

Rewilding gathers pace in the conservation mind fields

Two wildernistas, Peter Taylor and Alison Parfitt, take stock of developments as everyone starts talking of rewilding...

PETER TAYLOR

The September, 2015 Wild Thing conference, hosted by Professor Ian Rotherham at Sheffield Hallam University, followed on from a similar Wild by Design gathering in May 2014 – both of which I attended and gave presentations to. In just one year, it is evident to me that there is a rapid evolution taking place – a growing acceptance of rewilding themes amongst practitioners, associated with the work of BANC.^{1,2}

Full spectrum rewilding?

In the first conference, I had the opportunity to present the full spectrum and scales of UK rewilding programmes, encompassing a variety of models. Many conservation professionals had not then appreciated the history and scope of the rewilding movement in Britain and held some unfounded prejudices based upon media-coverage and the output of vociferous proponents, some of which had created a sense of impending conflict with traditional conservation objectives and values. I expected some resistance in 2014, but felt that most such melted away in the face of relevant facts and open discourse. For example, most rewilding practitioners are familiar with traditional conservation values relating to cultural landscapes, domestic grazing regimes, designated sites and all manner of managerial interventions, and have sought to rewild areas that do not engender conflict with traditional practices. The approach has not been either/or, rather it has been and/and.....according to site characteristics, histories, ownership and opportunity. At that first conference, data was presented for example on the value of ungrazed limestone pavement against the prevailing wisdom that grazing enhances wildlife value (by Steve Carver at Wildland Research Institute), but this does not necessarily translate into a policy that would push for one above the other where both regimes can be maintained.

In our 2005 recommendations for national wildland core areas – one each for Wales, Scotland and England¹, we showed that such large core areas of 400+ square kilometres could co-exist with traditional conservation zones (e.g. Rynogydd in North Wales, Ennerdale in the Lake District, and Glen Affric in the Highlands of Scotland). The concept of a large-area wildland zone embraced values of scale and natural process, e.g. wild river regimes, wind-throw in forest zones, fire etc.; the introduction of wild herbivores and diversification of the herbivore guild, and in Scotland at least, predators such as lynx and wolf. In such regimes, the micro-ecology of plant species structure, 'biodiversity' (meaning species diversity, with little sense of what that metric means in ecological terms) and subsequent knock-

on effects on BAP target species would be of less importance than the values attached to scale, naturalness and iconic re-introduced species, but we made it clear that traditional targets could be maintained in buffer zones to core-areas, as well, of course, in large tracts of more intensely managed grazing, burning and shooting regimes. Of course, rewilding rapidly became a broad church – which BANC welcomed, that would necessarily include proponents of large-scale land-use change with concomitant economic as well as ecological consequences.³

At the 2014 gathering, there was a palpable scepticism and reluctance to embrace rewilding as a paradigmatic shift, but a clear softening of opposition when its scope and variety of methods was more fully appreciated. At this recent gathering, the speakers and audience were drawn more broadly, with a stronger international presence (Frans Vera, Mario Agnoletti, Kenneth Olwig) and some representation from agencies which had been missing in the previous gathering. Further, since 2014, a Rewilding Britain working group has set up an organisation, with some of the advisory group attending the conference. I was struck by how other agencies were openly taking on board a clear shift in paradigm and seeking to showcase their own 'rewilding' ideas and nascent schemes (e.g. Forestry Commission, National Trust).

The wild man is missing from the ecosystem!

In such a receptive environment, I was tempted to reprise the previous presentation – as some foreign delegates would be unaware of the work in the UK, but felt instead to push the rewilding envelope and test the water for my personal concerns that relate to 'rewilding the human' and the capacity for a paradigm shift in our relation to 'conservation' to affect broader environmental and personal consciousness. I thus focussed upon recent human evolution and elements of shamanic consciousness – arguing that we should learn from indigenous cultures that had a better conservation record in remaining wild areas than our own extractive development model. I talked about the need to redress the mind's hemispheric imbalance in a patriarchal and consumerist society and for new models of education to balance the feminine receptive and intuitive forms of knowledge.

The first wild human, I proffered, was a shapeshifter, gathering the animal power of *lion* into his heart and walking not just upright, but with pride and confidence as the latest predator on the block. An ivory sculpture from a German cave carbon-dated to 40,000 BP is the oldest known human figurative art.⁴ The transformational Kundlino serpent came a bit later – and had its more positive origins in the Himalayas rather than the gardens and deserts of Juda.⁵

Surprisingly, what was described as somewhat 'challenging' material was nevertheless welcomed with at least some comments that it was good to be challenged.

