26

ECOTOURISM AND REWILDING EUROPE

Nils Lindahl Elliot

In 2016 Rewilding Europe, an organisation based in the Netherlands but with campaigns across the European Union, published a short video on its website that offered a vision of its mission. Amid wide shots and aerial footage of stunning mountains, forests, coasts, rivers and plains, the video focalised various wild animals: bears, lynxes, and golden eagles, but also ‘aurochs’, European bison, wild boar, and griffon vultures. According to the video, large parts of the countryside in Europe were being abandoned, and this constituted an ‘historic opportunity’ to make Europe ‘a wilder place!’ (Rewilding Europe, 2016a, bold lettering in the originals). To this end, Rewilding Europe was working to ‘support the comeback’ of grazers, as well as their predators and scavengers in areas such as the Laplands and the Central Apennines, western Iberia, and the Danube Delta. The plan was to rewild 1 million hectares, i.e., an area of some 10,000 km² or 3900 mi², ‘where rivers flow freely’, ‘where wildlife roams again’, and ‘where nature takes care of itself’ (Rewilding Europe, 2016a).

Rewilding Europe is just one—albeit one particularly ambitious—one of the many rewilding initiatives that have emerged across the world over the last two decades. There are significant variations in the meaning of rewilding (see for example Lorimer et al. 2015; Jorgensen, 2015), as well as debate regarding its scientific basis (see for example Rubenstein, Rubenstein, Sherman, & Gavin, 2016; Rubenstein & Rubenstein, 2015; Nogués-Bravo, Simberloff, Rahbek, & Sanders, 2016). Rewilding may nevertheless be broadly defined as a form of conservation that entails restoring ecosystems and landscapes to a state that is considered to be somehow ‘closer to nature’. However, ‘rewilders’ (as Rewilding Europe refer to themselves) are prepared to intervene across trophic levels in order to address what they regard as one of the more serious forms of anthropogenic degradation: the extirpation of large carnivores, and more generally of so-called keystone species, with adverse consequences for the biodiversity of ecosystems.

Many of the earliest scientific proposals for this kind of intervention have centred on the beyond-human aspects of ecological interaction; any attention given to human involvement has typically been a negative one in so far as conservation has focussed on limiting human impact on certain ecosystems (e.g., park-making), or on enabling wild animals to overcome the manifold barriers to mobility/migration placed in their way by human development. However, the Rewilding Europe video, like the organisation’s mission statements, suggests a way of approaching rewilding that is premised on a more proactive conception of human involvement.
In so far as there is across Europe a tendency towards ‘rural depopulation’, and in so far as ‘more and more Europeans want to enjoy wild nature and wildlife’ (Rewilding Europe, 2016a, bold in the original), this constitutes a business opportunity which can and should itself be capitalised. Central to such an opportunity is the development of tourism.

Rewilding Europe is by no means alone in proposing this kind of change. Across the world, there are many examples of initiatives that rely on tourism (and leisure practices more generally) as a means of at once funding, and engaging in what is, in effect if not by express design, a hegemonic turn with which to meet the often significant opposition to rewilding (for accounts of opposition and conflict, see for example Nilsen, Milner-Gulland, Schofield, Mysterud, Stenseth & Coulson, 2007; Barkham, 2017; Pellis, 2019).

In this chapter I problematise such proposals, and with them the interrelation between rewilding and ecotourism—an interrelation which, somewhat surprisingly, has thus far attracted comparatively little critical scrutiny (Hall, 2019). In the absence of an extensive corpus on the subject, I will employ the example of Rewilding Europe as an at once convenient, and strategic case study. However sui generis Rewilding Europe’s proposals may be on one level, the organisation has developed its proposals with reference to broader discourses of rewilding. This being the case, an analysis of Rewilding Europe may well have implications that go beyond the particularities of this organisation and its plans for rewilding certain areas across Europe.

