

Landscape

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Wild times

Rewilding has become a buzzword since the very successful publication of George Monbiot's book *Feral*. But what effect will it have in practice, and what role will landscape professionals play?

Governments from across the globe are in a celebratory mood as they leave the Paris Climate Talks, bringing 20 years of rollercoaster diplomacy to a close by securing an agreement that will keep temperature rises in check and avoid dangerous warming of the planet. At the same time I see pictures of the clean-up operations following the recent unprecedented storms that have caused havoc and distress across the north and Scotland, and which highlight our vulnerability to a changing climate.

I very much doubt news from Paris will be of any comfort to those affected by the floods or who are at risk of further

flooding over the winter months. I doubt also that government announcements on the billions of pounds allocated to flood management and defences over the course of this parliament will come as any reassurance to the communities that are endeavouring to rebuild their lives.

Undoubtedly flood defences need to continue to be constructed and maintained in the areas that are vulnerable. However, there are increasing calls for investment in the planting of trees and changing land management practices to encourage the restoration of natural climax vegetation communities in areas upstream of our towns and cities.

Such interventions, it is argued, would dramatically increase the infiltration rate of water, meaning that rain that percolates into the ground is released more slowly than rain that runs off the surface of closely grazed hillsides.

Maximising the contribution that rural areas can provide to society to mitigate the effects of climate change is one benefit of taking a fresh look at how we manage our landscape. However, it is not the only reason why an increasing number of people are thinking differently about the way we plan and use our rural areas.

The Lawton Review, published in 2010, reported compelling evidence that England's wildlife sites are

1 – A major rewilding initiative by a private landowner at Glenfeshie in the Cairngorms.





2 – More than 200 square miles of Caledonian pine forest has been rewilded at Abernethy Forest, which is owned by the RSPB.

generally too small and too isolated, leading to declines in many species. A recently published report in the journal *Nature Communications* on the fragility of the UK's wildlife adds further weight to the concerns that informed the Lawton Review. This is clearly a vital issue, not just for wildlife, but also for humans. Further damage to natural systems means our environment will be less able to provide the goods and services (not just flood mitigation) upon which we depend.

Lawton sets out a clear vision for the future in which whole landscapes are vibrant, wildlife-rich and ecologically functional. It is a vision shared by landscape professionals, planners and ecologists – professions that have been at the forefront of designing and delivering multi-functional landscape for decades. However, it is clear from Lawton that the scale at which we plan needs to be greatly increased.

Lastly, but no less important, is the debate around the increasing urbanisation of the UK population and the profound effects of decoupling people from contact with nature and

the natural world.

Whilst in the UK we understand the importance of nature and landscape to our quality of life, our experience and knowledge of what most people consider to be the natural world is based on our highly managed countryside or urban green spaces and nature reserves.

Our landscape has been changed and managed over thousands of years, meaning that there are very few, if any, places where people can experience truly balanced functioning natural habitats and the sense of wildness that these places generate. Whilst the historical interrelationships and landscapes that have been created by our management have an inherent value in themselves, we have all but lost the experience of wildness; of being just one part of the environment rather than the one that controls it. It was providing access to wild lands that inspired John Muir and colleagues in the Sierra Club to argue for the first National Park at Yellowstone in America in 1872, and remains a foundation of most national parks around the world.

We cannot continue to rely on tried

and tested approaches to landscape-scale planning if we are to address some of the practical, landscape, ecological and emotional challenges of a changing climate and increasing pressure on our use of land, and what we need from it. It is vital that we continue to challenge ourselves and explore new ways of thinking, and perhaps also re-visit the pioneering thinking of John Muir and his contemporaries.

Ecologist Dr Peter Shepherd and I have been discussing 'rewilding', a process of allowing natural processes to reassert themselves, for some time and strongly believe that this has great potential to form part of the future approach to tackling many of the issues that we currently face. We want to revisit the way that we manage the land and create resilient and inspiring landscapes that will deliver maximum benefit to society and to nature.

In this article we talk to Helen Meech, director of Rewilding Britain about the concept of rewilding, its role in strategic environmental planning and the delivery of multi-functional landscapes. We also explore how



landscape professionals, ecologists and planners will be essential to the fostering of wild places.

How would you define rewilding, and why is it different from other forms of conservation?

Rewilding is the large-scale restoration of ecosystems. Unlike some other forms of conservation, rewilding does not attempt to produce fixed outcomes. It sees dynamic ecological processes as an essential, intrinsic aspect of healthy living systems. At Rewilding Britain, we hope to restore the ecological dynamics that allow successional processes to take place and living systems to keep changing.

