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Abandoning or Reimagining a Cultural Heartland? Understanding and Responding to Rewilding Conflicts in Wales - the case of the Cambrian Wildwood.

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Abstract

This paper is about rewilding and the tensions it involves. Rewilding is a relatively novel approach to nature conservation, which seeks to be proactive and ambitious in the face of continuing environmental decline. Whilst definitions of rewilding place a strong emphasis on non-human agency, it is an inescapably human aspiration resulting in a range of social conflicts. The paper focuses on the case study of the Cambrian Wildwood project in Mid-Wales (UK), evaluating the ways in which debate and strategic action to advance rewilding is proceeding, assessing the extent to which compromise and learning has occurred amongst advocates. As such, we provide an important addition to the field, by detailing how conflicts play out over time and how actors' positioning and approach shifts, and why. In this case, tempers have flared around the threat that rewilding is seen to pose to resident farming communities. Tensions discussed include the differing social constructions of landscape and nature involved; the distribution of impacts on different stakeholders; and the relative power of different actors to make decisions and gain representation. Responding to these, the paper outlines how rewilding advocates have sought to advance a more peopled and culturally responsive vision, which seeks to champion sustainable livelihood strategies. The changes in

approach detailed demonstrate a reflexive stance from rewilders, which suggests that learning and adaptation can occur. Nonetheless, caution is expressed regarding the extent to which rewilding can truly advance inclusive opportunities for rural change, given a continued return amongst stakeholders to exclusionary narratives of belonging and authenticity, suggesting substantive difficulty in moving beyond longstanding concerns over identity and the re-imagination of place. Rewilding, it would seem, is about who we think we are and how we co-constitute our sense of self. We, therefore, close by arguing that tactics and politicking can only have so much bearing, tensions over rewilding are unavoidably emotional.

Key words: Conservation conflict; landscape restoration; place; identity.

1. Introduction

“A wilding experiment on the Cambrian Mountains would be akin to the herding of American Indians onto reserves, in order to satisfy a romantic whim... We have farmed these mountains for millennia and we will not give in to the latest attack on our way of life.”

(Derek Morgan, Chairman of Farmers Union Wales, quoted in Forgrave 2013)

This paper is about rewilding, the tensions it involves and the ways in which these are being worked through by advocates and affected stakeholders; focusing on the case of the Cambrian Wildwood in Mid-Wales. Given the strength of feeling exhibited in this case, as shown in the quotation above, this paper seeks to evaluate the extent to which compromise and learning has been achieved as a means to overcome social conflict. Here-in we provide an important addition to the field, by detailing how conflicts play out over time and how actors’ positioning and approach shifts, and why.

Rewilding is a relatively novel approach to nature conservation, which seeks to be proactive and ambitious in the face of continuing environmental decline (Taylor 2005; Monbiot 2013; Lorimer 2015). Reacting against traditional preservationist approaches, which aim to maintain and protect specific sites, rewilding advocates aim to create new spaces that allow nature to take its own course in an open-ended process. It does this by connecting existing conservation sites, restoring environmental processes and reintroducing locally extinct species and their attendant ecosystem functions (Lorimer et al. 2015; Navarro and Pereira 2015).

Whilst there is notable diversity in the understandings of rewilding advanced (Jørgensen 2015; Jepson and Shepers 2016), common questions arise around the extent to which rewilding is about recreating an accurate version of the past, the date of any past baseline which is to be

recreated, and what past ecologies looked like (Lorimer et al 2015). A further uniting feature is the strong emphasis on non-human agency (Prior and Ward 2016; Sandom and Wynne-Jones 2018). Nevertheless, rewilding remains an inescapably human aspiration resulting in a range of social conflicts, which are as much about human-human disagreements as they are about tensions in human-nature relations (Lorimer et al. 2015; Redpath et al. 2015). In this paper we do not seek to better define rewilding, but rather explore how conflicts have arisen and attempts at remediation, evaluating:

- (1) The differing constructions of landscape and nature invoked;
- (2) The distribution of impacts on different stakeholders;
- (3) The relative power of different actors to make decisions and gain representation.

More broadly, the paper adds to the literature on conservation conflict (see Redpath et al. 2015) by not just documenting tensions, but by exploring the learning and reflexivity of those involved in their responses to these difficulties. As such, the paper contributes both to a growing literature on rewilding praxis, but also the wider field of critical conservation studies, exploring the extent to which review and adaptation is occurring in practitioner circles.

Section 2 will position the paper in the literature on rewilding and conservation conflicts. Section 3 will give an overview of the case-study and methods. The findings and analysis are then detailed in Sections 4-5, with further discussion and conclusions in Section 6.

2. Rewilding: Conflicts and Social-Natures

Nature is an unavoidably cultural formation and ambitions to protect and reproduce it in specific ways are always laced with tensions (Castree 2014). Actions to advance rewilding are

no exception. Analyses centring on processes of social construction and questions of justice and power, help us to better understand and tackle the conflicts arising (Adams 2016; Redpath et al. 2016).

