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# *Rewilding* and the ethics of place

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***Rewilding or, to use Monbiot's definition, the large-scale restoration of ecosystems, implies drastic changes to the contemporary landscape. Many people, especially urbanites, applaud the creation of self-willed land, because it encompasses a departure from a worldview in which everything that exists is created and controlled by humans. Yet, rewilding projects occasionally also trigger resistance, especially among those people who identify with the cultural landscape and its history. In this chapter, I analyse this conflict as a result of the philosophical tension between traditional wilderness philosophy and an ethics of place. I will show how the interpretation of the meaning of rewilding based on wilderness philosophy leads to an alienation between the landscape and its inhabitants. I argue that a re-orientation on the value of wildness instead can help think through rewilding as a revitalization of sense of place. I will argue that a genuine rewilding approach can be conceived as being motivated by an ethics of place***

## What is rewilding?

Rewilding is an increasingly popular strategy in landscape management and nature conservation. In 1989, Michael Soulé and Reed Noss introduced the concept of "rewilding" as a term for the scientific argument for the restoration of great wilderness based on the regulatory role of large predators. According to Soulé and Noss, contemporary rewilding is characterized by three independent characteristics: in short: Cores, Corridors, and Carnivores (Soulé and Noss, 1998: 19). Other definitions have since emphasized other aspects, for example that rewilding is a forward-looking approach (Hughes et al., 2011; Carver, 2012), that rewilding focuses on restoring natural processes and is characterized by an 'experimental' approach (Lorimer & Driessen, 2014), or that rewilding involves a hands-off approach to ecological management. Although Soulé and Noss's scientific use is still dominant, over time, the term rewilding itself has gained more and more meanings, that stretch the breath of the concept even further, leading environmental historian Dolly Jørgensen to the conclusion that the term rewilding has become a fundamentally asocial and ahistorical 'plastic' word without specific content (Jørgensen, 2015). For example, certain

anarcho-primitivist groups see rewilding not just as a strategy in landscape management, but also as an antidote against an excess of civilization (Urban Scout, 2008).

The growing popularity of rewilding is part of a broader cultural trend to defend the value of wild nature against an overly humanized world. However, even though rewilding is popular among many people, concrete rewilding projects often give rise to controversies, especially when they are situated in cultural landscapes. Those opposing rewilding often stress that rewilding in essence is the attempt to rid the landscape of humans. According to Dolly Jørgensen, "taken as a whole, rewilding discourse seeks to erase human history and involvement in the land and flora and fauna" (Jørgensen, 2015: 482). And, indeed, it seems that some rewilders think of rewilding as the effort of freeing nature from human interference and create "new wildernesses".

An element common to all traditional definitions of wilderness is the absence of human traces on the land. For that reason, it does not come as a surprise that for those who identify with the landscapes that have resulted from centuries old human influences, rewilding is seen as nothing less than a threat, not just to the landscapes they cherish, but also to their identity that is based upon these places.

Rewilding in cultural heritage landscapes gives rise to intense conflicts between different views of landscapes and self that cannot be easily reconciled. Focusing on the strictly scientific meanings of rewilding does not help in understanding or addressing these conflicts. Andrea Gammon (2018) argues that in order to understand "the wider interest in rewilding as an emerging environmental phenomenon", we should acknowledge the breath of meanings of rewilding and treat the term as a cluster concept.

In this chapter I argue that we should take the cultural and moral dimension of rewilding more seriously. By making explicit the cultural and moral dimension of rewilding as a human endeavour, rewilding advocates can even strengthen the moral base of the nature conservation movement that sets out to correct an overly anthropocentric perspective on landscape. But in order to do that, it is helpful to pay attention to the ethical dimension of place. The way people feel, think and interact with specific places cannot be reduced to purely geometric relationships. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between abstract 'space' and personally experienced 'place'. Unlike 'space', 'place' is much more than just a physical location and can be described as a location filled with meanings and human experiences. Acknowledgment of the significance of place will not necessarily help solve the conflicts about rewilding, but at least it can help understand what is at stake in rewilding.

