

Villagers aiming to buy threatened lowland bog

By Sue Drummond

ENVIRONMENT CORRESPONDENT

RESIDENTS of a Kinross-shire village are hoping to buy a local wood containing a rare stretch of threatened lowland bog.

Portmoak Moss, near Scotlandwell, is up for sale as part of Forest Enterprise's programme of shedding land, with a price tag of £80,000. The community has been promised cash help from the Woodland Trust charity, but they must raise £20,000 themselves by September.

The trees on the 42-hectare site on the shores of Loch Leven are rooted in a raised peat bog which is now an extremely rare habitat in Scotland. Once lowland bogs covered 27,000 hectares; today, sites are down to just over 2,000 hectares, destroyed by cultivation, forestry and commercial peat extraction. Unspoilt areas in Fife have declined from 1,300 hectares to only 15 hectares.

The conifers and broadleaved trees planted at Portmoak have never been commercially harvested and the area is neglected, said Dr Karen McDonnell, one

of the leaders of the campaign to buy the land.

She said: "The Moss is one of only two remnants of a bog which once surrounded Loch Leven and extended into adjacent low-lying valleys. We would like to fell the conifers and restore the cleared bog areas by raising the water levels, while looking after the natural woodland."

Work would include looking after public walkways used by local people, and filling in drainage channels. The channels and the tree roots have drained water from the site and affected its ecology to the extent that the site is no longer "active".

The top layer of peat has dried out, some mosses have gone and the bog is no longer laying down peat to make more of itself.

But there is hope, according to the Scottish Wildlife Trust, which is carrying out a major survey of bogs in time for an international convention in Edinburgh next month.

The SWT project manager, Dr Rob Stoneman, said: "Once the delicate balance has been disturbed, it is a difficult job to

restore it, but if water levels can be brought back up, then the bog will start growing again." SWT's work elsewhere has shown that it can be done.

The site lies close to the Vane Farm nature reserve owned by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

David Fairlamb, the reserve warden, has surveyed the birdlife on the moss and backs the community's bid to run the site.

Species logged in the broadleaved woodland area include sparrowhawks, great spotted woodpeckers and the long-eared owl, which is rare locally.

Mr Fairlamb said: "Getting the wood into public ownership would be a great opportunity to put the area back in order, into its semi-natural state, while using it as a local amenity for people and for wildlife."

Local interest has been strong, and a meeting to discuss the buying proposal was packed out. Dr McDonnell is hopeful that the interest will now be backed up by financial commitments.