Tensions in the Interpretation and Implementation of Rewilding in Cultural Landscapes

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Defining rewilding?

• Rewilding can mean a lot of things
• Rewilding projects are very diverse
• Despite this flexibility, at rewilding’s core seems to be that it increases non-human autonomy
• In other words, it makes ecosystems wilder

See: Prior & Ward, 2016
But how wild?

Rewilding Europe, 2017, pp.12: “the goal is to move up a scale of wildness within the constraints of what is possible.”

Anthropo-centric
Designed ecosystem

Eco-centric
Autonomous ecosystem

Avalon Marshes

Knepp

Yellowstone

Drenthen, 2018

Wynne-Jones, et al., 2018

Tanasescu, 2017

DeSilvey & Bartolini, 2018
This spectrum elicits inherent tensions

• Wherever a rewilding project is ‘placed’ on the spectrum, it generates different tensions
• How is rewilding being interpreted?
  – Should we reintroduce species, or allow natural colonisations?
  – Should human-introduced elements be removed?
  – Should humans be allowed into rewilding sites?
• How is rewilding being implemented?
  – Should rewilding erase heritage?
  – Should rewilding support livelihoods?
  – Should rewilding preserve targeted rare species?
• Often these tensions are what make rewilding projects controversial
Rewilding is a flexible concept; this might be used to facilitate *compromise*

- It has been proposed that the flexibility in the definition of rewilding makes the term unclear, or less meaningful (Jørgensen, 2015)
- In practice, this flexibility allows practitioners to choose how they interpret and implement rewilding to navigate philosophical or practical tensions
- Our work has been trying to explicitly identify these tensions by using the rewilding spectrum
- From this, we hope understanding the tensions can help us to propose practical *compromises* that may reduce conflict and controversy
A brief look at our framework...

**Key**

- **Eco-centric**
- **Rewilding compromises**
- **Anthropocentric**

**Tensions**

- **A** How do humans and nature interact after rewilding?
- **B** Should anthropogenic elements be removed from rewilding?
- **C** Should rewilders intervene with wildness, by reintroducing species?
- **D** Should rewilding be undertaken when the outcomes are uncertain?
- **E** Should rewilding prioritise historic species, or dynamic processes?
- **F** Is maintaining wildness more important than rare species?
- **G** Is wildness acceptable, if it is considered un-scenic?
- **H** Should rewilding include culture and heritage?

**Tensions adapted from Gammon (2018)**
Examples: tensions and compromises

• We propose that identifying tensions might help in reaching effective compromises in rewilding projects to reduce controversy and opposition

• We will now show how compromises may or may not be reached, using two examples of projects in the UK that could be considered as rewilding
Our practical examples

Proposed reintroduction of Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*)
- 7 local farmer interviews
- Public survey (448 respondents)

Avalon Marshes wetland restoration
- 40 stakeholder interviews

Map: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f4/Template_europe_map.png](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f4/Template_europe_map.png)
Example: a tension in the *interpretation* of rewilding

*Should rewilding prioritise historic species, or dynamic processes?*
Historic species or dynamic processes?

Does rewilding make the ecosystem wilder by:

A) Restoring the species assemblage of a ‘wild’ historic baseline, before humans arrived

Or:

B) Prioritise dynamic ecosystem processes, rather than the compositional elements
Should rewilding prioritise historic species, or dynamic processes?

Replicated historic conditions
- Anthropo-centric

Proposed UK lynx reintroduction

Open-ended dynamic processes
- Eco-centric

Oostvaardersplassen

- The project focuses on rewilding one historic species
- Lynx predate roe deer; reintroducing a dynamic process
- ...But camera-trapping studies show that lynxes’ ecological role is limited (Samelius, et al., 2013; Schmidt & Kuijper, 2015)
- One historic species is rewilded, but the ecosystem is unlikely to become much more dynamic
Natural processes can have surprising results: are they always desirable?

Looking southwest over 8km of Oostvaadersplassen

Photos: Rowan Avery, 02/10/2018
Should rewilding prioritise historic species, or dynamic processes?

“*It's not a wild natural landscape, but [...] working with natural processes to create something new, obviously linked to something that, stretches to the end of time*”

(Interviewee 21; a conservationist)
Example: A tension in the implementation of rewilding

Should rewilding projects include culture and heritage?
Avalon Marshes: heritage built-into a wilder landscape

- Layers of cultural heritage are visible in the wilder wetland landscape form, alongside reconstructions and signage.
- Cultural narratives are remembered, not continued; the promotion of cultural landscapes is still limited.
What stories should a rewilded landscape tell?

Slightly wilder cultural landscapes

Rewilding project makes little provision for culture

Anthropo-centric

Compromise?

Eco-centric

Avalon Marshes

• “people can actually get that physical impression of what life was like in a Roman building, Saxon building or an Iron Age building. [...] that jump back into a thousand, two thousand years, is what we're trying to do” (Interviewee 38, heritage preservationist)

• Peat extracting veterans and conservationists all identified a compromise they’d accept: a reconstruction of a peat extractors’ hut
Lynx and farming culture

- Conflict with local pastoral culture; lynxes kill sheep
- Potentially problematic for getting a reintroduction license
- Lynx UK Trust propose compensation, but...
  - “I don’t think anyone is interested in compensation” (Interviewed farmer #4)
Lynx and the public

In a survey of 448 members of the public:

- 70% thought lynx would increase their enjoyment of the countryside
- 84% supported lynx reintroduction
- 94% thought at least occasional compensated sheep losses were acceptable
Understanding compromise in rewilding projects

- We propose that considering these tensions in rewilding projects:
  - Helps to identify what compromises might need to be made
  - Clarifies the specific *interpretation* of rewilding
    - Predicts more extreme views that might create tensions or controversy
  - Demands recognition of the inherent tensions in the *implementation* of rewilding

A. How do humans and nature interact after rewilding?
B. Should anthropogenic elements be removed from rewilding?
C. Should rewilders intervene with wildness by reintroducing species?
D. Should rewilding be undertaken when the outcomes are uncertain?
E. Should rewilding prioritise historic species or dynamic processes?
F. Is maintaining wildness more important than rare species?
G. Is wildness acceptable if it is considered unscenic?
H. Should rewilding include culture and heritage?
Conclusion

• Any vision of rewilding raises tensions
• We think that the definition of rewilding should be flexible; it permits compromises
• Our work aims to compile the key rewilding tensions into one decision-making framework
• However...it is work in progress and we would love to hear whether you:
  – Think identifying tensions and compromises might be useful in *practice*
  – If there are tensions we have missed
References


