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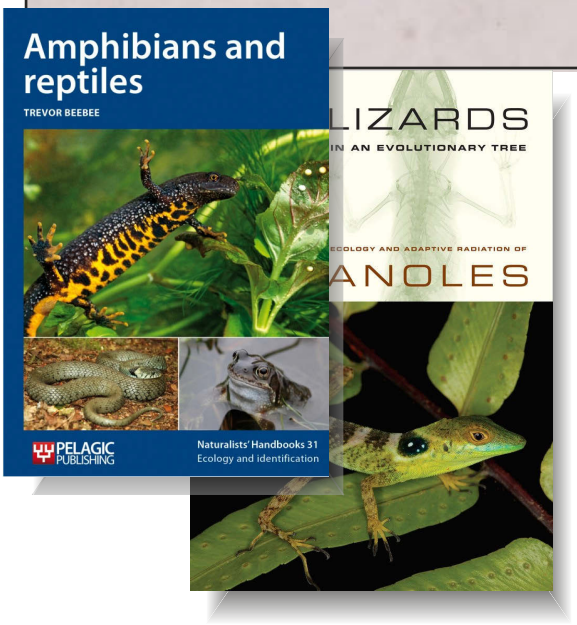


Reports from the Systematics Research Fund 2013

The British conservation model: unambitious, irrational and afraid of nature?

Taxonomy of British *Lepidocyrtus* and *Entomobrya* (Collembola)

The British conservation model: unambitious, irrational and afraid of nature?

A personal viewpoint

Clive Hambler, Hertford College, Oxford

This is a personal review and report based on a debate held on 13th November, jointly hosted by the Linnean Society of London and the Systematics Association

This meeting in the offices of the Linnean Society was framed as 'A debate between conservationists and rewilders'. The title reflects the division between those conservationists in Britain who advocate traditional management of semi-natural cultural landscapes, and other conservationists more typical of the international model in which 'rewilding' of some sort is the default approach.

What is rewilding? At the debate it was evident that different people have different ideas. Initially, the term was primarily used to mean bringing back large predators in a large, connected, protected landscape. But this restricts its use on many areas such as islands, and involves subjectivity as to what is a 'large' animal. I therefore define rewilding as 'restoration towards greater naturalness'. As such it is a concept as old as recorded conservation, which has been reinforced by conservation biology. About 200 years ago, Wordsworth advocated rewilding the lowland Lake District, and in the 1950s Elton instigated minimal-intervention areas in Wytham Woods. George Monbiot has now raised the profile of the idea, with his vivid and attention-catching writing and webcasts. I'd guess that to many international observers, rewilding is the re-branding of restoration with a romantic ring! Whilst this vision is not dependent on scale it will be easier at scale. This debate considered why many British conservationists have departed from their international counterparts - to the extent that they can be seen as in opposition to them!

I define rewilding as "restoration towards greater naturalness"

The debate was triggered by George's new book: 'Feral. Searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding' (see page 8), which has great value and interest on a global stage. Some of the arguments in the book may be

A European beaver

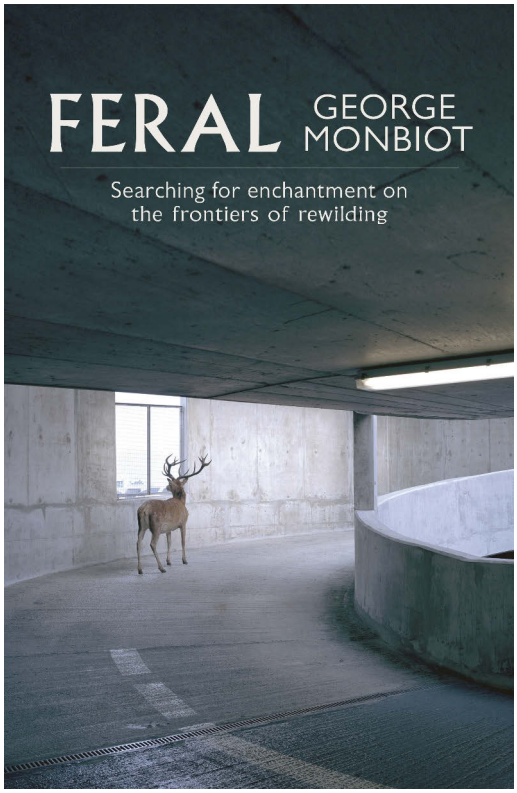
Photo by Per Harald Olsen (user made). [GFDL CC-BY-SA-3.0 or CC-BY-SA-2.5-2.0-1.0] via Wikimedia Commons

familiar, in Britain or overseas, but much of the evidence he presented was original and unpublished. Perhaps the greatest novelty is in George's proposed funding stream for rewilding: redirection of Europe's massive agricultural environmental subsidies (currently paying for conservation of semi-natural and agricultural landscapes) in a way that equitably benefits taxpayers and voluntarily participating locals.