**Wilderness philosophy**

Wilderness is commonly defined as "a tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by human beings" and "an area essentially undisturbed by human activity" (Merriam Webster

dictionary). The famous 1964 Wilderness Act, that created the legal definition of wilderness in the United States, and protected 9.1 million acres (37,000 km²) of federal land, defines wilderness: "in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, […] as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." The idea of wilderness has played a key role in American environmental ethics.[1]

Early conservationists such as Henry-David Thoreau valued wilderness not merely as a source of enjoyment, but also because it can teach people something profound – either through its astonishing beauty or by putting human lives in perspective. For Thoreau wild nature also had a moral and a spiritual meaning: good and wise nature stood against the contrived and hypocritical human society. The study of nature could make you a better person; it gave insight into what mattered and what was trivial. Thoreau's famous quote from his essay *Walking*, "In wildness is the preservation of the world" proclaims that wildness is the highest ethical ideal. In this view, nature represents a moral order to which people and society should conform.

However, today this 'transcendental' aspect of early wilderness philosophy has since all but faded from view. Most nature conservationists today no longer claim that 'nature' refers to a transcendental meaningful moral order with which people should attune their lives, or that nature as such necessitates a fundamental reflection on the meaning of one's own existence (Van de Gronden, 2015). Instead, they are much more hands-on and focus on more pragmatic reasons to protect plant and animal species and natural areas against the detrimental effects of urbanization, infrastructure, industrialization and agricultural intensification. Today, the protection of wild nature is typically justified by referring to the need to protect biodiversity and safeguard the many ecosystem services that nature provides. In recent years, there is also increasing attention to the beneficial influence of nature on personal well-being. Besides these utilitarian pleas, conservationists also call upon the intrinsic value of nature, that is: the value of nature in itself, independent of any value nature has for humans. Both of these forms of argument tend to abstract from the profound *significance* wild nature can have (James, 2016).

In contrast, in today's popular culture one can still see the deep fascination with the profound meaning of the wild that was so typical for early wilderness philosophers. For example, many popular books and films about wilderness, books like Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Place*s (2007), Cheryl Strayed's *Wild* (2012), and non-fiction books such as Jon Krakauer's book *Into the wild* (1996) or Richard Louv's *The Last Child in the Woods,* many nature documentaries, but also movies like *Touching the Void* (2003), *Grizzly Man* (2005), *Into the Wild* (2007), *Wild* (2014) *A Walk in the Woods* (2015), and *The Revenant* (2015) have shared themes, exploring ways in which confrontations with wild nature can become significant events that place one's life in perspective (Drenthen, 2009b).

[1] Nash, 1967; Oelschlaeger, 1991.

Overall, the idea that untouched wilderness is the kind of nature that is most valuable and most worthwhile protecting has remained influential, even though it is usually not explicitly acknowledged in the debate among conservationists. In his influential paper on the notion of wilderness in environmental thought, William Cronon (1996) shows that wilderness thinking is actually a relic of eighteenth-century European Romanticism. Cronon argues that the suggestion that the most pristine wilderness is also most worth protecting, in fact perpetuates a form of human-nature dualism that is not very helpful in thinking about a sustainable relationship between people and their non-human environment. The idealization of wilderness may seem appealing, but in practice it makes us less concerned about our impact on those parts of the world in which we humans reside. According to Cronon, in reality we value supposed wildernesses not so much because they do not contain human traces, but rather because they possess a quality he calls 'wildness': a certain independence of nature that has not been tamed, that escapes human control. In other words, Cronon clearly distinguishes between wilderness and wildness. While criticizing the concept of wilderness and the idea that nature is most valuable if untrammelled or untouched by humans – he draws attention to the notion of *wildness* as autonomy (or, to use another term, self-willedness) as something that is valued by most humans. That quality of wildness, however, does not only reside in pristine, uninhabited areas but can also be found in our backyards.

> "When we visit a wilderness area, we find ourselves surrounded by plants and animals and physical landscapes whose otherness compels our attention. In forcing us to acknowledge that they are not of our making, that they have little or no need of our continued existence, they recall for us a creation far greater than our own. In the wilderness, we need no reminder that a tree has its own reasons for being, quite apart from us. The same is less true in the gardens we plant and tend ourselves: there it is far easier to forget the otherness of the tree. […] The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw—even though the tree in the forest reflects a more intricate web of ecological relationships. […] Both trees stand apart from us; both share our common world. The special power of the tree in the wilderness is to remind us of this fact. It can teach us to recognize the wildness we did not see in the tree we planted in our own backyard." (p. 23-24)

Moreover, Cronon argues that we should not forget that the so-called wildernesses, just like our backyards, are part of a world that is and has been influenced by people[2] and for which people must bear some responsibility.

