

Our Position on Rewilding

This document outlines what we think about rewilding, explains how repairing and restoring land is part of our work and how we advocate for the freedom of wild places.

Trust position

1. The Trust prefers to use words such as ‘repair’, ‘restore’ and ‘protect’ to the word ‘rewilding’ when we describe what we do. We recognise that there are sensitivities around the use of ‘rewilding’ and that it can mean different things to different people.
2. The Trust is committed to protecting and restoring suitable areas of land so that nature has the freedom to repair itself. In doing so we seek to work with local communities. Our focus is the restoration and protection of land, for the benefit of nature and people.

Policy context and history of the issue

3. The term ‘rewilding’ was first coined in 1990¹ and has come into prominence in recent years. It has no standard definition but is used to describe an approach to nature conservation and ecological restoration that focuses on advancing a richer and wilder environment for the benefit of nature and people. The approach can cover non-intervention management in urban greenspaces to reintroduction of keystone species, including carnivores, in remote wild places. The ideas associated with rewilding are underpinning the work of a variety of organisations in the UK² and Europe³. The approach is closely aligned with the ethos of the John Muir Trust and how it has taken forward land management in the last 40 years.
4. In the UK, most land has been or continues to be managed. Large areas have been de-forested, burned, grazed, fertilized and drained. Most large wild mammals have been exterminated. As a result, the natural webs of relationships between species and habitats have been broken and most ecosystems are less able to replenish nutrients, purify water, regenerate naturally, provide food or shelter for animals, or store carbon. Nature conservation has historically been confined to relatively small, isolated areas, which are largely degraded semi-natural habitats.⁴ Elsewhere, land has been managed around a single species such as sheep, grouse or deer, which has greatly reduced biodiversity and nature recovery.
5. Rewilding is an approach with the potential to reverse such impacts. While rewilding is ultimately about allowing natural processes to take over, initial intervention is often required to repair long-term damage and re-start natural processes. Examples of interventions in the UK include reducing deer grazing to enable woodland regeneration, translocations or re-introducing missing keystone species like beavers, which shape ecosystems (e.g. by managing water courses and water flows).
6. Rewilding is not suitable or desirable everywhere and can conflict with other land use priorities for instance where agricultural production is the priority, such as on prime agricultural land. In policy and in practice there is a recognised role for nature friendly

¹ Fraser (2009), ‘Rewilding the World: Despatches from the conservation revolution’, Metropolitan Books

² Rewilding Britain (2021), ‘The Rewilding Network’: <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/rewilding-network>

³ Rewilding Europe (2021), ‘European Rewilding Network’: <https://rewildingeurope.com/european-rewilding-network/>

⁴ Hughes and Brooks (2009), ‘Living Landscapes: Towards Ecosystem-Cased Conservation in Scotland’

farming, silvicultural farming and regenerative farming practices, which could make a significant contribution to the UK's biodiversity recovery and carbon emission reduction targets.

Why we care/relevance to the Trust

7. Initially, the Trust bought wild land to protect it, but over 40 years has broadened its focus to repairing and restoring natural processes through active land management and protecting the UK's wild places through advocacy and engagement with people. Across all our properties – but particularly on Skye, Knoydart, Schiehallion and Glenlude – we are working to restore native woodlands, with the goal of establishing self-seeding mature trees and thriving ecosystems. As part of our work we monitor the growth of tree seedlings, the conditions of habitats and populations of wildlife on our properties.

