



Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life

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This book explodes with wonder and delight. Making use of remarkable scientific discoveries that transform our understanding of how natural systems work, George Monbiot explores a new, positive environmentalism that shows how damaged ecosystems on land and at sea can be restored, and how this restoration can revitalize and enrich our lives. Challenging what he calls his “ecological boredom,” Monbiot weaves together a beautiful and riveting tale of wild places, wildlife, and wild people. Roaming the hills of Britain and the forests of Europe, kayaking off the coast of Wales with dolphins and seabirds, he seeks out the places that still possess something of the untamed spirit he would like to resurrect.

He meets people trying to restore lost forests and bring back missing species—such as wolves, lynx, wolverines, wild boar, and gray whales—and explores astonishing evidence that certain species, not just humans, have the power to shape the physical landscape. This process of rewilding, Monbiot argues, offers an alternative to a silent spring: the chance of a raucous summer in which ecological processes resume and humans draw closer to the natural world.

Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life Details

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From Reader Review Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life for online ebook

Christopher says

We all have the need - buried deep in our psyche - to once in a while experience something truly wild. This is what Feral has convinced me of. George exquisitely describes a frustration that I've recently felt; one that stems from a modern life where our basic human needs are increasingly met through consumerism. Skills that were once necessary for survival have died out, and with them to a large extent has gone our respect for the natural world. Meandering back and forth between his own amazing experiences with nature, and thorough investigations into current environmental policy, George describes how human intervention has strangled the land and sea into a restricted and artificial state. Yet, rather than repeatedly bombard the reader with horror stories of policy-maker's mistreatment of the environment (there are plenty!), he presents a strong vision for the future which appears to be gathering momentum; rewilding. The story of rewilding so far exposes the short-sighted idea of conservation that some of our proudest national institutions hold. I was astonished by how the disproportionate amount of power afforded to land owners by the British government has frozen our landscape into a barren and lifeless 'desert' - far from the densely forested thriving habitat it once was. George makes the case that Britain is missing the large predators and herbivores that roamed here centuries ago. The reader is guided through numerous well-researched examples of how their reintroduction would allow nature to regulate itself, with benefits to other species and even to the all-important 'economic output' of the countryside.

Feral has opened my eyes to the desperate condition of our ecosystems, but has shown that in rewilding we have a compelling and workable solution. This is a rallying call for us all to preserve and encourage the growth of genuinely wild spaces. I now believe that these are not only critical to the recovery of highly endangered species, but to our own experience of feeling alive.

John says

Monbiot covers some interesting ground about restoring process rather than specific structure to "rewild" landscapes, but for the most part the book kept me asking, "when is he going to get to the point"? He wanders through all sorts of his own adventures and some interesting biological history of Europe but in the end doesn't really put together a cohesive story. At least it didn't work for me. I gave up about 2/3 of the way through frustrated with his lack of focus and often pompous attitude. This book had a lot of potential and god knows we need some better ideas about restoring natural areas given what we've done to degrade them, but this book didn't hit the mark for me.

Jude Bee says

This is the most disappointing book I have read in the last few years. It's all the more disappointing because it sets up one's hope high: Feral, Rewilding the land, the sea, and human life -- such fascinating and pressing subjects, it's hard to imagine how can one can wrong. And Monbiot does, grossly. Recently I compared a somewhat discursive and repetitious production by E. O. Wilson to brilliant tooth-pickings of a great mind; in contrast, FERAL is sensationalized tooth-pickings of egocentrism. The preface, with its in-page reference

lists, is the most satisfying and informative part of the book. Otherwise, in a book that is supposed to talk about the earth, biosphere, the environment, all we see is GEORGE in exotic settings doing wild things dished out pulp-fiction style: GEORGE in the grittiest corner on earth among the most unseemly characters, GEORGE eating 'foetally curled' beetle grubs with the locals, GEORGE hunting and murdering fish in the wild, GEORGE is having THAT feeling again, and again (insert new GEORGE adventures here).

In a world where survival is the very issue at risk -- grave risk, to put it mildly -- for both the human species and numerous others, GEORGE's central concern is what he self-identifies as 'Ecological Boredom': in the suburban security he finds himself, his justly manly longings for Adventure! Aggression! Violence! can not be fully satisfied -- a priceless gem, in my opinion, in the anthropocentric department, which is exactly what brought us where we are today.

GEORGE wants to take up the spear, and play the Paleo Man (Aggression!). Given where we are today already, I say keep this GEORGE out of the jungle, out of any civilization if possible, and safely in his dangerous and exciting caveman dreams.

Jonathan says

I don't think I can exaggerate the impact of this text upon my thinking.

