

WILD COMMUNITIES, TAMED PUBLICS.

CHRIS SMAJE administers a dose of agrarian scepticism in a review of recent books on rural and rewilding politics.

It's fallen to me to honour the promise in *The Land* 34 to review Guy Shrubsole's new book, *The Lie of the Land*. I can only do this by putting it into a wider context, so this essay considers not only aspects of Guy's preceding book, *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*, but also various other recent and recent-ish books bearing on nature, farming and politics.¹

Along with the likes of Eoghan Daltun, George Monbiot and Joel Scott-Hawkes, Guy is a prominent advocate for increasing the cover of temperate rainforest in the wet, western parts of the British Isles. This fits within a wider project laid out in his other books, which I'd summarise as follows: too much land in Britain is concentrated in too few hands, nature is in a mess due to human activities (farming critical among them), and something needs to be done about it – we need a different politics around farming and land use.

I agree with all this, and have argued along similar lines in my own books, where I've made the case for low-input local agrarianism. Yet while in the past I've interacted positively with some among the tribe of rainforest writers, I've more recently found myself publicly at loggerheads with most of them, including Guy.

I mention this by way of disclosure: I'm not an unbiased observer in this discussion. Nobody is ever an unbiased observer, a point that's relevant to my argument. However much we agree on the headline issues, there are differences between agrarianism and the approaches of the rainforest writers which I explain in this article in the hope it serves wider debate. More than that, in the hope it helps mitigate against emerging political conflicts over land that serve few interests except an accumulative and extractive capitalism.

In the State we Trust?

The Lie of the Land begins with two quotations. One is from former Tory MP, Matthew Parris: "Land needs to be owned if it's to be looked after". The other is from Gerrard Winstanley, well-known as a seventeenth-century land rights activist (less well-known as a merchant and landowner): "The Earth ... shall be a common treasury for all".

Guy's book proceeds from the notion that these two quotations are inherently incompatible. This isn't a hard argument to press when so few people own so much land and do such a bad job of looking after it, while so many people own nothing. The most compelling parts of Guy's book are when he deploys his formidable research skills to let rip with both barrels of his full-choked metaphorical twelve-gauge at the socially exclusive and ecologically destructive gamebird industry servicing the rich-listers and associated chummies who own Britain's gigantic moorland shooting estates.

Yet much as I admire this spectacle, a single well-aimed shot with an air rifle might have done the job. Ownership can mean different things in different societies, but essentially it's

just the collectively agreed right for the owner to derive an exclusive benefit (not necessarily every conceivable benefit) from the owned thing. This is why peasants and other ordinary folk have historically moved might and main to get ownership of a little patch of land and to nurture it for their own and their household's benefit, because lack of ownership exposes them to the fickle hand of fate. One way to make the Earth a common treasury for all is to create the conditions for widespread small-scale private ownership of productive land.

If landownership rests on collectively agreed rights, that prompts the question of how the collective is formed – who's in the room, doing the agreeing? Historically in Britain the answer is large-scale landowners, and few others. Guy ably shows how Tory MPs, landowner organisations, right-wing thinktanks and associated blowhards have tried to perpetuate

this monopoly by fabricating a narrative around the wise stewardship of existing landowners, the need to slash red tape, and the threat of the great unwashed public accessing land.

Perhaps now, though, Guy says, "there is a chance for a different conversation. As I write a new government has just taken power. Change is in the air".²

In its election manifesto, the Labour Party which has formed that government lamented the brake on economic growth caused by the current planning regimen, and promised to forge ahead with new roads and other infrastructure by slashing red tape. Quadrature Capital, an offshore-registered hedge fund with interests in fossil fuels and arms trading, made a sly £4 million donation to the Labour Party at the beginning of the election campaign.³ Political analyst Tom Hazeldine's view that the present Labour leadership is more committed to a Washington-led capitalist world order than any previous Labour administration seems, so to speak, on the money.⁴ Change in the air? Maybe not much.

An issue I have with Guy's book is that his main solution to the problem of private ownership (by which he generally means concentrated private ownership) is to further concentrate property rights in the hands of the state, whose interests he equates with those of the public's. Even if it were true that the public and the state's interest coincide on the occasions when the state is in the hands of the Labour Party, it seems a fair bet that it won't always be in its hands. Between them, the Conservatives and the Reform Party gained considerably more votes in the 2024 election than Keir Starmer's red tape-slashing Labour Party, despite its huge but shallow-rooted majority. Reform's manifesto included scrapping net zero commitments and protecting country sports. For those who want to safeguard nature, putting more power over land into the hands of the state could seriously backfire.

But that's not the main problem. The old-fangled notion that market failures are corrected by state ownership and regulation misses the fundamental problem of an expansionary global

A public is a group of people claiming long-term rights in respect of a state. A community is a group of people claiming long-term livelihoods in respect of a place.

capitalism that co-opts both markets and states. All political parties with a realistic chance of power in the Global North know which side their bread is buttered and are committed to this. Capitalism requires a particular alignment of market relations backed by state power to enforce corporate accumulation and profit maximization. Guy's analysis of the emergence of driven gamebird shoots as an outcome of Victorian-era industrialism implicitly underlines the fact that twenty-first century toffs with shotguns and their ecocidal gamekeepers are merely a symptom of a deeper problem.



