



Rethinking rewilding

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 April 2014

Received in revised form 21 October 2014

Available online 4 December 2014

Keywords:

Environmental discourse

Science communication

Plastic words

Historical genealogy

Ecological restoration

Wilderness

ABSTRACT

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. Rewilding as a specific scientific term has its beginnings as a reference to the Wildlands Project, which was founded in 1991 and aimed to create North American core wilderness areas without human activity that would be connected by corridors. Words, however, do not stand still—they change over time and take on new meanings, while sometimes simultaneously retaining the older sense. Employing Foucault's idea of historical genealogy, this article examines how the term rewilding was historically adopted and modified in ecological scientific discourse over the last two decades. This investigation probes *what* and, by extension, *when* and *where*, rewilding refers to as it has moved into various geographies across the globe. It then examines how the term has moved outside of science and been adopted by environmental activists as a plastic word. Taken as a whole, rewilding discourse seeks to erase human history and involvement with the land and flora and fauna. Such an attempted split between nature and culture may prove unproductive and even harmful. A more inclusive rewilding is a preferable strategy.

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Introduction

In the original Latin, the prefix re-means 'back'. A host of English words incorporate re- as part of the word, but the connotations are wider than just 'back' according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*): they include a starting point returned to (as in recede), an action done again often to return to a prior state (as in reform), and a previous action undone (as in resign).

Ecological science has an entire subdiscipline built on a re-word: *ecological restoration*. Both the practice of ecological restoration and the science of restoration ecology are young endeavors: the leading journal in the field *Restoration Ecology* was only founded in 1993; the companion journal aimed at practitioners, *Ecological Restoration*, is older by 12 years, but only moved to publishing four times a year in 2000 from its earlier twice a year format. What exactly *restoration* means in the context of ecological restoration has been highly contested within scientific circles. Scientists have debated about how much restoration means returning to a previous ecosystem arrangement with historical species configurations (referred to as historical fidelity, e.g. Higgs, 2003) versus returning to an ecosystem that functions in particular ways (the idea of novel ecosystems falls into this category, e.g. Hobbs et al., 2004). Most publications, however, defer to the definition written as part of an official statement by the Society for

Ecological Restoration which defines ecological restoration as 'the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed' (SER, 2004). Most scientists agree that they are trying to re-instate something—they just do not agree on what that something should be.

Within this unclear framework of what the word restoration really means, another re- term has entered the ecological fray: rewilding. The term sounds as if it should have a straightforward meaning 'to make wild again'; *OED* (2014) lists the first usage of rewild as 1990 and defines it as 'returning (land) to a wilder and more natural state'. But in truth the term has a complex history and a host of meanings have been ascribed to it. What does it mean to be *wilder*? Wilder than what? What does it mean to be more *natural*? I am interested in *what* and, by extension, *when* and *where* rewilding refers to as it has moved into various geographies across the globe. This article focuses on how the term rewilding was historically adopted and modified in ecological scientific discourse. After examining how the term has been adopted by scientists, I move to a discussion of how the word has been picked up by recent environmental activists.

Critical in this analysis is the idea that words do not stand still. They change over time and take on new meanings, while sometimes simultaneously retaining the older sense. Words are ascribed meaning by different people and over time, consensus about the definition of a word can be reached, albeit often temporarily. Previous research in ecological discourse has identified a suite of

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normative umbrella concepts, including biodiversity, ecological services, sustainable development, ecosystem health, ecosystem management, and adaptive management, that often set the agenda for ecological research and practice (Noss, 1995; Callicott et al., 1999). These umbrella concepts fail to question how the meaning of scientific words come into being and the influence of that history on shaping practices of restoration and rewilding. Scientific language is normative, constructed, and historically situated, thereby requiring investigation for a full understanding to avoid ignorant action and intervention.

Foucault (1984) proposes that histories of ideas like rewilding should be *genealogical*. By genealogy, Foucault does not mean a quest for origins—in fact, he explicitly rejects origin-based histories—but rather understanding a given system of thought as a result of historical contingency rather than a teleological outcome (Hook, 2005). Foucault's history relies on the telling of 'descent' which traces 'the myriad events through which—thanks to which, against which—they were formed' (Foucault, 1984, p. 81). As Hook (2005, p. 7) remarks, genealogy is the 'cultivation of skepticism towards that which is taken-for-granted, assumed to be "given", or natural within contemporary social existence'. This belief in the non-predetermined, conflicting, and contingent is critical in analyzing how ideas like rewilding have developed. Likewise Foucault's focus on emergence, the ways in which knowledge is constructed through power, is useful for tracing how concepts like rewilding have gained such rapid traction in modern environmentalism. This aligns well with Foucault's insistence on genealogy as a critique of the present as much as an investigation of the past (Foucault, 1984; Crowley, 2009). A genealogical history places knowledges and discourses on plural and contradictory paths with no single source.

