

# What is Rewilding?

I love wilderness. I think I've always loved wilderness, or at least the idea of it. When I was 15 what I really wanted to do when I left school was to live in the woods near my home – create a shelter, hunt rabbits, pick fruit, stuff like that. 'Travelling' in my 20s was primarily an attempt to explore, to go where other people tended not to go, to try to experience an unspoilt world. (Of course, I wasn't often successful, not least because the army of young people travelling the world are all looking for the same thing.) Since my mid-30s, I've discovered the sparse beauty of Norway, where I've spent three very happy holidays walking from hut to hut. The landscape is vast, beautiful and awe-inspiring, but an equally vital part of the experience is the lack of human influence – no other person, no building, vehicle, tool or artefact (until you reach the next hut).

And it's not just about me, not just about what I can experience and enjoy. I've never been to the Amazon rainforest, but it was the place that first made me aware of Environmentalism, and it remains a totem of wilderness, of bio-abundance and biodiversity, of just how amazing and wonderful the world can be – and of how easily humans can destroy it (by burning the forest, and then bringing cattle on to the scorched land to graze, for a year or two, until the soil nutrients are exhausted and more forest needs to be burnt).

Wilderness is that part of the Earth, and specifically the life on, in and around the Earth, that is not influenced by humans. Wilderness is a relative term – some areas are more wild than others, some systems (fauna, flora, bacterial, atmospheric) are more wild than others (though of course there is systemic interaction). And wilderness is not an all or nothing affair – it's likely that no pure wilderness remains on the Earth. Wilderness (nature) isn't static. It changes – sometimes quickly, but usually slowly, at evolutionary time scales, where a million years is a brief period. Wilderness isn't always abundant in terms of life (abundance meaning both sheer number of lifeforms – bio-abundance – and number of species – biodiversity). However, it is usually abundant, bar certain exceptional periods (such as the first billion years on Earth, and the odd million years following cataclysmic events) and certain exceptional places (the Antarctic). It is abundant because, given sufficient stability of environment over time, life exploits and fills every niche. The issue, in the most general terms, is that humans now change themselves and the environment at a speed vastly quicker than evolutionary time scales - cultural time scales are measured in thousands, hundreds or even tens of years - which means that there is no stability of environment in the above sense. Humans are like a meteor impact.

The practical issues involved in saving wilderness can be terrifying, not least in the bravery required to stand up to armed gangs, criminal networks, rich corporations, and corrupt politicians, who can all have an interest in the financial rewards resulting from the destruction of wilderness, and who have the means and lack of scruples to enforce those

interests. But, as far as I see it, the moral or philosophical issues involved in saving wilderness are pretty simple. In a nutshell:

**It is a moral imperative to preserve as much currently existing wilderness as possible.**

This is imperative precisely due to the enormous, and growing, influence of human influence on all places and systems on the Earth. It is estimated that 83% of the terrestrial biosphere is under direct human influence (<http://www.eoearth.org/view/article/153031/>). This is a 'defeasible' imperative – in other words, it should be weighed against competing demands such as the need for human habitation and food. I don't propose to specify exactly how those demands are weighed. The point I want to make is that the 'wilderness imperative' should be weighed in making public decisions about habitation, farming, mining, industry and more. I would love the imperative to be ranked very highly – but it would be a big advance for it to be incorporated into public decision making in any way whatsoever.

In contrast to saving existing wilderness, I've recently become aware of a new word – Rewilding\*. The overall idea is pretty simple – we should be doing more than just hanging on to the wilderness that we currently have, and should instead be adding to that wilderness – allowing more land to become wild once more. 'Rewilding' promises to revolutionise the debate – flipping Environmentalism from the domain of negative, conservative, 'don't do that' finger-waggers, to a positive, radical, vision-led movement. It promises the hope that we can start to create (or allow) the world that we so desperately want to see. The idea excites me. But I also want to point out that the concept, and practice, of rewilding raises a range of interesting issues, some of them moral or philosophical.

Precisely what is involved in rewilding? I would suggest – based largely on taking hints from George Monbiot's writing\* - that there are three standards involved, which are largely harmonious, but which can conflict.