Whilst born and partly educated in the suburbs, most of my life has been spent in the countryside and I readily identify as a member of the rural community (minus the flat cap, cider addiction and thick West Country accent) and my recent academic explorations focused on reintroducing woodland to the catchment of the Somerset Levels: had I read Monbiot prior to finishing, I would either have been far more radical in my intervention or thrown it all in to seek out wild places. As he, in no uncertain terms, states, Britain more than most countries has been completely reshaped by human activity, precisely because we are an island nation with no avenues by which formerly persecuted and hunted creatures can return, much to our loss.

It's inevitable some people will disregard this book as full of fanciful notions, impossible to reconcile with land use or personal safety but Monbiot references extensively to offer the skeptic ample opportunity to challenge his conclusions. I dare all potential readers to charge through this mixture of anecdotes and essays and imagine the richness of a Britain in which a walk in the woods yields the physical traces of wolves, lynx and the ever industrious beaver. For myself, such potential is frighteningly exciting.

Daren Kearnl says

Got to p103 and decided not to read any further. Monbiot's research and descriptions are interesting and poetic, but his suggestions to return to an ecosystem that was 40,000 years ago by re-introducing animals and removing sheep so that trees can re-establish themselves on the hills of Wales and Scotland are too radical. Whether he likes it or not, things have moved on with our intervention, and we cannot go back. As he accepts himself, a hunter gatherer lifestyle can only support a UK population less than that of Southampton, so intensive farming practices are a harsh necessity.

Pete Trewin says

A wonderful, thought-provoking book. George Monbiot makes the arguments for and against his case - that parts of the British Isles should be 'rewilded' to what they were in pre-history - and lets you decide for yourself. I like that. And as a qualified zoologist he certainly knows his stuff. No sentimental love of large predators here (a point of view that often goes with a quasi-fascist disdain for the human beings who live in their habitats). No, it is carefully argued on scientific - and in particular, ecological - principles. He makes a compelling argument against the insanities of EU agricultural policy and its destructive effect on the environment, in particular the subsidy of unsustainable sheep farming on our uplands and the discouragement of natural reafforestation. He makes the excellent point that the current state of these areas is analogous to recently cleared areas of the Amazon rain forest.

I for one would support the incremental rewilding of our uplands and the reintroduction of some of the creatures that used to live in them, starting with beavers and lynx. Not sure about elephants, though. That would need a bit of a PR campaign.

Leah says

‘A raucous summer...’

In the past few years, I feel I have been observing a welcome note of commonsense and even optimism creeping into the arguments of some of our leading environmentalists. In this book Monbiot, while proposing ambitious and doubtless controversial ideas, confirms that impression.

Feral is his story of why and how he has come to believe that the future for nature conservancy is to stop conserving - to sit back, release the brakes and go on a wild ride with nature in the driving seat. He calls this process 'rewilding'.

'Rewilding recognises that nature consists not just of a collection of species but also of their ever-shifting relationships with each other and with the physical environment. It understands that to keep an ecosystem in a state of arrested development, to preserve it as if it were a jar of pickles, is to protect something which bears little relationship to the natural world.'

He scared me in the first couple of chapters. It seemed as if he had turned into a mini-Welsh version of Crocodile Dundee (Grass-snake Aberystwyth?) as he regaled us with tales of tracking and killing his prey with his bare hands and then eating it raw - it was a mackerel! When he set out to harpoon flounders with a trident, I genuinely thought he'd lost it; and when he became mushily sentimental over initiation rites for an African tribesman that involved tormenting and killing a lion, I nearly gave up on him.

However, the point that he then went on to make eloquently and convincingly is that humanity has lost something precious by its disconnect with the wild world and that we in the UK have taken that disconnect to further extremes than most. He isn't arguing for a return to the world of hunter/gatherer (although the first couple of chapters made it seem as if he was about to). But he is arguing for the return of at least parts of the country to true, unmanaged wilderness status and for the reintroduction of some of the top predators - wolves, for example - arguing that trophic cascades show that such predators can have often unexpected effects on biodiversity and environment and thus are an important part of any rewilding project. However he

maintains a sense of realism and commonsense, making it clear that his suggestions should only be implemented with the informed consent of the people, and wryly admits that his attitude towards the introduction of top predators may not be universally shared.

'The clamour for the lion's reintroduction to Britain has, so far, been muted.'

Along the way, Monbiot gives us a history of why our landscape is as it now is. He blames sheep-farming for the bareness of our hills and points out that the sheep is a non-native species to the UK. He talks about the vested interests of farmers and landlords and how these seem to be given excessive weight, considering the comparatively small numbers of people employed in farming and the huge subsidies required to make it economical. He points to the somewhat symbiotic relationship between farming organisations and government and suggests this leads to suppression of real debate around the subject of land use. And his anger shows through as he discusses how the subsidy schemes of the EU continue to distort and warp the productivity of the land.