Rewilding Europe’s mission as discursive formation

To begin with, Rewilding Europe’s initiative may be approached via its mission statements and promotional literatures. These constitute discourses (Foucault, 1971, 1993) that invite subjects to attend to some objects and not others (what I will describe as indexing); to categorise those objects in particular ways (classifying); and in so doing to promote certain forms of practice, subjectivity, and interrelation (framing) (Lindahl Elliot, 2019, p. 216). Of course, such discourses are only a part of a much broader ensemble which includes institutions, fields of interaction (Bourdieu, 1992), as well as techniques and technologies of intervention in what are themselves complex beyond-human settings. As such, rewilding discourses may be regarded as aspects of an assemblage devoted to exercising biopower (Foucault, 1978). As Foucault famously put it,

[j]f one can apply the term bio-history to the pressures through which the movements of life and the processes of history interfere with one another, one would have to speak of bio-power to designate what brought life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life. (Foucault, 1978, p. 143, italics in the original)

I suggest that in the case of rewilding, the more immediate object of transformation is beyond-human life.

Approached from this perspective, Rewilding Europe’s mission statements constitute not just organisational expressions of intent, but more or less complex ways of indexing, classifying, and framing an ostensibly natural world for the purposes of a specific kind of intervention. That intervention is articulated by way of a discursive formation (Foucault, 1993) that includes discourses of nature, science, socio-economics, and tourism. With an important exception that I will consider below, the formation in question is premised on what is, philosophically speaking, a realist ontology of nature.
Even a summary analysis of Rewilding Europe’s communications reveals that the organisation treats nature as being quite separate from culture, and as being independent of any vicissitudes of representation. What is true for nature in general is particularly true for wildness, which Rewilding Europe, like rewilders more generally, treat as being, ecologically speaking, the ultimate expression of a nonhuman nature.

Starting from this very strong classification of the human and the nonhuman, rewilders define an arena of intervention that indexes particular kinds of animals (viz., wild animals) and geographies (wildernesses). These are framed as being inherently deserving of what is, in effect, a sacralising modality of classification: where other animals and geographies might be expendable, wild animals, and wildernesses ought to be preserved, and actively protected. In general, this articulation constitutes one of the more important, if silent ways with which rewilders establish a normative subjectivity vis-a-vis conservationist practice. In so far as certain animals are wild, and certain geographies are said to constitute wildernesses, they should be preserved.

On one level, this kind of discourse suggests a continuity with respect to romantic-sublime discourses of nature that are centuries old. However, rewilders specify the frame further: they index some kinds of wild animals and wildernesses, which they classify as being particularly worthy of conservation; and do so with reference to a scientific discourse about species and their interrelations. That discourse is the one associated with the field of conservation biology, which was established in the 1980s (see for example, Soulé & Wilcox, 1980; Meine, Soulé, & Noss, 2006).

A detailed account of this field, or even of its proposals regarding rewilding, is beyond the scope of this article. Here it will suffice to note that one of the founders of conservation biology was Michael E. Soulé, and in 1998 Soulé, writing with the biologist Reed Noss (Soulé & Noss, 1998), put forward proposals that are now widely regarded as being formative for what has become an increasingly globalised rewilding movement (see also Foreman, 2004). Soulé and Noss characterised rewilding as a form of conservation that goes beyond the ‘biodiversity conservation’ paradigm, and so beyond the ‘representation of vegetation or physical features diversity and the protection of particular biotic features’ (Soulé & Noss, 1998, p. 19). Rewilding, they suggested, involves intervention on three levels, or ‘the three Cs’: the preservation of cores (large, strictly protected reserves, i.e., ‘the wild’ or ‘wilderness’); the creation and/or preservation of corridors between such cores, across anthropogenically developed areas (thereby ensuring connectivity amongst the reserves); and the reintroduction where necessary of large carnivores (or more generally, of keystone species) (Soulé & Noss, 1998, p. 22).

As this account begins to explain, Soulé and Noss were particularly keen to index large carnivores, which they argued were responsible for initiating what they framed as ‘top-down’ ecological interactions, known as trophic cascades (Paine, 1980). In the absence of large carnivores capable of controlling, say, medium to large herbivores, but also smaller predators, an ecosystem might eventually lose its biodiversity thanks to overgrazing, or to predation by an exploding population of the smaller predators, with cascading effects across several trophic levels (see for example Terborgh et al., 1999). A classic example involves the extirpation of wolves from the Yellowstone Park in the 1920s, and then their reintroduction in 1995–1996 (see for example, Singer, Mark, & Cates, 1994; Beschta & Ripple, 2007).

