SELF-WILLED LAND

Self-willed land - the rewilding of open spaces in the UK

"Ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down, in the last analysis, to a question of intellectual humility. The shallow-minded modern who has lost his rootage in the land assumes that he has already discovered what is important...."
Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac

Leopold[1] convincingly sums up for me why there seems to be a denial in this country of any attempt to come to grips with what is a truly natural state for our landscape. We know what we like from what is currently presented to us and give little thought as to its origins, although there are some notable popular exceptions (i.e. the books of Dr Oliver Rackham and the television series with Prof. Aubrey Manning.)

We pressure ourselves to work hard to preserve what we like: in broader scale by designating areas to have discriminate planning regimes, and in micro-scale through giving prominence to key species and certain key habitats in action plans or nature reserves. We accept that our efforts for preservation are set against the backdrop of being secondary to the productive use of our landscapes and that its success relies on the goodwill and compliance of landowners. On the latter, we increasingly offer financial incentives, but concede that in the end we are mostly powerless in over-riding the interests of the owner. Given the opportunity to think past this acquiescence, we often hesitate or just miss the point. Where do we go wrong? Can we learn from others, and what are we currently doing?

I hope to answer those questions although I offer no startling revelations, as the information presented is freely available to all. It could just be an intensely personal viewpoint - the natural world often affects our psyches in that way. But I believe there are fundamental principles to be discussed and if there is to be action to follow then it is better that our journey at least starts out in roughly the right direction.

Heads in the sand dune

A descendant of John Muir was interviewed on radio on the day that a new national park was designated in Scotland. Muir had left Scotland in his boyhood for America and later in life was a prime mover in setting up Yosemite in 1890 as one of its first national parks. Liz Hannah, his great, great, great grand-daughter, thus expressed pleasure at the advent of Scotland's second national park, but she made the point that this new national park would be different from those in America because it had thousands of people living in it.

The studio discussion that followed did not pick up on this distinction. Instead, there was criticism that the Dartmoor National Park had suffered from unrealistic restrictions on business activity, leading the spokesperson for the new Cairngorms National Park to say that their approach would be different as it would ensure that the economic and social considerations of the people living within the park area would be of principal importance. John Humphries, ever the withering inquisitor, was thus left without any disagreement to exploit, although he seemed to relish the dismissal by both parks spokespeople that the views of urban-dwellers on park landscapes would have any relevance.

The discussion on fitting the purpose of national parks in the UK around the productive uses made of them is in complete contrast to what can be found in the latest edition of Wild Earth magazine published in America. This is the quarterly magazine of the Wildlands Project and it is mostly given over to a discussion of whether it would be wise to allow the use of mountain

bikes in wilderness areas in America, and thus in its national parks. This may seem trivial by comparison - on the one hand the economic exploitation of rural landscapes whereas on the other the intrusion of pedal-powered vehicles into wilderness areas, but we need to learn a bit more about the situation in America before we can understand its significance.

Learning from the wilderness experience

The Wildlands Project[2] was set up some ten years ago with a mission to protect and restore the natural heritage of North America through the establishment of a connected system of wildlands. The approach is simple - to allow the natural recovery (rewilding) of whole ecosystems and landscapes in every region of North America and to ensure that they are all connected in one continuous wildlife corridor. The Wildlands Project recognises that recovery on this scale will take time-100 years or more in some places, but it knows where it is going because it has a clear idea of what it seeks to renew. It is wilderness and it is seen as a wild home for unfettered life that is made up of 'extensive roadless areas - vast, self-regulated landscapes - free of mechanised human use and the sounds and constructions of modern civilisation. It will have viable, self-reproducing populations of all native species, including large predators, and will express the natural patterns of diversity at the genetic, species, ecosystem, and landscape levels.' This is what is meant by self-willed land.

This is inspiring stuff, but the Wildlands Project owes much to its predecessors in North America, not least the Sierra Club[3] founded in 1892 with John Muir as its first president. This club has the ongoing mission of exploring, enjoying and protecting the wild places of the earth, while practising and promoting the responsible use of the earth's ecosystems and resources. Its expertise and advocacy have long been a significant influence in oversight of the national parks and wilderness spaces in America, as well as on the legislative process.

Another predecessor is the Wilderness Society[4], established in 1935 with Aldo Leopold amongst its founding members. The mission of this organisation is to deliver an unspoiled legacy of wild places to future generations, with 'all the precious values that they hold.' The society aims to '...bring to bear scientific expertise, analysis and bold advocacy at the highest levels to save, protect and restore America's wilderness areas.'

