

Cultivating a Dialogue: Rewilding, Heritage Landscapes, and Belonging

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Article abstract

Rewilding in Europe currently presents a threat to long established forms of agriculture like upland sheep farming. Some rewilders, recognizing the heritage value of these farming practices, have proposed policy solutions to satisfy both the needs of farmers and the plans of rewilders. Such approaches, though striving for peaceful resolution of landscape conflicts, nevertheless overlook one crucial possibility: that both farmers and rewilders have something to learn from each other. By exploring philosophical ideas on dialogue, we propose that by engaging in real dialogue with traditional farming practices, conservation approaches like rewilding can learn a lot about some of the most fundamental concerns motivating conservation. This however demands laying oneself open to possible criticism and being open to the possibility of transformation.

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Cultivating a Dialogue: Rewilding, Heritage Landscapes, and Belonging

Mateusz Tokarski & Andrea R. Gammon

Few landscapes in the world are more renowned for conjuring the romantic idea of nature than the uplands of the United Kingdom. Wind-swept heaths, crags and lakes, and empty expanses roamed over by flocks of sheep and dotted by occasional cottages have been entrenched in the popular environmental imagination, thanks in no small part to Wordsworth's famous words describing the Lake District and its solitude:

*No habitation can be seen; but they
Who journey thither find themselves alone
With a few sheep, with rocks and stones, and kites
That overhead are sailing in the sky.¹*

Enshrined as such images are, some of these actual landscapes could be a thing of the past as it becomes harder to make a living from the centuries-old practice of sheep farming that has forged and defined them.

This is an increasingly common scenario in mainland Europe also. A mix of factors—aging rural populations, younger generations choosing to pursue livelihoods off the farm, mechanization and even digitalization of farming practices, and economic and policy pressures that tend to hit smallholdings farmers the hardest—add up to a trend of land abandonment throughout Europe that risks the continued existence of some rural communities and their ways of life.

However, nature famously abhors a vacuum. In the absence of cultivation, these areas quickly open up for new growth and the return of species that agriculture has long fenced out. For those who would like to see a wilder Europe, this is a chance to encounter a more self-willed nature. Among those who welcome these changes are rewilders.

Rewilding is a restoration strategy that sees the process of land abandonment as a great opportunity, both for nature conservation and for the prospect of human reconnection with nature. When the term came into use in the 1990s, it was first coined by US conservationists Michael Soulé, Reed Noss, and Dave Foreman, who defined it as the restoration of ecosystems through the establishment of core protection areas, reintroduction of carnivores, and provision of

¹ William Wordsworth, "Michael, A Pastoral Poem," in *Wordsworth & Coleridge, Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (New York: Routledge, 1968), 218.

corridors supporting movement of animals.² Transplanted in Europe, rewilding has become one of the most popular restoration strategies, aiming for the reinstatement of natural ecosystemic processes and the self-organization or “self-willing” of nature. In landscapes that have been overly-managed by humans, proposed rewilding might begin with human interventions, for instance, the reintroduction of locally extinct species and the kickstarting of natural processes, but eventually, once these have been restored, species diversity and the de-domestication of the land will proceed on their own.³

But rewilding, besides allowing nature to recover autonomy and some of its richness, can also play an important role in human lives. Through engagement with such newly restored places and their denizens, humans can rewild themselves by bringing joy, wonder and various other benefits into their lives. According to George Monbiot, whose popular book *Feral* can be credited with introducing rewilding to a broader public,⁴ personal rewilding aims at healing “ecological boredom” – a condition in which people often find themselves deprived of any signs of spontaneity or contact with wildness of the wider non-human world due to living ever more constrained and ordered lives. As such, rewilding proposes to not only change the materiality of landscapes, but also the main forms in which we engage with them. In the iconic uplands of the UK, targeted as one of the most promising rewilding locations, regenerated forests are likely to replace current expanses of heath and meadows; sheep paths may become hiking trails; and shepherds’ cottages and sheds will be refurbished as hiking huts and bothies for walkers and nature-lovers. Farmers and shepherds might choose to stay on the land, but their roles, too, will change, perhaps by becoming wilderness rangers or caretakers of bed and breakfasts that cater to the needs of nature-starved urbanites.

