

# Rewilding in Britain

## Lessons of the past 15 years

*The profile of rewilding is rising and the old and struggling order of conservation naturally seeks to incorporate its methods. Here, I draw attention to a disturbing tendency of wilful blindness toward the community-base and cooperative endeavours of the British rewilding movement and argue for a more socially responsible approach to the intractable problems of securing large-scale reserves dominated by ecological processes.*

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Despite widespread public concern for wildlife, in these times of economic austerity the political and economic future for conservation looks bleak. Wildlife surveys report continued serious declines.<sup>1</sup> Yet, there appears a glimmer of hope with rewilding. In the UK, there is a growing movement with a body of experience that involves community and cooperation at local levels stretching back more than 20 years. As other players now enter the field and try to incorporate a new paradigm, it is important that the central message and transformational nature of these initiatives is not ignored in the development of more idealised, essentially top-down and possibly unrealisable schemes.

My premise is that in Britain we have levels of 'rewilding' experience that are challenging to an old paradigm of conservation. This wilder experience of the natural world is developing at grass-roots level as an emergent community of practise involving both professionals and the broader public. The achievements of this movement are tangible and well publicised, in particular by BANC. There is, however, little indication that this shifting consciousness toward a more creative relationship to nature features large in the thinking of new and opportunistic players now exploring rewilding projects.

### Rewilding as a social movement

Rewilding, as concept, practice and potential social movement, may be capable of transforming our damaged relationship with the natural world in ways that traditional conservation fails to do. Community and personal experience of a transformational nature has no ready index and few champions – yet it is here that society most needs to register a shift in consciousness. I have witnessed such shifts in all of the projects reported in the supporting materials. These were presented at the conference and are available for download at [www.banc.org.uk/node/13](http://www.banc.org.uk/node/13).

### New players

Currently, there is a very professional high-profile campaign by *Rewilding Europe* where the lead is taken by WWF Netherlands, acting in partnership with eco-tourism interests. Rewilding is also attracting academic analysis as a concept to be

categorised and subjected to theory. This academic interest and the above interests of corporate bodies and associated entrepreneurs, see rewilding through the lens of their own designs, motivations and needs, selecting those aspects upon which to focus and discarding others. For example, in their one-day presentation to the 10<sup>th</sup> World Wilderness Congress in Salamanca, *Rewilding Europe* made reference solely to Alladale and completely ignored the breadth of initiatives documented by BANC and the Wildland Network.

It would be a pity if rewilding were to become solely identified in the public mind with such broad scale projects – in particular, where there are serious social and political issues relating to communities affected by such plans. Land abandonment in Europe causes hardship to many remote communities and whilst it offers an opportunity for resurgent wildlife, especially the large mammalian carnivores such as wolf, bear and lynx, it also demands careful consideration of the needs of these communities. A 'ghost village' syndrome stalks the wilder regions of Europe, but one that could also offer an opportunity for a more nature-friendly mode of community sustenance. In this respect, the work showcased by BANC is highly relevant.

Below I consider the most important lessons and issues from about a dozen relatively large-scale 'rewilding' projects in Scotland, Wales and England. I would argue that at a grass-roots level, most of these projects represent a fundamental shift in conservation values:

- Each moves beyond the static concept of protection toward a more creative relation to the *processes* of nature wherein human agency is minimalised;
- Each challenges at different levels the concepts of biodiversity value – such as priority species, or habitat protection, upon which many designated areas have been historically defined and 'preserved';
- Each involves a variety of actors, some in the state sector, some in the voluntary sector and even some utilities such as water companies, working toward a common ideal – often with active managerial cooperation;
- Most have an educational and community component that extends beyond that of traditional conservation volunteers – for example, in the health and education sectors ;
- Some involve a more overt spiritual dimension to the project which informs some key objectives that lie beyond those of a traditional conservation-science approach.

I have visited all of the projects outlined in *Supplementary Material* over the past 20 years and know personally many of the managers involved. In 2005, with the support of a small project grant from BANC, we published *Beyond Conservation* – the results of surveying projects in Britain to that date, and adding an appraisal of background issues such as agricultural economics, forest policy, and the 'rewilding' movement within the broader context of conservation values. I made an effort in that

book to extend conservation thinking to include physical and mental health issues, as well as the spiritual dimension – arguing that the patriarchal, Judaeo-Christian religious perceptions of Nature, with its elements of dominion, control and above all, the absence of ‘soul’ in anything other than the human, when coupled with an apparently objective scientific paradigm of conservation biology, were limiting the wider appeal of ‘conservation’ – most especially to younger and wilder people.

