Community to explore buyout of rewilding estate near Loch Ness

Friday 27 September, 2024

A local community in the Highlands has agreed to explore the purchase of some or all of the 513-acre Bunloit estate by Loch Ness with support from charity Trees for Life, to ensure community-led rewilding on the land by the world-famous loch.

Following a public consultation event at Glenurquhart Public Hall in Drumnadrochit on 25 September, Glen Urquhart Rural Community Association (GURCA) is to explore all options for purchasing all or part of the estate.

The current owners, Highlands Rewilding Ltd, recently announced that the land will be going onto the market in October. The company – whose stated purpose is “nature recovery and community prosperity through rewilding taken to scale” – has until January 2025 to pay off a £11m loan with the UK Infrastructure Bank and Top Online Partners, taken out to secure land for nature restoration.

Bunloit lies in Glen Urquhart on the western shores of Loch Ness, and includes a mosaic of habitats from native woodland to peatland.

Susan Griffin, Chair of GURCA, said: “We have decided to explore this rare opportunity for a community buyout, given that Highlands Rewilding founder and CEO Jeremy Leggett has said the local community will have first refusal on any purchase.”

GURCA and Trees for Life say that any community purchase of all or some of Bunloit would be to protect and restore habitats to tackle the nature and climate emergencies, while generating local benefits including nature-based jobs, better health, and re-peopling.

“We will be fully supporting the community as it investigates the purchase of land at Bunloit for what could be an exciting model of locally led rewilding to restore biodiversity and enrich lives,” said Steve Micklewright, Chief Executive of Trees for Life.

Details of the land-sale at Bunloit – and at Highland Rewilding’s other estates at Tayvallich in Argyll and Beldorney in Banffshire – will be made public on 1 October.

In a statement on its website, Highlands Rewilding says: “We will give preference to local communities wanting to buy the plots of land we are offering so long as we are able to fulfil our obligations to our 809 shareholders. We have three priority categories of land-sale, and our local communities come first in all of them.”

The statement also makes clear that Highlands Rewilding can choose who it sells the land to, and this doesn’t necessarily need to be to the highest bidder. The company says: “We are trying to sell land, making no profit, so that it can be locked up for community-centred nature recovery, essentially forever.”

GURCA is Glen Urquhart’s development trust, which works to ensure a vibrant future for the area, and to improve quality of life, work and leisure for local people through community-led initiatives. See gurca.co.uk.

Rewilding charity Trees for Life is committed to creating nature-rich landscapes in the Highlands that include and support people. Together with communities, it is restoring Scotland’s natural and cultural heritage while supporting local livelihoods. See treesforlife.org.uk.

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