

Seeking a Wilder Britain: Overview of a new initiative to promote rewilding and species reintroductions in Britain

Britain's land is all managed. Even in nature reserves nature is controlled and natural processes of succession are not allowed. We have lost most of our large mammals, almost all of our native forest and living marine structures. There are no large areas either on land or at sea in which we let nature be. Our national parks are dominated by sheep and grouse/deer estates; naturally regenerating native trees and shrubs are routinely cut and grubbed out in our nature reserves, our seabed is scoured and ploughed across 99.9% of its area. Conservation, to a greater extent than perhaps anywhere else on earth, aims to protect not self-willed ecosystems, but farming systems, where only a small and unrepresentative sample of wildlife can persist.

Seeking a wilder Britain involves the large-scale restoration of ecosystems, both on land and at sea, and of their dynamic, self-willed ecological processes. We recognise the valuable contribution of all forms of conservation management, the importance agriculture plays in feeding our populations and the beauty of our cultural landscapes. However, by campaigning to change policy and by promoting and supporting rewilding projects, we aim to restore lost natural wonders, encourage more natural regeneration of forests in areas which have been deforested, re-establish native species which we have driven out and provide people with opportunities to experience natural marvels of the kind they currently have to travel abroad to see. We feel that this, when combined with other approaches, will add greater ecological, economic and cultural value to the British landscape.



British rainforest - Trees for Life Image

With this vision in mind a group of interested people met in late 2013 to discuss what can be done to advance the case for rewilding in Britain. At that meeting the barriers and constraints to rewilding were discussed and key mechanisms were defined for promoting rewilding and reintroductions in Britain. It was clear that while there are a number of local and regional projects in Britain there is no national level initiative taking a progressive, collaborative approach to large scale rewilding. Britain and Ireland are the only places in Europe where this is not happening. A Steering Group was therefore set up and it was agreed to start a new initiative to work in close collaboration with other stakeholders to facilitate policy change and promote practical actions which increase the area of wild land and sea in Britain. The broad initial aims defined by the Group are to:

a. Campaign for changes to farming subsidies, to encourage rewilding.

- Based on an in-depth understanding of farming subsidies and their impact on the environment, we will seek the policy changes which contribute most effectively to incentivise rewilding in Britain through a broad coalition of interested organisations and with wide public engagement.

b. Promote the establishment of core areas of wild land and sea

- Core areas of land and sea will be defined which have sufficient scale (either large contiguous areas or smaller areas linked with corridors) and potential to support rewilding and the reestablishment of species. The initiative will focus on working with partners (landowners, public bodies, conservation organisations and local communities) to support the most promising ideas, projects and programmes promoting rewilding within each context. It is not intended for this initiative to directly implement projects on the ground but rather to facilitate, support and promote those who are delivering or proposing practical projects.
- Habitat restoration will also be promoted on a smaller scale across the country (e.g. on lowland clay/sand, wetlands, river valleys) as part of a network of sites to demonstrate the possibilities of rewilding and bring the experience of wildness within reach of more people.

- A key aspect of this work will be to encourage the active engagement of local communities affected by rewilding projects to ensure they both feel part of the process of change and that they benefit from it. This could include awareness raising, training, consultation, representation in decision-making processes etc.

c. **Promote cultural change through popular education**

- The initiative will work with key organisations and authorities to challenge and develop the prevalent conceptions of nature conservation and landscape, promote a shift in conservation policy and work collaboratively towards rewilding and reintroduction.
- Specific popular media campaigns will aim to 'reframe the narrative' to:
 - Shift awareness and perceptions of what is 'natural' in Britain's 'green and pleasant land'
 - Promote a wider and deeper understanding of wild nature and its importance to future generations
 - Promote the understanding and adoption of rewilding as an acceptable cost effective way of delivering ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation.
 - Present the economic opportunities brought by rewilding – e.g. benefits of wildlife tourism, flood management etc.
- Promote the work of organisations working with schools and community groups to raise awareness and increase hands-on experiences of wild nature
- Between February and May 2014 a consultation process will be carried out as well as mapping of projects and organisations and a state of knowledge review.

What would most help rewilding efforts in Britain?

Following the publication of *Feral* by George Monbiot a group of interested individuals met last September to discuss rewilding and subsequently set up a Steering Group to take the ideas forward. We have been lucky enough to receive some initial funding from two UK based foundations (Arcadia and JMG Foundation) for a consultation process to look at: 1) what is working well in rewilding in Britain; and 2) what would most help people and projects engaged or interested in rewilding to make progress and expand their efforts.

We feel that it may be useful to set up a new national level organisation or forum but are interested in hearing whether you think this is necessary and how it might add value rather than duplicating efforts. It may, for example, be that there is an existing organisation out there that could bring together all the actors and help achieve a step change in public opinion and practical implementation. We know there are similar discussions going on amongst organisations in Scotland and are working closely with those involved.

What we hope is that those most interested and involved in rewilding efforts in Britain help to shape this initiative and become part of a collaborative effort to promote both practical action and policy change.

If you or your organisation would like to contribute your thoughts to the consultation process we'd love to hear from you. So please email rebeccawrigley@hotmail.com or hannahs@gn.apc.org. If you are working more on research related to this field please email chris.sandom@wildbusiness.com. We'd be happy to arrange to call you if that's easiest. And feel free to pass this on to anyone else you feel might be interested.