

Rediscovering the ‘Noble Savage’: The Rewilding Movement and the Re-Enchantment of the Scottish Highlands

Abstract

This paper focuses on an exploration of an emerging and controversial trend in animal/environmental activism, the rewilding movement, and in particular issues arising from the identification of the Scottish Highlands as a suitable site for rewilding.

The rewilding movement contrasts with traditional conservationism in asserting that environmental revitalisation is best achieved through returning designated rural areas to a state broadly approximating that which existed prior to large scale human intervention, as opposed to merely conserving existing plants and fauna. Moreover, a key aspect of this process involves the reintroduction of ‘missing species’, in the form of apex predators such as Lynx, Boar and Wolf, where the latter are suggested to play a critical role in restoring ‘natural’ environments, largely through predation to control the activities and numbers of ungulate species whose grazing inhibits the growth of woodland and, hence, the restoration of ecosystems.

The paper addresses various political and socio-economic issues raised by proposals for rewilding in the Scottish Highlands, in terms of tensions with traditional conservationism and, not least, the challenges presented to policymakers and publics with respect to predatory species reintroduction, including perceptions of risk to livestock and, indeed, humans. With respect to the latter, more fundamental theoretical questions are also addressed, including the way in which discourses around rewilding have been constructed by both advocates and critics of this phenomenon.

Keywords: Rewilding; Environmentalism; Highlandism; Romanticism; Re-Enchantment; Wolf.

Introduction

By analogy today, the wolf has become the symbolic manifestation of wildness – the archetype of a consciousness of wildness...The Noble Savage is being replaced by the Noble Wolf, which may be a healthy sign that we are beginning to see and appreciate animals in their own right and not project ourselves onto them. The very concept of the Noble Savage is surely an idealized, romantic and egocentric symbol (Fox 1992).

A distinctive current of eco-activism has been gathering momentum in the last few years, generally referred to as the *rewilding* movement, a phenomenon whose apparent aim is to return areas of rural Britain to what is asserted to be their lost ‘natural’ state. The movement appears to have been skirting the peripheries of public consciousness for some time, having received periodic attention from the UK press. Rewilding is a project that has been backed by substantial numbers of influential environmental and conservation charities in the UK and beyond, and has had support from a range of governmental and non-governmental organisations and individuals (Breitenmoser et al 2000; Monbiot 2013; Bekoff 2014; Drenthen 2015). In the UK the movement is currently ‘fronted’ by campaign group Rewilding Britain, while there are also a broad range of loosely affiliated environmental organisations that support various aspects of this phenomenon.

Rewilding Britain was officially launched in July 2015. A key aim appears to be to emulate to some degree of larger scale projects such as that implemented in America’s Yellowstone National Park (YNS) (and other smaller rewilding projects across a variety of European regions) which have emerged over approximately the last twenty years (Monbiot 2013; Breitenmoser et al 2000). For British rewilding enthusiasts, in addition to some forested regions of England, significant attention has been focused on the Scottish Highlands, as a realm of lost biodiversity from which a more *natural* and authentic ecosystem might be disinterred. Thus, one facet of this project is aimed at re-establishing significant tracts of the once vast Caledonian Forest (Trees for Life 2017). Overall, rewilding might reasonably be understood as advocating the return of a form of pre-human Pleistocene landscape, where the effects of many hundreds if not thousands of years of human impact on the natural environment might be rolled back (Carver 2007; Monbiot 2013).

As a caveat here, it might be noted that many of the movement’s broader motivations seem relatively admirable and uncontroversial, at least in terms of the drive to establish a more self-sustaining and vibrant biosphere. In a world of increasing environmental and climatic problems, as well as accelerating species extinction, a proposal for significant intervention may not seem a particularly radical notion. However, it is in terms of the conditions the movement deems necessary for achieving its objectives that rewilding appears more contentious, and principally in its advocacy for the return of free ranging *missing species* in the form of *apex predators* to societies long accustomed to their absence. As discussed in more detail below, it is claimed that the re-introduction of animals such as the wild boar,

lynx, wolf and possibly even the bear, is a desirable if not essential step towards rebalancing ecosystems. The theory behind this, *trophic cascades*, as is discussed in more detail below, proposes that, in addition to farming and forestry, a key factor in the destruction of the natural landscape has been the eradication of the predatory species who once kept grazing animal populations in check, while simultaneously keeping them on the move through fear of predation. Restoring a balance here, it is argued, would allow trees, plants and, thus, habitat for other animals to prosper, revitalising rural landscapes (Monbiot 2013; Sandom and MacDonald 2015; Drenthen 2015).

