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REWILDING VENTURES IN THE UK

Peter Jones and Daphne Comfort

Introduction

One of the proposals in the *'Landscapes Review'* (Gov. UK 2019), which embraced National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), published in September 2019, was the need for *'strengthened management plans'* to *set 'clearer priorities and actions for nature recovery, including, but not limited to, wilder areas and the response to climate change.'* Further, the review outlined a *'role for wilder areas'* and argued that *'National Parks and AONB Management Plans should support and encourage efforts to create wilder areas in some places'* and provided a short half page cameo case study of the Knepp Wildland Project in West Sussex, which *'has been devoted to pioneering rewilding'* (Gov. UK 2019). That aside, rewilding, simply defined as increasing the role of natural processes within landscapes, received no explicit attention in the 168-page review. More generally, Brown et al. (2012) suggested that rewilding was *'receiving a great deal of practical and political attention'* and while it was a *'relatively new but contested discourse'* (Pellis and de Jong 2016), it could be *'a new paradigm for nature'* (Sandon and MacDonald 2015). With these thoughts in mind, this article outlines the variety of definitions and origins of the concept of rewilding, illustrates some elements of rewilding within the UK and offers some general reflections on the rewilding process.

The Concept of Rewilding

For some people, the term rewilding conjures up images of wolves, wildcats and bears and to a lesser extent, golden eagles, beavers and wild pigs, but rewilding has much wider scope and there are a wide range of rewilding opportunities and approaches. Reduced management alone, may achieve the restoration of natural processes, or the process may be actively pursued. At one end of this spectrum, where seed sources no longer exist in an area, trees can be planted to facilitate vegetation succession and at the other end the reintroduction of carnivores and herbivores can also help to restore natural processes.

That said, there is little consensus on the definition of the term rewilding. Lorimer et al. (2015), for example, claimed *'the term rewilding has been applied to diverse concepts and practices'* and Jepson (2015) suggested *'the term rewilding is gaining traction in conservation science and policy but lacks easy definition.'* Jorgensen (2015), noted *'the term rewilding sounds as if it should have a straightforward meaning "to make wild again." But in truth the term has a complex history and a host of meanings have been ascribed to it.'* Wentworth and Alison (2016) defined rewilding as *'reinstating natural processes that would have occurred in the absence of human activity'* while for Nogues-Bravo et al. (2016) rewilding is *'the proposed restoration of ecosystems through the re-introduction of species.'*

More extensively, Rewilding Britain (2019a) suggested that *'rewilding is the large-scale restoration of ecosystems where nature can take care of itself. It seeks to reinstate natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species – allowing them to shape the landscape and the habitats within.'* Brown et al. (2012) defined rewilding as *'a strategy for*

the conservation of complete, self-sustaining ecosystems, primarily involving the protection and, where necessary, reintroduction, of populations of keystone species in large, connected reserve networks.' In a similar vein, for Shepers and de Bruin (2015), *'rewilding ensures natural processes and wild species to play a much more prominent role in the land- and seascapes, meaning that after initial support, nature is allowed to take more care of itself.'*

The origins of the term rewilding has been traced to the US but the first use of the term is contested. Macmillan's Dictionary (2019) suggested that Dave Foreman, the co-founder of Earth First, the radical environmental protection society, coined the term in 1990. Jepson (2015) attributed the origins of the term to Soule and Noss (1998), almost a decade later. That said, Jorgensen (2015) suggested that the concept of rewilding is also linked to the concept of wilderness, seen as a *'conservation target'* and which has *'a long history'*, with the idea of wilderness having intrinsic value, being traced back to the nineteenth century.

In a similar vein, different origins are claimed for rewilding in Europe. In outlining a *'Short History of Rewilding in Europe',* Shepers and Jepson (2016), for example, suggested two factors played a major part in developing rewilding. Firstly, the growing interest in functional ecology, which exposed *'the extent to which we in Europe have come to accept degraded ecosystems'* (Shepers and Jepson 2016). Secondly, large scale abandonment of land in some regions of Europe with the attendant wildlife revival, provided *'a historic opportunity for nature conservation and to build new rural economies on wild values'* (Shepers and Jepson 2106). Further, Shepers and Jepson (2016) reported that in 2008, several nature conservationists in the Netherlands, Sweden and the UK began to explore the possibilities of steering abandoned landscapes towards a wilder future, and this, in turn inspired the creation of Rewilding Europe in 2011. At the same time, Jepson (2015) suggested that the emergence of ecological network planning and a growing interest in *'naturalistic grazing'*, in the first decade of the twenty first century, generated *'a suite of principles that inform contemporary rewilding.'*