Since the publication of Soulé and Noss’s proposals, rewilders have recontextualised aspects of those proposals in ways that have reflected the specificities of their own fields of interaction and the ecologies in which they wished to intervene. The proposals of Rewilding Europe are no exception. In some of the earlier policy statements, Rewilding Europe have been particularly keen on reintroducing large herbivores, or what one document classified more generally
as ‘Large Apex Consumer Species’ (Wild10, 2015, p. 9, italics added to the original. See also the signature ‘aurochs’ programme, Goderie, Helmer, & Kerkdijk-Otten, 2013). This has generated controversy in so far as some ecologists have regarded the emphasis on herbivores as a kind of ecological exceptionalism that reflects Dutch rewilders’ debt to the discourse of ‘Natuurontwikkeling’ (roughly translated as ‘nature development’) (see Fisher, 2018, 2019). Perhaps in response to this kind of criticism, later documents produced by Rewilding Europe have gone out of their way to recognise the importance of both leaving nature to ‘do what it may’, and of reintroducing large carnivores: ‘Rewilding Europe recognizes the crucially important ecological role of large carnivores’ (Rewilding Europe, 2019, p. 3, italics in the original). This emphasis to one side, Rewilding Europe recognised from an early stage that the absence of large predators and herbivores might ‘generate extensive cascading of detrimental effects in marine, terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems. This “trophic downgrading” affects functions and resilience of ecosystems and has negative impacts on biodiversity as well as the spread of infectious diseases, carbon sequestration, invasive species, and biochemical cycles’ (Wild10, 2015, p. 9).

Thus far, I’ve highlighted the role of discourses of science and nature. However, to understand how Rewilding Europe links tourism to its rewilding initiative, it is necessary to consider the role of socio-economic discourse, and with it, a discourse of tourism. Let’s begin with the former. In its earliest promotional literature, Rewilding Europe explained that ‘The backdrop for Rewilding Europe is an ailing agricultural economy in rural Europe, propped up by inefficient EU subsidies and heading towards a period of rapid change as these subsidies are replaced and restructured’ (Rewilding Europe, 2012, p. 20). But whereas ‘nature conservation has often been seen as an influence which seeks to slow or indeed halt economic activity’, Rewilding Europe would aim to recognise ‘the vital role of business, investment and job opportunities for the success of conservation’ (Rewilding Europe, 2012, p. 20). This being so, Rewilding Europe would ‘seek to exploit rapidly evolving new markets – for example, nature-based tourism’, which it noted was growing ‘at three times the rate of conventional tourism globally … with the right investments in tourism facilities and promotion, several areas in Europe have the potential to become world-class wildlife tourism attractions’ (Rewilding Europe, 2012, p. 20).

This, and numerous other invocations of the need to embrace ‘business’ suggest that the Rewilding Europe initiative has developed what is arguably a neoliberal discourse on rewilding (for an account of neoliberalism, and neoliberalisation, see Harvey, 2005; England & Ward, 2016, respectively). This is particularly evident in one of the economic discourses that is invoked by Rewilding Europe’s mission statements—what may be described as a discourse of ‘natural capital’ (after the influential concept proposed by Constanza & Daly, 1992 in an article for Conservation Biology). Natural capital, and the later ‘natural capitalism’ (see Hawken, Lovins, & Lovins, 1999), are at once responses to, but in the end themselves arguably forms of the neoliberalisation of nature (Castree, 2008). Simplifying somewhat, those who conceptualise natural capital seek to ‘economise’ ecological relations so as to reveal the ecological costs of economic development. However, this strategy is integrally linked to a much broader social process that involves dynamics of privatisation and marketisation, deregulation and reregulation, market proxies in the residual public sector, and the construction of flanking mechanisms in the civil society (Castree, 2008, p. 142). Rewilding Europe is, as an organisation, arguably a good example of the last of these aspects.

