

Wild dream for Scottish estate inspired by SA game reserve

Philanthropist plans to reintroduce Europe's Big Five, writes Fransje van Riel

WOLVES, bears, lynx and elk may soon be roaming the Scottish Highlands again if one philanthropist's plans get under way to reintroduce these European mammals that are now extinct in the British Isles.

Inspired by the highly successful Shamwari Game Reserve venture in the Eastern Cape, British entrepreneur Paul Lister decided to liaise with South African businessman and hotel magnate Adrian Gardiner to pursue his dream of restoring the Scottish Highlands to a wilderness area.

Lister, 46, bought the 9 307-hectare Alladale estate in the far northwestern corner of the Scottish Highlands for £3.2 million in 2003 after searching for the perfect location for seven years. Now it seems that his dream of returning the British Big Five to their natural habitat is about to be realised.

The grey wolf, brown bear, Eurasian lynx, wild boar and European elk once roamed the hilly glens and lochs of Scotland's high country in relative tranquillity until human intervention and encroachment on the habitat completely wiped out, despite their plentiful numbers.

Piercing cries of howling wolf packs were common in the wilder areas of the British Isles, but with the onset of the Middle Ages these were silenced forever when Edward I decreed in 1281 that all wolves in England must be eradicated.

One Peter Corbet was thus ordered to "take and destroy all the wolves he could find in the counties of Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Shropshire and Staffordshire".

As eradication parties methodically carried out these instructions, wolves began to vanish from the English countryside, being all but annihilated during the reign of Henry VII from 1485-1509.

The wilder, more inaccessible areas of Scotland provided the last stronghold for wolves where, despite equally severe persecution, they survived well into the 17th century.

Legend has it that a man by the name of Macqueen shot the last Scottish wolf in 1743 after two children were apparently killed in the hills by a "large black animal", but an official entry in an auction catalogue of the London Museum dated 1818 states that the last British wolf was disposed of in Lochaber in 1680.

The entry reads "Wolf - a noble animal in a large glass cage. The last wolf in Scotland killed by Sir Ewan Cameron".

If Lister's plans go ahead, the first two packs will set paw on British soil in 2009.

The second large Big Five predator, the brown bear, fared even worse during the course of the ecological history of British conservation. *Ursus arctos* disappeared from the wild just before the much smaller third carnivore, the Eurasian lynx, followed by the wild



DREAMER: Paul Lister surveys his vast estate in the Scottish Highlands which he plans to stock with elk, wolves, lynx and brown bears, right, that have become extinct in the British Isles.

boar and beaver.

According to Dr Derek Yalden of the University of Manchester, an estimated 14 000 brown bears roamed the forests of Stone Age Britain, as did 5 000 lynx and more than two million wild boars. Human expansion, uncontrolled hunting, intensive farming and modernisation have all contributed to the extirpation of these animals from the British landscape.

Lister's vision to restore the natural fauna to the Scottish Highlands may well be met with the approval of conservation bodies, as under the European Union's Habitats and Species Directive, signature states are required to consider the re-introduction of animal species annihilated at the hand of humans.

Technically, the return of the British Big Five at the Alladale Reserve would not be an official re-introduction, as animals would be released within a controlled environment in a fenced-off 50 000-acre reserve.

Says Lister: "The Scottish executive has recently rejected proposals to reintroduce the beaver. In my opinion the way forward is to bring back the lost species in a controlled environment much like at Shamwari."

The Scottish Highlands has the second largest wilderness area in Europe, second only to northern Scandinavia, and is one of Britain's most economically depressed and least populated areas.

So far, Lister has invested almost R10m to renovate the original 1877 Alladale Hunting Lodge, turning



the 128-year-old building into a luxurious country retreat that can accommodate parties of up to 16 guests.

The lodge boasts five glens, two river systems and 10 hill lochs, facilitating outdoor activities such as nature walks, salmon and trout fly-fishing and mountain biking.

Lister believes that the proposed wilderness area will provide economical upliftment by creating a niche market in the environmental tourism sector; a venture that could

result in the creation of as many as 100 job opportunities.

"Why," muses Lister, "should the Scottish executive and the local community reject a proposal to create 100 jobs by opposing the establishment of the only large-scale fenced wilderness and wildlife reserve in Europe?"

The Alladale Reserve is situated on the border of Sutherland and Rosshire counties and overlooks the most northerly pockets of indigenous Caledonian pine forest.

Up to about a thousand years ago, these vast forests carpeted most of the Scottish Highlands, providing cover for prey species from wolves, bears and lynx.

Today 99% has been felled for livestock grazing and arable farming.

Maintaining strong ties with the South African blueprint, Lister has recently sent two of his rangers to the Shamwari Game Reserve to "understand and appreciate a well designed nature tourism destination - from its fence design and ecology to customer hospitality and employment opportunities".

Not everyone shares Lister's vision. The British Ramblers' Association is concerned about the cordoning-off of land to their members, and local sheep farmers deliberate the possibility of carnivores breaching the enclosure.

Lister, however, assures landowners that by the time his plans come through, all animals will be tagged with satellite-tracking devices or will be radio collared, both to ensure that they are easily located and to enable visitors to spot the wildlife more readily.

Says Lister: "I have had this vision for decades; I do not expect total support from all my neighbours in less than 18 months.

"We need to prove we can operate sustainably without wolves and bears for the time being, and that the government is willing to financially support our initiatives. Despite this, we are in continual dialogue with them and one smaller owner is already showing encouraging signs."

In the meantime, Lister has appointed leading zoologist Dr David Macdonald of the Oxford University's Wildlife Conservation Research Unit (WildCRU) as the Alladale project's director of science.

His next move will be to erect a seven-kilometre game fence with electric strands to create a 550-hectare deer-fenced enclosure, designed to contain medium and large animals, while allowing the free movement of small mammals.

This, the first project of the Alladale Estate's science programmes, will allow the WildCRU team to study the impact of wild boar on the vegetation, provide research into habitat restoration and provide insight into the population biology of ticks, pre- and post-wild boar introduction.

The plan is to release European elk into the enclosure during the winter of 2007.

"We've made the decision to get the fence up, get the animals in and get on with it."

A pragmatic approach, but Lister also reveals a more emphatic demeanour.

"It would be nice that Alladale could be an example for our neighbours to follow.

"The public should realise that animals other than *Homo sapiens* have just as much right to be on earth as they do."

For more information: www.alladale.com