The Wilderness Society has a land ethic at the heart of its work and it defines principles for how humans should relate to the land. The ethic arose from the writings of Leopold and its tenor is encapsulated in this extract:
"The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.....In short, a land ethic changes the role of Homo sapiens from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it."

The Wilderness Society also has a clear vision of what they believe by wilderness, leading them during the 1950's to draft a Wilderness Act. The Act was finally signed into law in 1964 and it enabled the American Congress to set aside some nine million acres in selected areas in the national forests, national parks, national wildlife refuges, and other federal lands as units to be kept permanently unchanged by humans. There would be no roads, no structures, no vehicles, and no significant impacts of any kind. Here is the vision contained in that Act (Public Law 88-577):
"A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognised as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

More bills have been passed since the Act and there is now a total of 104 million acres in the National Wilderness Preservation System. The Wilderness Act opened the way for later groups, such as the Wildlands Project, to begin to build on the visions of the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society and to believe that it would be possible for America to regain and maintain its essential natural character. The American people have consciously made this choice, showing that their better judgement can prevail in the face of human fallibility. But to do this, people need to have clear reference points into the issue that they wish to deliberate. Thus it is worth seeing in detail the definition of wilderness given in the original Wilderness Act:

"...an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which

(1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable;

(2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;

(3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and

(4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value."

A number of things in this definition demand attention. By specifying Federal land the Act recognises public ownership as a principle for protected wilderness. It denotes a public will and the allocation of the resources needed to achieve it. Although there is every reason to believe that wilderness can exist in private land, public ownership provides a better means for legally enforcing the constraints necessary for the implementation of the Act.

In using the word primeval there is a characterization of the use of that landscape as unaffected by a post-aboriginal human culture and that human habitation of designated wilderness is prohibited. What this is saying is that contemporary patterns of land use are inappropriate to the stability and survival of wilderness. What could be appropriate would be patterns of land use that occurred before systemized production came about (i.e. agriculture) when the human population was a species more closely integrated with their fellow plants and animals (i.e. as part of the land community described by Leopold's land ethic - see earlier). This would be probably be recognised as the pre-Columbian era in North America (i.e. 500 years ago) and since it is an extremely rare form of living nowadays, it is not surprising that people and their livestock are banished from habitation in wilderness areas. People may still visit wilderness, but it is on the terms of the land community and not that of people.

The amount of land to be given over to a wilderness space is specified in the Act as at least 5000 acres. This is an indication that the success of an open space in acting as a refuge for a full complement of wildlife depends on a critical area of sufficient size - large enough to provide the carrying capacity and range of niches, and to have freedom from disturbance so that natural cycles may occur. The aim of the Wildlands Project in seeking to link wildernesses across the American landscape is an evolution that greatly enhances their likely success, ensuring that the larger predators can gain access and can roam this extended wilderness.

Later in the Act, there is a specific prohibition on the use of motor vehicles and any "other form of mechanical transport". This in effect denies access to mountain bikes as well, which is why there was the discussion in Wild Earth magazine. Advocates for the use of mountain bikes in wilderness areas know they will need to convince Congress to amend the Act to allow access. As we have seen on our own rural rights of way, access to mountain bikes is a contentious issue that has gone by default rather than the discussion it really needed and which the American people can undertake by virtue of a Wilderness Act already being in place. (Apart from anything else, mountain bikes collapse time and distance, thus diminishing the experience of wilder areas.)

The other side of the pond

In comparing ourselves to the American experience of wilderness, we have to contend with a major difference. It is generally regarded that there is no part of the UK that has been left untouched by post aboriginal humans whether it be by settlement or by agricultural or silvicultural activity. This is borne out by the satellite imaging used in production of an Atlas of Population and Environment[5]. The Atlas identifies areas of natural landscape - forest, savannah/grassland, wetlands, shrubland, dessert and snow/icefields - as well as the areas of human transformation. The UK is shown to have no area of any size that has been left

untransformed. In contrast, Canada and Australia maintain almost 90% of their land in an untransformed state and in America it is greater than 50%. Why is there this difference?

Oliver Rackham[6] (amongst others) has chronicled the massive transformation that took place in the UK landscape with the coming of agriculture some 6500 years ago. The arrival of farming from the Middle East resulted in an immense loss of our temperate climax ecology and a wholesale change in the way the indigenous population regarded its land. Before that time, tree coverage extended over all our landscape except for probably the following: the far North, a few small areas of moorland and grassland on high mountains, the coastal dunes, and the salt marshes. Our aboriginal ancestors maintained their existence from forest, river and sea, but the early farmers living side by side with those ancestors set about progressively clearing trees to encourage the growth of grass to feed livestock, to provide open space to sow cereals, and to create heaths. It is estimated that these activities led to the loss of half of our natural woodland by the early stages of the Iron Age (500BC) with also the loss of many of the larger of our indigenous animals. (We have since extirpated most of the remaining large predators.)