One especially prominent version of the neoliberal discourse may be found in the work of the biologist Gretchen C. Daily. In the late 1990s, Daily suggested that if ‘goods and services flowing from natural ecosystems are greatly undervalued by society’, this was at least partly because ‘the benefits those ecosystems provide are not traded in formal markets and do not send
price signals of changes in their supply or condition’ (Daily, 1997, p. 2). The solution was to develop a scheme with which to render economically accountable not just the ecological ‘goods’ that have long been employed by economies—e.g., seafood, forage, timber, biomass fuels, and many pharmaceuticals—but also the ‘ecological services’, viz., the ‘actual life-support functions, such as cleansing, recycling, and renewal’ as well as the ‘intangible aesthetic and cultural benefits’ of ecosystems (Daily, 1997, p. 3). Amongst the latter, Daily included the provision of ‘the aesthetic beauty and the intellectual stimulation that lift the human spirit’ (Daily, 1997, p. 4).

During the 2000s, this discourse came to echoed by a growing number of scientific and conservation(ist) institutions—amongst them, the United Nation’s Millennial Ecosystem Assessment (see for example, Millennial Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). The concept also began to be used in discussions about nature tourism, and ecotourism (see for example de Groot, Wilson, & Baumanns, 2002). Its influence is evident across the promotional literature of Rewilding Europe. For example, *A Vision for a Wilder Europe* (henceforth Vision), a document produced by Rewilding Europe and other participants in the tenth World Wildlife Conference (Wild10, held in Salamanca in 2013), spoke of the ‘the need for wild land to provide ecosystem services like clean water and air, as base-line scientific reference areas, [and] for recreation and tourism … and indeed, to refresh our human spirit and wellbeing’ (Wild10, 2015, p. 3, italics added). According to Vision, by 2025 the signatories of the proposals hoped ‘to give more people a closer relationship with nature in contrast to our highly technological world, increase resilience to the effects of climate change, and generate new economic opportunities and better services for society’ (Wild10, 2015, p. 7, italics added). An identical modality of framing is evident in later documents, including Rewilding Europe’s current Three-Year Strategic Plan (2019–2021), which suggests that ‘We have, as a society, begun to recognise the need for wild land, to provide ecosystem services like clean water and air, as base-line scientific reference areas, for recreation and economic development, and [once again], to refresh our human spirit and wellbeing’ (Rewilding Europe, 2019, p. 8).

To be clear, not all rewilders embrace neoliberalisation, and indeed some actively oppose it (see for example, Monbiot, 2019). In the case of Rewilding Europe, the proximity to neoliberalism may be explained with reference to various factors, including the corporate backgrounds of several of its organisational members and backers; the importance of a neoliberal ethos for environmental policy frameworks in the early twenty-first-century European Union; but also, and as I have just explained, the ironic rise of a neoliberal discourse even amongst conservation biologists who might otherwise be highly critical of untrammelled economic development.

Now if Rewilding Europe has been keen to develop certain socio-economic relations as part of its initiative, the statements quoted above reveal the importance that a discourse of tourism plays in this process. One of the ‘tools’ established by Rewilding Europe was the European Safari Company, which it launched in late 2016. According to its website, the European Safari Company specialises in ‘experiential nature-based travel across Europe’:

The European Safari Company offers unique adventures that directly support nature, wildlife and local cultures in unique places across our continent. Places where nature is still thriving or bouncing back due to rural depopulation, legal protection and rewilding efforts. Places that have the opportunity to build a new future based on their unique setting, landscapes, wildlife, local culture and people. (European Safari Company, 2016; see also Rewilding Europe, 2016b)
As these statements begin to suggest, the kind of tourism that the Rewilding Europe initiative seeks to promote entails a combination of wildlife tourism and adventure tourism. However, both are framed in ways that suggest a commitment to ecotourism—albeit, what might be characterised as ‘soft’ ecotourism (Weaver, 2001). There are of course numerous ways of defining ecotourism (Fennell, 2015), but for the purposes of this chapter it will suffice to employ a definition likely to be endorsed by Rewilding Europe: the one proposed by The International Ecotourism Society (TIES), ‘responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment, sustains the well-being of the local people, and involves interpretation and education’ (TIES, 2015). Soft ecotourism is easily mistaken for ‘nature-based tourism’, i.e., the kind of mass tourism whose members are attracted to sites and/or events deemed to be of outstanding ecological significance, but who require as a condition for travel the kinds of luxuries associated with modern tourism—for example, easy access, a certain standard of accommodation, visitor programmes, etc.