You have recently joined Rewilding Britain. What is it and what are its objectives?

Rewilding Britain is a charity set up with the objective of restoring ecosystems in Britain, on land and at sea. We believe it is not enough merely to try to preserve the tiny fragments of our wildlife. Meaningful conservation must involve restoring

broken ecosystems and re-establishing missing species. The animals we lack, such as beavers, boar, lynx, wolves, large tuna, pelicans, cranes and storks, are not just ornaments of the ecosystem – in many cases they have a role as ecosystem engineers and are essential to a proper functioning environment. We now know that highly simplified ecosystems of the kind that prevail across Britain are much less resilient to environmental change, such as climate change and invasive species.

By 2030 we would like to see 300,000 hectares of core land areas and three marine areas established where nature is starting to take care of itself and key species are starting to become re-established. These areas will be ecologically connected, supported by an engaged and enthusiastic public, and delivering a range of benefits for local communities and landowners.

Within 100 years we would like to see at least one million hectares (4.5%) of Britain's land and 30% of our territorial waters rewilded. To put this in perspective, in England alone

there are 380,000 hectares managed as golf courses. (www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24378868)

One of our challenges is to change public perceptions of what a healthy, attractive landscape looks like. We would like people to embrace and delight in the opportunity to experience nature finding its own balance and for landowners to see the benefits of new ways of managing landscape.

What would successful rewilding look like, say in 100 years?

Imagine wild rivers and regenerating forests creating complex, unpredictable landscapes inhabited by keystone species. Then imagine continuous wildlife corridors through productive farmland lining these places into the heart of our cities and towns. That is our vision.

Imagine the delight of seeing cranes feeding on the mudflats of a great estuary and pelicans flying out to their fishing grounds. Vast shoals of salmon and sea trout pushing their way up the river and otters, boar and (in remoter areas) lynx flourishing and playing

their role as ecosystem engineers. Beavers are building dams in the tributaries which slow down the river flow, reducing flooding and creating rich habitats for other species. On the uplands there is a rich mosaic of forest, glade and wild pasture that is allowed to shift and change.

Nature-based tourism is flourishing and bringing income and opportunities that help young people stay in their communities. Upland farmers with diversified income through tourism and rural enterprises are being paid to be stewards of a diverse landscape that produces a range of environmental benefits for towns and cities many miles away.

Within the century we want to see everyone living within 20 miles of an abundant, thriving living system and school children spending at least one day a month in one of these wild places.

With so much pressure on the land for development and to deliver food and fuel, why should we rewild?

Rewilding offers the possibility to work

with landowners and communities in areas where other forms of land use are perhaps increasingly marginal or uneconomic, to restore the wonder and enchantment of wild nature; to allow magnificent lost creatures to live here once more; and to provide people with some of the rich and raw experiences of which we have been deprived.

Landscape professionals and ecologists are well aware of the value that green infrastructure can bring in social, environmental and economic terms. Rewilding is a way of going beyond this to re-establish functional ecological systems that are going to work for people, provide for nature, and provide essential ecosystem services. Progressive business leaders are increasingly seeing the potential benefits. Water companies are interested in buying up land to protect water tables and insurance firms to address flood risk. In Scotland alone more than a million trips are made annually for the primary purpose of viewing wildlife, and nature-based tourism is

estimated to be worth £1.4 billion, with 39,000 associated jobs (*Deinet et. al.* 2013) A growing number of studies show that reconnecting people with wild nature leads to better health and generally higher levels of well-being, and it can help tackle social issues such as youth offending.

Rewilding has the potential to change the character of cherished and historic landscapes and challenge perceptions of what is beautiful. Is this an issue of concern?

Landscape evolves in response to a range of cultural, social and economic drivers. In the past 100 years the rural landscape has changed significantly and it can be anticipated that it will continue to change. Rewilding is just one of these potential changes.

I am excited about the potential for these landscapes to not just be a recreation of the past – they will come to symbolise a new relationship with the land and one of the mechanisms that this and future generations adopt to address climate change and other

4 – Alladale Wilderness Reserve in the Caledonian Forest is currently the UK's largest wilderness reengineering and rewilding project.



5 – Sgurr Dubh, Liathach and Beinn Eighe from above Loch Clair, Torridon, Scotland. Beinn Eighe is Scotland's first National Nature Reserve, now being rewilded by Scottish National Heritage.

challenges. In essence rewilded landscapes will be part of a continuum of the evolving relationship we have with the land.

