

Rewilding and ecosystem restoration: what is natural?



Debates about the role of livestock in wider landscapes have come into sharp focus around the idea of 'rewilding', linked to plans for 'ecosystem restoration'.

Rewilding Britain defines rewilding as “the large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself. Rewilding seeks to reinstate natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species.” The big question, though, is: what is 'natural' and what is defined as 'missing', over what timescale?

COMPETING VALUES, DIFFERENT LANDSCAPES

Different visions of landscapes and their uses compete in current debates, reflecting different values and understandings of ecosystems. Below two stylised arguments are presented.

TO REWILD OR NOT?

ARGUMENT 1: A rewilded landscape is richer in biodiversity and generates alternative economic activities that outweigh existing (often subsidised) uses based on livestock farming. A more natural, forested landscape can be recreated through rewilding and contribute to a 'half earth' vision, where one half of the planet's land area is protected from human use, while in the other half agriculture is intensified and livestock are replaced by cultured meats and plant-based food diets. This is a more 'sustainable' form of land use, one that tackles the big issues of climate change and biodiversity loss.

ARGUMENT 2: Low intensity (and mobile) livestock systems should be part of a regenerated landscape. Herbivore grazing (with livestock alongside wild animals) is central to protecting 'open ecosystems' such as rangelands. A natural landscape is one with patches of grazing and woodland maintained by grazing, fire and human use. Such land use can add value in terms of biodiversity and carbon sequestration, as well as providing for people's livelihoods through low-impact livestock production.

sheep should be removed from Cumbria in England, as they suppress tree regrowth through grazingⁱⁱ. But sheep farming has been part of these landscapes for thousands of years, and the open vistas with short grasslands and limited trees are maintained through grazing, a landscape widely loved by many and deeply embedded in English cultural and literary traditionsⁱⁱⁱ.

Reintroductions of animals are often part of rewilding efforts. However, in heavily populated and farmed landscapes in Europe, plans to reintroduce predators have caused much controversy.

PREDATORS AND PASTORALISTS

The reintroduction and protection of large predators as part of conservation programmes is highly controversial. For example, in France, following their elimination in the early twentieth-century, wolves expanded their territory from the early 1990s^{iv}. Today they are present in around a third of the country. Wolf attacks result in a high level of mortality of livestock in some areas. Despite numerous protective measures, including guard dogs, night pens and so on, wolves are not deterred. Until recently it was illegal to shoot wolves even if they regularly attacked livestock, as they were protected. Wolves must survive in a fragmented landscape where pastoralists' livestock must also graze. However, conservation lobbies argue for strict protection of wolves, bears and other predators, rather than seeking a more balanced co-existence^v.

In the UK, some argue that sheep in particular are the worst enemies of a natural, wild landscape and should be banished as they degrade the uplands and cause barren landscapes. For example, there are those who argue that

As the 'rewilding' movement has grown, there are of course many interpretations of the approach, ranging from more radical, exclusionary visions to those that incorporate diverse uses, including livestock keeping^{vi}. The big question, however, is not whether one form of landscape or species composition is best for the environment, as all have pros and cons, but whose values, aesthetics and livelihoods count? This is ultimately much more a political question than an environmental one.

WHAT IS NATURAL, WHAT IS WILD?

What is natural and what is wild is deeply contested. In the history of environmental conservation in Africa, for example, European colonists imposed a particular vision of 'wild' Africa, usually one that was suitable for their hunting exploits and bagging big trophies. In a similar way, urban environmentalists may impose their own visions of what is 'wild', and these may differ from those living in such landscapes and making use of it for other uses.

'Open ecosystems', such as rangelands, which are maintained by livestock grazing and fire, can most definitely be 'natural' and 'wild'. As with most ecosystems, however, they have to be maintained by human use. Rangelands are not simply degraded forests, as some assume, in need of 'restoration' through tree planting (see *Brief 2*). Indeed, many conservation organisations keen to enhance rangeland landscapes and preserve species and habitats have their own livestock to do this.

Visions of wilderness and ideals for rewilding are therefore embedded in economic, political and aesthetic perspectives.

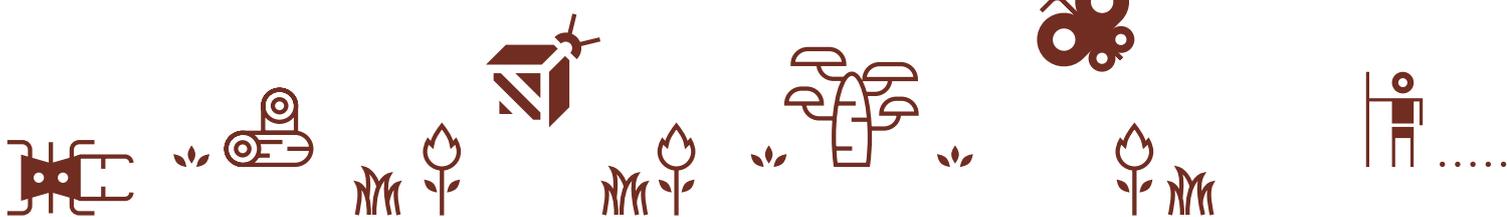
Those who wish to see landscapes devoid of extensively grazed livestock and people, while advocating an intensive, industrial alternative, are of course taking a political stance.

DEBATING ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION

Unlike in the past, when colonial visions of 'wild' environments were imposed on African populations, a more deliberative discussion is needed. What food system and what environment do we want? How can livestock keepers and their animals become involved in processes of ecosystem restoration to enhance biodiversity?

As other Briefings in this series argue, arguments that cast pastoralists as the villains of environmental destruction are often misplaced. Removing livestock from landscapes may not tackle the climate challenge, and may reduce biodiversity and increase wildfires. Indeed, livestock can enhance biodiversity (see *Brief 3*) and act to tackle climate change^{vii}.

In developing plans for rewilding and ecosystem restoration, a more sophisticated debate is required, where different visions of what is natural, what is wild and what forms of restoration are needed are interrogated. This process must include pastoralists and other land users who have created valuable landscapes through use by people and their animals over many years. In debates around COP15, the ecosystem restoration agenda must not be dominated by selective visions and narrow interpretations of what is appropriate conservation in rangeland areas.



References

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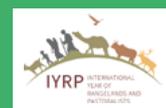


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