

Making Space for Rewilding:

Creating an enabling policy environment

KEY POINTS

- Rewilding signifies advances in inter-disciplinary conservation science interacting with wider social and political trends. It is about restoring natural processes in a variety of landscapes and at different scales within the constraints of what is possible. Rewilding is future orientated with the potential to extend and reinvigorate European nature policy.
- Rewilding expresses a new appreciation of wild nature. It represents a growing movement in Europe of people seeking a counterweight to our increasingly regulated lives, society and landscapes. It signifies a desire to rediscover the values of freedom, spontaneity, resilience and wonder embodied in Europe's natural heritage and to revitalise conservation as a positive, future-oriented force.
- Rewilding has attained a scientific¹, practical and media presence. In late 2015 and early 2016 we conducted ten interviews with experts in EU nature policy and legislation and in rewilding science and practice to explore opportunities to create a policy environment that would support fuller expression of rewilding visions and principles.
- Rewilding is a logical next step in an on-going process of EU nature policy development. The process began in the 1970s with the establishment of the Nature Directives to establish their legal power but is now moving to address under-developed areas of nature policy. In 2013 the EC published guidelines to address the missing dimension of wilderness in Natura 2000. Rewilding continues this direction of travel² by elaborating concepts of ecological restoration and networks within the Nature Directives and by providing momentum and support for policy development.
- Rewilding needs a supportive enabling environment. We recommend that the EU recognizes the rise and significance of rewilding in its nature conservation and land-use policies. Specifically we ask that in future policy the EU a) recognizes rewilding as a new conservation approach emerging from inter-disciplinary conservation science interacting with currents in culture and society, b) positions rewilding as a complimentary approach with the potential to extend the scope and impact of the EU nature policy in a cost-efficient manner, supporting a better implementation of the Nature Directives and c) undertakes to support and invest in rewilding initiatives and studies and engage in dialogue with the rewilding movement in preparation for the 2030 biodiversity strategy.

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Views and positions are those of the authors.

The quotes in this article refer to remarks made during the 10 interviews.

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¹ Since 2008 there has been a steep rise in number of scientific articles on rewilding. In 2015 saw publication of two major scientific review articles, namely Svenning *et al.* (2015) Science for a wilder Anthropocene – synthesis and directions for rewilding research. *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA* and Lorimer *et al.* (2015) Rewilding: science, practice and politics. *Ann. Rev. Environ. Res.*

² It is referenced in the 2014 guidelines for LIFE grants http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/toolkit/pmttools/life2014_2020/guidelines.htm

Rewilding

Rewilding is a new mode of conservation with the potential to build upon and extend the achievements of the EU Nature Directives and conservation policy. It offers visions and a set of principles that generate synergies between established and emerging policy frames within and beyond biodiversity conservation.

Rewilding is a powerful new term in conservation. This may be because it combines a sense of passion and feeling for nature with advances in ecological science³. The term resonates with diverse publics and seems to have particular appeal to a younger urban generation and among those who want a voice in shaping a new rural environment. Rewilding is exciting, engaging and challenging: it is promoting debate and deliberation on what is natural and the natures we collectively wish to conserve and shape.

“Rewilding has been happening in different guises for 20 years or more, it is just that we now have a term for it.”

Rewilding is a multifaceted concept with three broad dimensions that interact with each other: 1) restoring and giving space to natural processes, 2) reconnecting wild(er) nature with the modern economy, and 3) responding to and shaping cosmopolitan perceptions of nature conservation among European society. The following principles are coming to characterise and guide rewilding as a distinct approach to conservation.

- 1. Restoring natural processes and ecological dynamics** – both abiotic such as river flows, and biotic such as the ecological web and food-chain – through reassembling lost guilds of animals in dynamic landscapes.
- 2. A gradated and situated approach**, where the goal is to move up a scale of wildness within the constraints of what is possible, and interacting with local cultural identities.
- 3. Taking inspiration from the past but not replicating it.** Developing new natural heritage and value that evokes the past but shapes the future.