In *The Agricultural Dilemma*, Glenn Davis Stone shows how these capitalist relations operate in the global food system.⁵ They involve the overproduction of a restricted range of commodity crops (whatever a given region can most advantageously sell into global markets), typically orchestrated by a flow of public money to the private corporations that control the necessary input commodities, and thence a race to the bottom for farmers and ex-farmers caught in the price hammer of global markets – plus an awful lot of nature destruction. If we're to extricate ourselves from this global economy of death, we need a deeper analysis than Guy offers of what 'the government' or 'the state' is, and also of what 'the public' is. It's unwise to think a bit more housetraining can shore up the state as public guardian.

From Publics to Communities

This is a different discussion in the 2020s to what it was in the 1980s. Guy writes that "four decades of neoliberalism have wrecked our faith in the power of the state to do good".⁶ That's true, but there's a risk of progressives nostalgically trying to recreate their 1940s-1970s Keynesian happy place in a now vastly more debt-leveraged and growth-constrained world where the ability of states to even survive the political, economic and biophysical tensions they're under can't be assumed. I'd argue that a convincing contemporary analysis of the state's power to do good in the future needs to explain what that future state will look like. If the assumption is it'll be much like contemporary ones, how so? What we call 'the state' as if it's an obvious and enduring reality might prove to have been a random historical assemblage of political elements that are now drifting apart.⁷ We need to unlearn assumptions about the state as the ultimate arbiter of the good, and the ultimate seat of legitimate power.

A useful definition of contemporary capitalist society is that it secures its collective reproduction as an unintended side-effect of competitive profit maximization.⁸ 'Competitive profit maximization' and 'unintended side-effect' are key. It's not really about private property as such – it's more about the state as guarantor of the corporate private property that permits profit maximization, and its relative indifference to other kinds of property and relationships. This state-corporate nexus doesn't care about you and it doesn't care about the Earth, except inasmuch as it can generate a profitable revenue flow from either.

Governments do have to offer some services to their client populations and some protections from the worst excesses

of profit maximization, but they've moved into what political economist Wolfgang Streeck calls a 'consolidation' phase where their commercial market obligations take precedence over their political citizenship obligations. Guy's new book fits the 'return of the state' narrative recently popular in centre-left circles, but it flies in the face of these geopolitical realities⁹

Globally, few people can escape the state-corporate capitalist nexus, but many do try to build relationships and livelihoods as best they can outside it. Which prompts my working definitions of 'a public' and 'a community' that I'll use in this article. A public is a group of people claiming long-term rights in respect of a state. A community is a group of people claiming long-term livelihoods in respect of a place.

Like any bald dualism, it needs to be taken with a pinch of salt. But my argument is that in the long-term we'll best serve the interests of human wellbeing and ecological integrity by supporting livelihood communities, not by building publics dependent on the capitalist state and its ambiguous loyalties.

In his fine book *Shaping the Wild* – a gentle attempt to build bridges between conservation and farming based largely around a single Welsh upland sheep farm – David Elias writes that "the looming threat of environmental collapse" makes his efforts as a conservationist sometimes "seem like fiddling about on the margins".¹⁰ That resonates with me. In the present state of things, we're all basically fiddling. Guy proposes various fiddles at the end of *The Lie of the Land* to democratise the governance of land and make landowners accountable for their claims of stewardship. Most of them are quite sensible fiddles – although, as I'll argue below, some seem likely to militate against the interests of livelihood communities and in favour of publics who I fear will be disappointed by the paltry practical commitments of Britain's consolidation state. But they're still just fiddles. Maybe it's time to take the 'looming threat of environmental collapse' more seriously, and the notion that centralised modern states and their bureaucratic apparatuses are equipped to deal with it less seriously.

Farms and Harms

The impoverishment of British, and global, nature and wildlife since World War II has been precipitous. A major culprit is farming, along with forestry in some places. What lies behind this is the maturation of the global capitalist agriculture that I mentioned, what some call 'the cheaper food paradigm'.¹¹ The drivers have been processes of labour substitution involving rising use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, the terraforming of the farmed landscape around large-scale machinery and the pursuit of higher yields at lower costs which in Britain has manifested in changes like slurry instead of farmyard manure, silage instead of hay, decline in overwinter stubbles, hedgerow loss and Sitka spruce plantations instead of 'useless coppice'.¹² Generally it's been about the overproduction of cheap commodity crops as part of the global race to the bottom analysed by Stone.

A major focus of critique among the rainforest writers is overproduction of sheep in the 'sheepwrecked' British uplands. It's widely agreed this is a problem, although it's one instance

of a deeper one: global agricultural overproduction and over-specialisation that manifests in wheatwrecked, soywrecked, rapewrecked, chickenwrecked, palmwrecked, coconutwrecked, coffeewrecked and suchlike farmscapes around the world. Maybe the generic term could be nitrogen-wrecked, in reference to 'nitrogen capitalism' as the major destroyer of livelihoods and local agrarian communities in the modern period.¹³ A point of contention I have with the British rainforest writers is that they focus too singularly on upland sheep and not enough on the nitrogen-wrecked lowlands (another wildlife disaster) without appreciating the common thread.

This industrial land use needs to change – but how, and who needs to do the changing? Well, obviously farmers need to farm differently, but there's a tendency among the rainforest writers to pin the blame on them, as if the decision to shed labour from agriculture and embrace the nitrogen-wrecking cheaper food paradigm was some mad decision farmers collectively chose in the teeth of public protest and government resistance. It's a bit like blaming factory workers for industrial capitalism.