Rewilding in the UK

Rewilding is still very much in its infancy in the UK, but Rewilding Britain (2019b), founded in 2015, reported on a number of projects that they described as having *'elements of rewilding.'* Carrifan Wildwood, which is owned by the Borders Forest Trust, was a bare glen in the Scottish Borders, where centuries of heavy grazing by sheep and goats had left it in a barren state. The 650 hectare valley was purchased in 2000 by a group within the local community, who raised the necessary finance from public donations, with the aim of restoring it to a wild and largely wooded area, *'evoking the pristine countryside of six thousand years ago'* (Rewilding Britain 2019c). During the first decade, over half a million trees were planted in the lower valley and in subsequent years thousands of shrubs and trees have been planted in the high hanging valleys to recreate montane scrub and the natural tree line. Volunteers are have been involved in tree planting and the maintenance of fences to keep out sheep and goats and there has been significant culling of Roe deer.

The Cambrian Wildwood project, in the northern part of the Cambrian Mountains in West Wales, is a community initiative, designed to restore natural habitats and return lost native animals, including pine marten, red squirrel, and eventually wild boar and beaver, initially to some 300 hectares of degraded upland valley and moorland. Over time, the aim is

to extend the project to 3,000 hectares, through a mixture of land purchase and partnerships with neighbouring landowners. Another goal will be *'to reconnect people* with *nature by providing rich experiences in wild landscapes'* and *'to create trails and wild camping zones'* and to organise *'programmes for schools and groups who don't normally engage with nature'* (Rewilding Britain 2019d).

Wild Ennerdale, *'a nature first minimalist approach',* is *'helping to create a wilder valley in England's Lake District'* (Rewilding Britain 2019e). The remote valley on the northwestern edge of the Lake District National Park has been evolving more naturally for over a decade, due to less intensive human intervention and more reliance on natural processes. The project, established in 2003, a partnership venture, involving the Forestry Commission, United Utilities, Natural England and the National Trust, has brought a number of changes. The conifer forest is becoming more diverse as planting and natural regeneration of native broadleaves is diversifying the former conifer forest. Sheep numbers have been reduced as areas of intensive valley bottom and forest grazing have been increasingly given over to native Galloway cattle, which has in turn enabled the valley bottom to become more open and wild. Further, the Marsh Fritillary butterfly, formerly extinct throughout Cumbria, has been reintroduced into the Valley and the removal and re-engineering of bridges has allowed fish passage and gravel movements and has helped to restore natural aquatic processes.

Not all the projects chosen by Rewilding Britain to illustrate elements of rewilding are in upland areas. The River Wandle project, for example, is described by Rewilding Britain (2019f), as *'a fantastic rewilding project restoring life to a river in the heart of London.'* Once very badly polluted by the many mills and tanneries along its 11 mile route from Croydon to where if joins the River Thames at Wandsworth, the river is in the process of being restored to a chalk stream. The Wandle Trust, an environmental charity dedicated to restoring and enhancing the river, runs monthly community cleanups, enlisting the help of volunteers to remove rubbish dumped in the water, it has created passages to enable eels to move upstream and children in local schools have been raising trout to restock the river.

The Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST), is a community led initiative designed to *'rewild the seas around Arran and the Clyde'* (Rewilding Britain 2019g). The project was established by two local divers, who had become increasingly concerned about the decline in Arran's marine habitats, caused by bottom trawling and scallop dredging within 5 kilometers of the coast. Rewilding Britain (2019g) reported that *'the resulting dramatic recovery in the bay's marine life has helped to sustain the livelihood of those dependent on fishing and tourism. It has increased the popularity of the area as a diving site and tourist destination. Just as importantly, it is educating future generations on the need for marine conservation.'*

All the current Rewilding Britain projects are relatively small scale, compared to rewilding ventures in Europe. Under the banner *'Wilder Nature'* Rewilding Europe (2019), supports *'natural grazing'* in 16 pilot areas in 9 countries. These pilot areas cover some 15,000 hectares, with the largest being in the Velebit Mountains in Croatia, Faia Brava in Portugal and the Danube Delta in Romania, Moldova and Ukraine. However, there is growing interest in developing larger scale projects within the UK. On the one hand, Rewilding Britain (2019h) reported that it is working with a range of partners to *'make large scale rewilding a reality'* and here the focus will be on allowing nature to be the driver.

