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Turning back the clock or facing the future? Rewilding's alternative conception of time and the potential for social justice

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Abstract

Rewilding has a complex relationship with time, appreciating the past as inspiration for lost ecological processes, but also valuing uncertain future outcomes unbounded by stringent targets and preconceived results. This relationship with time has caused friction when the 're' part of 'rewilding' is emphasised, implying that its advocates wish to return to a past without human influence. This has led some to suggest that rewilding is incompatible with achieving social justice. However, the two do not have to be opposed because rewilding's future-facing aspect is conducive to explicitly considering future generations and restoring ecological processes that have benefits for people as well as nature. Access, ownership and use of land is the fundamental concern that drives opposition to rewilding in the UK and there is potential for rural communities' concerns to be remedied through including young people in rewilding projects, revitalising the countryside by staunching rural depopulation. This potential can be realised as seen by the case-study of Namibia, a country notable for its conservation and social justice successes in a continent dominated by exclusionary fortress conservation.

1. Introduction

Rewilding is a divisive concept: for some, it represents potential for an ecological paradise blanketing the currently nature-depleted UK (e.g. Monbiot, 2013) while for others, it is yet another round of land-grabbing enclosures targeting struggling rural communities (Wynne-Jones *et al*., 2018). A school of land management that advocates for a reduced or different role for humans in places with a strong cultural heritage of land use for primary production activities will inevitably cause conflict (Wynne-Jones, 2022). However, this essay argues that a more socially just form of

nature restoration can be initiated where conservation programmes are fair in their actions and consequences and do not impinge on stakeholders' basic interests (Vucetich *et al*., 2018) unlike what has historically occurred to marginalised peoples in many cases (Cronon, 1995). This can be done through harnessing rewilding's alternative conceptions on time. First, this essay will explain how rewilding departs from typical conservation practices, moving from a static conception of nature preservation to one that embraces a range of possible futures. It will then demonstrate the potential in the UK for more socially just conservation practices that are impeded by concerns about livelihoods and access to land. Finally, it will use Namibia as a case study to illustrate how, by harnessing a long-term view of ecological health and societal wellbeing, balancing these concerns with nature restoration is possible.

2. How is Rewilding Different?

The term 'rewilding' emerged in the 1990s, coined by David Foreman who conceived the idea as a form of nature restoration that prioritised the "three Cs": cores (protecting core wilderness areas), corridors (linking these cores through corridors of suitable habitat) and carnivores (reintroducing or bolstering populations of carnivores that enact top-down control on an ecosystem) (Foreman, 2004). The term rewilding is not uncontroversial, and is tainted by Foreman's views that were often in opposition to social justice values such as anti-immigration beliefs stemming from the Malthusian conviction that human overpopulation was a pressing environmental concern (Cagle, 2019). Cronon (1995) argues that 'wilderness' as an ideal is a colonial construct that results from the violent erasure of human activity in the landscape. Critiques of wilderness as an ideal have been targeted at rewilding in particular because of the terminology which implies that advocates for the movement wish to revert back to an imaginary past free of humans (e.g. Jørgensen, 2015). A focus on 'wilderness' combined with Foreman's beliefs about humanity's inherent negative impact on the environment led to a tension between this original form of rewilding and social justice.

While there are those in the rewilding movement that do not value communities' wellbeing as highly as nature recovery, rewilding is not inherently socially unjust: it is a multifaceted concept (Gammon, 2018) and the terminology has evolved rapidly from its original usage in the 1990s to be applied to an array of geographical and social contexts (Pettorelli *et al*., 2019). Although rewilding has proven to be a concept difficult to define conclusively which garners criticism in academic discourse (e.g. Jørgensen, 2015), it can now broadly be considered as a branch of nature restoration that prioritises non-human autonomy, uncertain outcomes, and a future-focused philosophy that includes people (Prior & Brady, 2017). A sign of this

transformation is exemplified by the Rewilding Institute who have added Coexistence as a fourth C to Foreman's initial "three Cs" as a clear signal that people are now being considered an essential part of rewilding (Rewilding Institute, n.d.).

Traditional conservation in the UK has a static view of nature illustrated by a historical fixation on nature reserves which provide small refuges for wildlife in the form of disconnected islands of suitable habitat rather than envisioning a more drastic vision for the future (Cooper, 2000). A more recent development in UK conservation is Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) where a new development must create 10% more or better quality natural habitat than was present before the development (Knight-Lenihan, 2020). Biodiversity is simplified to standardised units which can then be sold by land managers. Reducing biodiversity and all its associated ecological processes to fungible units enforces a static perception of nature as an unchanging, easily quantifiable commodity. Both nature reserves and BNG are designed to preserve natural heritage for the future but it does not take into account the fluidity of ecological processes or resilience against future change (Wood, 2000).

