

## Rewilding in Cultural Layered Landscapes

For many years, environmental philosophy has been dominated by an approach to environmental valuation that was focused on finding ecocentric alternatives to dominant anthropocentric (human chauvinist) perspectives on the value of nature. Philosophically, it focused on axiological questions, emphasising the importance of intrinsic, non-instrumental values of nature and seeking a philosophical foundation for a non-anthropocentric approach to the natural world. To show the existence of intrinsic value of nature independent of human valuation, the focus quickly went to the so-called wildernesses, places where nature had been left untouched by humans. This dominant perspective on environmental ethics has always had its critics. For instance, American pragmatists, such as Andrew Light (2010), have criticised the approach for being overly theoretical and abstract, and argued that it was insensitive to the concrete contexts of environmental problems and practices, especially in urbanised areas. Yet, it still remained the dominant approach by far. A similar thing is true for the focus on wilderness: the concept has been strongly criticised, most prominently by William Cronon (1995, also see Callicott and Nelson 1998), but it has remained highly influential both in environmental philosophy as well as in conservation policies. Both tend to focus on the need to protect the last remaining wild, undisturbed places in nature against human disturbance, and seem less interested in the places that have been altered by humans.

However, this focus, (if not obsession) with ‘undisturbed’ nature has come under pressure with the growing awareness that untouched nature hardly exists anymore in the age some call the Anthropocene (although a controversial term itself, see Baskin 2015). Evidence shows that even many places long conceived of as pristine wildernesses were influenced by humans long ago. Conversely, the need to rethink the value of humanly altered landscapes had become apparent. For instance, the landscapes of Europe have been inhabited by humans for many thousands of years, leaving no place unaffected. The centuries-long history of ‘human disturbances’ has often produced cultural landscapes that are biodiverse and culturally rich at the same time. Seeing these cultural landscapes merely as ‘disturbed’ by humans fails to do justice to the way that human history and these landscapes are intimately intertwined.

Over the last decade, this realisation has led to the development of an alternative take on environmental values that focuses on the significance of narratives. In their 2008 book *Environmental Values*, John O’Neill, Alan Holland and Andrew Light argue that the ways environments matter to people is also important for conservation, and that in order to understand this attention has to be paid to the role of narratives and history. The narrative approach could be seen as an Old World response to the traditional dominance of the New World perspective in environmental philosophy (Drenthen and Keulartz 2014). Whereas the earlier non-anthropocentrism in environmental philosophy

lent itself particularly well to the justification of wilderness preservation, the narrative approach is well equipped to justify societal practices of conserving old cultural landscapes for cultural as well as ecological reasons (Hourdequin and Havlick 2016). Yet, even more recently, the concepts of wildness and wilderness are resurging within the conservation debate, notably through the rise of rewilding as a new conservation strategy and a societal movement within the Old World context of Europe and elsewhere. As a result, the philosophical debate between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric perspectives has returned to the fore.

Originally, the term 'rewilding' was introduced in science by Michael Soulé and Reed Noss (1989) as a term for 'the scientific argument for restoring big wilderness based on the regulatory roles of large predators.' Soulé and Noss argued that there are: 'three independent features that characterise contemporary rewilding: large, strictly protected, core reserves; connectivity; and keystone species. In simplified shorthand, these have been referred to as the three Cs: Cores, Corridors, and Carnivores.' (Soulé and Noss 1998: 19). Since then, others have introduced definitions that highlight different aspects, such as a future-oriented approach to ecological restoration, or a hands-off approach to ecological management. However, as the practices of rewilding started to spread, so did the term rewilding itself. Even though the scientific use of the term is still dominant, more recently the term has been expanded beyond the confines of a strict scientific debate, gathering extra meanings in the process. This proliferation of meanings led Dolly Jørgensen (2015) to argue that the term has become 'plastic', and therefore can mean virtually anything, although 'taken as a whole, rewilding discourse seeks to erase human history and involvement in the land and flora and fauna' (Jørgensen 2015: 482).

For that reason, rewilding projects, especially in culturally saturated landscapes, are often being opposed by those who deeply care about the old cultural landscapes (for cultural or ecological reasons). Rewilders are blind to the value of the old cultural landscapes that are the result of centuries of human inhabitation, the argument goes. An erasure of signs of human history from the land would imply a blatant disregard of the many meaningful connections between local communities and the landscapes they inhabited over long periods of time. Indeed, some proponents of rewilding today fall back on the language that was developed by the early proponents of wilderness preservation, starting off from an opposition between wild nature and culture, and claiming that nature needs to be protected against human domination, while also claiming the importance of wild nature as an antidote to the historical dominance that humans have had over the natural world.

Yet, other rewilding advocates feel that rewilding in cultural landscapes requires a fundamentally different approach. Especially in places like Europe, that have been thoroughly changed by humans throughout history, it is obvious that one cannot simply turn back the clock and restore landscapes to a

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‘pre-disturbance condition’. Rather than seeking to restore a situation of the past, rewilding is fundamentally oriented towards the future and seeks to introduce wildness back into society. Some even seek to articulate the importance of wildness in ways that acknowledge the historic nature of the European landscape, and point out that rewilding can play a role in reviving forgotten elements of place history, and might even boost local economies.

