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# Rewilding – Departures in Conservation Policy and Practice? An Evaluation of Developments in Britain

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## Abstract

Rewilding has been hailed as ‘radical’ and ‘agenda-setting’ in the challenge it poses to mainstream conservation. This paper questions whether that is still the case, or if rewilding is now being mainstreamed and with what consequences? Our analysis focuses upon developments in Britain, up until 2018, discussing what changes have become manifest and the barriers and restraints that have been observed. As such, we evaluate the extent to which rewilding – in practice – departs from longstanding conservation sensibilities. Discussion is structured around three key questions— Who is now involved in rewilding across Britain? What they are seeking to do, in terms of how nature is conceptualised and managed (or not)? In what ways do their objectives involve people and human-centred aspirations? Our findings reveal three key differences from current conservation approaches. First, rewilding is associated with a proliferation of new actors, new mechanisms of finance and new spaces of conservation interest. Second, rewilding as an approach exhibits clear novelty in its stated aim to be nature-led and, despite challenges, attempts to work through ongoing negotiation and experimentation. Finally, rewilding is currently being advocated and pursued as an agenda for people *and* nature, which moves beyond earlier nature conservation paradigms of protecting nature from human influence. However, it remains to be seen whether rewilding advocates can realise their ambitions to popularise and create peopled wild spaces across Britain’s landscapes.

**Keywords:** Rewilding, conservation governance, anthropocene, future-nature, biopolitics

## INTRODUCTION

Rewilding has been hailed as ‘radical’ and ‘agenda-setting’ in the challenge it poses to mainstream conservation, offering an ambitious and optimistic response to accelerating environmental crises (Taylor 2005; Monbiot 2013; Lorimer et al. 2015). But given that it is an approach spanning over twenty years of intellectual gestation and practical experimentation (Foreman 2004; Jørgensen 2015; Johns 2019),

is it still breaking the mould and defying convention, or are these ideas now being mainstreamed? Recent research emphasises the heterogeneous character of rewilding (Gammon 2018; Sandom et al. 2019), noting a proliferation of projects and uptake beyond the organisations and sites initially assessed by early analyses (Taylor 2011; Jepson et al. 2018; Sandom and Wynne-Jones 2019). These emerging cases suggest that rewilding is evolving and responding to different contexts and challenges arising (Wynne-Jones et al. 2018), although some contend that it is losing its identity and critical edge (Foreman 2018). There is a consequent need to take stock of developments, to assess the extent to which rewilding has become constitutive of a new regime of conservation governance, and what modifications have occurred along the way.

Our analysis focuses upon rewilding developments in Britain<sup>1</sup> up until 2018. We examine the changes, barriers and restraints that have been observed, and evaluate the extent

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1 to which rewilding – in practice - departs from longstanding  
2 conservation sensibilities. Our discussion is structured around  
3 three key points— Firstly, who is involved? Responding to,  
4 and building on, earlier arguments that position rewilding as  
5 a radical agenda sitting outside of mainstream conservation  
6 (Lorimer and Driessen 2014; Jepson 2016), we ask whether this  
7 continues to be the case, exploring which actors and interests  
8 are now evident.

9 We then turn to the specifics of the agenda being advanced,  
10 evaluating the ways in which rewilding is being conceptualised  
11 and how this in turn informs what actions are undertaken  
12 (or otherwise). Herein, we assess the change that rewilding  
13 represents biopolitically i.e. the ways in which rewilding,  
14 as a form of conservation governance, engenders particular  
15 means of administering and managing life, underpinned by  
16 specific ways of knowing ‘nature’ (Lorimer and Driessen 2016;  
17 Biermann and Anderson 2017).

18 In the literature, rewilding is seen to depart from  
19 ‘compositional’ approaches, centred on designated species and  
20 features (Lorimer et al. 2015), focusing instead upon the integrity  
21 of ecosystem processes and functionality (Lorimer and Driessen  
22 2016; Svenning et al. 2016; du Toit 2019). The imperative for  
23 ‘management’ is ostensibly reconsidered, with lost species  
24 returned (or comparable species substituted to reinstate trophic  
25 processes) and impediments on natural-function removed  
26 in order to reinstate a more ‘self-willed’ ecosystem (Fisher  
27 and Parfitt 2016). However, there is notable uncertainty and  
28 tension surrounding these objectives— specifically, the degree  
29 to which ‘rewilders’ are aiming to return to a desired ‘past’  
30 state of ‘unfettered’ nature, or whether they position wildness  
31 in future-orientated terms, prioritising non-human autonomy  
32 without preconception of ‘end-points’ (Lorimer and Driessen  
33 2016; Prior and Ward 2016). Herein, the degree of overlap  
34 between rewilding and longer-standing objectives for ecological  
35 restoration is placed in question, with those who see rewilding  
36 as working to past-baselines, contending that it has much  
37 in common with restoration agendas (Hayward et al. 2019).  
38 However, others who see it as a more radical departure from  
39 previous approaches emphasise the functionality of ecosystems  
40 foremost, embracing the potential for novelty in the species  
41 assemblage and unanticipated outcomes, rather than seeking  
42 to reproduce lost conditions (Biermann and Anderson 2017;  
43 du Toit 2019). We examine how these contentions are now being  
44 negotiated by practitioners across Britain. We also consider how  
45 such objectives are being achieved, and specifically whether  
46 the pursuit of ‘wildness’ is truly a process of stepping back  
47 and letting go.

48 Our third and final area of discussion is the extent to which  
49 rewilding is dividing the human and non-human, in terms of  
50 objectives set by advocates. This is highlighted as a continuing  
51 area of debate with several authors outlining how wildness can  
52 encapsulate a range of ontological positions – from primitivist  
53 retreat through to more fluid conceptions wherein wildness  
54 can be actively produced rather than returned to (Lorimer and  
55 Driessen 2016; Prior and Brady 2016; Ward 2019). These have  
56 differing implications for justice and conflict (see e.g. Crowley

1 et al. 2017; Deary and Warren 2017; DeSilvey and Bartolini  
2 2018; Vasile 2018; Wynne-Jones et al. 2018), depending  
3 on whether human history and involvement is erased, or  
4 more profound forms of intervention (e.g. back-breeding  
5 or genetic modification) are legitimated (Biermann and  
6 Anderson 2017: 8). It is, therefore, a critical area for discussion  
7 in our evaluation of emerging initiatives.

8 Overall, as Lorimer and Driessen (2016) and Biermann and  
9 Anderson (2017) point out, rewilding offers a broad spectrum  
10 of biopolitical possibilities with differing degrees of departure  
11 from traditional conservation approaches. To date, these have  
12 remained contested and the direction of travel unclear. Our  
13 evaluation looks at what is now becoming apparent in the  
14 British context.

15 This paper also responds to numerous reviews calling for  
16 substantive empirical evaluation of rewilding to ground the  
17 wealth of theoretical discussions emerging (Pettorelli et al.  
18 2018). Some case-based evaluations have been conducted,  
19 of species reintroductions (e.g. Buller 2008; Crowley et al.  
20 2017; Drenthen 2015; Vasile 2018) and area-based projects  
21 (e.g. Convery and Dutson 2008; Lorimer and Driessen 2014;  
22 DeSilvey and Bartolini 2018; Overend and Lorimer 2018;  
23 Wynne-Jones et al. 2018), along with analyses of specific  
24 organisations (Jepson et al. 2018). Here we present empirical  
25 analysis across 17 initiatives in Scotland, England and Wales,  
26 (see section 2 for details of selection criteria), to enable  
27 assessment of broader patterns and characteristics.

