

CONSERVATION

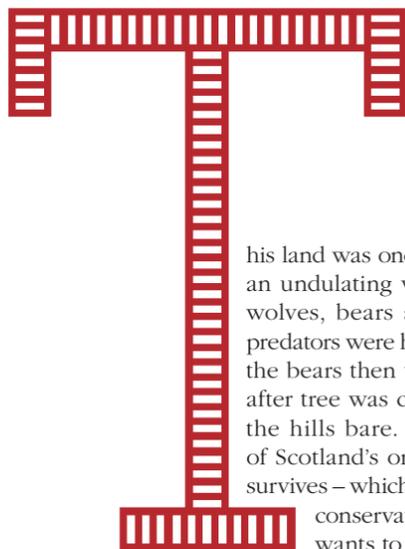
WHERE THE WILD THINGS WERE

— Millionaire philanthropist **PAUL LISTER** wants to fix a damaged ecosystem and doesn't mind being mocked for trying. If he has his way, wolves, bears and lynx will once again roam the Scottish Highlands.

By **LAURA SEVIER**

Photography **OLAF WIPPERFÜRTH**
Photo assistant **TROELS JEPSEN**

With special thanks to **TOM BLOY,**
INNES MACNEIL, **SIAN MACKENZIE**



his land was once covered in thick forest, an undulating wilderness teeming with wolves, bears and lynx. Then all the predators were hunted to extinction – first the bears then the big bad wolves. Tree after tree was chopped down, stripping the hills bare. Less than one per cent of Scotland’s original Caledonian forest survives – which is why Paul Lister, British conservationist and philanthropist, wants to turn back the clock.

Opposite: Paul Lister

It’s a misty, grey June evening and I’m sitting on the lawn outside Alladale, Lister’s lodge an hour’s drive north of Inverness. He points towards the panoramic postcard view of the glen. Where I see a magnificent Scottish view, he sees a scene of devastation, “huge swathes of heather and bracken that have taken over the countryside because of a lack of trees.” Lister explains how the Scottish highlands have been “abused by man for several centuries” and reels off the culprits: the Industrial Revolution, the British Empire, railway construction, two World Wars. This, he says, is the main reason for “rewilding” Alladale, the 9,300-hectare Sutherland property he bought in 2003. His vision is to reforest the hills and welcome back lost species, among them wolves, bears, lynx, wild boar and moose. Human inhabitants still haunted by Little Red Riding Hood needn’t panic: the animals will be enclosed by an electric fence 80 kilometres around.

Unlike many other Scottish estates, where the focus is on managing deer, grouse and salmon for sport, Alladale is called (by Lister) a “reserve” and the keepers are “rangers”. “I want to differentiate it from other land in Scotland. *Estate* sounds like a link to the past,” he says. “I’m ashamed of the past. I want to go forward.”

Paul Lister is a controversial and unconventional squire, with his hot-wired energy, and boundless enthusiasm. He’s constantly cracking jokes. Much has been written about the fear, feasibility and folly of this “wolfman” bringing back predators to a country where, legend has it, the last wolf was shot in 1743.

Before I met Lister I watched a recent and somewhat irreverent BBC series about him that played up his eccentricities and the opposition he faced from locals

and ramblers after unveiling his plan in 2004. Here was a rich Englishman trying to create a Jurassic Park in Scotland. Lister seemed an easy target for ridicule.

In many ways it is a bonkers, hugely ambitious plan and Lister himself is a paradox. He is equally at home in the Scottish highlands as he is in Miami where, along with London and Latin America, he divides his time. During the week I interviewed him I saw him schmooze London’s champagne set at an opulent Mayfair shop where he was hosting a fundraising drive for his other conservation project, The European Nature Trust (TENT). Later in Scotland I saw him sporting black-and-yellow fancy dress and clutching a can of lager at a local lass’s bumblebee-themed birthday party in Ardgay village hall, on the edge of Alladale.

Lister’s family made their fortune in the furniture business (his father Noel was the co-founder of furniture empire MFI) and after a stint following in his father’s footsteps, he turned his attention towards his passion: conservation. Is it just a happy coincidence that Lister has ended up replanting trees instead of selling them as tables and chairs? He has previously joked that his rewilding plans maintain the family tradition of pinewood and four legs. Lister calls himself a “caretaker” of the land and feels a strong sense of giving something back. This humility is countered by a singular, almost fanatical determination to pull this project off. After Lister explained his vision in detail during the few days I spent with him, I found myself warming to the idea, much like the locals who, though initially sceptical, now seem to be behind it. “A recent interviewer from BBC Radio 4 went into the nearby village, Bonar Bridge, to try and get some possibly negative comment about what [we are] doing – he didn’t have any luck,” Lister laughs.