One of the most fascinating discoveries in modern ecology is an abundance of trophic cascades. A trophic cascade occurs when the animals at the top of the food chain – the top predators – change the number not just of their prey, but of species with which they have no direct connection. The impacts cascade down the food chain, in some cases radically changing the ecosystem, the landscape and even the chemical composition of the soil and atmosphere (Monbiot 2013: 84).

Rewilding enthusiasts supporting this perspective have been vigorous in advancing proposals for species reintroduction in recent years. As to their progress to date, we have seen the managed return of beaver in the UK, while the prospect of Eurasian Lynx being subject to a phased return looks to be a medium term possibility, albeit that the notion of reintroducing free ranging bears appears to have been set aside as much too large a step in the foreseeable future. Wild boar, as a species championed by the rewilding movement for the beneficial effect of its rooting on forest grounds rather than predatory influence on the environment, have returned to roaming freely in a number of areas across the UK, including the Scottish Highlands, apparently due to animals either escaping from captivity or being released illegally (UK Lynx Trust 2017; Trees for Life 2017; BBC News 19 July 2016).

A key feature of the rewilding debate, however, has focused on the potential reintroduction of wolves, with the animal arguably becoming emblematic of the wild and charismatic depiction of nature associated with the movement as a whole (Rewilding Europe 2017; Rewilding Britain 2017; Trees for Life 2017). The support for wolf reintroduction in the UK follows a trend where the movement has successfully lobbied for the return and protection of wolves across a range of areas of mainland Western Europe and Scandinavia, where they had been eradicated or substantially marginalised for some time (Euronatur 2017; Sandom and McDonald 2015; Drenthen 2015).

This paper argues that this growing phenomenon raises a number of interesting sociological questions, with respect to our relationship with nature in late modernity and, not least, in terms of the practical implications of this agenda with respect to human/animal interactions and the impact on rural areas such as the Highlands should it gain significant support. Moreover, from a more theoretical standpoint, the motivations, influences and perspectives of those advocating rewilding may be potentially of as much interest as the practical considerations that this phenomenon raises. In this particular regard, as argued below, in addition to purely ecological concerns, there are questions as to how far the phenomenon

might be regarded as being reflective of a contemporary form of romantically inspired re-enchantment, driven by a constituency disenchanted with the humdrum and artifice of contemporary metropolitan life.

Only with the Romantic movement, and still more recently with the modern wilderness movement, did the current concept of wilderness arise, a pristine realm unspoiled by humans (Rolston III 1997: 46).

With respect to Scotland's case in particular, questions arise as to the extent that its targeting as a site for rewilding may, at least in part, be based on a re-invocation of longstanding romanticised imagery of the Scottish Highlands as an empty and enchanted wilderness (McCrone 2017). On this point, the rewilding lobby have also been vigorous in presenting boar, lynx and the wolf as being shy, benign and, to various degrees, charismatic ecological benefactors who can harmoniously co-exist with humans with little difficulty, while the movement has also lobbied on the grounds that such a project might also enhance the pull of the countryside as a tourist attraction (Rewilding Britain 2017). However, it is argued below that this perspective may also rely on similarly idealised and romanticised imaginings that may be at the very least subject to further qualification.

Rewilding and Conservation

When approaching an understanding of the rewilding movement it is important to note that, while this phenomenon might at first glance appear to be simply an extension of mainstream conservationism, such a conception may be misleading. Rather, it appears that the rewilding agenda may potentially be opening up a division between different perspectives and approaches to environmental activism (Carver 2007). One of rewilding's high profile supporters, the journalist and writer George Monbiot, takes explicit and critical aim at conservation in a segment of his book, *Feral*, a publication that has been widely cited as having galvanised the current wave of rewilding (2013). With respect to conservation, the crux of Monbiot's argument appears to be that conservation merely entrenches an unnatural, manufactured landscape and eco-system that, of itself, appears as a product of human intervention and rational modernisation designed to control and suppress the 'real wild' (Monbiot 2013). As he suggests, '(s)ome of our conservation groups appear to be not just zoophobic but also dendrophobic: afraid of trees. They seem afraid of the disorderly, unplanned, unstructured revival of the natural world' (Monbiot 2013: 210).

This is a central factor that seems to distinguish rewilding from more familiar variants of 'mainstream' environmentalism. In the former view, it is insufficient, indeed anathema, to set the current state of nature in aspic, potentially with a few added trees or support for dwindling animal and plant species. By contrast, rewilding advocates a more radical form of chronological reset, replete with a re-establishing of animal species from the distant past, followed by a significant withdrawal of human intervention to allow 'real nature' to take its course (Carver 2007; Monbiot 2013). It may be argued, however, that any such move would presumably entail as much, if not more, intervention and planning as other rural management policies (Fenton 2015). Moreover, even if one overlooks the evident paradox

presented by this position, there are questions as to who defines the version of the past that should be reinstated, aside from considerations as to how such a project might be reconciled with the needs, way of life and interests of the contemporary human settlements affected by this proposed environmental and ecological change. As argued below, there is also a sense that, in its enthusiasm, the rewilding project may be driven by a range of its own albeit well intended fabrications, around its imaginings of the past and conditions of the present, the efficacy of the processes that it intends to instigate and, not least, its conceptualisation of the nature and risks associated with the fauna that are central to its vision.

