An introduction to rewilding
Wild in the eye of the beholder
Case study: Carrifan Wildwood
EDITORIAL

The landscape-scale approach to conservation is becoming increasingly popular, and recent CLM articles have demonstrated how restoration is being implemented across entire river catchments to achieve sustainable solutions to flooding and erosion.

But many are now looking towards something even more ambitious – decreasing human influence and reintroducing keystone species to restore ecosystem processes and achieve something akin to ‘wilderness’. In some quarters this is known as ‘rewilding’, although whether it is possible to revert a landscape to a former state is hotly contested.

However we term it, until recently the UK has seen rather more talk than action where this approach is concerned. But, things are beginning to change. Natural England has just approved a licence to allow a family of beavers in Devon to remain in the wild; 3,700ha of fen is being restored in East Anglia; and a number of extensive native-tree-planting projects are now under way.

In this special ‘wilding’ issue, various perspectives on the possible benefits, likely challenges, and the range of implications for land managers are discussed. We finish with the first of a series of articles that will focus on examples of where wilder environments are developing across substantial areas – this time an ambitious project to re-create a forested wilderness in the Southern Uplands of Scotland.

Do please get in touch with your reactions.
Katy Roper, Editor
Renewed interest in conservation through radical new approaches has been instigated by the publication of the seminal texts Grazing Ecology and Forest History (2000), Future Nature (2003), and Beyond conservation (2005). ‘Wilding’ and ‘wilder’ landscapes, applied effectively and sensitively, offer huge benefits for biodiversity, heritage, and amenity. However, there can be significant pitfalls if implementation lacks careful planning and design. The ‘eco-cultural nature’ of landscape, resulting from long-term, intimate interactions between people and ecologies, is important, but across Europe and elsewhere, twenty-first-century depopulation means rural landscapes ‘abandoned’ – not ‘wilded’. Ecology, communities and economies are potentially devastated.

Alongside urbanisation of rural landscapes, socio-economic and demographic changes cause ‘cultural severance’, with long-term, often rapid, declines in biodiversity and landscape quality. Furthermore, from urban to remote rural areas, attitudes to, and perceptions of, ‘alien’ invasive species challenge attempts to ‘wild’ the landscape. Feral species, exotic plants and animals, and invasive natives, form recombinant biodiversity, but ‘rewilding’ discussions rarely mention feral and exotic.

Perception and politics
Ideas and perceptions of ‘wild’, ‘wildness’, ‘wilderness’, and the essence of ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ are the key. Ecology, and nature freed of people, are suggested panaceas for widespread environmental declines, but reality is different. Indeed, many approaches are interventionist, rather than wild. Furthermore, cultural severance rapidly triggers massive ecological changes and species loss.

Failing nature
Today, we struggle to manage and conserve rapidly diminishing ecological resources. With human dominance over nature so complete, we have altered almost everything inherited from previous generations; nature is no longer ‘natural’, but ‘eco-cultural’. In massively disturbed and eutrophic environments, globalised and increasingly populated by exotic species, feral nature frees successions that are different from anything before.
Free, feral or hostage to fortune?

Many desire wilder landscapes and freer nature; maybe feral nature with processes considered more natural, such as large-herbivore grazing. Yet balancing domesticated, and wild or feral, herbivores generates fierce discussion. Some favour ending grazing and farming to release ecological successions. Interestingly, woodland is regarded as somehow ‘natural’ and other communities not; a fallacy when species-rich elements of heaths, commons, bogs, fens, and unimproved grasslands are cultural-landscape elements derived from genuinely ‘more natural’, ancient ecology. To deliver truly rich and sustainable ‘futurescapes’, wilding must recognise and conserve these hotspots for biodiverse ecology.

Decisions and interventions

What happens if freed ecology means dominant bracken or birch? Do you control feral red deer, or let nature take its course (animal starvation and little tree regeneration)? Will land managers, conservationists, and the public accept exotic rhododendron, sycamore, larch, spruce, Japanese knotweed, Himalayan balsam and giant hogweed feral across the landscape? This is free, feral nature with mink, rabbit, grey squirrel, Canada goose, ruddy duck, ring-necked parakeet, signal crayfish, and deer. We already have recombinant ecology through ecological fusion, though many refuse to accept the inevitable.

Looking forwards to futurescapes

How do conservation bodies respond to remnant biodiversity and priority species lost when a site is ‘freed’? Even if ‘the loss of a few species is a price worth paying for a wilder nature’, who decides? If we intervene, then who does it, why do they do it, what do they do, where do they do it, and when do they do it, and who decides and pays? Over centuries, people have shifted environmental baselines so significantly that whether we choose to intervene or not, the outcomes are culturally determined. Even not intervening is a positive intervention; both people and nature trapped within our humanity, which, like it or not, is part of nature. The central paradigms are therefore concerned: 1) with the type of human interventions in nature and the responses that follow the changed parameters; and 2) how these might be managed and manipulated to free nature for a wilder landscape. History and science will guide us through likely trajectories for future, wilder nature, but expect a rocky ride.

This article addresses issues raised at the 2014 Wilder By Design PART 1 workshop, and continuing at the major Wilder By Design Part 2 conference 9–11 September 2015. 
More on http://ianswalkonthewildside.wordpress.com and www.ukeconet.org

Ian D. Rotherham
Professor of Environmental Geography and Reader in Tourism & Environmental Change in the Department of the Natural & Built Environment, Sheffield Hallam University

Suggested readings

Monbiot, G 2013a Feral: searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding. Allen Lane, London
Rotherham, I D (ed.) 2013 Cultural severance and the environment: the ending of traditional and customary practice on commons and landscapes managed in common. Springer, Dordrecht

Rotherham, I D 2014 The call of the wild: perceptions, history, people and ecology in the emerging paradigms of wilding. ECOS 35(1): 35–43
Vera, F W M 2000 Grazing ecology and forest history. CABI Publishing, Wallingford