More specifically, Rewilding Britain plans to establish at least three pioneering rewilding pilot projects over the next 10 years. The focus will be on offering an opportunity to demonstrate a workable model for rewilding, that will be developed with, and for, the benefit of local communities.

On the other hand, a small number of large projects within the UK have some elements of rewilding. Cairngorms Connect (2019) for example, is a partnership of land managers, committed to a 200-year vision to enhance habitats, species and ecological processes across a vast area within the Cairngorms National Park in Northern Scotland. Cairngorms Connect covers some 600 square kilometers (60,000 hectares), and it includes a wide range of landscapes including a central mountain massif, woodlands, lakes, blanket bogs and wetlands and it provides habitats for a range of rare plant and animal species.

The work of the partnership currently has a twin focus, namely restoration projects and the predator project. The restoration projects embrace a range of activities including, restoring watercourses and floodplains to a more natural state, enhancing woodlands, restructuring Scots pine plantations, restoring high altitude woodland and montane scrub, managing deer populations to enable recovery of damaged habitats and restoring blanket bogs. The restructuring of Scots pine plantations involves thinning unnaturally dense plantations, diversifying the plantations by retaining more deformed and over-crowned trees and creating space around birch, rowan and juniper trees, and creating tangles of deadwood for wildlife habitats.

In recognising that predator species, including, golden eagle, hen harrier, peregrine and merlin, have been returning to the Cairngorms in recent decades, and that other species, such as capercaillie, are under threat, the predator project has a number of elements. Namely, to ascertain baseline information on predator and prey species within the Cairngorms Connect area, to examine the ecology of predator-prey relationships, and to generate interest in predators and their behaviour. Within the predator project, several initiatives are underway including a Ph. D. programme at Aberdeen University designed to explore the changing predation interactions and pressures; the annual monitoring of voles, capercaillie and raptors; and a study of the predators that consume deer grallochs (entrails) after the animals have been shot.

Discussion

A variety of projects, which include elements of rewilding, are underway within the UK, but such ventures are very much a conservation work in progress, and it will be some time before any systematic analytical evaluation research can be meaningfully undertaken. That said, a number of sets of issues merit discussion and reflection. Firstly, there are problems of definition in the identification of rewilding projects. This is simply illustrated by the Cambrian Wildwood project outlined earlier. While Rewilding Britain (2019c), perhaps deliberately, sidestepped the issue by describing the project as having *'elements of rewilding'*, Cambrian Wildwood (2019) reported that while *'many people are interested in Cambrian Wildwood as an example of rewilding….. we are no longer promoting the project as such.'*

In explaining this decision, Cambrian Wildwood (2019) suggested *'the problem with this term* (rewilding) *is that it is not well defined and means many different things to different people. '*Further, Cambrian Wildwood (2019) suggested that the lack of a clear

definition *'leads to misapprehensions about what we are doing and what our plans might be.'* Here one of the concerns is that in the local area, the term rewilding is perceived as being synonymous with land abandonment, whereas Cambrian Wildwood claims that its management process is active and involves restoration and the reintroduction of grazing animals.

At the same time, Cambrian Wildwood recognises that many people living in towns and cities have a positive view of rewilding and see it as a potentially important way of stemming the loss of wildlife from the rural landscapes. However, Cambrian Wildwood argues that many rural dwellers, particularly those who make their living from the land, see rewilding leading to job losses and rural depopulation. More generally, and perhaps more significantly, farmers, notably sheep farmers, who are in receipt of what can be substantial agricultural subsidies fear that rewilding, and more specifically the introduction of large carnivores, can pose a major threat to their income as well as to their way of life. Such existing commercial interests certainly seem to pose a challenge to more widespread development of rewilding projects.