Whereas the classic ideal of wilderness presupposes the absence of humans, the concept of wildness lends itself to acknowledging the fact that wildness can exist in cultural landscapes. Conversely, whereas wilderness thinking could lead us to think that rewilding would

[2] And of course many 'wildernesses' as classically defined, including North American ones, have long been influenced by indigenous peoples.

necessarily involve the destruction of human traces, a focus on wildness opens up a more inclusive idea of rewilding (Ward, 2019).

The critique on the wilderness ideal by Cronon and others has led many rewilders to reframe rewilding as bringing back wildness rather than restoring wilderness. Yet, the classic wilderness idea is still influential in the way rewilding projects are being discussed today, ironically enough especially by those who oppose rewilding. The reason for that is that many of those who oppose rewilding projects start from a radically different perspective on the value of landscapes and on the role of humans therein.

**Ethics of place, identity and the value of historic landscapes**

What rewilders often fail to appreciate is that landscapes are not only valued for their ecological significance but also because they contribute to the well-being and identity of their human inhabitants. Some local residents react angrily when rewilders want to 'give farmland back to nature' or reintroduce beavers in places where these animals were wiped out long ago. Underlying the disputes about rewilding are conflicts of interest (economic and political) between farmers, conservationists, water managers and other stakeholders, and much is invested in trying to resolve these conflicts by seeking smart compromises and win-win situations. However, underlying these conflicts are also differences that have to do with clashing notions of what is worthy of protection. These kinds of differences in meaning are not easily reconciled.

Many opponents of rewilding start from an entirely different vantage point than wilderness philosophy. In environmental philosophy this alternative approach is known as 'ethics of place'. At the core of ethics of place is the idea that human life in an environment can in principle be characterized as 'storied residence'[3] and is characterized by a deeply contextualized 'discourse about places.'

'Place' is a central concept in social geography. In the 1970s, Yi-Fu Tuan, inspired by phenomenology, claimed that social geography must do justice to the way people perceive and react to their environment (Tuan, 1977). According to Tuan, geography as a science must therefore distinguish between abstract 'space' and personally experienced 'place'. Being in place cannot be reduced to purely geometric relationships, because people's spatial behaviour is a reflection of their values, feelings, and desires: "Space is abstract. It lacks content; it is broad, open, and empty, inviting the imagination to fill it with substance and illusion; it is possibility and beckoning future. Place, by contrast, is the past and the present, stability and achievement".[4]

[3] Cf. Rolston 1988, p. 341.
[4] Tuan, 1975: 164-165.

O’Neill et al. argue that people make sense of their lives because they can place it within a larger narrative of what came before and what will come after. And one of the reasons environments matter to people is that landscapes provide just such a larger context from which they can make sense of themselves (O'Neill et al., 2008).

According to Jim Cheney (1989) the task of environmental ethicists is to deconstruct mystical images of nature and instead articulate moral approaches that emerge from the lived reality of the place in question. Cheney criticizes a simplistic and ahistorical concept of the value of nature and argues for a pluralistic postmodern ethics of place, the goal of which would not be to establish ethical principles in a speculative way, but rather to develop moral narratives that allow for a normative understanding of how specific places provide a context for concrete, physical people who find themselves in those places. Whereas a universalist would emphasize that a specific place (e.g., the forest next to my home) is a particular instance of something more general (e.g., oak-beech woodland), a place-based perspective focuses on the unique and contingent character of each place and on our connection to it. I feel connected to the forest near my home, because it is part of my world and plays a role in my life – as the place that I visit several times a week to encounter fellow beings and experience that my life is part of a larger whole, in which I, my community and other lifeforms have become intertwined in a way that is unique to this specific place. This forest is a unique place with a particular history, that is different from other places that might look similar. I cherish this particular place, not just any forest, because it is the deeply contingent whole that provides my life with a wider context that helps me understand who I am amd where I am.

In a similar vein, Mick Smith in his book *An Ethics of Place* (2001), argues that ‘place’ provides a foundation upon which a person can construct a local identity. Drawing on a complex and multifaceted concept of place, Smith establishes an environmental ethic that prioritizes the moral considerations of the individual subject on the ground over abstract top-down management. Ethics of place, then, is primarily a concept for resistance against the abstract ethical reasoning of modern environmental ethics that understands places merely as particular instances of a universal ‘nature’, and loses sight of people’s connectedness to specific places. Based on this idea, Smith explores the phenomenon of NIMBY (Not-In-My-In-Backyard) activism. Politicians often respond negatively to NIMBY activists because the nature of their engagement is perceived as inappropriate for political debate. The dominant political discourse within liberal democracy requires citizens to formulate their political position, either with reference to the ‘common good’ or in the form of personal preferences that can be weighed against other preferences. Many NIMBY activists, however, take a radically different approach. They challenge the idea of the comparability of places in general. According to the NIMBY activists' worldview, the world consists of different, unique places, each with their own character. From this perspective, it is not possible to make general statements about places – it requires a place-based recognition of the relevant local conditions. Such place-based rationality is difficult to incorporate into current political processes, since in liberal democracies, site-specific

arguments appear to be either ‘irrational’ – because they cannot be generalized – or purely personal and subjective, and thus politically non-binding preferences.