Should such tourism still be called ecotourism? A number of scholars have noted that the ‘eco’ in ecotourism may be subject to greenwashing (see for example, Honey, 2008; Fennell, 2015). Soft ecotourism may itself be a sign of the neoliberalisation of alternative forms of tourism. To be sure, in the context of an increasingly catastrophic climate change, a case must be made that no form of tourism that relies on greenhouse gas-producing infrastructure may be regarded as being ‘ecological’. In recognition of these issues, I use the expression (eco)tourism to underscore the contested nature of the term. The last points notwithstanding, and as the earlier quotes show, Rewilding Europe does at least profess a commitment to sustainable forms of development, and with it, tourism with a strong element of localism. While practices on the ground may end up contradicting any such intent, it seems clear that, if rewilding is to involve any tourism, it can, discursively at least, only really ‘go’ with some form of ecotourism; to do otherwise would flatly contradict, even on the level of official policies and mission statements, the very aims of rewilding.

We can say then that, even as rewilding might restore wilderness areas and their wild animals, according to Rewilding Europe those same areas can and should in turn provide tourists with an ‘ecological service’—a cultural ecological service—which travellers might access via entities such as the European Safari Company. But doing so should be part of a broader business strategy designed to ensure that rewilding projects might still obtain funding despite the privatisation of environmental initiatives—itself one of the many consequences of neoliberalisation.

As I began to suggest at the start of this chapter, the discursive formation that articulates the relation between rewilding and (eco)tourism in the case of Rewilding Europe is based on a realist ontology. There is, however, an important exception to this orientation: what has to be characterised as an overtly idealist turn at the core not just of Rewilding Europe’s vision, but of rewilding initiatives more generally. The turn in question takes us back to the earlier mention of a romantic-sublime discourse of nature.

Across some of the quotes presented thus far, the reader will have noticed several references to an ‘imperative for wilderness’ (Wild10, 2015, p. 3), and a need for wild land ‘to refresh our human spirit and wellbeing’ (Rewilding Europe, 2019, p. 8). Daily also refers to ‘the aesthetic beauty and the intellectual stimulation that lift the human spirit’ (Daily, 1997, p. 4) (italics added to the originals). Of course, there can be no scientific evidence for ‘refreshment’, let alone the existence of a human ‘spirit’. The logic of this frame would thus appear to be a version of the following: if wild places and animals have essential attributes (as per the realist ontology), then those essences may somehow be transferred to, or reactivated in the ‘human spirit’ if individuals are able to travel to, or otherwise ‘commune’ with the wild, with wilderness. From this perspective, it seems that ‘going back to nature’ is the human equivalent of rewilding.
At least in the thought of some prominent rewilders, what might be characterised as *auto-rewilding* is not as far-fetched as might be assumed. *Vision*, the Wild10 conference statement mentioned earlier, included a long epigraphic quotation from George Monbiot’s (2013)*Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding*. Monbiot and *Feral* are credited with having played an important role in popularising rewilding across the English-speaking world (see for example Jørgensen, 2015). In *Feral*, Monbiot employs the representation of his own rather extreme leisure pursuits to illustrate what he himself describes as the ‘rewilding of human life’ (Monbiot, 2013, p. 10). According to Monbiot, this kind of rewilding should go hand in hand with the rewilding of beyond-human species and ecosystems. While Monbiot is careful not to oppose human rewilding to ‘civilisation’, he also makes it clear that it entails something like *becoming hominid*. In one example in the third chapter of *Feral*, Monbiot explains that, after finding a dead deer while ‘foraging for herbs and fungi in a wood in southern England’, he ‘gathered up the [deer’s] ankles and heaved it onto [his] shoulders’, and the ‘effect was remarkable. As soon as I felt its warmth on my back, I wanted to roar … This, my body told me, was why I was here. This was what I was for’ (Monbiot, 2013, p. 33). According to Monbiot, he believed, though he recognised he could not prove it, that he was ‘experiencing a genetic memory … These genetic memories—these unconsidered urges—are printed onto our chromosomes, an irreducible component of our identity’ (Monbiot, 2013, pp. 33–34).

