

WHY REWILDING IS CRUCIAL FOR HUMAN HEALTH

– Jan Deckers –

George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea, and Human Life*,
Penguin Books, London 2014

The pivotal argument of this book is that the state of most ecosystems on the planet, indeed of the ecosphere in general, is deplorable, and that we must rewild vast tracts of land and sea to alter this situation. Many scholars have argued as much when they reflect upon the narrow use value of biodiverse ecosystems for members of *homo sapiens*, i.e. their capacity to provide the material resources on which human life depends, and what the loss of this value might imply for the longer-term survival chances of our species.¹ Monbiot enriches the discussion by arguing that rewilding is not only important to secure our material resources, but also to enhance our mental well-being. In doing so, he stresses something which I have argued is crucial to human morality: the recognition that many human actions produce negative Global Health Impacts (GHIs) that ought to be avoided.² Whilst others have argued that rewilding is vital for human health,³ Monbiot – a journalist with a background in zoology – makes this point better than any account that I have seen thus far. His book gripped me from start to finish as the language he uses is very accessible and speaks straight to the heart. Whilst philosophers have also written on this topic,⁴ Gammon may be right to call Monbiot “rewilding’s biggest promotor.”⁵ In spite of the fact that his style may be somewhat different from standard philosophical texts, I believe that this book will have long-lasting appeal to ecological philosophers not only because of the way in

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¹ See e.g. Daily, Matson (2008).

² Deckers (2011).

³ See e.g. Fraser (2009).

⁴ See e.g. Deliège (2016); Prior, Brady (2017); Tanasescu (2017).

⁵ Gammon (forthcoming).

which it is written, but also because of its profound challenge to dominant conceptions of what we ought (not) to do with the nonhuman world.

Monbiot provides vivid and lyrical personal illustrations of how his own health is felt to be in jeopardy by the monotonous landscapes that dominate nature management, and how many nature conservation organisations largely act to preserve these barren landscapes, which he frequently refers to by means of the term 'desert.' An example are the heather moors and rough grasslands that dominate much upland, which Monbiot considers to be symptomatic of ecosystems that have been impoverished by the removal of trees. Whilst he appreciates that heather landscapes, and the species that they harbour, may be relatively rare, he fails to understand why many ecologists wish to preserve them. By preserving them, we prevent other species from entering the landscape, where rewilded landscapes provide habitats for a far greater range of species.

When it comes to mapping out the ecological destruction that many people take for granted, Monbiot provides many examples, focusing in particular on Great Britain, and particularly on Wales, where he identifies "a woolly ruminant from Mesopotamia" as the chief agent: "The sheep has caused more extensive environmental damage in this country than all the building that has ever taken place here."⁶ Hence the title of chapter 9, "Sheepwrecked," wherein he laments that "the only wide tracts of upland Britain not grazed to the roots by sheep are those grazed to the roots by overstocked deer, in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland."⁷ As deep vegetation results in a slower release of water compared to shallow vegetation, this results in flooding and soil erosion. Monbiot not only sketches the ecological implications but also the financial costs: many sheep farming enterprises in Great Britain only survive because tax payers both provide subsidies and absorb externalised costs.

Rather than preserve these landscapes, Monbiot argues for a mixed approach where productive land would continue to be farmed in the interests of human food security, but where less valuable land, including many upland areas, would be rewilded. The aim of rewilding is not to restore or to preserve particular ecosystems in accordance with some human blueprint, but to allow nature to be. Whilst he uses the concept of nature to refer to nonhuman nature, Monbiot does not aim to divorce human beings from nature and, indeed, recognises that we are an integral part of it. Monbiot associates many benefits with rewilding, including reductions in erosion, flooding, and disease, but his principal motivation lies

⁶ Monbiot (2014): 70.