It must have become increasingly difficult to maintain the aboriginal approach to life with agriculture proceeding to dominate the landscape and diminish the ability for primeval existence. The clearance of trees carried on from the Iron Age and it is now considered that there is no real wildwood left today (i.e. self-sown, self-regenerating and unmanaged). A post-aboriginal population has thus been around for some 5-6000 years in the UK and it has reshaped everything in its path. The surprise is that such a comparatively small population up to the Iron Age (and even for some time after) could and would have need for such a wholesale effect in transforming the UK landscape. In North America, by contrast, the pressure on their landscape was only imported with its 'discovery' by Europeans as recently as some 500 years ago. Thus while North America still has some landscape that bears testimony to its original state, we have to be satisfied with our inheritance of entirely man-made landscapes, and we continue to this day their dependence on us for their existence.

Reserving nature

With no true wilderness left to preserve, it is unsurprising that we have no Wilderness Act in the UK or even a Wilderness Society. There have been historical movements taking a view on our landscapes - our oldest national conservation body is the Open Spaces Society[7] founded in 1865. Its principal work however is in the protection of commons (which are not necessarily the public spaces that some confusingly think), town and village greens, open spaces and public paths. No sense here that the Society seeks anything other than to maintain the status quo of a landscape productively used and maintained by people.

In terms of legislation, we have the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949[8] which introduced the concept of National Nature Reserves (NNR) and Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)[9] and conferred powers on local authorities to establish Local Nature Reserves. England has seven national parks, all of them in upland areas and all of them populated and subject to agricultural and silvicultural activity. The parks are distinguished by their restrictive planning laws, but many commentators regard the biggest threat to these parks to be overgrazing by livestock, something for which there is no legal constraint. The 'woolly mower' has thus reached every part of our island, holding back natural succession and successfully maintaining it as an artificial landscape.

There are now about 300 NNRs (205 in England) only a few of which are in public ownership with the rest requiring leases or management agreements with their private owners. A significant minority of NNRs are owned by special interest bodies such as the RSPB, Wildfowl Trusts and Butterfly Conservation, but they are managed for the specific interests of their members (i.e. for particular birds or butterflies) and thus not in the wider interests of self-willed nature. As a system they are also flawed due to their often-insufficient size to act as a refuge for anything other than their target species.

SSSIs fare no better in spite of the further legislation contained in the Wildlife and Countryside Act, 1981, which toughened up the sanctions that could be taken to prevent harm becoming them - and there has been some additional tinkering around SSSIs in the Countryside and Rights of Way Act of 2000. The passage of the Wildlife and Countryside Act led to significant

damage as private landowners made use of the delay, during the required re-notification of all SSSIs, to go out and "re-manage" that piece of land with a JCB or plough. Sure enough the passage of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act some 20 years later also resulted in reaction from land owners, with one farmer facing prosecution[10] for ploughing inbye land in the hope of preventing a right of access to it. SSSIs now total over 4000 sites in England, encompassing about 6% of landmass (over one million hectares) - and some are even large individual areas such as whole river basins.

We should not be too impressed by these SSSIs of considerable size. It is relatively easy to draw a line on a map - much less easy to have influence over the area contained within the line when it is privately owned. Peter Marren[11], one of the more interesting commentators on nature conservation in the UK, has pointed out the obvious - that the concept of SSSIs relies on co-operation between the conservation agency (English Nature, Scottish Natural Heritage or Countryside Council for Wales) and owner/occupier. Thus he accepts the reality that the land is subject to habitation and systemised productive use.

His acceptance also that most of our wildlife is dependent for its survival on grazing animals and on regular low-key maintenance and harvest goes to the heart of what is so wrong-thinking in this country about our wildlife. Isn't it true that our appreciation of wildlife is predicated only on species that are maintained in these almost-certainly artificial landscapes that we have inherited from those early farmers? The fact that those landscapes need external intervention (i.e. grazing animals) indicates that they are not self-willed. Whether we realise it or not, we have become entranced with plant and bird species that may not have such a key presence if our land was allowed to revert to true wilderness. Marren again notes this, predicting a significant drop in diversity if land is left to manage itself, but he may be basing this on his observation of a few poorly featured nature reserves (how could they be otherwise) and over a relatively short period of time.