In *The Lie of the Land*, Guy pushes this blame game pretty hard. He advocates for public access to farmland so that people can act as whistleblowers for destructive farm practices. I appreciate the case for it, although I fear the false positives and cultural negatives of ignorant-blunderer-meets-struggling-farmer could have bad political consequences. Guy gets to the crux in a quotation from former MP, Gordon Prentice: "...walkers and ramblers have not poisoned the countryside with pesticides. We have not polluted the water courses. We have not silenced the countryside as the birds have perished".¹⁴ No, but have they bought cheap food at the supermarket, or availed themselves of BOGOF offers, or bought petrol at the garage? Can farmers lurk at these citadels of cut-price consumerism and be whistleblowers for this public malfeasance, the other side of the coin to their own misdeeds?

Most people in Britain aren't Tory MPs, posh estate owners or farmers of any stripe, so it's easy to stand with 'the public' against these malefactors (and certainly they can be malefactors) without turning the gaze back on oneself. The petrol at the garage I mentioned is a case in point. Currently, I can buy as much of it as I like for around £1.40 per litre, no questions asked. Globally, most greenhouse gas emissions come directly from fossil fuel combustion, and a good deal of the rest are indirectly enabled by it. In the UK, emissions from domestic transport are more than double those from agriculture.¹⁵ Guy rightly emphasises the responsibility of landowners and managers to do their bit for carbon sequestration, but it would be nice to at least occasionally turn the gaze from the land as a carbon sink to the bigger question of the wider energy economy as a carbon source, bringing a broader spectrum of society into the sights.

From Rewilding to Refarming

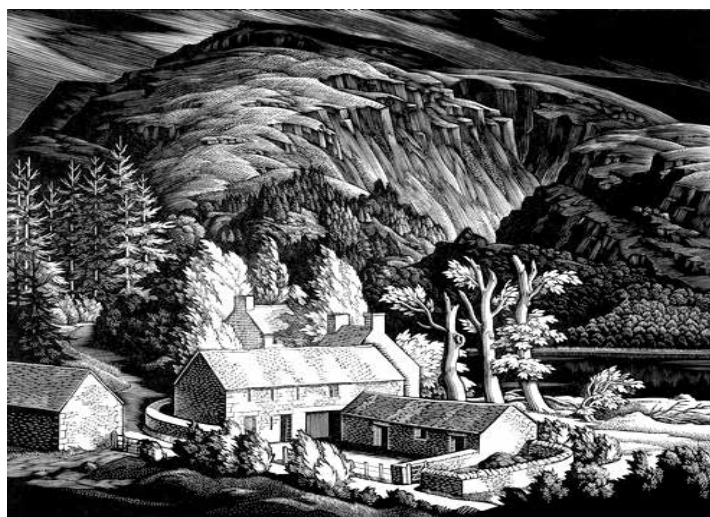
I think we – 'the public' – need to own this. Countries get the farmers they deserve, and are willing to support. The problem is structural and it needs to be addressed collectively with less blame and shame, fewer erroneous narratives of farmers as subsidy-junkies. The economic implications are profound, encompassing the need for cheaper housing, greater social equity, dearer food, dearer energy, dearer money and more labour in farming.

Ultimately, the best way the public can hold landowners to account is by holding themselves to account, possibly by being landowners themselves. A lot of the hard political work that needs doing is missed in a landowner versus public framing.

As to *how* to change land use for wildlife benefit, this is a surprisingly tricky question. Do we try to boost individual species that come to our attention? That might involve tilting the odds against other species. Farmers sometimes kill foxes and crows with the aim of selectively favouring their preferred species, and so do conservationists. Or do we try to maintain given habitats – species assemblages – that we consider important? Nowadays, that often means using grazing livestock to maintain habitat diversity – especially, in the British uplands, cattle rather than sheep, with the associated implication of giving farmers greater financial support to keep them. Or do we fence out the livestock and let nature take its course – an approach often, if misleadingly, called 'rewilding'? Alternatively, do we rewild with specific goals in mind involving ongoing human management, for example trying to prevent the spread of unwanted species or building in carbon sequestration or flood abatement?

Two important books by Carwyn Graves and Sophie Yeo to go alongside the previously mentioned one from David Elias discuss these intractable issues in detail.¹⁶ They converge on four points. First, high-input, top-down, government-sponsored efforts at 'agricultural improvement' have often been bad for nature. Second, low-input, small-scale, locally oriented farming has often been good for nature, not usually because its practitioners particularly care about it but because the diverse and minutely jumbled landscapes they create have that unintended consequence. Thus, what Sophie calls the 'practical entanglement' of people with the land brings benefits for nature. Third, we know very little in detail about most organisms, and how to secure their interests: there's a need to avoid the hubris of overconfident general prescriptions for land management. And fourth, our modern human bias toward tree fetishism – 'trees good, grass bad' – is, precisely, a bias.

Sophie's book offers lovely vignettes of these issues, for example on the latter front in her analysis of how low-input livestock husbandry in Transylvania has preserved herbaceous biodiversity. The ecologist William Bond has likewise critiqued via a more formal scientific analysis the modern overemphasis on the naturalness of tree-covered landscapes, and the implicit value judgments involved in words like 'overgrazing' and



George Mackley: A Welsh Farm



‘degraded’.¹⁷ ‘Undergrazing’ is now identified as a problem in some conservation landscapes in the UK. It’s complicated!

