

Rewilding in the UK – hidden meanings, real emotions

The word rewilding has become common currency in nature conservation narratives, but it rarely features in wider discussions on land use. The very mention of the word – especially without context or meaning – stirs up reactions that can equally engage or enrage people. This article reflects on discussions about rewilding at some events in Spring 2016.

ROB YORKE

Where I live in South Wales, the landscape is changing in front of my eyes. Due to reducing human and sheep populations, the Black Mountains are undergoing their own rewilding. Century old ash trees sprout from moribund farmsteads, stone walls crumble in 60-year old conifer forests as nature emerges from human structures. Nature envelopes our home – field voles sneak through doors, tawny owls hoot from chimney pots, hornets hum in bedrooms, stoats drag rabbits into the loft, masonry bees drill into walls, slow worms slither over floors, ox-eye daisies push through paving slabs and spiders weave webs over still warm teacups.

No wonder, 30 years on from the Chernobyl disaster, the official exclusion zone and other human-devoid areas demonstrate how nature reclaims territory on a grand scale.

Here in the UK, over our 243,000 km², we are anything but free of humans. 65 million British people are concentrated into 10% of the land surface of urban and suburban areas, much of it in south-east England, surrounded by 75% countryside with 13% afforested, all subject to shifting baseline perceptions of how the land should both look and be utilised.¹ This shifting syndrome of how we view changes in landscapes - from when the first agriculturalists cleared land 10,000 years ago to new hedges planted on arable farms last winter - influences our view of rewilding.

Baseline tensions

Conflicts over land use are advancing to the fore as society becomes more attuned to the pressures on the environment from an increasingly consumerist society, divorced from where food comes from, yet seeking succour from experiencing nature and getting rewards from leisure. While there are various takes on rewilding, some based on single issue proposals, the range of public benefits can be contested in this process-led conservation. Rewilding is still sometimes used as a challenge against existing land use (forest and woodland before sheep, trees over grouse moor), rather than as a tool for conservation, such as less prescriptive habitat management plans.

A piece in *British Wildlife* (June 2016) lauds rewilding as nature “allowed it’s head...animals (including livestock) behaving naturally, crashing through thickets,

rooting up turf".² One person's scrub is another's land abandonment, just as long as it's not our front lawns. The very excitement around rewilding usurps existing conservation practices and land-use norms. But these norms are merely part of the shifting baseline syndrome as to what we perceive as normal. To confront some of these norms, let us garner a range of views as to why society is still very much deconstructed around what it wants from rewilding.

'Hey, what's your take on rewilding?'

From a random selection of those attending an April 2016 BES symposium with the Cambridge Conservation Initiative on conservation policy (mainly ecological scientists), I asked the simple question "what's your take on rewilding?" A student opened with the gambit that rewilders "do not have much time for agriculture", with another adding that "farmers just take the subsidy, they don't provide anything" (a view adopted via a polemicist's talk). Many liked the idea of rewilding but felt the need to be honest: "it's an experiment and it should be controlled", whereas a National Trust employee was ready to leave areas, however big or small, "for nature to do what it wants to do". Whether mink or marten, rhododendron or rowan, there was to be no intervention.

Another participant, interested in carnivores, wanted to go further. To win the war against human domination over land management. Putting aside his confusion of how farm subsidies were paid to landowners, there was to be no compromise, no consensus because it was time landowning interests were overturned because "we are all looking in the same direction, no one daring to look elsewhere".

"The famous wolf must replace the famous grouse whisky in Scotland"

Participant at BES conference

A senior RSPB scientist was a 'big fan' of rewilding as an idea, but had concerns over scale to make it really work and "where humans would still have to intervene". A politician said that conservationists should be more open, honest about the whole picture: "it's not just about new habitats but also manmade pylons and oil refineries" so that we find it "easier to handle the whole picture of modern ecosystems – wild and unwild". A social scientist, a rare breed in a natural science environment, was "really intrigued by it" but conflicted by whether rewilding railed against conservation control or was in fact "the most incredibly hubristic type of control you can image as to what goes into any ecosystem".