#1. Rewilding is letting nature take its own course, whatever that may be – the journey, and the unknown destinations along the way, are part of the point. Monbiot strongly emphasises this aspect, and in particular on the difference between this sort of rewilding, and traditional conservation management. We are (I am) used to thinking of Wildlife Trusts, the RSPB, the National Trust, and the like as the 'good guys', defending the countryside against development. But Monbiot has persuaded me that we should look closer at what underpins their approach. In short: nature is treated like a garden, to be tended with an aim to encourage a certain species or another, perhaps a type of butterfly, bird, heather or flower (these are the 'interest features' of that site). The aims are given by what the public wants (or what it is supposed they want), and by what ecological specialists are keen to see more of – both, ultimately, driven by a subconscious tendency to regard the ecosystems encountered in childhood as normal and desirable (ecosystems usually very different to the pre-human

wilderness state.) To promote the desired species, other species must be kept in check, or excluded altogether, resulting in a never ending struggle to keep nature in the state that we want it, just as the gardener can never slacken in their mission to create weed-free borders. This is often accompanied by an assumption that this management is valuable or even necessary for nature to flourish. ('Fewer sheep ... means irreparable damage to Scotland's beautiful landscape' says the NFU of Scotland – Monbiot\* p.159 – 'heather moorland is declining in quality due to neglect of ... cutting and burning' says the Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust – Monbiot\* p.219.) As Monbiot says: 'you wonder how nature coped before we came along'.

A few weeks ago, I received an offer by Danny Udall of the Eastern Moors Partnership (who look after the portion of the Peak District that is nearest my home) to meet him on the Moors, to discuss a proposed cull of wild deer. Danny is a busy Park Ranger, and his willingness to spend a couple of hours talking to me, simply an interested local, I thought was very generous. The visit gave me an insight into the contortions that the conservation management ethos forces people like Danny into. He was clearly someone who valued and was passionate about wildlife, including the local deer. But he was hemmed in by demands from all sides. Natural England demands an upper limit on the forestation permitted on its sites, such as the Eastern Moors. The limit is a rigidly enforced 10% - if trees cover 11% of the site, then the offending portion must be felled. Not only does this limit highlight the bureaucratic intrusion into our wildlife (necessitating detailed studies, spreadsheets, and reports), but limit on forestation specifically is just bizarre. Not only is it true that the natural (pre-human) state of this area was pretty much continuous woodland, but it's also been found that native woodland supports a far higher number of species than alternative habitats, such as grassland (11 times richer) or heathland (13 times richer – Monbiot\* p.219). Where do limits and rules like this come from? It seems from what Danny Udall told me that in the background is public opinion – or at least, what groups like the Eastern Moors Partnership take to be public opinion: that open aspects, predominantly heathland, is what people want to see in places like the Peak District. Other demands assail people like Danny – he mentioned frequent complaints by local residents concerning the damage caused by deer to their gardens – 'when are you going to sort out the deer problem?'.

These considerations led Danny to come up with a complex strategy taking in the deer, alongside the use of some farm animals – cows and sheep – on site, since they graze in a different way to deer. If the requirement is to maintain the land in an unnatural state (heathland), then ongoing management will be necessary. In the case of the deer, it led Danny to set an arbitrary upper limit to the number of deer – a nice round 200 – above which management intervention would be necessary, i.e. discretely shooting the animals. Indeed that cull has now taken place, and will be repeated next year if the deer have had the temerity to increase in numbers once more.

In defence of Danny Udall, it might be asked: if left alone for long enough, surely the deer population would increase to a point where it would harm other (plant) species, and given the lack of natural predators, surely culling will be necessary somewhere down the line? This leads to a second idea of rewilding:

#2. Rewilding is also – and perhaps more literally – an attempt to return nature to as it was before human influence. A little imagination, and a little (eco-historical) knowledge is all that is required to appreciate the scale of loss that we have suffered (brought about) over the past 40,000 years or so. In Britain, there was once forest covering the land from coast to coast, and amongst those trees roamed wolves, bears, lynx, bison, boar, beavers. Look far enough back, and Britain had lions, elephants, hippopotamuses. The largest wild animals still hanging on are badgers, as well as the aforementioned deer. The trees have given way to cities, ever more sterile farmland, tiny pockets of urban parks and gardens, as well as largely ‘sheep-wrecked’\* National Parks, such as the Peak District. The tragic loss of sea life is still unfolding, and you need a sufficiently wide historical perspective to appreciate the scale of it. In 1776, ‘a typical body of herring was divided into distinct columns, of five or six miles in length, and three or four broad ... the whole water seems alive, and is seen so black with them to a great distance’\*. And this is 400 years after trawling had begun. A recent study estimated that fish population between 1889 and 2007 had dropped by 94% (Monbiot\*, p.242). That’s one-seventeenth of the fish that existed in the late nineteenth century.