There is so much packed into this book that I can only give a pale impression of its scope in this review. Monbiot discusses the damage that an uncontrolled red deer population is doing to the landscape in the Highlands of Scotland; the adverse effect on childhood health (not to mention imagination) of the more indoors, sedentary lifestyle of today's child; the reasons for the growth of the myth of big cat sightings around the country; the Nazis' adoption and corruption of the concept of rewilding. He explains the effects that Shifting Baseline Syndrome has had on the debate over the years - that because *'the people of every generation perceive the state of the ecosystems they encountered in their childhood as normal'* then attempts are made to conserve back to a state of nature that was already seriously degraded.

Towards the end of the book he extends his arguments for rewilding to include the seas, building on the arguments put forward so impressively by Callum Roberts (whose *The Ocean of Life* I heartily recommend) that areas set aside as protected zones actually lead to greater fishing productivity rather than reducing it. And as he set off in his kayak in the final chapter to hunt the newly returned albacore, I no longer felt that he'd 'lost it' but that, perhaps, if we listen to what people like Monbiot and Roberts are saying, there's still hope that the rest of us may 'find it'.

'Environmentalism in the twentieth century foresaw a silent spring, in which the further degradation of the biosphere seemed inevitable. Rewilding offers the hope of a raucous summer, in which, in some parts of the world at least, destructive processes are thrown into reverse.'

NB This book was provided for review by the publisher.

www.fictionfanblog.wordpress.com

Ariel Gordon says

From the June 1 edition of the Winnipeg Free Press' Books Section:

Rabble-rousing U.K. journalist George Monbiot doesn't much like sheep.

In his eighth book, *Feral*, he minces no words about the effect the ruminants have on the British landscape:

"Sheep farming in this country is a slow-burning ecological disaster, which has done more damage to the living systems of this country than either climate change or industrial pollution."

Monbiot worked as an investigative journalist in Brazil, Indonesia and East Africa for six years. He's been a columnist for The Guardian for nearly two decades, writing on multinational corporations (2000's *The Captive State*), democratic reform (2003's *The Age of Consent*) and climate change (2006's *Heat*).

But it was a move to the Welsh countryside with his young family in 2007 that forced Monbiot to focus on his immediate surroundings: the heaths and moors of the Cambrian Mountains.

Even though his Guardian column demanded that he range across disciplines - from science to economics to politics - Monbiot realized he felt disengaged from his body and his environment. He was, as he called it, "ecologically bored."

After a little digging, Monbiot realized that the Welsh landscape was not especially natural. As little as 1,300 years ago, according to the fossil record, most of the U.K. was covered in forest. Man cut down the trees and then filled the empty spaces with sheep, who browse anything green down to the ground.

"Heather, which many nature-lovers in Britain cherish, is typical of the hardy, shrubby plants which colonize deforested land," writes Monbiot. "I do not see heather moor as an indicator of the health of the upland environment, as many do, but as a product of ecological destruction."

What follows is an argument for the "rewilding" of the British uplands so as to reverse some of the environmental damage they've sustained and re-invigorate the people who live there.

Rewilding, according to Monbiot, "involves reintroducing absent plants and animals (and in a few cases culling exotic species which cannot be contained by native wildlife), pulling down the fences, blocking the drainage ditches, but otherwise stepping back." Monbiot advocates rewilding only in areas "in which production is so low that farming continues only as a result of the taxpayer's generosity."

Readers may be wondering how Monbiot's ideas apply to the North American landscape. While we don't have sheep, we do have cattle ranches and a high density of deer in both rural and urban areas. And scientists and conservation officers across the country are currently asking some of the same questions Monbiot does on the value of maintaining (and in some cases reintroducing) keystone species such as beavers and wolves.

Unfortunately, Monbiot sandwiches his largely compelling arguments between chapters that detail his goal to live a life "richer in adventure and surprise." (In Monbiot's case that mostly seems to mean the times he nearly kills himself with his sea kayak.)

In addition, while Monbiot was likely motivated by beginning a family to write *Feral*, there is no denying that the risk-taking he describes is gendered. It is predicated on the fact that there is someone at home with the children who is not trying to kill herself with a sea kayak.

Combine those interludes with Monbiot's nostalgic recollections of his adventures in East Africa and Brazil and, well, you've got a very manly book.

Part of the posturing is probably due to the fact that Monbiot is a 'radical thinker' and not a lowly scientist or an academic. These stories are meant, at least in part, to establish Monbiot's bona fides.

They're also likely an attempt to inject some colour into a book where he mostly wanders through the woods, muttering bleakly about sheep.