### The Wildland Network

Just prior to that publication, a small group of us in BANC set up The Wildland Network with the intention of each project learning from others, and to gain a higher profile among government agencies and within the voluntary sector. The Network ran regional seminars and national conferences, along with site visits and invitations to the leaders of the Dutch ‘flagship’ projects that use feral herbivores. In the pages of *ECOS*, we sought authors from all of these projects, as well as wider European schemes – for example, lynx and bear re-introductions. This body of *ECOS* writing (60 articles by 53 authors) was published as *Rewilding* (Ethos) in 2011 as a hardback and series of PDF colour downloads available from BANC. Additionally, BANC members were instrumental in setting up the Wildland Research Institute at Leeds University in 2009.

### Avoidance of the social issues

‘Wilful blindness’ occurs when individuals and in some cases corporate bodies ignore awkward facts or issues because they do not support their particular agenda. It seems to be a feature of early 21<sup>st</sup> century politics, for example, it was identified in the Leveson Inquiry regarding corporate responsibility in the media as well as in the lead-up to the apparently ‘unforeseen’ financial crisis. As a consequence of that crisis, government agencies in the UK are in the middle of a 30% cut-back in key staff. NGOs are also at the effect of this general austerity drive – both in respect of government funds and industrial sponsors, as well as with general membership. Academia is faced with the same general austerity, but more particularly, by government’s further intention to make research contribute a proven (measurable) ‘impact’ to the general economic good.

This is the overall political and economic environment within which all organisations must now find sustenance. Such financial scarcity may work in either of two directions: lack of resources especially at the grass-roots may foster cooperation; but in the corporatised environmental sector, that same scarcity may work against cooperative ventures and connection to community – with a shift toward capturing private foundation or national heritage lottery monies. This is the trophic environment for several leading wildlife organisations, as well as academia. Authors of popularising books will likely also have an eye to gallery mentalities.

Margaret Hefferman in her book *Wilful Blindness* draws attention to how executives isolate and insulate themselves from wider social responsibilities, and warns: “To the extent that money is thought about a great deal in any group culture, social connectedness weakens or falls apart”.<sup>2</sup> I am concerned that such wilful blindness has been such a feature of *Rewilding Europe*<sup>3</sup>; in the media profile that is emerging

from journalist George Monbiot’s highly successful *Feral*, following which the author is setting up a small group intent on furthering the ‘rewilding’ of Britain<sup>4</sup>; and in the academic approaches represented at the Sheffield conference (Wilder by Design, Sheffield University, May 2014). As political initiatives, both *Feral* and *Rewilding Europe* initially ignored the breadth of British experience, selecting instead projects that support or illustrate their converging approaches, and failing to reference, discuss or debate any other models. Something similar operates within academic contexts – for example, Jamie Lorimer’s sole focus upon the Dutch experience from which theoretical conclusions about rewilding might be drawn and where a broader appraisal might make an appeal to theory less convincing.<sup>5</sup>

The same limited vision serves conservationists who would defend their traditional objectives by railing against the more extreme projections of rewilding, such as appeals to rewild the British uplands in general. Such wilder visions for the uplands and *Rewilding Europe*’s large scale plans for abandoned farmland have serious political implications in relation to marginal farming, community life and rural economics. Monbiot argues, for example for the phasing out of ‘perverse farming subsidies’. Such broad statements by players who have no communal responsibility are not representative of the rewilding movement that BANC has documented. Whilst having the potential to popularise and widen the constituency for rewilding, there is also the potential to alienate key players on the ground, such as farmers, game interests, commercial foresters and even traditional conservationists – a negative potential that all of the grass-roots projects have worked hard to avoid. These new players could usefully lobby for a new class of subsidy that actually supports wildland objectives such as feral grazing, wood-pasture and natural regeneration on tracts of former agricultural land.

