First Minister’s refusal to consider lynx reintroduction ‘out of step’ with public opinion

Wednesday 19 February, 2025

The publication of a new opinion poll today indicates surging public support for the reintroduction of lynx to Scotland.

The poll coincides with an open letter that has been sent to the First Minister supported by 20 organisations questioning John Swinney’s judgement in dismissing the return of lynx out of hand.

An opinion poll conducted by Survation in January for the Lynx to Scotland Partnership shows that support for the return of lynx to Scotland has increased to 61% – a rise of nine points since the last such survey in 2020, most likely due to growing public awareness of the species and its benefits. Just 13% of respondents were opposed – a drop of six points.

Steve Micklewright, chief executive of Trees for Life, one of the charities involved, said: “This poll shows that growing numbers of Scots want to see lynx reintroduced and understand that the benefits of their return outweigh any problems they might cause.

“A carefully managed lynx reintroduction would make Scotland’s natural world richer and stronger, providing wider benefits for biodiversity, climate resilience and economic prosperity.”

Lynx are a ‘keystone species’ which play a vital role in maintaining healthy living systems, and biodiversity is negatively affected by their absence. Research shows the Highlands has the habitat to sustainably support around 250 lynx. The species’ reintroduction would require Scottish Government approval, following habitat assessments and a full public consultation.

The lynx is an elusive, forest-dwelling labrador-sized feline that mainly preys on deer and poses no threat to humans. Lynx were driven to extinction in Scotland due to hunting and habitat loss in the Middle Ages. They are recovering across Europe with the help of successful, well-planned reintroductions.

The open letter to the First Minister calls into question his judgement in dismissing lynx reintroduction when speaking at the recent National Farmers Union Scotland Conference. At the conference, Mr Swinney said: “My government will not be reintroducing lynx, or indeed any other large carnivorous species, in Scotland.”

The letter questions the First Minister’s commitment to tackling the nature emergency, and highlights the environmental, climate and economic benefits of reintroduced species.

The signatories ask why Scotland cannot live with lynx when other countries coexist with much more challenging animals like lions and tigers. It also highlights the extensive and long-term work being done by the Lynx to Scotland Partnership to understand the concerns of stakeholders and how potential problems could be managed.

Peter Cairns, head of rewilding at SCOTLAND: The Big Picture, said: “Last month’s abandonment of lynx in the Cairngorms was reckless, and such acts are certainly not the way to achieve the return of a lost species to Scotland. But none of us can understand why this has led the First Minister to rush to turn his back on any proposal that could reintroduce this important species in a sensible and well-managed way.

“Considering the surging support for the return of lynx, and the efforts being made to ensure that this would be done properly in line with best practice, the First Minister appears out of step with public opinion, and we urge him to reconsider his position.”

The Lynx to Scotland partners are SCOTLAND: The Big Picture, Trees for Life and The Lifescape Project. For more information, see www.scotlandbigpicture.com/lynx-to-scotland.

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