The idea of rewilding, then, brings new forms of nature and new forms of engagement not just for visitors but also for locals. And though these forms of engagement are not actually new—people have been hiking, camping, birding, and walking in nature for ages—these have not been the dominant ways of engaging with landscapes that have been domesticated or semi-domesticated for centuries. They are also not the practices that have given these landscapes their current shape and have been at the centre of locals’ lives. Today, the low-impact, recreation activities that align with rewilding’s commitment to stepping back and limiting human presence and control are poised to

² Michael Soulé and Reed Noss, “Rewilding and Biodiversity: Complementary Goals for Continental Conservation,” *Wild Earth* 8 (1998): 19-28; Dave Foreman, “Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act and the Evolving Wilderness Area Model,” *Wild Earth* 3, no. 4 (1993-4): 57-62; Michael Soulé and John Terborgh, ed., *Continental Conservation: Scientific Foundations of Regional Reserve Networks* (Washington D.C.: Island, 1999).

³ For an introduction to rewilding in Continental Europe, see Henrique Miguel Pereira and Laetitia M. Navarro, ed., *Rewilding European Landscapes* (Cham: Springer International, 2015). For a more academic overview of rewilding projects and themes, see Jamie Lorimer et al. “Rewilding: Science, Practice, and Politics,” *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 40, no. 1 (2015): 39-62.

⁴ George Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).

become the main form of human engagement with these landscapes.

From an environmental perspective, the transition from cultivated landscape to a wilder one is an exciting prospect because of increased biodiversity and the potential for increased ecosystem services. The wilder the better, it seems, as we tend to think about the value of such places as arising from their naturalness, freedom from human impact, and absence of human presence and superintendence. What we think less about, from the environmental perspective, are the contributions of the countless generations of farmers, shepherds, and homesteaders, and the ways they've worked and shaped the land. The traditional landscapes in question—the upland fells and the farmsteads throughout the UK and Europe—are places of nature, but they are also human places and offer rich examples of the legacy of the intertwining of humans and nature. What remains largely unmentioned in environmental discussions are the stories and meanings attached to these places, their vernaculars, their myths. Little attention is paid to the incredible wealth of knowledge of the personal, economic, and natural histories of the land amassed over generations that is lost as traditional agriculture gives way to its industrial forms, or rewilding overtakes formerly cultivated land, or tourism and conservation become the dominant economic and cultural forces shaping these places.⁵

The disappearance of such heritage certainly matters for those whose way of life is threatened by this transition. Ecotourism offers a poor substitute for the loss of the centuries-old practices and communities that jointly comprise the agricultural heritage of these places. But should this dying of a way of life and its losses matter to environmentalists? Monbiot does not despair at the loss of England's iconic hills, hedgerows, and countryside; after all, to him, they are "sheepwrecked"—denuded by hundreds of years of overgrazing, owing their existence to the continuation of misguided subsidies.⁶ Monbiot considers the landscapes of domesticated England largely devoid of interesting ecology, and his stance is typical of some forms of environmentalism generally, and rewilding specifically.⁷ But he does worry about the people, the farmers and homesteaders, whose livelihoods, it seems to him, are going by the wayside. Monbiot is sensitive to the fact that the benefits of rewilding come with costs—namely the transition away from traditional forms of agriculture and losses in productivity and jobs—and these costs should be borne out fairly. This means considering the situation and interests of upland farmers whose livelihoods are at stake and incorporating them during deliberations about the future of these places. Monbiot cares that this is done equitably, and he even takes this on personally in one effort he describes: his visit to a sheep

⁵ George Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Steve Carver and Mark Fisher are two outspoken representatives of this view. E.g, Steve Carver, "Making Space for Real Nature," *Ecos* 35, no. 3/4 (2014): 4-14 and Mark Fisher, "Self-Willed Land: Advocacy for Wild Land and Nature," blog, <http://www.self-willed-land.org.uk/>.

farm in Wales and his conversation with the shepherd Dafydd Morris-Jones.

