The wildness delusion

A defence of shared-willed land

Many conservationists need shaking out of lazy assumptions. But we should beware replacing those assumptions with another overconfident creed – particularly one that risks creating more divisions than connections.

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I long for scenes where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie
The grass below—above the vaulted sky.

John Clare, 'I Am' (1845)

The conflicts which affect our wild places are not between people and nature, but between different groups of people. Sometimes we love nature just because it isn't human. Sometimes we see ourselves as champions of nature, in a battle which is actually all amongst ourselves. Rewildling is the latest in a long line of standards behind which battle lines are drawn.

Professional conservation has been around long enough as a career for people to have developed some complacent certainties about what is good for nature, and when and where management helps or hinders nature's ability to flower. And like any profession, it needs to be grabbed by the shoulders and shaken up a bit, every so often. Now is one of those times, because the current approach largely isn't working, and following the Brexit decision we are entering a watershed period when everything is up for grabs.

The rewilding community sees its role, in part, to be to provide the arms to do that shaking up. But are rewilding's own certainties any healthier? In politics right now (and for politics read everyday relations between people across this whole teetering country), it should be pretty clear to anyone with good sense that the priority is to build bridges, find commonality, nurture the ingredients of trust. Does the approach being taken by advocates of rewilding do that? Does it heal, or does it massage old divisions and create new ones? While professing a language of goodness for people and nature, does it pave a way towards that goodness, or harbour misanthropic attitudes which will do harm in the longer term?

Since it quietly began life in the pages of *ECOS*, and latterly since it became the rhetorical cause célèbre of more high profile exponents, the rewilding community in Britain has become more noticed and more confident in stating a new case – or

perhaps an old case, in a new way – for reversing the decline of wild habitats and species in this country. Central in its doctrine are three notions: that we should restore wildness to large areas of our landscape by standing back and letting nature take its course; that we should assist the process by moving towards the reintroduction of missing top predators and other keystone species; and that the uplands in particular are ripe for releasing from the grip of subsistence agriculture and being allowed to find a new, more diverse ecological balance.

I have no issue with the application of these ideas in themselves. Conservation land management is rife with stale assumptions about the true value of arrested successions like heathland, and a less hands-on, more adventurous attitude to large-scale conservation land management would be a refreshing change. The spread of beavers and the return of wolves, if it could be achieved, would be a deeply poignant and wonderful moment for our islands' starved ecosystems. And livestock grazing for the sake of it, artificially supported by subsidy, seems perverse in some parts of the uplands.

But despite expecting to want to throw my hat into the rewilding ring with gusto, I find myself troubled by the form it has taken, and reluctant to clamber onto the bandwagon. I've wrestled with this for months now, trying to work out why I feel such ambivalence, and though I'm far from clear what the full reasons may be, I'm pretty sure they include what follows.

Human or natural?

At a core, philosophical level, the central tenets of rewilding rely on the assumptions that human beings are not 'natural', and things are generally better if humans aren't involved. The vision of nature-in-the-absence-of-humankind has a joyful, liberated honesty about it, which I fully understand (given the chance, I always gravitate to the wildest landscapes I can find). To stand back and let nature act freely - and then to be able viscerally to experience the fruits of that freedom as a human being, going back into a reasserted and unconstrained wilderness, has a recapturing-Eden quality to it. It resonates deeply with us as children of the post-industrial age, whose outlook is still strongly influenced by nineteenth century Romanticism. We see ourselves as latter day Wordsworths, longing to stride out across untamed and somehow fearful landscapes, thrilled by the knowledge that the wolves are watching us once again.

But the majestic wildness we voyeuristically hanker for in nature, can in equal measure become the wildness we consequently deny in ourselves. To wish for nature to be 'free' of human influence is to assume that to be influenced by humanity is to be imprisoned, somehow. Is that how we should see our puny lives? Are we part of this land, or not? Are we ashamed of our footprints? Surely we need a relationship with nature that affirms our legitimacy as part of it, rather than confirming our incongruity and our degeneracy.

If we put wild nature on a pedestal because it isn't human, we perpetuate the humans-are-not-natural dichotomy which is at the root of much of what has gone

wrong for our species. And it's defeatist, somehow: 'Humans only make things worse - leave nature alone and everything will work out alright'. No, for heaven's sake! We shouldn't see presence or absence of human influence as the arbiter of what is good: it's the *quality* and *kind* of influence that matters.

There is a strand of thinking in rewilding that sees the release of land from human management as constituting some sort of atonement for the wrongs we have committed on it in the past. It smacks of the Fall, of a basic assumption that we are sinful creatures and that wherever we lay our hands, we spoil. I used to think that, when I was 15. I hoped humanity would perish, because of the damage it had done. But I was a misanthropic adolescent, then. I want to see self-willed land expressing that will, but I think I've worked out, all these years later, that the 'self' within the land is no different from the 'self' in me.

