



Herts and
Middlesex

Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust Position Statement on Rewilding

Background

What is rewilding

There is no single agreed definition for rewilding and people use the term to mean different things. Rewilding was a term originally used to describe wilderness conservation by restoring missing natural processes and keystone species to massive wild areas, such as the Carpathian Mountains or Yellowstone National Park. Characteristic to these projects is the reintroduction of ecosystem engineering species, such as bison and beaver; or top predators, such as wolf and lynx. By then stepping back and not interfering, this allowed nature to find its natural balance.

The scale, naturalness and beauty of these schemes is incredibly inspiring. Not surprisingly, rewilding is something that any conservation organisation might aspire to achieve. However, this original pure form of rewilding is not realistic in many highly developed parts of the world, including much of the UK, due to the lack of available land and its long history of high levels of human management and alteration. As a result, many who have been inspired by rewilding have created large-scale conservation projects that follow varying levels of rewilding principles, within their own particular set of constraints. The key principles are to restore natural processes and minimise artificial management intervention to large areas, by methods that might include reintroducing keystone species or grazing animals and taking more of a step back from prescribed land management. There are a range of good examples from various parts of the UK, such as Pumlumon in the Cambrian Mountains and Knepp Castle Estate in Sussex. These inspiring projects are great opportunities not only to efficiently restore large areas towards nature's recovery but also to engage and educate people in the natural world.

Economic incentives for rewilding

The Trust recognises that rewilding schemes require large areas of land that in our part of the country are valuable for alternative commercial purposes. Therefore for schemes to be viable, landowners need to be able to generate an income from the scheme. The Knepp Castle Estate has shown how business can be generated from ecotourism and selling conservation grade meat from the grazing livestock. There are also several new potential income streams that rewilding schemes may be able to benefit from. Hosting biodiversity offsets as part of a robust genuine biodiversity net gain planning system could be a good option. Likewise, carbon offsetting is an interesting possibility if a robust genuine carbon offsetting system were to be developed and suitable for our area. Sources of income as well as minimised land management costs together have the potential to make rewilding schemes viable. The Trust is keen to offer help and advice to landowners in our area that are considering a new rewilding scheme.

Other benefits of rewilding

Semi-natural and natural wildlife habitats of all types accumulate carbon, particularly in their soils. This is covered in more detail in the Trust's Climate Change Position Statement. Rewilding large areas naturally could absorb and accumulate large amounts of carbon from the atmosphere. More and more carbon will continue to accumulate in soils for decades, and even longer, after the start of a rewilding scheme.

Rewilding schemes may also naturally provide its surrounding area with large amounts of other ecosystem services, such as cleaner air and water, and flood management.

Rewilding schemes fundamentally change the landscape and uses of a large area of land. Planned well and fully involving local communities in the process, a rewilding scheme can become a community focus and bring health & wellbeing, tourism and other benefits to people.

The Trust's position on rewilding

The Trust recognises that people use the term rewilding in different ways and there is no single agreed definition. The Trust considers that there are several key ecological characteristics of rewilding. In order to avoid confusion and overly raise people's expectations, we will only use the term rewilding where these characteristics play a significant part in the design of a project:

- Natural and dynamic processes able to happen and govern outcomes (in both directions of succession and disturbance)
- Large-scale
- Keystone species and ecosystem engineers at large
- Low levels of management by humans

Rewilding is a spectrum and we operate within a highly constrained landscape in our part of the country. For a rewilding project to be realistic and successful the above characteristics may play a significant part and are the rationale behind decision-making but other interventions and compromises will also be needed. These could be a consequence of a wide range of practical, political, personal and commercial reasons and might include some or all of:

- Livestock used as a proxy for wild grazers and other ecosystem engineers (eg cattle, ponies, pigs, sheep, goats)
- Culling/harvesting/felling to replace predation and other natural processes
- Absence of keystone species
- Part of the area managed more intensively to set objectives due to high cultural and/or biodiversity value
- Some degree of pre-planned outcomes being targeted
- Jump-starting the process – there may be an intensive level of input to start (such as introductions and seeding etc)

Rewilding projects are inspiring and are a wonderful opportunity to deliver huge biodiversity improvements and contribute towards the nature recovery network on an ambitious scale. They can be a major community focus and asset with benefit to people and communities beyond their boundaries. The Trust is always excited to hear about your rewilding aspirations and we are happy to discuss, advise and support as appropriate. We also offer ecological services that might help with design or evidence, such as baseline surveys.

Care should be taken where semi-natural habitats already exist within the project area. Rewilding principles require flexibility over outcomes and relatively low intervention by humans; whereas existing habitats must be managed specifically for the conservation of the rare and important species already existing within them. Hertfordshire's State of Nature Report identifies that lack of appropriate conservation management is one of the biggest causes of declines in many of our most threatened habitats and species. Applying rewilding principles to a nature reserve or other high quality habitat would change dynamics and could cause local extinctions of rare and threatened species due to inappropriate habitat change and loss of specific features on which those species depend. Whilst applying rewilding principles to existing high quality habitats could be damaging, rewilding areas around and between existing habitats is highly beneficial and maximises the potential for natural colonisation and expansion of important species. The most successful rewilding schemes will be where nearby habitats are expanded and complemented by the scheme, following landscape-scale conservation principles. The Trust can offer advice on landscape-scale conservation and help design the most appropriate scheme for a given location within the ecological network.

Whilst the Trust will not use the term rewilding to describe or promote small site-based habitat creation or restoration schemes, we recognise that there will always be far more opportunity for these schemes and that, together, they all make significant contributions to the nature recovery network and make our part of the UK wilder. All such schemes are exciting and valuable both for conservation and local communities, and the Trust is always interested in discussing your ideas and offering advice, support and ecological services. Please do get in touch with us about any habitat creation scheme you may have in mind, whether it is rewilding or smaller scale.