⁷ Ibidem: 158.

simply in his “delight in the marvels of nature,”⁸ a motivation that I share wholeheartedly. This does not mean that all human intervention should be prohibited. Rather, it may be necessary to create the right conditions to allow nature to move towards a more biodiverse landscape to address historic problems. An example is the eradication of the wolf in many countries. Monbiot refers with enthusiasm to the fact that Yellowstone underwent dramatic and unexpected changes since the wolf was reintroduced, after all human attempts to manage deer in the absence of the wolf had failed.⁹

Monbiot identifies several obstacles to his rewilding project. Firstly, there is the cultural belief that managed landscapes are better than unmanaged landscapes. Monbiot notes, however, that double standards operate in relation to this belief. On the one hand, many people may be upset about the demise of rainforests in tropical countries that still enjoy a rich biodiversity. On the other hand, people want to keep on seeing the land that they are used to seeing in the condition that it is, priding themselves of the fact that it is in that condition. What they forget, however, is that the rich biodiversity that features in tropical rainforests could be present in more temperate climates as well. Monbiot mentions, for example, that rainforests could extend all the way from Spain to Great Britain. A further example of these double standards is his recognition that many people are quite prepared to pay for the preservation of dangerous animals in far-flung countries, for example leopards and tigers, but dismiss the idea of reintroducing the wolf, in spite of his research which documents that these animals rarely harm human beings.¹⁰

Secondly, even if some people may value so-called “unmanaged” landscapes more positively, the landscapes that are perceived to be unmanaged may in fact be managed to a great extent. The reason why our perception may not be appropriate relates to a condition that he calls “shifting baseline syndrome,” a concept coined by Daniel Pauly.¹¹ Landscapes that are highly artificial, for example those found in the Lake District of England, are regarded as natural, simply because people’s baselines about what they consider to be a wild landscape have shifted. Out of sight, out of mind. When people no longer see a wild landscape, they no longer know what it is, and consequently come to see landscapes that may in reality be a far cry from wild landscapes as truly wild. Monbiot rightly wonders

⁸ Ibidem: 106.

⁹ Ibidem: 85–86.

¹⁰ Ibidem: 114.

¹¹ Pauly (1995).

whether children's books might contribute to this queer perception of reality. In these books, Monbiot writes, "farmers have broad smiles and rosy cheeks and live in arcadian peace with the animals they keep" and "the issues of slaughter, butchery, consumption, castration, tussing, separation, battery production, farrowing crates, pesticides, waste disposal and other such industrial realities never feature."¹²

Thirdly, he identifies the power of land owners as a significant factor. With regard to this power, a large body of evidence supports the view that land owners in most societies possess far greater control over what is done with the land than those who do not own it. Whereas what is (not) done with land is in the interest of all people, land owners also cater for their own interests. If what we do or do not do with the land is, however, in the interest of all people, there is no good reason why decisions should be made largely by a small elite. Under the Common Agricultural Policy of the European Union, for example, subsidies to farmers are largely dished out according to acreage: the more land, the more money, regardless of what one actually does with it. This is how, for example, everyone in Britain pays a large sum of money to the 0.6% of the population who own 69% of the land, a statistic that Monbiot attributes to Cahill.¹³

A final obstacle that he identifies is fear, which takes me to chapter seven of Monbiot's project: "bring back the wolf," where he notes with enthusiasm that this animal has been reintroduced or spread in many European countries, including Spain, France, Germany, and Poland. Monbiot is aware that some will oppose the wolf's reintroduction in other countries, either out of fear for the lives of people or out of fear for the lives of others, where sheep farmers, for example, may loath the idea of wolves killing sheep. In relation to the latter, Monbiot retorts: "a wolf that makes a habit of killing sheep can simply be shot."¹⁴ He continues that hunting may in fact be beneficial for wolves for three reasons. Firstly, a hunting lobby might be concerned about the preservation of the wolf to protect their hunting interests. Secondly, he thinks that it conjures up the idea that the animals are being managed, thus alleviating the concern that many have with an unchecked population. The third reason, which he considers to be the most important, is that it would keep the wolves frightened of people so that they may be less likely to attack them. In relation to this third reason, Monbiot makes an interesting speculation about why so many large animals ("megafauna") have continued to exist in

¹² Monbiot (2014): 164.

¹³ Cahill (2002).

¹⁴ Monbiot (2014): 115.