Marie says

I have been following George Monbiot through his Guardian column for many years and always enjoyed his old-fashioned passion and his sparking social conscience as he writes on everything from the environment to the economy. This was the first of his books that I've read and while recognizing his mildly sarcastic and very English wit and his lucid views, I was pleasantly surprised to also make acquaintance with another side to his writing, a side which doesn't always come across in his more journalistic texts. "Feral" was brimming with poetry. While I don't always agree with his take on everything (I am after all one of those people who love the English moorlands and the "Mesopotamian ruminants", aka sheep, that graze them), I see no fault with the poetic prose in which much of this book is written. The astonishingly original and beautiful descriptions of nature sprinkled throughout constitute a rewilding in themselves.

Wanda says

My husband read this and seemed to be enjoying it a lot. I found the title and concept intriguing. I admit that when my husband looked up occasionally from the book to tell me what was happening it sounded like Monbiot was having a midlife crisis. With these reservations in mind I started the book and it was true he was having a midlife crisis. His life wasn't exciting enough anymore since he had kids and had to be responsible and not go off to war zones to report and what not. Each chapter opened with an exciting tale of derring do that would be an allegory for his argument for the coming chapter. Initially this approach made me skeptical and worry that there was going to be no argument just a series of grandstanding stories of manliness to support a mad theory.

I will admit that the further I got into the book the more I changed my mind. Was I going mad too? Do I think that elephants and hippos should be reintroduced to England and Europe at large? But his argument really does start to work. He starts with trees and letting nature manage itself. You think, yeah trees are great they help make oxygen and look nice. Of course how reasonable. Then he moves onto the horrors of sheep, who he seems to hate. I start to agree with him there as well. Then there are the beavers and it all seems so reasonable that you think to yourself, "what's people's problem with beavers?" Eventually, you can see where this is going, I was thinking "elephants, in England? That would be awesome!"

Joking aside, rewilding is a growing movement and hopefully in the future this will be seen as the book that saw it coming. The English countryside feels sterile and mostly devoid of life, I would love to see some of the animals that have been driven to extinction return. Maybe even an elephant or two.

Sarah Clement says

I really was not impressed with this book at first. I wanted a book on rewilding, and from the first page this seemed to be a record of Monbiot's mysterious adventures, boosted by delusions of grandeur. I suppose he wanted to set the tone and establish that this wasn't a dry, factual tome; but for me it just came off as pompous and distracting from the central point. As the book went on, however, it grew on me. I started to

accept the book for what it really is; a sort of memoir of a British environmentalist, dissatisfied with the lack of biodiversity that surrounds him. It was just structured around the concept of rewilding in this highly modified island, an island full of landscapes shaped by people and culture. As the book progressed, he still wove in some stories in which he featured as an intrepid traveler performing brave feats, but I warmed to them somewhat because the rest of the text was so damn good. I especially loved the chapters on Wales, which is one of my favourite places, and I really had not realised the full extent of modification in the uplands. I found the chapters on reintroductions (e.g. wolves, lynx) and marine conservation both captivating and compelling, and the information about reforesting the Scottish highlands was inspiring. This book is indeed sentimental, but it is also built on a solid foundation of knowledge from Monbiot, the literature, and experts. The chapter on "how not to rewild" at first threw me for a loop, as he invoked Godwin's law fairly early on, but by the end I realised what he was doing.

As a new migrant to the UK who seriously misses "proper" nature, this book gave me so much fodder for my imagination. The world I constructed from the information in this book is a Britain I would love to see. Unfortunately, aside from a few minor policy changes - like re-introducing a few animals and perhaps protecting a bit more of the sea - I can't fathom any of Monbiot's vision coming true. The environment is not even part of the national dialogue here. Still, I thoroughly enjoyed entertaining the notions in this book, and I would be happy if I was proven wrong and we really did rewild Britain.

Zanna says

I read Monbiot's book *Heat*, in which he sets out a plan of how the UK could and should respond to human-made climate change by cutting carbon emissions by 90%, in 2010. I was convinced, but not optimistic; the changes we need to make are radical; the restructuring in transport for example, would be deep, and despite the strength of the argument against doing so even I have failed to stop flying (I have restricted myself somewhat, but totally failed to persuade anyone else), which has become so integral to working life and family together-time as we spread ourselves across the globe.

So when I took up *Feral* I wasn't expecting to find a carnival of hope and joy! There is no single narrative here; Monbiot alternates and weaves together anecdotes of his fishing expeditions, intense, dramatic and dense with description and encounters with wildlife and rural places, with discussions of progressive biodiversity loss and habitat destruction caused throughout our history by gratuitous hunting, agricultural practices and often bizarre regulation. He describes how ecosystems are kept healthy by large predators, and explores the potential for reintroducing animals such as lynx and even wolves to the UK, as well as less controversial animals like the beaver, a herbivore whose dam-building habits create opportunities for a variety of fish and all sorts of other fauna and flora to thrive. Some readers might wish Monbiot would cut to the chase but it's obviously important to him to share the sense of 'enchantment' and revitalisation that has informed his conception of 'rewilding'.