‘Charismatic’ Creatures

The Lynx

It might be suggested that the potential re-introduction of the Eurasian Lynx appears as one of the movement’s least controversial proposals to reintroduce large predators, albeit with some caveats.

The lynx, a relatively diminutive member of the big cat family, has been absent from the UK for around 1300 years. While there have been some instances of attacks on pets and livestock from free roaming lynx in other territories, the animal is suggested to be shy and to present no great danger to humans (The Lynx Trust 2017). Nonetheless, the lynx is regulated by the Dangerous Wild Animals Act 1976 (amended 1984; 2007). There are also some other inconsistencies in terms of perceptions regarding its safety. Of note there is the fact that, while a well-developed proposal for a trial release of 6 animals in the Kielder Forest has been tabled following a two year consultation, two instances of lynx escaping from captivity in the UK during this same period have resulted in a range of alarmed responses from local authorities involved, from the closure of schools to the recent killing of one animal due to the asserted ‘severe’ risk the animal posed to public safety (Lynx Trust 2017; The Guardian 11 November 2017). This scenario encapsulates the often contested constructions that inform the rewilding debate, including widely oppositional discourses and framings concerning our relationship with ‘the wild’ and its toothier inhabitants.

On balance, it would appear that the risk of serious injury to humans from wild lynx is very low indeed (Hetherington 2006). By contrast, however, with respect to the wild boar – an animal also subject to the aforementioned legislation, but hailed by rewilders for its asserted benefits to soil and plant growth - the albeit limited risks it presents to people may be less readily dismissed.

The Boar

The boar was hunted to extinction in Britain in the 17th century but has returned since around the late 1980s, apparently more by accident than design. In 1998 it was confirmed that wild boar were now roaming freely and have now become established in forested areas from Southern England to Highland Scotland (British Wild Boar 2017; Trees for Life 2017). While these omnivorous animals will occasionally prey on livestock, including sheep, they are considered to be ordinarily of low threat to humans if left undisturbed. Nonetheless, boar

can be very dangerous to people under some circumstances, albeit that this is almost wholly confined to situations where they are surprised or cornered, and particularly where they are encountered with their young (British Wild Boar, 2017). While attacks are rare, a frightened or aggressive boar - which can weigh over 400 pounds, can run up to around 30 miles per hour and is armed with sharp teeth and tusks (males) - is capable of causing serious injury which can potentially result in fatalities. It may be noted that the potential, if limited, dangers posed by the species are recognised by advocacy groups such as British Wild Boar (2017). However, boar attacks do tend to be wholly defensive and they tend not to pursue and attack humans as prey (British Wild Boar, 2017). As discussed below, however, the most controversial issue in this overall ongoing debate concerns how far this relatively benign view of the apex predators proposed to be suitable for reintroduction can be applied to wolves (Linnel et al 2002).

The Wolf: *Canis Caledonia*?

In the absence of knowledge, interest groups have been able to fill the vacuum with images of the wolf as a harmless, godlike animal on one side, and as a ferocious beast on the other (Linnel et al 2002: 731).

Historically, as was the case in many areas of Europe and Asia, the wolf in Scotland was generally viewed as a dangerous and unwelcome predator, while there were recurrent culls leading to the animal's eventual eradication, suggested to be during the 18th century. It seems clear that a major motivation for the killing of wolves appears to have been economic, given the animal's reputation as a killer of sheep and other livestock. However, the fact that the wolf was also considered to be a significant threat to humans was evidenced by the erection of small buildings along highland and forest routes frequented by travellers, *spittals*, whose specific function was to shelter the latter from wolf attacks (Alston 1912). As with other features of the rewilding debate, there may also be an element of irony here in that one factor contributing to the deforestation of Highland Scotland, in addition to logging and possibly climate change, appears to have been an element of deliberate tree clearing to reduce the habitat of the wolf, and thus the perceived threat posed to livestock and humans.

The exact date of the extinction of the wolf in Scotland is doubtful. The great forests which had covered so much of the country had dwindled almost to the vanishing point. The cause of this is an open question, as to which opinions differ; but it seems that, to some extent at least, forests were destroyed for the purpose of exterminating the wolves. In Stuart's Lays of the Deer Forest it is told how Oliver Cromwell caused great areas of oak and fir woods in Lochaber to be burnt for this purpose; and the like measures were carried out in other localities (Alston 1912).

