

such as the size of the site, local social and economic circumstances, the condition of the ecosystem and much more besides will influence the decision making. Where species can be reintroduced or management relaxed, the ecosystem will be a little wilder; where they cannot, conservation management will help maintain the diversity and abundance of nature. Much work still remains to be done to tease out all the overlap between habitat management and rewilding, and I am seeking to work with NGOs to achieve this. But the examples presented here already suggest it is worth exploring where species can be reintroduced and where management can be relaxed to allow nature to manage itself a little more.

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Rewilding – keeping the brand integrity

Rewilding offers an exciting opportunity to reconsider our attitudes and approach to nature. Embracing the idea of self-willed nature offers a challenge to agriculture and forestry, as well to mainstream nature conservation.

But there is a risk that as rewilding gains prominence the core ideals are dissipated as the lexicon of rewilding practice is absorbed into the mainstream. The language of the wild and rewilding seems to have more intuitive public appeal than biodiversity and habitat action plans, and it won't be long before it is purloined by others, but without the essence of what it once was.

The fascination for tracts of wilderness and the reintroduction of large carnivores should be part of a wider examination of our relationship with nature, not just in distant hills, but near to where most of us live.

MIKE TOWNSEND

Challenging the norm

The emergence of rewilding as part of a new approach to nature conservation is founded on a challenge to human domination of land, both within agriculture and forestry, but also within nature conservation. For example, rewilding confronts the idea that uplands managed for farming represents the right and proper use of those areas in support of their landscape and wildlife interest.^{1, 2}

In relation to statutory and voluntary conservation interests, rewilding questions the site-based approach to wildlife protection, founded on the management of habitat for prescribed, often narrow species-based outcomes; a system seen as deeply anthropocentric with species selected on the basis of human preferences.

Treasured landscapes or barren spaces?

One of rewilding's key challenges has been towards the 'treasured' status of many of our iconic protected landscapes, such as National Parks. What has been coined by some as the 'cultural hegemony'³ of historical land use, particularly by landowning interests – whether it is upland sheep farming, grouse shooting or deer stalking.

Many of these landscapes, without the direct influence of humankind, might be forest covered and rich with wildlife, instead of which they are often overgrazed, with monocultures of bracken and stripped of their soils by erosion. Our rural designation systems and institutions celebrate these landscapes, rather than imagining the different and perhaps richer array of wildlife and outdoor experiences if nature was released or liberated from current management regimes.

These views are challenged by people who love the open landscape of the hills, and by farmers and landowners who appeal to tradition, rural economy and the needs for food production. Conservationists whose priority species may have adapted to these modified landscapes also support this status quo. Pejorative terms such as 'neglect', 'abandonment', and 'scrubbing over' are used to support the need for continued management to maintain open hills.

Rewilding as a philosophy

Much of the interest in rewilding, particularly in the media, has highlighted the reintroduction of large carnivores such as Eurasian lynx and the wolf. This is understandable, but in some ways regrettable, since whilst it has generated coverage and a reaction, it has focussed on the more eye-catching aspects of rewilding, rather than the fundamental philosophical shift it represents. This often fails to convey the essence of rewilding which challenges our relationship with nature that is different to the prevailing worldview.

Nature conservation in the UK is the product of a particular philosophy and of a history which has seen the creation of institutional structures, bodies of scientific understanding, discourses and narratives which become more or less convincing. They can remain convincing even against a background of changing evidence and an apparent failure to deliver their purpose - that of conserving nature.

Western culture and attitudes to nature have emerged from a largely Judaeo-Christian world view which places man (sic) somewhere below God, between the angels and the animals.⁴ This view has persisted. Humankind is seen as separate and above nature and much of the way we behave is rooted in this philosophical position, at least subconsciously. It creates a sense that humans need to tame and manage nature; that human stewardship is essential for the creation of a well ordered and thriving natural world.

