

Is rewilding the answer?

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The last decades have been characterised by the continued destruction of the natural environment, punctuated by the occasional “successes”, like Red Kites and Sea Eagles. Faced with the broad history of failure, many have turned to the idea that what is needed is an overarching strategy of “rewilding”.

There are lots of reasons why the concept has caught on. It has a nice romantic feel. The “wild” is an enduring concept. It captures the idea that there is some nature out there which is not despoiled by human enterprise. Better still, by withdrawing human interventions, it is easy and cheap. A cash-strapped National Park, or a Treasury weighed down with the pressures on public spending, can embrace an idea which both resonates with our emotions and reduces their costs and the charge on the public purse.

Both of these attractions – the wild and the cheap - are superficially appealing, but dangerous. They point towards a non-human domain, nature without people as an integral part, and they can undermine active policies to restore natural systems. To see why scepticism about the rewilding enthusiasms is required, and why restoration is a much better way of thinking about conservation strategies, we need first to delve into the multiple interpretations given to this most elastic of concepts.

What is the question to which rewilding is supposed to be the answer?

To make sense of the current enthusiasms for rewilding, we need to start by asking: What is the question or questions to which “rewilding” is supposed to be the answer?

Consider the following possible meanings: getting back to nature; recreating some past ecosystem; minimal intervention conservation; reintroducing past lost species from particular habitats; focussing on native plants and habitats (as against alien species); and the more mainstream restoration of natural systems. It is immediately apparent that a great deal of modern conservation efforts could fall under one or other of these definitions. The issue is whether “rewilding” adds anything extra, or worse detracts

from other and better conservation efforts, and even actually damages aspects of the environment which are of value.

Consider what rewilding is not. It is not the protection and enhancement of natural capital (though in some circumstances, some of the above might contribute to this end). It is perfectly possible to think of a host of “rewilding” measures that would reduce natural capital stocks, and for two obvious reasons. First, natural capital is all about assets that produce benefits for people. Many of those keen on rewilding are less keen on people accessing the newly created “wild”. Indeed “wild” is often at least implicitly taken to be “without people” or at least “without many people”. It is also why so much emphasis is placed on doing it where there are fewer people, like central Wales and the Uplands, as opposed to right next to larger populations where people have the greatest scope to benefit from nature.

Imagine a “wild” where there are no humans – any time for most of the history of the planet. Why would we care about its natural capital, other than it just happens to be on a causal path to us? Why would we care about the species that lived then? The “we” matters: nature does not care about the state of the environment at any point in time or how much biodiversity there is then or now. Only we care.

Much of the “wild” we have today is the caused by human activities. Nature includes the human species, and we have created a vast number of habitats that would not be where they are in the absence of people. Think of water meadows, urban parks, gardens and agriculture. Some of these have been good for some species, and bad for others. Returning to the “wild” would create some really interesting transitional changes, but in the end much of Britain would be covered in woods and forests. Rewilding *as a transition* tends to lead to higher biodiversity, and especially if it starts by eliminating fertilisers and pesticides. But it peaks, and then it declines.

It is an illusion to think that there was some great past, when there were few humans, which had much higher biodiversity. For the UK this is far from clear, as humans diversified habitat types. Even if there was, there were few benefits to humans because there were not many of them.

Returning to the past

One branch of the rewilders argue that we should aim to return our environment, or at least bits of it, to some point in the past. When challenged about this, some rewilders quickly say that is not what they mean, that they just mean “more nature” and leaving nature alone to do its thing. We deal with these other claims below, but the fact is that many rewilders do have some past date in mind, some utopian arcadia. So let’s start by looking at how sensible this might be.

One reference point is the post glacial period when there were not many people about. Rewilders try to draw lessons from this past time, and recreate habitats now which try to replicate at least some of its features. One reason they need to do this, is to come up with a vision of how the rewilding process might end up with a new equilibrium, and one that is not in the UK’s case of fairly uniform forest cover. It helps the rewilders if they can claim that natural processes (without people) kept the forests open and hence created and sustained diversity of habitats. Otherwise it might be quite uniform and not very biodiverse.

The obvious question is: why pick one date rather than another, one assumed past ecosystem for another? Immediately a further and prior question arises: what is the end to which the particular choice of date is directed towards? One answer is to select a period of maximum biodiversity. Again, the questions mount up: why is maximum biodiversity the aim? And: is the selected period one in which biodiversity was in fact maximised? There is much doubt that the post glacial world was actually maximally biodiverse, and even more doubt that rewilding to try to get back some of the features of this environment would increase biodiversity, other than in a transitional period. The mixing of the world’s species and genes has increased biodiversity (as in the UK did the mixed agriculture up to the enclosures), and the process of getting back to this past world starts with getting rid of all the aliens that have since turned up. Are not rabbits, sheep and cattle all part of our ecosystems now? Are they not all aliens? We might (and indeed should) manage their numbers, but that is an active and not a passive conservation strategy, and one with lots of merits.