Despite these attempts to reconcile rewilding with concerns over landscape history, cultural identity and cultural heritage, clear tensions remain between the view that cultural heritage landscapes should be protected as they are, and the view that sees the need for humans to step back and make more room for natural processes and be more inclusive towards non-anthropocentric narratives and perspectives in the landscape. Rewilding therefore is not just a new conservation strategy informed by new conservation science, but also a new perspective on human–nature relationships that challenges those who seek to protect wilderness outside the human world, but also those who believe that the human world exists independently of and separated from the wild world. The debate on rewilding, in other words, raises new questions about the relation between human history and nature, and between anthropocentric perspectives on the narrative meaning of landscapes and those more traditional reflections on the need for a non-anthropocentric perspective that acknowledges the value of nature’s autonomy.

The papers in this theme issue attempt to find connections between these different perspectives on landscape and nature protection and contribute to the ongoing debate about the meaning and value of wildness and history in layered cultural landscapes.

Andrea Gammon addresses the meaning of the term ‘rewilding’. In a response to Dolly Jørgensen’s critique that rewilding has become a plastic term, Gammon argues that an analysis of the debate on rewilding should not start with a single definition, but instead should try to interpret the actual use of the term. She proposes to view rewilding as a *cluster concept* – ‘a concept that has multiple defining characteristics, none of which is necessary to the definition’ – in order to ‘to yield a broader, more encompassing, if not working concept of rewilding that responds to its various meanings and more general usage’. She then presents three key issues in environmental philosophy that are being re-addressed by rewilding: 1) the question of the exclusion from humans in wild areas; 2) the idea that wild areas have an ontological purity because of their non-human origin; and 3) the concept of the layered landscape and the legibility of wild places or wilderness. Gammon suggests that rewilding must be understood in the context of the wilderness debate, carrying on the main themes of this debate but also raising novel questions of its own.

Hans Renes focuses mainly on the historical dimension of conflicts between proponents of rewilding and those protecting cultural heritage landscapes. Typically, rewilding does not seek to reconstruct a past situation, however the

past still plays an important role in most rewilding projects. Rewilders often claim that they seek to restore old landscape features and thus restore the historic continuity of a landscape. Based on a number of cases of rewilding in the Netherlands, Renes shows that the landscape history is much more complex than rewilders typically acknowledge, and that therefore many attempts to take into account the historical continuity of a landscape result in the creation of a landscape that in reality never existed or could have existed, damaging the layered landscape in the process. At the same time, he also points out that the landscape nostalgia of those who oppose landscape change is also deeply problematic. Renes argues that a more nuanced approach to the role of history in the landscape is needed, in which more attention is paid to the layered nature of historic landscapes. Rather than seeking to fixate landscape history to a certain point in the past, or create landscapes that disregard landscape history altogether, the starting point should be that rewilding projects should make landscape history itself visible. Such an approach would enable a more fruitful dialogue between supporters and opponents of rewilding.

Sophie Wynne-Jones, Graham Strouts and George Holmes argue that whilst definitions of rewilding place a strong emphasis on non-human agency, it is an inescapably human aspiration resulting in a range of social conflicts. These conflicts can be traced back to at least three different issues: first, differences between 'social constructions of nature' and in particular the role of the history of the landscape; second, the distribution of costs and benefits of concrete rewilding projects; and third, the political question of who has the power to make decisions. They show how these conflicts play out over time. They present a case study where rewilding advocates involved in the Cambrian Wildwood project in MidWales (UK) have sought to advance a more peopled and culturally responsive vision. At the same time they question the extent to which rewilding can truly advance inclusive opportunities for rural change. Given a continued return amongst stakeholders to exclusionary narratives of belonging and authenticity, tensions over rewilding will be unavoidably emotional and not easy to reconcile.

Martin Drenthen examines what is at stake in conflicts between those who want to protect traditional cultural landscapes and those who advocate rewilding. He too discusses several attempts at reconciliation between cultural landscape protection and rewilding, either by a spatial separation of cultural landscapes and new wild lands, or by adopting a more human inclusive narrative of rewilding. He argues however, that easy reconciliations will fail to do justice to what is at stake between the competing normative narratives on the meaning and value of landscapes: rewilding implies a radical non-anthropocentric stance that demands a reinterpretation of the landscape and of the history of the relation between humans and their environment, and thus challenges the identities that are based on that history. He argues that focusing

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on the interpretative dimension of our landscape understandings can help find more creative solutions to continue landscape biography.

Finally, Isis Brook investigates the ethical tools necessary for responding to the complex questions that restoration and rewilding in culturally-saturated landscapes pose, and how these can help make justifiable decisions. She explores the tension between a cultural and a nature oriented perspective on the landscape, focusing on the case of the Lake District. Using the ethical theory of responsive cohesion developed by Warwick Fox, she seeks to juxtapose the demands of retaining the rich cultural narratives written into the landscape and the potential for rewilding such areas to allow for greater biological diversity and space for unrestrained nature. Any judgement about responsive cohesion depends on a prior understanding of a larger context, and that can be culturally or ecologically defined. In the end, the theory cannot solve once and for all the clash between different contextual understandings of the situation. What it can do, however, is ‘broaden the perspective out to the biosphere whilst recognising the relevance of local values that need to be brought into and honoured in a conversation about where to from here.’

A balanced view on rewilding in culturally saturated landscapes should adopt a human inclusive perspective, a rich understanding of landscape history, and an open eye for the tensions between the different interpretative horizons that are in play in the conflicts about rewilding. Rewilding of cultural landscapes unavoidably involves interpretational questions about the meaning of landscape, history and the relationship of humans and the natural world. Conflicts between interpretations often lack a simple solution, but require a genuine discussion between stakeholders about their understanding of landscape and self, in which the parties are sincerely interested in each other’s perspectives.

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