Others were more emphatic. A senior Birdlife official thought it was a "fantastic thing - bringing back iconic wildlife that we'd wiped out, to return habitats that have been human-modified to something more natural". A National Park ecologist mooted that the "country needs to debate with landowners, whether conservation, a very established industry, should be part of something exciting – something not seen that often in the countryside". An ecologist working in Africa liked the idea that "it got people talking about new approaches but was concerned that we often didn't understand it from landowners' point of view".



NEIL BENNETT

Excitement rules

The overriding word applied to rewilding is 'exciting'. When I've hosted debates on rewilding, whether with farmers or non-farmers, I've always sought to frame rewilding between passive - 'humans stepping back, allowing nature to determine what happens next' and active - 'reintroducing absent wildlife'. You can guess which one of these, especially the media, find the most exciting.

Part of my introduction on rewilding is scripted like this: "Disciples of rewilding love its unstable, incoherent, radical raucous joy in breaking up a staid conservation industry. To its disbelievers, rewilding risks destabilising rare species, allowing invasive ones in, upsetting management of nature reserves, a threat to farming practices". To date, I've found much of the running is from 'disciples', who, starting off on the wrong foot, find themselves wading through treacle when engaging with the various land-use stakeholders and local interests. They are knocked back by disbelievers, partly a knee-jerk reaction, as we fail to frame the whole context for rewilding and the scope of issues it can embrace.

Social subtleties in communication are often missed. How the matter is presented is key, especially when proposing a conversation with (not a 'talk at') a roomful of –

those 'locals' making a living from the land most affected by change of use. Hosting a talk on rewilding at Cwmyoy village hall, in deepest Monmouthshire, attracting 15 hill farmers within a crowd of 50 was no easy feat. Replacing and rephrasing the potentially inflammatory flyer on rural notice boards, I rung round key farmers to urge them to hear and engage in conversations that involved them and their livelihoods.

Problem is, there is no conservation psychology text book; it's not what you say, it's sometimes who you are labelled as, and how you say it. Not to mention what you've said, or are perceived to have said, on other matters. As *Countryfile Magazine* reported, the majority of farmers at Cwmyoy were "surprisingly pragmatic and open to it". Perhaps not hearing it for the first time from one or other's point of view helped. There is room for more independent expression, less partisan posturing, in bringing along those, conservationists all, that may "resent having change forced upon them and want to be involved in decisions – even if rewilding is a consequence of a lack of farming".

The hundred-odd audience at the discussion I chaired on 'Elements of rewilding - perceptions and prejudices' at the May 2016 Hay Literary Festival opened up a wide range of topics in a short hour, with roving microphones enabling audience input. The all-female panel comprised the National Farmers Union (Batters), Foundation for Common Land (Aglionby) and Wales Wild Wood (Wynne-Jones). Discussion ranged over whether we needed a strict definition of rewilding (no), splitting agriculture in the uplands into 'agri' and 'culture' (resisted by some), slowing the flow (yes), tree planting (overhyped), deer control, tourism (not every farmer's cut out for B&B), lynx (insignificant at the event, this arguably spurious remark caused excitement), badgers (predators prefer easier meat), cultural landscapes (who's?) to shouldn't we look after red squirrels first?...

"One theme that kept being emphasised was the desirability of avoiding conflict and trying to find consensus, rather than the sometimes stronger language that you see."

Audience blog on The Hay Festival

Defensive positions were voiced at Hay, new concerns mooted, consensus found on working together and agreement that rewilding means different things to different people. There was a sense that early stages of rewilding would require some form of management – from dealing with invasive species to pragmatic operations around species reintroduction. As one of the panellists said, food production and the environment have a shared ambition. In my view, it is well-nigh impossible to discuss changes in land use without acknowledging its impacts in providing us with affordable food.

Farm and funk

Tensions with farming and with other land uses such as forestry and fieldsports, are rarely engaged on in detail by those interested in rewilding. A lack of nuanced inquisition as to how land is used, bypassing historical context of why farmers do what they do (for example the post-war push for food production from marginal



A mid-Wales pine marten observed as part of the Vincent Wildlife Trust's Pine Marten Recovery Project.
Photo: <http://www.toonphoto.com/>

land and livestock 'headage' payments), misses the opportunity to find common ground between different land users.

