

Actress supports return of bison to Scotland

Mark Macaskill

VIRGINIA MCKENNA, the actress turned conservationist, is helping to spearhead a campaign to reintroduce bison, beaver and wild boar into the Scottish countryside.

McKenna is advising Paul Lister, the millionaire son of the co-founder of the MFI furniture chain, about a pilot reintroduction of the species on his 23,000-acre Alladale estate in Sutherland and Wester Ross next year.

According to Lister the scheme also has the support of Zac Goldsmith, son of the late Sir James Goldsmith and the editor of the Ecologist magazine, and Damian Aspinall, son of John Aspinall, founder of the Howletts Wild Animal Park in Kent.

Last year Lister announced plans to reintroduce the wolf, the bear, the lynx and the European bison into the wild in Scotland. His lodge, near Inverness, overlooks ancient Caledonian pine forest and he hopes to offer safaris for visitors to



McKenna is backing a campaign to reintroduce beaver and European bison to the Highlands on the Alladale estate, near Inverness

see predators absent from Britain for up to 1,000 years.

He aims 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.

While the reintroduction of the bear, the wolf and the lynx will require permission from the

Scottish executive, Lister hopes to pilot the release of "less controversial" mammals, such as

bison from Poland, and wild boar and beaver from specialist stocks in Britain, into a 1,000-acre "mini-reserve" that will be surrounded by a six-mile fence, as early as next year.

Bison, while still found in many parts of Europe, were

hunted to extinction in Scotland during the Roman occupation.

The last Scottish wolf is said to have been killed by a hunter called MacQueen in 1743. The bear has been extinct there for more than 1,000 years.

A number of extinct bird species have been reintroduced to Scotland such as the red kite, osprey and capercaillie. Many

argue that similar programmes should take place for mammals.

"The idea is to create a reserve which will be the model for bigger things," said Lister, who founded a charity that protects wolves in Romania's Carpathian mountains, home to 5,000 bears, 3,000 wolves and 2,000 lynx.

"Why don't we have the same

thing they have in Africa but in Europe, where we can see wonderful species that we lost but are still wandering around parts of Europe?"

Lister has met McKenna, the British actress who appeared in the 1966 classic film *Born Free*. The film was based on the story of Joy and George Admonson, who raise Elsa, a lion cub, in a

Kenyan game reserve before releasing her into the wild. The film changed the actors' lives and they became active campaigners for the protection of wild animals and their habitat. They went on to appear in *An Elephant Called Slowly* and *King of Bright Water*.

In 1984, with their son Will, they founded the campaigning organisation Zoo Check that became the Born Free Foundation. A spokeswoman for the foundation confirmed that they were in talks with Lister.

Lister's steering group, which includes members of Scottish Natural Heritage, the Forestry Commission, Wilderness Scotland and the Rambles Association, is consulting the local community.

He plans to erect a 50-mile fence, complete with "swing-shut" doors to allow unfettered access by ramblers.

Lister will also seek to allay fears of local residents, particularly farmers, that wolves will not be able to venture beyond the park boundary and wreak havoc on livestock and other animals.