Project to save Scotland's rare Sea Eagle soars ahead

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The United Nations declared 2010 to be the International Year of Biodiversity and invited the world to safeguard the variety of life on earth. As it draws to an end, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) has today given its backing to projects to save two endangered aspects of Scotland's natural heritage - the sea eagle and the country's mountain woodland.

HLF has awarded a first-round pass* of £235,900 to RSPB (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Birds) Scotland to ensure the survival of one of Scotland's most iconic species, the sea eagle or the white-tailed eagle. With a massive 9ft wingspan, it is the largest bird of prey in the UK but died out in Scotland when the last native bird was shot on shetland in 1918. It is gradually being re-introduced but it remains as one of Scotland's most threatened species and as such, is given one of the highest levels of natural heritage protection.

'SEEVIEWS' (Sea Eagle Education, Viewing, Interpretation and Engagement within Scotland) is a project designed to complement and extend Scottish Natural Heritage's current five year programme of re-introduction on the East Coast which is due to finish in 2012/13. Building on the success of a project in Mull described as the 'biggest wildlife Neighborhood Watch in the world', community volunteers will be trained to take on the monitoring and guardianship of these rare birds. They will be trained in skills such as radio tracking, identification methods, visitor engagement, field teaching and event-management.

The current re-introduction programme will be extended by a year to ensure sustainability of the species. A further 15-20 sea eagle chicks will be reintroduced to bring the total number of chicks released in Scotland to just under 100 - a number which research has shown to be the level needed to establish a sustainable population.

Education will play a large part in the project so that more people will have the opportunity to see and better understand these rare birds of prey and so increase its chances of survival and growth. Field teachers will be employed, initially in Wester Ross and Perth & Kinross to educate students both in the classroom and out in the field. Sea Eagle trail guides will be produced and CCTV introduced to visitor centres in Skye, Wester Ross and in the East Coast to allow people to watch the birds nesting without disturbing them.

Commenting on today's announcements, Colin McLean, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund in Scotland, said: "The recent extreme weather conditions have highlighted the changes happening to nature. Scotland has a wonderful natural heritage, a heritage which we collectively have the power to protect or destroy. Yet people are unlikely to care about or understand the value of things and places they have never seen or experienced. Through projects such as these, communities will be inspired and empowered to look after the rich biodiversity on their doorstep, safeguarding it for future generations."

Roseanna Cunningham, Minister for the Environment, said: "This funding will support the work already being carried out to ensure the survival of an iconic Scottish species. There is a wide network of people who are passionate about Scotland's wildlife and this project allows their enthusiasm to be put to practical use so we can learn as much as

possible about the Scottish sea eagle. Wildlife is a vital part of Scotland's tourist appeal and funding such as this will allow us to properly protect out native species."

Duncan Orr-Ewing, Head of Species and Land Management at RSPB Scotland, added: "With the ongoing East Coast sea eagle reintroduction project, over time we will succeed in completing the jigsaw to bring back these magnificent birds across the whole of their former range and territory in Scotland. In addition to making this happen, it is equally important to ensure that people are aware of the central importance that this species has played in their social and cultural history prior to being wiped out in the UK, and to help others to share in the benefits these birds can bring."

Mountain Woodland

HLF has also awarded a first-round pass* for a grant of £500,000 along with development funding of £25,800 to Highland Birchwoods to restore large areas of mountain woodland, an important but scarce part of the Scottish landscape.

Mountain woodland, sometimes known as montane scrub, consists of dwarf trees and low shrubs and forms a natural fringe to the forest before the scrubline, the altitude at which shrubs can no longer survive. Over decades, certain practices such as over-grazing and fire have contributed to its decline creating harsh, unnatural edges to the landscape. Mountain woodland is important in stabilising soil and reducing water run off, lessening the risk of erosion and landslip. It is also rich in biodiversity with many rare trees and plants providing a habitat for small mammals and birds. Although it is too late to save some, this project will give a variety of rare species the chance to survive.

A programme of tree planting will see 500,000 trees of native woodland species planted over three sites - Dumfries and Galloway Forest District, Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park and Dundreggan Estate. The planting project will be reinforced with an extensive adult education programme and volunteer training. Up to 1,500 people will have the opportunity to be trained and participate in creating and maintaining mountain woodland through courses run in conjunction with the Forestry Commission. Seminars and information days will also be held for groups such as botanical societies and land managers, as well as local communities and schools.

Roseanne Cunningham, Minister for the Environment, said: "Mountain woodlands, between the timberline and the upper limits of tree and shrub growth, are a missing link in Scotlands natural heritage with just a very few relicts surviving from historic times. This project has the potential to make a vital contribution towards restoring some of this vital part of our biodiversity."

William Bodles from Highland Birchwoods welcomed the announcement: "We are delighted that HLF have granted us a first round pass, mountain woodland is a truly special habitat and an incredibly important part of our natural heritage. It is fantastic new that HLF are willing to support our project and help communities safeguard mountain woodland for future generations."

Notes to editors

*A first-round pass means the project meets our criteria for funding and we believe it has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award.

The Sea Eagle has been part of Scotland's cultural heritage since Neolithic times and can be seen in Orkney's 5000 year old Tomb of the Eagles where 14 Sea Eagle skulls were included in the ceremonial burial of 300 people. The birds also featured on Pictish standing stones, in early Christian art and in Shetland's fishermen myths.

Mountain woodland species include aspen, rowan, scots pine, white beam, willows, birch and juniper. Plants include smooth lady's mantle, wood cranesbill, alpine saw wort and holly fern. Many species are extremely rare for example the sowthistle is on the edge of extinction, as is the woolly willow. Mountain hares and black grouse graze on the woodland shrub and it provides a habitat for voles, mice and shrews and a wide range of invertebrate species and fungi.

HLF has funded £71,730,545 in Scotland's land and biodiversity projects to date.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the HLF sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. To date, it has invested over £500million in Scotland's heritage.

Further information

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