Project to save Scotland’s sea eagles soars to new heights

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The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has today confirmed that over £235,000 has been awarded to RSPB Scotland to firmly secure the survival of the white-tailed sea eagle.

Entitled SEEVIEWS, the See Eagle Education, Viewing, Interpretation and Engagement within Scotland project will primarily focus on engaging and educating the public about one of the country’s most iconic species.

Through field teaching, volunteer monitoring, CCTV cameras and public exhibitions in sea eagle strongholds like Mull, Wester Ross, Skye and Eastern Scotland, the scheme will allow more people to see and better understand these rare birds of prey, thus improving the species’ chances of long-term survival. In turn these activities will give local people and tourists the chance to get involved in sea eagle conservation.

Public access and education will form the focus of the project, but the funding also means that the reintroduction programme currently underway in Eastern Scotland can be extended by a further 12 months. Research has shown that the five year project, a partnership between RSPB Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Forestry Commission Scotland, needs to release some 100 young birds in order to establish a sustainable population.

The white-tailed sea eagle was completely wiped out in Britain, largely due to human killing. The last native bird was killed in Shetland in 1918. After an absence of over half a century, a reintroduction programme started on the island of Rum in 1975, aimed at returning these majestic raptors to Scotland’s skies.

Affectionately known as ‘flying barn doors’ due to their near eight foot wing span, an adult bird has a striking white tail, making the majestic sea eagle a spectacular sight and a tourist magnet to areas such as Mull and Skye. A recent independent study commissioned by RSPB Scotland found that the economic benefits delivered by Mull’s white-tailed eagles have more than tripled in just five years and now stand at £5million per annum.

Colin McLean, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Scotland, said: “We have some wonderful native wildlife in Scotland and collectively we have a responsibility for its survival. It is the prospect of glimpsing rare species, such as these glorious sea eagles, that attracts visitors to our shores bringing much-needed tourist income to our rural communities. This project gives us all the opportunity to learn more about an important bird of prey and the role it plays in Scotland’s biodiversity. It will inspire and empower people to help safeguard the existence of the sea eagles for future generations.”

Stuart Housden, RSPB Scotland Director, said: “These magnificent birds are a valuable and essential part of our natural heritage, bringing with them not only benefits for biodiversity but also huge economic potential, as recently demonstrated on Mull. A land where eagles are welcome and can be seen by local people and visitors, represents a great success story. We are delighted thanks to HLF, that we will now have the opportunity to achieve extend our work and involve more people in the conservation story.”