In contrast, an ethics of place explores how the world can appear as a moral home for embodied, world-open beings in the context of a place that is always specific. An ethics of place seeks to understand what it means to live in and feel connected to a particular place.

Place-based ethics emphasizes that a morally meaningful relationship to the world presupposes that mere space is constituted as a structure of meaning. The starting point of an ethics of place is thus the observation that people who engage with their environment have *appropriated* the world culturally and materially and have incorporated that environment into a symbolic order. An ethics of place assumes that a moral engagement with one’s environment presupposes an understanding of the world as an ethos (ηθος), that is, as a morally meaningful home, a place of living and being, a meaningful, significant place in which we can live as moral beings. People appropriate the world through interpretation, but necessarily always in a specific fashion, that is: reflecting certain assumptions, leaving aside other possibilities. The prime goal of an ethics of pace is to explicate, examine and reflect upon specific interpretations of place, including possible criticisms of any particular interpretation of place.

An ethics of place emphasizes the importance of those types of places that can appear *as a meaningful world* in the first place. With globalization, the "inspired landscapes of generations of farmers, monks and landowners" are becoming an "anonymous by-product of the global economy" with "local characteristics" increasingly giving way to "interchangeable stereotypes" (Pedroli et al., 2007). Out of concern for this development, the *European Landscape Convention* was signed in 2000. According to that convention, a landscape is “an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and human factors”, which is “a fundamental part of Europe's natural and cultural heritage” and “contributes to human well-being and the consolidation of European identity” (Council of Europe, 2000) and should therefore be protected. However, recognizing that each place has a non-interchangeable meaning and identity, does not necessarily mean that we should leave everything as it is.

An adequate understanding of a place should not simply reinforce existing place-based identities but stimulate a critical self-examination in light of a critical interpretation of the landscape. Place narratives cannot be rewritten at will, but they should somehow be ‘grounded’ in an understanding of the ‘objectivity’ of a place: its history, soil composition, hydrology, habitat, food, climate, etcetera. Some rewilders provide the basis for a critical re-interpretation of a landscape by focussing the attention on certain essential ecological processes that have been suppressed in recent times and that any genuine interpretation of a place should acknowledge. Rewilding implies a radical non-anthropocentric normative reinterpretation of place and human history that calls for a critical re-examination of the cultural identities that are based on that history (Drenthen, 2018).

The loss of the old cultural landscapes is not primarily due to the rise of rewilding. More common causes are the intensification of agriculture, expansion of infrastructure and urbanization. Yet many critics of rewilding seem to blame rewilders in particular for the perceived loss of traditional landscapes, perhaps because rewilding is seen as a deliberate attempt to change existing landscapes, whereas other forms of landscape change are seen as mere inevitable side-effects of modernization. With the loss of old cultural landscapes, the assemblages of species that are typical of traditional cultural landscapes tend to diminish, often causing a deep sense of loss among its inhabitants. In the Dutch language, this feeling has been dubbed 'landscape ache'.[5] Moreover, besides specific local species, something else gets lost: an – often centuries-old – way of living with and in the landscape. Several writers have given voice to the sense of loss when an old cultural landscape in which a story could be told about every place disappears, for example James Rebanks' *A Shepherd's Life* (2015). Rapid changes in old cultural landscapes can lead to feelings of loss and disorientation amongst residents (Buijs, 2009).

Rewilders and traditional landscape defenders do not simply emphasize different values. Whereas defenders of cultural landscapes see the landscape as a meaningful reflection of human history and value landscape features that reflect sense of place, rewilders value non-anthropocentric values such as biodiversity, ecological fidelity and wildness (Higgs, 2003). However, the conflict about the landscape cannot be reduced to a disagreement about which functions and landscape elements are valuable or not (wetlands or farmers' fields, wolves or sheep), but ultimately also entails a clash between different narratives about the landscape, and about humanity's place within nature. It is important to not only look at the various 'values' in the landscape, but also pay attention to the role of history and stories in people's relationships with their environment (Deliège, 2011; Deliège & Drenthen, 2014; Drenthen, 2018).

