Routes Journal Special Issue: Young People & Rewilding

Editorial Introduction: Young People and Rewilding

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Rewilding encompasses a plastic, generative, and controversial set of ideas and practices which have reinvigorated nature recovery, conservation, and land management debates and practices around the world (Gammon, 2018; Jørgensen, 2015; Lorimer et al., 2015). Understood at the broadest level, rewilding constitutes a new strategy for nature conservation developed by conservation biologists in North America and Western Europe to address the biodiversity crisis of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Blythe and Jepson, 2020; Pettorelli et al., 2019). Whereas traditional conservation approaches focused on preserving the composition of existing species and their habitats, rewilding advocates for the restoration of autonomous ecological processes at scale. Its key principles revolve around the so-called "Three Cs": protecting *core* areas, connecting them to other habitats via wildlife *corridors*, and reintroducing *carnivores* (like wolves), or other keystone species (like beavers). Rewilding organisations, like *Rewilding Britain*, suggest vast tracts of land (100+ hectares) are required for rewilding. The Knepp Estate in West Sussex, England, is perhaps Britain's most iconic example of rewilding at this scale. Others, however, suggest rewilding principles can be applied in back gardens or even on windowsills. Pioneering urban nature conservationists are thus beginning to promote and implement "urban rewilding" initiatives, which are garnering popular support from a range of policymakers, conservationists, and publics (Turnbull et al., 2025). Despite its reputation as a conservation approach that involves simply abandoning landscapes and letting nature take control, rewilding requires heavy initial investments in ecological repair followed by ongoing human maintenance, with the ultimate goal of enabling ecosystems to regenerate and evolve with minimal human intervention. These initial efforts

involve practices such as species reintroductions (both legal and illegal), the re-wiggling of canalised rivers, or the removal of invasive species.

For some, rewilding offers a bold vision for restoring degraded ecosystems that are nearing collapse. But this bold vision of the future excites some publics as much as it appals others. Indeed, critiques have been leveled at rewilding by stakeholders whose livelihoods and cultural values are perceived to be threatened by the new modes of land management that rewilders advocate (Fry, 2023; Schwartz, 2005). Notably, rewilding can be deeply unpopular amongst farmers, foresters, hunters, fishers, and other traditional land-use communities. For some, rewilding embodies a conservation approach designed by an urban elite disconnected from a particular cultural heritage of landscape management and without experience of living alongside or managing wildlife (and all the labour and strife that involves). For others still, rewilding proffers a challenge to ideals of agricultural productivity and food sovereignty. In countries like the UK, critics have noted that rewilding landscapes at home simply displaces the negative consequences of agricultural production to other places. These critics have noted that restoring nature through rewilding in Britain leads directly to the deforestation of untouched habitats elsewhere, often in the global south, connecting nature recovery and rewilding to longer histories of coloniality. Rewilding is thus very much entangled with the elitist and exclusionary baggage of legacy approaches to conservation.

Regardless of one's opinion, rewilding advocates have gathered significant momentum in mobilising popular support and are increasingly well resourced in financial terms. They posit a radical vision for future landscapes in the countryside and in cities. But despite this future focus, the voices of young people—the inheritors, beneficiaries, and stewards of future rewilded landscapes—are rarely included in mainstream rewilding discourse, which is largely controlled by the usual majoritarian suspects. A range of organisations, however, have begun to emerge that are actively putting young people's voices front and centre in the design and management of rewilding landscapes. These groups are harnessing the social as well as environmental opportunities presented by rewilding for young people. Their aim is to "rewild people" as much as landscapes, as they respond to reports that suggest young people are more disconnected from nature than ever before (Beery et al., 2023), which is predicted to have significant negative repercussions for mental health and the impulse for nature recovery in the future.

