

Big cats in your back yard?



Photo: Chris Cachia Zammit.

As the golden sun began to set beyond the mountain range, haunting shadows of ancient trees quivered in the autumnal wind. Suddenly, there was a commotion in the undergrowth: a lone young roe deer dashed across an opening in the forest. Closely behind him, a large felid with a short tail bounded after the ungulate in hot pursuit. A lynx. Gaining ground, the lynx tripped the deer, causing it to stumble into a pile of fallen leaves. With a swift, bone-crushing bite to the back of the neck, the lynx severed the spinal cord of the deer, killing him instantly.

Scenes like this have not been witnessed in Scotland for well over a millennium. Changes in climate and habitats, combined

with sustained persecution by humans, led to the extinction of British lynx around 1,300 years ago. The disappearance of this big cat has left a noticeable hole in the ecosystem. As lynx are predatory animals, high up in the food chain, they have the ability to exert top-down pressure on the landscape and its fauna. However, since the extinction of large carnivores in the UK, there has been no control (besides humans) to limit deer populations. As a result, deer populations have exploded in some areas of the country.

Whilst the average city dweller visiting the countryside may marvel at the elegant sight of a herd of deer dashing through a wood, rural residents in deer-infested areas often feel otherwise – particularly those that work in forestry. Deer are very fond of juicy, nutritious young shoots, including those of trees. The absence of a wild predator to control deer populations has resulted in stunted tree regeneration across Scottish landscapes.

Forest lovers and naturalists alike have been yearning for the return of lynx for many years, in part to restore these areas of Scotland to their former woody glory. Now, with the pressure from an environmental NGO, this dream could well become reality. But what will this mean to the people that could share their land with these carnivorous felines? Will 21st century Britain embrace the lynx?

At present, there has been no published systematic enquiry to determine how people in the proposed reintroduction sites feel about the release of lynx. As a carnivore conservationist who focuses on the human dimensions of threats to felids, this lack of research bothers me. Amongst the dozens of carnivore

reintroductions that have taken place across the world, many failed because the social side of the equation was not taken into consideration.

Lynx were predominantly wiped out due to humans killing them and we do not know whether this threat is still present. Given the sustained intolerance towards other predatory species (such as raptors and foxes) in many rural areas of Scotland, this does not bode well for the lynx. It has been suggested that tolerance could be increased by creating financial incentives to bribe people not to kill them. However, previous studies have repeatedly proven that compensation payments and income from tourism does not reduce poaching of carnivores. We cannot rely on money alone to stop people killing lynx.

If we are to make a genuine attempt to reintroduce lynx into Scotland, we must conduct widespread social studies, particularly in and around the proposed reintroduction sites. We must understand the attitudes that landowners hold towards a lynx reintroduction, but must not forget that attitudes often decline once carnivores have been reintroduced. We need to start awareness campaigns directed towards farmers to reduce the threat of livestock predation by lynx. But perhaps most importantly, we have to understand that although we may feel it is morally and ecologically right to reintroduce lynx, this cannot go ahead until we can prove that the original cause of the decline, i.e. persecution by humans, has been addressed.

Niki Rust is a PhD student at the University of Kent studying predator-friendly behaviour to benefit rural farmers and carnivores in Namibia. veganslovecarnivores.blogspot.co.uk