**The narrative significance of wildness**

During protests against large-scale rewilding (or 'nature development'[6]) along the rivers in the Netherlands in the 1980s, writer and activist Willem van Toorn stressed that old landscapes remind us "that there is a past [in which] people lived who had to deal with the world just like us, who had to protect themselves from nature and at the same time use its resources" (Van Toorn, 1988; also see Drenthen, 2009a). Staying in touch with this past was important "because we owe our existence, our identity, our representation of the world to

[5] Landschapspijn (De Boer, 2017).

[6] Rewilding is a relatively recent term, but projects that today are labelled as rewilding have a longer history. In the Netherlands in particular, rewilding has a history of several decades, although the most commonly used term for projects that today would be labelled 'rewilding' is 'nature development' ('*natuurontwikkeling*') or 'new nature' (Bulkens et al., 2016). In this chapter I use the terms interchangeably.

the past, and because we can think about the future only by drawing on past experiences." By getting rid of all 'legible' human traces from the landscape, rewilding would fail to appreciate the role these human traces can have for the meaning of landscapes.

As already indicated, O'Neill, Holland and Light (2008) argue that environments matter to people because they embody a larger context within which people can make sense of their lives. This is clearest in the cultural landscapes that "specifically embody the lives of individuals and communities" (p. 198). But natural landscapes also have a narrative dimension: they not only help put into perspective human history by contextualizing it as part of an older history "that extends to before humans appeared and will continue after the human species has disappeared again" (p. 164), but they also provide a context that helps us understand ourselves and our historic role in the landscape.

> "Unintentional natural processes provide part of the context in which intentional human activities take place and through which we understand their value." (p. 198)

This latter narrative dimension shows that rewilding projects, if done right, might actually help to provide a deeper ground for a sense of place. By bringing back the wildness of the natural processes that humans have suppressed for so long, rewilding can restore a sense of historical and narrative continuity, not so much by restoring an original, primaeval, untrammelled version of nature, but rather by giving a glimpse of what it must have meant for the first humans to inhabit (and cultivate) a landscape. Thus, bringing back wildness, rather than wilderness, can help enrich the sense of place that is so important for people to feel attached to a particular place. In this sense, rewilding can be a form of place-making (Gammon, 2019).

Some rewilders seem to be aware of this. For example, Wouter Helmer, founder and former director of Ark Nature Foundation, the most prominent Dutch rewilding organization (and also co-founder of Rewilding Europe), argues that rewilding should be based on the 'genius of place', respecting the existing geomorphology, local characteristics *and* local history (Helmer et al., 1995). In this approach, rewilding in historically saturated landscapes does not have to mean that the cultural-historical elements are all erased. The Ark Nature Foundation acknowledges on its website that rewilding ('nature development') also has a cultural context.

> "It is a new phase in the development of a landscape. And just like in a book, a new chapter is easier to read after the previous ones have been understood. That is why ARK also tries to keep the cultural history of an area visible as much as possible. Historical elements are given meaning again in the present wherever possible."

Examples of this interweaving of nature and culture in nature development are plentiful. In the Gelderse Poort, a rewilding area in Netherlands along the banks of the river Rhine, some historical elements such as cold war bunkers or the remains of old brick factories are expressly preserved and protected from decay, in order to keep the cultural history of a landscape visible. In the same region, in the Millingerwaard, half fossilized 8,500-year-old

hardwood trees that were dredged up from the river, were used to make a Stonehenge-like work of art that quite literally recalls a past that preceded human habitation. Another fascinating example is to be found nearby, in the Geitenwaard, where the decision was taken to reinforce old Hawthorn and Blackthorn hedges (whose history dates back to the Iron Age and Roman times), not in order to preserve them forever, but to allow them to slowly fade with the ravages of time. Where the choice seemed at first to be between letting history disappear unnoticed or stubbornly preserving and freezing it, a third option was found. On the one hand, it was recognized that the historic wood banks had lost their function in the contemporary landscape and preserving it would not fit in with the new vision on rewilding the floodplain, on the other hand it was recognized that a meaningful historical relic could contribute to the story of the place. And for that story, the literal preservation of that planting structure is not a necessary condition.

