

Can we rewild Britain?

And what could it mean for the landscapes our children and grandchildren will inherit? Dr Tony Whitbread investigates

Travel through rural West Sussex, between Wisborough Green and Petworth, and you will discover a wonderful old forest: tall beeches and oaks soaring above holly trees and a scattering of woodland flowers. This ancient place is 'The Mens'. It's Sussex Wildlife Trust's biggest woodland reserve and home to a long-running ecological experiment.

There are no obvious signs of management here. Instead, The Mens has been deliberately left to its own devices since we bought it in 1974, and probably for decades before that.

It is, arguably, one of the few places like a 'natural' wild wood in lowland England. So it's a good place to start looking at 'rewilding' – helping the natural processes that once drove the ecology of places to regain a foothold.

Rewilding is an idea finding its time thanks at least in part to George Monbiot's recent book *Feral*. In it, Monbiot argues that we need large areas where we can experience something close to the full grandeur of nature. Places where we can rewild ourselves, as much as rewild nature. But that doesn't just mean restoring trees and peat bogs to the sparsely-populated uplands. Rewilding asks deep questions about our relationship with nature, and how we look after it.

In some places UK nature conservation is already heading in this direction. From upland forest regeneration in Glen Affric, peatland restoration in the Pennines to saltmarsh restoration in Essex, we see a move towards understanding and working with natural processes over large areas. But what did wild Britain look like before we took up the axe and plough?

People generally picture a dense 'wildwood' that covered Britain perhaps 8,000 years ago. After all, many habitats in Britain, if left alone, will eventually develop into woodland.

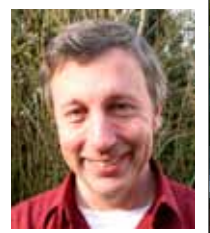
But that original wildwood must also have included all the precursors to the habitats we know today such as grassland and heathland, as well as dense forest. These would have been formed as a result of natural disturbance, such as wind, fires, grazing, flooding and probably a great deal more besides. Evidence of oak and hazel in prehistoric pollen records suggests the wildwood would not have been continuous trees, as these species don't regenerate well in dense woodland. And more than half of all our species need open, unwooded habitat, while many of the rest live on forest edges. So whilst trees may have been abundant in the wildwood we also need plenty of imagination when conceiving the wildness of our past and future landscapes. So what does this mean for nature conservation today?

Rewilding is about understanding how nature works and using this to shape our future landscapes, not recreate the past.

There is some debate on the best way to rewild – should we just leave areas completely, or should we restore natural processes where they are absent? If the aim is wild places with as many natural processes present as possible then a range of approaches may be needed.

This could mean encouraging the natural regeneration of trees such as at Dundreggan in Scotland (the 'Trees for Life' project). It could mean opening up large areas for 'near-natural' grazing such as in the Great Fen (a partnership led by The Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs and Northants) and in the privately owned Knepp Estate in Sussex. It could also mean reintroducing the 'ecosystem engineers', such as beavers, as is being trialled in Knapdale by the Scottish Wildlife Trust and Royal Zoological Society of Scotland. Or it could mean kickstarting natural processes by reversing engineering works on some rivers or blocking ditches on peatlands.






Tony Whitbread is Sussex Wildlife Trust's chief executive. He's worked for The Wildlife Trusts since 1990

Rewilding is allowing nature to work (as much as possible) as it should. At Cossington Meadows near Leicester, semi-wild Exmoor ponies help to keep wetland habitats wild and healthy


LIVING LANDSCAPES



The Mens - a wood that has seen no human disturbance in decades



Natural tree regeneration at Blaeneinion in mid-Wales, Pumlumon Project



Wild Nephin - a major new rewilding project in Co Mayo, Eire

Putting the top predators back, however, may be more difficult. The ecological need is clear – they are a missing part of our ecosystems and they drive diversity in nature. But we live in highly modified and populated landscapes and there are practicalities to consider. Nevertheless we should keep an open mind; in the long term our society needs healthy, functioning ecosystems, with as many constituent parts as possible. For example the reintroduction of lynx to parts of Scotland is gathering support, both for ecological and socio-economic reasons.

The Wildlife Trusts' Living Landscape aim is for a wilder, more ecologically balanced landscape. To put it simply, we insist that wildlife should be abundant throughout the landscape, with natural processes restored where we can. This is why we are re-naturalising rivers, working with farmers to create wildness in farmland areas, reintroducing key

missing species and blocking thousands of miles of upland drainage ditches. Ditch blocking in particular should improve the country's balance sheet – in this case by reducing the cost of clean drinking water and storing carbon.

So what has the experiment at The Mens shown us so far? Some natural processes – most large herbivores and their predators – are missing. But old-growth forest with minimal natural disturbance – common in the wildwood – is now extremely rare. And the decision not to actively 'manage' the wood has provided a valuable study into woodland ecosystems. One example was The Great Storm of 1987. In the 25 years that followed there was a huge pulse of regeneration in gaps where trees blew over. Broken trees sprouted, shrubs grew, wildflowers colonised and birds which usually stay on the edge moved inside. But in the long term the storm has not altered a gradual reduction of oak, hazel

and hawthorn. And whilst some less common species of fungi, flies and hole-nesting birds are doing well, other flowering plants and woodland lichens are becoming less widespread as shade-loving beech and holly gradually take over. This shows that while storms are important, they are only one form of natural disturbance in woodland ecology.

