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Critical review

Reimagining rewilding: A response to Jørgensen, Prior, and Ward

Aaron A. Cloyd *

English and Humanities Division, North Idaho College, Coeur d'Alene, ID, USA

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ABSTRACT

This article continues and expands the conversation initiated by Jørgensen on the need to rethink rewilding, which elicited a response from Prior and Ward. To spur further conversation, my response to both papers argues for two modes of discourse expansion: geographical and disciplinary. Although both articles gesture toward global rewilding sites, their discussions remain focused on European geographies. I offer James Feldman's environmental history of the Apostle Islands to extend a geographical purview beyond European contexts. Secondly, I take up these papers' implicit call for humanities scholars to join this conversation, and I argue for the relevance and importance of fictional writings to a debate regarding rewilding. I briefly introduce two recent fictional works and argue for their place in rewilding conversations based on the ability of imaginary writings to develop empathy.

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1. Introduction

Jørgensen's (2015) article "Rethinking rewilding" and the corresponding critical review by Prior and Ward (2016) present a welcomed schematization of the increasingly-slippery term "rewilding." Jørgensen overviews various adaptations of rewilding since its coinage in 1990[1] through 2013 publications and sets out six connotations of the word, while also indicating an associated scale and geography of each use. Upon her findings, Jørgensen expresses concern that the word has become too vague, but she also contends that an interpretative breadth of rewilding has allowed scholars and activists to connect previously-siloed debates, draw public attention and emotion to environmental concerns, and construct cross-disciplinary conversations (Prior and Ward, 2016: p.486). Jørgensen concludes her article by analyzing a propensity within uses of rewilding to demarcate culture and nature, and she argues for a need to interrelate humanity and nature within rewilding contexts.

Prior and Ward (2016) focus their response to Jørgensen on her claims regarding the ambiguity of rewilding and its potential to perpetuate a human/nature dichotomy. To address Jørgensen's concern over the diffuse applications of rewilding, Prior and Ward (2016) offer "non-human autonomy" as a "central" component of rewilding and argue that it provides "coherency and clarity to the term [rewilding] as both a theory and set of related practices" (2016: p.133). To counter Jørgensen's claim that rewilding efforts falsely separate the human from the non-human, they describe two examples that "acknowledge the implicit entanglement of non-humans and humans in conservation endeavours" (Prior and Ward, 2016 p.134). Prior and Ward (2016) conclude that such "hybrid landscape[s]" avoid a "call to return to a pre-human pristine Nature" while also affording autonomy to non-human elements (2016: p.135).

* Address: North Idaho College, English and Humanities Division, 1000 West Garden Ave, Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814, USA.
E-mail address: aacloyd@nic.edu

[1] A slight confusion occurs in Jørgensen's (2015) article when she initially lists 1990 (p. 482) as the first occurrence of rewilding but later cites 1991 as the earliest use of the word in print (p. 483). The Oxford English Dictionary (2016) cites a 1990 *Newsweek* article written by Jennifer Foote as the first in-print use of rewilding.

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In my response, I aim to continue and broaden this conversation initiated by Jørgensen, Prior, and Ward in twofold ways. One, I hope to expand Prior and Ward's examples of rewilding to also include the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness – Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in the United States and James Feldman's environmental history of these places. I offer Feldman and the Apostle Islands to also develop Jørgensen's European-focused description of rewilding as productive land abandonment. Two, as a scholar in the humanities, I would like to actualize the implicit claims by Jørgensen, Prior, and Ward that rewilding is a cross-disciplinary conversation; I offer sites where imaginative and creative writings may interact with texts from environmental science and history, and I provide a brief reading of two recent works of fiction that take up the topic of rewilding.

2. James Feldman and the Apostle Islands

To challenge Jørgensen's presentation of rewilding as a call to a prelapsarian Garden of Eden, Prior and Ward (2016) highlight two existing cases of rewilding: the Scottish Beaver Trial (SBT) and the Oostvaardersplassen Reserve in the Netherlands. As they point out, both examples rely on the "premise that humans and non-humans co-exist and co-inhabit the same space" (2016: p.134). In both cases, Prior and Ward detail initial consultations, lobbying efforts, ongoing collaborations with land owners, support for tourism and education, and other human efforts that, rather than dismiss human presences within sites of rewilding, reveal how humans are "embedded" within these created "hybrid landscapes" (*ibid*: p.135). The SBT and Oostvaardersplassen represent well-known examples of rewilding, but because both cases rely on European contexts, I view them as a starting point from which to extend the conversation to include other geographies.