Africa and in some parts of Asia, whereas they are largely extinct in other parts of the world: they co-evolved with hominids and early human beings, thus learning to fear them, whereas in other parts of the world they did not do so, turning them into easy targets when human beings migrated out of Africa.¹⁵ Whereas Monbiot may be right in this respect, I wonder whether a harmonious relationship with wild animals might be possible without the need to shoot them or to instil fear. In any case, I do not share the view that wolves who present threats to sheep should simply be allowed to be shot.

I think that at least two other factors could be added to this list: the power of habit, and conceptual confusion. The first of these relates to “shifting baseline syndrome”: baselines are shifted through habituation. Repeated exposure to incorrect ideas increases the chance of entrenching them, reducing the chance of new ideas emerging and being taken seriously. Applied to this topic, we might say that the likelihood of people being able to distinguish more natural landscapes from less natural ones not only diminishes with the destruction of the former, but also with repeated exposure to incorrect ideas of what such landscapes actually are.¹⁶

A second, and related problem, is conceptual confusion. Monbiot claims that rewilding means both leaving nature alone and actively intervening in nature. This paradox is confusing. Such confusion is not uncommon, prompting Testa and Harris to conclude that “any meaningful distinction between the natural and the artificial [...] has (been) all but obliterated.”¹⁷ If this were the case, Monbiot’s project would seem to be doomed. Could it be rescued? I think it can but first some conceptual clarity must be provided. In one sense, everything is part of nature, including human beings. In this sense, rewilding might refer to the ambition to respect the self-willed character of both human and nonhuman entities. In another sense, however, the concept of nature can be used to refer to that which is outside human agency, to refer to what Monbiot defines as “wilderness”: ecosystems that are “self-willed [...] governed not by human management but by their own processes.”¹⁸ It is this sense of rewilding that is relevant for Monbiot: to create space for nonhuman entities to flourish without being managed by human beings. However, this also creates a problem as it is unlikely that Monbiot would regard the many places in Scotland where thousands of deer roam, unchecked by any human or other predators, as more natural or wild landscapes compared to places where,

¹⁵ Ibidem: 139.

¹⁶ Duhigg (2013).

¹⁷ Testa, Harris (2005): 161.

¹⁸ Monbiot (2014): 10.

all else being equal, trees can reproduce thanks to deer numbers being kept under control, in spite of the fact that the latter involves an element of human intervention that is absent from the former, either through human culling or through the reintroduction of the wolf.

This raises the question why, in some situations, it may be more appropriate to associate rewilding with managing spaces than with leaving them alone. I think the answer to this conundrum lies in acknowledging that further human intervention may sometimes be necessary to avoid continued exposure to the effects of past human intervention. It seems appropriate to think of these efforts not in terms of attempts to restore the kinds of processes that took place before any particular human interventions, but as attempts to mitigate some of the prolonged effects of past human interventions, for example the effects associated with the eradication of the wolf. Whilst Monbiot and others are right to emphasise the centrality of nonhuman agency within the concept of rewilding,¹⁹ Monbiot also recognises rightly that projects that allow nonhuman nature to be do not necessarily exemplify rewilding more than other projects that involve some human intervention. This shows that rewilding projects can be distinguished from other projects that manage nonhuman nature by the attempt to reduce, rather than to continue or to reinforce, the effects of past human interventions.

A rewilding project that Monbiot refers to with much enthusiasm is a project in Scotland, led by Alan Watson Featherstone, the founder of “Trees for Life,” an organisation that has planted more than a million trees in the north of Scotland on land it has purchased.²⁰ Whereas this organisation culls deer to prevent them from killing young trees, Monbiot refers to research that suggests that wild predators do a better job at protecting trees than hunters,²¹ which is why he would welcome the introduction of the wolf in the highlands of Scotland “if there is broad public enthusiasm for the project.”²² With regard to this condition, Monbiot is rightly at pains to point out that such support is needed to avoid the coercion associated with forced rewilding projects that have been carried out in the past, for example by the Nazis who cleared the area in and around the Białowieża Forest in Poland after their invasion in 1941, killing many people in the process.²³ Whereas Monbiot rightly disagrees with this process, he also points out that the Białowieża

¹⁹ See e.g. Ward, Prior (2016).

