

## **Comment: Rewilding: a landscape-history perspective**

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Rewilding is a slippery word. Often used to describe the minimisation or removal of human interventions from extensive tracts of land, it can also refer to the reduction of management within more limited areas. Occasionally, it is employed simply as a kind of fashionable synonym for 'conservation'. However it is used, rewilding embodies a fundamental shift in attitudes. Until recently, nature conservation as practised in the UK centred on the preservation of cultural, human-made landscapes, and on the management of features or habitats shaped by practical activities which are now, for the most part, redundant. For advocates of rewilding, in contrast, the future of nature lies not in the management of the countryside, but in the very opposite. My purpose here, as a landscape historian, is to critique this new approach and to highlight some of its philosophical and practical limitations. For while rewilding certainly has a significant role to play in sustaining biodiversity, the overwhelming importance now assigned to it by many people is, I believe, potentially harmful.

### **No return to Eden**

There is an obvious emotional appeal in the idea that nature, left to its own devices, can 'heal' itself, and that tracts of land can be restored to the condition that they were in before the impact of farming (Monbiot 2013). Inspired by Knepp, in Sussex, a number of projects aim to create relatively open wood-pastures, with the development of denser secondary woodland held in check by grazing ungulates. The model here is the primeval landscape as envisaged by Frans Vera, kept largely open by herds of wild cattle, deer and horses (Vera 2002). Yet Vera's model remains contentious, and there is considerable evidence to suggest that the European pre-Neolithic landscape largely comprised closed-canopy woodland with only limited tracts of more open land (Hodder *et al.* 2009; Kirby & Baker 2013; Yalden 2013; Sandom *et al.* 2014; Noble 2017). By the early postglacial, the scale of human predation, which (perhaps in association with climate change) had already led to the extinction of the European megafauna, may have been enough to reduce the numbers of wild grazers to below the level required to keep the landscape open. We have been major drivers of environmental change for a long time; the very existence of debate around Vera's ideas shows how far we have come from any truly 'natural' landscape.

Thousands of years of human intervention have ensured that plants once common – such as Small-leaved Lime *Tilia cordata* – are now so patchy in their distribution that it is uncertain whether they could ever, in conditions of rewilding, return to their former prominence or dominance. Conversely, rewilded areas will always host a mass of alien species which were absent from the pre-farming environment. These deliberate or accidental introductions include long-established fauna such as the Brown Rat *Rattus norvegicus*, Rabbit *Oryctolagus cuniculus* and Fallow Deer *Dama dama*, as well as more obvious and recent interlopers such as Grey Squirrel *Sciurus carolinensis* and Muntjac *Muntiacus reevesi*. Old arrivals such as Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* and Common Poppy *Papaver rhoeas* will be well represented alongside recent ones like Japanese Knotweed *Fallopia japonica* and Himalayan Balsam *Impatiens glandulifera* (Rotherham & Lambert 2011; Williamson 2013). Readers who have spent long hours trying to eradicate these latter invasive species from watercourses might ponder their likely fortunes in any genuinely rewilded tract of land. Those keen to lift the dead hand of management from our upland moors should consider, in a similar manner, how Rhododendron

*Rhododendron ponticum* might respond. The simple act of ceasing to manage land will not lead to the restoration of Britain's 'natural' landscape, whatever that was like. Instead, a historically constituted assemblage of plants and animals would simply be left to its own devices, developing quite novel ecosystems. Some writers argue that the emergence of such 'recombinant ecologies' should not be considered problematic (Thomas 2017). But, either way, there is no easy return to Eden.

### **What did traditional management ever do for us?**

Many re-wilding initiatives are more limited in scope, involving the cessation of management within restricted areas, without the introduction of grazing animals. Here we should note that the country is not short of the kind of secondary woodland which is the usual outcome of such an approach. Natural regeneration on old industrial land, and on neglected (re-wilded?) heaths and commons, has been one of the main contributors to the doubling of the woodland area which has taken place, in England at least, since the late nineteenth century (Williamson *et al.* 2017). Further regeneration may benefit biodiversity in some contexts but certainly not in others (on old-established chalk grassland, for example). In other cases, rewilding involves allowing individual landscape elements, such as watercourses or hedges, to develop unhindered by human intervention. Whatever the scale of the initiative, the removal of management is presented as inherently beneficial in biodiversity terms, largely through a comparison with the results of modern farming. But is management *per se* necessarily bad for nature? Readers will be well aware of the distinct assemblages of plants and animals associated with earlier systems of land management. Such systems varied significantly over time and space but generally supported high diversity precisely because they were intensive and complex (Fuller *et al.* 2017; Dolman *et al.* 2017; Fuller & Gilroy 2021).