Guy’s books traverse much of this ground with similar ecological sophistication. Mercifully, he doesn’t subscribe to the full-bore anti-livestock positions of some among the rainforest tribe. Nevertheless, his references to grazing livestock are generally negative, and its role in his writings is largely consigned to that of servant to nature restoration, not as a feature of the farmed landscape in itself. His writing about woodlands inclines to the sublime – “Immersing myself in the dripping, viridian fastness of an Atlantic rainforest is the closest I’ve ever come to a spiritual experience”¹⁸ – whereas his pastoral vocabulary is more profane: “knackered farmland”, “apocalyptically bleak”, grass bitten “to the quick”.

He’s got a point. The agricultural overproduction analysed by Stone is everywhere. But this does look like something of an anti-pastoral axe to grind. Carwyn’s eye for the complexities of the woodland-grassland spectrum in the Welsh landscape in his chapters on *coed*, *cloddiau*, *cae*, *ffridd*, *mynydd* and *rhos* is refreshingly nuanced in comparison. There’s a need for better integration of future farming options in this conversation, which David’s and Carwyn’s books offer – for example, in the possibility of both nature recovery *and* significant stocking of cattle and sheep in Wales’s scrubby *rhos* agroecosystems, and in the possibility of reintroducing landscape-based shepherding.

But to make these a reality would involve challenging the cheaper food paradigm, what Carwyn calls “narrow metrics of feeding more mouths, more cheaply and as quickly as possible”. He muses about what could have happened in agriculture over the last sixty years without the cheaper food paradigm, the heavy inputs of fossil fuels, the decoupling of livestock from arable and the indiscriminate pushing of productivity¹⁹

Such thinking around livelihood communities and small-scale farming doesn’t get much of a look-in in the rewilding and rainforest literatures. The cover blurb of *The Lie of the Land* says that the book features, among others, small farmers who are restoring our lost wildlife, but I found little systematic vision within its pages of locally scaled agrarianism. One of the few explicit references to small-scale farmers veers into caricature: “the stereotypical Old Macdonald leaning on a farm gate sucking on a straw”.²⁰

It would be good to stop consigning local agrarianism to the bucolic nostalgia slot, and instead to start thinking of it as a vehicle for nature recovery. Time for less talk about rewilding and more about refarming and community-building?

Take Nothing but a Livelihood: Indigeneity and the People of the Forest

In *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*, Guy sometimes mentions in passing that a remnant rainforest he’s discussing was once coppiced, but he says little about the people who were managing the woods in this way and what they were up to. I was hoping he’d spill the beans in Chapter 9 (‘Forest People’), but this turned out to be a chapter mostly about efforts in contemporary Scotland to purchase land from the large estates via the Scottish community right to buy provisions.

He develops this theme further in *The Lie of the Land*, discussing a community buyout of one of the Duke of Buccleuch’s grouse moors. He explains that the new community-owned nature reserve replacing it will make ends meet via farm payments, the sale of timber from the existing non-native tree plantations, rents from buildings, and income from courses and eco-tourism.²¹

Which is all great, but it relies on tapping the flow of wider abstract capital rather than generating any direct livelihood from the land itself. The only person doing that under the new regimen is a sheep grazier who’s damned with faint praise because ... well ... sheep.

Few of us today can extricate ourselves from the flow of abstract capital so I don’t intend this as a criticism of the project. But it does raise wider questions, which get back to my earlier distinction between publics and communities. The community involved in the community buyout is more public than community in those terms. Now that it’s wrested landownership from the Duke, might it become a community in time? Is that desirable?

In his rainforest book, Guy discusses an interesting iteration of this in relation to the tangled tale of a regenerated rainforest in Devon, Lustleigh Cleave, which had once been grazed by livestock owned by a motley collection of latter-day commoners. The upshot is that the site was both overgrazed then undergrazed (hence the rainforest) by the commoners’ livestock, essentially because the commoners weren’t a community but a public, locked into contested relationships with the state. Guy’s analysis gets close to the welcome admission that Garrett Hardin’s infamous ‘tragedy of the commons’ really does happen sometimes (as his critic Elinor Ostrom readily accepted), but usually in circumstances when common property has degenerated into a kind of private property right held by a public which is not relying on a livelihood from it. Writ large, that kind of situation – degenerated private rights held by publics backed by capitalist governments like Britain’s – is basically the neoliberal world we now live in, complete with agrarian overproduction and a damaged natural world.

So to answer my own question – yes, I believe it’s desirable for publics to become communities.

Maybe that same dynamic explains past livelihood-making in the rainforest. Guy mentions Glasdrum National Nature Reserve in Scotland as one of the wonders of the world for its temperate rainforest. On a recent visit, I noticed the reserve signage reports it was coppiced in the 17th century for charcoal to fire local ironworks and grazed by Highland cattle until the end of the 18th. It states that coppicing is great for the health of the woodland: the practice is maintained

nowadays by school groups and local volunteers.