4. Creating self-sustaining, resilient ecosystems (including re-connecting habitats and species populations within the wider landscapes) that provide resilience to external threats and pressures, including the impact of climate change (adaptation).

5. Working towards the ideal of passive management, where once restored, we step back and allow dynamic natural processes to shape conservation outcomes.

6. Creating new natural assets that connect with modern society and economy and promote innovation, enterprise and investment in and around natural areas, leading to new nature-inspired economies.

7. Reconnecting policy with popular conservation sentiment and a recognition that conservation is a culturally dynamic as well as a scientific and technical pursuit.

As a new conservation frame, rewilding brings together established and newer conservation worldviews⁴. People are combining these in different ways creating different ‘shades’ of rewilding, many of which have labels. This is a limitation and opportunity. On the one hand it exposes rewilding to sensationalist media interpretations and charges of a lack of clarity, consensus and evidence by groups within conservation science. On the other hand it reflects innovation and creates the possibility for a common, but differentiated (situated) mode of conservation: one that is guided by a set of principles that member states or regions can interpret in ways suited to their nature conservation traditions, landscapes, culture and economies.

Rewilding and EU politics

The rise of the rewilding visions and practice across Europe coincides with the fitness check of EU nature legislation. Civil society environmental organisations within the EU have mounted a coordinated campaign to protect the Nature Directives from deregulation. There is a strong and agreed view that the Nature Directives must be kept intact and that the focus should be on better implementation. In short, gains from the past must be secured and protected.

This said, our interviews revealed considerable support for rewilding so long as it extends rather than unsettles the strategy to protect the direc-

³ This interplay has deep cultural roots in Europe that can be traced back to Alexander von Humboldt as Andrew Wulf shows in her acclaimed new book “The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World” (2015).

⁴ Nature conservation has its origins in five distinct social movements representing different but complimentary worldviews on what is natural and the primary goals of conservation. As a result conservation has always been political and as a new frame or movement rewilding unsettles and inspires.

tives. There was a clear desire for a new agenda to work on after the fitness check process has been completed – something inside and outside the core ‘space’ of the Nature Directives where conservation interests can innovate, forge new partnerships, co-produce new visions and establish new coalitions with actors in society.

Rewilding following the principles mentioned above could offer cost-efficient solutions to some of the implementation challenges associated with Natura 2000, for example in areas with high levels of land abandonment and a shrinking local economy, by creating new opportunities and values that incentivise people to protect and improve their natural environment. Importantly, rewilding also offers a vision and an approach to create natural value in the 80% of Europe not protected by Natura 2000 (e.g. in more urbanised areas), thereby improving the prospect of meeting targets in the CBD and 2020 biodiversity strategy.

There are understandable concerns that appearance of new conservation arguments and ideas at a politically sensitive time constitutes a policy risk for the environmental movement. This is because there is little experience yet of how to frame rewilding ideas for policy at the EU level and it is difficult to predict how they may be aligned or appropriated by interests seeking to weaken nature legislation. This policy brief addresses this risk by positioning rewilding in relation to EU policy.

“We need to protect the achievements of the Nature Directives and kick-on!”

Rewilding and the Nature Directives

Some suggest that rewilding’s focus on processes and dynamic systems is incompatible with the Nature Directives because they were designed to conserve patterns of species and habitats in place. A combination of interacting factors has created a perception that the purpose of the directives is to maintain (or restore) habitats and populations to a desired state. These factors include: a) the ‘favourable condition’ concept interacting with habitat typologies⁵ and species annexes in specifying how member states should meet their obligations under the direc-



Europe has spectacular landscapes that can ‘brand’ different regions and re-invigorate European identity. Ţarcu Mountains, Southern Carpathians, Romania.



There is huge potential for coastal and marine rewilding in Europe. Kornati National Park, Mana Island, Croatia.

tives, b) the rise of performance management (management by targets) in the public and NGO sectors during the 1980s and after, and c) the need to establish the legal power of the Nature Directives.