Despite this apparent disconnection, however, many young people are worried about the climate and biodiversity crises, exhibiting forms of "eco-anxiety." Rewilding, we think, presents an exciting vision and set of opportunities to channel these concerns and worries into meaningful social and ecological transformation. The access to nature and community that rewilding projects can provide to young people have important well-being and health benefits (Woodland Trust, 2023), while ambitions for more 'nature-based economies' promise job opportunities for young people in urban and rural areas alike (Green Alliance, 2024). At the same time, young people face many challenges associated with social justice when it comes to getting involved with rewilding in practice. Careers in conservation are often inaccessible, and don't frequently present opportunities for social mobility. As a result, young people—especially those from marginalised socio-economic groups—often do not see themselves reflected in decisions about nature and land use, and do not necessarily benefit from them either (CPRE, 2021). Challenges around access to land, the networks that might support their involvement in rewilding, and a lack of diversity and youth representation in the nature sector persist, even as positive changes are afoot (Youngwilders, 2026; Rewilding Europe, 2025). Engaging diverse young people is thus seen as a key method for addressing these concerns and challenging the forms of exclusion that have shaped conservation practices in the past, while offering a more hopeful, inclusive, and forward-looking nature recovery agenda for all.

With the above concerns in mind, this Special Issue of *Routes: The Journal For Student Geographers*, produced in collaboration with Youngwilders, aims at opening new conversations and research directions related to young people and rewilding. Youngwilders is a non-profit organisation focused on accelerating nature recovery in the UK by involving young people in the process and movement. They do so by facilitating youth-led nature recovery projects across England and Wales, as well as a mix of experimental youth-engagement and platforming programmes oriented around upskilling and energising the next generation of environmental stewards. Youngwilders' growing number of small-scale nature recovery and rewilding projects include a 30 acre rewilding project in Sussex, an urban wildflower meadow creation project in Islington, London, and a 20 acre woodland and river restoration project in Essex. These ecological projects are youth-led, with all interventions conceived, designed, and delivered by young people. By taking this approach, Youngwilders aims to provide young people with practical experience in nature recovery work, a sense of community and well-being, an opportunity to feel more

connected to nature and to shape the direction of active conservation projects. They see this as an answer to the lack of empowerment and agency currently confronting young people in the conservation and nature recovery spheres. Youngwilders also run a number of creative programmes and activities focused on involving young people in the nature recovery movement. These include workshops, seminars, a magazine (*Overgrowth*), documentary work, social media outreach, and two annual youth rewilding summits held at the Knepp Estate in Sussex and Hepple Wilds in Northumberland.

The Special Issue, the first of its kind for *Routes*, brings together the Journal's aims to showcase the perspectives of young geographers across a plurality of student voices, identities, and backgrounds with Youngwilders' ambitions to accelerate nature recovery and involve young people in the process and movement. It features critical, creative, and practice-focused scholarship from an exciting cohort of young geographers (in research and practice). Our authors explore the theme of young people and rewilding from a range of perspectives and contexts spanning cities, rural landscapes, and the ocean.

What's in the Issue?

How should rewilding relate to past, present, and future ecologies, and what roles might young people play in shaping the future of rewilding practice? Alfie Wraith and Jessica Barker-Wren's articles share an interest in these questions. Wraith's article reviews what sets rewilding apart from other conservation and ecological restoration approaches, arguing that rewilding adopts a more open approach to **ecological temporalities**. Wraith suggests this offers an exciting vision to bring new people and perspectives into the sector and charts paths towards a more socially just conservation paradigm. Yet rewilding is often resisted by communities concerned with access to land, livelihoods, and ways of life. Fostering the involvement of young people embedded in these communities in rewilding activities may help to remedy this. Drawing on examples beyond the UK, specifically alternative models for community-based conservation in Namibia, Wraith outlines ways in which this involvement, and the social and economic benefits of rewilding, might be achieved.

Jessica Barker-Wren's illustrated essay considers what it means to make kin with long-lived organisms like sturgeon in the context of ecological restoration.