As noted, however, the consensus amongst rewilding enthusiasts is that such concerns and the myths and stories that spawned them are, at the very least, misguided (Mech 2012). According to this view, wolves are shy of humans and avoid them wherever possible, while it is suggested that misleading images of dangerous wolves and historical accounts of wolf

human predation are mainly the stuff of folklore (the ‘Red Riding Hood myth’), bad science as well as more contemporary depictions of dangerous wolves in films such as the 2011 film *The Grey* (Bekoff 2014). In offering a corrective to such scare stories the rewilding lobby proposes that wolf reintroduction will be feasible once the general public are sufficiently convinced of the animal’s actual nature and the various benefits where, in addition to the revitalisation of natural environments, the return of the wolf would provide a boost to the economy through tourism, as positives that can be gained with negligible risks (Monbiot 2013). However, this has not gone unchallenged, with detractors suggesting that rewilding advocates have countered the alarmist demonization of these animals by generating their own misleading ‘myth of the harmless wolf’ (Linnel et al 2002; Geist 2007; Drenthen 2015).

It has been argued that much of the evidence supporting the notion of the wolf as a benign benefactor has been based the relative absence of recorded wolf attacks in North America and Eurasia in the 20th century, while historical accounts of dangerous wolves have, for the reasons suggested, tended to be treated with considerable scepticism (Linnel et al 2002). Regarding North America, according to Linnel et al (2002) the harmless wolf perspective was significantly influenced by the opinion of wolf experts who had experience of extensive relatively trouble free encounters and who had pointed to the dearth of non-rabid unprovoked attacks on humans in the US. However, Linnel et al (2002) also point out that wolves had been eradicated from practically all US states (lower 48) by the mid-20th century, while evidence from other parts of the world paint a much more nuanced picture. In India, for example, there has been a clear and longstanding pattern of wolf predation of children in particular, which has been attributed to a mix of both rabid and non-rapid packs, a lack of natural prey, and proximity to humans whose poverty and living conditions has left them poorly protected (Linnel et al 2002). Evidence from Russia, where wolves are also numerous is more equivocal, but nonetheless also suggests a less easy relationship than rewilding advocates tend to present. While, as above, researchers have indeed pointed to a relative scarcity of wolf attacks, it has also been argued that reports of attacks on humans were suppressed for some time in the USSR, in apparent legitimization of the authorities’ preference for the sustaining of an unarmed rural population (Geist 2007).

The view of the “harmless” wolf was greatly welcomed by the communist party of Russia, which ever since coming to power suppressed accounts of man-killing wolves. During and after the Second World War such censorship intensified, as was only disclosed after the fall of the communist rule in Russia. The reason for such suppression was to obscure the link between lethal wolf attacks and the disarming of the civilian population during the war. Wolves quickly exploited the defenselessness of villagers, leading to many fatal attacks on humans. When Russian scientists disclosed this, their translations in the west were suppressed and their authority and motives questioned by environmental organizations and some scientists (Geist 2007:1).

How might one come to reconcile these conflicting accounts and what might this mean in terms of returning the wolf to the Scottish Highlands? On reviewing the evidence, what

seems to emerge is that wolves do seem to pose little threat to humans, but only under particular circumstances, whereas under the right conditions they are capable of becoming dangerous (Linnel et al 2002; Geist 2007). Thus, it is suggested that they remain fairly low risk where they have plenty of prey, where they have learned to fear *armed* humans, and where they have not been routinely scavenging near human settlements and, crucially, where they have not become habituated to human beings (Linnel et al 2002; Geist 2007). It follows that, while there may be low risk when wolves are initially introduced to isolated areas with an abundance of prey animals, the potential remains for such a scenario to break down over time.

The stage is set by prey scarcity, few opportunities to kill livestock, and de-facto protection of wolves. Next comes the systematic targeting of people as prey, mainly children (Geist 2009).

On this point, it may be the perception of the wolf as a potential human predator that has led to greater controversy and focus on wolf reintroduction than has been the case with boar, despite the fact that the latter might be considered equally dangerous under the right circumstances. The relatively safe re-introduction of the wolf in Scotland, would evidently depend on such conditions being avoided while, in this regard, there may be some considerable grounds for concern. In the first instance, while deer are very numerous in areas of Scotland, wolves appear to be more capable than anticipated in reducing their numbers, with potentially problematic consequences.

...high densities of wolves within protected areas such as Yellowstone National Park may contribute to a substantial decline in ungulate abundance, and, as a consequence, are forced to roam over larger areas in search of prey. This could then result in most wolf packs spending considerable time in the mixed-ownership lands (Garrot et al 2005: 1252).