²⁰ See <http://treesforlife.org.uk/> [Accessed 19.3.2018].

²¹ Kuijper (2011).

²² Monbiot (2014): 117.

²³ *Ibidem*: 186–208.

Forest is now one of the most undisturbed ecosystems in Europe, attributing its rich biodiversity partly to the presence of the “rooting and grubbing” behaviour of the wild boar.²⁴ Many areas of Poland and Sweden also enjoy rich biodiversity because of the actions of European beavers, who eat trees, thus creating more diverse habitats.

With regard to the question of whether wooded landscapes enhance biodiversity, Monbiot also refers to a study in the Cairngorms (Scotland),²⁵ which found that the small area of the Cairngorms that is wooded supports eleven times more nationally important species than grassland, and thirteen times more than heather moorland.²⁶ He also stresses the importance of woodland restoration for the whole of Great Britain by considering a paper that describes that 40% of species that have become extinct in Great Britain since 1800 lived in woodland.²⁷

In the final two chapters, he turns his attention to the sea, where he mentions that hardly any areas are protected from fishing and that many are subjected to the destructive force of fishing, including trawler fishing: “rockhopping trawlers turn over boulders of up to 25 tonnes, either flushing out or smashing the fish and crustaceans they harbour, destroying the habitat as effectively as a bulldozer in a rainforest.”²⁸ Arguing that this is not simply an ecological disaster, but also a significant social problem, he writes: “Fish is an essential source of protein for communities in West Africa, but the foreign fishing fleets have wrecked many of the stocks on which they depend.”²⁹ I share this concern, but hasten to add that it is not because fish are “an essential source of protein” that their consumption ought to be “essential.” Whereas the health of many people in West Africa may depend on the consumption of fish, the consumption of fish has been questioned where people can sustainably consume other sources of essential protein without jeopardising their health.³⁰

Monbiot weaves a significant amount of fiction into his factual account which is not always based on academic literature. I personally do not care much for this approach but this may say more about the fact that I find it hard to relate to any literature that is not academic than about any shortcomings in Monbiot’s

²⁴ *Ibidem*: 95.

²⁵ Shaw, Thompson (2006): 399.

²⁶ Monbiot (2014): 219.

²⁷ *Ibidem*: 225. Reference is made to Hambler, Henderson, Speight (2011).

²⁸ Monbiot (2014): 247.

²⁹ *Ibidem*: 245.

³⁰ Deckers (2016).

approach. Whereas some factual claims may need to be checked over carefully for their accuracy, it does not take anything away from the validity and great significance of Monbiot's vision: yes, we must all urgently commit ourselves to a significant rewilding project. This does not imply that cultural landscapes with rich meaning should necessarily be rewilded as Deliège has argued, in my opinion convincingly, that more traditional nature preservation projects are, in spite of their differences with rewilding projects, united in the quest to either preserve or establish meaning.³¹

Whether the execution of Monbiot's project would optimally establish meaning, however, is another matter, as Gammon has questioned whether it goes far enough in that she thinks it is "compatible with the necessities and even luxuries of contemporary lives in the global north."³² Whilst this critique is too harsh, there is no doubt that what she calls "primitivist rewilding," advocated for example by the group Wild Abundance in North Carolina, entails a greater commitment to detach oneself from the ordered world that prevails in many capitalist northern countries than envisaged by Monbiot's project.³³ Whereas more discussion is needed on what is required from us to establish optimal relationships with other ecological entities, I would like to end this review by reiterating my agreement with Monbiot's main thesis by using some of his words: "I believe that pockets of wild land – small in some places, large in others – should be accessible to everyone: no one should have to travel far to seek refuge from the ordered world."³⁴

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³¹ Deliège (2016).

³² Gammon (forthcoming).

³³ See e.g. <http://www.rewild.com/> [Accessed 19.3.2018].

³⁴ Monbiot (2014): 153.

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