

THE WILDNESS DELUSION

GAVIN SAUNDERS ponders the place of people in the wider rewilding project.

The spread of beavers and the return of wolves, if it could be achieved, would be a deeply poignant and wonderful moment for our islands' starved ecosystems. And livestock grazing for the sake of it, artificially supported by subsidy, seems perverse in some parts of the uplands.

But despite wanting to throw my hat into the rewilding ring with gusto I find myself troubled with the form it has taken, and reluctant to clamber onto the bandwagon. I've wrestled with this for months now trying to work out why I feel such ambivalence, and though I'm far from clear what the reasons are, I'm pretty sure they include what follows ...

The vision of nature in the absence of humankind has a joyful, liberated honesty about it. It resonates deeply within us as children of the post-industrial age whose outlook is still strongly influenced by nineteenth century Romanticism. We see ourselves as latter-day Wordsworths, longing to stride out across untamed landscapes, thrilled by the knowledge that wolves are watching us once again.

But the wildness we voyeuristically hanker for in nature can become the wildness we consequently deny in ourselves. If we put wild nature on a pedestal because it isn't human, we perpetuate the humans-are-not-natural dichotomy which is at the root of much of what has gone wrong for our species.

There is a strand of thinking in rewilding that sees the release of land from human management as some sort of atonement for the wrongs we have committed on it in the past. It smacks of the Fall, of a basic assumption that we are sinful creatures and that wherever we lay our hands, we spoil. I used to think that when I was a misanthropic adolescent of 15. I hoped humanity would perish, because of the damage it had done. Is that how we should see our puny lives? Are we ashamed of our footprints? Are we part of this land or not? Surely we need a relationship that affirms our legitimacy as part of it, rather than confirming our incongruity and degeneracy?

Shared-Willed Land

I've attended a couple of discussions which lapse into the metropolitan bloodsport of demonising farmers as a race, directing ill-educated ire at upland farmers who are actually the most low-input land managers of any. Yes the sheep farming industry is too ubiquitous, sustained by subsidy and often making little sense in economic or environmental terms.. But it has a place and a history and a culture, and a case. To imply that it is expendable because it happens to occupy the urban dweller's playground is to invite the dismissive conclusion that rewilding is a distorted view seen only from the urban end of a very long telescope.

More importantly, it forgets that human joy in nature is not just a voyeuristic spectator experience requiring Goretex and binoculars, but is also experienced through physical engagement with dirt, with wood and with flesh. It is about using our hands — turning the soil, tending livestock, harvesting, making things. That's where so much human wisdom, culture, sense of self and scope for well-being stems from.

The "sheepwrecked" argument, despite its legitimate essence, risks being used with such rhetorical exaggeration that it polarizes the upland/lowland divide even further, emphasising different world views and implying that the uplands should become just a playground for nature lovers, albeit with economic dividends for some. It also plays into the hands of those who advocate a "land spare" approach, which corrals nature into the uneconomic uplands, while the lowlands, where most of us live, remain a food factory, only even more so.

There's a dark side here, a zealotry coming from a fierce conviction of speaking up for nature's best interests. Yet the rewilding idea is just another phase in the cultural evolution of western attitudes to nature. For all its romantic notions of championing the release of nature from its shackles, rewilding is just another management choice, like any other intervention.

The Rewilding Britain website quotes the famous aphorism of Aldo Leopold "When we see land as community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." That statement has been a lodestone for me throughout my working life. But I feel it is being misused in this context because the rewilding movement is not properly acknowledging the place of people in the community of the land.

Gavin Saunders is the chair of the British Association of Nature Conservationists. This article is condensed from a longer article of the same title in ECOS 37:2 2016,



Imperial War Museum

Nature doesn't wait to be asked: rewilding happens when people's backs are turned.