Rewilding is a different challenge in different landscapes. The Wildlife Trusts are working hard to help nature gradually re-assert herself in all sorts of different places – upland, lowland, rural and even suburban and urban. Our long-term goal is restoring natural processes and re-establishing wildness where we can. But meanwhile we still need to intervene actively in some places to preserve critical wildlife – for example by traditional grazing of wildflower meadows. Nature reserves are called this for a reason. They are reserves for the future, not an end in themselves. A living



Naturalistic grazing at the Knepp Estate, Sussex



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: JIM MATTIE/HEMROBERTS; KNEPP ESTATE; WILDEN NEPHIN; MONTGOMERYSHIRE; LWT

A natural approach

Projects around the UK where natural processes are being restored. From a range of organisations. Local communities are often involved. Scale and methods differ.

Dundreggan Conservation Estate, 4000ha

Who: Trees for Life

Where: Glen Moriston, Scotland.

What: Reforestation, using wild boar for natural regeneration, montane scrub restoration, tree nursery treesforlife.org.uk

Soar Valley, 6000ha

Who: Leicestershire & Rutland Wildlife Trust

Where: Leicestershire, England

What: Floodplain, wetland, naturalistic grazing. lrwt.org.uk

Wild Ennerdale, 4300ha

Who: National Trust, Forestry Commission, United Utilities, Natural England

Where: Cumbria, England

What: Re-naturalised rivers, naturalistic grazing, montane restoration, forest regeneration and native woodland expansion

wildennerdale.co.uk

Pumlumon, 9000ha

Who: Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust & landowners

Where: Montgomeryshire, Wales

What: Naturalistic grazing, woodland, scrub and peatland regeneration. montwt.co.uk

Wild Nephin, 8,000ha

Who: Coillte, National Parks and Wildlife Service (Ballycroy National Park)

Where: Co. Mayo, Eire

What: Wild conifer forest, river, lake, restored bog and forest coillte.ie (search 'wild nephin')

Knepp, 1400ha

Who: Knepp Estate

Where: Sussex, England.

What: Naturalistic grazing, wetland, scrub and woodland regeneration kneppsafaris.co.uk

Alladale Wilderness Reserve, 9300ha

Who: Alladale, European Nature Trust

Where: Alladale, Scotland

What: Forest and peatland restoration, naturalistic grazing, reintroducing species

theeuropennaturetrust.com

The Great Fen, 3,700ha

Who: Wildlife Trust for Beds, Cambs & Northants, Environment Agency, Middle Level Commissioners, Natural England, Huntingdonshire District Council

Where: Cambs, England

What: Wetland restoration, naturalistic grazing, scrub and woodland regeneration.

greatfen.org

Dingle Marshes, 93ha

Who: Suffolk Wildlife Trust

Where: Suffolk, England.

What: Natural reshaping of man-made coastal defences.

Wetland. suffolkwildlifetrust.org

Scottish Beaver Trial, 4,400 ha

Who: Scottish Wildlife Trust, Royal Zoological Society of Scotland & Forestry Commission Scotland

Where: Knapdale Forest, Argyll, Scotland

What: Trial beaver reintroduction. Wet woodland, Atlantic oak woodland, lochs and burns.

scottishbeavers.org.uk

For more information and links: wildlifetrusts/rewilding

“ We need large areas where we can experience something like the full grandeur of nature

version of the seed bank at Kew, they give us a chance of one day helping wildlife to disperse and recolonise.

Understanding the wild still has a place here however. If natural processes like disturbance are largely missing we can design conservation plans to mimic this, especially if informed by what we learn from wild nature. Similarly removing disturbance by fencing land and leaving it also influences the nature we get.

Rewilding also applies to the sea. This means persuading Governments to designate protected areas – something The Wildlife Trusts and others are helping to achieve. Once that's done, our seas could begin to return to a more natural state. In the part of Lyme Bay

now closed to scallop dredging we are beginning to see a recovery of slow-growing organisms such as Ross corals.

Thinking big for nature has long been part of the plan, but rewilding can help widen our vision. In a densely populated country, we can't always recreate true wilderness but we can, for example, improve the natural functioning of river valleys, enabling nature to take its course far more than we do now. We may not have the ancient wild aurochs to lumber through our woodlands, opening up glades. But extensive grazing with native cattle might help. We may not have top predators prowling the countryside and influencing how grazers behave – at least not yet. But for now we can 'pulse'

grazing to create diversity.

We cannot, however, ignore the impact of humans. Ours is a cultural landscape which probably goes back many thousands of years. The last truly natural wilderness may have been in the previous interglacial period more than 100,000 years ago when elephants, rhinos and bears mingled with badgers, deer and otters.

Those thousands of years of interaction between people and wildlife are important. But our job now is to create our future natural landscapes: places where people can experience wild nature with healthy ecosystems that can support us through life.

Conserving what remains is the starting point, but it is not the best we can have. Restoring our wildlife and ecosystems is a work in progress but we must imagine, and do, better. And popular support for rewilding can help to inspire that change.