From this kind of perspective, auto-rewilding via adventure tourism and wildlife tourism may be regarded as a way of returning to something like one’s ‘Pleistocene roots’—an idea that suggests a sociobiological discourse. It is arguably no coincidence that Monbiot, who is a zoologist by training and is well versed in rewilding conservation theory, adopts such a frame vis-a-vis his own practices. One of the main theories used by Soule and Noss to justify their version of rewilding is island biogeography theory, which was developed in part by Edward O. Wilson (see MacArthur & Wilson, 1967). As well as being a famous conservation activist in his own right (see for example Wilson 2016), Wilson is the renowned founder of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology (Wilson, 1975, 1978, 1998), and the proponent of the biophilia hypothesis (Wilson, 1984; Kellert & Wilson, 1993). Sociobiology, evolutionary psychology, and biophilia embrace adaptationism, and so diminish *a priori* the importance of cultural-historical contingency in any account of human natures (see Orzack & Forber, 2017).

**From discursive formation to hybrid geography**

Researchers in both the physical and critical social sciences have raised numerous questions regarding the claims made by evolutionary psychologists in general (see for example, Gould, 1979; Lewontin, Rose, & Kamin, 1984; Rose & Rose, 2001), and those who advocate the biophilia hypothesis in particular (see for example Joye & Blocke, 2011). Many have done so from discursive perspectives that reflect a *nominalist* ontology. A discussion of the different varieties of nominalism is beyond the scope of this chapter (see for example Rodríguez-Pereyra, 2016). Here it will suffice to note that the kind of nominalism that is generally used to critique evolutionary psychology underscores the discontinuities between general categories such as nature, human nature, the wild, or wilderness, and the particulars that they refer to. Where the subjects of realist, and positivist discourses tend to adopt a ‘nature-endorsing’ stance (Soper, 1995, p. 4), the advocates of nominalist and what are generally constructivist discourses adopt a ‘nature-sceptical’ stance (Soper, 1995, p. 4). The latter is the kind of perspective adopted not only by Foucault himself, but also by poststructuralist scholars concerned with discourses of nature, including Raymond Williams (1983), William Cronon (1996), and in a less markedly culturalist manner, Donna Haraway (1989, 1991).
The proposals of these scholars have been widely discussed, and in some cases hotly disputed (for a particularly pertinent example, see Soule, 1995). This being so, here I will consider a more recent set of proposals. As suggested earlier, rewilding initiatives may be regarded as a form of biopower. However, in Foucaultian scholarship, as in poststructuralist theory more generally, analyses of biopower tend to be short on the ‘bio’, and long on the ‘power’ (for a critique of this tendency, see Lindahl Elliot, 2019, pp. 235–237). Discourse analysis also runs the risk of logocentrism. These problems can be at least partly addressed by turning to research that is itself thoroughly nominalist (to echo the expression used by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, 2014, p. 492), but which does at least engage with beyond-human actors. I refer initially to the work of the social theorist and philosopher Bruno Latour, one of the founders of Actor-Network-Theory (Latour, 2005); but also to that of Sarah Whatmore, the leading scholar in a closely related subfield of human geography known as hybrid geography (Whatmore, 2002).

Simplifying greatly, ANT researchers argue that the meanings and roles of things are entirely contingent on their place in networks. However, the networks are themselves regarded as a matter of trajectories and inter-relations that are always in a state of flux. The networks can thus never be fully represented; a nominalist frame is evident in so far as it is assumed that there is, indeed there must be, a chasm between the necessarily generalising representations produced by scientists (or any other actors, for that matter), and the individuals (objects, processes, etc.) that such representations refer to. The challenge is thereby to develop a form of inquiry that remains very close to an explanatory degree zero vis-a-vis particulars. Any researcher’s attempt to develop a metalanguage (a vocabulary of theoretical concepts, more or less technical explanations, etc.) with which to explain a certain state of a things includes not only humans and their institutions, but all manner of creatures; documents and elements take and hold their shape in relation to each other in a state of flux. The networks can thus

In the context of this chapter, perhaps the best way of engaging with this kind of approach is via the research developed by Sarah Whatmore (2002), a human geographer who has built on ANT and other fields to develop a series of proposals vis-a-vis the study of beyond-human animals and geographies. In particular, I would like to highlight three aspects of Whatmore’s work which seem particularly pertinent to a problematisation of rewilding: its emphasis on the hybridity of ostensibly wild geographies; its rejection of a wilderness conceived as an outside; and its focus on topological, as opposed to metric space.