2.1 Visions and Values

Firstly, there is often conflict between rewilding advocates and local people over the differing social constructions of nature, which connect to disagreement over visual aesthetics, preferred ecological composition and the use-values present within a landscape. The broad rewilding movement advocates the restoration of species and processes removed by human actions, which can require reductions, or total removal, of agricultural and other primary resource-use activities (e.g. hunting). This inevitably causes conflict with the people who value these activities and landforms (Lorimer et al. 2015; Navarro and Pereira 2015).

By extension, rewilders are also critiqued for downplaying or obscuring the human history of an area, and the heritage value of activities which have shaped current landscape forms (Convery and Dutson 2008; Drenthen 2009). Even where rewilding is occurring through processes of land abandonment, concerns have been aired about cultural loss (Hochtl et al 2005). Notably farmed landscapes, which are primarily under threat, are often seen to be emblematic of national – and not only local - identities (Daniels 1993; Schwartz 2006). Particularly in the European context, the balance of preference for wild versus managed landscapes remains fraught and is closely wedded to narratives of place attachment and identity (Agnoletti, 2014; Bauer et al. 2009; Drenthen 2009; Navarro and Pereira 2015; van Zanten et al 2014).

As a means to acknowledge the cultures and histories that continue to act and ‘show through’ in any ecological restoration work, Hourdequin and Havlick (2016) have advanced the

conception of layered landscapes (see also Arts et al. 2016). Equally, rewilders have begun to engage in reflection and negotiation over the amount and type of human involvement in ‘wild’ landscapes (Lorimer and Driessen 2014; Deary 2016; Townsend 2016). Consequently, whilst there are echoes of the tensions over wilderness conservation here-in (Cronon 1995, Jørgensen 2015), it would be over-simplistic to see rewilding as advocating a pristine untouched nature. Aspirations for *wildness* are often markedly different both ecologically and aesthetically (Prior and Brady 2017). Overall, rewilders tend to advocate an open-ended, dynamic physical and cultural transformation of the landscape, characterised by uncertainty and change rather than stasis and control (Lorimer and Driessen 2014; Sandom et al 2013; Prior and Ward 2016).

Whilst some ontological tensions do persist in rewilding discourse around the degree of human separation from ‘wild nature’ (Arts et al. 2016; Jørgensen 2015), there are promising signs in the extent to which rewilders are now acknowledging the cultural sensitivities in their aspirations. For example, in Scotland, Mackenzie (2008) and Deary (2016) outline how the problematic history of Highland clearances, raised by MacDonald (1998; see also Brown et al. 2011),¹ is now being acknowledged in conservationist discourse. In the Netherlands, Lorimer and Driessen (2016) demonstrate how Rewilding Europe has sought to reject narratives of racial purity and ethnic supremacy in the framing of their animal reintroduction programme, due to their links with histories of Nazi occupation, and instead sought to pursue more cosmopolitan imaginaries to underpin their work.

Nonetheless, the achievement of more socially just framings is far from straightforward and a necessarily ongoing process. Open questions remain as to whether more cosmopolitan socio-

¹ Romanticised framings of an empty landscape are seen to erase the history of 18th Century clearances where crofters (subsistence farmers) were removed from the land to make way for sheep ranching and other activities that were more profitable for the landlords.

natures can come together in a way that enables political voice and equity in outcomes for the different actors involved.

2.2 The Costs and Benefits of Conservation

Whilst there is limited evidence, as yet, evaluating rewilding's social impacts, particular concerns are anticipated (following Holmes 2007; Oldekop et al. 2016; West et al 2006). Rewilding is predominantly occurring in areas where agricultural livelihoods are declining for a range of socio-economic and political reasons (Navarro and Pereira 2015). Given the incompatibilities outlined above, it is likely that this decline in traditional agricultural activities will be exacerbated. Although new livelihoods associated with ecotourism may emerge (see Rewilding Europe 2016), it is not clear who will be able to capitalise on these opportunities, or the level of benefits achievable (following Duffy 2012). Induced displacement may then occur, as farmers feel they have no alternative but to leave an area, particularly in the current European context where broader geographies of social transition are leading to land abandonment and community decline in many peripheral areas (Agnoletti 2014; Beilin et al. 2014; Navarro and Pereira 2015).

The emphasis within rewilding on carnivore reintroduction has the potential to generate significant human-predator conflict, with impacts such as economic losses to predation and psychological impacts (Buller 2008; Pooley et al 2017). Despite efforts to introduce compensatory measures (Navarro and Pereira 2015), costs and benefits are often unequally distributed and regressive (Oldekop et al. 2016).

2.3 Who gets to decide?

The final tension, alluded to in much of the above discussion, is the question of who gets to decide how rewilding proceeds. As with other conservation interventions, rewilding could be

seen as an attempt from a metropolitan elite to impose their values on rural communities whom they do not understand or value (Arts et al. 2016; Holmes 2007; Redpath et al. 2015; Schwartz 2006; Yorke 2016). Equally, as Arts et al. (2016) outline, conflict is often driven more by issues of power differentials than actual differences in stakeholders' agendas (see also Young et al. 2016). Where rewilding is driven by wealthy philanthropists there are questions over whether it is a plutocratic imposition, amounting to an undemocratic land-grab (Holmes 2011; 2014). Where rewilders are seen as cultural and political outsiders, there can be accusations of conservation as a colonial imposition of landscape form and meaning (Adams and Mulligan 2003)².

