Re-wilding the grazers – obstacles to the wild in wildlife management.

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I specifically wanted to provoke ecosystem managers into reflection on their own role in keeping the wild at bay.

British wildlife habitats have a multi-dimensional quality that can easily be overlooked – the most obvious dimension of physical ecology might appear to the less enquiring eye as a mosaic of woodland, heath, dry and wet grassland, reedbed, salt-marsh and mudflats with associated communities of plants and animals, but the professional eye sees another layer of activity required to maintain these habitats in some kind of optimal condition according to a set of management objectives or targets; and then there is another dimension that contains the processes whereby these objectives are set. It is with regard to this latter dimension related to the role of grazing animals and wildlife that I would like to contribute some discussion.

I was recently asked to present a radical view, based upon my book *Beyond Conservation* and the work of the Wildland Network to a special meeting of PONT (the equivalent in Wales to GAP – the English Grazing Animals Project), after which there followed a day of discussions on the theme of 'How wild should Wales be?' I was arguing for a radical system of core areas and corridors of *wildland* that would go beyond the current paradigm of small and increasingly beleaguered 'nature reserves' surrounded by agricultural or forestry land where, in recent times, a huge, costly and largely failing effort has been aimed at managing these essentially industrial and economic systems to become more 'wildlife friendly'.

Most participants – drawn from a range of practical land management professionals in government agencies, farming, forestry, and the voluntary sector, had recognised a wave of interest in 'rewilding' and in particular, the return of the larger and more charismatic of the exterminated mammals, as now practised in some of the nature reserves in Holland. However, as the day progressed, I became increasingly doubtful that anything really wild was likely to emerge from the meeting. As with all paradigm shifts – it takes time for old ways of thinking to change, and as in so many areas of human endeavour, the most resistant force in the face of new thinking is bureaucratic.

The dimension of the desk interpenetrates all aspects of British wildlife, and for the most part its aspects are hidden from ordinary view. It is at the desk that objectives and targets are set – and it would be a worthy exercise on any field excursion if whenever a species is being observed, a backdrop of a desk and a manager is projected onto the habitat behind it, because in this bureaucratic dimension there are forces at work at least as potent as climate or geology at shaping habitats, but far less studied and understood.

If we examine the case of grazing animals in the context of landscape scale rewilding projects, the following dimensions unfold:

The need for grazers.

There is a general acceptance of the need for grazing animals to maintain a diversity of habitats and species in virtually all Britain's nature reserves – and with a marked decline in

the economics of grazing, this is proving problematic. The Grazing Animals Project and PONT have thus had plenty to do in brokering grazing agreements and we have seen an increased use of hardy breeds of pony such as Koniks and Exmoors, and of cattle such as Highland, Belted Galloway, Old Gloucester and Longhorns in wildlife reserves. Debates have emerged about ‘naturalistic’ grazing and the re-instigation of natural processes, an essential element of large-scale rewilding schemes, but there is wide spectrum of understanding regarding what these terms might mean.

Konik ponies grazing in a National Trust fenland reserve (National Trust)

Exmoor ponies living wild in Exmoor National Park (Toby Hickman)

A natural grazing regime could not be natural unless it operated over a sufficiently large area for effective dispersal and utilisation by grazing animals of a range of habitats, particularly during harsh weather in the uplands, or flooding in lowlands; it would not be natural if there were no predator-prey interactions affecting dispersal patterns, mortality and fitness selection if not actual population sizes (which tend to be controlled more by available food supplies); and there also needs to be a *guild* of grazers and browsers – a range of large mammals occupying different niches. In the latter respect, the mega-herbivores that have co-evolved with north temperate forest structure, such as the straight-tusked elephant, forest rhinoceros, and northern hippo were exterminated about 30,000 BP. These animals create clearings and maintain riparian meadows which are then grazed and browsed by wood bison, moose, forest cattle, tarpan, boar and beaver – all four of which are now found only in wilder areas of eastern Europe. In their natural dynamic state, this herbivore guild would have had European lion, sabre-tooth cat, leopard, hyena, bear, wolf and lynx to predate adults and young. It is seldom appreciated that previous inter-glacials were only marginally warmer than today and that north-adapted equivalents of modern African or Asiatic fauna roamed the Atlantic oak forests and riparian meadows.