Though both men live in Wales, they seem to come from different worlds. Monbiot is cosmopolitan: a columnist for *The Guardian* and the author of several best-selling books, he spent his early years working in the tropics reporting on conflicts in Brazil, East Africa, and Indonesia. His writings champion environmentalism, Indigenous populations, and later, the economic working- and under-classes. Morris-Jones, on the other hand, lives a life deeply rooted in the landscape and the language of Wales: a shepherd and outdoor educator who translates Welsh poetry and has lived in the same spot, doing the same work as his great-grandfather. He works alongside his mother, also an experienced shepherd, who is capable of diagnosing a sick sheep simply by observing its posture and gait.

Morris-Jones takes Monbiot around the area, narrating its natural and his personal history in extreme detail and giving Monbiot a sense of what it means to be an upland shepherd. Shepherds like Morris-Jones are not only attached to their land but defined by it. He shows Monbiot how, to those like Morris-Jones who know it and can read it, their history is “written out on the landscape.”⁸ Understandably, they worry that rewilding will erase their community, and they recall attempts by the Forest Commission in the mid-20th century to do just that by planting spruce plantations and demolishing ancient farmsteads. Rewilding, to Morris-Jones, represents another iteration of this effort, as he expresses to Monbiot:

I’m not against something new, not by any means, but it should be a progression from what you’ve got, not wiping the slate clean. With blanket rewilding you lose your unwritten history, your sense of self and your sense of place. It’s like book-burning.⁹

Morris-Jones’s life as a farmer, his knowledge of the region and its history, his craft, his commitment, and the way his and his family’s identity is bound up with the place deeply impress Monbiot, and he writes: “He could have done anything. But he had chosen the sparsest and hardest of livings. It also became clear to me that he had something else few people possessed: he knew who he was. I envied him that.”¹⁰

Monbiot’s impression of this way of life, so alien and yet somehow so alluring, provokes some hesitation in him. He fully expects rewilding to salvage and deepen his connection with the natural world and to enlarge his life, which he admits feels sometimes small and shuffling. But in this exchange, he seems to realize that rewilding might not afford the kind of relation to nature that provides a sense of purpose and identity that Morris-Jones finds in his rooted life. This realization is

⁸ Monbiot, *Feral*, 172.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 172.

strong enough to make a staunch advocate of rewilding admit a pang of jealousy: surely this is a confession that deserves some attention. Could it be that with the loss of farming heritage something of value for rewilding and wilderness enthusiasts will also be lost? Perhaps the stories, practices, and identities embodied in farmer's way of life are important in mediating connection with landscapes, and yet are missing from the new forms of engagement with nature that rewilding proposes?

Monbiot, unfortunately, does not engage in this line of questioning and instead hatches a seemingly ingenious resolution to the threat that rewilding poses to the survival of the world of farming. He finds a policy loophole that would allow the few dedicated farmers like Morris-Jones to continue in their livelihoods while the rest of the land—currently controlled by wealthy, absentee landowners with no actual interest in farming—could be rewilded in accordance with Monbiot's vision. He seems to have found a solution that leaves everyone pretty satisfied: some land goes towards rewilding while communities like that of Morris-Jones stay intact: win-win.

However, there is something dissatisfying with how this problem is so quickly solved. It does not seem to touch the core of the question that troubled Monbiot. Though he quickly passed over it, it's worth stopping here to consider the conflicting views in a bit more depth and to probe the questions that underlie them. The point is not to criticize either the practical solution devised by Monbiot or the general impulse to look for conciliatory policy solutions in environmental disputes. But technical solutions have a way of obscuring or glossing over issues that sometimes require more sustained attention and reflection. To illustrate what is missing from the exchange between the two men, and how such exchanges could be improved, we will refer to some ideas from hermeneutic philosophy about the nature and aims of dialogue.

According to Hans-Georg Gadamer, a true dialogue is directed towards a better understanding of the subject matter.¹¹ A true dialogue isn't arguing to win or to show off your knowledge; the aim is to deepen the understanding of the topic at hand. A true dialogue requires that we open ourselves up to the possibility that the other has something to say that relates to the heart of our concerns. The other may very well be right: this is the *point* of dialogue. Not every conversation reaches this status, but especially in situations of conflict or disagreement, a true dialogue can reveal important ideas and inspire us to change our thinking.