It's often claimed that industries like ironworking caused deforestation, but apparently not here – and not generally in premodern Britain.²² The problem seems to be when excess, abstract and extractive capital from outside penetrates existing human ecologies that can't contain or absorb it on their own terms locally. Glasdrum wood survived, but a lot of the Highlands didn't. Indigenous farming communities cleared for sheep, thence deer, moor, great estates – finally, in some places, buyouts from local publics. But not yet communities.

It makes sense that the Highlands are the centrepiece of re-rainforestation – not only ecologically, but also historically. Post-Clearances, they're about as close as it's possible to get in Britain to supposedly pristine *terra nullis* – a colonially cleared zone ripe for terraforming according to the whims of its postcolonial publics. In his rainforests book, Guy discusses a rainforest blessing in Argyll where Indigenous rainforest people from Brazil had been invited. We don't learn anything about how they make their livelihoods in their home forests. Earlier we're told that rainforests in both Britain and the Amazon fell to 'slash and burn agriculture',²³ a contention that needs an awful lot of unpacking. But it seems that rainforests are now just places to visit ('take only photographs' as Guy wisely admonishes his readers), or at best to volunteer in, not places to work or live in ('take only a sustainable livelihood').

Beyond *The Mabinogion*

The place in Britain that probably comes closest to a continuous tradition of community livelihood-making is upland Wales. Carwyn Graves contrasts the Welsh situation where "stone walls snake up the slopes, and the valley bottoms are dotted with farms, cottages, fields and woodlands" with the Highlands where the land "has been emptied of almost all that matters: people, trees, wildlife and culture".²⁴

It's instructive to see how Guy handles the Welsh case. The chapter about it in his rainforest book offers woody tales from *The Mabinogion* and references to Tolkien, Alan Garner, medieval green men and suchlike. It's enchanting in its own way, but the only contemporary Welsh voice Guy interacts with in the chapter is poet Gwyneth Lewis: "Oh don't fall for any Celtic bullshit!" she admonishes him, "we're not the original Brythonic Celts, we're all immigrants, too".²⁵

Thus authorised to treat Welshness more or less as a modern construct, Guy visits some Welsh rainforests, swears at the sight of bleak sheep pastures, represents sheep farming as a largely recent intrusion into Welsh land use, sees a 'NO TO REWILDING' sign on a farmer's field, laments the polarisation of the rewilding debate, and states that there needs to be a different kind of farming in Wales with fewer sheep and more space for nature, but Wales first needs to be inspired and re-enchanted with the magic of rainforests.

To this Englishman's ears, that sounds a bit patronising. Given the parlous economic state of British farming in general and Welsh upland farming in particular, and given the grounding of Welsh language and culture in its persisting livelihood communities of upland farming, there's surely a danger that a successful push for substantial rewilding and re-rainforestation will turn those communities into mere publics, with only a distanced, modern connection to a historical woodland tradition. David Elias writes:



Neil Meacher: Farm in Snowdonia

Anyone with an urge to repopulate the hills with wildlife by depopulating them of people should pause and know that there is more at stake than agri-culture and biodiversity. Language and its cultural expression represent a way of looking at the world, which is an expression of being human, and deserves to stand shoulder to shoulder with biological diversity.²⁶

My sense is that some re-rainforesters might agree with that, yet they lack proposals for maintaining rural livelihood communities. Not every upland farmer can diversify into property rentals and eco-courses. And even if they could, something critical would be lost.

David writes that farmers usually speak about land issues in Welsh while English tends to command the wider discourse, with English speakers from outside the community "louder about generalised concepts and lines on maps".²⁷ Carwyn makes a similar criticism about the Welsh government, with "policies that want measurable tree-planting results and laudable CO2 reductions, but prefer to borrow from global discourse rather than sensitively understand place and its dynamics. Governance in Wales remains, from a biophysical point of view, insufficiently Welsh".²⁸

The pity is that there's a lot of agreement on agroecological goals like cutting sheep numbers in the Welsh uplands, and the need to diversify production for local food needs – Carwyn shows how reclaiming Wales's 'lost rainforest orchards' could provide fruit for people and habitat for an astonishing diversity of wildlife. In a sense, all the pieces of the jigsaw are there in Guy's books. But those speaking from the divergent perspectives of local communities and of wider publics can often find themselves at odds with one another, even when they share similar ideas.

Anecdotes and data

In *The Lie of the Land*, Guy says that he could easily have written about enlightened farmers and landowners doing good things on their properties. He lists a few of them, but then says, "But the plural of anecdote is not data".²⁹

What a can of worms opens with those eight words! An anecdote or a story is data, and more anecdotes are more data. A sign in a farmer's field that says NO TO REWILDING is data, and if you find that sentiment is widespread, that's yet more data. Guy's books – everybody's books – are concatenations of anecdote and story. Carwyn writes that for many Welsh speakers, for reasons of both etymology and cultural history, the word 'rewilding' is redolent of killing a culture.³⁰ That's a

powerful story to set against any data purporting to prove its importance.

On page 205 of *The Lie of the Land* Guy cites a figure from the National Food Strategy that the least productive 21 percent of England's land produces three percent of our calories. By page 222 this has become three percent of *food*. Guy says these numbers show that if this land wasn't farmed at all this would be a sensible trade-off of food for nature. Well, there might be some sensible trade-offs to negotiate there but, no, the numbers don't 'show' this. There's a kind of spreadsheet-brained London conference centre vibe here: map says rewild. Yet there are so many possible stories – anecdotes? – that could be told to put context around such figures.

