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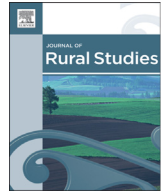

Divergent visions of wildness and naturalness in a storied landscape: Practices and discourses of rewilding in Scotland's wild places

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ABSTRACT

The public profile of rewilding has risen rapidly, and there is broad agreement within rewilding discourses about the desirability of enhancing naturalness and wildness. However, there are contrasting views about what such enhancement should comprise, both philosophically and practically. Here we investigate understandings and practices of rewilding amongst managers and owners of wild land in the Scottish uplands. The data, gathered in 2011–2013, comprise (i) semi-structured interviews with 20 stakeholders in the upland management sector, and (ii) an investigation, utilising the Delphi method, of the objectives and rationales of 17 upland estates engaged in rewilding. The results reveal some broad areas of consensus, but considerable divergence concerning the desired ends and means of rewilding, especially about (i) the place of people and cultural artefacts within wild land, and (ii) the relative merits of intervention and non-intervention. The paper presents a ‘many wilds’ synthesis of these contrasting perspectives in the form of a matrix with four interconnected axes (wild nature, wild places, wild experience and wildness), offering a way of conceptualising this plurality and of considering the conflicts which are the corollary of multiple goals for wild places.

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1. Introduction

Rewilding is being championed internationally by NGOs, environmental campaigners and private landowners, and has caught the public imagination, as exemplified by the advocacy and demonstration work of Rewilding Europe (Helmer et al., 2015) and Rewilding Britain (2017). This reflects the growing importance of ecological restoration within environmental policy and the ambitious international targets which have been set (Suding et al., 2015). Partly because rewilding has been adopted rapidly and in many settings, interpretations and practices vary widely and are evolving fast. It has broadened from a narrow focus on restoring ecosystem dynamics to include ‘wilder farming and forestry, educational and health-orientated projects, river restoration, wildlife corridors in cities and programmes for the deeper psychology of relationship to the land, wildness and nature’ (Taylor, 2015:22). Reflecting the burgeoning enthusiasm and diversity, the literature has multiplied and fractionated in almost equal measure, incorporating not only a wealth of scientific publications (Sandom et al., 2013; Lorimer et al., 2015; Corlett, 2016; Svenning et al., 2016) but also more popular, journalistic and practitioner-focused accounts (Taylor, 2005; Fraser, 2009; Balmford, 2012; Monbiot, 2013). There is no doubt, as Nogués-Bravo et al. (2016:87) put it, that ‘the drumbeat for rewilding is getting faster and louder’, although they caution that it might be ‘the new Pandora's box in conservation’.

When the vision of rewilding was first fully expounded in the seminal paper by Soulé and Noss (1998), it seemed beguilingly simple and attractively proactive, tapping into the newly-established orthodoxy that nature conservation should get off the preservationist back foot and onto the restorationist front foot. Almost 20 years of subsequent experimentation and debate have demonstrated that it is, in fact, highly complex, intersecting with some of the most intractable debates in conservation (Table 1). So although the term ‘rewilding’ sounds as if its meaning should be straightforward, the prism of conservation practice has split the term into a broad spectrum of understandings. In fact, such a host of different meanings have been invested in it that Jørgensen (2015) argues that it has become a ‘plastic word’, encompassing so much that it lacks specific content, although this accusation is disputed (Prior and Ward, 2016; Cloyd, 2016). Many advocates of rewilding, especially in North America, emphasize trophic rewilding using species reintroductions to restore top-down trophic interactions

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Table 1
Broader tensions and debates in nature conservation which are important questions within rewilding.

Conservation controversies affecting rewilding	Exemplar references
Naturalness as a guide for conservation: should natural states and processes always be preferred?	Angermeier, 2000; Cole and Yung, 2010; Marris, 2011
The relative value of pristine and novel ecosystems: is 'unspoiled nature' always more valuable?	Landres et al., 2000; Hobbs et al., 2009, 2013
Landscape *v*. biodiversity: when aesthetic and ecological values conflict, which should prevail?	Henderson, 1992; Foreman, 1998; Cole, 2000
Natural *v*. wild: is protecting biodiversity more important than respecting nature's autonomy?	Ridder, 2007; Peterson, 2008
The place or role of humans in 'nature': separation or integration of nature and culture?	Plumwood, 2006; Cowley et al., 2012; Pereira and Navarro, 2015
Natural means *v*. natural ends: is intervention acceptable/necessary or should 'hands off' approaches prevail?	Sydoriak et al., 2000; Landres, 2010; Steinwall, 2015
Past *v*. future - 'rewilding' or simply 'wilding/wilder': how relevant is history in the Anthropocene?	Hobbs et al., 2009; Feldman, 2011; Balaguer et al., 2014; Mehrabi, 2016

that promote self-regulating biodiverse systems (Svenning et al., 2016), whereas in Europe there is a greater focus on passive rewilding by allowing ecological succession on abandoned land (Navarro and Pereira, 2015; Corlett, 2016). One unifying thread shared by many rewilding projects, according to Prior and Ward (2016), is the goal of enhancing non-human autonomy, but consensus remains elusive because there is too much diversity of practice and vision to be captured by one neat conceptualisation (Gillson, 2015).