If you need further convincing that our appreciation of wildlife is skewed then consider that nature conservation is rarely about wild mammals and in the few instances where re-introductions are contemplated, the hue and cry from landowners is utterly predictable. It was ever so because wild mammals pose a greater threat to agricultural and silvicultural productivity than the wildflowers and birds that appear to be the few crumbs from the table that those early farmers have left us with. And on the latter, the landowner often nowadays receives financial compensation. (Does anyone else feel uncomfortable with a system that pays farmers to keep sheep on marginal land, praising them for preventing the encroachment of scrub - the effect of the woolly mowers - but then the farmer also gets paid to take the sheep off the land at certain times so that a few wildflowers may have a chance of growing to full height and flower?)

There is a pilot program to re-introduce beaver into Scotland with a view to eventually rolling it out to the rest of the UK. It is hedged with many cautions that could see the program halted if reaction from land users becomes too heated. As evidence of what this re-introduction is up against, an entomologist is reported to have given an angry response to the consultation process, fearing that beavers would cut down too many of the trees that were host to the rare flies that were under study. I am sure the poor beaver would be puzzled at this fuss, as it is not the nature of wild animals to necessarily think through the consequences of their action. Does it mean though that we have to make compromises because of all the special pleading that could arise? Will we have to compensate landowners to tolerate the planned re-introduction of beavers?

Honouring its native son

It would be ungenerous to suggest that there isn't any concern for the true state of self-willed land in the UK. Scotland seems to be a test bed for widening the envelope of our understanding as evidenced by the formation of the John Muir Trust[12] in 1983 and in the process honouring its native son. Included in the Trust's object is the 'conservation and protection of wild places with their indigenous animals, plants and soils both for their own sake and for the sustenance and inspiration they give to humanity; and to renew wild places, where they have been damaged, by encouraging natural processes'. The Trust interprets "wild" to

mean places 'where the presence of people and the influence of human actions is not predominant, that convey to those who go there a sense of remoteness and scale, and where other non-human influences such as weather, landscape and wildlife prevail'.

The Trust firmly believes that the only sure way to protect wild land is for the Trust to own it. They have targeted some of the wildest landscapes - areas such as Knoydart, the Cuillins, NW Sutherland and the Cairngorms - and purchase holdings when they come up for sale. The hope is to compile large blocks of land in these areas so that the integrity of the whole area can be restored. The Trust currently owns and manages seven areas in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, totalling 20,000 hectares (48,000 acres). These are not unpopulated areas, but they are some of the least populated and by degree the least managed.

Other organisations are beginning to take greater note of wild places in Scotland. Last year the National Trust for Scotland[13] issued a policy statement on Wild Land and it was followed by a policy statement on Wildness In Scotland's Countryside from Scottish Natural Heritage (Policy Statement No. 02/03)[14]. But perhaps the most significant event was the recognition of wild land by the Scottish planning system. In its guidance note on Natural Heritage[15] -National Planning Guideline (NPPG) 14 - wild land is defined as:
"uninhabited and often relatively inaccessible countryside where the influence of human activity on the character and quality of the environment has been minimal."

The planning guidance itself notes requirements for structure plans and local plans to include policies for protecting and enhancing areas of importance for their wild land character. This is not a Wilderness Act as it only seeks to regulate development within existing land ownership patterns and says nothing about its current use. It is however a remarkable foundation on which the Scottish people can build. Earlier, in February this year, Scottish Environment LINK organised a seminar in Pitlochry with the title 'Wild land in Scotland: realising the resource.' Ken Crocket[16] was there, as one of the delegates from the John Muir Trust, along with others from a range of NGOs and Government Departments and Agencies. Ken reports that they spent the day clarifying their understanding of the wild land concept in Scotland and identifying its resource values. They went on to explore ideas on how best the qualities of wild land might be formally protected, managed, and enhanced. And they developed a broadly agreed position for wider public debate and promotion.

Channelling the English

Envy makes me consider relocating to Scotland, but wilderness will only succeed if it is universally appreciated and that there are opportunities to experience it within reach of most people. If pressed to speculate on the least affected habitat that is generally accessible in England then I would have to say it is the coastline between low and high water mark. It is a short distance from there to the sand dunes and the inaccessible cliffs in some coastal areas, both of which have no use in agriculture, but which exhibit some of our best wildflower displays.