It is clear, therefore, that the term *natural* can be of little guidance – even if qualified as ‘near’ natural, or naturalistic. A line can be drawn anywhere with regard to biological era or the degree of naturalness envisaged. And it is at this point that the bureaucratic mind can make decisions which may conceal all manner of reasonings related to processes within its ministry. If nothing can be entirely natural, then compromises are easier to make – and this will very much depend upon the strength of other forces represented at the desk, such as farming, forestry, tourism, recreation, access, veterinary security, public safety, accountability, land tenure, and cultural identities, in addition to any interests on the part of wildlife enthusiasts.

Wild grazers or hardy domestic breeds?

How much easier then for land managers and planners to opt for safer and perhaps more economically proven options!

As I listened to plans for a large-area scheme in the North Cambrians, headed by Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust, and seeking to model the collaboration of voluntary bodies with government and the water industry (such as the National Trust-Forestry Commission-Water Company project in Ennerdale), I could see the radical vision of a true core area beginning to fade into the compromise zone of SSSI targets for grazed heath and Tir Gofal type Single Farm Payments forming a co-ordinated landscape-scale buffer zone, with the Forestry Commission restructuring its plantations to incorporate grazed zones and more native woodland. The grazers could range from the current hardy breeds of sheep, through Highland or Galloway or Welsh Black and the various breeds of Welsh pony. Every economic interest would be appeased in some way as unprecedented new levels of finance were accessed. Undoubtedly, BAP targets and SSSI favourable conditions would be met. In ten years or more, there may be more plovers, grouse, ring ouzel, kite and stonechat, as well as fritillaries and orchids. Eco-tourism might prosper under a branded regional identity. And upland organic meat could be marketed as wildlife-friendly.

There is no doubt that such a model – as now being developed in Ennerdale, would reverse some of the decline of species in our uplands, and may help to solve the decline in farming and give more meaning to what is on many sites an entirely uneconomic forest enterprise. Water companies might also benefit from reduced costs in maintaining water quality and silting. Flood control in lowland areas might also benefit.

But what about the *wild* in the wildlife of Britain? This model is management oriented. It *maintains* a bureaucracy, and although each member rightly sees themselves as pursuing a worthy objective on behalf of nature conservation, it is important that each reflect upon their own interests and how this affects the final managerial outcomes. If every interest has to be appeased in the final outcome, then we end up with a situation where a large and extensive public movement toward rewilding is thwarted by narrow self interest and an unimaginative bureaucracy – as happened with the blocked project to re-introduce the beaver to Scotland.

There is no doubt that truly wild grazing animals present major problems for the bureaucracy. The list would include:

- the absence of any developed grant structure for non-economic grazing animals;
- issues of veterinary safety (foot and mouth disease, for example) and of domestic water safety (cryptosporidium);
- issues of animal welfare in non-intervention regimes during harsh winters, or in fighting and general disability with cattle, and more especially horses;
- public safety for walkers and open access;
- the introduction of predators such as lynx (and wolf in the Highlands) would raise issues of compensation for livestock kills;
- new populations of red deer or re-introduction of roe deer raises issues of forest damage to plantations;
- wild boar can be destructive of croplands;
- beaver interfere with drainage.

In the light of these problems and of the acknowledged low-risk, try-to-please-all -stakeholders manual of bureaucracy, what chance then of a truly wild zone experiment in England or Wales? There is a much better chance in Scotland – especially now that the pioneering Trees For Life group are purchasing a 10,000 acre estate contiguous to the Forest Enterprise and National Trust for Scotland land in Glen Affric, an area that has been the subject of a prize-winning programme of Caledonian Forest regeneration. This zone extends to a possible 1500 sq km collaborative enterprise with other estates and public land – large enough for a wider herbivore guild to include boar, beaver, wild horse and wild cattle, perhaps moose and wood bison, as well as lynx, wolf and possibly also bear.