One story is the interconnected historical farm ecology of upland pastoralism and lowland mixed farming that an unecological focus on calories misses. Another story is England itself and its relationship to other stories like the United States, and that country's story of export agriculture that's conditioned in turn the story of so many other countries' farmscapes – stories with an awful lot of political, historical, cultural and cartographical labour behind them to make them real. Upland areas have 'unproductive' agricultures partly because they're integrated into national and international food commodity markets, which hobble their ability to be more diverse and fruitful. There's a geographical or cartographical determinism in Guy's analysis which may not serve the residents of England's 'productive' and 'unproductive' places well if the stories of England or other countries change in the future.

A huge literature in the social sciences, sometimes going under the unlovely term 'colonial governmentality' after the influential work of Michel Foucault, has shown how ideas of hard data, science, maths and agricultural 'improvement' are so often used colonially as a means of removing people from their lands for wider state purposes justified in supposedly unarguable mathematics.³¹ It's to Guy's credit that he usually puts agricultural "improvement" in inverted commas, but the land sparing food ecologies he apparently favours and the rhetorical burnishing of data over story seems cut from similar cloth. More than the 'data' pertaining to this place or that, what's required is a structural understanding of how the global political economy conditions land use and access to land for agrarian communities.

Land Sparing as Colonialism

Land sparing, the idea that we should concentrate food production and other human activities on as small an area as possible and leave the rest to nature, contrasts with land sharing, the idea that we should produce food in nature-friendly ways that enable us to coexist with wildlife. Some ecologists endorse the need for land sparing while others consider the sparing/sharing framework an uninformative dualism.³² All agree that to speak of land sparing, land does actually need to be spared for nature. It's not enough simply to point to some technique that supposedly cuts the land-take of food production. You also have to identify the land that's been spared.

This issue is currently playing out in the British uplands around pressure on livestock farmers to sell up to corporations for carbon-offsetting tree plantations. Generally, this doesn't involve land sparing, or rewilding. We're talking plantations, not rainforests, and land 'spared' from farming only to be swallowed up into corporate greenwashing. Another case of overemphasising carbon sinks at the expense of its sources. Guy touches on this in his books, but doesn't really confront it.

The holy grail of land sparing is food production with ostensibly almost no land footprint at all, a dream George Monbiot hailed in his book *Regenesi*s in the form of manufactured microbial food. The debate about this, such as it's been, has echoed around recent issues of *The Land*.³³ A brief update is relevant to my theme here:

Microbial food can be land efficient, but energy intensive, so there's a potential land/energy trade-off. In *Regenesi*s, Monbiot claimed that data from Solar Foods, a pioneering Finnish microbial food company, showed that microbial protein can be produced at 16.7 kWh of electricity consumption per kg.³⁴ But it struck me that even that hefty 16.7 kWh figure was implausibly low for the total energy consumption. I calculated a low-end estimate of around 65 kWh per kg, nearly four times as high, and tried to get to the bottom of the discrepancy. Eventually, it emerged that Monbiot's source was a literature review paper, not industrial data – a paper with questionable energy figures whose full energy specification Monbiot hadn't included in his estimate. It's now clear, among other things from actual company data, that my figure of 65 kWh per kg is a more accurate estimate.³⁵

That is an enormous amount of paid-for energy to devote to producing food. As an alternative to manufacturing just 1kg of microbial protein, 65 kWh could produce over 50 kg of hot-rolled steel from cold scrap.³⁶ To meet global human protein requirements with this microbial food would use about nine times the existing global solar electricity production, calculated with my more realistic bottom-end figure and other generous assumptions in favour of microbial food. To meet global human calorific requirements would use about forty-five times that amount.³⁷ There are better things to do with our precious renewable energy than use it in vain attempts to replace the free sunlight tapped by farming.

Monbiot fronted a campaign by the self-described ecomodernist organisation RePlanet (now renamed WePlanet), an organisation largely funded by the charitable arm of Quadrature Capital, the same offshore hedge fund I mentioned earlier that's been bankrolling the Labour Party.³⁸ WePlanet favours breakneck 'land-sparing' urbanisation; its vision for the year 2100 involves 90 percent urban residence, globally.³⁹ The campaign aimed among other things at securing public money to subsidise microbial food. This bore fruit when the EU announced a €50 million package of support for startups in the sector.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, corporate concentration in the microbial food sector has continued apace. A recent court case over intellectual property rights for a microbial food protein ended in victory for



one of the parties, Impossible Foods, and the closure of its rival. Impossible Foods reportedly now holds over half the patents for alt-meat proteins in the US and the EU.⁴¹

My criticisms of Monbiot have prompted a lot of bluster about the inability of we ‘food nostalgia’ folk to deal in numbers, and accusations that our visions for food localism are a ‘formula for mass death’, but no retraction, to my knowledge, of the incorrect energy figure, no acknowledgement of the rampant corporate concentration occurring in the sector, and no justification of the mass death jibe – the latter an example of what Glenn Davis Stone calls “neo-Malthusianism and the dogma that scientists might be able to keep the world fed, if only we got out of their way and let them devise technologies that corporations could roll out”.⁴²