This rewilding is not a monolithic concept; it is being constructed differently by varied groups of advocates. Monbiot freely admits that, while he can make an impressive economic case, his real motivation is the yearning for reconnection and encounters with exciting ecosystems. He points out that sheep farming has left large areas of the UK biodiversity deserts, which without our intervention, would surprisingly be covered in rainforest, as diverse as the Brazilian *Mata Atlantica* of which it was once a part! He argues against the 'conservation prison'; the preservation of ecosystems that are actually severely depleted, having been created by historic farming practices and industrial processes. Do we really want our environment to be a museum? Monbiot wants to see areas of 'self-willed' land.

The effects of stepping back and letting nature recover are inspiring. Simply fencing out sheep for twenty years produces a startlingly rich and varied patch of woodland where previously nothing lived but grass. In the ocean, where the biodiversity disaster has been even more dramatic than on land due to destructive fishing practices and the misguided removal of predators, it is even easier to restore biodiversity and ecosystem health; simply by creating marine reserves. This is one example among many in the book of the need for **nothing but political will** to bring about a hugely beneficial (to the fishing industry and seafood-lovers as much as to wildlife) change at no or minimal cost and with no investment in technology or R & D. In the case of agricultural practice, one solution Monbiot advocates is the *removal* of a rule that forces farmers to work or graze land they would otherwise leave fallow. One of the more difficult problems is the vice-like grip of extremely wealthy landowners, often living overseas, who wield extremely disproportionate influence in government.

Monbiot is not naïve about the problems with rewilding areas of land. This is NOT a call for a return to ANY earlier stage of civilisation, to stop cultivation or reduce human populations. He balances his argument with chapters about his discussions with sheep farmers, and a cautionary discussion of the harrowing history of 'Nazi rewilding projects' that Simon Schama wrote about in *Landscape and Memory*. Monbiot also notes indefensible colonial 'conservation' projects, such as in Kenya, where imperial rulers have appropriated land from local people such as the Maasai, leaving them without homes or property, to create reserves.

On the other side of the argument is another example of colonial thinking; asking people in African and Asian countries to conserve dangerous animals such as big cats and rhinos sits ill with our unwillingness to tolerate predators on our own shores. The reintroduction of the wolf to Yellowstone in the USA is an incredible success story, and its slow reappearance in continental Europe is having similar effects, with many benefits to people.

Rewilding, Monbiot stresses, must be a democratic process, fully negotiated with all the stakeholders involved, but it has huge potential to enrich our land, seas and lives. Read and feel good!

Update

One issue in this book that has become especially topical is reasons why we now have far more flooding in the UK. Vegetation dramatically slows down run off into rivers and regulates transpiration, as well as preventing soil erosion. At one time government agencies removed fallen trees and so on from water courses to speed up the flow, and many wetlands have been drained to make way for more crops, inevitably speeding up the channels water flows in. How to prevent flooding: SLOW DOWN the movement of water. This also helps biodiversity

Wendy Wagner says

A bit of a slow (albeit fun) start. The middle section, mostly spent discussing conservation and forestry efforts in Scotland, is absolutely riveting. Inspiring stuff!

Sergio Mori says

I think I didn't like it mainly because of the expectations I had. I thought the focus was going to be philosophical. Instead, what I got was the random adventures of a glorified boy scout. The final straw for me

was the smug tone he adopts when he talks about cryptozoologists. Really annoying. He just sounds like a spoilt brat.

So, after 50-odd pages I gave up. If you can't grab my attention in 50 pages, you probably won't be able to do it later.

Chris says

I heard the author on NPR so I had to read the book. The book is somewhat disjointed. It's got passion but too much info. But still read it. It's very informative. You learn about trophic cascades and shifting balance syndrome among other things. Monbiot is a revolutionary, an iconoclast, a pragmatist, and someone who should be in charge of making things happen. If you think the US is messed up in terms of its conservation you should look at the UK which Monbiot mercilessly grills over its inane policies which do everything to achieve the reverse of what's needed. Although this book is pretty UK centric it's discouraging to see what constitutes management and conservation policy. Monbiot points out that much of what we call the natural world is not so but a manmade construct that's relative to our point of view or time. In the UK an obscenely small percent of the population own 69% of the land! The landed gentry work against the land with their focus on hunting. The farmer's lobby with the focus on neatness and removing woods, marshes as well as the pre-eminence of sheep which destroy the land- does nothing but make the land worse for wear. Monbiot likens some areas of Wales to a desert: no trees and the omnipresent sheep eating everything so there's no roots or grass. And they wonder why there are so many floods in the UK now according to Monbiot. Just a very interesting rant on the arrogance of man and how even his best attempt at management screws everything up. Leave Mother Nature alone and let her be and we'll all be better off is Monbiot's message.

