

Rewilding Agriculture

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Many agricultural systems have become more sensitive to the benefits of biodiversity and environmental services in recent years. But at the landscape scale, modernized landscapes in industrialised countries rarely seem to change. But could something new happen, beyond the on-farm conservation and nature reserve protection that is being increasingly encouraged? Could whole landscapes be transformed to rewild agriculture? One of the most compelling of Aldo Leopold's short 1940s' essays, *Thinking Like a Mountain*, details the relationship between the wolf, deer and mountain. He recalls his own shooting of a mother wolf caring for a pack of tumbling cubs: "*in those days, we never heard of passing up a chance to kill a wolf*". But seeing the green light in its eyes extinguished, he comes to mourn his earlier lack of understanding, and goes on to describe the consequences of eliminating the wolves, for, without them, the deer expand in numbers, and the mountain loses all its vegetation. In the end the whole system collapses.

What prospects are there, then, to bring back some of the more iconic wild animals into landscapes? Rewilding has been described by Peter Taylor in *Beyond Conservation* as "*putting a new soul in the landscape*". It aims to create something quite new. Many of the animals and birds being proposed as possible reintroductions have long since disappeared from our local memories. Bringing them back would change the land and change the people too. Some reintroductions have been relatively uncontroversial. In the UK, the White-tailed eagle was eradicated in 1916, reintroductions attempted from 1959, and has been breeding successfully in the Western Isles of Scotland since the mid-1980s. The Great Bustard has been reintroduced from Hungary to Salisbury Plain, and has so far survived the predatory effects of foxes and motor cars. Tarpan and Konik horses now help in the managed grazing of coastal marshes and reed beds, and Chillingham cattle, relatives of ancient aurochs, now wander northern forests.

But it is the next cohort of introductions that will excite controversy. Beavers have been proposed for release, but hitherto rejected by some for fear that their escape would lead to habitat destruction (but wouldn't some more wetlands be good?). Others are talking about elk – could they be introduced as part of the Wicken Fen project to the north-east of Cambridge, as fragmented fens in the landscape are gradually linked by careful land purchase and consolidation? Wild boar are already present in four or five herds across southern England, and the policy question centres on whether they should be permitted to remain, or be hunted for money. But the greatest of all controversy would come with predator introductions, particularly wolves, bear and lynx. Bear get a better press than wolves, but are rather low on any proposed lists. Lynx do not carry so much public concern, and might be permitted one day.

Wolves, though, would be an extraordinary attraction if introduced into a landscape large enough to support active packs. I suspect many people would love to see them in the wild, whilst at the same time feeling the almost visceral fear that wolves seem to provoke. In Norway, some wolves have crossed the border from Sweden, provoking public concern, despite the fact that there are no records of wolves having attacked people, and that dogs hospitalize 4000 people per year – but are not subject to the same concern. Elsewhere in Europe, wolves are now in Poland, Germany, Slovenia, Italy, Switzerland, France, Romania, Ukraine and Russia. But these iconic animals would need whole landscapes to be devoted to them if they were to survive. The best example of such a project is at Oostvaardersplassen in the Netherlands, a 5600 hectare reserve created on a reclaimed polder. There are no predators, but there is a herd of 300 ancient Hech cattle and another of 200 Konik horses.

What do all these rewilding ideas mean for agriculture? Some of this rewilding does mean the creation of completely separate habitats, but most implies an overlap, a sharing of the landscape for its various functions. I believe that it is possible to have food producing systems that complement and enhance nature. More often than not, such nature will be in farms and fields. There is now growing

confidence that we can indeed make the transition directly to more sustainable and productive farming systems that both protect and use nature. This will require some rethinking about the very idea of a farm, and its redefinition as an activity that does many things. The new model farm produces wholesome food that people want to buy and eat, and it contributes to the production of many environmental goods and services. It coexists with wildlife, and links people to the land directly via the food they eat and places they know about and can enjoy.