Other conservation contexts such as sub-Saharan Africa are also prone to static perceptions of conservation practice that reinforce a dichotomy between humans and nature. Here, the dominant conservation framework builds on a legacy of colonial enterprises, leading to protected areas becoming the default model of conservation on the continent (Brockington et al., 2008). The hegemony of the fortress conservation model of large protected areas that exclude people from the land that they subsist on endures despite its increasingly obvious unjust nature (Knox, 2025). For example, Kahuzi-Biéga National Park in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has been the site of violent conflict between park rangers and indigenous people displaced from the area (Beaumont, 2019). The same is true for many protected areas across the world (Dowie, 2009), but there is a concentration of exclusionary zones in Africa due to colonial administrations' widespread hunting pastime which led to the creation of game reserves (Prendergast & Adams, 2003). Protected areas such as Mkomazi Game Reserve were originally game reserves that local people were excluded from in the name of hunting but are now barred from in the name of conservation (Brockington, 2002). Conservation practices have been immutable, adhering to principles formed during colonial rule and have not been successfully challenged with a view to the future.

Rewilding initially inherited these exclusionary practices and in the UK, some communities now perceive it as a colonial method of conservation. For example, there are concerns that rewilding will prompt displacement of people for the sake of prioritising nature in Scotland, reminiscent of the Highland Clearances in the 18th and 19th centuries (Martin *et al*., 2021), while in Wales, Derek Morgan, chairman of

Farmers Union Wales, controversially compared a rewilding project to colonialists forcing indigenous Americans onto reserves (Wynne-Jones *et al*., 2018). What sets aside rewilding from traditional forms of exclusionary conservation, however, is a more flexible relationship with the past, present and future. Rewilding entails a specific approach to managing life's temporal dimensions (Soares & Lorimer 2025). Even projects under the umbrella of Pleistocene Rewilding that explicitly attempt to emulate a specific ecosystem of the past are constantly considering future implications like the potential for climate change mitigation (Cromsigt *et al*., 2018). Rewilding is often criticised for a perceived desire to turn the clock back to a time before humans (as the 're' in rewilding may imply) thereby putting it in opposition to social justice (Jørgensen, 2015). In practice, many projects look to the past for inspiration to instigate healthy, dynamic and novel ecosystems rather than using that knowledge to create a simulacrum of a long-vanished ecosystem impossible to perfectly replicate (Tree, 2018; Macdonald, 2022). DeSilvey & Bartolini (2019) write about the introduction of Sorraia horses into the Côa Valley in Portugal, famous for prehistoric cave paintings of ancient horses, where the past has been used in the present to shape possible futures. Sorraia horses are not precisely analogous to now-extinct species of horse but what is known of past species assemblages has inspired this action of reintroduction which will bring back lost ecological processes to create a new ecosystem. This goal of ecosystem health and dynamic processes rather than an imitation of the past is reinforced by the fact that rewilding does not wholly condemn non-native species, instead fleshing out ecosystems with implications for future climate resilience (Eatherly, 2019).

The unpredictable nature of rewilding is one of its key attributes, emphasising non-human autonomy and a lack of specific expectations for how an ecosystem should look while letting natural processes and species-driven interactions take hold on the land (Tree & Burrell, 2023). The fluidity and flexibility of rewilding is what allows it to evolve and transform, enabling the possibility of a shift towards a more socially just conservation paradigm whereas the structure of traditional conservation practices have seen little change in many cases since the environmental movement emerged (McClennen, 2025). If rewilding is to become a socially just conservation model, it must distance itself from colonial histories of conservation and it is this relationship with time that will enable it to do so.

3. What is preventing socially just rewilding in the UK?

Despite rewilding's more recent commitment to social justice, there are still important concerns for stakeholders surrounding access to land. In UK rural communities where smaller family farms are predominant, there is an anxiety about rewilding because to them, it may represent an abrupt change in tradition, often seen as imposed by a 'metropolitan elite' who only understand the countryside as an

imaginary, romanticised idyll (Wynne-Jones et al., 2018). Rewilding projects can enforce physical exclusion from the landscape where the doctrine of no human interference is implemented to the extreme but also an intangible sense of exclusion where the cultural heritage of farming, mining and other primary production activities is disappearing from the countryside (ibid.). George Monbiot, an enthusiastic proponent of rewilding in the UK, received much criticism after describing sheep as "woolly maggots" wrecking the countryside (Green, 2025). This is an example of how rewilding can be perceived as an attack on rural communities' way of life and confirmation that it will lead to the destruction of their livelihoods. Fostering a relationship between young people and rewilding may be the key to legitimising and forming consent for rewilding in these situations by combatting other threats to rural communities such as depopulation.