Idealists venture out into the countryside, thinking the zeitgeist is with them, armed with novel 'funky' ideas to rescue a sheep-shagged countryside. Farmers, themselves as conservationists upset by how they've had to change practices to stay afloat (losing beloved lapwings as a result of 1950s government-led rudimentary agricultural intensification), fall back to entrenched mentalities forged in challenges around producing food.

Meanwhile next generation sustainable intensification, such as the world of hydroponics and robotic precision farming, uses less resources and less land. This might free up areas to rewild and needs to be explored further but involves paradigm shifts in how we perceive farming, forestry and aquaculture, primary industries on which we depend.

"Let us move forward together, not back to rewilding."

Farmer in the Black Mountains

Discussions, often on single issues, can polarise opinions and muddy productive debate. Let's be more honest in the discussion. What do we want? Seeking change for the sake of change? Disruption is a fashionable term in the ways that rewilding has shaken up conservation, but it may lay false trails of win-wins that don't exist. Ecosystem services can clash against each other, for example the tradeoffs between tourism and capercaillie, blanket scrub and wildfire risk. Well planned vigorous conifer woodland is required in the uplands as much as any stunted native woodland. We should be thinking holistically, and plan ahead with trees more resilient to environmental change than some of our existing species.

"The UK public is overwhelmingly in favour of beaver reintroduction. In a democracy that should be decisive"

A beaver enthusiast

Are we ready for 'red in tooth and claw' elements of ecosystems, unravelling as they see fit, not how we anticipated? One outcome may be iconic rare species eating charismatic endangered species. Troublesome apex predators, coexisting with Transylvanian shepherds for generations, are shot in Romania, while the Dutch lowland rewilding of Oostvaardersplassen has not been without its controversy over herbivores dying on the roadside. Our quest to experience wildlife conservation first-hand may even compromise the welfare of reintroduced animals (two lynx released in Germany had to be recaptured for being too tame) but most are likely desperate to get away from humans and lethal roads. Those who release mammals unauthorised into the countryside may be signing their death warrant; as witnessed by the beavers in Tayside.

Fear not?

The pine marten recovery project in Mid Wales (existing native ones are hanging on) is an exemplar in several ways. In remote and sparsely populated areas, with careful communication, and not allowing rewilding to be perceived as a threat, the Vincent Wildlife Trust has worked with local communities, gamekeepers and landowners to find ways for martens to coexist with existing land users while petitioning government agencies to control rogue pine martens once established.

It is ironic that our fear of the loaded word 'rewilding' can disengage some people from debating the topic without prejudice and perception. Impatient with negotiations and trade-offs, many fear change in the landscape and whereas others push for 'societal debate on conceptions of nature that should be incorporated into conservation policy.³ Perhaps we fear shifting our own baseline expectations.

Is rewilding for us or for wildlife? Let us accept that an over-ambitious zeal to chase public opinion might be better tempered by realistic opportunities to deliver public benefits. Perhaps there is no shortcut from how we live our own lives: look closer to home, take smaller steps in rewilding, locate where common ground lies, enable



The Ennerdale rewilding project has allowed the river Liza to keep a dynamic course which in turn has helped flood resilience and water quality in the Ennerdale Valley.

Photo: Jennifer Gooden

'top-down' policy to stimulate 'bottom-up' co-operation and don't fear harnessing tensions. Perhaps these are priorities before trumpeting overly challenging large carnivore projects that risk conflict stalling the excitement around rewilding before it's even got off the ground. The plaque on the wall of Cwmyoy village hall in the partially abandoned Black Mountains speaks volumes: "By agreement small things grow, by discord the greatest go to pieces."

References and notes

1. The urban landscape accounts for 10.6% of England, 1.9% of Scotland, 3.6% of Northern Ireland and 4.1% of Wales according to the National Ecosystem Assessment.
2. 'The great rewilding experiment at Knepp Castle' Peter Marren. *British Wildlife* June 2016
3. 'A rewilding agenda for Europe: creating a network of experimental reserves'. P Jepson. *Ecography* July 2015

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