The first of these aspects is what gives the name to the geographic subfield: hybrid geographies rejects the culture–nature dualism that is so integral to rewilding. Instead, it seeks to recognise the hybridity of modern geographies. As conceived by Whatmore, this requires ‘an upheaval in the binary terms in which the question of nature has been posed and a recognition of the intimate, sensible and hectic bonds through which people and plants; devices and creatures; documents and elements take and hold their shape in relation to each other in the fabric-ations of everyday life’ (Whatmore, 2002, p. 3). Hybrid geographies oppose ‘the purifying impulse to fragment living fabrics of association and designate the proper places of “nature” and “society”’, and seek instead to countenance the world ‘as an always already inhabited achievement of heterogeneous social encounters where, as Donna Haraway puts it, “all of the actors are not human and all of the humans are not “us” however defined”’ (Whatmore, 2002, p. 3).
Rewilding Europe would doubtless enthusiastically embrace the idea that not all of the actors are human; its managers might suggest that the *whole point* of the initiative is to privilege nonhuman actors. Note, however, that central to this endeavour there is a ‘purifying impulse’ in the form of the indexing the wild and of wilderness, and with it the tacit opposition/classification of nature and culture. From this kind of perspective, wilderness is not only symbolically constructed as being wholly separate, but as being ‘outside’.

According to Whatmore, this *a priori* of a nature that is ‘outside’ must itself be refused. In as much as the wild is defined as that which lies beyond of human civilisation’s historical and geographical reach, it ‘renders the creatures that live “there” inanimate figures in unpeopled landscapes, removing humans to the “here” of a society from which all trace of animality has been expunged’ (Whatmore & Thorne, 1998, pp. 435–436). Instead of starting from an exterior world or an ‘original nature’, Whatmore would like to start from the premise that “‘wild’ animals have been, and continue to be, routinely imaged and organized within multiple social orderings in different times and places’ (Whatmore, 2002, p. 14). Such orderings ‘confound the moral geographies of wilderness which presuppose an easy coincidence between the species and spaces of a pristine nature, confining their place to the margins and interstices of the social world’ (Whatmore, 2002, pp. 9–10). The problem is thereby not to start with the wild or with wildlife as ‘the outside’, but to approach it from an ‘inside’ where ‘the everyday worlds of people, plants and animals are already in the process of being mixed up’ (Whatmore & Thorne, 1998, p. 437).

Two aspects of this critique seem particularly relevant to Rewilding Europe’s initiative. First, however much Rewilding Europe and figures such as Monbiot have emphasised the importance of leaving nature to be what it will (both Monbiot and some of the later Rewilding Europe mission statements acknowledge the impossibility of a return to a historic nature [see Monbiot, 2013, pp. 9–10, and Rewilding Europe, 2019, p. 6]), there is a contradiction to the extent that rewilders can and must, according to their own discourse, *intervene*. As Monbiot has put it,’Rewilding, to me, is about resisting the urge to control nature and allowing it to find its own way’. Alas, he adds in almost the same expository breath that ‘[rewilding] involves reintroducing absent plants and animals (and in a few cases culling exotic species which cannot be contained by native wildlife), pulling down fences, blocking the drainage ditches, but otherwise stepping back’ (Monbiot, 2013, pp. 9–10). In this double movement – claiming on the one hand that nature must find its own way, but on the other hand suggesting what steps should be taken to ensure that this happens—we find what is, discursively speaking, a key ambivalence in the rewilding movement, as well as the clearest evidence that a certain biopower must be involved.