Secondly, there is a set of issues about scale. Rewilding needs sufficient geographical scale so that natural processes can reinstate themselves and create ecologically coherent units. Here land assembly can be a major problem and Carver (2015) claimed that along with commercial interests, *'the critical stumbling block to most rewilding is land ownership'* but there are some promising examples of successful land assembly to enlarge the scale of current projects. The Border Forest Trust, for example, has purchased the Corehead and the Talla and Gameshope estates, which are adjacent to the Carrifan Wildwood project. The goal for the Talla and Gameshope estate, for example, which covers some 1,800 hectares, is to restore a large area of hills and upland valleys to their natural state and to provide more sustainable habitats for a range of wildlife.

Thirdly, there are claims that rewilding can play a role in mitigating the impact of climate change. Wentworth and Alison (2015) for example, suggested that rewilding can help flood prevention and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Rewilding Britain (2019i), argued that, inter alia, *'another feature of rewilding could be of pivotal importance in the next few years – the sequestering of carbon from the atmosphere.'* At the same time, Friends of the Earth and Rewilding Britain (2016) have claimed *'we believe rewilding has a crucial role to play in our efforts to reduce flood risk and adapt to the effects of climate change.'* More specifically, three ways in which rewilding can reduce risks were outlined, namely: land management practices, river restoration and the reintroduction of beavers. While climate change is a popular rallying cry for the vast majority of environmental campaigners, and rightly so, it would be foolish to suggest that rewilding within the UK can play a major role in adapting to, and mitigating, global climate change.

Fourthly, it is important to recognise that rewilding may produce unpredictable, and potentially undesirable, consequences. Nogues-Bravo et al. (2016), for example, argued that the introduction and reintroduction of species can provoke unexpected negative consequences and that subsequent control measures can prove to be both challenging and costly. More specifically, Nogues-Bravo et al. (2016) identified a number of *'far reaching consequences of rewilding'* associated with the introduction/reintroduction of species including, the extinction of native and protected species, the spread of pests and parasites

within native ecosystems and conflicts in the co-existence of wild animals and humans. More generally, in summarising concerns about rewilding Sandon (2016) suggested that *'there is limited scientific support for rewilding'* and that *'considerable caution should be employed when putting rewilding into practice because of the unknowns of ecosystem dynamics.'*

Finally, there are issues about rewilding and statutory policies, or more accurately the absence of such policies concerning rewilding, within the UK. Indeed, there are no explicit UK Government policies on rewilding but Wentworth and Alison (2015) suggested that *'rewilding is relevant to many policy areas including agriculture, natural capital and biodiversity.'* In looking to explore the policy implications surrounding rewilding, Pettorelli et al. (2018), suggested that two policy areas were particularly relevant to rewilding, namely agricultural policy and land use policy. In addressing the agricultural policy area, Wentworth and Alison (2015) suggested that post Brexit, landowners might receive financial support from the Government for providing specific ecosystem services, for example flood prevention measures, and that this might fund some rewilding ventures. Arguably less optimistically, the recently published *'Indicators'* for *'Biodiversity 2020'* (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs 2019), the strategy for England's wildlife and ecosystem services, published in September 2019, make no mention of rewilding.

Within the UK, the popular view is that land use is regulated by local planning authorities, but it is the development, rather than the use, of land that comes under planning legislation, and in truth, the planning system has little control over agriculture and forestry. England's National Planning Policy Framework emphasises the importance of conserving and enhancing the natural environment and of addressing the challenge of climate change but rewilding receives no mention in this framework. The planning policies for the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales also make no reference to rewilding. Scotland does have a specific land use strategy but here too there is no explicit mention of rewilding, though the British Ecological Society Scottish Policy Group (2016) suggested that *'rewilding could be incorporated into something based on the general principles of the Land Use Strategy*, *especially if the latter was being used to investigate what was feasible at different scales.'* Overall, there seems little by way of statutory policy to guide rewilding within the UK.

Conclusion

At a time when, the *Landscapes Review* (GOV. UK 2019) asks *'how to support wilder areas'*, rewilding would seem to have a potentially important part to play in management plans. However, while the advocates of rewilding emphasise that it can play a vital role in increasing the role of nature within landscapes, public uncertainty and unease, limited scientific support and a lack of statutory public policy guidance, suggest that rewilding may, have a limited part to play in encouraging wilder places within UK landscapes.

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