Rewilding therefore requires the knowledge of what existed before humans came along, together with the will to reintroduce those missing species: or at least the ‘keystone’ species – those species, such as the wolves or Yellowstone Park, that permit other species to exist and flourish, so-called ‘trophic cascades’ that are the processes caused by animals at the top of the food chain, cascading down to affect not only their immediate prey, but other fauna, flora, even soil and atmospheric composition.

There are potential problems here. For a start, it can be a hard sell to persuade people that there needs to be return of possibly alarming predators, like wolves or lynx. (However, we in the rich West demand that people in other countries live alongside more dangerous animals than these – lions, bears, crocodiles.) Then there is the fact that some species have simply become extinct and so cannot be reintroduced – most notably the top predators and megafauna, killed by the first humans as they reached Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Australia – the animals that occupied the same niche as the African cheetah, lion, buffalo, or camel. Some have argued that the ‘matching’ animals be imported to fulfil a similar role in the new ecosystem, though alongside the issue of selling this to the public, there is the additional question of whether the perceived similarity will be enough for the imported animal to fulfil the same ecological role as the extinct one.

A somewhat different issue, comparing idea #2 to #1, is that while ‘Rewilding as Letting Go’ (idea #1) is implacably opposed to management, ‘Rewilding as Turning the Clock Back’ (idea

#2) demands the difficult management of bringing an environment back to its pre-human state, requiring suppression or removal of some (non-native) species, and the importing of other ones to replace those that have gone locally or globally extinct. Although the end desire is the same – to enable a flourishing wilderness to develop without human influence – there is a tension here at the heart of Rewilding. It's clear which side Monbiot thinks he is on – it 'is not an attempt to restore [natural ecosystems] to any prior state, but to permit ecological processes to resume' (p.8\*). But that just isn't the whole story. It is just not enough to leave our existing, impoverished, ecosystems to develop from the state they are currently in – moorland should be reforested, top predators reintroduced, non-native 'plague' species (such as Japanese bindweed) suppressed. Good management is needed to drive out bad (c.f. Wittgenstein on philosophy). Once the management has achieved its goal of returning nature to (roughly) as it was before humans came along to ruin it, then management can step aside to allow nature to develop in its own unpredictable way.

#3. Bio-abundance and bio-diversity are a third standard, and can be a guide to when management is required, and when management is, and is not, successful. Given that the normal, natural, state of our biosphere is one of abundance, aiming at abundance is also to aim at the Wild state, in the sense given by #2. It's not a trump card – I don't think that we should aim to cram more species into a given area, without regard for the particular eco-history of that area. But it helps us to see why the management of reforestation and reintroduction of top predators is good, while the management of sheep farming and moor burning is bad.

Enough of all these principles and distinctions. We know roughly what wilderness is, and we want to protect it, and encourage it. What can we do, as relatively powerless individuals? I want to end with some practical suggestions, which I will attempt to follow myself, and which I hope may be useful for others.

What can we do?

- **Have a rich imagination.** Elephants and lions once roamed this land. We don't have to settle for the landscapes that happened to be there when we were young.
- **Change public opinion, one person at a time.** The overall vision of conservation bodies is driven by public opinion. If people want native woodland, rather than managed heathland, the arguments given for current conservation practices start to evaporate.
- **Be a part of the wider movement, campaign, give money.** In Britain this is centred on the new organisation, [rewildingbritain.org.uk](http://rewildingbritain.org.uk).
- **Give practical help** to rewilding initiatives, for example Trees for Life in the Scottish Highlands.

- **Visit wilderness.** This is hardly a demand, more a joy. But it can also encourage the preservation of wilderness, and rewilding, on the grounds that local people can see the financial benefits of wilderness tourism, compared to other, competing, uses of that land.
- **See wilderness in the small scale, and the local.** After I had read Monbiot, and thought about the things I've written here, I started spotting wilderness in all sorts of unexpected places: scrubland beside a railway line, a microhabitat under a plant leaf, rock pools on a beach. These can be saved, and treasured, even while we long to see rewilding on larger, more ambitious and imaginative, scales.
- **Garden planting.** On similar lines, we can plant gardens with wildlife (micro-wilderness) in mind, if we're lucky enough to have this opportunity. I am lucky, having moved a couple of years ago to a house with an attached one acre field. I've planted some native trees already, and am looking forward to sowing wild flowers that are best for pollinators, and putting in hedges to replace the broken down fences.

Thanks for reading this first article. Comments welcome.

\* See George Monbiot: 'Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life' (2013)