However our interviews revealed a more nuanced situation. The directives refer to ecological restoration within Nature 2000 and EC case law can be interpreted as being supportive of ecological dynamics although within limits. The space for ecological dynamics in law depends on context. In western Europe where natural values are both associated with pre-industrial land uses and under severe pressure the law is set very strict. In this context, focusing on targets based on lists of species and habitats enables clear legal judgements on what can or cannot be permitted and what needs to be done to meet favourable condition. In other regions of Europe where

⁵ These were developed using a phyto-physiological approach which produces classification based on plant species composition.



Restoring flooding regimes and flood plains are core rewilding measures, providing ecological, flood protection and economic benefits for nature and society. Flooded area in the Northern part of the Livansko Polje karst plateau, Kazanc area, Bosnia-Herzegovina.

natural values are under less pressure member state interpretations of the directives tend to offer more scope for rewilding.

The directives permit the creation of new natural value alongside existing natural value⁶, as is happening with the rewilding of rivers which is underway in member states across Europe⁷. Furthermore, the Natura 2000 management plan is the main instrument for managing natural values in a Natura 2000 site and this requires that socio-economic interests are also taken into account. As several Rewilding Europe projects demonstrate, ecological and socio-economic rewilding can be practiced in Natura 2000 sites so long as it does not undermine the existing natural value.

Introducing rewilding approaches outside Natura 2000 sites could allow more flexibility in

approach and generate a positive dynamic with the Nature Directives. In such cases, rewilding would be less constrained by the provision of the directives. At the same time it could be positioned as a supporting strategy towards meeting biodiversity targets and it can be shown to improve the cohesion and connectivity of the Natura 2000 Network. Once established such rewilding sites could be incorporated into the Natura 2000 Network based on the new natural values they have created. This together with evidence concerning the potential of rewilding sites to help bring populations of endangered species up to favourable status, could provide a way to expand the scope and interpretation of the directives without recourse to revisiting the legal texts.

Rewilding beyond Natura 2000 could also support implementation of the Water Framework Directive. This includes a requirement for ecological protection and the concept of 'good ecological status' which is defined in terms of the biological community expected in conditions of minimal environmental impacts. The rewilding of rivers to restore more natural flow and braiding regimes, through for example the removal of

“Rewilding supports a move from damage prevention to building a new case for Europe’s nature and biodiversity.”

⁶ i.e. the ecological attributes that formed the justification for Natura 2000 site designation

⁷ See e.g. Leuven *et al.* (2002) “Living Rivers:Trends and Challenges in Science and Management”, Springer

dams or dykes, would support delivery of WFD targets. Also the Marine Framework Directive is an important legislative tool that could support rewilding and recovery of marine ecosystems (including trophic upgrading), in an integrated way with the other three directives.

A particular legal issue constraining trophic rewilding concerns the status of 'rewilded' and de-domesticated forms of bovids and horses. (e.g. auroch, wild horse). These act as ecological replacements of species that have been 'lost' in natural state and play an important role in restoring ecological functions and trophic cascades. However, European law only knows these animals as domestic animals and consequently veterinary, animal welfare and public liability law govern their management. A future EC guidance note on the status of wild bovids and horses would be in line with the IUCN guidelines on species reintroduction⁸. It would represent a significant contribution to creating a more supportive policy environment for restoring natural grazing as a key ecological process. Rewilding Europe is working with ARK Nature on a project to promote formal wild status for horses in the open system of the Rhodope Mountains in Bulgaria, and this together with the Dutch ruling on the legal status of the Heck Cattle in the fenced system of the Oostvaardersplassen could provide the basis for such guidelines.

Rewilding and wilderness

The 2013 Guidelines on Wilderness within Natura 2000⁹ clarify when wilderness approaches are appropriate and necessary within Natura 2000 sites and provide guidance on how to implement non-intervention management approaches. We propose similar guidelines for rewilding but with a focus on generating new value both within and outside the the Natura 2000 network.