There are also other reasons for suspecting that wolves would inevitably come into contact with rural populations and possibly even urban populations. Reports in the media in recent years suggest that this has been the experience in other areas of Europe where the wolf has been re-introduced. In France, media coverage suggests that wolf reintroduction has seen wolves come close to rural populations, leading to growing discontent amongst French sheep farmers who have lost livestock to the animals, and there have been claims, albeit disputed, that wolves have been sighted in the Paris suburbs (The Telegraph 17 January 2017). In response to livestock predation, the French authorities have also overturned a ban to allow limited hunting of grey wolves (wilderness-society.org, 2014).

In Germany, a small pack of wolves has apparently become established in the suburban Berlin, around 15 miles from the city itself (The Independent 20 November 2012). While there have been no reported serious attacks on people with the advent of these recent developments, it may be that this poses a risk of wolf habituation over the longer term (Geist 2007). However, even were problematic wolf encounters found to be relatively rare occurrences over the longer term, given their potential severity where they do occur, how

might fear amongst the public invoked by free ranging wolves affect quality of life? It has been suggested that problems in this regard have been experienced in Russia, and in Finland where wolves have recently returned, in terms of generating fear amongst parents regarding the safety of children playing outside or travelling to and from school (Bisi and Kurki, 2008). In both instances authorities have had to arrange special school transport as a consequence of the perceived threat to children from wolves (Bisi and Kurki 2008; BBC News 9 November 2016; The Guardian 25 February 2017). This sort of scenario has also been experienced in New Mexico where wolves have been cited as a source of concern for farmers and for parents, and where ‘kids cages’ have been introduced to shelter children travelling to school from the perceived threat posed by ranging wolves (Mark, 2015). Parallels with the aforementioned ‘spittals’ of preindustrial Scotland might evidently be drawn here.

In a large scale study conducted by researchers at the University of Helsinki, understandably, fear of wolves was highest and a significant issue of concern for most respondents in the rural areas that were within wolf ranges, while the key issues were the threat posed to children pets and livestock, as well as the associated impact the presence of wolves entailed for outdoor activities (Bisi and Kurki 2008). Overall, it seems clear that opinion regarding this aspect of rewilding appears heavily divided between those who view wolf reintroduction as an opportunity for excitement, enchantment and ecological regeneration and those who view the prospect as a threat to security, safety and well-being on a number of fronts (Bisi and Kurki 2008; Drenthen 2015).

As noted at the outset, the rewilding lobby’s case for reintroducing the wolf, as well as other predatory animals whose return it supports, is almost unequivocally presented as resting on its benefits for the landscape through the aforementioned process of trophic cascades. Evidence from the return of wolves to Yellowstone Park, however, suggests that the success of the project even in this regard may be more equivocal than UK wolf enthusiasts assert. This is in line with a growing interrogation of the trophic cascades thesis itself (Marris, 2014; Fenton, 2015). In the first instance, while there has been recovery of flora in areas of Yellowstone, there are questions as to how much of this can be attributed to the wolf, suggesting that levels of vegetation recovery may be overstated and that, where it does occur, the causes may be more complex than the trophic cascades theory suggests, i.e. that the theory may conceal a more complex multi-causal process (Marris, 2014).

...scientists now disagree about whether wolf-related behaviorally-mediated-trophic cascades in Yellowstone are really occurring or at least whether that hypothesis has been rigorously tested (Kauffman et al. 2010). At most, the well-publicized claim may not be correct at all (Mech 2012: 145).

The experience in Yellowstone has also raised other questions regarding the costs and benefits of the re-introduction of the wolf. Garrott et al (2005), for example, conducted a study in two areas of Yellowstone, the first where wolves were remote from farmland, rural populations and hunters, and the second where they were less so. As they indicate, ‘wolves

that colonized this study system repeatedly came into conflict with humans by killing pets and domestic livestock. Despite the efforts of federal, state, university, and private conservation organization personnel to minimize or resolve these conflicts through enhanced public education, aversive conditioning, and modifications of domestic animal management, lethal control actions were required each year that wolves were studied' (Garrott et al 2005: 1251).

Rewilding Scotland: A Tourist Attraction?