Many featured regular cycles, with extraction or disturbance followed by phases of inactivity and recovery. Coppices were felled, regenerated, were felled again; hedges were similarly plashed or coppiced on rotation. Others involved more irregular patterns of disturbance. Many heaths were stripped of heather, for fuel; burrowed by Rabbits kept in warrens; dug over in order to extract sand or gravel; or sporadically ploughed. All such practices ensured dynamic regrowth and provided the early-successional habitats required by many species. Yet areas subject to repeated interventions and major disturbance were often interspersed with places that were not, and which were simply used in the same way over very long periods. The distinctive flora of chalk downland, for example, was shaped by centuries of continuous grazing by sheep. All this heterogeneity, moreover, took the form (in most lowland districts at least) of a particularly fine and complex mesh. In woods, recently felled coppices coexisted with stools in various stages of regrowth; on any single farm, hedges recently plashed or coppiced existed beside those ready for cutting; pasture, arable and other forms of land-use were finely intermixed.

Other elements of management systems similarly promoted diversity. Many areas were constantly depleted of biomass by the systematic removal of material, not least for fuel, serving to counteract eutrophication. Furthermore, and in marked contrast to the situation in rewilding projects, livestock, rather than being allowed to roam at will, had their movements carefully controlled and curtailed. They were thus excluded from most coppiced woods, allowing – along with the act of coppicing itself – characteristic plants to flourish (many 'ancient woodland indicators' have poor resistance to grazing; Dolman *et al.* 2010a). They were barred from hay meadows during spring and early summer,

thus allowing bulky, tall species such as Globeflower *Trollius europaeus* and Oxeye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare* to flower and set seed, again leading to the development of a distinctive flora. All these management practices fostered a complex and dynamic landscape, proliferating niches and habitats and opportunities. Rewilding at scale might be able to match this heterogeneity and deliver equal or even greater benefits, but this has never been demonstrated – it is simply assumed and asserted, through comparisons with the degraded landscapes created by modern farming.

There were of course less intensively managed tracts of land in the UK in the relatively recent past, even in the lowlands. In particular, before the later 18th century extensive areas were occupied by grazed woodlands, especially in the form of wooded commons and deer parks. These delivered a range of environmental benefits comparable to those provided by some modern rewilding projects, not least because stocking densities were usually similarly regulated, by local custom and manorial courts. But they were complementary to more intensively managed countryside and were usually adjacent to or interwoven with it.

### **Abandoning the countryside**

While it is true that most of the management practices just described have been rendered redundant by technological or economic change (Spencer 2021), many could certainly be reintroduced onto farmland. Others are already being mimicked (such as disturbance of heaths), and could be implemented on a wider scale. There are multiple reasons why conservation through countryside management ought to be given at least as much emphasis in conservation policy as rewilding (Fuller & Gilroy 2021).

The concept of rewilding was first formulated in North America, where there are vast areas with only sparse human habitation (Foreman 2004). Needless to say, the UK is smaller and more crowded. Our population is approaching 70 million, we are unable to produce much more than half our food and as the world population soars problems of food security loom, especially at times of political uncertainty abroad. There are also rising demands on land for housing and recreation. In these circumstances, areas selected for large-scale rewilding would of necessity be agriculturally and often spatially marginal. If the creation of such areas was then seen as an adequate response to the need to 'look after nature', there is a real risk of conservation being seriously downgraded as a priority elsewhere in the countryside, including in the urban-rural fringe – the very place where most people, and certainly most disadvantaged people, encounter wildlife. Such an approach may already be appealing to a UK government keen to forge free-trade agreements with major foreign producers, and to control spending on farming and the environment. Rewilding is likely to prove cheaper than supporting traditional management, and the smaller farmers involved in it, in marginal and especially upland districts.

The countryside and its wildlife are more insidiously threatened where smaller-scale rewilding is widely implemented, in preference to the continuation or restoration of 'traditional' practices. In most cases this rapidly erodes the character of the features and habitats that these practices created in the first place. Consider the case of the East Anglian Breckland, home to a wide range of rare plants and invertebrates, their presence in part a reflection of how the local heaths were managed for centuries. Many of these species require not only the open conditions created by grazing sheep but the presence of the disturbed ground which was traditionally afforded by the digging of heather,

sporadic ploughing episodes and the burrowing of Rabbits (Dolman *et al.* 2010b). As these have declined many species have not fared well. But it is doubtful whether they would do better in the rapid changes that would ensue under conditions of rewilding. Here the impacts of rewilding are perhaps obvious, but there would be more uncertainty in under-researched contexts, where the range of species present, and their particular requirements, have not been fully audited. The easy assumption that rewilding will, of necessity, improve biodiversity in all or most situations needs to be challenged. As Fuller & Gilroy (2021) state: 'It is impossible to predict with any precision which of the UK's declining or priority species would benefit from rewilding initiatives.'