Those rewilding initiatives that take a cooperative approach work within slow-moving generally conservative rural communities; they generally do not define their concept of rewilding or set fixed targets (something funders find hard to appreciate); and they engage in activities that reach beyond the scientific paradigms of ecology and biodiversity. Thus, they do not fit within narrow definitions or traditional academic discourse, nor does their experience on the ground support ideas of large scale political and economic change of the kind that would be required to fulfil the ambitions of a new rewilding agenda.

As this more ambitious agenda moves onto a bigger political stage – with potentially far reaching economic and social implications, it has begun to create organised political opposition. Its narrow focus upon big schemes, however imaginary, is readily taken up by opponents of rewilding – such as the Farmers Union of Wales, and provides an excuse to ignore or side-line the cooperative, long-term, small-scale work *with* farmers, such as with the National Trust on Snowdon or in Ennerdale in Cumbria. The English National Farmer’s Union has taken a defensive stance over the more extensive rewilding visions of the Lake District, but ignores the cooperative work at Ennerdale, and such polarised attitudes feed back to the local communities, which then act as political pressure against more naturalistic grazing regimes within Ennerdale and against initiatives that would slowly widen the scheme across the Fells.<sup>6</sup>

This myopic approach would be understandable if the hard work of cooperative endeavour, practical compromise and a willingness to eschew definitions was buried in unpublished managerial practice. This is not the case: the Wildland Network and BANC have worked to make all of this readily accessible. In particular, material has been made available to all of the above popularising initiatives well in advance of their public announcements.

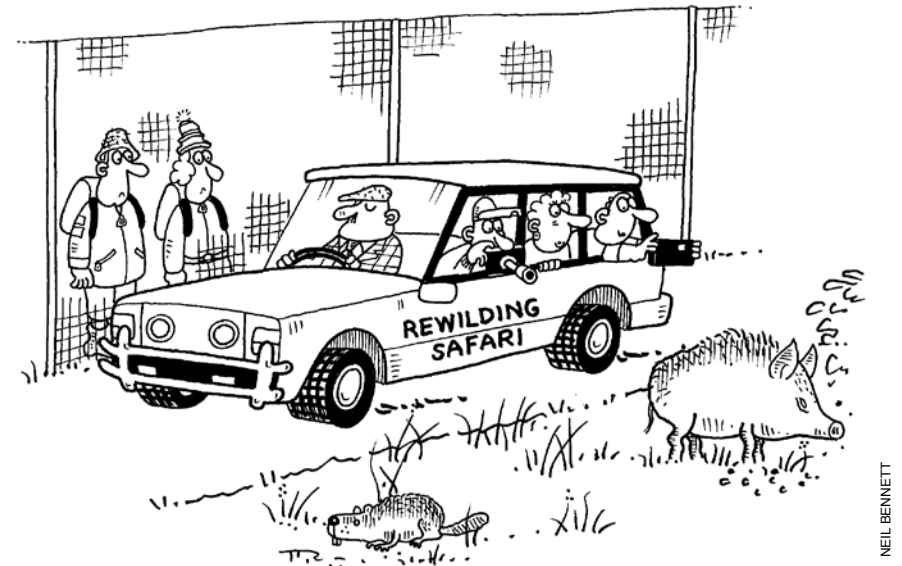
In this respect, Rewilding Europe, having produced glossy professional brochures and secured substantial lottery funding, as well as a team of chief executives, has acted on feedback and recently embarked upon networking. The more socially aware funders are looking for elements of inclusivity, grass-roots involvement and economic relevance to the rural issues of decline at the margins of agriculture. It is in this latter area, that the British experience is most relevant and where a number of us have been critical of the purist rewilding concepts, safari-land ecotourism and models of 'nature development'.<sup>7</sup>

### Declaring personal colours

My preference is for all endeavours that affect the countryside and wildlife to serve the broader community without prejudice. In that, I am slightly red with an orange tinge - I like to see decision-making that is inclusive and by consensus. If I have any blue, it is that I care for continuity and tradition, but dislike authoritarian regimes where local community decisions can be over-ridden in the 'national' interest. I become an 'activist' when supposedly national interest usually disguises economic benefits accruing to small elites of business, landed gentry, corporate or financial players. I am a deep green when it comes to living simply, keeping my footprint small and enjoying a wilder lifestyle.

And then there is a colour that would describe a spiritual connection and appreciation of nature but I am not sure what it is – it doesn't surface, of course, in the political spectrum. In India, it would be black – but, obviously, in Europe black has rather sensitive undertones! In Hindu symbology, black represents both the creative and destructive aspects of the 'mother' Universe. Opposite to this is white.