It is important to note that rewilding is not synonymous with wilderness. The qualities of wilderness are specified as naturalness, free functioning natural processes, largeness and the absence of developments. Rewilding is not a state; it is a process. It is about moving up a scale of wildness and giving the ecosystems a functional 'up-grade' whatever their nature, scale and location. On a hypothetical rewilding scale of 1–10, wilderness areas would already be at 9–10 and restricting rewilding to this upper end would limit both its geographical scope and transformative potential.

Rewilding and Ecosystem Restoration

Progress towards the 15% restoration target in the 2020 Biodiversity Strategy has been disappointing: only Finland has presented restoration plans on how it will meet this target. Three issues may contribute to this limited uptake: 1) a lack of consensus on how to define a degraded ecosystem, 2) differing opinion on whether this target refers to (or priority should be given to) restoring to favourable conservation status of species and habitats in Natura 2000 sites, and 3) uncertainty concerning the recurrent costs that ecosystem restoration might incur.

“The goal of rewilding is not to restore a painting that then needs curating, it is about restoring a system that can come to look after itself.”

Rewilding offers a solution to these conundrums and an opportunity to avoid the ecosystem restoration targets running into the ground. Rewilding logics align with the gradient approach to defining ecosystem degradation. As mentioned rewilding proposes a scale of wildness where rewilding occurs when we move up the scale, be this from 2–3, 5–7 or 8–9.

Furthermore, rewilding represents a cost-efficient approach to ecosystem restoration. The goal is to restore dynamic and self-sustaining ecosystems and, where appropriate, catalyse new enterprise and economic activity. This opens the prospect of significantly reducing recurrent management costs¹⁰, and the opportunity to raise new investment and income streams, thus creating new incentives for stakeholders and local communities to value their natural capital and to support conservation.

Rewilding is not a panacea for ecosystem restoration. For instance it is not suited to the restoration of habitat types representing particular successional stages or very limited in extent. It is however well suited to have positive biodiversity impact in a wide range of situations from degraded lands such as ex-mining landscapes, regulated rivers and wetlands and exhausted or abandoned agricultural lands to Natura 2000 sites in a more natural state. As such rewilding offers a framework and approach to re-energise interest and action to meet the 15% restoration target.

8 <https://portals.iucn.org/library/efiles/edocs/2013-009.pdf>

9 <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/wilderness/pdf/WildernessGuidelines.pdf>

10 See LIFE guidelines for applicants http://ec.europa.eu/environment/life/toolkit/pmttools/life2014_2020/guidelines.htm



Many regions in Europe suffer from land abandonment and young generations moving to cities, with significant socio-economic impacts for rural areas. Abandoned house in Castelo Rodrigo, Portugal.



Rewilding can create new values in areas where marginal agriculture is disappearing, providing new opportunities for new generations. 89-year-old José Maria Félix ploughing with his donkey, Faia Brava, Portugal.



Rewilding responds to increasing demand for affordable safari-style experiences in Europe. Faia Brava Star Camp, Cõa Valley, Portugal

“We can aim for a natural environment that looks after itself and generates value for society and economy.”

Rewilding, enterprise and economy

Across Europe, rewilding projects are proactively working to revitalise marginal agriculture through the development of modern and dynamic nature-based economies. Rewilding represents a positive contribution to the growing debate on the future of the EU common agricultural policy.

Many areas unsuited to mechanised and competitive agriculture are experiencing land-abandonment and outward migration, particularly among young people. This is causing a decline in rural culture and the scrubbing over of biodiversity-rich habitats. Addressing the negative impacts of such changes with subsidy mechanisms is costly and not sustainable in the long run. Rewilding engages with these landscape dynamics in a positive, creative and investment-orientated way. For example, Rewilding Europe has started Rewilding Europe Capital (REC), Europe’s first conservation finance facility and a revolving fund, funded by philanthropic and investment capital. Since the start in 2013, REC provided relatively small loans to 16 enterprises in five rewilding areas in order to leverage carefully defined rewilding outputs as part of a pioneer phase, to help create nature-based economies¹¹. In 2015, the European Commission has launched the Natural Capital Financing Facility (NCF) to support enterprise-related conservation through the European Investment Bank¹².