Shifting geographies of rewilding

To see how the term rewilding was adopted and modified in ecological scientific discourse I performed searches in Web of Science, a database of published papers commonly used by ecologists for identifying relevant literature, and Google Scholar for rewilding and rewilding, as well as the verb form rewild. I used both variants because early on the version with a dash was used and now the version without the dash is the norm. Limiting the search to scholarly literature was intentional in order to investigate the specific uses of the term within academic publications. The search resulted in a list of 49 articles, including research articles, letters, proceedings papers, and reviews, published through 2013. I read the articles to identify how the author is employing the term rewilding and then attempted to categorize the different uses of the word.

Before beginning the analysis of the scientific uses of the word 'rewilding' it is important to acknowledge, as Foucault would argue, that the word does not come out of nothing. 'Wilderness' as a conservation target, particularly in the US, has a long history. The year 2014 marked 50 years since the passage of the US Wilderness Act, which has had a profound influence on defining what counted as nature worth saving (see the roundtable on the Wilderness Act in October 2014 issue of *Environmental History*). Wilderness under the Act passed in 1964 was defined as 'an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man', yet wilderness was also a 'resource' for human use. Scholars have fiercely debated the merits of 'wilderness' as a concept (e.g. Cronon, 1995 and responses in Callicott and Nelson (1998) and Nelson and Callicott (2008)). As Nelson and Callicott (2008:41) argue, the concept of wilderness becomes particularly problematic when we try to operationalize it because of inherent conflicts. Rather than trace back all of the precursor ideas about wilderness

and the wild—which Foucault would argue is a futile endeavor in any case—the focus of this paper is the amorphous and shifting uses of the term rewilding in practice.

Cores, corridors, and carnivores

Rewilding as a specific scientific term has its beginnings as a reference to the Wildlands Project (now called Wildlands Network), which was founded in 1991 and aimed to create North American core wilderness areas without human activity that would be connected by corridors. The earliest use of the word rewilding in print was in 1991 in the magazine *Wild Earth*, which was connected to the project. The project was particularly interested in creating space for large carnivores that have large home territories. These interests have been summarized as the three Cs: cores, corridors, and carnivores (Soulé and Noss, 1998). The Wildlands Project vision statement published as Soulé and Noss (1998) is frequently cited in academic literature as the foundational manifesto for rewilding. Soulé and Noss (1998, p. 5) define rewilding as 'the scientific argument for restoring big wilderness based on the regulatory roles of large predators'.

Under this earliest rewilding concept, the wild is the time when large carnivores were abundant in North America. Rather than define when that was, Soulé and Noss (1998) give two examples of the destruction of the wild: the wolf extirpation from the Yellowstone National Park (the last wolf was killed in 1926) and the construction of Lago Guri in Venezuela (which was begun in 1963). Soulé and Noss (1998) also refer to the longer history of the systematic destruction of large carnivores in the US, pointing out the continued existence of the Wildlife Services program (formerly Animal Damage Control) of the US Department of Agriculture, which was founded in 1895 to control predator and rodent pest populations. In this earliest definition, the wild is said to have existed prior to the carnivore eradication programs in the US—essentially up to the 19th century in the United States.

The original meaning of rewilding in the Wildlands Project is employed in the two earliest results in Web of Science (Foreman, 1999; Noss, 2003). This should come as no surprise since the articles were authored by two of the most involved scientists in the Wildlands Project, Dave Foreman (a deep ecologist, Earth First! Founder, and current President of the Rewilding Institute) and Reed F. Noss, both of whom are still scientific advisors to the Wildlands Network (Wildlands Network, 2009). The three C rewilding does not assume that a time prior to human settlement is the baseline, even though the exclusion of humans from the reconstituted core areas is often presumed. 'Wildness' is based on the presence of large fauna, but often this fauna has been extirpated within the last 200 years.

The meaning of rewilding as the three Cs seems never to have caught on in scientific circles. Only one investigation, which studied the affect of predators on prey evolution (Reznick et al., 2008), directly references attempts at rewilding through carnivores. Carnivores are, however, often included as a type of animal in reintroduction schemes that appear in contemporary definitions of rewilding, as is discussed below.

Pleistocene mega-fauna replacement

In 2005, Donlan et al. published a controversial commentary piece in the major journal *Nature* advocating 'rewilding' of North America. Instead of the three C meaning, which is based on increasing populations of large fauna that are still extant, rewilding was defined as 'the restoration of large wild vertebrates into North America in preference to the "pests and weeds" (rats and dandelions) that will otherwise come to dominate the landscape' (Donlan et al., 2005, p. 913). The time reference for this rewilding was the

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