White is beyond the political spectrum, apparently, but I would ascribe it the colour of the scientific and objective mind, the calculator, the econometrician and measurer of all things. White, tinged perhaps with pretentious purple, is also the colour of the priesthood that accompanied all colonial and industrial scale expansion of Europe with its destructive impact on indigenous community and their supporting ecosystems. A white-beard, white-sky worship emerges – patriarchal to its core, where the dark feminine earth and waters are seen purely as natural *resource*. And further, by refinement, a business world develops in tandem with a financial system that can claim only 1% of its investments as either ethical or ecologically sustainable. Thus the modern corporate world separates itself not just from the Earth, but in evolving the managerial concept of *human* resources, separates from *humanity* itself. This is now the common 'development' model offered worldwide to developing countries – one almost impossible for any state to ameliorate without considerable financial penalties.



I make this spectral digression because whenever more than one conservationist is gathered together in the name of the wild, there will be a spectrum. And we – in whatever role as academics, practitioners, enablers or philosophers of a potentially revolutionary movement, should acknowledge this and strive toward inclusivity.

### No room for wild nature?

As an evolving animal, conservation is now well-adapted to the purely rational and 'scientific' paradigm of resource management and of ecosystems as a service to the economy. What then is *conserved*? *Not wildlife* if current trends continue. Certainly - not the *wild*. Most nature as defined is now confined to *reservations* where conservation mentality is a reflection of other mentalities disguised as economic imperative - of roads, ports (both air and sea), railways, housing, population growth, funiculars, golf courses, jet-skis, fisheries, logging, mining, dams, industrial wind turbines, biofuels.... all of these conflicts can be found in Britain. They all still act as a *model* for global growth.<sup>8</sup>

In such a world, wildlife conservation is a colluding cousin to devastation of community, cultural degradation and alienation, mass migration to cities and the growth of wage-slave labour in a globalised economy. All of which Britain pioneered as a package that is now sold world-wide. The ways-and-means for exploitation of natural resources gets covered under the rubric of biodiversity offsets and natural asset banking (note the recent appointment of Professor David Hill as deputy Chair of Natural England).<sup>9</sup>

### A transformative future?

We have heard talk of 'The End of Nature' and of the reality of a modern 'Anthropocene' where nothing on the planet remains untouched by the hand-

of-man. Some of the more recent advocates of rewilding do seem to believe that a Pleistocene Park could re-create former realities, but again wilfully ignore the practicalities of re-creating short-tusked elephants and their sabre-toothed predators.<sup>10</sup> Much of this co-opting of the concepts and language of rewilding has its roots in American eco-philosophy and in out-dated conceptions of pristine wilderness (with no indigenous people) and ecosystems in an idyllic balance.

Ecosystems are not stable but constantly changing. And we would have to go back to the last inter-glacial (125,000 years) before we could find an ecosystem unshaped by the hands and mind of *Homo sapiens*. The late Pleistocene post-glacial pristine wilderness is an enduring myth. Humans had *already* vastly reshaped the continental fauna and flora of Eurasia and Australasia – less so Africa and the Americas.<sup>11</sup>

Was such anthropogenic influence natural or un-natural change? The answer depends not on science, but the quasi-religious definition of nature. Science colluded politically by separating the human mind from nature, including its own body - the word itself is derived from Latin *sciare* - to separate. Had science been true to the communality, it would not have disguised itself in Latin mumbo as some kind of ultimate truth, and called itself what it is, The Practice of Separation. The methodology has obvious benefits, but it's downside is most clearly observed in modernity's destructive impact on Nature.

If it is time for an end to the old collusions, rewilding has the potential for a new social movement. There is a danger that conservation - colonised as it is by corporate managers and target mentality, may cast itself as the enemy of rewilding – as opposition to letting nature do its thing in the name of management objectives, priority species, biodiversity action plans, and things that volunteers can safely do – like cutting 'scrub' or uprooting 'aliens'. Some conservation organisations have become the wildlife equivalent of travel agents, theme park and gift-shop merchants, encamping on the doorstep of Nature Reserves, developing footpaths, interpretation boards, space for cars and buses. In many localities, sensitive developments can be valuable *additions* to wild space, but often they invade that space – and as the corporate mentality creeps into the mission, more remote localities become targets for growth of this portfolio.