So I found it revealing when Guy weighed in with me on social media, asking how an agrarian localist approach could feed the global population and for the facts of my disagreements with Monbiot, then expressing his lack of interest in the facts of Monbiot’s energy underestimate and in what I’ve called here colonial governmentality around quantified metrics of agricultural ‘improvement’. Behind the veil of an ostensibly radical agenda around land access lurks, it seems to me, a neo-Malthusian affinity with the industrial food paradigm, and no real interest in agrarian communities. Stone again:

Our real dilemma is how to unthink the entrenched belief that we will starve without new tricks from scientists and input industries when in reality we have been locked on a treadmill of subsidized overproduction for over the last century. When agriculture is industrialized – driven by those input industries and the perennial support and subsidy they need from the public purse – it grows inexorably at the expense of our economy, environment and health.⁴³

I believe this industrial colonization and undermining of livelihood communities must be fought. But the fight involves a whole lot of unthinking, and it’s all too easy for the proponents of the industrial food system to present themselves as saviours bringing prosperity, decolonization, wildlife benefits, hard data and other good things. To present, too, their critics as divisive ideologues rather than as people pointing to difficulties in their own rather divisive and implicitly pro-capitalist forms of supposed anti-capitalism.⁴⁴

Bluntly, the industrial food paradigm is more likely to cause mass death because its food solutionism doesn’t offer real solutions – as is apparent in the unpayable energy costs of microbial food – and its main interest is in capturing public money and intellectual property rights, not in feeding people. It doesn’t care about you.

From Land Sparing to Land Sharing – Access to Land as Livelihood

In *Finding Our Niche*, a hard-hitting defence of a decolonial, land-sharing human ecology, Philip Loring mimics the siren song of this disaster capitalism: “Only we can solve this problem. Only we can feed the hungry. Only we can keep you safe.” He goes on to say: “These are the voices of manifest destiny. These are the voices of the white saviour. But in reality, the opportunists making these promises can deliver on none of these promises. Why? Because their approach – indeed, their very culture – is part of the system that creates

these problems in the first place”.⁴⁵

I agree with Loring’s view that to save the world we need to stop trying to save the world. Which is one reason I’m not inclined to answer Guy’s question to me about how agrarian localism can feed the world. It’s not for me to determine how small-scale local farmers in places I’ve never visited should go about things – they’re the experts. What I will say is that, bearing in mind the ecocidal overproduction of bad food in the present industrial system, it’s not difficult for such farmers to do a better job worldwide of securing human health and ecological integrity. Their main problem isn’t usually how to secure enough per-acre productivity, but how to secure enough acres in the first place from agro-industrial players.

A presumption against the productivity of peasant or local agricultures is common among the rainforest writers and other land-sparers. But it’s odd in the face of much contrary evidence from many times and places.⁴⁶ I think this points to a difficulty in their position. Loss of community access to land due to enclosure and engrossment of farmland into fewer hands is an important historical reference point for arguments to restore land to the public. Despite its numerous complexities, enclosure at root involves extinguishing the livelihood autonomy of productive small-scale farmers and their communities through appropriating their private property rights. Yet restoring these rights so that people and communities can earn a local livelihood isn’t part of the rewilding/land-sparing agenda. Its vision is top-down: giving the public access to recreation in rewilded spaces, with food

needs ideally being taken care of by the industrial food system – probably in a factory somewhere – and rural property in the hands of the state or heavily-regulated landowners.

This involves accepting a key plank of the enclosers’ arguments – that small-scale farming is unproductive – while nevertheless speaking against enclosure.

Radical land sparing is appealing in this sense: *the land* can be made more accessible to the public, while *the food system* can remain enclosed in the state-corporate industrial nexus. This only hangs together with questionable arguments about the poor returns of local food systems and the trustworthiness of the state-corporate nexus. It’s not a radical vision for land distribution as a means to livelihood and political autonomy.

This last point struck me when I read Guy’s proposal for a new ecological Domesday survey mandating all who own over a thousand acres to be accountable to ‘the wider public’ (that p-word again) for sequestering carbon, restoring habitats and aiding wildlife recovery. I don’t object to it in principle, but framing it as a ‘Domesday’ survey is revealing. The original Domesday survey was a colonial document whose main interest in local matters was how to extract maximum value from the land for the incoming Norman rulers.⁴⁷ Describing it as Guy does in neutral terms as a survey to determine “who owned land, and how much tax they owed to William the Conqueror”⁴⁸ evades important questions about the relationship of citizenries to the states that rule over them (there’s surely a clue in that surname of William’s). No doubt some will consider it a sign of progress that a new Domesday survey would be concerned with extracting maximum nature value rather than maximum tax value, but the shared extractive framing points to more than just a problem of nomenclature.

**To save
the world
we need to
stop trying
to save the
world.**

The problem is, as Loring says, a solutionism born of the system that's creating the problems in the first place.

My proposal instead would be to start moving as quickly as possible to a situation where thousand-acre estates were mostly broken up and distributed among 'the wider public' for low-impact agrarianism. Not *too* quickly – no mass death! – but broadly I'm with Guy in his view that we should trust ordinary people with the land. Possibly, my suggestion would be less popular in the short term than his, both with the owners of large estates and with the wider public, who would no longer be able to complain so easily about careless landowners because they would be the landowners, and would have to take care. However, in the long term I don't see any way to deliver real climate, nature, food, economic and land justice other than by turning client publics into functional communities, and getting people off their computers and onto the land as the preferred space for problem-solving.