Prompted by dreams of a large and strange fish, Barker-Wren began investigating the natural history of the sturgeon, its presence/absence in the UK, and the fate of sturgeon reintroduction efforts elsewhere. By way of a careful appraisal of context-specific Indigenous relations with sturgeon, alongside contrasting temporal frameworks associated with biodiversity markets and human and nonhuman lifeworlds, Barker-Wren asks how young rewilders can engage "technologies of imagination" to care for living entities like sturgeon and rivers anew. Such approaches might be essential to crafting ecological futures beyond market-based articulations of nature recovery.

Rewilding entails engaging with changing and **new ecological configurations**, both desirable and unwanted. Haoran Wu's article reviews research into ash dieback and management responses to this proliferating tree disease. Under changing ecological conditions, traditional approaches to conservation which prioritise static ecological communities may no longer be effective. Pointing to the limitations of conventional approaches to managing tree pests and pathogens, Wu argues for restoration approaches, like rewilding, that adopt a more dynamic and processual approach. Often the reintroduction of species to invigorate ecological processes is a fundamental pillar of rewilding efforts. Şeniz Mustafa's article draws on the stories of four young practitioners, including herself, involved in different species reintroduction projects in the UK. Covering storks, ospreys, lynx, pine martens, and wood ants, Mustafa and her colleagues provide important insights into the work, rewards, and challenges of young people establishing rewilding careers. Mustafa calls for established practitioners to support young people into the sector, especially those from marginalised backgrounds, to both secure long term prospects for nature recovery and diversify the people and perspectives involved.

Participatory research methods can be vital to more inclusive forms of rewilding research and practice. Such methods are one focus of Ben Harris and Eden Sedman's and Trisha Mehta's articles. Experiences of connection with community and nature in the context of rewilding can be transformative for young people's well-being, social inclusion, and ecological awareness. Ben Harris and Eden Sedman's article reflects on the experiences of participants involved in 'Wild Camps' organised by Rewilding Youth, designed to foster nature connection and community among young people (aged 13-22) living in disadvantaged urban areas. Through youth-led participatory action research with Camp participants, Harris and Sedman identify

key themes influencing the transformative capacity of immersive nature-based practices for young peoples' relations with nature, home, and themselves.

What new possibilities might rewilding open up for **more-than-human urban life**? This question is one focus of Trisha Mehta's work. Mehta asks: what would it mean for ecological processes to become central to urban life, and how might this disrupt or sustain existing systems? Through a participatory foresight study with young people in London, involving a speculative map and multiple rewilding scenarios, Mehta outlines an approach through which the tensions and possibilities of different urban rewilding models can be confronted, and viable futures imagined.

Ruoyan Zhu continues this exploration of urban rewilding in her photo essay. Narrating visits to two major parks in Chengdu, China, Zhu describes the diversity of habitat types and species present in the city, as well as the role of water as a vital facilitator of ecological connectivity. Searching for signs of rewilding in the city, Zhu observes that rewilding is not only about the presence or introduction of 'nature', but also connects with themes of education and well-being as well as broader trajectories—social, ecological, economic—of urban transformations.

Rewilding complements established approaches to conservation not only in urban and rural settings, but also out **at sea**. Prerena Balu's article discusses how marine rewilding initiatives and nature-inclusive design can help to reconcile multiple priorities for marine space. As the UK moves to decarbonise its energy industry through the build out of offshore wind, it stands to gain from applying lessons from other Northern European contexts. Countries like the Netherlands are pursuing innovative approaches such as restoring reef systems within wind farms, limiting ecological disruptions from energy infrastructure, and even embedding this infrastructure within marine restoration. Ultimately, Balu argues the UK should more actively prioritise biodiversity net gain within the decarbonisation of the energy sector and look to marine rewilding initiatives implemented elsewhere as a model for doing so.

Taken together, these diverse contributions offer insight into a lively area of geographical research and debates about young people and/in rewilding. Such debates are becoming more energetic and diverse in the perspectives they account for, and are informing new conservation practices. We strongly hope this inspiring

collection will resonate with readers from different disciplines and areas of practice, leading to future research, conversations, and collaborations.

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