28 Why look at Britain? One might fairly question whether  
29 it is an appropriate location at all for rewilding to progress  
30 given the density of population, associated infrastructure,  
31 and consequent pressures on the environment. However, this  
32 is exactly the reason many advocates give for rewilding to be  
33 taken forwards here - in an effort to enable nature to flourish  
34 on this crowded island (Monbiot 2013). In addition, we  
35 have seen a wide range of experimentation and engagement  
36 with rewilding here over the last ten years (see Table 1),  
37 accelerating notably since the publication of Monbiot’s  
38 (2013) best-selling treatise ‘*Feral*’. As a country with a  
39 well-established conservation landscape, including clearly  
40 demarked governance institutions, frameworks and attendant  
41 rationalities (Evans 2002), Britain also offers a useful case  
42 to explore the extent of change within and beyond these  
43 structures. This is not only in terms of how established norms  
44 and procedure are being modified or re-interpreted, but also  
45 in terms of the potentially new conservation geographies – of  
46 actors and sites - that are coming into play through rewilding.

47 The UK’s vote to leave the EU has also created heightened  
48 interest in rural land-use, with the rewilding movement  
49 benefiting from the purported opportunities offered by Brexit  
50 in terms of land availability and supporting policy frameworks  
51 (Wentworth and Alison 2016). Specifically, the heightened  
52 focus on environmental enhancement and measurable public  
53 benefits (e.g. Downing and Coe 2018) could be seen to work  
54 in support of rewilding advocacy. Consequently, we explore  
55 the extent of, and rationales espoused through, rewilding  
56 developments in this emergent policy context.

**Table 1**  
**Rewilding projects evaluated**

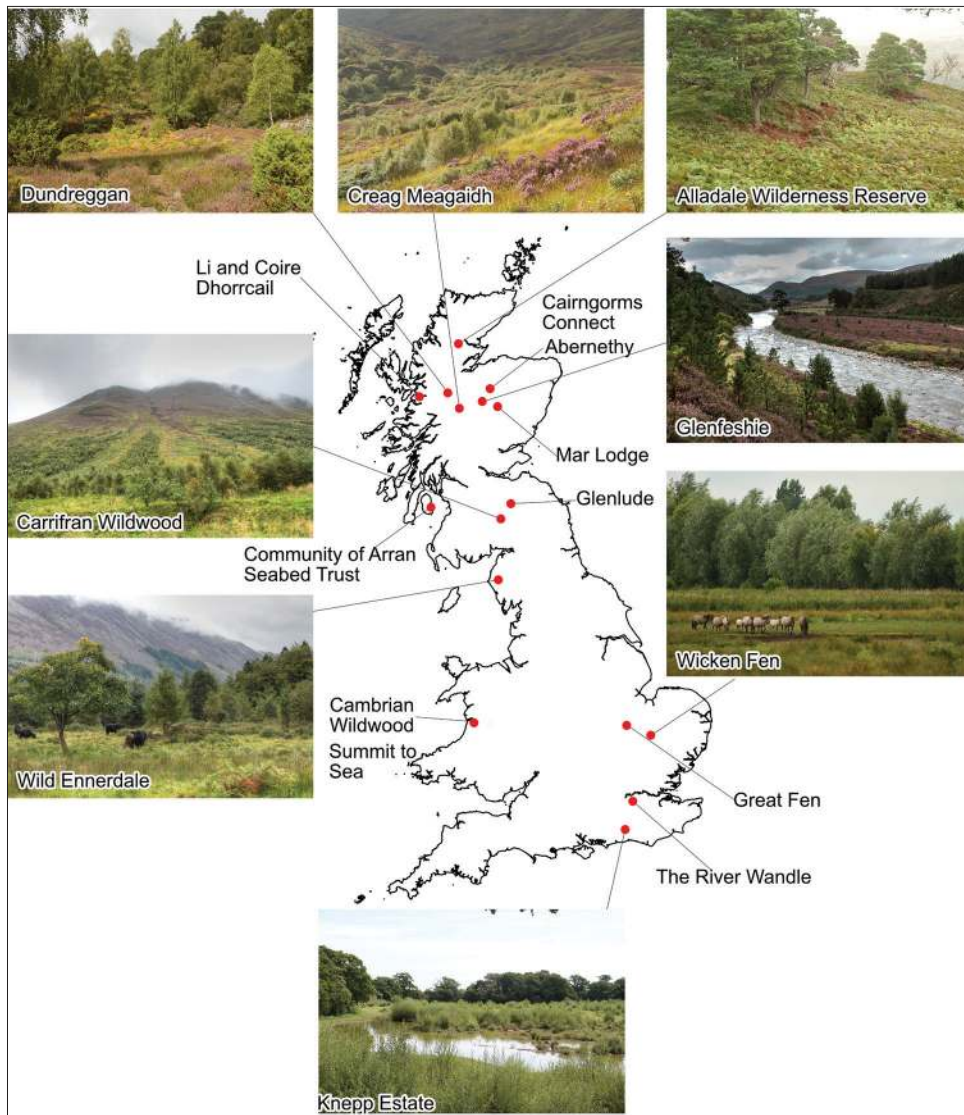
Project Name	Organisation(s) involved	Dates from	Country	Website(s)
Alladale Wilderness Reserve	Private Estate	2003	Scotland	<a href="http://www.alladale.com/">http://www.alladale.com/</a>
Li and Coire Dhorrcail	Partnership: John Muir Trust and Knoydart Foundation	1987 1997 Knoydart Foundation established	Scotland	<a href="https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/trust-land/knoydart">https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/trust-land/knoydart</a> <a href="http://www.knoydart-foundation.com/">http://www.knoydart-foundation.com/</a>
Creag Meagaidh	Scottish Natural Heritage	1985	Scotland	<a href="http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk/creag-meagaidh/">http://www.nnr-scotland.org.uk/creag-meagaidh/</a>
Cairngorms Connect (Incorporates Glenfeshie & Aberneithy)	Partnership: RSPB (Aberneithy), Scottish Natural Heritage, Forestry Commission and private land owners including the Glenfeshie Estate.	2018 1998 RSPB at Aberneithy Other estates longstanding	Scotland	<a href="http://cairngormsconnect.org.uk/">http://cairngormsconnect.org.uk/</a> <a href="https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/loch-garten/">https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/loch-garten/</a> <a href="http://www.glenfeshie.scot/Glenfeshie/Glenfeshie_Estate_Welcome.html">http://www.glenfeshie.scot/Glenfeshie/Glenfeshie_Estate_Welcome.html</a>
Mar Lodge	National Trust	1995	Scotland	<a href="http://www.nts.org.uk/Visit/Mar-Lodge-Estate/">http://www.nts.org.uk/Visit/Mar-Lodge-Estate/</a>
Trees for Life	Trees for Life	1993 Glenaffric and Glenmoriston 2008 Dundreggan	Scotland	<a href="http://treesforlife.org.uk">http://treesforlife.org.uk</a>
Glenlude	John Muir Trust	2003	Scotland	<a href="https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/trust-land/glenlude">https://www.johnmuirtrust.org/trust-land/glenlude</a>
Carrifran Wildwood	Partnership: John Muir Trust & Borders Forest Trust	2000	Scotland	<a href="http://www.carrifran.org.uk">http://www.carrifran.org.uk</a> <a href="http://bordersforesttrust.org/places/wild-heart/">http://bordersforesttrust.org/places/wild-heart/</a>
Community of Arran Seabed Trust	COAST	1995	Scotland	<a href="http://www.arrancoast.com">http://www.arrancoast.com</a>
Wild Ennerdale	Partnership: National Trust, Environment Agency, Forestry Commission.	2001	England	<a href="http://www.wildennerdale.co.uk">http://www.wildennerdale.co.uk</a>
Cambrian Wildwood	Partnership: Wales Wild Land Foundation & Woodland Trust	2007 WWLF 2017 Bwlch Corog	Wales	<a href="https://www.cambrianwildwood.org">https://www.cambrianwildwood.org</a>
Summit to Sea	Partnership: Led by Rewilding Britain & Woodland Trust	2018	Wales	<a href="http://www.summit2sea.wales/">http://www.summit2sea.wales/</a>
River Wandle	Wandle River Trust	2012	England	<a href="http://www.wandletrust.org">www.wandletrust.org</a>
Knepp Estate	Private Estate	n/a	England	<a href="https://knepp.co.uk">https://knepp.co.uk</a>
Wicken Fen	National Trust	n/a	England	<a href="https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wicken-fen-nature-reserve">https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/wicken-fen-nature-reserve</a>
Great Fen Project	Partnership: Wildlife Trust, Environment Agency, Natural England, District Council	2001	England	<a href="http://www.greatfen.org.uk">http://www.greatfen.org.uk</a>