In Wildness is the Preservation of the World

It's a commonplace in the rewilding debate to say that humans also need to rewild themselves, but there's not much discussion of what that means. In his rainforest book, Guy quotes Henry David Thoreau – "in wilderness is the preservation of the world" – and his books nicely extrapolate these words in framing wilderness as places we need to experience reverentially and regularly, but not residentially, not occupationally, as we live out the rest of our lives in non-wilderness spaces like the nitrogen-wrecked landscapes of lowland England. Take nothing but photographs.

Except what Thoreau actually wrote was "in *wildness* is the preservation of the world".⁴⁹ This suggests something radically different and much more inclusive of humans as participants within an enveloping wild ecology. I think that intent is clear in Thoreau's text. There's a lot of reverential wilderness wandering in it – Thoreau was the pioneer of what Kathleen Jamie has called the 'lone enraptured male' school of nature writing, a trap that the British rainforest writers sometimes fall into.⁵⁰

Indigenous people had walked those woods long before Thoreau did. I think Philip Loring is right when he says that words like 'wild' and 'pristine' are excluding, colonial words. How can we rewild ourselves non-colonially? Sophie Yeo's book gives some clues. I admire the way she draws in nuanced ways on scientific research but is also willing to emphasise the animal and spiritual aspects of being human. She writes beautifully at the end of the book about giving birth to her daughter – a female, embodied, animal experience of connection and separation that to my mind brings home spiritual insight more successfully than most of the enraptured men of the forests.

But ultimately she retreats to tamer ground, arguing that contact with nature can now only be a deeply personal (and therefore implicitly not a collective, society-wide) mission, and that it's unrealistic and undesirable for us all to revert to hunter-gathering or small-scale farming. All of us, yes – but few argue that. Why not more of us? She doesn't say, but she's right when she suggests "there can be no locking the door when modernity comes knocking".⁵¹ The problem is that most of the doors were unlocked long ago, and modernity is now dead on its feet, blocking the entrance to other ways of thinking.

Maybe her reluctance stems from fear of ridicule from the powerful modernity-mongers still clinging to the neo-

Malthusian progress narrative. Heralding the death of modernity implies no commitment to returning to what came before, but contemporary political culture bristles with the ever-ready charge of rural romanticism. I wish more writers were willing to stare down this facile accusation.

Whether a small farm future is desirable or not, I suspect it's what a lot of people will get, and the sooner we face up to that the less undesirable it will be (remember also that there are probably still more small-scale farmers worldwide than any other single employment, and their prospects for changing that aren't great – for many, it's not a case of 'reverting'). As I see it, the wildness we need to cultivate at this stage in the human game and the wildness that will be the preservation of the world is like the wildness of most wild organisms. It involves using our natal skills to learn how to live and thrive mostly within local ecologies and their limits. In practice, this mostly means developing local agrarian communities against the grain of the modernist state. I fear the rainforest writers, rewilders and land sparsers, despite their good intentions, have chosen the wrong way to frame the politics of food and nature, contributing to an emerging agrarian class conflict that ill serves this task.

If a small farm future arises, it will most likely occur quite chaotically as the contradictions of the consolidation state in trying to serve the interests of its various publics and the larger interests of profit maximisation intensify and begin tearing it apart. This is amplified by the fact that the circle of acceptable public debate is so tightly cinched around right-wing market neoliberalism and left-wing state neoliberalism that agrarianism can't get a look in. Another birthing metaphor seems apt: Antonio Gramsci's remark that "the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear". I'd argue the morbid symptoms in this case are things like the ecomodernist solutionism of manufactured food, inordinate faith in neoliberal administrations like Keir Starmer's, and in modern state gigantism generally. Those of us opposed to this can't just snap our fingers and birth alternatives. At present, we can only try to shape the emergence of resilient livelihood communities as best we can, and speak up for agrarianism and against the industrial food system and its processes of corporate enclosure.

The Books:

- Guy Shrubsole. 2024. **The Lie of the Land: Who Really Cares for the Countryside?** William Collins.
- Guy Shrubsole. 2022. **The Lost Rainforests of Britain.** William Collins.
- Glenn Davis Stone. 2022. **The Agricultural Dilemma: How Not to Feed the World.** Earthscan.
- Wolfgang Streeck. 2016. **How Will Capitalism End?** Verso.
- David Elias. 2023. **Shaping the Wild: Wisdom from a Welsh Hill Farm.** Calon.
- Carwyn Graves. 2024. **Tir: The Story of the Welsh Landscape.** Calon.
- Sophie Yeo. 2024. **Nature's Ghosts: The World We Lost and How to Bring It Back.** Harper North.
- William Bond. 2019. **Open Ecosystems: Ecology and Evolution Beyond the Forest Edge.** Oxford University Press.
- George Monbiot. 2022. **Regenesis: Feeding the World Without Devouring the Planet.** Allen Lane.
- Philip Loring. 2020. **Finding Our Niche: Toward a Restorative Human Ecology.** Fernwood.
- Henry David Thoreau. 1862. **Walking.**
- Kathleen Jamie. 2008. **'A lone enraptured male'** *London Review of Books* Vol 30 no. 5.

CHRIS SMAJE is a smallholder and former academic, author of *A SMALL FARM FUTURE* and *SAYING NO TO A FARM-FREE FUTURE*. REFERENCES in full for this article will be found on his blog, <https://chrissmaje.com> and on page 65 of this issue.