The next point to make is that returning to some environmental past is actually impossible. The claimed benefits of having lots of very large herbivores around to keep the forests open, much emphasised by some rewilders, runs into a lot of obvious difficulties. Some of these are extinct, and hence proxies have to be found. Even if substitutes are added, the big herbivores were part of a wider ecosystem which included lots of very large predators too. The substitutes, like the domestic pigs and cattle and ponies, are hardly close substitutes to what the rewilders have in mind as the animals that kept the forest canopies open, though they are less likely to be a danger to the humans who might venture into these new and typically fenced enclosures.

Humans are the top predators

Putting aside the fact that domesticated pigs and domesticated cattle are not big enough to take down trees and keep the land sufficiently cleared to match this past landscape, the sorts of predators needed to keep herbivores in turn in check are not going to reappear in large enough numbers for a long time, and probably not in the next couple of centuries. The re-wilded world is one which will forever be without key elements of the past ecosystem.

Not only are humans not going to accept large predators on the scale that the rewilders seem to imagine, but these predators are never going to be able to do the job as well as the top predator – humans – can. Take an obvious requirement for many rewilding projects of a mass culling of deer, notably on some of the Scottish estates. It is a huge, important and continuous undertaking. It will have to go on in perpetuity. Compare the scope for the rifle to make a serious dent in deer numbers as against the impact of packs of wolves confined within large enclosed areas. It might just work in the special and vast area of Yellowstone in the US, but the UK is not remotely comparable, even in the remoter highlands. Worse still, wolves may deter people from getting the benefits of access to the countryside, whether or not the dangers and their fears are justified.

This point illustrates a larger one: very active management is required to make even a start on trying to get back to some past ideal the rewilders want us to aspire to, and only humans can now do this at scale. Not only that: very active management is necessary to keep the new “wild” in the desired state too. The inescapable fact is that good

conservation is all about improving human management of nature. It is better called restoration.

Safari park rewilding

Now let's ask a practical question, even if rewilders can sometimes try to avoid it. How to make this sort of large-scale rewilding pay its way? One answer is to use the land as a safari park. Set up safari lodges, run a private lodge, start glamping camps, take people out on nature watching trips, and preferably high paying guests. This is partly what the bigger rewilding experiments are all about: nature tourism.

This model has a lot of conservation pluses. The land is likely to become better than it was, the tourists pay and hence provide revenues to manage the nature, and the landowner gets an economic rent. Better still, if it costs very little compared with agriculture to run the safari park, it can be much more profitable.

Now ask a different question: how does the safari park model work from a natural capital perspective? The key point here is that safari parks tend to keep most people out. Otherwise how is the owner going to charge people lots of money to visit? If you and I can simply turn up, walk around and take a tent too, we do not need to pay the landowner. The conflict between open access, wild camping and a charging safari park becomes immediately apparent. This is a private venture.

Many of the benefits of natural capital come from the fact that these tracts of land have important *public* dimensions, and *public* goods. The benefits of natural capital are in terms of clean air, recreation, physical and mental health, as well as from water services, and carbon sequestration. It may well turn out that these safari parks are good at some of these, notably water and carbon. But they may be less good at the direct human benefits. These may be for the few not the many in the safari park model.

Reintroducing species and eliminating aliens

These human related benefits can be seen in the reintroductions of once native species, and also in the introductions of aliens. Think of gardens and the huge business that is the import of non-natives.

The classic cases of reintroductions are white tailed eagles (sea eagles), red kites, beavers, cranes and storks. Their attractions include the fact that they are rare: people will travel a long way, and pay a lot to see something rare. That is why the new safari parks are so keen on what would otherwise be called visitor attractions, from stocks to wolves. Mull has had seen a major increase in tourism to see the sea eagles – and tourist revenues – as a result. Once sea eagles are common again, like the red kites, the interest may begin to drop off. It is a fact – and perhaps a sad fact – that we get much more pleasure out of seeing rare animals, birds and plants.

Which species should be reintroduced? This depends upon the objective. Rewilders are focussed on putting back species that are missing from an ecosystem, and in particular the wild ecosystem they want to get back to. Top predators are iconic and obviously missing, replaced by us humans. Beavers change rivers and create new habitats. With lynx and wild cats, it is less the impact on the ecosystem and more about maintaining the species itself. Once the human role in managing ecosystems is accepted, and particularly the top predator human role, the practical questions dominate. Would the reintroduced species have clear benefits to other species and to biodiversity generally? Would it lead to greater human pleasure? Would it improve the local economy and contribute to higher sustainable economic growth? With these considerations in mind, the decision looks like the usual restoration questions. Some cases are better than others.