## DATA AND METHODS

The paper draws on data derived through a combination of interviews, ethnography and textual analysis. This includes 16 formal research interviews with rewilding advocates,<sup>2</sup> practitioners and project staff across Britain, undertaken by authors 1, 2 and 3, between 2016-2018; specifically pertaining to the initiatives shown in Table 1.<sup>3</sup> Site visits and observations were also undertaken (locations shown in Figure 1) in conjunction with evaluation of project management plans and strategy documentation. Long-term ethnographic engagement (including repeat informal interviews and observations) with the rewilding movement in Wales, and a period of earlier interviews (in 2005-2006) with key instigators was also undertaken by author 1 (see Wynne-Jones et al. 2018). In addition, Author 4 conducted

a series of 'rewilding knowledge exchange' workshops with wider conservation and land-use interests across England (Sandom et al. 2019). Lastly, textual analysis was conducted on publicity and outreach material.

The projects under discussion here were chosen due to either their self-identification as rewilding or listing by Rewilding Britain as exemplar projects (to which they had consented).<sup>4</sup> The recently announced Summit to Sea project, led by Rewilding Britain, was also included in our analysis along with Wicken Fen and the Great Fen, which have been listed by others.<sup>5</sup> These selection criteria mean that we do not discuss 'unintentional' forms of rewilding, where land abandonment is leading to outcomes that rewilding advocates have otherwise applauded. This is due to a lack of comprehensive data on the extent of such changes. For the purposes of this paper we have also chosen not to discuss



**Figure 1**  
*Location of projects. Photos Chris Sandom*

animal reintroductions operating in isolation from wider changes in land-management (although see Sandom and Wynne-Jones 2019).

A recent parliamentary review (Wentworth and Alison 2016) outlines that rewilding “generally refers to reinstating natural processes that would have occurred in the absence of human activity...” with an emphasis upon ‘self-regulating natural processes’ into the longer term. Whilst this broad definition fits all of the projects in question here, we acknowledge that there is no single *accepted* definition of rewilding, despite many calls for clearer parameters (Pettorelli et al. 2018). It is not the intention of this paper to reach tighter stipulations around what should and should not be regarded as rewilding. Instead, we are interested in the way rewilding has been embraced and remoulded in multiple ways and to differing degrees. The very fact that rewilding is changing and proliferating as a diverse movement is central to the analysis presented here.

## FINDINGS

The follow section presents and discusses our findings, exploring who is now involved in rewilding and what objectives they hold.

### Avant-garde or mainstream?

Earlier discussions of rewilding have presented it as a movement on the cutting-edge of conservation, with instigators acting outside of the mainstream. Almost by definition, rewilding has been framed as a critique and counter to the mainstay of conservation endeavour. Established governance frameworks prescribing what is valued, and how this is monitored and maintained, can work against some of rewilding’s central principles – namely the celebration of more emergent and dynamic conceptualisations of nature (Lorimer 2015; Jepson and Schepers 2016). It is perhaps unsurprising then that observations

thus far have centred on the pioneering work of key individuals like Frans Vera and new organisations like Rewilding Europe (Drenthen 2009; Lorimer and Driessen 2013 and 2014; Jepson et al. 2018). Here we question whether rewilding is now entering a new phase of wider engagement, as well as acknowledging the contribution of a broader array of actors.

Whilst Rewilding Europe (est. 2011), and actors within the Dutch conservation sector who initiated the charity, were certainly at the forefront of publically championing rewilding from the 1990s onwards, many UK conservation professionals were intrigued early on by Vera's ideas about the 'natural state' of ecosystems and the dynamics affecting this (Taylor 2005; Parkes 2006). Coming together from the early 2000s through groupings including the British Association of Nature Conservation, Wildland Network and Wildland Research Institute, a diverse array of actors began to debate the relevance and implications of this new conservation paradigm (see e.g. Kirby 2004; Hodder et al. 2009; Taylor 2011; Sandom et al. 2013). This was linked to emerging questions around the appropriate scale (spatial and temporal) of conservation efforts, to enable resilience in the face of advancing, anthropogenic-induced environmental change (Lawton et al. 2010; Lorimer 2012). It also occurred alongside a broader surge of interest in the potential, and importance, of wild land in Scotland (Interviewee 27). It is from this period, in the early and mid-2000s, that initial practical experimentation – and many of the projects in question here – stemmed (Ward et al. 2006).<sup>6</sup>

Consequently, although the publication of Monbiot's (2013) *Feral* is commonly regarded as the watershed in rewilding's ascendance in Britain, it is important to appreciate this longer gestation, which provided the groundwork for Monbiot's clarion calls. Indeed, many of these actors then came together to support the formation of Rewilding Britain in 2015 (Interviewees 27 and 19). Tellingly, however, there was a strong sense that a *new* organisation was needed to take this agenda forward:

*"an organisation that can say the awkward things that [other organisations] can't say and can push [these organisations] further than had previously been comfortable. So, opening space, basically for [others] to move into..." (Interviewee 19)*

Reviewing the actors and type of projects present at the outset, it is evident that smaller bespoke entities and pioneering individuals played a formative role and were certainly some of the first to publicly pronounce their actions as rewilding – with Trees for Life and Alladale in Scotland, and Knepp Castle in the South of England (see Table 1 for project start dates). Yet formalised conservation NGOs and government associated environment bodies were not absent, with Wild Ennerdale demonstrating the interest of the National Trust, Forestry Commission and Environment Agency in the Lake District. Whilst in Scotland<sup>7</sup>, large public and charitably owned estates were also beginning to experiment with a 'reduced intervention' approach, aiming to reinstate more 'natural' condition and processes, reflecting the wider questioning of conservation norms (Parkes 2006).

Amongst these NGOs and public bodies, the John Muir Trust (JMT) took a leading role with Li and Coire Dhorrcail on Knoydart, in Scotland, and in partnering with the Borders Forest Trust in the establishment of Carrifran. JMT were also the first NGO to outline an official policy statement on rewilding (John Muir Trust 2015b), perhaps unsurprisingly given the close fit of their established remit as a 'wild land' charity, with rewilding objectives. Today, an increasing cross-section of UK NGOs now have a policy statement on rewilding (e.g. RSPB 2017; Woodland Trust 2017), outlining how rewilding can work to support their particular objectives. Although, for some this has been a more cautious embrace:

*"We recognise a lot of what we do constitutes as rewilding. I think we would rather call it landscape scale habitat restoration really... There's a strong overlap in what we are doing and what others are promoting as rewilding, but the term itself doesn't suit our approach... and because of its toxic rejection amongst some people." (Interviewee 23)*

Tellingly, even for those initiatives most closely aligned and comfortable with the term, care was expressed in terms of how and with whom they would use the term. These sensitivities were largely connected to negative associations with large carnivore reintroductions and the divisive nature of publicity surrounding Monbiot's (2013) *Feral*. Hence, organisations were keen to assert exactly how they were interpreting and applying rewilding, or when necessary eschewing this loaded term.

*"We're a bit judicious on how and where we use it. So if we're going to work with land owners we might steer clear and not use the term" (Interviewee 22)*

*"I've no problem with [the project] featuring under the umbrella of rewilding. We just explain where we're coming from in relation to that" (Interviewee 24)*

This wider uptake, and the concerns equally noted, can in many ways be tied to the policy window that Brexit has opened up, with rewilding explicitly framed as an option for future land-use policy (Wentworth and Alison 2016; Diamond 2017), ushering the spectre of wider change. Whilst advocates such as Taylor (2005) have long made the point that the European Common Agricultural Policy acts as a barrier to the wider proliferation of conservation activity, by stabilising the farming sector, this argument is now being mainstreamed (Monbiot 2013). Consequently, conservation organisations have been keen to secure their interests in a future operating outside of this policy framework. Yet equally, the insecurity and tension this has created amongst rural stakeholders has meant that the excitement of new possibilities also has to be tempered with a commitment to the communities that are set to suffer marked dis-benefits from the changes under way – a point we return to below.