Them and us

I've attended a couple of rewilding discussions which lapse into the metropolitan bloodsport of demonising farmers as a race, directing ill-educated ire at upland farmers who are actually the most low-input land managers of any. Yes, the sheep farming industry is too ubiquitous and far-reaching, sustained by subsidy and often making little sense in economic or environmental terms. But it has a place, and a history, and a culture, and a case. To imply that it is expendable because it happens to occupy the urban dwellers' playground is simply to invite the dismissive conclusion that Rewilding is a distorted view seen only from the urban end of a very long telescope.

More importantly, it forgets that human joy in nature is not just a voyeuristic spectator experience requiring Goretex and binoculars, but is also experienced through physical engagement with dirt, with wood and with flesh. It is about using our hands – turning the soil, tending livestock, harvesting, making things. That's where so much human wisdom, culture, sense of self, and scope for continuing well-being, stems from.

The 'sheepwrecked' argument, despite its legitimate essence, risks being used with such rhetorical exaggeration that it polarizes the upland/lowland divide even further, emphasising different world views, and implying that the uplands should become essentially just a playground for nature lovers, albeit with the economic dividends which might flow from that, for some. It also plays perfectly into the hands of those who advocate a 'Land Spare' approach which corrals nature into the uneconomic uplands, while the lowlands, where most of us live, remain a food factory, only even more so.

Moral high ground

I'm not arguing that conservation can avoid conflict. Bad practices and policies need to be confronted: grouse moors, badger culls, and yes, sheepwrecking. But confrontation which creates no more than antagonism on one side, and a sense of camaraderie amongst the righteous on the other, may feel good but gets us nowhere. It feels good to be part of a movement, but as witnessed by some parts

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of our current political parties, the reality of whether or not you're likely to succeed can all too easily become less important than remaining true to the group's purist doctrine. There's a darker side in here too, a zealotry coming from a position of fierce conviction of speaking up for nature's real best interests. Yet the rewilding idea is actually just another phase in the cultural evolution of western attitudes to nature. For all its romantic notions of championing the release of nature from its shackles, rewilding is in truth another land management choice, just as much as any other intervention.

The Rewilding Britain website quotes the famous aphorism of Aldo Leopold: "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect". That statement has been a lodestone for me throughout my working life. But I feel it is being misused in this context, because the rewilding movement is not properly acknowledging the place of people in the community of the land. When human beings pursue their needs and express their will on the land, they do so in a spectrum of ways between the peaceful and the violent, between the constructive and the destructive - between that which builds, and that which takes away. But what we do is not inherently artificial. It isn't inherently better if we aren't there. To think otherwise is to deny our humanity, and our nature too.

Shared-willed land

In a blink of geological time we have gone from being hunter-gatherers, through shifting agriculturalists, to settled villagers, to post-industrial urban dwellers. Reading the arguments around the subject of rewilding, from its early appearances in *ECOS* through to the present, it's very clear just how confused we are as a species, given the rapidity of that change. The urban dweller dreams of the simplicity of tilling the soil in peaceful contemplation. The rewilder dreams of rediscovering the visceral fear of wilderness breathing down our necks. Neither knows what nature really is any more, and neither can grasp the natural self. Both are nostalgic, both are often fanciful, and both risk fiddling while Eden burns.

Rewilders condemn 'mainstream' conservationists for seeking to control nature and fit it into preconceived bucolic templates, refusing to let it get out of hand. There's plenty of that attitude around, and plenty of effort and money wasted trying to hold back tides of scrub, prevent things from growing where they supposedly shouldn't, and routing offending invasives. But that doesn't mean that conservation managers are simply short-sighted control freaks. It shows that, while triyng to do the best for wildlife in the diminishing places where it thrives, they are sometimes too heavy-handed, sometimes too wedded to management plans, and sometimes get misled. But they do at least have the virtue of displaying those frailties while actually getting their hands dirty.

I fully acknowledge that some well-regarded initiatives which would class themselves as representing rewilding in practice, do indeed break their backs and scar their hands in the cause of their vision. But I sense that rather too much of the most energetic talk about rewilding lacks that real-world grounded-ness, and the humility – towards people as well as nature - that comes with it.

The decades of land management experience built up since conservation bodies first began acquiring nature reserves, itself built on centuries of traditional knowledge, at least has the quality of being honed in reality, rather than developed through some sort of rhetorical distillation of true doctrine. It has many faults, and it badly needs new vision and new energy, but it still represents our best attempts yet at creating what I would like to think of as Shared-Willed Land. There are generations-worth of learning yet needed before we might feel we are doing that sharing properly, and any wise practical conservation manager knows that. But in the meantime, nature reserve wardens and other low-intensity land managers tend not to turn into tub-thumping zealots, for a reason: they've got jobs to do, and they're tired when they get home.

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