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Born to be wild again

Reintroducing native species is one of the best ways of reviving a habitat. But try bringing wolves back and you have a problem

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It's a sight that hasn't been witnessed for almost 8,000 years. As we crunch through the snow of the Scottish Highlands and over the brow of the hill, two elk stop nibbling birch shoots and swing their heads towards us. Eight feet high at the shoulder and with impossibly long, comical noses, these creatures went extinct in Britain hundreds of years ago. And yet, here they are, 50 miles north-west of Inverness, in a wilderness reserve that has become one of Britain's most controversial pieces of real estate.

Fangs, but no fangs: a wolf in Shropshire. PHOTOGRAPH: WOLFWATCH UK   Photo: Ross Andrews

Its name is Alladale, and Paul Lister, the son of the founder of MFI, wants to use it as a base from which to "rewild" much of Scotland. "I want this to be a place where nature has a chance to develop and breathe," he explains. "At the moment, it's an environmental desert, and I want to bring it back to life." The two elk, which are regarding us curiously, are part of Lister's vision of a land whose barren, bleak hills will once more be covered in native Caledonian pine forest, populated by red squirrels, wild boar, lynx and, of course, wolves.

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Reintroducing animals into their former habitats has become something of a mania in conservation circles. Scottish Natural Heritage has just given the go-ahead for beavers to be returned to the Highlands; sea eagles are back on Scotland's eastern coast; and the large blue butterfly has been successfully reintroduced to more than 90 sites by the National Trust, 30 years after it became extinct in the wild here. "It's become fashionable to talk about reintroductions,"

says Hugh Fullerton-Smith, Alladale's estate manager. "It's also easy to do. But by God, it's difficult to put it into practice."

The problem is that the key components of ecosystems are often predators, like wolves. Often, the natural world simply does not function without them – but anyone trying to bring back a carnivore is likely to face considerable opposition, as well as a Kafkaesque tangle of bureaucracy.

In his new book, *Where the Wild Things Were*, wildlife journalist William Stolzenburg shows how the loss of a top predator affects species at lower levels in the food chain. The result, he says, is "chaos in their absence, brazen mobs of deer, marauding racoons, urchin-scoured reefs [and] bizarre impoverished landscapes of pest and plague".

Of the host of studies that support this view, one of the most relevant to Alladale is the first, carried out in the Sixties by ecologists Robert Paine and Charles Elton. They removed a predatory starfish from rocky shores and found that very quickly, without the top carnivore, a new group of species took over which the starfish would otherwise have kept in check.

It is exactly this scenario that has occurred in Scotland. As I headed into the Highlands, the taxi driver told me I was about to see the land "just as it was when it was first made". In fact, the bare hills and purple heather that we think of as pristine and aboriginal are not natural at all. "Five hundred years ago," says Fullerton-Smith, "you would have seen a harmonious blend of tree species – willow, birch, rowan, alder – moving into native pine as you got up into the hills. This was once what the Romans called the great forests of Caledon, but now only one per cent of our old Caledonian pine woods are left in Scotland. We're stuck with a man-made prairie."

After humans removed the woods and exterminated the wolves, there was an explosion in the number of red deer, which destroyed tree seedlings and prevented the forests from regenerating. Lister is attempting to remove red deer and plant new trees for 35 miles along the river. But what he really needs, he says, are wolves: unless they keep down the deer, it will be hard to restore the land, particularly since Alladale is surrounded by estates whose raison d'être is to raise deer for shooting parties.

The result, however, has been a legal farce. Introducing wild wolves is too controversial an idea for many in the area, so Lister initially planned to fence in the whole reserve. He then faced opposition from the Ramblers Association, as this prevented them from exercising their hard-won Right to Roam. He got round this by putting up stiles over the fence, which is electrified and hung with signs that say "Danger – Wild Animals". However, if wild animals are fenced in, then legally they are no longer wild but are categorised as being in a zoo. As such, the predators are not allowed to catch and kill their own prey – which is, after all, the whole point.

There is another problem – Alladale covers 23,000 acres, but ecologists estimate that Lister would need at least 50,000 acres, and preferably 250,000, to support a couple of wolf packs. For all his wealth, Lister is not attempting to buy out his neighbours, just hoping they'll have a change of heart. After all, in spite of their fearsome reputation, wolves are frightened of humans and do not inevitably take livestock, according to a number of studies in other parts of Europe and North America.

While he waits, he's putting other plans into place. This year, he wants to reintroduce red squirrels, and Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation and Research Unit is carrying out research into the possibility of bringing back lynx. WildCRU has already studied a group of fenced-in wild boar at Alladale. When Lister takes me to see them, they come trotting over and I am able to walk safely among them – a couple even present their tummies to be tickled.

If they were truly wild, I'd have been lucky to have had a glimpse of the creatures. Instead, the boar are being used as a management tool – turning over the ground with their snouts to remove bracken and heather and create an ideal sowing medium for Caledonian pine seeds. The elk are almost as tame, but Lister hopes their young will lead more natural lives.

The process is lengthy and painstaking, as shown by other successful reintroductions, whether of common cranes to Norfolk, corncrakes to Cambridge or red kites to the Chilterns. But the benefits can be economic as well as ecological. Lister has 25 staff on his payroll after only five years of running the reserve, and plans to employ up to 100 locals as the business expands. He freely admits, moreover, that his vision of Alladale is plagiarised from a visit to a South African game park 20 years ago, where local people tolerated the return of predators only when there was some

financial incentive, and the animals were fenced in.

The game park as wildlife reserve is a model other communities and conservationists have also embraced. The American Prairie Foundation is restocking prairies with pure-bred bison, prairie dogs and their highly endangered predators, the black-footed ferret. The Wildlands Project is attempting to connect existing wild areas from Alaska to Mexico to make them big enough to support large viable populations of predators, while in the Oostvaarderplassen in the Netherlands something akin to Europe's post-Pleistocene fauna has been created: red deer, barnacle geese, sea eagles and wild horses living together as they would have 10,000 years ago.

"Scotland is being run as if we were still in the Victorian era," says Lister. "It's time people realised that we should put aside certain parts of the landscape for wildness and wilderness, even if that involves pushing the boundaries."

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