Anna says

I found this book wholly delightful. It contains a mixture of adventures Monbiot has had in the wilder parts of the world and well-reasoned arguments for allowing more of the world to be wild. The most powerful concept he uses is 'shifting baseline syndrome', the idea that we consider the countryside of our childhood to be the 'natural' state of things. This is a useful reminder that notions of wilderness are culturally and socially mediated. I wasn't especially surprised to learn that the UK is especially resistant to rewilding and strangely convinced that fields of sheep occur naturally. I wonder if this attachment to a specific vision of the past and general fear of visual change links also to the bizarrely fervent resistance to wind turbines? The incredible, near-feudal concentration of land ownership in the UK clearly also has a major impact here, as Monbiot notes.

Perhaps I was predisposed to embrace the idea of rewilding, but I'm gleeful at the prospect of wolves, boar, lynx, elk, and even elephants reinhabiting the UK. I grew up in rural East Anglia, in a landscape wholly dominated by monocultures of oilseed rape. Here and there pockets of habitat survived, in churchyards, around rivers, in hedgerows, and the odd meadow. Woods, however, were basically non-existent. Monbiot's accounts of exploring beautiful regenerating forests made me want to live in Scotland, where the air is clean enough for trees to be draped with lichens and moss.

Given the sheer scale of human destruction chronicled in the book, it is impressive how positive the overall message is. I suppose the massive amount of energy and effort expended to alter and degrade ecosystems

implies a certain symmetry; stop expending that energy and ecosystems will quite quickly reconfigure themselves. Restricting climate change to asides also adds to this cheerful message. Rewilding is more closely linked to climate change adaptation than mitigation, as more diverse habitats tend to be more resilient. Regarding mitigation, it can only be hoped that greater personal identification with the wild environment would change social priorities away from overconsumption. Rewilding is, after all, subversive. Although its economic side benefits are discussed, ultimately it involves prioritising economic inactivity over profit-seeking use of land. Indeed, I doubt that the discipline of mainstream economics would ever comprehend rewilding. Monbiot himself stresses that the main benefit is the sheer wonder and enjoyment of wild places. Current social mores value what can be priced over such intangible concepts, so it is refreshing to find this challenged.

I was also amused to find a mention of how ‘authenticity’ is a difficult and unhelpful concept, something I tied myself in knots about while reading *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Perhaps my favourite element of the book, though, was the excited descriptions of extinct megafauna. It saddens me that, barring some great advance in cloning techniques, I’ll never see a giant ground sloth. I am deducting one star as the book could have a clearer structure. The academic side of me likes to see an argument set out systematically, although that clearly wasn’t the style intended here. Nonetheless, reading this book made me happier and enthusiastic about the prospects of rewilding.

Maayan K says

[...] I had banished my ecological boredom. The world had become alive with meaning, alive with possibility. The trees now bore the marks of elephants; their survival in the gorge prefigured the return of wolves. [...] the depleted land and sea were now gravid with promise. For the first time in years, I felt that I belonged in the world.

Warning: You might hate sheep by the end of this book.

A year and a half ago I read J.B. MacKinnon's book *The Once and Future World: Nature As It Was, As It Is, As It Could Be*. This is its more dangerous, passionate twin. Published in the same year (2013) the two books, were they scientific papers, would have been bitter competitors; as it is their authors give each other flattering blurbs. They both examine how humans have steadily subdued the Earth into fewer dimensions, reducing its natural state of nearly unimaginable abundance to a toy version where we seldom even recognize what we've lost. MacKinnon and Monbiot both use many of the same references, mining deep history for stunning examples of environmental change and shifting baselines. They both show us the hope of regeneration, not through intensive management with prescribed end-goals, but through the concept of rewilding: the restoration of a few key ecological interactions that then do the work of transformation with little or no human intervention.