Re-introducing keystone species

8. The Trust supports the translocation and the re-introduction of keystone species following IUCN guidelines, which detail the need for full public consultation, involvement and support.⁵
9. The Trust believes that prior to any re-introduction being carried out, there needs to be broad political, public and local support. The Trust accepts that management solutions will be required to mitigate conflicts if they arise. On this basis, the Trust's position on the re-introduction of the following keystone species is:
 - **Beavers:** the Trust supports the re-establishment of beavers in suitable locations in the UK.
 - **Lynx:** the Trust believes that a trial re-introduction project to Scotland should be implemented⁶.
 - **Wild boar:** the Trust supports the official re-introduction of wild boar.
 - **Wolves:** the Trust believes that there is no ecological barrier to their reintroduction into remote parts of Scotland, but a public education programme, scientific assessment and public consultation would need to inform any trial reintroduction, which should only be considered following assessment of any Lynx reintroduction. Comprehensive local and national public support would be essential for such a trial to go ahead.
 - **Bears:** the Trust believes that their re-introduction into the UK is currently unlikely.
10. The Trust believes that any consideration of further reintroduction of previously resident native species to the UK should be done within the context of a comprehensive rewilding or appropriate biodiversity strategy.

Non-native and invasive non-native species

11. The Trust recognises that some non-native species are less harmful than others and some have become established near-native species through time. The Trust recognises that species are moving due to changes in climate and that giving nature

⁵ IUCN (2013), 'Guidelines for Reintroductions and Other Conservation Translocations'. Version 1.0

⁶ From January 2021 to February 2022, SCOTLAND: The Big Picture, Trees for Life and Vincent Wildlife Trust are conducting an extensive and impartial study to assess people's views about the possible reintroduction of Eurasian lynx to the Scottish Highlands. The Trust has supported this consultation with an article in our Spring 2021 Journal.

the freedom to repair itself accepts that nature is a dynamic system. In the future (or near future) waves of non-native species may arrive to the UK. As species that might be adapted to a warmer UK climate, they could be important for conservation rather than threats.

12. However, the Trust accepts there is a difference between non-native species and invasive non-native species. The latter can be detrimental to the recovery and reestablishment of non-native species. The Trust supports the active management of invasive non-native species with the aim of reducing or removing their impacts. Invasive non-native species include species introduced to the UK and can include those species that are managed for commercial operations, such as Sitka spruce. The Trust believes that land management that involves planting and harvesting invasive non-native species should meet high standards for nature.

Policy solution

13. Rewilding can go hand in hand with job creation, investment in training and education, environmental protection, improved health and wellbeing and nature-based tourism.⁷ We have seen the associated benefits first-hand around the land we care for.
14. The Trust will, on its own and through engagement with both UK as well as European rewilding initiatives, promote and advocate for policies at a government level that will protect and restore natural habitats and species in order to:
 - Raise awareness of the unique benefits of wild places – clean air, water and soil, flood prevention, peatland and woodlands as carbon sinks and wildlife habitats – and their role in human health and well-being.
 - Protect fragile and sensitive wild places and challenge inappropriate development and damaging land management practices.
 - Strengthen and expand protected sites and the connectivity between them.
 - Increase funding for new and evolving large landscape-scale restoration projects.
 - Improve rural incentives schemes for farmers and crofters to manage land so that nature has more freedom to repair itself.
 - Re-introduce keystone species at appropriate times, in suitable areas, and where there is public support for re-introductions.
 - Identify places across the UK with the potential for ecological recovery.

Policy outcomes

15. The Trust hopes to see the following policy outcomes:
 - Thriving ecosystems, which will support life and be more resilient to the effects of climate change.
 - Improvements to biodiversity, water, air and soil quality as a result of healthy ecosystems.
 - Restored native woodlands, which will provide the seed source for future natural regeneration of native woodlands.

⁷ Rewilding Britain (2021), 'Rewilding and the Rural Economy': <https://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/news-and-views/research-and-reports/rewilding-and-the-rural-economy>

- Restored habitats, which will provide food and shelter for native wildlife species.
- Living landscapes characterised by connected habitats, free flowing rivers and native forests.
- Revived interest in and connection with wild places, as people participate in conservation and restoration projects to bring about nature recovery (e.g. through tree planting in the uplands, river restoration projects, peatland restoration works).

Publication approved by Trustees: December 2023
Date last updated: October 2023