Alongside the gradual engagement of 'mainstream' conservation bodies, new organisations have continued to emerge, including the Wales Wild Land Foundation (in 2007) and Rewilding Britain itself (in 2015), who then formally entered a partnership with Rewilding Europe in 2017. Looking more widely, novel partnerships are a key feature across a

1 range of emerging projects, demonstrating the high levels of  
 2 innovation and energy that rewilding has inspired – and seems  
 3 to require (Interviewees 20, 25 and 24). Here it was noted that  
 4 institutional constraints might otherwise hamper innovation  
 5 and flexibility.

6 “there was such a lot of energy and interest and I think that  
 7 one of our advantages is that we are small and can be kind of  
 8 agile and can operate almost as a sort of start-up company  
 9 rather than an NGO...” Interviewee 20

10 Established organisations are working together to realise  
 11 larger scale visions, like the Great Fen Project and Cairngorms  
 12 Connect, and bigger NGOs are working with community  
 13 groups and small emerging charities. For example, the  
 14 Woodland Trust has collaborated with Wales Wild Land  
 15 Foundation on the Cambrian Wildwood. Co-investment  
 16 with community stakeholders is also a distinctive feature in  
 17 Scotland, given the supporting legal framework there.<sup>8</sup> It is  
 18 also an area of interest for projects elsewhere (pers. comm.  
 19 Rewilding Britain 2019). Herein, an important emphasis is  
 20 being placed on supporting bottom-up engagement, with  
 21 projects led by groups that are proximal and more rooted in  
 22 locales. This was something many respondents considered to  
 23 be critical (Interviewees 15, 22, 20, 26, 27), seeking to counter  
 24 criticisms of rewilding as an ‘outside agenda’ being parachuted  
 25 in (see Wynne-Jones et al. 2018).

26 There has also been an increase in the number of private  
 27 actors involved, as part of wider partnerships like Cairngorms  
 28 Connect and Summit to Sea, or working with organisations  
 29 like Trees for Life, as well as those expressing an interest in  
 30 post-Brexit ‘diversification’ following the model of Knepp  
 31 (Rewilding Britain. pers. comm. 2018). Private donors and  
 32 philanthropists are also playing an increasing role, whether  
 33 through the donation of existing estates (such as Glenlude now  
 34 managed by the JMT), or providing substantive funding to  
 35 emerging initiatives (as was the case for Cambrian Wildwood).

36 Reflecting more widely on the issue of finance, a range of  
 37 novel mechanisms for supporting and facilitating rewilding are  
 38 evident, showing a transition away from traditional reliance  
 39 on charitable funding sources. Here, a notable theme (which  
 40 connects to our discussion in section 3.3) is the increasing  
 41 link between rewilding and ‘nature-based’ business enterprise.  
 42 This is very notable in the advocacy of Rewilding Britain  
 43 (echoing the thinking of Rewilding Europe, e.g. Rewilding  
 44 Europe 2017), framing rewilding as a more economically  
 45 resilient approach to land-use, with potential to draw new  
 46 revenue streams. For the private estates in question, nature-  
 47 based tourism is a key feature. Similarly, for emerging projects,  
 48 the apparent potential that rewilding offers to diversify the  
 49 traditional rural land economy is being celebrated, even if they  
 50 are not seeking to operate themselves as standalone business  
 51 enterprises (Interviewee 15).

52 ‘Payments for ecosystem services’ have featured strongly in  
 53 these discussions (Woodland Trust 2017; Sandom et al. 2019).  
 54 Here, by working to restore natural processes, rewilding is  
 55 framed as providing desirable ‘eco-commodities’ including  
 56 carbon sequestration and flood mitigation, with work now

1 ensuing to connect projects to corporate and public sector  
 2 buyers (Rewilding Britain and Friends of the Earth 2016;  
 3 Rewilding Britain 2018). Even where direct financial  
 4 rewards are not being sought, the rhetoric of ecosystem  
 5 service provision was utilised by a number of respondents  
 6 to champion their projects (Interviewees 22 and 24). This  
 7 was not, however, universal and many longer-standing  
 8 projects were notable in their lack of engagement with such  
 9 framings and associated efforts to develop a business arm  
 10 to their projects (Interviewee 25), suggesting that this is an  
 11 approach being favoured by more recent projects. However,  
 12 a review of *current* income streams and finance used to secure  
 13 existing sites demonstrates that to-date rewilding has not  
 14 departed significantly from longer-standing models of reliance  
 15 upon charitable (including philanthropic) and public sector  
 16 funding. Nonetheless, we can see notable *aspiration* for a  
 17 more financially diverse, and to some extent commercialised,  
 18 approach to gaining conservation funding suggesting a certain  
 19 degree of novelty in the approach that is being pursued  
 20 (c.f. Brockington et al. 2012; Büscher et al. 2014).

21 Overall, we have seen a marked expansion from pioneer  
 22 projects, with wider levels of engagement including both  
 23 ‘mainstream’ conservation actors (including NGOs and  
 24 government associated bodies) and more bespoke initiatives.  
 25 This demonstrates that rewilding is moving beyond a niche,  
 26 with a diverse array of actors now coalescing around this new  
 27 way of thinking. This not only suggests movement within the  
 28 conservation sector through the embrace of new ideas, but  
 29 also reflects a wider opening of conservation activities and  
 30 enterprise beyond traditional actors and mechanisms of finance.  
 31 As such, we contend that whilst rewilding clearly now has a  
 32 place amongst the ‘mainstream’ of conservation, innovation  
 33 and novelty continue to be key features in driving it forward.  
 34 To better understand the implications of the trends outlined,  
 35 we now take a closer look at what projects are seeking to do.  
 36

### 37 How wild? Openness and risk 38

39 In the following section we focus on two questions, firstly  
 40 whether ‘rewilders’ are working to restore past states, or  
 41 seeking a ‘future nature’, and secondly, to what extent is their  
 42 approach ‘nature-led’. Moving towards a *wilder* ecological  
 43 state is one of the most important areas of distinction for  
 44 rewilding (Jepson and Shepers 2016). Yet, tensions have  
 45 persisted around whether rewilders are working towards  
 46 objectives drawn from historical baselines, or whether their  
 47 efforts to repair ecosystems is forward-looking and working  
 48 from current contexts and possibilities. Whilst some early  
 49 rewilding proposals were clearly informed by past contexts  
 50 (Jørgensen 2015; Johns 2019), a focus on historical baselines  
 51 has been widely criticised. The majority of projects reviewed  
 52 here demonstrate a clear sensitivity to the difficulties of using  
 53 past baselines, and strongly rejected such a stance. This concurs  
 54 with Deary and Warren’s (2017) observations in Scotland  
 55 and Lorimer and Driessen’s (2016) discussion of Rewilding  
 56 Europe’s stance.

1 “Rewilding, and certainly what [we] are doing, needs  
2 to be about the future and asking what do we want in the  
3 future for these landscapes...if there's a bandwagon that says  
4 let's turn the clock back 4000 years then we're not on it.”  
5 (Interviewee 22)

6 “The ‘re’ [of rewilding] does suggest that we are trying to  
7 take it back to some previous state that we want, and I am not  
8 sure that is what we are really doing, we are just trying to let  
9 a wild state emerge” (Interviewee 16)

10 As such, practitioners in Britain now appear to be less  
11 concerned with a particular imaginary and moment of  
12 what wild should be, and more orientated towards realising  
13 natures' potential. This aligns with a wider adoption, within  
14 the conservation world, of 'future nature' approaches  
15 (Collard et al. 2015). Nonetheless, there was acknowledgement  
16 that projects were informed and inspired by past states, drawing  
17 on archaeological and palaeoecological data (Interviewees  
18 15, 24 and 25), but not strictly wedded to reconstructing  
19 them (in contrast with aspirations for ecological restoration,  
20 c.f. Hayward et al. 2019). Equally, an ethical commitment to  
21 what has been lost was often articulated, but not fixated-on as  
22 a romanticised notion of purity to be achieved. This compares  
23 well with Mackinnon's (2013) description of the past as a  
24 measure of possibility, not only a lament (Collard et al. 2015:  
25 327). It differentiates rewilding as observed here from a more  
26 radical 'new conservation' position which fully rejects past  
27 reference (e.g. Kareiva et al. 2012).

