
Rewilding. A pragmatic focus on the technical composition of the wild

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Abstract

In Europe, the United States and other countries around the world the number of initiatives aimed at rewilding environmentally degraded areas has been increasing significantly. Rewilding projects involve restoring and conserving large areas by reintroducing key species (especially megafauna and predators) and improving connectivity. Proponents of rewilding underscore the inherent value of wilderness areas, as well as the physical and psychological benefits for humans who come in close contact with it. Compared to more common types of environmental restoration, rewilding emphasizes returning an area to its wild primal state, often applying paleoenvironmental knowledge to carry out the projects. This focus has led to a rather long list of criticisms that go beyond those levelled at any environmental restoration project. These include criticisms related to the safety of humans and domestic animals, since these projects include the reintroduction of potentially dangerous animals; there are also doubts about the reliability of the scientific knowledge provided and the effectiveness of the techniques and policies implemented; it is pointed out that because ecosystems are in continuous transformation, returning an area to a specific historical period is arbitrary; there is also criticism regarding the paradox of employing artificial means and modern management techniques to return an area to a supposedly natural state; the strength of the arguments used to value wilderness and its "authenticity" over humanized environments (such as those used for agriculture and to raise cattle) has been questioned; there is concern regarding the economic losses and infringement on rights that rewilding could cause to traditional activities; the problem of identifying which practices to promote and which to advise against or even prohibit during or after the rewilding process is another preoccupation; and finally, there are concerns about to what extent decision making processes in rewilding projects are democratic.

These problems and apparent paradoxes can be effectively analysed using a pragmatic focus, in particular, the work of Isabelle Stengers and Bruno Latour. Although it does not specifically deal with the issue of rewilding, their contributions would still be useful to clarify and articulate the scientific, technical and traditional practices and conceptions revolving around human interactions with nature. The main contributions of the suggested focus are:

- to maintain a non-naïve distinction between the natural (wilderness) and the artificial (technique), that is, insofar as it is useful to indicate the two ideal poles of a scale of degrees, with an indeterminate number of hybrid situations in between, and for the positive consequences that can be derived from the distinction and comparison for human beings and the planet.
- to place more emphasis on the practice and agency of the actors, rather than whether they are human or non-human.
- to prioritize the consequences of actions and

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the responsibility for them rather than statements that are made about them. - to exploit the fact that rewilding projects set geographic limits that counteract human indifference to the repercussions of actions that do not have a precise localization. - to highlight the production of "matters of concern" over the "matters of fact" surrounding a rewilding initiative (the scope, the animals to be introduced, how to make it compatible with other uses, the economic consequences it will produce, how to make decisions, etc.). - to promote the development of a policy on nature, with a lower case "n", understood as a composition of heterogeneous elements and not as a reality that backs an indisputable epistemic authority, which hides politics and puts an end to controversies. In the cases at hand we can substitute the controversial word "nature" for "wilderness" or for a more preferable term. - to favour the co-existence and even the composition or coherent articulation of different technical and non-technical practices of the different actors through the distribution of agency in networks.

In summary, the pragmatist approach to rewilding offers a non-naïve analysis of the interactions between human practices and the dynamics of nature, allows for conceptual clarification of the technical composition of the natural world and also favours the establishment of useful lines of action to deal with the problems and dilemmas of specific rewilding initiatives.

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