I am encouraged that it is coastal areas that are providing a test bed in England for one form of rewilding of our landscape. Last year the Environment Agency put out for consultation a Cuckmere Estuary Restoration Project[17], which aims to bring back the natural landscape around the outlet of the Cuckmere River on the East Sussex coast. The major flow of the Cuckmere River was canalised through the estuary in Victorian times to eliminate its meandering nature and reduce transport times for coal barges. The canal walls are in poor repair and face gradual encroachment by the sea, eventually leading to their breach. By deliberately breaking the banks on one side of the river, the Environment Agency envisage that the valley will be protected against future flooding and its key landmarks will be preserved. In addition, the salt marsh of around 113 acres that will develop as a result will become a haven for waterfowl and will increase local biodiversity

The Environment Agency enlisted partners in the National Trust and English Nature, but reaction from local residents has been adverse. I am tempted to characterise their reaction as a comfort in the neatness of their landscape at present compared to the wildness and the possible landslip that may ensue in nearby cliffs, but this is supposition on scant evidence. The Environment Agency have faith in their project and now seek planning permission for it to go

ahead. And a good idea bears repeating as DEFRA[18] has recently put out another proposal on wetland creation. This one is looking to recreate new habitat to compensate for two areas of saltmarsh and mudflat destroyed by port developments on the East Coast of England in the 1990s. A judgement in the European Court of Justice, in 1997, ruled that these two areas, which supported a high number of wild birds, should have been legally protected. The new wetland will therefore be designed to replace the habitat that was lost. Preliminary assessment shows that the low-lying farmland on Wallasea Island would have the characteristics that make it suitable for creating new wetland through managed coastal realignment.

Facing a future in the wilderness

I am a professionally qualified Permaculture Designer[19]. I learnt as part of my training in this earth science that wilderness provides many lessons in how to design enduring self-regulating processes based on natural systems. Landscape designs using Permaculture principles always seek to include some regenerating self-willed land within the design, setting constraints on its access and use in much the same way that the Wilderness Act does in America[20]. It's a mute point whether my empathy with wilderness is due to the training in Permaculture or that it is a fascination with wildlife that makes designing through Permaculture so satisfying a pursuit. Either way, I recommend both particularly since Permaculture embodies a land ethic in similar vein to that of Aldo Leopold and has design strategies that seek to reduce the overall effect of the human use of natural resources. There is a consistency in this which is important - we may be able to regenerate and conserve wilderness areas, but they will become merely museum pieces always under threat if they are surrounded by consistently overworked and degraded landscapes.

Wilderness becomes a greater prospect every day that we see the profitability of farming in marginal areas unravel and that there is a growing public will to have a collective view about future landscapes. I don't feel I am in a position to make proposals in isolation. I do however offer some guidelines based on the information reviewed above:

1. Develop a clear understanding and definition of wilderness so that the language and thoughts of its public debate and promotion are accessible to all - hence the preponderance of examples supplied herein;

2. Let us be honest with ourselves that nature conservation in the UK has developed in the direction of maintaining mainly artificial landscapes that do not represent self-willed land;

3. We should come to accept that systemised production and external intervention for management purposes is incompatible with self-willed land. Human habitation is also incompatible in its current form;

4. Wilderness will require regeneration rather than preservation, as there is no pristine landscape in the UK. This will take hundreds of years rather than decades and will require re-introduction of lost species, particularly mammals;

5. Areas designated for rewilding must be of sufficient size and, ultimately, linking between them will be desirable. An aim may be to allocate an amount of land at least equal in size to that currently occupied by 99% of the population of England and Wales. This is around 2.2 million acres and which represents 6% of its landmass. I would suggest that it could easily be found within the 27 million acres of land that are currently used for agriculture and which only have a population of about 400,000. I have faith that Scotland can come up with their own target, which in all probability can exceed that for England and Wales;

6. Experience shows that public ownership or ownership in the public interest (i.e. like the John Muir Trust) provides greater opportunity for regeneration and then preservation of self-willed land. A Wilderness Act would be desirable in providing a legal framework to which both Government Agencies and Land Trusts could work to;

7. Use every opportunity to observe, study and document rewilding in every location in an unobtrusive a way as possible and learn its lessons. The proposed regeneration of wetlands on the Cuckmere Estuary and Wallasea Island offer an excellent start. Dryer land rewilding will be

more difficult since it will depend on the extant species rather than being shaped by elements - i.e. by the sea and weather. Thus it could be predicted initially to be disappointing and it may prove that an initial rogueing of non-natives may be essential in some areas. We must hope for an inflow of species as the wilderness evolves and that wild mammals return to participate in shaping the rewilding. In turn, we shall probably need to reintroduce wild predators so that the wilderness is supplied with a full complement of its essential tools for balance.

8. When we can assess that the wilderness has evolved to a sufficient level of robustness, open it up to ensure that people have access to it by way of footpaths. Let them enjoy this reward for having given land back unselfishly to nature.

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