Monbiot's approach is more anthropological and more personal than MacKinnon's, and that's why to me this is the better book. He spends more time exploring the idea of the inner rewilding of people themselves - and in particular of his own self. The book is punctuated by his increasingly ill-advised expeditions in his kayak out from Cardigan Bay, near his home in Wales, as he attempts to hook, harpoon, and bodily wrestle sea creatures with indifferent skill but increasingly apparent enthusiasm through the soaking rain and stiffening winds. These missions - in a denuded, poor piece ocean on the tame Welsh shoreline - nonetheless bring him (and us) into contact with a bit of danger, a bit of rawness. I think this is the feeling Monbiot wants us to get - the feeling of primal energy that despite being soaked and cold, you are holding a trident and trying to kill

something which you will eat, raw, on the shore not long after. He wants to trigger a genetic memory in himself and his readers of what it might feel like to take part in an ecological world with all its complexity and interacting parts. This is what he means by being released from ecological boredom (a great phrase). Of course Monbiot offers the usual caveats: he acknowledges that life is better now than it ever has been, less violent, longer, cleaner, etc. He knows that the primal violence of a wild life often involves trampling the freedom of others, and he doesn't defend that. But he wants us to remember the feeling - perhaps a feeling most of us have never felt.

Though Monbiot brings examples from all over history and the world, I especially enjoyed the time he spends on his home country of Wales and Britain. It's in these parts where we get to enjoy his biting wit as he roasts local politicians and conservation agencies for their counterproductive efforts. In contrast to Europe, where people are in part embracing the reforestation of formerly agricultural land and the return of wolves, bears, and other creatures, Britain, Monbiot argues, is the most zoophobic country on Earth. They have no more predators and they would like to keep it that way, thanks very much. This absence has had disastrous results for everything else as unchecked deer (game for rich absentee landlords) and sheep farming (unprofitable but heavily subsidized) graze woodland and pasture to the roots, preventing regeneration. These sheep- and deer- scoured uplands of Scotland, England and Wales, which used to be covered by rainforests but now resemble blasted moonscapes, are themselves the objects of "environmental" protection (!). The tiny bits of forest that are left are dying of old age because no new tree can survive the grazing. Yet, governments and nature agencies claim that this grazing is critical for the conservation management of the desired upland environment. Monbiot dismantles this circular logic with thorough and devastating effect. I will never see the iconic treeless rolling hills and cliffs of Britain the same way again.

This book is really good at showing how rewilding and human thriving aren't necessarily at odds. The poisonous trope in environmentalism that people are cancerous growths on the planet dovetails very eerily with horrific political ideologies that have asserted similar things, usually about specific types of people, whereupon they are removed or murdered. In the end, Monbiot's greatest triumph isn't his command of science, his rich historical research, or his sharp writing (though they're all on point), it's his tenderness towards the people that he encounters on the land. As environmentalists, feeling and enacting that tenderness is the only way we can hope to justly live in a wilder and better world.

Mark Avery says

This is a book that many people ought to read. I read most of it before I went to the USA and then read all of it, some of it several times, on my return. I was reading it again at 6am yesterday morning in the back garden of the Old Mill Hotel in Salisbury where a kingfisher, a juvenile robin and a loud wren distracted me.

I agree with the thrust of this book – which I believe is that we need more wild nature in our lives and that we ought to put it there through ‘rewilding’ some of the world around us. That’s a good message and is almost becoming nature conservation orthodoxy in the UK. Some of the questions that remain are; how much? how? where? and how quickly?

What is this thing ‘rewilding’? It’s restoring ecosystems that are largely unperturbed by our own species, including restoring some large and locally extinct species such as wolves and white-tailed eagle.

Monbiot suggests that we are all missing the wilder life and discusses people’s keenness to ‘see’ large black cats running around the British countryside. We need more forest, more wolves, more beavers, fewer sheep,

less fishing of the seas and we need the policy makers either to stand aside or to adopt this as a basis for public funding of land managers, but we shouldn't oppress the landowners if they don't fancy the prospect of change.

There are some lovely bits of classic Monbiot. He has a go at farming unions for talking rubbish and the CAP for being rubbish. Monbiot writes, '...the CAP stings every household in the UK for £245 a year. That is equivalent to five weeks of food for the average household, or slightly less than it lays down in the form of savings and investments every year (£296). Using our money to subsidise private business is a questionable policy at any time. When important public services are being cut for want of cash, it is even harder to justify.' When Monbiot from the left of politics, and Roger Scruton from what looks like the right to me (in Green Philosophy), both criticise the CAP on similar grounds there seems no place for the discredited implementation of a European ideal to hide.

This book has quite a lot of how Monbiot feels about nature, what he enjoys doing in Wales, and anecdotes and instructive stories from his past in a variety of locations outside of Europe. These didn't help me very much in following the argument nor did they work that well in keeping me interested – they may work brilliantly for you, of course, as those things are very personal in nature.

It's not obvious, to me, whether Monbiot thinks that this re-wilding idea is 'the' way to do nature conservation or 'a' way to do nature conservation. If the former then he is wrong, if the latter then he is right. Many species, including declining species, rely on farmed landscapes for their existence and we shouldn't abandon them and their needs (for example) while we wait for an overgrazed hillside to grow into an ancient woodland.

