

Planning application submitted for world's first rewilding centre

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Trees for Life has submitted a planning application for the world's first rewilding centre at its 10,000-acre Dundreggan estate in Glenmoriston, between Loch Ness and the Isle of Skye.

The planning application submitted to Highland Council on 22 June features an innovatively designed visitor centre inspired by wild native forests and the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Highlands.

The conservation charity expects the pioneering project to welcome over 50,000 visitors annually – showcasing the benefits of rewilding and working with nature rather than against it, while boosting the rural economy and creating at least 15 new local jobs.

“Dundreggan Rewilding Centre will be a place for people from all walks of life to rewild themselves by exploring and enjoying a remarkable wild landscape in a beautiful Highland glen, and to spend time learning about the area's unique wildlife and inspiring Gaelic history,” said Steve Micklewright, Trees for Life's Chief Executive.

The inclusive centre will provide events, experiences and exhibitions for casual visitors, those seeking a more immersive experience, and groups with specific requirements – such as those with physical or learning disabilities, families and schools.

To fit in with the landscape, the building's design has been inspired by local Gaelic heritage and history, and by the globally important but endangered Caledonian Forest – with verticals representing trees, changing light to reflect how light plays in woodlands, and materials and colours conjuring up bracken and forest bark.

In the all-weather visitor centre, a 'Welcome Tree' central space – featuring a striking Scots pine sculpture – will be a focal point where people can discover the activities on offer. A Gaelic bothy area will spotlight local history and heritage, and there will be spaces for learning and events.

The building will act as a gateway to the forest and wild outdoors, where there will be fully accessible trails and more adventurous walks. Family-friendly features where people can learn, play and relax will include a Squirrel Wood forest play area, and a wildlife pond for dipping.

An accessible 20-bed accommodation space will be constructed on the site of an original lodge, enabling people – including students and researchers – to have longer stays at the acclaimed rewilding estate.

The project has been made possible thanks to over £2 million support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Scottish Natural Heritage-led Natural and Cultural Heritage Fund funded through the European Regional Development Fund, and from others. Trees for Life is seeking further funding to ensure the centre can be constructed on schedule in 2021.

Feedback from an extensive community consultation – which overwhelmingly supported the project – has been incorporated into the plans. Inverness-based Threesixty Architecture has led the design team for the centre.

Highland Council granted planning permission in principle for the centre in April 2019. Construction should begin in early 2021, with the centre opening in 2022.

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Trees for Life has been rewilding Dundreggan – including by protecting and expanding fragments of the Caledonian Forest – since its 2008 purchase of the former deer stalking estate. Dundreggan is home to over 4,000 plant and animal species – including some never recorded in the UK before or once feared extinct in Scotland.

Trees for Life is dedicated to rewilding the Scottish Highlands. Its volunteers have established nearly two million native trees at dozens of sites, encouraging wildlife to flourish and helping communities to thrive. See www.treesforlife.org.uk.

Company Contact:

[Trees for Life](#)

T. 07753 488146

E. richardbunting@gmail.com

W. <http://www.treesforlife.org.uk>

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