Surprised by Joy

Robert MacFarlane interviews George Monbiot about rewilding.

Robert MacFarlane & George Monbiot

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RM: Aldo Leopold, the great American conservationist, wrote in 1947 that 'wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow'. Feral argues otherwise: can you explain the book's chief premise?

GM: Leopold was right. But ecosystems don't have to be primordial wilderness to be diverse and fascinating. The rewilding I would like to see involves allowing natural processes to resume. It means pulling down the fences, reintroducing missing plants and animals, and then stepping back. At sea it's even simpler: excluding commercial fishing and other destructive practices from large areas. Rewilded areas of land and sea, I think, would be better described as self-willed than as wilderness: governed by their own processes, rather than by human agency.

RM: Feral is, in part, a counter-factual: it imagines the lives we no longer lead but might, the species that no longer exist but could, and the faculties we no longer engage but should. How did you think (research, explore, experience) it into being?

GM: It took me by surprise. When I started writing it, I had no idea where I was going. I had a powerful sense that I was suffering from ecological boredom. This sense was heightened by two powerful experiences. In the first case I had picked up a deer that had just died and slung it across my shoulders. In the second, I was trying to spear flounders in an estuary. In both cases I was suddenly overwhelmed by two sensations: profound familiarity with something of which I had no prior knowledge and a sense that I had stumbled across something magnificent and thrilling. I believe I had tapped into vestigial emotions, essential psychological equipment which evolved to guide us through more interesting times.

I started writing about my attempts to live a more exciting life, which meant seeking the least disturbed fragments of forest, taking my kayak far out into the Irish Sea to find fish and birds and dolphins, diving for spider crabs. But I soon found that the thrills I sought were limited in ecosystems as depleted as ours. Then I stumbled across the word rewilding and I knew, for the first time, what I was writing about.

RM: 'Hope' is a key word and vital concept in the book, which describes your own return to hopefulness. Leopold (again), wrote that the price of being a conservationist or ecologist is that you 'live in a world of wounds', able to see damage that is invisible to others. How do you reconcile hope and wound?

GM: Again, he's not wrong, and another motivation was to seek to dull the pain of seeing so much that I love being lost. It was not wholly successful, because in researching the subject I discovered that the losses have been far greater than I had imagined. Every continent except Antarctica had a megafauna until modern humans arrived. With the exception of Australasia, elephants dominated the habitable landmass of the planet. Britain and Europe had a megafauna similar to the remnants in Africa today: forest-dwelling elephants, rhinos, lions, hyaenas, hippos.

But I also came to see the great potential for restoration, not least as farming retreats from the less fertile parts of Europe and North America. So great is this retreat on both continents that we might consider reintroducing not only wolves, lynx,

bison, moose, and bears to places from which they have been extirpated, but also, perhaps, members (or closely related species) of the lost megafauna.

RM: Where is the most hopeful place you know in Britain?

GM: The Dundreggan estate in Glen Moriston, which has been bought by a remarkable organisation called Trees for Life. It wants to restore the Caledonian forest to much of its former range, and reintroduce missing species, including, within 30 years, wolves.

RM: Cancer is wild in the sense of being 'self-willed', 'irrepressible', 'disobedient to human control', and so forth. The common cold is wild; we might even argue that capital – self-willed, emergent in its properties – is wild. How do you fold certain desirable kinds of wildness into your account, and keep others out?

GM: What I have sought in Feral are freedoms whose exercise does no harm either to other people or to the natural world. I feel that in rewilding I have found some of these: that the mass restoration of ecosystems can enhance the opportunities for people to lead wilder lives than might otherwise be permitted in our crowded, buttoned-down world. But, as you suggest, not everything that is wild improves our lives.

RM: The ideal of re-wilding as a dynamic process with no fixed outcomes or deliverables is appealing, but as soon as you select the species you plan to re-introduce, surely you are engaged in a highly directive form of management? Can you give an example of how re-wilding works most ideally?

GM: For me, the aim of rewilding is to restore to the greatest extent possible ecology's dynamic interactions. In other words it's about enhancing the opportunities for animals, plants and other creatures to feed on each other: to re-build the broken strands in the web of life. That means bringing back species which are able to restore this dynamism. So yes, there's some direction there, but its aim is to facilitate the free and unpredictable development of ecosystems. Without large disruptive herbivores and carnivores, ecosystems have almost nowhere to go: successional processes are arrested.

But I'd also like to see missing species of all kinds restored: blue stag beetles, pelicans, sturgeon, grey whales and night herons, all of which once lived in Britain, as well as wolves and lynx and boar and bison.

RM: Have you initiated or become involved in any new re-wilding projects recently? Is the book itself stimulating new initiatives or networks?

GM: I've decided to wait until the book is published (as I write there are still three weeks to go). With luck there will be enough enthusiasm to start generating new projects. In the meantime, I'd urge people to support Trees for Life.

RM: How do people figure in your vision of a re-wilded landscape? How does it escape the old and dangerous deep-green dream of extreme population reduction?

GM: I believe that rewilding must be compatible with human rights and social justice. There's a chapter in the book in which I look at the terrible human histories behind the creation of some of the most magnificent rewilded ecosystems, and strongly urge that they should not be repeated.

My approach differs in this respect from that of some anarcho-primitivists, who imagine a time in which people in industrialised nations might return to hunting and gathering. You need only discover that the maximum population of Britain during the Mesolithic (the last period in which we lived only by those means) appears to have been around 5,000 to see what thist would entail. For me, rewilding is not about abandoning civilisation but enhancing it.

RM: The book's subtitle is 'Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding'. But 'enchantment' is never explicitly defined, existing rather as a kind of atmosphere. You speak at one point of nature's 'endless capacity to surprise': is that at the heart of enchantment?

GM: I would struggle to define it. I suppose the closest I come to a definition in the book is being "filled with wild yearning: of the kind that used to afflict me when I woke from that perennial pre-adolescent dream of floating down the stairs, my feet a few inches above the carpet". Or of detecting a "high, wild note of exaltation – after a drought of sensation that had persisted since early adulthood; a drought I had come to accept as a condition of middle age, like the loss of the upper reaches of hearing." I see that in both cases I'm harking back to sensations that were more familiar when I was younger. Perhaps enchantment means the recovery of an openness to emotion and experience that is often lost as we age.

RM: Could you briefly describe your ideal re-wilded Britain of 2050?

GM: I would be surprised if by 2050 farm subsidies still exist. If they go, then a great deal of unproductive land which is farmed only with the help of public money becomes available for other uses. I would like one of those uses to be rewilding. But how the land will develop once it has begun is impossible closely to predict, which is one of the reasons why I find rewilding enthralling. It's likely though that there will be a lot more vegetation, and much of it will evolve into woodland, creating habitats into which wolves, lynx, bison and other species could be released. I would not like to see a mass rewilding of productive land, which will become ever more important for feeding people.

At sea, reefs of corals, oysters, sea fans and other species would regenerate themselves, fish and crustaceans could breed and grow once more to the great sizes they reached in antiquity. The ecosystem could begin to support the whales, bluefin tuna and large sharks which were once abundant around the coasts of Britain.

George Monbiot's book Feral: searching for enchantment on the frontiers of rewilding is published on May 30th by Allen Lane.

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