Rewilding as a philosophy on the other hand, sits within a largely ecocentric world view. This has its radical roots in the early conservation movement of the United States and particularly the views of deep ecologists and 'Earth First!', a radical movement advocating direct action to protect wild nature and often displaying misanthropic views. Gentler tendencies can be seen in the writing of early conservationists such as Aldo Leopold⁵, who place humankind within nature rather than having dominion over it. This view leans towards nature free of human management (accepting that humankind draws needs from nature); where nature is left to its own end, untamed; it celebrates wilderness or at least a wilder world.

The fundamental basis of what constitutes an ecocentric world view – that humans are within nature – suggests a different approach to nature conservation. An ecocentric world view sees the current environmental crises not as a series of technical challenges to be overcome by our ingenuity, but as a failure to understand our impact and interconnectedness with the totality of nature. This can be seen in the conflicting approaches to issues such as climate resilience, environmental pollution, collapse of pollinators and recent episodes of flooding.



Montaña Palentina in Northern Spain – the retreat of agriculture has led to the expansion of wolves and other animals and the return of woodland cover.

Photo: Mike Townsend

Rewilding as a product – what does it look like?

For many of those who have rallied to the rewilding movement, the priority is wilderness, or at least a greater emphasis on wildness. It represents one end of the spectrum of possible outcomes and has some very particular components. This view of rewilding is about freeing-up large areas of landscape, the recovery of lost species of large herbivores, the reintroduction of top predators such as wolves and lynx and the withdrawal of human management of the landscape.

However, the idea of 'wildness' and 'wilderness' as a place untouched by human influence is something of a mirage. Even if you stand in the remotest reaches of the Polar Regions you inhale an atmosphere enriched by carbon dioxide as a result of human-caused emissions, and the waters carry microscopic plastics and other pollutants. It is impossible to escape the influence of human activity.

Given the illusiveness of true wilderness, it might seem better to think of rewilding and wildness, as people living within an environment which has varying degrees of non-human nature; one in which we accept and encourage nature for the benefits we know it brings us, but also with a greater acceptance of nature following its own path. This will be represented quite differently in the centre of a large city, or a lowland farm, or in the Cairngorms. It is more about an active acceptance of nature and natural processes than it is a clear and unambiguous state of wildness.

In the uplands of Scotland a rewilded landscape might have large tracts of forest interspersed by mires with lynx and wild boar, with river courses interrupted by the activities of beavers, and with large areas unmanaged and left to their own ends. This seems unachievable and impractical in suburbs or cities, but the core idea could still prevail.

In her book *Rambunctious Garden*⁶ Emma Marris calls for a form of rewilding which is accepting of a wilder landscape in towns and cities and in everyday places; a hybrid of wild nature and human management which is neither towards wilderness, nor a bucolic past. This calls for a greater acceptance of unfettered nature close to home and to 'tread lightly' on the Earth.

Rewilding as a process – how do we do it?

Central to the idea of rewilding as a practice is that natural processes should be allowed to take their course. This includes natural succession on open habitat and fluctuations in population abundance and presence of species without deliberate intervention.

In particular the notion of trophic cascades is seen as critical to re-establishing natural processes - food webs which include all levels from plants and primary production through to top predators. By restoring trophic cascades the dynamic balance between various levels is maintained to the benefit of the diversity and resilience of the system. Because many of these ideas developed in practice in the United States, conservationists recognised that a key missing element was the absence of large carnivores which regulated the extent and behaviour of ungulate populations, which in turn impacted on the vegetation.

The reintroduction of Wolves into Yellowstone National Park⁷ is a celebrated example of how replacing this missing element had wide benefits for the ecosystem as a whole. The impact of wolves on the behaviour of herbivores, particularly in the river valleys, allowed the recovery of vegetation, the return of beavers and subsequently of a wide range of fish and mammals and other wildlife.

The example is compelling, but it is worth considering the context. Yellowstone National Park is an area of wild land of 8,983km² – roughly equivalent to Surrey, Sussex and Kent put together. The UK, with the exception of the northern half of Scotland, has high human population densities compared to most of Europe and very little and fragmented habitat.