The enterprise and economic potential of rewilding extends to urban and peri-urban areas. Using rewilding principles, new nature-based attractions and public experiments in nature conservation could be created on degraded industrial, mining and agricultural lands close to cities. As well as generating enterprise opportunities, such rewilding assets could generate value through cost effective delivery of public services in the areas of recreation and health¹³ and through enhanced city brand and local property prices.

¹¹ 2011 National Survey Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation. A National Overview. US Fish & Wildlife, United States

¹² <http://www.eib.org/products/blending/ncff/index.htm>

¹³ In the 1980s local authorities embraced urban conservation as a cost-effective means to extend leisure services provision. Today local authorities face the challenge of growing numbers of citizens living with mental health of dementia problems. An emerging body of practice integrated engagements with natural assets in mental health policy.



Wild nature appeals to diverse publics and seems to have particular appeal among a younger urban generation. Wild Wonders of Europe outdoor exhibition in Berlin.

Rewilding and positive policy frames

Our interviews revealed opportunities for positive interplays between rewilding and strategic policy frames and the agendas of other directives. Rewilding links existing policy logics of species protection, multi-function landscapes and ecosystem services with positive concepts of green infrastructure and a Trans European Green Network (TEN-G), climate ambition, new rural economies, innovation and the better regulation agenda.

The EC policy experts interviewed were positive about alignments between rewilding and green infrastructure, saying that whilst there was a general commitment to green infrastructure, the concept is languishing because it has yet to be given a clear meaning. Infra-structure development is central to the European project and is generally conceived of as developing fixed assets and structures supporting collective economic and social well-being. A primary focus of the EC has been on the development of infra-structure (physical and organisational) to support a Single Market.

The incipient concept of TEN-G picks up from earlier ideas of a pan-European ecological

“Rewilding represents an additional, entrepreneurial and refreshingly bold approach for nature conservation.”

network¹⁶. It chimes with the ‘bigger, better, joined up’ strap line of the UKs Lawton report¹⁴ and envisions more connected landscapes and better functioning ecosystems across multiple scales that are better able to respond to climate change and support ecosystem services¹⁵.

An insight that emerged from our discussions is the need for an infra-structure that helps build and strengthen a common European identity: that the success of the Single Market may be sub-optimal if citizens don’t identify with Europe as a place. The role of parks in constructing or reasserting national and regional identities, such as in the US in the 19th century and the UK after WWII, is well established¹⁷. Through the rewilding lens we can imagine a pan-European network of sites that

¹⁴ Lawton, J. H., et al. “Making Space for Nature: a review of England’s wildlife sites and ecological network.” Report to DEFRA (2010)

¹⁵ EHF GIIR Working Group, TEN-G – a Green network for Europe. Draft think pieces for discussion. 3.11.2015

¹⁶ The 1995 Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy (endorsed by 24 EU member states) included the development of ecological networks as a priority

¹⁷ Anderson, Benedict. “Imagined Communities, revised edition.” London and New (1991)



Rewilding is about restoring natural processes and ecological dynamics, like the role of scavengers in prey-rich landscapes. Griffon vultures in the Campanarios de Azába reserve, Spain.

“Rewilding opens the prospect of new partners, new allies, and new ways of making the economic case for nature.”

capture the public imagination on account of their blend of natural spectacles, past and future ecologies, iconic wildlife species and authentic and modern ways of living. Such sites could ‘brand’ different regions of Europe, reinvigorate traditions of the European tour, support new wildlife economies, align rural regions with a positive, forward looking form of environmentalism, and allow Europe’s multi-cultural societies to shape their versions of nature for the 21st century¹⁸.

A TEN-G underpinned by the principle of nature-based innovation could act as test-beds for new conservation finance mechanisms and re-connect natural assets with modern society and economy thereby reinvigorate countryside economies and enhancing societal resilience to change. Such ideas are not fanciful: the now 48 sites (23 countries, over 2,5 million hectares

involved) in the emerging European Rewilding Network exemplify this ‘nature-based solutions’ ethos (see map next page).