In England we have several developing smaller scale schemes that are nevertheless revolutionary in their potential. At Knepp in Sussex, an area of 3000 acres is mooted for wild or hardy breeds to graze freely, and in the fens, the Natural Trust is targeted 10,000 acres for purchase next to its reserves at Wicken Fen, where it already grazes the almost wild-type Polish Konik horse. Ennerdale has pioneered cooperative management between forestry, agricultural and water interests over a large upland area. Such schemes could be developed in Wales if ways can be found to integrate common grazing interests on the moor, uneconomic forestry plantations that could be restructured and water industry interests and their potentially available finance. But the chances are that the current bureaucratic paradigm will prevent anything truly wild happening for some time yet. It is not that the land is not available – there are suitable sites where these interests could be integrated; nor is it an absence of finance – funds can be found within the current structures with a little bending of rules. The obstacles are largely cultural: farmers want to continue within a small-business semi-industrial production model – with deference to environmental objectives for which they are paid extra, and the land managers of voluntary bodies and conservation agencies, together with the wildlife scientists themselves, are still locked into an old set of BAP targets and managerial practices that have already been subject to the compromises fought for in relation to these other economic interests. Many of the target species depend upon a stasis of secondary habitat that can only be maintained by intensive management – and letting things go wild could have uncertain impacts.

The one potential agent for more radical change is the growing realisation that upland farming has deluded itself about the business-economic paradigm – very few farmers are free agents economically – they are maintained by state subsidy, and hence subject to political forces beyond their control. Rural decline is a fact of life in the hills, despite the raft of schemes to keep it going. It is doubtful whether unimaginative environmental schemes will sufficiently appease a growing public unease at farming subsidies. The future in the uplands may lie in integrated large area land management schemes for water, forestry, carbon sequestration, and wildlife enhancement where traditional farming has a role mainly in buffer zones.

I believe that the wildlife enhancement component now needs to take a leap of imagination – more connected to the *meaning* of wildlife than to esoteric biodiversity targets. There is a huge groundswell of public concern for wild places that now includes a global consciousness relating to biodiversity loss, climate change and the place of nature in our lives. This represents both an opportunity and a crisis. The world is faced not just with the loss of iconic species such as tiger and polar bear – but a future of degraded ecology including our own life support systems, and yet it continues to follow a development model and set of material values has signally failed to grapple with these issues in an effective way. We in the western industrial nations have promulgated this model and from the pioneering work of the last ten years, we know the model is amenable to change if the values change. The Dutch government has demonstrated this with extended reserves, re-introduced species, core areas, corridors and even wildlife bridges over motor-ways. Wild areas are not incompatible with industrially advanced society, even in the most populated of countries –

the secret is connectivity and an inclusive mosaic of habitats.

Reconstituted 'Aurochs' in Dutch nature reserve (Hans Kampf)

This, I would argue, is the true value and meaning of *wild* grazers. They signify and represent this shift in paradigm, They *communicate* through their iconic status – the *wild* in wildlife means something – there is an element of risk, of potential loss, and perhaps most importantly, a statement that we, the managers, are not in total control. In this there is a potential renewed reverence for nature and natural processes – and it is this that has the greatest chance to 'save the planet'. And no one is talking of turning *all* farmland or forestry into wildland, not even all grouse-moors, wild heath or reedbed – rather that we select a few large core areas and make room, in this crowded land, for the spirit of wildness itself – and nothing symbolises this more than a herd of wild grazers, with the chance perhaps, of sighting a stalking lynx or hearing the howl of a wolf.

The return of potentially dangerous predators to a crowded island is not necessarily fanciful. Within a half-hour drive of San Francisco there are well visited country-parks, such as Point Reyes, where puma raise their kits, and deer and ranch cattle maintain the coastal heath. Not a few ecologists, farmers and foresters could show us similar breeding territories for our own feral big cats that now regularly appear on the policeman's country beat. I would argue for a more relaxed attitude to risk – indeed, that such is a moral imperative if we are to entreat Indian villagers to tolerate tigers on their boundary, or Africans the lion and leopard. It is time for our local wildlife organisations to move to a wider stage – what we do here could have global resonance, if we are bold enough.