Younger generations have been a vital part of environmentalism, transforming democratic life in many countries with poignant and persuasive pleas for action regarding the climate (Sloam et al., 2022). However, young people are harder to engage in protecting and enhancing local wildlife (O'Sullivan et al., 2018). What rewilding offers is an enticing, more unorthodox approach to conservation that does not easily mould itself to our preconceptions of what nature should look like (Gammon, 2018). While the current mainstream model of nature reserves preserves a static list of nature for the future, rewilding offers species reintroductions and landscape-wide transformation on an unspecified timescale with uncertain outcomes (Prior & Brady, 2017). An apathy towards local nature in young people can be remedied by raising the status of wildlife among that age group (O'Sullivan et al., 2018) and the concept of a 'wild' future is well-placed to capture imaginations (Pettorelli et al., 2019). While this may seem similar to the Romantic concept of the 'sublime' that played a part in driving violent conservation measures in contexts such as the USA (Cronon, 1995), this movement towards socially just rewilding has people firmly embedded in visions of a 'wild' future. Furthermore, by expressly considering the future as a shifting and uncertain arena where many ecological outcomes are possible instead of a series of targets for fixed goals that seem to be endlessly failing, rewilding may be a point of positivity for combating deteriorating mental health in young people such as the 70% of the UK's 18-14 year olds who experience eco-anxiety (Wright et al., 2021).

Rewilding is also able to contribute to the regeneration of rural economies, providing more varied opportunities for young people within the countryside and potentially stemming the flow of young people to cities (Macdonald, 2019). Instead of excluding people from the countryside, rewilding has the capability to bring people back to it. Species reintroductions such as the return of white-tailed eagles to the west coast of Scotland have proved to be a success, generating income for the tourism sector (Dennis, 2021). Rewilding at larger scales could make it financially

viable for young people to choose to stay or move into rural communities. For example, the Knepp Estate rewilding project in Sussex have in-hand farming profits per hectare that have repeatedly outperformed the English average over the past two decades and the Community of Arran Seabed Trust has more than 12,000 visitors per year, leading to an increase in local businesses focused on sustainable tourism (Rewilding Britain, 2021). Economic choices are not the only factor that influences rural-urban migration, but the crumbling rural economy that relies heavily on farming subsidies is in much need of revival (Monbiot, 2013). Young people staying in their local areas and working in tourism, conservation and the other sectors connected to rewilding could reduce the feeling among certain rural communities and residents that rewilding is imposed on them from outside their communities.

Sentiments about engaging communities and providing economic opportunities do not always translate to reality. For example, the Coetir Anian/Cambrian Wildwood project in Wales has caused rising tensions in local farming communities and platitudes regarding promises of livelihood opportunities have not assuaged anxieties (Wynne-Jones et al., 2018). One potential tactic to mitigate these rising tensions is for rewilding practitioners to work closely with young people embedded in these communities, demonstrating the economic and social benefits that can flow from rewilding and helping to address some of the factors involved in rural decline and depopulation. Other conservation contexts adopting successful future-facing approaches may provide insights and strategies for increasing opportunities in UK rural communities for both people and wildlife.

4. Namibia

Rewilding, with its alternative conception of time, has the potential to induce landscape-wide change to create a range of ecological futures but in the UK, the perception (and sometimes reality) that the rewilding movement wants to enclose depopulated landscapes for nature must be overcome. With its constitutional commitment to protecting nature which emphasises the importance of present and future generations (Constitution of Namibia, art. 95, sec. l), Namibia is well placed as an example of a socially just conservation framework that explicitly considers a range of timescales. While there are significant historical, political, social and ecological differences between the UK and Namibia, there is nevertheless a strong case for drawing lessons from the country when it comes to models for integrating conservation with social justice considerations. Land is the fundamental concern of communities in both Europe and Africa but Namibia is notable for balancing wildlife protection and the rights of local people within a continent dominated by fortress conservation (UNDP, 2012). The success of Namibia's Community-Based Natural Resources Management Programme is underpinned by legally protected ownership

and use rights over the land by historically marginalised populations (Boyd & Keene, 2021). Using Namibia as inspiration for UK conservation defies the usual direction of epistemic travel, flowing from "Global South" to "Global North" instead of vice versa. This is important for redressing past (and current) injustices in mainstream conservation where knowledge has been key in upholding colonial systems (Collyer et al., 2019).