Monbiot is not over-generous in referencing the steps that many conservation organisations, and indeed individual landowners, are doing in the fields of species reintroduction, habitat restoration and habitat re-creation – there is quite a lot going on, it's difficult work and it's very expensive too. But if his book brings the message of how much nature we have lost to many more people, and persuades them that we might be better off mentally, physically and even financially, if we brought back more wild nature then it will have done everyone a service.

Monbiot largely leaves it to others to work out how to get from the mess we are in now to his rather unspecified better world. That's fine, but it does need doing.

Really wild places will have to be really big to be really useful. There is no point, or not much at any rate, doing a bit of tinkering. I'd love to see us re-flood The Fens, or some of them anyway, and bring back a living wetland that would store carbon, produce fish and other food and act as a wetland National Park for East Anglia. I would love to see much of Salisbury Plain return to chalk grassland and low-intensity arable farming with masses of butterflies and chalk grassland flowers (and great bustards of course). With good rail and road links from London this could become a weekend destination for re-wilding addicts fleeing the big city. Let's see large parts of upland Wales return to deciduous woodland with bison in the woods and bison-burgers in the pubs.

I'm up for all of these, certainly after a drink or two, but in the cold light of day you can see that there might be a few sugar beet and carrot farmers in Cambridgeshire who are a bit less enthusiastic about the first; some arable farmers un-keen on the second and the odd Welsh sheep farmer who is concerned about the last one. And that's a large part of the reason why they haven't happened yet – not because nobody thought of them but because we were all too scared to push them as hard as they need to be pushed and for as long as they need to be pushed. Maybe Monbiot's book will stiffen the sinews and summon up the blood and we can go

back into the breach again.

Any book that the President of the National Farmers Union hates must have something going for it and this book really does have a lot going for it. It didn't, it seems, open Peter Kendall's mind to future prospects of exciting wild lands but your mind might swing open more easily. Read it – it should enthuse you about the possibilities of the future, but it certainly isn't a road map for getting there.

Feral: searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding by George Monbiot is available on Amazon as is Mark Avery's book Fighting for Birds.

This review first appeared on Mark Avery's website www.markavery.info

Paul says

The landscape of the UK has been tamed by man and domestic animal for millennia, so much so that vast parts of it are almost monocultures now. This legacy is one of the human desire to control and dominate their environment, and biodiversity has suffered as a result. In this book Monbiot is advocating us to re-engage with nature and considers bold and daring options to re-wild the countryside.

Possibly the bravest of his suggestions is to reintroduce wolves. First hearing this, most people will raise their hands in horror because of the danger, but as has been proven in America, and other parts of Europe, the reintroduction of a top level predator can shake the natural environment completely. For example, having wolves back in Scotland will mean that the deer population can be controlled naturally, less deer will mean that the vegetation can grow and recover, and all these have a massive effect on the animals and plants up and down the food chain. The planned and accidental introduction of beavers seems to have worked, with the changes that they make to the river systems hopefully will have a knock on effect by reducing flooding.

He isn't a huge fan of sheep either... These simple, harmless animals cause massive devastation to the landscape, almost to the point where there is more life in a desert than on the Welsh uplands. Areas that have had sheep excluded, within a handful of years will have a rich variety of flora and fauna. The same principle applies to oceans; the modern way of trawling with dragnets wreaks utter devastation to the ocean floor. Simply banning that type of fishing in certain areas, and limiting activity in the margin of the zone will have a similar effect fairly soon too.

But as ever change is never straightforward.

Monbiot is normally a political writer, and as you'd expect there is a political element to this book. He considers the effects that the common agricultural policy has on our landscape, in particular that very little land can be left to go wild and must always be managed to be able to claim subsidies. There is a part on the failed re-wilding undertaken by the Germans, and also the evidence that our present native trees had evolved to cope with the mega fauna such as elephants and rhino that used to live here.

There is at the moment precious political will to change things, coupled with powerful (and frequently absent) landowners with little desire for change, things are not going to happen soon. For change as bold as this there needs to be full commitment from all stakeholders and parties involved, and I for one would like to

see the reintroduction of the top level predators and the return of proper wilderness to parts of Britain.

It is a well written and passionate plea for the necessary revolution that is needed in our natural world. Well worth reading.

Michelle says

I won this book through a Goodreads giveaway, and it's taken me ages to read it. I basically only finished it to write this review. Some of the prose is very captivating, but some of it is rather purple. I'd cut out the whole first chapter, too.

My feelings about this book are summed up in the words of a Welsh farmer who the author interviews on page 176-177. The author calls it "the subject that divided us", and the farmer says "I'm not against something new...but it should be progression from what you've got, not wiping the slate clean. With blanket rewilding you lose your unwritten self...It's like book-burning."

Just...rather uninspiring!