Scotland is not wild, rather it is rural. Large, toothy critters are gone and converting the human-dominated landscape back into something that could accommodate them would require radical social change (European Nature Trust 2016)

Perhaps in recognition of the perceived difficulties of returning free roaming wolves and other large predators to Scotland, one highly publicised rewilding project has pursued the reintroduction these animals within an extensive fenced area of the Scottish Highlands, the Alladale Wilderness Reserve owned by MHI furniture group heir Paul Lister. Lister, as a strong advocate of rewilding, has seemingly proposed this as a sort of halfway house where the aim has been to maintain these animals within the walled borders of a 50,000 acre (cc 200 km²) reserve, comprised of his own 23,000 acres and the remainder from adjoining landowners that he hopes will become involved, and where large predators might be fenced off from the general public but within an area large enough to provide something of a natural habitat. Lister's vision is also advanced via the European Nature Trust (TENT), an association he founded in 2001, and whose website indicates that a key aim is to realise similar projects to Yellowstone National Park in areas of Europe, identifying rural Romania as well as Highland Scotland as the sites they wish to focus on (European Nature Trust 2016).

While this compromise approach to rewilding might seem less controversial it has, nonetheless, also attracted criticism from a range of sources. From the general public 'side' there are concerns over security, while given the boar's unplanned transition to the wild this may be understandable to an extent.

There are, however, further pragmatic considerations regarding the fencing off of such extensive areas, given that ramblers in Scotland retain a right to roam so long as they behave responsibly. Thus, both the fence and the inclusion of free roaming predators within this area would possibly conflict with the spirit of the law in this regard. Even amongst advocates of rewilding, however, there are reservations regarding Lister's vision, as the proposal to enclose the area with an electrified fence has raised questions regarding the safety to the public and the well-being of animals from this form of fencing, as well as the extent to which the Alladale project might be regarded as a bona fide rewilding project or simply an extensive zoo. The application from the estate for a zoo licence in 2010 was considered by some critics to point to the latter, while also raising questions as to the commercial status of the project. On this point, while economic concerns may not have been a primary

consideration in the Alladale case, the notion that the impetus for rewilding might also coincide with commercial motivations may seem understandable given the above (McNeish, 2013). This potential blurring of the boundaries between rewilding as an ecological and commercial proposition can also be related to the experience in other areas.

Staffan Widstrand, from Rewilding Europe, who has considerable experience in the wildlife tourism trade, suggests that high quality viewing opportunities of charismatic animals can be charged at between €120–270, to see bears in Finland, and €200, to see wolves howling in Sweden (Widstrand 2013). In Sierra de la Culebra in Spain, the wolf is being seen as a new economic opportunity for the tourist industry (Richardson 2013). Further afield, the wolf reintroduction to Yellowstone National Park in 1995 was associated with a 35.5 million dollar increase in visitor spending in the local economy (Duffield et al. 2008 as cited in Sandom and McDonald 2015: 304).

In light of all of the above, given the significant uncertainties regarding the benefits and costs of reintroducing such animals, and going beyond straightforward commercial interest, motivation for the strong advocacy and dismissal of conflicting views and evidence by rewilding advocates and supporters might be subject to further exploration.

Romancing the Highlands and the Quest for Re-enchantment?

Appreciation of wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy. The ideas of these literati determined their experience, because in large part they saw in wilderness what they wanted to see. ...The concept of the sublime and picturesque led the way by enlisting aesthetics in wild country's behalf while deism associated nature and religion. Combined with the primitivistic idealization of a life closer to nature, these ideas fed the Romantic movement which had far-reaching implications for wilderness (Nash 2014: 44).

The focus on 'charismatic' animals, perhaps another reason for less attention being paid to the boar, tends to lend weight to the perception that rewilding may be motivated to some extent as much by the experience of spectacle or thrill-seeking as environmentalism.

I will try not to disguise my reasons for wanting to see *missing* (my italics) animals reintroduced. It is not ...the desire to control floods, or reduce erosion or hinder the spread of disease, though all of these might be useful *side effects* (my italics). My reasons arise from my delight in the marvels of nature, its limitless capacity to surprise; from the sense of freedom, of the thrill that comes from roaming in a landscape or seascape without knowing what I might see next, what might loom from the woods or water, what might be watching me without my knowledge. It is the sense that without these animals the ecosystem is lopsided, abridged, dysfunctional. I can produce reasons scientific, economic, historic, and hygienic, but none of these describe my motivations (Monbiot 2013; 106).

Such sentiments, it can be argued, are broadly consistent with the sensibilities that have long been associated with the tourist's search for 'authentic' experiences and, correspondingly, the contemporary urbanite's weariness with everyday experience; a search for romantic re-enchantment amongst a sector of society disenchanted with modern urban living and the manufactured diversions of consumerism as much as the more laudable aims of restoring biodiversity (McCannell 1976). As Drenthen observes, '(w)olves represent authenticity, their pureness, honesty, grace, and innocence—typical elements of a romantic view of nature—are seen as reasons for loving them. Moreover, many wolf lovers stress that wolves and sensitive wolf-loving people alike both are victims of modern civilization that is dominated by an arrogant human chauvinist, overly rational attitude towards nature' (2015: 326). Moreover, in terms of its imaginings of the Scottish Highlands as a desired site for rewilding, the movement could indeed appear to be an inheritor of the romantic vision that gripped tourists of the 18th and 19th century, of a wild, desolate and untamed landscape, while rewilding's romanticised image of the wolf may reciprocally also be seen to re-invoke notions of the iconography of the noble savage (McCrone 2017).