We engage in such a dialogue because we know that another person, with different experiences, views, and ideas, can illuminate an issue from a different perspective, revealing aspects of it we might not have seen and maybe never would've thought of on our own. Quite conveniently for this discussion of landscape, Gadamer uses a metaphor of the horizon to illustrate his point. When we

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1994).

speak about education and experience, we often speak about broadening our horizons, in the sense that we've opened up to a better, usually more comprehensive, perspective. Our viewpoints are altered by such experiences, and we ourselves are transformed. In context of a dialogue—to use another metaphor—trying to step into someone else's shoes is not the way to go. Though we have to be empathetic in our conversations, if we only see a perspective from someone else's point of view, we've failed in allowing it to question our own understanding of the issue at hand. Gadamer wants to go further than this. It's not enough to agree to disagree and just remain where we are standing: in a true dialogue, we fuse horizons with the other, incorporating their views in a way that transfigures our own. We ourselves are changed by a true dialogue because the other enlarges our understanding of its topic. Gadamer puts it this way: "To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were."¹²

How can these ideas on the nature of true dialogue illuminate our understanding of the exchange between Monbiot and Morris-Jones? We can say that Monbiot, unfortunately, seems to only go as far as to get into the other's shoes and to agree to disagree. He sympathizes with Morris-Jones, recognizes his claim, and understands the extent of his loss. Monbiot does in fact grant that Morris-Jones is right. He realizes, that from a certain perspective, rewilding risks perpetuating the economic and cultural exclusion of farmers in Wales and might be feared as a final erasure of their histories and language that are inscribed in the land and nowhere else. In this sense, a resolution to partition land is laudably just and egalitarian, and his compromise is certainly an understandable and admirable reaction to the conflict he finds himself facing. Monbiot adapts the proposed rewilding plans in such a way as to make space for both farmers and rewilding projects. Re-envisioned in this way, the two groups will carry on, abiding the other's existence, but not addressing each other, not questioning each other, and not opening up different possibilities of understanding the subjects they seem to have in common. This is the problem: that Monbiot's revision does not even touch the question whether forms of engagement with nature implied by rewilding proponents, himself included, are adequate for a development of rich and meaningful engagement with the land many of us are striving for.

The point is not to pick on Monbiot. In and out of *Feral*, his account is vivid and thoughtful, and rewilding couldn't ask for a more ardent and compelling spokesperson. Rather, we claim that Monbiot provides an entry point into a conflict between environmentalism and heritage that is not being debated adequately. His plan demonstrates exactly this shortcoming: though it is a successful strategy in that it will satisfy the desires of the largest number of stakeholders, splitting the difference doesn't touch on the matter at its core. The rich, historically rooted engagement with landscape he witnessed in Morris-Jones's life—his satisfaction and fulfillment from his work and

¹² Ibid., 379.

sense of belonging—are not brought in to play at all in Monbiot’s new proposal. Monbiot has designed a practical solution that fails to appreciate their different views as a conflict of interpretations—each offering a view about the proper way of engaging with the land—and so he reduces the conflict to a practical problem of how to find space for different worldviews or interests on the same, limited land.

For the possibility of dialogue to be realized it is necessary that we open ourselves up to the critique of the other, and to the possibility that such critique might appeal to our thinking or answer our questions. Whether we allow it to challenge our views is the litmus test of a broadening of horizons. By entering into a true conversation we are risking that what we believe in might prove to be wrong, or at least incomplete and that we, as a consequence of the dialogue, will have to change.