How can a landscape be encouraged to revert to a wild state, and what role will landscape professionals, planners and ecologists have?

The process of rewilding seeks to frontload ecological interventions to bring back missing elements that can kick-start dynamic, successional processes, then to stand back and intervene as little as possible. The principle applies as much to vast upland landscapes as it does to lowland wetlands. It can also apply to smaller-scale areas, say in cities and towns. A range of professions will be needed to plan, design and create these wild places.

While rewilding will involve some management interventions, the role of land managers will change. Rather than preserving landscape features (sites, habitats, species) their role will be to restore ecological functions. Among the missing elements that

could be introduced are islands of trees in places too far from the nearest seed sources for natural regeneration to occur and free-flowing rivers in which canalisation, weiring, dredging etc. can be reversed. Rewilding may involve removing drainage and fences, reducing stocking densities, managing the return of once native species or fulfilling the role of keystone species where these haven't yet returned. There will also be roles in monitoring and researching the dynamic living systems as they emerge.

We believe that landscape professionals should play a critical role in re-imagining and restoring land, in both urban and rural areas. In fact, without the involvement of landscape professionals, it is hard to see how the vision for rewilded places can be realised.

Are there any examples of rewilding projects in the UK?

There are several inspiring projects that have been initiated by very different groups of people. For example, Trees

for Life, a grassroots organisation, has, through public subscription, bought a 10,000 acre estate in Scotland and its volunteers have now planted more than a million trees. It has also persuaded some of the neighbouring estates to participate in its rewilding schemes.

At the Knepp Castle estate in Sussex, Sir Charlie Burrell has transformed what were once intensively farmed arable fields into an evolving landscape of scrub and trees and rough pasture that now supports some of the UK's largest populations of turtle doves, nightingales and purple emperor butterflies.

The Wandle Trust has transformed the River Wandle from Croydon until it meets the Thames at Wandsworth from a stinking canalised ditch into a thriving chalk stream, supporting wild brown trout.

Community of Arran Seabed Trust (COAST) shows how communities can lead the protection of local habitats for the benefit of everyone, being responsible for the establishment of Scotland's first No Take Zone in Lamlash Bay.



Further afield, much larger schemes have been developed. For example, Conservacion Patagonica provides an inspiring example of working with local communities to restore 80,000 hectares of degraded land in Southern Chile.

What is next for Rewilding Britain?

Like all significant landscape change, rewilding should take place only with the active consent and enthusiastic engagement of local people, and should be debated and broadly accepted at both the national and local level. We want to start the conversation and build understanding and support for rewilding across Britain.

Helen Meech joined Rewilding Britain as director in September 2015. Helen has worked in the natural environment policy and campaigns sector for the last 10 years, most recently leading the National Trust's public engagement on nature, including the award-winning '50 things to do before you're 11 ¾' campaign.

Ian Houlston is a landscape architect and archaeologist at LDA Design where he is responsible for leading strategic environmental planning projects and green infrastructure strategies.

Peter Shepherd is a partner at BSG Ecology with expertise in landscape-scale habitat planning and creation, and was the principal ecologist working with LDA Design on the creation of the London 2012 Olympic Park. Ian and Peter are exploring the application of rewilding to all scales of project and its role in addressing the key drivers of change through creative landscape planning, design and management.



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We recognise that the changes we would like to see will be strongly influenced by other policies. First among these are farm subsidies, which currently act as powerful driver of wildlife loss. If farm payments are to continue, which might be an unlikely proposition in this age of austerity, they should surely deliver ecological and social benefits, rather than harm, and they should be restructured to this end.

We feel there might be great potential for connecting rewilding approaches with other policies. Sustainable drainage schemes are an obvious example. We would like to see them extended to the upper reaches of

river catchments. One of the weaknesses of flood prevention is that it tends to be concentrated in the floodplains ignoring the rest of the water catchment. A catchment-based approach to flood management would seek the recovery of deep vegetation and soils in the hills where most of our rain falls.

We also believe there might also be scope for rewilding in the design of housing estates and large commercial and public developments. We need to think less about putting nature into cities and instead should recognise that cities exist in nature. We want to see real urban jungles.

6 – Helen Meech, director of Rewilding Britain.

7 – The Wandle Trust has restored the River Wandle in south London from a stinking canalised ditch to a thriving chalk stream, supporting brown trout.



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