The debate was chaired by Professor Bruce Pavlik, bringing his substantive international experience. He framed the discussion with key questions including: 'where is wild?'; 'what is wild?'; and especially for this debate, 'how is wild?'. He asked if we should simply accept and, on a fine scale, shepherd the wildlife which survived the excesses of our hungry ancestors. Or should we set up conditions suitable for nature to take over and run the hopefully most beneficial course? Should we acknowledge limits to knowledge of natural processes and of the possible results of our manipulations?

The first presentation was by George, with his characteristic style and appeal as a "professional troublemaker". He contrasted the British model of protecting ranches from rainforests with the global conservation norm (the opposite, of course). We actively retain bare landscapes both in the lowlands, and, atypically, in the "sheepwrecked", "grouse-trashed", burned and cut uplands. Conservation groups fear that 'undergrazing' (by "an invasive ruminant from Mesopotamia"!) risks the loss of those favoured 'target species' which need grazing. But why do we not break out of this circular thinking by selecting different target species and indicators of habitat quality?

The next speaker was Myles King, bringing his experience of British policy and practice. He focussed on the management origins of the current landscape, and why cultural landscapes (semi-natural habitats) should be conserved for



Feral. Searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding

a range of interests and the wonderful wildlife in them. There are heritage values in the semi-natural, and things to learn from it, with parallels to the value of maintaining culture in museums. He predicted and lamented the end of the age of the semi-natural.

I argued that during the 1970s the British model departed from international norms. There has been a fear of 'neglect'. We have failed to use the evidence from fundamental ecology, and from extinct and threatened species. We do not fully explore our potential for rewilding, nor enthuse about its value. I conclude the result has been extinction rates that are rising. As a test of 'rationality', I asked if an alien conservationist visiting Earth would do it our way.

Rounding off the presentations, Aiden Lonergan, Futurescapes manager at the RSPB, illustrated much common ground between the speakers, with examples of the innovative habitat restoration and re-introduction work

RSPB are already doing, including wetland enlargement and removal of plantations in the Flow Country. He showed examples of their successful international work on overseas territories and beyond (with their BirdLife International and other partners). His experience was that re-introduction of raptors had indeed been challenging, and he cautioned that the opportunities for rewilding in Britain were limited by scale. He stressed it was important to re-connect people with wildlife even on small scales.

With all speakers having miraculously kept to their allocated six minutes, the debate was opened to the audience. It was here that the differences between the approaches became clearer. There was some concern for food supply if rewilding took hold, especially in the lowlands. George responded that little food is created in the uplands, whilst I argued (tongue in cheek) that rewilding can create novel opportunities for wilder foodstuffs.

This debate has run for years... it may take an alien ecologist to resolve it!

As with the talks, it appeared from the lack of agitated dissent amongst the speakers that the panel members agreed on many issues - unsurprising given their professions and value systems. Perhaps the sharpest areas of disagreement came whilst discussing the importance and natural frequency of open habitats. Myles argued that taxa such as lichens need sunlight and hence justify management, but my response was that many of the internationally important populations need the humidity and clean air of the western regions, and thrive(d) under a closed canopy. The British history of open-ground species was debated. Did they occur in a forested but gappy landscape, and if so what maintained the gaps? Is this consistent with the sub-fossil evidence? Or are they opportunistic invaders - beneficiaries of our deforestation, exploiting the gaps we make through our exploitation? This debate has run for years and has been continued though subsequent blogs and online comments; it may take an alien ecologist to resolve it!

The questions and discussion ranged from the societal benefits of greater exposure to wilderness, the synergies of vegetarianism and conservation, and the cultural values underpinning the British model. There are deep issues that, along with many others, could not be fitted into one and a quarter hours. George sees the uplands as presenting the greatest opportunities for rewilding in Britain; these have few species, produce very little food, and current conservation might even lower total food production. Private land ownership could be a constraint or an opportunity for conservation at scale. Agricultural subsidies could be re-directed to pay local people to be stewards. Children need more contact with wild places. Sir Crispin Tickell pointed out the need for rewilded sites as examples, and asked what the overall policy implications of the debate were. But by that time the drinks and nibbles were calling loudly - and such essential policy formulation will have to wait for an occasion where it does not compete with refreshments and discussions with an enthusiastic (but fortunately not wild) audience.

The Chair noted the common ground such as the desirability of maintaining some of the current model within a larger toolbox. There was no vote, perhaps diplomatically - but I hope the real winner was wildlife. The hosts and sponsors deserve many thanks for enabling this occasion to raise and think about many issues. The event was filmed, and is available on the societies' websites (with minor formatting problems on some slides). So you can make up your own mind after watching: to be continued, I suspect....!