For Monbiot, as for many of us struggling against alienation from nature, ideas of how to re-engage with nature need to be exposed and expanded. They are the questions at issue. Recent environmental writing attests to this, and the disappearance of nature as a meaningful aspect in our lives recurs thematically.¹³ *Feral* is one such example. Monbiot petitions for rewilding not by focusing on ecology or nature policies (though he does address both), but by narrating his personal experiences of wildness. Rewilding reimagines the status quo relationship between Britons and their environments and offers a means of reconnection and re-invigoration. How people relate and belong to these landscapes is exactly what is being questioned. Monbiot’s stories are often about feeling at home in the world again. In one particularly significant passage he writes:

I felt at that moment as if I had passed through the invisible wall that separated me from the ecosystem, as if I were no longer a visitor to that place but an inhabitant...The world had become alive with meaning, alive with possibility...For the first time in years, I felt that I belonged to the world.¹⁴

Monbiot is out to find a satisfying and rich form of engagement and belonging that could be an answer to the sense of alienation and dispossession he feels in his suburban life. Instead of seeing this as an internal contradiction in the logic of rewilding or in Monbiot’s thinking, this actually shows how central the relation of belonging is to environmentalists, even those who yearn for unpeopled landscapes, greater wildness in the world, and experiences in places free from human control or influence where nature has free reign. Against the ideas of wilderness, where contact

¹³ Cf. the concept of “nature deficit disorder” in Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2008) or the worries over “extinction of experience” in Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), James R. Miller, “Biodiversity Conservation and the Extinction of Experience,” *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 20, no. 8 (2005): 430-434, and Michael J. Samways, “Rescuing the Extinction of Experience,” *Biodiversity and Conservation* 16, no. 7 (2007): 1995-1997.

¹⁴ Monbiot, *Feral*, 225.

with nature occurs only in rare touristic encounters, the kind of close and daily intimate relationships with the land could be important for environmentalism, even if these are mediated through productive practices. Tourism, wilderness adventure, and various forms of wildlife spectatorship might not be capable of furnishing a relationship of belonging. Farming and associated practices can be here both sources of understanding what constitutes this satisfying relationship (for instance, requiring an intimate and embodied knowledge of a place, dedication over a duration of time, honed methods and strategies, etc.), and a source of inspiration for developing such relationships. For instance, William Jordan draws on gardening when designing his ideas of ecological restoration. Paul Kingsnorth, in his paper titled “Dark Ecology,” explains his use of the scythe as focal point of his relation with nature. Wendell Berry’s entire oeuvre is dedicated to the intersection of American agrarian landscapes and place-based environmental activism in the modern world. Urban volunteers in a European volunteering project WikiWolves help farmers make fences to guard sheep from predators.¹⁵ These are but a few of many possible examples of how by looking to farming we can deepen our understanding of the subject of belonging in nature.

This detour into philosophy has rerouted the conflict between rewilding and farming into a greater examination of what is really being debated. We now see that Monbiot and Morris-Jones are talking about the same thing but going about it in different ways. Similarly, rewilding and landscape heritage, the respective views the two represent, are in some ways at odds, but in some ways are interested in the same thing. However, the work of making this conflict a successful dialogue still remains: both Monbiot and Morris-Jones have ideas and visions to contribute to this, and most environmental thinkers, in one way or another, do too. How is the concept of belonging a part of our environmental attitudes in the present and the future? How does belonging feature in our strategies for preserving heritage or making room for wildlife and wilder landscapes? Will it continue to matter in an increasingly globalized and homogenized world? These are all open questions. Neither Monbiot nor Morris-Jones has a monopoly on insights about this. Just as Monbiot’s vision for a rewilded Great Britain may suffer some blind spots, practiced ways of agriculture and husbandry are not excused from scrutiny or criticism because they can claim to be backed by tradition. There is no single way of understanding the land, looking at landscapes, or belonging to a place. Philosophy asks us to acknowledge that various—even rival—ways of understanding the relation of humans and nature can challenge and enrich each other, and reminds us that few big questions in life are ever settled once and for all.

¹⁵ William Jordan III, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Paul Kingsnorth, “Dark Ecology,” *Orion Magazine*, <https://orionmagazine.org/article/dark-ecology/>; much of Wendell Berry’s work touches on this theme, but his *Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1977) offers a particularly sustained treatment of the culture of farming; WikiWolves is a small organization in Germany that brings volunteers to alleviate the burden that increasing numbers of wolves in Germany puts on sheep farmers: <http://www.wikiwolves.org/>.