Going beyond ecotourist models of a wilder economy

My overall perception was thus of rapid progress over a relatively short period of time. I was also encouraged that my further concerns that rewilding might grow too far from its community roots were met with positive responses, especially from those concerned with the biocultural elements of landscape. One future challenge will be

to integrate new forms of rural community and economy in or around wildland areas – forms that go beyond the current models of ‘ecotourism’ toward new modes of settlement and co-existence with wild nature, and which do not need to compromise core-area philosophies, rather support them.

References

1. Taylor, P. (2005) *Beyond Conservation*, Earthscan, London.
2. Taylor, P. ed. (2011) *Rewilding: ECOS writing on conservation and wildland values*
3. Monbiot, G. (2013) *Feral: searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding*. Penguin.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lion-man>
5. Cozort, D. (1986) *Highest Yoga Tantra*, Snow Lion Publications

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Rewilding place and person

ALISON PARFITT

I too, see my passion for wilding being about rewilding the human as much as rewilding land. The one is integral with the other as I see it. So I am heartened by the appointment of Helen Meech as the first Director of the new organisation Rewilding Britain. Helen has been leading the National Trust’s public engagement work on outdoors and nature, including the award-winning 50 Things to do before you’re 11 3/4 campaign, Great British Walk and Project Wild Thing.

Does more engagement lead to our transformation?

You might now be saying, ... “could this lead towards the paradigm shift in our relation to ‘conservation’ to affect broader environmental and personal consciousness...?” that Peter Taylor speaks of. Of course it is not to be assumed. But it feels like a good next step, to draw upon Helen’s experience of connecting people to the outdoors and nature as a way towards accepting and loving real, visceral wild and more of nature as it is (rather than as we humankind attempt to contrive it). After all, it is nearly two decades that ECOS has been showcasing the many rewilding, ecological restoration projects in Britain, and these very different projects are growing to show us a great deal about how land and nature can flourish. So now it seems very appropriate to consider how we, humankind, fit with that nature, or not? Book after book and blog after blog say that we cannot go on as we are.¹

Nature’s vitality is our vitality

The same understanding emerged at the BANC Plotting in the Woods event in September.² Discussing questions within BANC’s revitalising conservation campaign, participants flagged up the familiar horrors of unwanted effects of globalisation, economic growth and the like. They also said be risk aware, not risk-averse, and linked this to a need for greater focus on resilience, in all areas of society and the environment. This will involve embracing change, including invasive species and climate change as well as the unexpected. Clear links were also made to the

health and wellbeing agendas – how can we nurture ourselves without nurturing our place? Health and wellbeing has to be about us as a part of all nature, a nature with vitality.

Ecological literacy and clowning

Elsewhere in this issue, Sophie Lake, representing VINE, says that connection is a great starting point, but it needs to lead on to ecological literacy – the ability to understand how nature sustains life and how to live accordingly. I see that as including embracing the wild, the dynamics of nature and ourselves. Also including, as Peter says: “the need to redress the mind’s hemispheric imbalance in a patriarchal and consumerist society and for new models of education to balance the feminine receptive and intuitive forms of knowledge”. There has to be change, has anyone come up with a better starting point than wilding? My own first wilding steps have included branching out into improvised performance, clowning, as a means of dialogue with folk beyond where discussion usually takes us.

I and many others have been saying these things a long time. Nonetheless, both our increasing appreciation of the potentials of rewilding and the incontestable sense of the health and wellbeing agenda open up possibilities towards the paradigm shift and change of consciousness that are needed.

Rewilding Britain

The new organisation Rewilding Britain³ has said that rewilding is the liberation of natural processes, including the return of keystone species, to large core areas of nature-led land and sea through non-intervention, for the benefit of nature, people and livelihoods. More detail, principles and values, and what we can do first will all emerge soon. How radical Rewilding Britain will be, how much of a change in consciousness will we aim for eventually I cannot foresee. Nonetheless, now I do see that wilding of place and people will have to come together, it is the same thing ultimately and I relish it.

References

- 1 <http://thinkinglikeahuman.com/>
- 2 A summary on BANC website <https://www.banc.org.uk/plotting-in-the-woods-banc-agm-and-event-september-2015/>
- 3 <http://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/>

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