Why I'm a wolf man

If you genuinely value diversity, you should welcome the reintroduction of large predators

It hardly compares in importance to the invasion of Iraq, or the fall of the dollar, or the outcome of the next election. But in some ways the decision that we are being asked to make will say more about us and the world that we choose to inhabit than any of the grand political themes.

Last week, a man called Paul Lister held a conference in Scotland. He explained that, if his plans are accepted by the public, within five years he will be able to reintroduce the wolf, the bear, the Eurasian lynx, the wild boar and the European bison to the Highlands. Similar claims have been made before, but Lister is the first enthusiast who can make it happen. He has millions of pounds and a 23,000-acre estate. He wants his land to become the core of a much larger conservation area. Another landowner, Paul van Vlissingen, has volunteered to add his 81,000 acres to the scheme. As animals such as the wolf and the lynx are smart and agile enough to escape from almost any large enclosure, this is in effect a proposal to repopulate Britain with its extinct native wildlife.

Two days later, we discovered that the mammals had pre-empted them. A herd of wild boar – the fourth to have established itself in this country – has emerged from the Forest of Dean, having escaped, it seems, from a farm. The government must decide whether to let it survive. The big wild animals are returning. It is an attractive idea, with unattractive implications.

Though the advocates of reintroduction sometimes seek to deny it, four of the five species that they hope to bring back are dangerous to humans. A couple of years ago

Van Vlissingen told the Times that there had been no known cases of a wolf killing a person in Europe over the past 100 years. If this were true, then the objections to reintroduction would be harder to sustain. But it is not. Twenty-one people were attacked by healthy wolves in Europe between 1950 and 2000, and four of them were killed. Five others (though this should not be an issue in Britain) were killed by wolves with rabies. Lynx won't hurt anyone, but European brown bears, though less aggressive than North American grizzlies, killed 36 people in the 20th century. Though only a few hundred boar are living in the British countryside, several people have already been chased by them. And the boar aren't half as scary as the bison, as the photos in this month's edition of BBC Wildlife magazine testify: members of a herd in Poland appear to be playing volleyball with a wild boar that they have gored to death.

An admiration for large wild animals often appears to be linked with a contempt for human life. "And I think in this empty world there was room for me and a mountain lion," DH Lawrence wrote. "And I think in the world beyond how easily we might spare a million or two of humans/ And never miss them." John Aspinall and Joy Adamson would have nodded vehemently. There is a certain kind of ill-adjusted person who seems to project himself into the mind of a predator, roaming across a world without people.

The risk of being attacked by one of these beasts is tiny by comparison with almost any of the other hazards that we confront. In Canada, where bears occasionally prey on people, you are 67 times more likely to be killed by a domestic dog, and 374 times more likely to be killed by lightning. But it's a risk that those who would introduce these animals impose on other people, with or without their consent. It is hard to argue with the verse, with which anyone who picks up a shotgun is instructed: "All the pheasants ever bred/ Won't repay for one man dead." If we believe that human lives are more important than animal lives, and if even one person is killed by a wild animal deliberately reintroduced into this country, is that not too great a price to pay for the purely aesthetic benefit of restoring our native wildlife?

I am not convinced that it is. If every tree that grows close to a road or a house were felled, dozens of human lives could be saved; but you would be hard put to find anyone who thinks that this is a good idea. The French government ran into massive opposition when it tried to clear the famous avenues that line its country roads. A few extra deaths are considered, by most French people, to be a fair exchange for the preservation of some flickering shade. When a city council in Britain proposed to cut down a row of horse chestnut trees because children might be hurt when collecting conkers – or might hurt someone else when throwing sticks and stones into the branches – it caused a national outcry. Similarly, we use public money that could have

been spent on the national health service to support galleries, museums and parks. Aesthetic concerns in all these cases are weighed against human life, and permitted by society to win.

There is, of course, a moral difference between the failure to eliminate existing risks and the introduction of new ones. But, in permitting public bodies to plant new trees or dig new ponds, we commission them actively to trade human survival against a diffuse social pleasure. Unlike the businessmen who want to be allowed to expose their workers to dangerous industrial practices in order to boost their profits, the tree planters give us something in return for the risk that they impose on us.

This might make sense even in terms of moral arithmetic: people who live in unstimulating places are more likely to become depressed, and people who become depressed are more likely to kill themselves. Dramatic but mildly dangerous lifeforms – or just the excitement of knowing that they are out there somewhere – might even save lives.

And the vision of those who would deny room in this empty world for large wild animals is surely as misanthropic as DH Lawrence's. When Norwegian hunters set out to eliminate the wolves that kill a few dozen sheep in that country each year, or when, as they did last month, French hunters shoot the last female Pyrenean brown bear, we are rightly outraged. We see in them an intolerance of diversity, of contingency, of unruliness. They would reduce the world to a money-making monoculture, a bland, controlled, mechanical place that is as hostile to the needs of humans as it is to the needs of animals.

I want to live in a land in which wolves might prowl. A land in which, as I have done in eastern Poland, I can follow a bend in a forest path and come face to face with a bison. In which, as I have done in the Pyrenees, I can stumble across a pair of wild boar sleeping under a bush. I am prepared to exchange a small risk to my life for the thrill of encountering that which lies beyond it. This is a romantic proposition, I admit. But is it not also a rational one?