

Position Statement

‘Rewilding’

Working with nature

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Background

Recent years have seen an increasing interest in the UK in ‘rewilding’ as an approach to nature conservation. This is against a background of a continuing decline in biodiversity in the UK and globally.

Ideas about wilder landscapes have been around for some time. In Europe, the Dutch in particular have a long association with ‘ecological’ approaches to conservation and to landscape, an approach which extends from the city centres out into the wider landscape. A withdrawal from agriculture in many parts of Europe, and an interest in the restoration of natural processes, has fuelled a growing interest in a ‘rewilding’ approach to land management. There is particular interest in the ideas of natural succession and dynamic landscapes through the reintroduction of large herbivores.

This ‘rewilding’ approach calls for the establishment of large expanses of land set aside for nature, connected by corridors which allow the movement of species between the larger areas. This builds on the central idea that natural processes should be allowed to take their course, including natural succession on open habitat, fluctuations in population abundance and presence of species without deliberate intervention. This is in contrast to current conservation practice which often involves the close management of habitats to maintain them at a particular successional stage

in order to support a distinct array and abundance of species in ‘favourable status’. Intervention under a rewilding approach is limited to restoring missing species and missing parts of the system which allow natural processes to occur. In particular, the notion of trophic cascades - food webs which include all levels from plants and primary production through to top predators, is seen as important to re-establishing natural processes.

Replacing missing parts of the functioning ecosystem need not be limited to large animals, and there may be elements that are more pertinent to many parts of the UK landscape. ‘Reintroducing’ trees and woodland into the landscape can be part of the response to restoring key missing stages in developing natural processes. Smaller carnivores, such as pine martens, could herald a return of red squirrels; beavers could act to create wetland habitat, and expanding ‘scrub’ could create habitat for invertebrates which in turn support species of birds in decline.

If the aim is to adopt an approach which increases the sense of ‘wildness’, and there is a greater acceptance of the benefits of wild spaces everywhere, then the opportunities for action will expand. There can be wild spaces in towns, cities and closely managed landscapes. Nature is everywhere and doesn’t always need pre-determined objectives; it can just be allowed to run on.

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The Trust’s view

The natural systems that make up the planet are dynamic, they have adapted and evolved to changing conditions and continue to support life in its myriad forms.

Pressures from climate change, pollution, habitat loss and fragmentation, increased pest and disease impacts, and unsustainable land-use threaten to undermine the integrity of natural systems. This is impacting on their ability to provide the foundation for the survival and well-being of humans and other species.

We need to act to protect, restore and recreate ecosystems and build resilience in the natural environment. This means working with natural processes, enabling natural systems to be dynamic, adaptable and robust.

We would like to see a greater acceptance of wild spaces everywhere. Even within managed landscapes, and urban areas, there are opportunities for wild and unkempt spaces; prescribed management may not always be needed, nature can be allowed to take its own course.

- We believe that ‘rewilding’ is about the restoration of natural processes, working with nature to enhance the natural environment and the species it supports, but also to provide the goods and services we need as a society.
- We support the view that re-establishing natural processes can be an important and powerful way to manage land alongside conventional or traditional forms of land management for food production and maintaining valued landscapes.
- Whilst wild areas may be separate from farmed landscapes, there are also opportunities for integrating more wild space within farming systems in ways which support both wildlife and production.
- Creating a sense of wildness is possible in most places. However, the degree to which natural processes are able to dominate will be affected by both scale and location. Large remote areas are more likely to have a greater degree of self-determination than small sites in urban areas.

- We believe habitats should be extended, enriched and linked in a way that allows both habitats and species to operate and interact over sufficiently large areas to support dynamic natural processes. In many cases re-establishing natural processes will require intervention. This might include the creation of habitat such as woodland, or on occasions the reintroduction of species that have been lost.
- Reintroduction of larger animals, including large herbivores and carnivores, is sometimes identified as important to re-establishing natural processes. This should only be undertaken where sufficient suitable habitat exists to ensure the wellbeing of viable populations of the reintroduced species. Any species reintroduction needs to take full consideration of the legitimate concerns of stakeholders and, in particular, local communities whose livelihoods and wellbeing might be affected.

We will

- Advocate the use of natural processes to promote the conservation and expansion of wildlife able to respond and adapt to climate change and other pressures.
- Continue to promote and actively undertake the creation and restoration of habitat, particularly where it contributes to building resilient landscapes, and where it can deliver ecosystem benefits, for instance through mitigating flooding.
- Consider the reintroduction of species where there is evidence that this can contribute to the conservation and adaptation of habitats and species, or where it will support natural processes which deliver wider ecosystem benefits.
- Engage individuals and communities in supporting and taking action to promote the recovery of nature and natural processes for all the benefits they provide, whether this is in remote places or the places where we live and work.



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