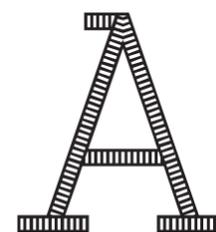
Local farmers who feared the wolves would escape and devour livestock have been reassured that the animals will be enclosed within an electric fence. “Any animal that gets close to it won’t go near it again.” Lister also insists that wolves are not a danger to humans, that “wolves are terrified of humans.” Although wolf attacks on humans are incredibly rare, they do happen. A recent attack on a jogger in the Alaskan wilderness is a case in point – although admittedly that incident happened on unfenced land. ▶





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Alladale's proposed fence is not welcomed by everyone. The Ramblers Association is angry about Lister's plans to enclose the entire property, which would jeopardise their legal "right to roam". Lister counters that once the wolves and bears arrive, the place will become a magnet for tourists, bringing money and jobs into the area. "For an area of land that 300 people a year have to forfeit the right to roam through, we'd get 20,000 visitors and employ 100 people." Ramblers would still be allowed there, albeit under the supervision of a ranger.

Lister's vision for Alladale, however, has a long way to go. So far, there are just nine wild boar and two European elk (moose), all of which have to be enclosed under the Dangerous Wild Animals Act, as well as a herd of 30 Highland cattle. Wild cats, European bison and red squirrels are next on the list but there's no sign of them yet. The 100,000 trees Lister's team have planted have yet to grow into anything resembling a forest, but another 260,000 trees will be planted, including alders, willows, birch, rowan, Scots pine and aspen. This is a serious restoration project.

At the moment, Alladale treads an unusual path between wildlife reserve, stalking destination and luxury lodge – some people enjoy taking pictures of deer while others go to shoot them. Whatever happens, Lister is keen for Alladale to be commercially successful. If the wolves do arrive, stalking would stop altogether and guided 4x4 safaris more akin to African game reserves would be the main attraction. How does reserve manager Innes MacNeill feel about managing predators in an enclosure? "I'd be happy to go into the enclosure. I'm not worried. If you travel to Spain and Scandinavia you see bears and wolves in the wild."

Wolves aside, Alladale is breathtakingly beautiful, spanning five glens and two rivers. The safaris are already up and running: you can get up close to the wild boar, pet Highland calves and witness the immensity of the place by Land Rover, mountain bike or Highland pony. Walk along the rivers in Summer and you'll see salmon leaping up spectacular falls.

"We're the lead predator on the planet," says Lister. "Can we put up with these other predators? I think we should be able to." He points out that the population of red deer has burgeoned to roughly four or five times beyond what it should be. With no major predator they are left to just chomp away at the vegetation.

Lister cites the example of Yellowstone National Park where wolves were successfully reintroduced in 1995 after a 70-year absence. Because the wolves were "chasing deer around 24/7" this helped give the forest time to regenerate. In Scotland, it's presently left up to man to do the job with a rifle; Lister says you'd have to cull 700–800 deer a year just to keep on top of population numbers.

So what's holding up the process at Alladale? "The biggest obstacle so far has been land," Lister says. He figures that 20,000 hectares is enough space for two grey wolf packs and "half a dozen or a dozen" European brown bears. As this is double the amount of land he owns, he either needs to influence his neighbours to follow his example or buy more land.

Red tape presents further challenges. Although Lister does not want Alladale to be labelled a zoo, he has had to apply for a zoo license because "undomesticated" animals here are available to the public for more than seven days a year. The matter is complicated further as Scottish law forbids predator and prey to share the same enclosure, whatever the size. Even bringing back red squirrels is mired in technicalities. A lengthy process needs to be carried out to check that the squirrels can survive there, despite their flourishing in nearby Highland regions. "There is a lot of bureaucracy," laments Lister.

As man's actions have triggered a massive disruption of natural ecosystems, so it is up to us to jumpstart their regeneration. In the grand scheme of things, rewilding is still a niche experiment – in many places it's just not practical.

Whether or not Paul Lister pulls off his own ambitious rewilding project at Alladale, he certainly deserves credit for trying – and for challenging our notion of what may be considered a "practical" way to right the wrongs of the past. ○

Photo left:
ALLADALE LODGE
While Alladale
Wilderness Reserve
focuses on preserving
nature, humans are more
than welcome. Built in
1877 to accommodate
hunters, Alladale Lodge
was recently refurbished
by Laura Ashely and now
houses guests in seven
en-suite bedrooms.
Activities on offer include
pony trekking, fishing,
stalking, clay-pigeon
shooting, guided 4x4
safaris, mountain biking,
hiking and golf at nearby
courses.
www.alladale.com