Thus, as well as instigating a debate around its practical implications and competing perspectives on nature, the emergence of the rewilding phenomenon may also have something to tell us about the human psyche in the late modern era and our own ambivalent nature when it comes to the manner in which we experience the environments we encounter.

Risk, Re-enchantment and the Multi-dimensional Appeal of the Natural

Wilderness has taken on connotations, and mythology, that specifically reflect latter-twentieth-century values of a distinctive Anglo-American bent. It now functions to provide solitude and counterpoint to technological society in a landscape that is managed to reveal as few traces of the passage of other humans as possible ... This wilderness is a social construct (Graber 1995 as cited in Rolston III 1997).

If modern psychology has proposed anything that now appears self-evident regarding human emotions it is that for the most part we seek to sustain a comfortable balance between emotional under and over-arousal, albeit that the circumstances that sustain this balance or otherwise vary from individual to individual. Thus, we have an optimum state of arousal largely predicated on our evaluation of the perceived risk and reward, pleasure/pain and sense of control in relation to what we experience. In very general terms, this largely presents as a tendency to favour 'normalcy', simplicity and predictability with respect to what we encounter (Giddens 1989; Bone 2005; 2010; 2016). While this might suggest that human beings are inherently conservative and risk averse, and while many may well be, it also appears to be the case that those who we might regard as thrill and sensation seekers tend to engage in forms of seemingly 'risky' behaviour where they feel that they have the resources or skill to control or mitigate that risk (whether this reflects the reality of the situation or otherwise). Moreover, the tendency to lean towards a preference for risk or security appears to be rooted in our base state of emotional arousal and reactivity. In short, those who have a tendency towards low base arousal are more inclined to seek out novel and

highly stimulating experiences while those whose emotional system tends towards overstimulation may seek out conditions of familiarity, stability and tranquillity (Balint 1959; Eysenck 1971; Goffman 1973; Jung 1923 [1921]; Csíkszentmihályi 1996; Bone 2005; 2010; 2016).

In line with this spectrum of emotional states, there is good evidence to suggest that key features of contemporary living have the potential to stretch our emotional coping capacities in both directions around our 'base' state. Firstly, there is a wealth of observation and evidence that the complexities, pace and myriad demands experienced by modern citizens can induce a state of anxiety where people are so predisposed or lack the resources to exert control over significant aspects of their daily lives (Simmel 1903; Gergen 1991; Bone 2010). Conversely, the mundane constraints and endless routines presented by contemporary bureaucratic organisation, and the rationalised, standardised, disenchanting landscapes and potential anonymity presented by modern urban societies can also induce a sense of frustration, apathy, boredom, alienation and ennui. In short, living in urban environments may present as an experience of stultifying confinement for some while, for many others, modern urban living itself presents as an unnerving environment of overwhelming stimulation, chronic insecurity and stress inducing demands (Simmel 1903; Bone 2010). Thus, maintaining a sense of balance in such an emotionally polarising and novel environment, in broad historical terms, might be regarded as a considerable accomplishment (Simmel 1903; Bone, 2010).

By contrast, the lure of the natural has evident appeal from a number of perspectives. In a general sense there is a range of evidence indicating that engagement with natural environments has a positive benefit on emotions and other indices of well-being (Bowler et al 2010). Clearly, it is not difficult to understand the appeal of the tranquillity and rich aesthetic experiences of the countryside for those overwhelmed by the demands of modern living. However, it may be argued that, for or those with more thrill-seeking tendencies the appeal of the rural idyll could presumably be enhanced by the addition of *fierce creatures*, adding the frisson of excitement that Monbiot's sentiments, as expressed above, tend to convey (Monbiot 2013). Thus, the appeal of natural rural beauty may be further enhanced by the elevated arousal associated with the, albeit remote, possibility of an encounter with a creature with at least a dangerous reputation and, to an extent, mystical quality.

Locals hope that the proposed reintroduction of lynx to the Kielder Forest Park will bring tourists. It'll certainly bring me, and for one, primal reason: the whiff of danger (The Telegraph 1 August 2017).

