Meet the troublemaker

Author and journalist **George Monbiot** has recently stirred up controversy with a call to remove sheep from our hills and return the landscape to wilderness. But what drives his desire for debate on rural issues? Rob Yorke found out

Illustration: Tracey Tucker

George Monbiot's latest provocation is all about rewilding upland Britain; allowing nature to decide what happens next by reducing sheep numbers, afforesting the hills and reintroducing 'absent' wildlife such as wild boar and beavers – ideas promoted in his current book *Feral*. Rural commentator Rob Yorke managed to ambush him at the Hay Festival of Literature and the Arts to discover more about this self-confessed professional troublemaker.

Rob Yorke (RY): Where did you spend your childhood?

George Monbiot (GM): I was brought up in the Oxfordshire countryside next to a old golf course that had returned, I suppose rewilded, to an amazing habitat mix of scrub, dry valleys and Neolithic flint mines. It was perfect for a bunch of young lads doing what kids do in the countryside: roaming, making camps, fishing, birdwatching, botanising and having lots of wars. I was quite nerdy on natural history.

RY: How would you describe yourself today?

GM: A campaigning environmental journalist. A few book critics say that I'm having a midlife crisis. That's not a bad thing. As I've not much time left before I turn into an old crock, I want to focus on where it takes me, to look back on what kind of world I would want to live in. I prefer to call it a midlife reflection.

Having studied zoology, I went into the BBC Natural History unit to do investigative environmental radio programmes. Things went well until the team was disbanded and I went abroad writing books on similar subjects. It was a very miserable and grim business: everywhere you looked there was destruction, degradation and stupidity – it was like passing through the veil of tears. That's why, after falling into despair with all the stuff I was covering, I've now found such a source of hope and optimism with rewilding.

RY: Is that how you wish to engage us with nature – through your own journey?

GM: Yes, partly by showing there is hope, that it can go into reverse, but what really gets me going is explaining to people what was here beforehand. When you tell kids in particular about straight-tusked elephants once roaming the British countryside, it's a direct connection with the flora and fauna of today.

RY: So you're engaging with kids but disengaging with hill farmers?

GM: Yes, a regrettable outcome!

> *"It's often perceived that the countryside is just about farming"*

RY: Is it in fact easier to engage with nature, than engage with the complexities of a working countryside?

GM: Yes, it is more complicated, but we've come to see the countryside and farming as synonymous.

It's often perceived that the countryside is just about farming. In Wales, which is more rural than much of Britain, farmers are only five percent of the population but yet have 95 percent of the 'voice'. Sheep could be reduced on the hill by changes in the subsidy system. My own obsession is to revoke a EU subsidy-linked condition stating that scrub must be kept in check to enable land to be brought back into food production; but with modern machinery that would be easy today.

RY: So would you like to see the National Trust's Beatrix Potter estate in the Lake District 'roughed up'?

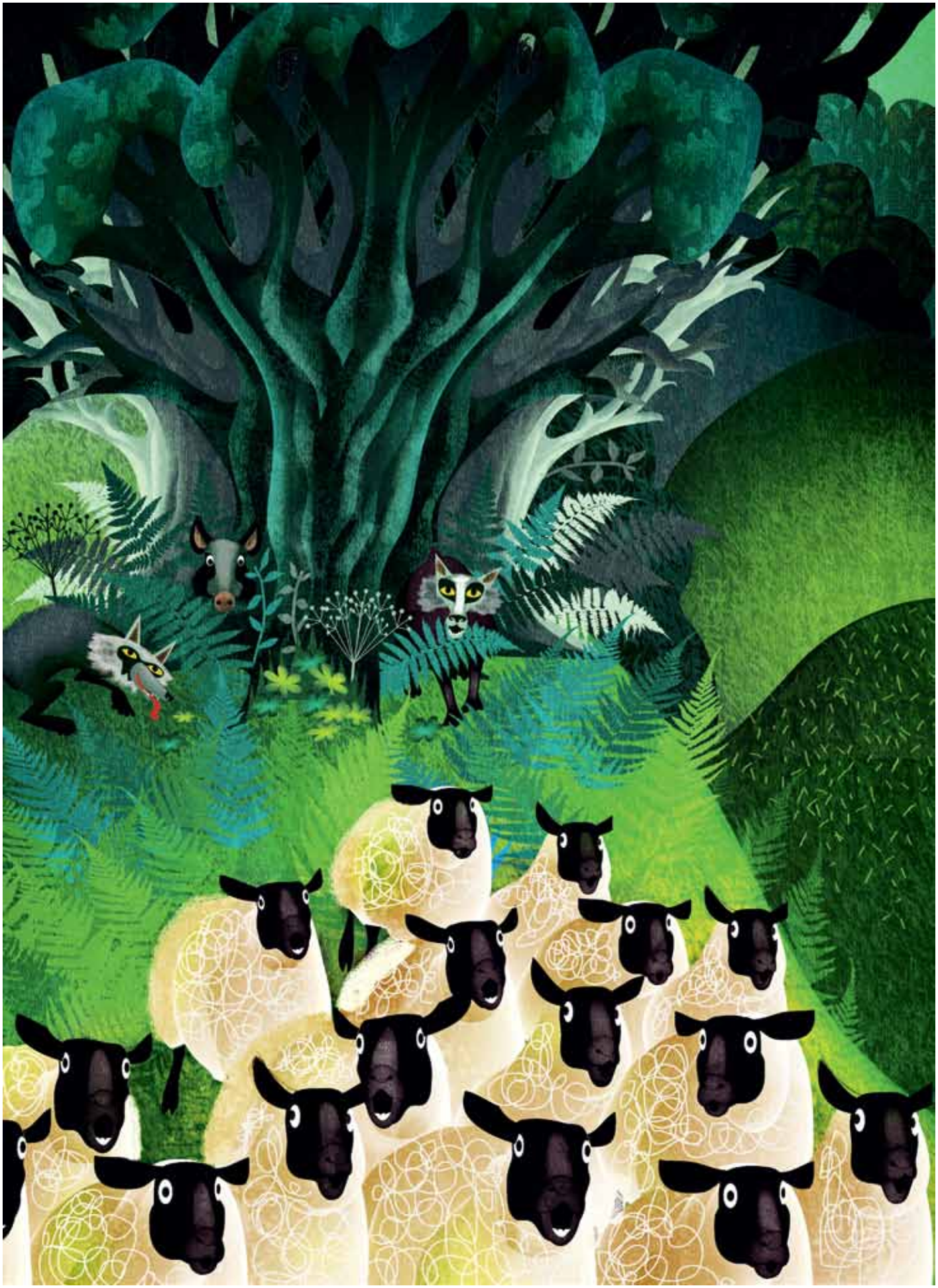
GM: To their credit they are doing a bit of rewilding at nearby Ennerdale, perhaps not taking it back as far as I would like it to go, but there's a lot to latch on to. As most of the Lake District is astonishingly impoverished and much of the common land is overgrazed, it would be good to see more rewilding in 'Beatrixville'.

