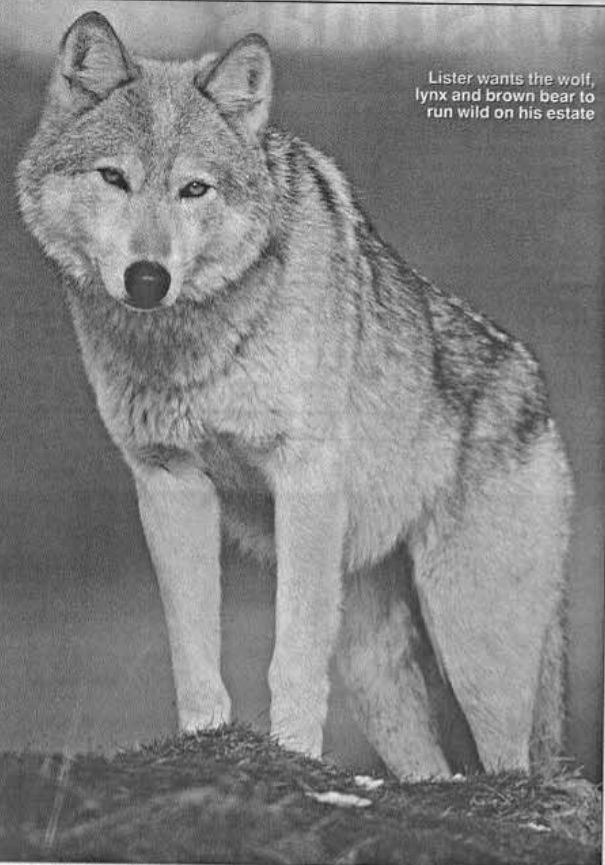


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Laird plans to unleash wolves on Highlands

Lister wants the wolf, lynx and brown bear to run wild on his estate



Nicholas Hellen
Social Affairs Editor

A MILLIONAIRE businessman has bought a 23,000-acre estate in the Scottish Highlands to reintroduce the wolf, the bear and the lynx to the wild. Paul Lister, 45, son of the co-founder of the MFI furniture chain, will disclose plans for the game reserve to fellow landowners and wildlife organisations next weekend.

His Highland lodge, 40 miles north of Inverness, overlooks ancient Caledonian pine forest. It will offer safaris for visitors to see predators absent from Britain for up to 1,000 years.

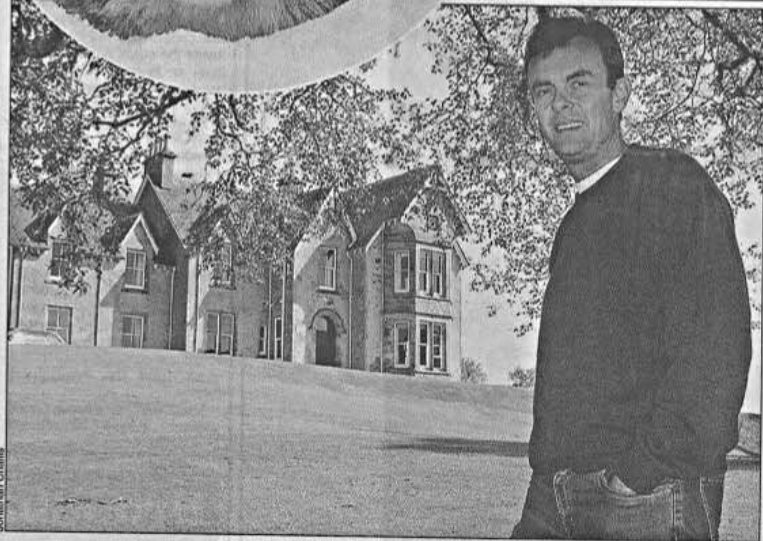
While tourists in Africa go to spot the Big Five — lion, leopard, rhinoceros, buffalo and elephant — visitors to the glens will tick off a British Big Four, the fourth animal being the European bison, which weighs about three-quarters of a ton. Moose and boar may also be introduced.

Lister decided to buy the Alladale estate, which cost £3.2m and straddles Sutherland and Ross and Cromarty, after years of preparation. He is the founder of a charity that protects wolves in Romania's Carpathian mountains, home to 5,000 bears, 3,000 wolves and 2,000 lynx.

He plans to restore the ancient habitat of Caledonian pine, juniper, hazel and round birch. Experts estimate that a population of 1,600 red deer could sustain 20 wolves.

Guests, some of whom may arrive by helicopter from Inverness, will pay between £15,000 and £20,000 to rent Alladale Lodge for a week. Daytrippers will be offered conducted tours by rangers.

A spokesman for Lister said: "We intend to create a long-



If the laird has his way Alladale Lodge will be turned into a safari centre for visitors seeking a glimpse of Scottish wildlife as it used to be



term project which will restore the indigenous Highland flora and fauna of 2,000 years ago. The discussions that are taking place this weekend are the first step in a long journey."

Because no one has attempted such a project, it is unclear what approval is required, but local councils, the Environment Agency and the Countryside Agency will be consulted.

Lister is believed to have the support of his father Noel, 76, who co-founded MFI. He sold his 8% stake in 1985 for more than £52m after disposing of shares in 1979 for £11.2m. His wealth is estimated at £60m in The Sunday Times Rich List.

Previous schemes to reintroduce large carnivores to Scot-

land have failed to overcome atavistic fears, still powerful more than 260 years since a wolf was blamed for killing two children in Morayshire. Wolves vanished from Britain in 1743. The European brown bear disappeared in the 10th century.

Dr Derek Yalden, president of the Mammal Society, believes Lister's compromise plan for an enclosed reserve could gain the support of political and environmental opinion. He said an electric fence 8ft high would be sufficient to prevent animals from escaping over snow drifts or fallen trees. Wolves could be tagged to monitor their movements.

Yalden argues that the carnivores must kill their own prey if

the reserve is to be credible. "I would be pretty disappointed if I went on safari to the Serengeti [the Tanzanian national park] and found the lions were prevented from making a kill."

He has long advocated that wolves, rather than rifles, should be used to cull deer on the island of Rum.

According to Nicholas Reiter, director of the Deer Commission for Scotland, the country has 350,000 red deer and an unknown number of roe deer. He said he had no "intrinsic" opposition to the use of wolves to control their numbers.

However, Richard Morley, head of the Wolf Society of Great Britain, warned that animal rights activists would come

to the rescue of the deer inside the reserve.

"Even feeding live rats to snakes has become a contentious issue in zoos," he said.

Ramblers are also likely to oppose any reduction in their access to the hills, inevitable if a game reserve is enclosed. Lister has appointed the Edinburgh branch of Weber Shandwick, the public relations firm, to handle such concerns.

According to one Highland laird, invited to attend the meeting with Lister next weekend, the public response to the planned safari park will have wide implications for the future of the Highlands.

"We have one of the most sparsely populated areas of

Europe yet it also has one of the most impoverished habitats," he said. "Sheep farming is only sustained by subsidy, and wind farms are the only businesses that turn a profit."

Other landowners have been urged by Lister to "pool" their estates with him to create a vast nature reserve that could become ecologically self-sufficient. One of Scotland's largest landowners, Paul van Vliissingen, has previously held talks with Lister about releasing predators on his 81,000-acre estate.

Andrew Harding, who is managing the project for Lister, said: "It is amazing that somebody is willing to put something back after people have raped the land for years."