

MCofS Position Statement on Alladale Project

Introduction to Alladale

Alladale Estate is 23,000 acres (93.1 km²) on the borders of Sutherland and Ross-shire; at the narrowest part of the British Isles and to the west of Ardgay. It was bought by Paul Lister in 2003. Part of Alladale estate covers part of 2 SSSIs (Alladale Pinewoods and Beinn Dearg), part of 2 SACs (Amat Woods and Beinn Dearg) and part of an SPA (Beinn Dearg). Hence the importance for biodiversity includes pinewoods, dotterel breeding sites, geology / geomorphology, upland assemblage mosaics, vascular plant assemblages, alpine assemblages (grassland, heath and scree), montane assemblages (grassland and scrub) and blanket bog. It is also an important area for access including 7 crags used for rock and winter climbing, eastern slopes of one Munro (over 3000 feet); Seana Bhraigh, one Corbett (over 2500 feet); Carn Ban and 2 Grahams (over 2000 feet); Carn a Choin Deirg and Meall a Chaorainn, and is a commonly used route choice for highland coast to coast walks. There is also a bothy managed by the Mountain Bothies Association (another bothy was closed by the estate in November 2007). The area has great merit in its wild land qualities.

The Project so far

The current fence that encompasses about 450 acres went through as a discrete forestry project, and hence as a permitted development right. The size and location does not present current significant problems for access as it has gates (soon to be replaced by stiles) and there is open access. A small number of wild boar are in the area. The owner has imported a number of elk to introduce to the enclosure.

Media-sourced information about the future project

Lister has been reported in many newspapers and other publications as saying, "It would not be practical to have people walking around Alladale while wolves roam. There are lots of places where people can walk in Scotland, but there will not be lots of places that they can see animals in their natural habitat. Are we prepared to sacrifice access to an area that makes up 1% of the Scottish Highlands?" (The Herald Monday 29th October 2007). An electrified fence is proposed (possibly up to 2.5 metres), with access track, along the ridge crests surrounding Alladale. Species that have been extinct in Scotland up to 3000 years ago are planned to be "reintroduced"; including elk, wolf, and lynx. The estate wishes to restrict access to paying visitors and guests, and only in the company of an estate employee.

Re-introductions in General

We are in favour of re-introductions in general, when the supporting ecology is in place and IUCN/SSC Guidelines for Re-Introductions are followed. These state that the principal aim of any re-introduction should be to establish a viable, free-ranging population in the wild. In the case at Alladale, with the intention of keeping the "re-introduced" animals in an enclosure (however big this is), this project is not a re-introduction. Additionally, adherence to these guidelines require that the programme should be fully understood, accepted and supported by local communities, and that if the species poses potential risk to life or property, these risks should be minimised and adequate provision made for compensation where necessary. There is no evidence that local communities have been properly consulted, and there are concerns regarding livestock safety.

Habitat

The habitat is currently degraded and is not at present appropriate for the species that have been mentioned as targets for "re-introduction" to the Alladale enclosure. The IUCN/SSC Guidelines for Re-Introductions also state that availability of suitable habitat needs consideration; re-introductions should only take place where the habitat and landscape requirements of the species are satisfied. This is not currently the case at Alladale. The habitat would be likely to take in the order of decades to become significantly "better." This would necessitate artificial feeding of the animals else their welfare would be of concern. It is likely that large predators habituated to humans, and dependant on being fed by humans, will become potentially dangerous to hill walkers passing through their territories. Our statutory rights of unrestricted access would therefore be put at risk. There seems no evidence of scientific evaluation of this. A habitat must be able to accommodate and sustain the impact of re-introduction on existing food

webs without hardship or detriment to existing species We are in favour of restoring good quality natural habitats, but reintroductions need to be a bottom-up process of ensuring the habitat is appropriate, establishing natural herbivore populations, and only then contemplating reintroduction of predators.

Animal numbers

The area, even at the largest mentioned, is small in comparison to the natural territory of top predators such as wolves, hence they would not be able to display natural behaviour, and would have negative implications for the genetics of the isolated population. An estimate of wolf pack territory size at Yellowstone National Park (USA) is 150-300 km². The whole of Alladale Estate is 93.1 km². This project has a commercial aspect, at least to make the project economically sustainable, based on visitors viewing the species. In order to satisfy the paying visitors, the density would need to be high enough to ensure a reasonable probability of viewing, this would provide pressure for unnatural densities. Viewings of these species are very rare, even when sought, in natural situations. An unnatural density of top predators would inevitably result in increased possibility of conflict between access users and the animals; which are a very rare occurrence in truly natural situations.

Fence and Vehicle Tracks

Fences and vehicle tracks are not natural features, and such a long, high electric fence would detract from the wildness of the Alladale area. Associated tracks would similarly negatively impact upon the wild landscape. The current fence has gates, but some were reported to be deliberately propped open late October / early November. The wild boars that were resident in the enclosure escaped and had to be rounded up with the advantage of radio collars. The gates were subsequently locked. The Access Officers of Highland Council requested that they be reopened and they are currently working with the land owner to site and install stiles.

Access

Mr Lister has called for an acceptance of a “clear derogation” from statutory access rights, the wish is to end the right of access to Alladale. This is completely unacceptable in such a large area of open hillside, and goes against the spirit of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. Quoting from www.outdooraccess-scotland.com: “The access legislation in Part One of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 aims to make it easier for people to enjoy the outdoors.” This is diametrically opposed to the intentions of the Alladale project.

Conclusion

The derogation of access is totally unacceptable in such a large area. It is also unacceptable that the impacts on local communities have not been taken into account. The member organisations of this group find this unofficial, but well-publicised project, as unacceptable as stated. We call for a recognition that the unnatural density, probable artificial feeding and commercial nature shows that this project is a safari park, which would require a zoo licence, and hence is completely different from what it is promoted as which is a re-wilding project. A full project study should be undertaken, followed by an environmental statement stating the legal basis on which this project will be based.