

Rewilding – the most radical Eco-Concept

I'd like to begin this article by thinking about Chernobyl.

What - you might say - does one of the worst man-made disasters, in modern times, have to do with Eco-concepts? Well, I think it has a lot to teach us about nature.

The nuclear meltdown in Chernobyl happened over 30 years ago. "The Chernobyl Exclusion Zone is a fascinating example of nature's power to rebound from degradation," says Tim Christophersen, head of the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP's) Nature for Climate Branch.

On 26th April 1986 there was an explosion in the Chernobyl 4 reactor as a result of flawed design and its operation by inadequately trained personnel. Two workers died immediately and a further 26 died as a result of acute radiation poisoning in the next few weeks. In addition, it is estimated that there have been 6500 thyroid cancers (with 15 fatalities). Some 350,000 people were evacuated from the immediate area. A few people still remain despite the dangers of radiation, but it is only a handful of elderly native people. The total exclusion zone is around 3600 sq. km (889,579 acres). The accident caused the largest uncontrolled radioactive release into the environment ever recorded for any civilian operation, and huge quantities of radioactive substances were released into the air for about 10 days. This caused serious social and economic disruption for large populations in Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine. The last Chernobyl reactor was shut down in 2000. The whole area has remained largely deserted since the accident: Man has had little influence over the surrounding countryside.

What has happened in the area since 1986? Two large areas have been converted into natural



reserves, which will allow native forest to help cleanse contaminated land and waterways. There has been a quite extraordinary explosion (perhaps not the best word in the circumstances!) of wildlife. The populations of boar, elk and roe deer have become so plentiful that they were even becoming a nuisance to farmers outside the exclusion zone. Camera trap surveys have revealed Eurasian lynx, brown bear, black storks, black grouse and European bison all returning to the area. Wolf numbers are seven times higher now, probably due to much lower hunting pressure. Researchers have discovered hundreds of new plant species in the zone, including more than 60 rare species. There is now a richer forest ecosystem in the exclusion zone. The original pine plantations have given way to more diverse primary forests which are more resilient to climate change and wildfires. They are better able to sequester carbon.

The changes that have occurred have demonstrated that nature's resilience can buffer human

societies from disasters, it can restore the original natural order and can benefit the planet in terms of climate change. There is lots of research going on into the effects that the remaining radiation might have on the new fauna.

What about rewilding in the UK? 56% of the UK's native species are in decline and 15% are threatened with extinction, we have lost 97% of our wildflower meadows, and the British Trust for Ornithology indicates that 40 million birds have vanished from our country since the 1970's. As a result, an organisation, called Rewilding Britain, has been set up. There are some 18 rewilding projects happening within the UK, many of them in Scotland. (Even so, less than a third of Scotland is free from the visual intrusion of man-made development).

There are, however, only 212,903 acres of land in rewilding from a total in the UK of 60 million acres. That's about a quarter the size of the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone! But, up and down the country, new initiatives are creating extraordinary opportunities for nature. Examples are Ennerdale in the Lake District, the Knepp Estate in Sussex, Langholm in Dumfries and Galloway, where the community is attempting to buy a huge upland area from the Duke of Buccleuch, and the stunning Avalon Marshes Project in the Somerset Levels.

One of the earliest rewilding projects in the UK can be found at the Knepp estate, in West Sussex, owned and run by Charlie Burrell and his wife Isabella Tree. He inherited the estate in 1987 and they undertook extensive renovations to Knepp Castle and the surrounding area. As part of the 'Dig for victory' campaign in the war, the surrounding Repton Park was ploughed up and subjected to intensive farming. That intensive agriculture continued until Charlie Burrell took over. For decades the farm had made a loss, and despite attempts at modernising, that continued. The oak trees in the park were suffering from the intensive agriculture and in 2001,



Rewilded undergrowth



Tamwoth pigs

350 acres were taken out of agriculture. The whole area was sown with Weald Meadow Initiative seed mix of native flowers and grasses. Later 150 fallow deer were introduced. Wild flowers and insects began to flourish – the rewilding project had begun! It was a turning point in presenting new ways of looking at the land, and increasingly nature conservation crept in. Using grazing animals as the drivers of habitat creation and putting in new natural water courses, there has been an extraordinary increase in wildlife. Rare species like turtle doves, nightingales, peregrine falcons and purple emperor butterflies are now breeding there. Populations of more common species are rocketing. It is a self-sustaining, functioning eco-system, where nature is given as much freedom as possible. It has proved to be a low-cost method of ecological restoration suitable for failing or abandoned farmland. Again, like Chernobyl, it's a hands-off approach, allowing nature to find its own way. When humans stop interfering, nature itself takes over, and flora and fauna regenerate.

Nature is our life support system, it's the air we breathe, the food we eat, the water we drink, the energy that sustains us. Species extinction and catastrophic climate change threaten all life on earth. We must take action!

So, rewilding is much more than conservation. It's all about allowing nature to take care of itself. Enabling natural processes to shape the land and the sea. It's about repairing damaged ecosystems and restoring degraded landscapes – degraded by human activity, that is. It's about re-establishing natural rhythms, creating wilder more diverse habitats which benefit the planet and our communities. We refer to many of our National Parks as conservation areas, but really it is still humankind trying to manage the flora and fauna. Rewilding is letting nature take over, letting it run free and do its own thing. I'm not saying that conservation is a bad thing, but essentially it is just dabbling with nature. In Yellowstone Park, for instance, the rangers never clear fallen trees: they leave them to rot naturally, they try to protect natural migration routes for wildlife. But, of course, Yellowstone is still a major tourist destination for 4 million plus, human beings and sadly they leave their mark on the land. Despite conservation efforts Canada lynx, grey wolves, grizzly bears, monarch butterflies and wolverines are listed as endangered species in Yellowstone. There are many, many square miles of planted pine forests. You might well say: "Something is better than nothing", and you would be right – but is it enough? Nature, if left to itself, is much more successful than we will ever be.

A problem with rewilding, for human beings, is the time it takes. Human beings have very narrow horizons – we want to see results. This is particularly the case with politicians, whose horizons are just simply the span of their election term. Rewilding requires time. Imagine if we just left our back gardens to rewild, our need for neatness and our need to see results means that we would probably tire of the experiment after a year or so. Rewilding is not for our own generation: it is for the next generation at the earliest, and almost certainly for succeeding generations after that.

We need to be wild: we need to let our imaginations run wild! We need to support rewilding projects.

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Here's a link to a video about the Knepp Estate rewilding project:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ikNVLbRKI_8