RY: What's your favourite part of the UK?

GM: North Norfolk saltmarshes. They are self willed, always changing, not heavily managed and no one goes there. The birdlife in winter is exquisite; one of my favourite sights is watching the short-eared owls hunting waders over the flats.

RY: Is it habitat or species that interest you the most?

GM: It's the dynamic interaction between both. And this is where my complaint against conservation comes in. Conservationists are very much into pickling ecosystems, making sure nothing changes, allowing no dynamism or succession. Not in all cases, but some nature reserves are a depressing experience. Just read the management plan – everything is pegged down to the nearest percentage point. That's not »



» nature they're conserving, that's a clinical museum. What's wonderful about nature is the unexpected things, the surprises it throws up as species interact with each other.

RY: Respected ecologist George Peterken said that some heavily wooded areas, such the Wye Valley, may not be so rich in wildlife as when the area was coppiced for charcoal. Can we have both landscape and biodiversity?

GM: There's not always a conflict. Part of the problem is that worked woodland doesn't have a build up of deadwood that biodiversity needs. We miss deadwood; in virgin forest 70 percent is deadwood. Of Britain's missing species, a high proportion are deadwood species, while many 'old' ecologists believe that there is more life in deadwood than in living wood. Coppicing imperils a far greater number of endangered invertebrates than it supports. Yes, there would have been some natural coppicing in the past – because of elephants – but too much of it limits the possible number of habitats.

RY: Ok, so you remove sheep from the hills and bracken would overshadow everything; we would have to wait years for deadwood?

GM: My feeling is that every succession stage is fascinating. To deal with the bracken, you bring in a keystone species such as wild boar, an ecosystem 'engineer' that has a disproportionally powerful impact on the environment around it – they are great at creating conditions for trees. Beavers are another keystone species.

RY: But people complain about wild boar and want them culled when they dig up their gardens (particularly in the Forest of Dean).

GM: It's less of any issue in the featureless, treeless Cambrian 'desert' in mid-Wales, where there are no gardens for a very long way. But of course not everyone is ready for a reintroduction of these species and will complain – I understand that.

RY: We really want to see nature near us. From the M4 corridor, would we go anywhere near these wild, wooded places?

GM: I think connecting people to nature is a good thing – but there's no guarantee that if people are close to it, they are going to connect to it. I noticed this in rural mid-Wales; proximity doesn't necessary mean proper contact but I agree that we are a bit fearful of trees. Many love the openness of the uplands, whereas I just lose the will to live when up there. Let's have something that we can both enjoy – some openness and some woodland.

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RY: What would you plant in the uplands?

GM: We need much more vegetation in the uplands, and what absorbs rainwater best? Forest – the denser the root structure the better. The small-leaved lime is my favourite tree; it represents old, wild wood. It's a magnificent tree when allowed to grow large, with its fine shape and beautiful daffodil-yellow leaves in autumn. As to which tree species to plant, it depends on where you are and the nearest seed source; birch would be good to start with, then perhaps oak via acorns carried in by jays.

RY: There's not many jays at 550m (1,800ft), so what about more hardy, pioneering conifers?

GM: Sure. Scots pine do well – even on mountain tops, in fact it should be called British, not Scots pine! Look, even the grimmest and darkest sitka spruce plantation has more invertebrate and bird life than the sheep pastures surrounding them.

RY: What did you think of the National Ecosystem Assessment (the first assessment of the state and value of the UK's natural environment including its provision of ecosystem services such as food, soil, landscape and recreation (uknea.unep-wcmc.org)?

GM: It was done in such depth, I loved it, it's so good. There are, for instance, so many cultural ecosystems. My criticism of the National Trust's view of a cultural landscape is that it is a Downton Abbey one – harking back to just a 100 years ago – a classic conservationist's approach. After I argued on Radio 3 with a former director-general of the Trust about cultural landscapes, she came up to me afterwards and said that, hang on, of course wolves were part of our cultural landscape until the 17th century.

It may all be a question of which cultural landscape, but let's just have a few more of them.

George Monbiot's latest book *Feral* (Allen Lane, ISBN 978-1846147487), poses some searching questions as to how and for whom, we undertake conservation today.