Jørgensen (2015) gestures toward a more international context as she includes Yellowstone National Park, Lago Guri in Venezuela, Mauritius, the Arabian Peninsula, Arctic Russia, and Vancouver in addition to European contexts. Yet despite these references, she situates her fifth connotation of rewilding – productive land abandonment – solely within Europe (Jørgensen, 2015: p.484). The geographical marker derives from Jørgensen's research sample, but similar to Prior and Ward, her description of European rewilding environments provides a beneficial frame from which to discuss other similar geographies.

To develop Prior and Ward's discussion of rewilding landscapes where humans and non-humans intermingle, and to expand the range of Jørgensen's description of productive land abandonment, I offer James Feldman's environmental history of the Apostle Islands, published as *A Storied Wilderness* in 2011. Located in the United States, in Northern Wisconsin, the Apostle Islands are shaped by centuries of human habitation and use. Early Ojibwe Indian sacred rites, seventeenth-century fur trade practices, nineteenth-century quarrying and logging activities, and fishing, farming, and tourism define the islands as much as their designation as the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness and Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. Throughout *A Storied Wilderness*, Feldman explores the interconnections between natural and human histories and how intersections between the two grant understanding to a current returning of wild conditions. For Feldman, the islands are "not simply a result of ecological processes left to play out on their own. The forests regenerated in ways profoundly influenced by their history of human use" (2011, p.9). In an attempt to simultaneously recognize the deep human history of the Apostles, which is now fading along with the abandoned quarries, farms, and logging camps to give way to present-day wilderness-like characteristics, Feldman rejects words like "healing" and "recovery" in favor of rewilding (2011: p.9). For Feldman, rewilding captures the "ongoing impact of human choices on natural processes and of natural conditions on human history" (2011: p.9).[2]

Feldman's presentation of rewilding in the Apostle Islands aligns best with Jørgensen's fifth connotation of rewilding: productive land abandonment, and his attention to management practices and relations between human and non-human elements echoes Prior and Ward's depiction of the SBT and Oostvaardersplassen, but rewilding in the Apostles also reflects unique bioregional distinctions. The Wilderness Act of 1964, the Wisconsin hemlock forests, and the nineteenth-century reliance on the islands' sandstone to help build cities like Chicago all inform the particularities of rewilding throughout the Apostles. However, I do not reference the Apostle Islands and Feldman's work as an isolated case, but as one piece of a global pattern of rewilding that will allow us to continue defining and understanding a wide range of rewilding circumstances, and as Feldman (2011) argues, the stories we tell about these places (p.21).

3. Rewilding across disciplines

According to Jørgensen (2015), the upshot of multivalent uses and understandings of the term rewilding is twofold: the potential for imprecision and the possibility for connections (p.486). Prior and Ward (2016) respond at length to the first concern, and I take up the second aspect here. In contemplating connections associated with the use of rewilding, Jørgensen (2015) observes three movements. First, as rewilding has entered "scientific and activist discourse," it has reshaped ideas by becoming a "focal point of large and complex debates, some of which were not connected before" (Jørgensen, 2015: p.486). Second, Jørgensen observes that ideas of rewilding have connected "public imagination" and popular attention to environmental proposals, presentations, and articles (Jørgensen, 2015: p.486). Third, the "fuzziness" of rewilding has allowed "people to appropriate it and use it to discuss across boundaries" (Jørgensen, 2015: p.486). While Jørgensen gestures toward a scientific/political boundary crossing, I am more intrigued by the interdisciplinary boundary work indicated by Prior and Ward (2016) when they tacitly invite humanities scholars to join a conversation regarding rewilding.

To involve the humanities in rewilding discourse, I propose two cross-disciplinary moves. One, I look to bring creative and imaginative texts into contact with writings of environmental history and ecological sciences. Jørgensen (2015) implies this move when she juxtaposes George Monbiot and Emma Marris with Fanz Vera's writing and other accounts of Oostvaardersplassen (pp.486–487), but the works of authors, such as Jack Turner, Gary Snyder, Terry Tempest Williams, and Helen Macdonald, also speak toward rewilding and should become part of a larger conversation. In addition to advocating for creative, nonfiction works, I argue for a second step as well: the inclusion of imaginative works of fiction.

My move toward fiction reflects Buell's (1995) argument that "environmental crisis involves a crisis of the imagination the amelioration of which depends on finding better ways of imagining nature and humanity's relation to it (p.2). The SBT, Oostvaardersplassen, and the Apostle Islands grant actual case studies whereby to examine definitions of rewilding, characteristics of rewilding locations, and corresponding human actions within such sites, but fiction is able to consider vast models of rewilding and an extensive range of human responses to those imagined, but potential characteristics.

Vandermeer's (2014) *Southern Reach Trilogy* provides one context wherein to contemplate expanded possibilities of rewilding.

[2] William Cronon, who directed Feldman's dissertation, similarly argues that rewilding is the "interpretive framework that can best integrate the natural and cultural resources" of the Apostle Islands (2003: p.41).