This does not preclude the reintroduction of missing species including large carnivores such as lynx; however it does highlight the lack and the fragmented nature of forest cover and other habitats. Replacing missing parts of the functioning ecosystem need not be limited to large animals, and there may be elements that are more pertinent to many parts of the UK landscape. 'Reintroducing' trees and other species into the landscape can become part of the process of re-establishing key missing stages in developing natural processes. Mesocarnivores, such as pine martens, could herald a return of red squirrels, beavers could help create wetland habitat which has all but disappeared in many places, expanding 'scrub' could



The Brecon Beacons – whose treasured landscape? Would rewilding and a different vegetation matrix enhance it?
Photo: Mike Townsend

establish habitat for invertebrates which in turn support species of birds in decline, and so on.

Cultural wildness?

If the aim is to increase the sense of 'wildness' and have a greater acceptance of wild spaces everywhere, then the opportunities expand. Even within agricultural landscapes and urban areas there are opportunities for wild and unkempt spaces without prescribed objectives. The key is to stop thinking of nature as something just in special places and reserves, and to regard nature as everywhere and fundamental to the human ecosystem. While a total lack of human intervention in natural processes may be impractical (even in the uplands) withdrawing intervention as much as possible could be the intention. Rewilding, particularly where it extends from the centres of population to the tops of mountains, could form part of a new cultural landscape which embraces and lives within nature.

Staying true

The rewilding movement should focus attention on the main shift in thinking which the philosophy represents, to liberate natural processes. It should not be distracted by arresting or topical examples of the rewilding spectrum. For example, reintroducing large carnivores may present a challenge, but it is within the ambit of the mainstream conservation model. Large tracts turned over to nature are already part of the thinking of landscape-scale conservation, and are likely to be remote

from most people's lives. Harnessing natural processes for mitigating flood risk is already being considered as a cost effective option within the existing approach to land management. Focussing on the practice of rewilding as opposed to the philosophy runs the risk of bits being cherry-picked and absorbed into the current paradigm of land use.

The lexicon of rewilding is already drifting into use in other areas. The contribution of rewilding has been to challenge not just current practice, but foundational ideas of our relationship with the rest of the natural world. Rewilding needs to remain distinct in its worldview, and not be seduced into sacrificing the big idea for the gratification of acceptance.

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Scrub matrix at Montaña Palentina in Northern Spain – a wildlife-rich landscape emerging from the retreat of agriculture.
Photo: Mike Townsend



Purbeck – a place for future rewilding?

Is the approach of rewilding helpful or achievable in a place like Purbeck in Dorset, with a plethora of designations and a resident population of around 47,000? This article explains current conservation schemes in the area and explores if and how they could take a step toward rewilding.

ALISON TURNOCK

The recent book *Feral!*¹ and the establishment of the organisation Rewilding Britain² reflect the emergence of rewilding as a force in the conservation sector. Ennerdale in the Lake District and Knepp Estate in Sussex are inspiring models of rewilding projects, however they are occurring in places where the majority of the land in question is owned by one individual or a small number of organisations.

Purbeck lies to the west of the Poole and Bournemouth conurbation, and has a long history of partnership working with regard to conservation through the Purbeck Heritage Committee, Dorset Area of Outstanding Beauty (AONB) Partnership and more recently through the Wild Purbeck Nature Improvement Area (NIA). This article summarises how the NIA projects have contributed towards landscape-scale conservation in Purbeck, and considers the extent to which this constitutes rewilding.

Purbeck and the Nature Improvement Area

Purbeck stretches from Poole Harbour in the east to beyond Lulworth in the west and includes the following mosaic of habitats and landscapes:

- a limestone plateau with calcareous grassland and maritime cliff and slope along the south coast;
- a clay vale along the Corfe valley with dense hedgerows and small broadleaved woodlands;
- the Purbeck ridge to the north of this with chalk grassland, woodland and historic features;
- the heathland around and to the west of Poole Harbour;
- the valleys of the rivers Frome and Piddle.

The area includes the richest 10 km square in the UK for higher plant diversity, and around a quarter of it is designated internationally (as Special Protection Area, Special Area of Conservation or Ramsar) or nationally (as Site of Special Scientific