

Scottish entry in international awards to boost tourism and Gaelic by saving red squirrels

Tuesday 16 October, 2018

Scotland's only entry in the Forests category of a leading international conservation competition could this week secure funding to create a lifeline for Scotland's red squirrels, while boosting nature tourism and the Gaelic language in the northwest Highlands.

Trees for Life's Reds Return initiative will receive more than £25,000 from the European Outdoor Conservation Association if it wins an online vote open to anyone until Sunday 21 October.

Red squirrels, relocated from thriving populations in Inverness-shire and Moray, will be reintroduced to four northwest Highland woodlands – so they can spread, safe from threats from grey squirrels.

The project, which can be supported at www.treesforlife.org.uk/voteTFL, also aims to benefit rural economies and to support the Gaelic language.

"This is about breathing new life into the Highlands by helping to save red squirrels, helping hard-pressed rural economies through wildlife tourism, and helping to promote Gaelic. So we are urging everyone to vote for us in this competition," said Steve Micklewright, Trees for Life's Chief Executive.

New nature tourism opportunities such as guided walks, leaflets and events will be used to attract visitors and help people learn about the Caledonian Forest and its red squirrels – including the challenges the animals face, their reintroduction and the best places to spot them in local woodlands.

Local people will be able to get involved, including through citizen science – bringing generations together to learn about, monitor and protect red squirrels. Much of this will take place through schools, with local teachers already keen to get involved

Trees for Life and the Highland Council Ranger Service will train local community red squirrel rangers to monitor the reintroduced reds, and to lead talks, walks and events.

With Gaelic a threatened minority language, there will be new teaching materials about red squirrels in Gaelic and English. Young people will be able to gain skills as storytellers, and there will be songs, stories and theatre performances for locals and visitors, in both languages.

Trees for Life has already reintroduced red squirrels to a few Highland locations, where they have been successfully breeding and spreading into wider areas.

The UK's red squirrel populations have been decimated by reduction of forests to isolated fragments, and by competition and lethal disease from non-native grey squirrels. Only an estimated 138,000 survive, with some 120,000 in Scotland.

The European Outdoor Conservation Association competition attracts huge interest internationally with national media, politicians and celebrities getting involved.

Ends

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Company Contact:

Trees for Life

T. 07753 488146

E. richardbunting@gmail.com

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

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