A second implication is for (eco)tourism. Far from simply constituting the kind of ‘return’ of people implied by Rewilding Europe’s use of concepts such as ‘rural depopulation’ or ‘land abandonment’ (see for example Wild10, 2015, p. 27), tourism constitutes but one instance of an ongoing, and almost always ancient entanglement between both human and beyond-human actors. In this context, to speak of ‘rural depopulation’ arguably constitutes a convenient case of what critical discourse analysts would describe as a non–transactive, and nominalised statement (Kress & Hodge, 1993, p. 20). It is convenient in so far as it symbolically empties rural areas, and thereby prepares them for rewilding—but this without having to engage with the politics behind any real or imagined exodus. From a hybrid geography perspective, far from being the purely restorative process that is envisioned by many rewilding initiatives, and to which people may be ‘added’ as part of a general shift towards something like, say, an ‘experience economy’ (Pine & Gilmore, 1998, 2013), rewilding tourism constitutes the latest chapter in nature-culture entanglement, however *sui generis* (eco)tourism might be from a cultural-historical point of view.
Taking this point further, it may be argued that it is precisely the entanglement which makes rewilding possible—this not just thanks to the hybridity of the geographies in question, but because in many cases rewilding initiatives do quite literally generate, as Rewilding Europe itself puts it, ‘business’. From this perspective, if the many who oppose rewilding on the grounds of agribusiness have a vested interest in maintaining a certain rural order, so do those who seek to generate wildernesses mainly if not expressly for the purposes of tourism. A case in point, the rewilding game reserves in South Africa (see for example Hoogendoorn, Meintjes, Kelso, & Fitchett, 2018). In such contexts, it might even be argued that there is a particularly convenient ‘goodness of fit’ between the taxa indexed by many rewilding initiatives, and tourism: the kinds of animals that many travellers would most like to see are often precisely the large, and ‘charismatic’ carnivores and herbivores.

Rewilders would doubtless object that the choice of species/taxa has, or should have, nothing to do with charisma and everything to do with trophic cascades—themselves dynamics objectively observed and well-documented by science. If, however, some recent research is anything to go by, then such claims may not rest on as solid a foundation as might be expected. At the very least, it is likely that there is a great deal more complexity than is allowed for by accounts such as Soulé and Noss’s (see for example Alston et al., 2019; see also Marshall, Thompson Hobbs, & Cooper, 2013; Nogués-Bravo et al., 2016).

The last aspect I will consider with respect to hybrid geographies involves the shift from metric to topological space, for which Whatmore draws on the work of the philosopher Michel Serres (Serres & Latour, 1995). Serres explains the difference between the two kinds of space via a remarkable analogy: when one takes a handkerchief and spreads it out as if to iron it, one can see in it certain fixed distances and proximities. If, for example, one sketches a circle in one area, one can mark out nearby points and measure far-off distances. This is, arguably, precisely the kind of spatial logic that is used by rewilding initiatives to delimit wildernesses, however much they then seek to interconnect those wildernesses via biotic corridors. If, however, one takes that same handkerchief and one crumples it by putting it in one’s pocket, then suddenly two hitherto distant points will be close, or even superimposed. Or if one tears the handkerchief in certain places, the opposite happens: two points that were close now become distant. Topology is the science of nearness and rifts, while metrical geometry is the science of stable and well-defined distances (Serres in Serres & Latour, 1995, p. 60).

Whatmore approaches hybrid geographies and their creatures in ways that acknowledge a certain ‘crumpling’ and tearing of space—in the context of rewilding, precisely the kind of phenomenon that occurs when humans remove specimens from one place, and reintroduce them in areas where they had previously become locally extinct; or indeed, what happens when humans reintroduce themselves, as tourists but also as rewilders, into habitats that nevertheless continue to be conceived and objectified along the lines of a metric conception of space, and on the basis of the traditional conception of wilderness: as an ‘out there’, a non-human space.

If scholars such as Latour and Whatmore offer a valid perspective—and certainly some substantial objections may be raised (see for example Lindahl Elliot, 2019, pp. 359–364)—then the advocates of discourses of rewilding and (eco)tourism should put far more emphasis on the hybridity of both practices. By this kind of account, (eco)tourism in rewilding areas involves not so much going back to a restored nature, but the latest in a long line of interventions, or perhaps one should say in-terventions: interventions ‘from inside’—inside, that is, an at once topologically and metrically conceived space. From this kind of perspective, the challenge is to recognise and explain the hybrid contingencies of encounter, as opposed to simply celebrating, in the way that the Rewilding Europe video does, the opportunity to go to the wilderness and to see wild animals.
References