A balance is therefore required, where land can be purchased, preferably by smaller and more local initiatives. There are dozens of real-world practitioners willing to cooperate and create a mosaic of wildland sanctuaries of natural process *alongside* the communities of wildlife nature-gardeners and the few more responsible farmers. It is this vision that we must safeguard as a truly transformative relation for human and animal communities.

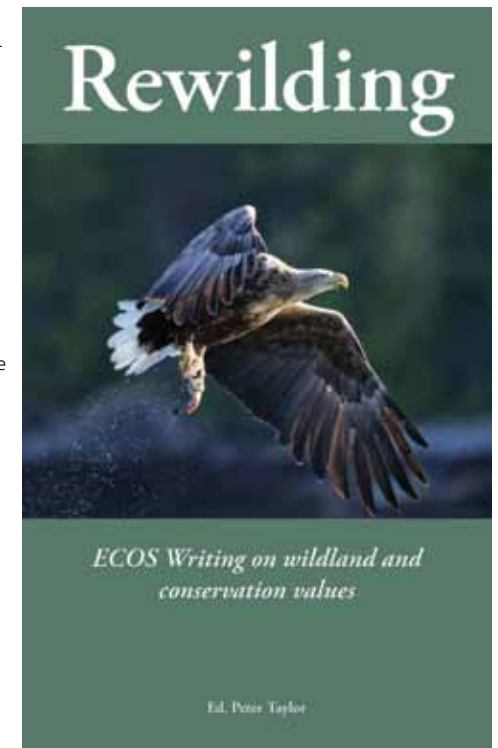
## References and notes

1. Burns F., Eaton MA, Gregory RD, et al. (2013) *State of Nature Report*. The State of Nature partnership.
2. Hefferman, Margaret (2012) *Wilful Blindness*. Simon & Schuster, New York & London.
3. See: Deinet, S., Ieronymidou, C., McRae, L., Burfield, I.J., Foppen, R.P., Collen, B. and Böhm, M. (2013) *Wildlife comeback in Europe: The recovery of selected mammal and bird species*. Final report to Rewilding

Europe by ZSL, BirdLife International and the European Bird Census Council. London, UK: ZSL [www.rewildingeurope.com](http://www.rewildingeurope.com) and especially: [www.europeanrewildingnetwork.com](http://www.europeanrewildingnetwork.com)

4. Monbiot G. (2013) *Feral: searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding*. Penguin, London.
5. Lorimer J & Driessen C. (2014) *Wild experiments at the Oostvaardersplassen: rethinking environmentalism in the Anthropocene*. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers. Citation: 2014 39 169–181 doi: 10.1111/tran.12030
6. Recent discussions in the project management group, in which the Wildland Research Institute takes part, revolve around the community compromises entailed when sheep numbers are reduced and domestic but hardy breeds of cattle graze the woodland under Higher Levels Schemes of agricultural income support.
7. The issues surrounding 'wild' herbivore re-introductions have been extensively discussed in *ECOS* by specialists from Natural England, the National Trust and the Forestry Commission: see in particular the contributions of Keith Kirby, Matthew Oates, Neil Harris and debates between Peter Taylor, Mark Fisher and James Fenton in *Rewilding: ECOS writing on wildland and conservation values*. Ed. Peter Taylor, Ethos (2011).
8. I discussed this recently following the 10<sup>th</sup> World Wilderness Congress in Salamanca, Spain (October, 2013), where delegations of indigenous people made presentations of their stewardship of 'natural resources' and 'biodiversity'; but were largely ignored when making a plea for changes in 'western' consciousness (see The Road to Salamanca, *ECOS* 34 (3/4) 2013).
9. David Hill heads up the Environment Bank and the Environmental Market Exchange. The rest of the Board of Natural England show strong representation of farming interests and involvement in agri-environment schemes. <http://www.environmentbank.com/environmental-markets-exchange.php>
10. The practicalities are discussed in Taylor, *Beyond Conservation* (2005) Routledge. The work was sponsored by BANC and deals in particular, with available species for breeding, hardiness, migration and dispersal, contagious diseases, etc.
11. See Flannery *The Future Eaters* (2002) and *The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History of North America and Its Peoples* (Grove, 2008).

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