Which aliens should be eliminated?

Perhaps a more interesting way of thinking about rewilding is to ask what aliens should be eliminated. Most would want to get rid of mink. Crayfish and zebra mussels probably as well. Or green parakeets? Should we try to eliminate grey squirrels to get the red squirrels back? How about the 50 million plus pheasants released each year? The hedgehogs in the Uists eating their way through the wading birds' eggs, or the rats on St Agnes? Or the tropical plants escaping from Tresco Abbey gardens onto the shoreline? Fallow deer? Rabbits?

The rewilders do not have any easy answers to these questions. Letting the land “go wild” might actually be good for some of these aliens. Muntjac deer would probably thrive even more. Restoration conservation takes each on its merits, on a case-by-case basis, as part of managed and often permanent interventions.

Who should pay for rewilding?

The rewilders offer up a picture of neglect, of letting nature “take its course”. Taken literally, it should have zero cost. This is likely to be immensely appealing to the Treasury, to National Parks and some wildlife charities.

If costs are zero, why should rewilded farms continue to be subsidised? The really important point is that since in key cases the land was unprofitable with subsidy, there was no other rational choice but to stop farming – or keep on making losses. Suppose now the subsidy ceases. It would not be profitable to return the land to farming, so it will remain returning to scrub and eventually woodland. Given that public money is limited and there are lots of other calls on the Treasury, the general principle should be to allocate the subsidies to those activities which *add* the greatest benefits.

The rewilders should be very careful what they wish for. Restoration can have significant and permanent costs, both initially for projects like reintroducing beavers, and for their continuing maintenance. Restoration needs public support, subsidies and grants. Pure rewilding does not cost at all. It results in whatever full neglect throws up, and in due course in England at least this might be overwhelmingly a woodland canopy.

Natural capital – a better framework for conservation

Some rewilders hate natural capital as an organising principle, and for two reasons. They do not like its human-centric focus; and they don’t like economic justifications. Yet it is only if restoration has a human orientation, and if it raises people’s well-being, that it will get the support it needs, and rightly so.

As noted, nature does not care, only humans do. Nature does not mourn the loss of species, the loss of landscape and beauty. We do. We need nature for our mental and physical health. We need nature to provide us with clean water, clean air, recreation and

the wonders of what nature offers up to us. We are rooted in nature, of which we are a part. Nature provides our most important set of assets. It is our natural capital, upon which our lives are built. We combine nature with physical man-made capital, human capital and ideas and labour to build our lives. Our economy produces our income and facilitates everything from agriculture to our health services, energy and water. Natural capital is the foundation for building a better economy, one that has nature seriously as core to our well-being.

Natural capital is an economic concept, but it is not some neo-liberal concept or even (as some rewilders claim) part of a “neo-liberal conspiracy”. Economics is not the “enemy”. Economics is all about the allocation of scarce resources, about the costs of doing one thing *or* another, and therefore about *choices*. Nature conservation has costs. We can’t do everything and we can’t expect the voters to support everything. If we spend money enhancing hay and water meadows, that money is not available for doing something else. Every Wildlife Trust and environmental charity has to make these choices every day, and so does the country as a whole. Many of the natural capital enhancements make very good economic sense: they add to sustainable economic growth.

Natural capital does not require silly things like putting a price on nature, on particular flowers or birds. It requires us to address the costs of doing one intervention as opposed to another. Costs are inescapable. We have an obligation to spend what monies we have for nature in the best way we can, for the maximum benefits.

What natural capital forces is the integration of the environment into the economy, not as a separate concern defined *against* the economy. It forces us to account for natural capital assets, to provide for their capital maintenance and to invest in enhancements where these bring positive benefits. These benefits are to people, both directly and by supporting and enhancing ecosystems upon which our economy and well-being depends. That is why we should care, and if we don’t do these things we will be worse off. Our economy will be less sustainable.

Sometimes the best thing to do is nothing. Sometimes it is to make some enhancements (like culling deer or removing hedgehogs for the Uists) and then doing nothing. But

most of the time it involves making enhancements and carrying on managing nature. It is almost never a good idea to try to recreate some past natural nirvana with few or no people and call this “rewilding”. There is no wild, there is not going to be any wild, and nature without people is not something we can benefit from and hence not desirable in itself. That is why restoration, based upon a baseline of natural capital, with costed enhancements, and the proper provision of capital maintenance is a much firmer foundation for conservation. The US has room for Yellowstone. This has been a great restoration project. Sadly perhaps there is nothing on that scale in the UK, with its 70 million people. They are not going to go away, nor should they. They deserve the maximum benefits from nature that we can provide for a given budget, consistent with leaving the next generation with at least as good natural capital as we inherited. They should expect choices to be made with a view to the maximum benefit for them. Neglect sometimes yes, but pure re-wilding no.