The 're' in rewilding and restoration strongly implies that the objective must be to reinstate something from the past that has been lost, and this is indeed a frequent objective, but there is no agreement about what should be reinstated or about the appropriate means for doing so. Nor is there agreement about the extent to which the past should guide management for the future. Because the selection of a single 'Garden of Eden' baseline is unavoidably arbitrary (Breed et al., 2016; Mehrabi, 2016), and may in practice be inappropriate or impossible (Balaguer et al., 2014), some advocate the term 'wilding' (Taylor, 2005), arguing that a future orientation should be adopted. Thus Sandom et al. (2013:433) characterise rewilding as 'fundamentally a future-orientated proposal that seeks to learn from the past rather than recreate it', and Seddon et al. (2014:410) argue that the goal of rewilding should be 'to enhance ecosystem resilience, rather than [to restore] some arbitrary historical state'. It is clear, then, that the what, when and where of rewilding - in other words, the means and ends, the temporal reference points and the spatial scale - are all contested. This is perhaps unsurprising given that such choices connect directly with a range of difficult philosophical and practical debates, summarised in Table 1, which are being actively disputed within nature conservation more generally.

Scotland is an intriguing setting in which to explore rewilding ideas and practices, partly because of the range and diversity of rewilding initiatives (Mc Morran et al., 2008; Brown et al., 2011), and partly because large parts of the uplands consist of landscapes which, despite evoking a sense of wildness today, are the product of millennia of human management. Reflecting trends across Europe, the importance of wildness within conservation and land management policy agendas in Scotland has been steadily increasing. This is evidenced by the active debates surrounding the meanings, definition and mapping of wildness (SNH, 2002; Mc Morran et al., 2008; Carver et al., 2012), and notably by the drive to identify Wild Land Areas, an official map of which was published in 2014 by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH, the government's environmental agency) after over a decade's work (SNH, 2014). The desire to protect wild land has been given added impetus by the rapid spread of large windfarms in the uplands since the late 1990s, prompting campaigns to preserve wild places. Today, as for the last two centuries, the Scottish uplands predominantly consist of large private estates managed primarily for game sport. Recent decades, however, have seen a diversification of ownership, with increasing areas owned by environmental NGOs and local communities, and growing interest in conservation management (Warren, 2009). Land ownership and management has been the focus of intense political debate since Scottish devolution in 1999 (Wightman, 2010; Glass et al., 2013a; McKee, 2015), but rewilding initiatives have not been affected significantly by the unfolding land reform agenda, nor are they restricted to one type of ownership. Diverse initiatives are being undertaken on land in private, public, NGO and community ownership (Taylor, 2011).

Notwithstanding the identification of Wild Land Areas, at present there is no formal policy basis for rewilding in Scotland. So far, it has been a 'bottom up' phenomenon, driven by landowning organisations and individuals rather than by strategic policy direction. One consequence of this lack of government leadership and policy is that the Scottish rewilding movement is characterised by great diversity of objectives, approaches, motivations and emphases (Taylor, 2005, 2011; Deary, 2015). Nevertheless, a prominent feature of many Scottish wildland visions is the restoration of native woodland and its biodiversity (Wilson, 2015), as exemplified by the Carrifran Wildwood (Ashmole and Ashmole, 2008), Trees for Life's work in Glen Affric (Featherstone, 2004) and the current interest in adopting the 'Norwegian model' of upland land use to increase woodland cover (Wilson, 2017). The growing currency of wildness has been accompanied by an evolution of the traditional use of 'wild' as a synonym of 'remote' into a more ecologically-orientated usage encompassing ecosystem functioning, naturalness and nativeness.

The shift in emphasis within international conservation thinking from preservation to restoration (Mace, 2014) has been accompanied by a parallel shift in ambition to embrace greater spatio-temporal scales - restoration of resilient ecological networks at a landscape scale over timescales of centuries. The original definition of rewilding by Soulé and Noss (1998:5) - characterised by the 'three Cs' of Cores, Corridors and Carnivores - focused on 'restoring big wilderness based on the regulatory roles of large predators' which could restore ecosystem function and resilience through top-down trophic interactions. The more in-depth scientific presentations of the concept in Soulé and Terborgh (1999) paint it on a similarly sweeping canvas, advocating the rewilding of 30–40% of the USA and Canada in large, connected areas with reintroduced keystone species. Boldest of all is E.O. Wilson's clarion call to hand over half the earth's surface to nature (Wilson, 2016). But such large-scale visions are of limited immediate applicability in Scotland, partly because no large predators remain and also because, as Smout (2000:172) puts it, 'in this small, old country … nothing is wilderness'. Rewilding has been seen by many, for both environmental and political reasons, as inapplicable and irrelevant (Brown et al., 2011). In contrast to North America, the wide-open spaces for creating extensive, interconnected, people-free wilderness areas do not exist, nor is there socio-political scope for doing so because - in the Highlands especially - the word 'wilderness'

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