### **The death of history**

At times the injunctions to rewild show a disregard for all the other non-economic roles that landscapes can play, the other important benefits they deliver, and the interests and concerns of other stakeholders. In many discussions of rewilding, these are simply ignored (e.g. Carver & Convery 2021). The focus is solely on 'nature', with or without a capital 'N', which is usually undefined – other than in terms of the absence of human influence (and frequently in spite of an explicit recognition of the fact that the 'natural' worlds of today, and tomorrow, have been critically determined by human history).

To ecologists of the previous generation, such as Oliver Rackham, rural landscapes embodied both human and natural history (Rackham 1986). A well-hedged countryside offered a wealth of habitats and corridors for wildlife. But it was also a historical monument, like an old house or an ancient church. It might incorporate patterns of land division a thousand years old; it might, no less interestingly, represent an enclosure event of the 18th century. Hedges, woods, commons all have a historical dimension, and variations in the character of this human landscape provide – where it has not been too far eroded by modern agriculture – regional distinctiveness and that sense of place which many find appealing in an increasingly homogenised world. Yet some advocates of extensive rewilding are overtly hostile to such ideas, wishing to see complex mosaics of areas and features, centuries in the making, replaced by their own particular vision of how a natural landscape should look. It is not just that they do not seem to care about the loss of what Hoskins famously described as 'the richest historical document we possess' (Hoskins 1955). Rather, in seeking to create an impression of wilderness, signs of human life are an anomaly and a distraction which *should* be obliterated. The experience of wilderness is all (Monbiot 2013).

Landscapes have other significances, and other values, which I believe should similarly place limits on what and where we rewild. Some have an iconic importance because they are celebrated in art or literature. Dedham Vale on the border of Essex and Suffolk still looks much as it did when John Constable lovingly painted it in the early 19th century. Would it be a suitable candidate for rewilding? And as well as being represented in art, landscapes can themselves *be* works of art. I, for one, would mount the barricades to keep Capability Brown's magnificent Golden Valley at Ashridge in Hertfordshire in its present form. Such well-preserved examples of the work of key designers should surely be sacrosanct.

Brown's designed landscapes of the 18th century, with their close-cropped turf and smooth landforms, serpentine waters, scattered trees and massed woods, were often described as 'natural' by contemporaries. But some considered them not natural enough and, in the 1790s, Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price advocated more 'picturesque' – rougher and wilder – styles of design. The

former included in his book of 1794 two engravings to demonstrate how a 'Brownian' landscape might be appropriately 'improved', and which strangely resemble an exercise in rewilding (Payne Knight 1794). Indeed, some forms of rewilding are arguably another version of the same thing. A project that aims to control stocking densities in order to ensure a resemblance to the supposed landscapes of prehistory, and to remove signs of previous human activity, is essentially a form of large-scale landscape design – attempting to recreate one particular, socially constructed, ideal of 'nature', unblemished by farming or other forms of practical exploitation.

It is, indeed, arguable that the popularity of rewilding is driven by complex social and psychological needs and not just by nature conservation. Islands of contrived 'wilderness' offer (to those who can access them) escape from the grim realities of a world in environmental crisis; the wilful obliteration of hundreds or thousands of years of history, and the removal of distinctiveness, says much about current attitudes to identity and the past. Above all, re-wilding seems to involve the 'othering' of nature, making it something separate from us, a spectacle to be visited and observed rather than something integral to working lives and landscapes. The passion to rewild is a sign of how divorced we have become from rural life, food production and the realities of the natural world.

### **The real role of wilding**

There is no doubt that rewilding, especially the creation of extensive grazed woodlands, should play a major part in future conservation strategy. However, it should only be one element alongside others – including, crucially, the continuation, reinstatement or mimicking of traditional management systems within the preserved or restored framework of the wider cultural landscape. Moreover, we should perhaps view the establishment of extensive wood pastures less as a return to wilderness, more as the restoration of a key long-term component of the historic landscape: the wooded commons, deer parks and royal forests which covered large areas of ground in the medieval and early-modern periods (Williamson *et al.* 2017, 88-100). The creation of tracts of grazed woodland should be directed towards those places – usually on land of low agricultural value – known to have been managed in this manner in the relatively recent past, especially where their successor agricultural landscapes have been badly damaged by intensive farming. On the Ken Hill estate in west Norfolk, rewilding is focused on the old wood-pasture area of Caen Hill or Ken Hill Wood, returned to its former extent through the abandonment of farming on adjacent arable land. More conventional conservation management is undertaken on the coastal marshes, while the wider estate is farmed according to the principals of 'regenerative farming'. Such an approach delivers exemplary levels of wildlife conservation while carefully respecting the historical character of the local landscape.

Grazed wood-pastures, minimally managed, should be welcomed back to the landscape. But how numerous and extensive they should be, and where they might be located, are matters that urgently need to be addressed, along with the question of how important a role other forms of rewilding should play in conservation policy. All this must be done through a balanced evaluation of evidence, costs and benefits, rather than messianic enthusiasm and emotion. Ultimately, we ought to remember that 'rewilding' is not a panacea. It is a word.

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