Sometimes landscape artists can help to keep various layers of meaning visible within the context of rewilding. For example, by 'translating' meaningful cultural-historical structures into a different, more natural material so that they continue to tell their story as part of the new nature: a row of trees can mark a vanished wall, a simple wooden swing the spot where a school building once stood. Landscape art can also provide a problematic past history - of a former toxic dump, battlefield or other disaster area – with critical commentary and thus save it from oblivion (Drenthen, 2015). In all these cases, the line between nature and culture blurs and it becomes clear that the so-called 'new wilderness' is not outside our culture, but rather a new phase in our cultural history. Through a broad, people-inclusive interpretation of rewilding, the place attachment of the local community can even be strengthened. In this way, many contradictions in the landscape debate can be softened.

**New wild places as cultural landscapes**

There is an element in the current fascination with wildness that emphatically wants to leave behind human history, because human 'civilization' would necessarily entail a suppression of nature. Some radical rewilding groups, adherents of so-called 'primitivism', seek not just the rewilding of nature, but also a radical social upheaval and a rewilding of humans.[7] Numerous studies have shown that it is mainly city dwellers who are attracted to 'wilderness'; in contrast, rural dwellers usually prefer more orderly, Arcadian landscapes (Van den Berg et al., 2006). There is a clear connection between urban culture and human rewilding, which seems to stem from a desire to break with history, and to be able to break free from modern society with all its conventions and limitations. Some critics point out that such a romantic flirtation with wild nature can only exist because others are farming the food for these rewilders. I think it is important nevertheless to recognize that the desire for wildness also

[7] Urban Scout 2008, see also : rewild.com, rewildu.com, rewildportland.com, and fireflygathering.org/manifesto/.

contains an aspect that could give a sharper cultural and social profile to the nature conservation movement, as already argued.

The cultural landscape is like a layered text, a palimpsest, in which the recent human traces are written over older ones that precede human activity. Rewilding is primarily about setting free the natural processes that have formed the existing landscape, not with the aim of return to primeval or untouched nature, but rather to show the wildness lying dormant underneath even the most cultivated landscapes. And if our traditional sense of place does not feel at home with this, then perhaps it is time to critically examine that sense of place and to deepen it (ecologically and culturally-historically) into a 'Sense of place 2.0' (Drenthen, 2009a; Drenthen, 2018).

For many people, the current fascination with wildness is related to a critical understanding of the limitations of the all-too-human. Wild places are not so much places without people, but rather places where humans are not centre stage. Wild places can therefore serve as a mirror that allows us to look at ourselves and society from the perspective of non-human nature. Such a look in the mirror can teach people to put into perspective modern civilization:

> "Rewilding expresses a new appreciation of wild nature. It represents a growing movement in Europe of people seeking a counterweight to our increasingly regulated lives, society and landscapes. It signifies a desire to rediscover the values of freedom, spontaneity, resilience and wonder embodied in Europe's natural heritage and to revitalise conservation as a positive, future-oriented force." (Jepson & Schepers, 2016)

Rewilding can create places where we are confronted once again with the vital power of natural processes and thus learn to put the human, all-too-human world into perspective. Helmer considers these new wild places as "insane oases" (Helmer, 1996): places where we can recover from the pervasive rationality of modern society.

But let's not be too naive either. Ultimately, the new wild places will also be part of our everyday landscape and will not totally evade its practical, administrative and financial context. One may well dream of 'new wild places' as a counter space, but the new wild will inevitably remain a part of the modern landscape with its economic pressures and human activities such as tourism and biodiversity policies. We will probably never get rid of a certain uneasy feeling that rewilding is never free enough.

Rewilding fundamentally questions the current human-nature relationship by reviving that age-old idea that a better understanding of nature will lead to a fundamental reflection on one's own existence and to a critical perspective on humans and society. Rewilding and the contemporary desire for wildness thus offer the nature movement the opportunity to reconnect with its moral roots and develop into a broader social movement.

If we understand rewilding as part of a social and moral movement and practice in which people learn again to take care of their habitat, while also making room for wildness – the

autonomy of non-human beings – then rewilding is not about the creation of wilderness. Rather rewilding is about the sincere attempt of a political and moral community to develop a new relationship with the non-human environment. In that process, biologists and ecological experts can play a role because they have knowledge of the ecosystems with which humans interact. But the new developments must also fit within a meaningful historical narrative of landscape development, and be carried out in such a way that people can re-establish a meaningful relationship with the non-human world around them. The new rewilding zones will not be wilderness in the traditional sense of the word. Even our wildest natural areas are in a sense cultural landscapes, because they are the expression of human choices and value judgments. The new wild places are our newest cultural landscape. But that does not make them less wild.

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