

E209 Notes on Rewilding

To let parts of the countryside 'go back to nature' sounds romantic. The singer Ed Sheeran is reputedly buying up land for this. In places it might make sense, but it is not a simple abandonment of agriculture. Nor, in a world where a war can disrupt 30% of the global grain and oilseed supply, should it be adopted glibly. Isabella Tree in her book *Wilding* describes how she and her husband managed (it was management, not abandonment) the reversion of their estate in Sussex to a wilder state. They were blessed with thousands of acres, and thorough rewilding needs such an area. Less is not enough for a natural ecology including large herbivores to re-develop. Their motives were related to the economic management of their poor quality land, and a vision for ecological diversity, rather than any awareness of their carbon footprint. Even Tree had to restrict plans to allow for rights of way, and to construct high fencing which kept 'wild' stock within limits and respected neighbours' hesitancy. Other, equally moral questions raised by the NFU among others are whether the current Government land management subsidy proposals to 'restore' the countryside will favour large landowners (including charities such as the National Trust), who dispossess smaller, tenant farmers within their estates, and whether high quality land might be taken into such schemes,ⁱ thus diminishing food production in this country and 'exporting' our carbon footprint. Such possibilities have been likened to the Highland Clearances!

So what is 'the wild?' A mediaeval *merrie Englande*, or the Bronze Age, or when? Should we zealously plant rows of native trees covering 300,000 hectares by 2030? All are human, managed landscapes. All do imply animal husbandry. People picture the original wildwood that developed after the ice withdrew as if it were a solid blanket of trees from Dover to the Highlands. (One Vegan scenario envisages this, claiming that Britain could achieve its legal zero emission target by 'reforesting' all pasture.ⁱⁱ This is dubious. A study from 2003 suggests that it would take the forestation of twice the land area of the UK to offset our emissions.) Tree calls that picture into question as do archaeologists working near Stonehenge,ⁱⁱⁱ pointing out that from the end of the ice large herbivores grazed and bulldozed through the land ~ remember those mammoths

mentioned in the main book ~ opening clearings and swathes of grassland, so that the natural ecology would look more like the open heathland of the New Forest than a Forestry Commission plantation. (Are Natural England right to squeeze the Dartmoor pony off Dartmoor because their vision of a proper 'natural' Dartmoor requires the regeneration of scrubland and a consequent reduction of grazing?) If that 'original' condition is rewilding, then large animals are in the equation; cattle, deer, boar and horses, if not mammoths! Either that, or people would have to manage the land intensively, mimicking the action of these large herbivores ~ at a cost including GHGs. Animals achieve this more efficiently, but if left to multiply they would overgraze the available land, defeating the object, and would starve in hard winters. Naturally in the 'wild' they would be controlled by predators, but would wolves reintroduced round the M40 be as acceptable as the Red Kites? Even in rewilded land livestock management is necessary. This implies culling, for incineration if not food, unless corpses are left for the scavengers ~ which is currently illegal in Britain.

In some places this sort of 'rewilding' is appropriate, though the label needs caution. For some people it implies far less ~ simply abandoning fields to revert to uncultivated scrub. For others it is a swearword!^{iv} Appropriate places might be where the arable land is of low quality. To try to turn such land into a grain-basket would be mistaken, though grazing of some form ~ dedicated stock rearing (for meat or milk) is an appropriate and natural use.

I once asked a dairy farmer, based near London, what he might do with his land if the use of animal produce for food was curtailed. After thought he suggested that an open farm, attracting visitors to the countryside, would be his best option. That might work for one or two farms in a county, but there is a limit to the number of farm visits a school, or city-dwelling families, can make. And what would they be seeing? It would not be an education in where their food came from, if it no longer came from animal sources. It would be a museum. Would people want to visit abandoned 21st cent. milking machinery, in the way they are interested in Victorian cider presses, hand milking and horse ploughing in our local 'historic working farm?' (Which required Local Authority subsidy, and is not economic.)

One point in this web-page is that animals do have to be part of any rewilding scheme, and that to do this realistically and economically, and indeed humanely, implies that they would be used for food not just as adjuncts to the scenery. But this does not imply an uncritical advocacy of their *intensive* management.

Rewilding is not the same as ‘**regenerative**’ farming, which aims to grow crops and manage stock in ways which respect more natural cycles of growth and fertility, avoiding monocultures and leaving space for the wild and in the process sequestering carbon. Arguably this leaves the soil in better health, and in the long term is less destructive and maybe more productive. James Rebanks powerful book *English Pastoral* describes his journey towards this kind of farming.^v

ⁱ *Farmers Weekly*, Jan. 7th 2022, p6. Proposals will be vetted, so that good land should not casually attract a subsidy for rewilding.

ⁱⁱ A report cited by the Vegan Society from a Harvard Law School project, 2019. [www//animal.law.harvard.edu/ Eating-away-at-climate-change-with-negative-emissions](http://www.animal.law.harvard.edu/Eating-away-at-climate-change-with-negative-emissions). The 2003 study is by Broadmeadow and Matthews; ‘Forests, Carbon and Climate Change; the UK contribution.’ P.7. *Forest Research Information Note*, Forestry Commission.

ⁱⁱⁱ See a report in *Current archaeology* Sept. 2022, p28f

^{iv} Tree, *Wilding*, Picador, London, 2018,. pp.151-154, 159. Farmers used to maintaining an ordered and productive landscape might see rewilding as immoral. Cf. *Farmers Weekly*, 25 Mar. 2022, p.30. See also Jepson & Blythe, *Rewilding*, Icon, London, 2020.

^v Penguin, 2021. For regenerative farming see also Jake Fiennes, *Land Healer*, Random House, London 2022. The large Norfolk estate which is Fiennes’s setting combines some areas of regenerative farming with tracts of rewilding.