28 “Future natural is a term we use... we're not turning  
29 the clock back to any previous state... why would you pick  
30 that point? Was it natural? ...However, we can look to our  
31 past, there's lots of evidence... and that helps influence our  
32 thinking... you can understand how people have lived off that  
33 land...” (Interviewee 24)

34 “We have to be careful about using words such as “back”  
35 since it implies having a fixed point in the past that you are  
36 trying to emulate or return to... but we get clues... that gives  
37 you ideas as to how it could be again.” (Interviewee 15)

38 In place of identifying a particular point they were aiming  
39 for, respondents stressed an ambition to step back, to let go  
40 and allow nature more autonomy.

41 “It's not talking creating pristine wilderness. It's talking  
42 about letting nature, you know natural processes take hold.”  
43 (Interviewee 27)

44 In many instances this was articulated as 'learning from  
45 nature' to ensure a more effective means of doing conservation.  
46 This explains the rejection of a need to return to a fixed point,  
47 as this would work directly against the perceived need for  
48 dynamism (c.f. Manning et al. 2009; Lorimer 2012). Here again  
49 we see wider points of connection with the thinking of 'new  
50 conservation' proponents, and their emphasis upon an innately  
51 resilient nature, but a sense that some support (i.e. repair and  
52 restoration) is needed to allow this resilience to occur.

53 *The natural systems that make up the planet are dynamic,*  
54 *they have adapted and evolved to changing conditions... We*  
55 *need to act to protect, restore and recreate ecosystems and build*  
56 *resilience in the natural environment. This means working with*

*natural processes, enabling natural systems to be dynamic,*  
*adaptable and robust.* (Woodland Trust 2017)

Reducing intervention and becoming more nature-led was a  
common point of alignment, even for projects that were more  
nervous about the broader 'rewilding' label, and was expressed  
as a key principle for Rewilding Britain.

*Natural processes drive outcomes: Rewilding seeks to*  
*reinststate natural processes – for example, the free movement*  
*of rivers, natural grazing, habitat succession and predation. It*  
*is not geared to reach any human-defined optimal point or end*  
*state. It goes where nature takes it.* (Rewilding Britain 2017)

This is evidenced in project management plans which  
revealed a consistent ambition to give nature greater freedom  
to 'take its course'. For example, the owners of the Knepp  
Estate indicate that they believe their approach is 'radically  
different to conventional nature conservation in that it is not  
driven by specific goals or target species' (Knepp Estate 2017).  
At Wicken Fen, the National Trust identifies a contrast between  
working with natural processes and setting narrow species-  
driven goals (The National Trust 2009). This appears to support  
arguments that hail rewilding as a new biopolitical regime  
in conservation governance, departing from old measures  
and framings of success and, perhaps more substantively,  
denominations of who/what is governing who (Biermann and  
Anderson 2017).

However, whilst *aspirations* to reduce human intervention  
were notable, for the majority of projects this was not being  
realised in the immediate term with none of the projects taking  
a zero-management approach. Instead, various actions were  
being undertaken with the aim of restoring functionality,  
repairing impeding damage, and removing limiting factors.  
This included removal of human infrastructure or physical  
impacts e.g. weirs and drainage ditches<sup>9</sup>); (re)introducing  
missing or depleted fauna; planting missing flora; and  
managing large herbivore population dynamics in the absence  
of large predators (e.g. culling or exclusion fencing (Newton  
and Ashmole 2000; Wild Ennerdale 2006; Roberts 2010; John  
Muir Trust 2012 and 2015a; Knepp Estate 2017; Trees for Life  
2017; WWLF 2017). In some instances, explicit targets had  
been set (i.e. for desired habitat condition and composition)  
to restore ecosystems to more functional state which could  
then develop naturally through ecological processes (Newton  
and Ashmole 2000; Trees for Life pers. comm. 2017). Such  
interventions evidence a conception of damage, complicating  
readings that nature – in any state – is always, already resilient  
(Tsing et al. 2017). Whilst we see a strong aspiration to learn  
from nature and enable greater self-governance within natural  
systems, there was still a sense that there was an optimal state  
to be achieved before such 'release' could occur. A critical  
dimension of this was that anthropocentric presence was  
often conceptualised as a continuing impediment on healthy  
functionality.

Beyond these initial interventions, or active forms of  
rewilding, which appeared to be necessary for most projects  
under consideration, there was also a sense of restriction  
continuing to be imposed into the future with stakeholders



1 outlining ambitions to be nature-led *‘as far as possible’*.  
 2 Management plans included qualifying statements such as  
 3 ‘as much freedom as possible’, ‘unless an estate asset is under  
 4 risk’. Risks to human life and property were also considered,  
 5 particularly with regards to fire and flood risk management,  
 6 with some noting greater capacity to experiment if there were  
 7 no human settlements close by (Interviewee 24).

8 Limitations also arose in relation to current governance  
 9 frameworks and objectives (i.e. SSSI, NNR or Natura 2000  
 10 designations), which organisations had a duty towards. For  
 11 example, respondents explained that successional processes  
 12 were being halted and/or the introduction of flora not  
 13 undertaken in some instances, or particular areas, if designated  
 14 features were threatened. However, for some projects such  
 15 restrictions were of lesser concern where initiatives were  
 16 largely operating on non-designated sites (e.g. both the  
 17 Cambrian and Carrifran Wildwoods, Glenlude, and some of  
 18 the Trees for Life areas) or extending far beyond the confines  
 19 of a core designated site (e.g. Wild Ennerdale, The Great Fen  
 20 Project, Cairngorms Connect, Summit to Sea). Yet even here  
 21 there were clear challenges noted in how projects should be  
 22 monitored and reporting, for example whether descriptors like  
 23 ‘favourable management’ should be used in place of assessing  
 24 ‘favourable condition’.

25 Beyond reporting requirements and statutory duties,  
 26 funding stipulations also resulted in a less flexible approach.  
 27 For example, government tree planting grants (which several  
 28 projects utilised or considered) have set targets in terms of  
 29 ‘planting success rates.’ Hence a tighter management regime  
 30 was needed where such funding was being drawn upon. In  
 31 some instances, this required a substantial input of labour to  
 32 ensure the continued survival of planted flora. This paradoxical  
 33 situation was discussed by several interviewees, with a number  
 34 of projects highlighting a preference for less interventionist  
 35 approaches. For example, rather than planting extensive areas  
 36 (as was done at Carrifran Wildwood for example), the Cambrian  
 37 Wildwood proposes planting smaller areas to provide a seed  
 38 source that would enable natural regeneration into the longer  
 39 term, but in a less managed fashion where outcomes were more  
 40 uncertain. This was presented as a commitment to the future  
 41 rather than setting fixed requirements for immediate results.

42 This approach was also discussed as one with lower  
 43 financial burden, which was noted as a point of attraction for  
 44 rewilding compared to conventional conservation management  
 45 (Wentworth and Alison 2016). Yet larger NGOs also noted  
 46 the risks associated, both in managing potential ‘failures’  
 47 (e.g. where trees do not establish) and the difficulties in  
 48 communicating the rationale of such approach to public visitors  
 49 and supporters who want to see more rapid changes in the  
 50 landscape. Such concerns demonstrate an underlying target for  
 51 what the landscape *should* look like, and in these instances the  
 52 ‘rewilding’ or ‘natural-process-led’ method seems more a tool  
 53 rather than an end point. This was echoed in statements where  
 54 natural processes were articulated as the best means to achieve  
 55 desired outcomes, rather than overtly aiming to reinstate  
 56 nature’s autonomy as a goal for its own sake. Here we see the

1 balance of bio’- versus anthropo- centric framing differing  
 2 across respondents, a point we explore further in section 3.3.  
 3 This also demonstrates the persistence of particular mindsets  
 4 which complicate efforts to rework conservation biopolitics,  
 5 even when the technologies and targets of governance are  
 6 amended.