Rewilding also has the potential to re-purpose areas with grey infra-structural assets that are redundant or that are reaching the end of their economic life. For instance, rewilding principles contribute innovative and appealing socio-economic visions for ex-mining sites, badly degraded agricultural and de-commissioned dams.

More fundamentally, this could open an EU wide discussion on what is land for – is it for food production/farming or to provide a range of ecosystem services. This question is central to the Paris Agreement because delivering on climate ambition will require bold new thinking on landuse. Rewilding provides exemplars to suggest that in areas where farming is marginal or at odds with other priorities (e.g. flood management) it may be better to see land as an asset for other forms of value generation, such as climate mitigation and adaptation.

In summary, rewilding represents a positive and proactive contribution to deliberations on the future of EU nature policy and to a restating of the vision and purpose of a European Union.

¹⁸ The Parcs Naturels Régionaux (www.parcs-naturels-regionaux.fr) policy introduced by France in the 1980s as a policy to strengthen the role of strong regional identities in construction the French national identity adopted these logics

Members of the European Rewilding Network (situation April 2016). This is a starting network with potentially hundreds of rewilding initiatives across Europe that are happening or are being developed.



European Rewilding Network members: ● Rewilding Europe areas ● Other rewilding initiatives

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: CREATING AN ENABLING POLICY ENVIRONMENT FOR REWILDING

Natural value is under pressure across Europe. In response to the EC consultation on the Nature Directives¹⁹ over half a million citizens said that the directives should be maintained and better implemented and reasserted the democratic voice for nature conservation. At the same time rewilding is gaining ground as a popular movement for a wilder, more innovative, confident and forward-looking form of conservation. In short, the emerging message from citizens, scientists and conservation practitioners is that we want to safeguard what we have achieved in protecting existing natural value, but we also want to reset expectation on what is possible from nature conservation policy.



Nature and wildlife photography is a booming activity in Europe, contributing to new, nature inspired economies. Wildlife watching hide near Deven, Rhodope Mountains, Bulgaria.



There is a strong market potential for wildlife-watching in Europe, which can contribute to the appreciation of species, mitigation of human-wildlife conflict and wildlife conservation. Brown bear in Kuhmo, Finland.

A new conservation policy vision for Europe represents an exciting opportunity for innovation, investment and significant social, ecological and economic returns for the next few decades. It also involves risk and uncertainty. A challenge for policy makers is how to find and use spaces to allow innovation in nature policy and open opportunities to go beyond strict interpretations of existing law. Our assessment is that spaces for innovation exist in medium and larger Natura 2000 sites across Europe, but also by framing rewilding as a conservation agenda for the wider European countryside, including smaller and even urban areas where ecological processes can be improved. The strength of rewilding is its flexibility which derives from its focus on ‘up-grading’ ecosystems processes, using the past as a source of insight and inspiration rather than a template for restoration, and a willingness to mix nature, society and economy. As such rewilding offers a vision for a green-infrastructure where groups come together to coproduce natures that reflect context and the multi-cultural (ethnic) make-up of European society.

We urge policy makers to create the spaces and partnerships to allow rewilding to gain traction as a complimentary conservation approach that will expand upon past achievements and refashion conservation in the 21st century. We propose that a first step is for the significance and potential of rewilding to be recognised in the EC communique on nature conservation scheduled for later in 2016 and for this to signal the intent to prepare an EC document on the principles and potential of rewilding and its relationship to the Nature Directives and wider EU strategy. In support of this need we are forming a EU wide task-force of experts to spear-head thinking in this area. This process will interface with existing structures such as the European Habitat Forum²⁰.

In summary, rewilding represents an opportunity for conservation policy to shift gear – from a Phase I focus on protecting and designating to a Phase II focus on restoration that ‘up-grades’ ecosystems, improves network connectivity and creates new value for people.

“We need new concepts and innovation in policy for nature conservation to regain ground.”

¹⁹ <http://www.naturealert.eu>

²⁰ <http://iucn.org/about/union/secretariat/offices/europe/activities/?50/European-Habitats-Forum>