It has been noted, however, that the desire for the latter type of experience and support for the return of apex predators, perhaps self-evidently, finds significantly more favour with those who can experience it as a relatively controlled and time limited event than with the rural communities who are routinely exposed to the possibilities of predation of livestock, pets, and the fear of harm coming to themselves and those close to them (Bisi and Kurki 2008; Wilson 2004). It might be noted here that, as above, a significant feature of the rewilding debate has been this focus on the (low) *risk* of human harm from large predators.

However, it may also be observed that, as with fear of flying, people do not only respond to assessments of risk but also to the perception of consequences. As with the latter, the fear of predators might be understood in terms of it being a low risk but highly fearful event where it might occur. While even one or two instances of this being widely publicised may have a huge impact on public opinion.

Returning to the issue of wildlife tourism, as above, rewilding supporters cite the appeal of large carnivores as an adjunct to ecological arguments as a rationale for their reintroduction in areas such as the highlands (Rewilding Europe 2017). However, it may evidently be argued that the potential appeal of charismatic animals such as the lynx, boar and wolf may, conceivably, act as much of a deterrent to casual ramblers, campers and sightseers of a more cautious disposition as much as it provides an attraction to the more adventurous amongst the rewilding camp.

The appeal of large predators in the Scottish Highlands, as presumably in other rural settings, may perhaps also be related to notions of the mimetic impulse described by Norbert Elias (1939). His argument that modern citizens could be attracted to situations of controlled de-control, satisfying in a relatively low risk manner the impulse for emotional excitement that some of our ancestors experienced from battle, hunting and so on, might readily be translated to include the prospect of temporary exposure to the distant risk of an encounter with a potential predator (Ibid 1939). A key issue here, once more, is the temporary nature of such exposure.

Finally, and perhaps also echoing aspects of the romantic ethic, tacit association with the *noble savage* may also present rewilders with the opportunity to align their identities with an attractive set of signifiers, as being more earthy, enigmatic, adventurous, distinctive and knowing than the mainstream of the urban throng, setting them apart from those viewed as being risk averse, cossetted and preoccupied with the banal and sterile diversions of our consumer culture.

Conclusion

The rewilding project is interesting from a sociological perspective in a variety of respects, in its seeming re-invoking of the romantic desire for a lost, authentic and more natural milieu of the distant past, in terms of the motivations of its adherents and its critics, in the questions it raises regarding the relationship between urban modernity and nature, and in terms of its potential consequences for the way in which the rural is depicted and experienced from an aesthetic, economic, recreational and practical standpoint.

As argued above, plans to rewild the Scottish Highlands, particularly with respect to returning apex predators, look to be a growing issue of debate for the medium to longer term. At present, there appears to be little support for such a move from the Scottish Government and other authorities. Nonetheless, given the enthusiasm for this type of project over recent years, the ongoing lobbying of a variety of interests, and taking account of the fact that apex predators such as the wolf are increasing in numbers through such efforts across the European mainland, it seems reasonable to assume that this is a phenomenon that

may not simply be disregarded, or one that might not gain favour over time. The fact that the movement has also been supported by a range of pan-European governmental bodies for some time, as well as by the host of campaign groups, also tends to lend weight to the view that the phenomenon should be taken seriously (Breitenmoser et al 2000). On this point, it might be noted that there has been no great response from the authorities in Scotland to address the unplanned reintroduction of the wild boar. Thus, all of these factors may suggest that there is at least some prospect of official opposition eroding over time.

It may well be the case, as rewilders assert, that contemporary UK citizens have become too accustomed to a sterile, rural landscape, stripped of its natural 'wildness', and that there may indeed be benefits to living in a less risk free environment (Monbiot, 2013). However, the notion that this level of radical change can be carried through easily, particularly in countries such as Scotland that have become accustomed to a rural landscape that has been almost devoid of dangerous animals for centuries, remains an open and presumably politically sensitive question (Wilson 2004). Many in the rewilding community appear to hold to the view that this will be accomplished once the public are re-educated sufficiently to reject the myths on which opposition might be founded. Nonetheless, while the rewilding movement's assertions regarding the risks associated with the animals they hope to see returned may be plausible to some extent, it also appears evident that in their zeal they may also tend to overlook or downplay countervailing evidence. As wolf expert David Mech has noted (as an observation that might also be applied to other predators championed by the rewilding community), 'The wolf ... remains as one more species in a vast complex of creatures interacting the way they always have. It is neither saint nor sinner except to those who want to make it so' (2012:147). The question is how far the contemporary Scottish public might be able to re-accommodate such creatures in the full array of their potential. Finally, there may well be ecological grounds for considering the rewilding agenda, both in terms of sustaining the species it champions and assuming that further evidence does support the trophic cascades thesis. As argued, however, any debate must evidently take place with reference to carefully evaluated evidence, as opposed to the assertion of competing constructions that may be seen to have informed the rewilding debate thus far.

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