

## Rewilding Britain: is it time to bring back our lost predators?

Britain used to be a land of wild and untamed forests where wolves, lynx and even bear roamed, preying on elk and wild cows called aurochs. As the human population on these isles increased, farming, deforestation and hunting led to the demise of these species. Many have been extinct several thousands of years. In the case of the wolf though, the last one was hunted only a few hundred years ago. Britain had lost its great predators; no longer was it a country of tooth and claw. However there are those who want to bring extinct species back. The capercaillie, the sea eagle and the beaver are three species which have been reinstated. And there are those who want to take it one step further and bring back the predators such as wolves or lynx. The debate about whether this is a good idea has passionate views on both sides.

Wolves and lynx are apex predators. This means that they are the top of the food chain. Supporters of rewilding point out that apex predators are very important to a successful and balanced ecosystem. They help keep populations of other species under control. For example, they would hunt on herbivores such as deer. If deer populations are too high, it results in damage to woodland and crops due to overgrazing with repercussions on species such as some birds which rely on these habitats. Did you know that over 100,000 deer are culled in Scotland each year as part of conservation efforts? This would not be needed if apex predators were there to keep the ecosystem in better balance. The health of the whole ecosystem would improve with corresponding benefits to the environment as a whole. To add to their arguments, supporters of reintroducing these predators argue that these species would not have disappeared at all if not for man's impact. Therefore, they say we have a moral obligation to reverse this harm. Finally, there are the potential financial gains from tourism associated with having such majestic creatures roaming our wild areas. Safaris and nature-spotting tours would bring much-needed money and employment to rural areas.

On the other side of the argument, there are concerns about how these predators would threaten farm animals and even humans. Lynx do not attack humans and they have not caused considerable



problems to farm animals in Europe where they already live. They are largely shy and mysterious creatures. In Norway however, higher numbers of sheep have been killed by lynx. This seems to be because in Norway the sheep graze in and close to the lynx's forest home. Wolves on the other hand pose a bigger threat. The proposals to reintroduce wolves therefore involve keeping them in fenced reserves. However, this has outraged walkers and other nature-lovers who worry about their access to large swathes of the countryside being cut off. There is the worry that the reserves would become visitor attractions for rich tourists and off-limits to anyone else. Another concern is that reintroducing these animals is a rather unpredictable experiment. The habitats have changed since wolves and lynx were last here. Could they still support these species? Would they simply slot back in where they left off? No one can be totally sure of the scheme's success and the impacts it would have. Of course, if these rewilders have their way, we will find out soon enough.

What do you think? Do you like the idea of lynx stalking in our forests again. Does the thought of wolves howling in the night give you a tingle of excitement or send shivers down your spine?

## VOCABULARY FOCUS

1. Which word in the introduction is closest in meaning to 'brought back'?
2. What does demise mean?
3. What does 'repercussions' mean?
4. Which phrase tells us that we have a duty to reintroduce lost species?
5. Which phrase tells us that the wolf enclosures would most likely be big?

## VIPERS QUESTIONS

- R** When did wolves become extinct in Britain?
- S** In your own words summarise how apex predators are essential for a balanced ecosystem.
- R** Why would reintroducing these species bring economic advantages?
- E** What words does the writer choose to paint the predators in a positive light?
- P** Which predator do you think should be the main candidate for reintroduction and why?