Namibia's communal conservancies (local institutions that have rights to use wildlife in their area for economic development and the responsibilities for conserving it) provide a model of community-based natural resource management (MEFT/NACSO, 2023). 86 conservancies cover 20% of the nation's total land area and have contributed more than N$10 billion to Namibia's net national income (Huntley, 2023). The largest of them is the N≠a Jaqna conservancy in the north-east of the country where the majority of residents are part of the historically marginalised !Kung San People (UNDP, 2012). Residents were actively involved in the founding of the conservancy and management decisions while also benefitting from the tourism industry, jobs as game guards and revenue from commercially viable native plant species (Boyd & Keene, 2021). In the time since the conservancy was founded, populations of elephants, giraffe, wild dogs and roan antelope have increased too, demonstrating that balancing land rights, inclusion, and nature restoration is possible (UNDP, 2012).

Young people are involved in conservancies through schemes such as Young Professional Accountants who aid conservancies in their financial management and the Youth Conservation Network where unemployed young people are selected by their conservancies to contribute to activities like monitoring and to attend workshops that equip them with skills for sustainable livelihoods (MEFT/NACSO, 2023). Conservancies are successful in promoting pride in rural cultural heritage while reducing poverty through the diversification of livelihoods (ibid.) which addresses some of the main concerns that rural communities in the UK have towards rewilding. Although conservancies are not perfect with increases in human-wildlife conflict and insufficient compensation (Gargallo, 2021), the local and democratic nature of the conservancy model is something that could be applied in the UK as a potential remedy for the sense that rewilding is being imposed upon communities by those who do not understand rural ways of life. Giving opportunities to young people within the same communities that they grew up in can sustain rural life instead of letting the current slow decline in the countryside continue unabated.

While, given their fundamental differences, this model is not exactly transferable from Namibia to the UK, there are signs that community based natural resource management is not a bucolic dream for the UK. Scotland's Land Reform Acts that

support communities in buying land are not dissimilar to communal conservancies (Wynne-Jones et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021). Extending these reforms to other parts of the UK and giving local communities more power and responsibilities over their land, economies and wildlife is an achievable and necessary goal for ecological recovery. Combining rewilding and its landscape-wide vision of change with a more democratic form of natural resource management will not necessarily be a comfortable process in the UK with human-wildlife conflict a particular area of contention. If rewilding is perceived as an imposed act, then those that oppose it feel legitimised to undermine it such as by poisoning carcasses to kill white-tailed sea eagles (Dennis, 2021) or campaigning for (and winning) the right to shoot beavers in Scotland (Castle, 2021). Such disputes may be avoided through more carefully considered programmes for community empowerment. Engaging people in community-led conservation that also prioritises rural economic development has proven successful in many cases in Namibia and learning lessons from the Global South may help reconcile people with rewilding in the UK.

5. Conclusion

Rewilding has rightly been criticised for its reproduction of historical, unjust power relations in land management. However, by harnessing its alternative conception of time, it has the potential to restore nature while addressing social justice considerations. Rewilding considers time differently to traditional conservation practices, valuing inspiration from the past while also considering many alternative futures rather than a singular future preempted by unilaterally imposed, strict goals common in mainstream conservation. This is key to rewilding's close relationship with young people who would like to shape the futures that they have to bear. In the UK, including overlooked stakeholders from the next generation in rewilding projects could foster greater collaboration between different actors involved in land management, diminishing the (perceived) threat that rewilding poses to the traditional rural way of life. The case of Namibia may offer inspiration with regards to communal conservancies and the purposeful inclusion of future generations in land management for new forms of human-nature interaction in the UK. There is no cure-all for the ills of the environmental movement, but a rewilding philosophy with a conception of time that prioritises process instead of targets has potential to lead a transition towards revitalised ecological health of whole regions. Within these regions, including young people's perspectives is a valuable start to community based resource management for improved ecological and social outcomes. Young people, perhaps not burdened by the baggage of past iterations of rewilding, have an opportunity (if provided the right support) to continue driving its trajectory to a more socially conscious state and shift the environmental movement towards a new paradigm of social justice.

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