7 *“What we need to do is look at the land right now and where  
 8 it could get to... and which outcomes do we want? For us the  
 9 best way of doing that is through natural processes, let nature  
 10 figure it out”* (Interviewee 22)

11 The management of fauna poses similar questions around  
 12 appropriate levels of intervention. In this case the dilemma  
 13 centres on the extent to which the animals are allowed to be  
 14 wild. This is particularly contentious in the case of herbivores  
 15 that have not previously been regarded as wild (e.g. horses at  
 16 Wicken Fen and Cambrian Wildwood). Perceptions of what  
 17 constitutes appropriate levels of welfare, and how much  
 18 management animals should be exposed to, was an area of  
 19 fraught discussion amongst respondents (c.f. Lorimer and  
 20 Driessen 2013; von Essen and Allen 2016). Equally, managing  
 21 the impacts of animals (i.e. pine martens, beavers, foxes, sea  
 22 eagles) on human property and livelihoods was an area where  
 23 ongoing intervention was being conducted in most cases (see  
 24 also Simms et al. 2010; Crowley et al. 2017; Wynne-Jones  
 25 et al. 2018).

26 Overall, whilst most projects demonstrate a clear commitment  
 27 to enhancing nature’s autonomy and becoming more ‘nature-  
 28 led, there are significant questions regarding the extent to  
 29 which this occurs in practice. These experiences raise key  
 30 questions about how ‘letting go’ will work into the longer  
 31 term, affirming questions on how – or whether – to amend  
 32 current conservation restrictions to enable rewilding freer rein  
 33 (Lorimer 2015; Jepson and Shepers 2016; Nogues Bravo et al.  
 34 2016). Our insights suggest that although enabling wildness is  
 35 not straightforward, rewilding is resulting in new spaces for  
 36 conservation interest, operating outside of older frameworks  
 37 and notions of what holds conservation value.

### 38 Spaces for Nature...and People?

39 Our final area of discussion is the extent to which rewilding is  
 40 being pursued as a uniquely nature-centred set of objectives.  
 41 To put it another way, to what extent is rewilding being  
 42 understood, and enacted, as an agenda for nature *and people*?  
 43 A lot of early critiques have focused on the exclusionary, and  
 44 potentially misanthropic, framing of the ‘wild’ in rewilding,  
 45 echoing well acknowledged arguments about the problematic  
 46 discourse of wilderness (Jørgensen 2015; Ward 2019). Notably,  
 47 such critiques are connected to a historically framed ambition  
 48 for wildness as a past condition before human intervention  
 49 and damage. Given the more forward-looking orientation of  
 50 the projects observed, we could infer that such concerns have  
 51 less grounding (supporting Prior and Ward 2016). However,  
 52 it is still necessary to question whether the projects adopt  
 53 a relational approach (Ward 2019) in being inclusive of,  
 54 and indeed targeted towards, human flourishing as part of  
 55

1 the ecosystems they aim to rejuvenate. This is particularly  
2 important given persisting concerns surrounding the spatial  
3 and ontological division of nature and human culture in  
4 contemporary conservation in which wildness serves as a key  
5 signifier (Lorimer 2015; Prior and Brady 2016).

6 In one of the earliest iterations of rewilding advocacy in  
7 Britain, Peter Taylor (2005) set out a bio-centric and post-  
8 humanist vision in which rewilding was presented as an  
9 ethically driven agenda for nature. Whilst humans are seen  
10 as part of this vision, it is primarily in terms of achieving  
11 spiritual and moral order through a renewed, and reconfigured  
12 relationship with the natural world. Some interviewees  
13 expressly rejected human-centred rationalities for rewilding:

14 *"Wild land does have benefits in terms of human welfare...  
15 but I do need to emphasise...we specifically felt we were not  
16 going the way of most conservation organisations in saying  
17 'for wildlife and people'... We're trying to restore nature for  
18 nature's sake primarily."* (Interviewee 25)

19 But other actors regarded the inclusion of human interest as  
20 a longstanding guiding principle both within and beyond the  
21 'established' conservation NGO sector:

22 *"We don't distinguish in an area for nature and areas  
23 for people... for us it [rewilding] is about restoring natural  
24 processes...and doing so in a way that people can be involved  
25 with and have a stake in that going forward."* (Interviewee 22)

26 *"Allowing greater opportunity for natural processes to  
27 benefit people... It's really important that when we're talking  
28 about looking after a landscape that there is a people element  
29 there, recognising a living working managed landscape... The  
30 long-term goal is simply to strive for a more sensitive balance,  
31 towards a functioning natural landscape... but also how we as  
32 people engage in that landscape."* (Interviewee 24)

33 *"There's an upsurge in people saying well this is exciting,  
34 we've talked about species, and habitat, and that's all quite  
35 dry and this is refreshing. It's...involving people, making things  
36 better for people."* (Interviewee 27)

37 For this broader array of projects, rewilding was fundamentally  
38 framed as being about nature and people; achieving a better  
39 relationship and balance, by bringing people in greater contact  
40 with nature and ensuring people could benefit from a healthier  
41 environment. Discussions of 'rewilding ourselves' came to the  
42 fore (c.f. Louv 2008; Monbiot 2013). This was articulated in  
43 diverse terms, sometimes in strongly spiritual tones that echoed  
44 Taylor's (2005) framing, and in other instances as utilitarian  
45 framings of human wellbeing connecting to government policy  
46 agendas.

47 *"...nature has a deeply profound healing effect...It is actually  
48 crucial to our survival on the planet to realise that we are part  
49 of it...rewilding ourselves in the sense of realising that we  
50 are already wild, that we are part of nature"* (Interviewee 16)

51 In both cases, respondents were strident in their  
52 conceptualisation of nature conservation as a holistic (people  
53 and nature) rather than divided (nature vs people) objective.  
54 Their statements demonstrate a clear awareness and reaction  
55 against purist notions of nature, and a more reflexive stance  
56 amongst practitioners than some earlier commentators would

1 suggest. There was an acknowledgement that rewilding could  
2 move in either direction, and hence needed to pursue a more  
3 inclusive vision:

4 *"There's been a bit of backlash in terms of 'what does this  
5 word mean?' Some people see it as exclusionist and purist...  
6 that this should be somewhere people are kept out of... and  
7 if I think that's the case then it's a term that will come and go  
8 and fade away. Or is it dynamic and people based? If it's the  
9 latter that will give it longevity and I can see people getting  
10 on board with that."* (Interviewee 22)

11 In this regard, a number of projects involved distinctive  
12 visitor, education and/or volunteer programmes for supporting  
13 people to gain access to project sites and engage directly with  
14 activities underway, thereby countering critiques of rewilding  
15 as exclusionary project. Some recent projects also involved a  
16 social inclusion remit for supporting disadvantaged groups  
17 to experience their sites (Interviewee 16). However, in other  
18 instances the price tag attached to visitor experiences, along  
19 with the distance from larger centres of human population  
20 (see Figure 1), pointed to a more socially exclusive model.  
21 Several respondents revealed keen attention to questions  
22 of social justice, drawing attention to socio-political  
23 hierarchies in terms of who had access to land and capacity  
24 to gain environmental benefits. Such reflections were most  
25 prominently raised in a Scottish context, where inequalities in  
26 land ownership and access are marked and scarred by historic  
27 violence (see Mackenzie 2008; Deary and Warren 2017).

28 *"If more people have a stake in the land I think it will  
29 be healthier, certainly a healthier society and...a more  
30 constructive debate on what should happen. ...a wider range  
31 of people benefit from that not just benefiting one group of  
32 people..."* (Interviewee 22)

33 Organisations operating in Scotland also discussed  
34 the importance the Land Reform Act (2003 and 2015) in  
35 supporting communities to buy land now coming on the  
36 market in Scotland, and how this informed the approach  
37 they were taking. There was evidence of NGOs supporting  
38 communities to buy land and exploring how community and  
39 NGO aspirations could be mutually beneficial (Interviewee 27).  
40 In other instances, divisions between local communities and  
41 those initiating and running projects was blurred, with long  
42 term residents playing key roles (e.g. Cambrian Wildwood,  
43 COAST, Knoydart Foundation). However, this was not a  
44 universal experience and there is the potential danger of  
45 external actors seeking to buy-up land in a way that threatens  
46 local stakeholders (Wynne-Jones et al. 2018).

47 The respondents in this study demonstrated awareness of  
48 the criticisms that rewilding has faced, including heightened  
49 sensitivities to the current Brexit context which has intensified  
50 anxieties around land-use change. In contrast to the very  
51 adversarial stances aired in the popular press, our interviews  
52 and observations reveal more careful and less polarising  
53 position.

54 *"It's not about imposing something, because that won't  
55 work... We've said in our public comms 'yeah we definitely  
56 support rewilding, and it's not for everyone, it needs to be in*

1 *the right place. You need peoples' consent... For [particular*  
 2 *sites] it's not worth looking into but that doesn't mean we can't*  
 3 *support it in other places..." (Interviewee 27)*

4 In some instances, there was direct acknowledgement  
 5 that previous actions and declarations on rewilding were  
 6 problematic, or unjust, and moving forwards a new approach  
 7 needed to be taken:

8 *"There needs to be a much clearer pathway on reintroductions*  
 9 *that assures people that they are not going to happen in the way*  
 10 *some reintroductions happened in the past. People should be*  
 11 *much more involved in the decision-making process and much*  
 12 *clearer on what the options are in the event that something*  
 13 *goes wrong." (Interviewee 23)*

14 Respondents also stressed the work that was now being done  
 15 as part of their projects to proactively communicate with, and  
 16 actively support, local communities and businesses to derive  
 17 benefits. This was in instances where project leaders were both  
 18 external actors and local residents.

19 *"There's a recognised brand that local businesses use.*  
 20 *We've got a new visitors' centre that can help support local*  
 21 *businesses which is great... we do a newsletter that goes out to*  
 22 *all the parish households. We just supported a new community*  
 23 *centre so we're having an open evening... we work beyond our*  
 24 *boundaries..." (Interviewee 24)*

25 Rewilding was often positioned as underpinning new  
 26 business initiatives and as a means to draw in novel forms  
 27 of income:

28 *"It's an option for people and the community. It's not a*  
 29 *threat, we're not forcing them to do it... There's lots of different*  
 30 *options... Rewilding is opening up peoples' views for different*  
 31 *options for upland management." (Interviewee 27)*

32 The financial sensibilities of this new approach were directly  
 33 compared to longstanding practices of farming and game-  
 34 keeping, with claims that rewilding offers increased levels  
 35 and diversity in forms of employment:

36 *"...we think it can provide more employment and economic*  
 37 *activity and be a value to more people by being restored,*  
 38 *revived, rewilded if you like. There used to be six shepherds*  
 39 *full time [on the site] in 1800, when we bought it there was*  
 40 *one part time... in purely economic terms the input that we've*  
 41 *provided in terms of people who build fences, plant trees, do*  
 42 *survey work, who grow the trees for us, who cull the deer and*  
 43 *so on. The employment is actually greater and more varied..."*  
 44 *(Interviewee 25)*

45 The emphasis on potential economic opportunity of a more  
 46 peopled and socially just model of land use was a key message  
 47 for staff of Rewilding Britain. Whilst this shows notable  
 48 overlap with the nature-enterprise centred approach of their  
 49 partners Rewilding Europe, staff within Rewilding Britain  
 50 justify their thinking more in response to personal experience  
 51 and connections to communities, rather than in corporately  
 52 aligned terms.

53 *"Rewilding embraces the role of people – and their cultural*  
 54 *and economic connections to the land – working within*  
 55 *a wider, healthy ecosystem. Rewilding is a choice of land*  
 56 *management. It relies on people making a collective decision*

1 *to explore an alternative future for the land." (Rewilding*  
 2 *Britain 2017)*

3 Despite these benign intentions, however, many rewilding  
 4 proposals are incredibly fraught and hotly contested (Wynne-  
 5 Jones et al. 2018). Although the proposed model of nature-  
 6 based tourism may be viable in some instances (RSPB 2011;  
 7 Birnie and Barnard 2016), there is little evidence to indicate  
 8 that it can be successfully scaled up or provide an effective  
 9 antidote to post-Brexit rural decline. For some, the recent  
 10 attempts to reframe the rewilding agenda in economic  
 11 terms is seen as a betrayal and retreat from core principles  
 12 (Foreman 2018). In fact, organisations such as Rewilding  
 13 Britain now contend that they are stuck between two sets of  
 14 opponents, one for whom their vision is too wild and the other  
 15 for whom it is not wild enough (pers. comm. 2018).

16 An important point to consider here is that a human emphasis  
 17 does not necessarily entail a retreat from the central unifying  
 18 feature of projects - to grant natural processes more autonomy  
 19 and create more space for nature. Rather, this central imperative  
 20 of rewilding can have direct benefits for people, and as we have  
 21 shown here is being championed as such. But there is a tension of  
 22 priority here, and whether (or perhaps when) too much autonomy  
 23 for nature creates problems for people. Whilst we are seeing  
 24 excitement and demand for working with nature, learning from  
 25 nature, and becoming more connected with nature, this may  
 26 only work up until the point that human dis-benefits materialise.  
 27 This connects to the difficulties highlighted above in relation to  
 28 management approaches, and whether being nature-led is driven  
 29 from an anthropocentric perspective or biocentric one.

30 Considering these changes in terms of governance, whilst  
 31 rewilding appears to offer a break with old biopolitical framings,  
 32 and strictures, these are potentially simply being replaced with  
 33 new outcomes and metrics that are still denominated by humans  
 34 for humans. We also observe an awkward juxtaposition of the  
 35 environmentalities being applied (consciously or otherwise) to  
 36 nurture rewilding developments (Fletcher 2017). These include  
 37 on the one hand a market-orientated position that encourages  
 38 the enhancement of wild nature as a business opportunity  
 39 and on the other, a more-than-economic stance that desires  
 40 more attention to, and enrichment of, our own wildness.  
 41 Nevertheless, rewilding in Britain appears to be moving forward  
 42 from binary divisions of nature and culture (or at least trying  
 43 to), demonstrating a much more blurred model of desires and  
 44 interdependencies, aligned with Ward's (2019) framing of  
 45 relationality. Practitioners here also demonstrate marked efforts  
 46 to support non-human and human flourishing in cohesive ways,  
 47 but there are still many compromises to be worked through.  
 48 In particular, we have seen tensions not only in terms of how  
 49 nature is being governed, and to what ends, but also in terms of  
 50 who is making these decisions and whether they are proximal  
 51 or distant from the environments in question.

## 53 CONCLUSION

54 In this paper we set out to address three key questions—1)  
 55 Who is now involved in rewilding across Britain? 2) What are  
 56

1 they seeking to do, in terms of how nature is conceptualised  
 2 and managed (or not)? 3) In what ways do their objectives  
 3 involve people and human-centred aspirations? Our focus here  
 4 responds to key questions posed in the literature, regarding the  
 5 biopolitics of rewilding (Lorimer and Driessen 2016; Biermann  
 6 and Anderson 2017) and seeks to extend earlier insights that  
 7 have primarily explored the role and approach of pioneering  
 8 projects.

9 Our findings demonstrate an expansion of engagement  
 10 beyond early instigators, reflecting interest and experimentation  
 11 across the mainstream conservation sector, and new  
 12 forms of collaboration between NGOs, communities and  
 13 private partners. This encompasses a combination of new  
 14 actors coming to the table and a shift in thinking of those  
 15 well-established within the conservation sector. Whilst the  
 16 'Monbiot effect' is undeniable, our discussion evidences a  
 17 much longer standing and more slowly evolving uptake of  
 18 ideas about nature-led management, as well as reflecting the  
 19 sense of opportunity and policy opening that Brexit now offers.

20 In terms of the conceptualisations of nature underpinning  
 21 the projects reviewed, we have outlined overlaps between  
 22 rewilding and wider framings of a 'new conservation' approach  
 23 (see Collard et al. 2015), which rejects the imperative to  
 24 manage nature based on fixed (historical) reference points of  
 25 a desired state, and instead prioritises nature's dynamic and  
 26 self-regulating capacity. But we have also shown that the past  
 27 is still relevant for those experimenting with rewilding; both  
 28 as a source of data and inspiration for how ecosystems can  
 29 operate (see also Jepson 2019) and in terms of their feelings  
 30 of loss and obligation (see also Deary and Warren 2019). As  
 31 such, rewilding, as observed here, appears more measured in  
 32 the 'future nature' it seeks.

33 Exploring the forms of (non-)management then undertaken,  
 34 further distinctions are evident. In particular, whilst all the  
 35 projects reviewed here place a clear emphasis upon unleashing  
 36 nature's potential and granting more autonomy to natural  
 37 processes, we observed numerous limitations to this aspiration  
 38 in practice. Most prominently from the outset nature was seen  
 39 to be in need of repair before self-regulation could unfurl. This  
 40 framing of damage is in stark contrast with the optimism of  
 41 the new conservation discourse, and shares some aspects of  
 42 purist notions of nature as untrammelled by human influence.  
 43 In reality, the rewilding projects occupy an uneasy position  
 44 between these two poles, demonstrating unresolved tensions  
 45 regarding requirement for human action or absence (see  
 46 also Sandom et al. 2019). They reflected the extent to which  
 47 traditional conservation frameworks (and mindsets) were being  
 48 reworked, and/or could be escaped.

49 Our study questions whether rewilding is opening  
 50 conservation to new actors and new spaces of previously  
 51 unvalued nature. Although respondents proposed new  
 52 modalities of governance with different conceptualisations  
 53 and measures of success (in contrast to the traditional focus  
 54 on species abundance and habitat condition and composition),  
 55 their projects demonstrated several instances of return to  
 56 conventional conservation approaches. This was largely

1 due to persisting regulatory restrictions (on designated sites  
 2 in particular), financial obligations (of grants to support  
 3 conservation work) and risk management (both in threats to  
 4 life and property, but also public perception). Key tensions  
 5 were equally present in respondent's motivations to pursue  
 6 a nature-led approach, that is, whether this objective was an  
 7 end in itself, or one that was seen to serve other outcomes.  
 8 However, our analysis also showed an emerging trend for the  
 9 establishment and extension of rewilding projects on non-  
 10 designated sites with the explicit aim of circumventing some  
 11 of the issues outlined above.

12 Finally, is rewilding now proliferating as an approach for  
 13 nature *or* people, or one that seeks justice for all lifeforms?  
 14 Our analysis shows that the latter goal is now widely held, in  
 15 contrast with some earlier espoused positions. Respondents  
 16 were both sensitive and reflexive in their positions but unable  
 17 to free themselves from the exclusionary framings that persist  
 18 in relation to rewilding. Although some current tensions and  
 19 openings were linked to the current Brexit context, many of  
 20 the vulnerabilities and pressures for change were longstanding  
 21 and should not be seen as uniquely due to Brexit. Nonetheless,  
 22 the change that will arise from this policy rupture will have  
 23 marked implications for rewilding in Britain.

24 In working to ameliorate such tensions and create positive  
 25 alternatives for land-use futures, rewilding may be seen as  
 26 moving further toward the anthropocentrism that it otherwise  
 27 seeks to temper. Evidence from our study, however, indicates  
 28 that the projects are attempting to move beyond old binaries and  
 29 offer a more relational pathway (Ward 2019) toward enhancing  
 30 human-nature connectivity and livelihood opportunities.  
 31 The avenues pursued are still deeply fraught in terms of  
 32 whether nature-based entrepreneurship can provide a social  
 33 and environmentally just mechanism for creating abundant  
 34 futures. There are tensions in the forms of environmentality  
 35 presented, with both a sense of needing to invest in nature for  
 36 business returns and a desire to nurture less reductive modes  
 37 of being with nature.

38 Overall, our analysis provides an update on the direction  
 39 of travel for rewilding in Britain, showing both the extent of  
 40 current engagement and identifying key trends in thinking and  
 41 practice. Whilst experimentation and engagement is certainly  
 42 not uniform, there are key points of alignment, adaptation and  
 43 common difficulties. In terms of departures from mainstream  
 44 conservation policy and practice, rewilding in Britain reveals  
 45 three key differences. First, rewilding is associated with  
 46 a proliferation of new actors, new mechanisms of finance  
 47 and new spaces of conservation interest. Second, rewilding  
 48 as an approach exhibits clear novelty in its stated aim to be  
 49 nature-led and, despite challenges, attempts to work through  
 50 ongoing negotiation and experimentation. Finally, rewilding is  
 51 currently being advocated and pursued as an agenda for people  
 52 *and* nature, which moves beyond earlier nature conservation  
 53 paradigms of protecting nature from human influence.  
 54 However, it remains to be seen whether rewilding advocates  
 55 can realise their ambitions to popularise and create peopled  
 56 wild spaces across Britain's landscapes.

Looking to the future, rewilding research and practices will need to examine whether and how new spaces of value can be created outside of the current protected area network. The difficulties faced by rewilding advocates advancing a radically different mode of biopolitics may not simply be tied to existing legal impediments or constraints. Rather, it will require them to decide whether the pursuit of ‘nature-led’ approaches should be tied to human-determined objectives or free to evolve without predetermined outcomes.

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### NOTES

1. i.e. In Scotland, England and Wales.
2. These were undertaken as part of a study including additional interviews with wider stakeholders that are not reported on here, hence the numbering of interviewees (given with quotations) goes up to 27.
3. Whilst the overall sample is shown here to evidence the extent of developments, and publically available material (e.g. marketing material and management plans) are discussed with reference to named projects / organisations, statements and insights from interviewees are anonymised.
4. Projects are described as ‘trailblazers, putting elements of rewilding into practice’: See <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/rewilding/rewilding-projects/>. Accessed on June 25, 2019.
5. See <https://treesforlife.org.uk/blogs/article/10-exciting-rewilding-projects-happening-in-the-uk/>. Accessed on June 25, 2019. <https://adriancolston.wordpress.com/2016/10/05/rewilding-and-soft-rewilding/>. Accessed on June 25, 2019. It was beyond our capacity to address all of the projects listed by Trees for Life.
6. Some early initiatives were not initially declared or promoted as rewilding, but claim that they were doing rewilding ‘before it was invented’.
7. It is notable that a high proportion of projects are in Scotland. This reflects not only a higher degree of perceived ‘wildness’, reflecting a lower intensity of land-use due to historic factors (Deary and Warren 2017; Mackenzie 2008) but also greater opportunity for large-scale land-purchase with relatively lower land values than England and Wales and the prevalence of large estates. The Land Reform Act, discussed in section 3.3 has also aided some of these purchases.
8. This is due to the Land Reform Act 2003 and subsequent additions to this supporting ‘communities right to buy’; see <https://www.webarchive.org.uk/wayback/archive/20180129140103/http://www.gov.scot/Topics/farmingrural/Rural/rural-land/right-to-buy/Community>. Accessed on June 25, 2019.
9. See for example <http://www.wandletrust.org/tag/river-restoration/>; <https://knepp.co.uk/river-restoration/> Accessed on June 25, 2019.

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