Whilst the colonial hues of conservation in many parts of the world has been critiqued (e.g. Garland, 2008), this *is* relevant to rewilding in the UK, albeit to a lesser degree. The Celtic fringes of the UK, characterised by linguistic differences and longstanding tensions over outsiders' domination, have been characterised as post-colonial landscapes (Toogood 2003). Further details of how this framing is relevant in the Welsh context are considered in Section 3.1.

Despite the wealth of insight offered in the studies reviewed here, rewilding is still largely a nascent ambition. What is needed now are studies of how tensions play out; how actors' positioning and approach shifts, and why. It is with this in mind that we turn to the example of a rewilding project in Wales.

² We should stress that rewilding is not always in the dominant position, nor is it synonymous with a unified conservation agenda.

3. Case-study and Methods

3.1 The Welsh Context

Wales is predominantly rural, characterised by extensive livestock farming across marginal upland areas. Nearly half of Wales is subject to some form of environmental designation and traditional approaches to farming are often asserted as a key tool for supporting environmental benefits (Midmore and Hughes 1996). Farm incomes are strongly underpinned by subsidies from the EU Common Agricultural Policy (FBS 2016), particularly upland farms, and Brexit has intensified debates over the longer term sustainability of these enterprises as subsidies could be withdrawn or substantively decline (Franks 2016; Ricketts Hein et al. 2017). Farms are predominantly small-medium family run enterprises (WRO 2010) and whilst the direct contribution of agriculture to the national economy is relatively low, the indirect impact upon rural economies is substantive in some areas (WRO 2013). This socio-economic context has strongly informed debates over appropriate land-use futures (Ricketts Hein et al. 2017; Wynne-Jones and Vetter 2018).

A history of antagonism with its English neighbour has led to a post-colonial framing being employed by many Welsh Nationalists (Williams 1978). Although the legitimacy of such positioning is contested (Aaron and Williams eds. 2005)³, it is evident as an important discourse in many conflicts. For example, in its earlier years Snowdonia National Park (in the North of Wales) suffered staunch criticism as an English ‘outsider’ imposition, which did not acknowledge the working nature and cultural histories of the land (Williams 1978; Perrin 1997).

³ Wales has never been a ‘colony’; it is a country but not a sovereign state, despite having a devolved government.

Critically, the farmed uplands and the communities they support are often asserted as a heartland of Welsh identity, particularly in moments of perceived threat (see Gruffudd 1995; Midmore and Moore-Colyer 2006), adding further weight to these debates (c.f. Schwartz 2006). Moreover, it is notable that Wales has been described as a country where national identity is seen to persist as an ethnic rather than civic quality, despite efforts to develop more inclusive post-millennial framings (Jackson and Jones 2014).

3.2 Case-study Overview

Media interest in rewilding across the UK has centred upon George Monbiot's (2013) book *Feral*, which sets out an impassioned plea for the potential of rewilding. Subsequently, Monbiot initiated Rewilding Britain⁴ as a charitable organisation to champion this cause. Action to develop rewilding in Wales does, however, pre-date Monbiot's interventions. In the mid 1990's ecologist Peter Taylor moved to Southern Snowdonia with a vision for a 'wild wood' (Taylor 2005). Taylor's ambitions struggled to gain traction at the time, but inspired one long-term resident of Mid-Wales to set up the Wales Wild Land Foundation [WWLF] in 2007⁵ and develop proposals for a 'Cambrian Wildwood'⁶ (*Coetir Anian* in Welsh) in the northern Cambrian Mountains of Mid Wales. The aim here is to purchase ~1200 hectares and work with partners to create a wider ~3000 hectare area where the objective is:

*"To rewild or restore land to a wilder state to create a functioning ecosystem where natural processes dominate by carrying out habitat restoration, removing domestic livestock, and introducing missing native species as far as feasible."*⁷

⁴ See <http://www.rewildingbritain.org.uk/> [last accessed 12/7/17].

⁵ Executive functions are now managed by nine trustees (including author 1) who are largely based within Mid-Wales. Monbiot is not directly involved but has endorsed the charity.

⁶ See <http://www.cambrianwildwood.org/> / http://www.coetiranian.org [last accessed 30/8/2016].

⁷ Quoted from Mission Statement #2 <http://www.cambrianwildwood.org/about-the-project/wales-wild-land-foundation/> [last accessed 30/8/2016].

The precise assemblage of desired species is not specified, nor is it linked to particular historic baselines, although trustees are keen to pursue palaeo-environmental analysis to inform their plans for habitat restoration (Garton 2017). Realising these aspirations has involved liaison and public engagement work with local and national stakeholders, to gain acceptance of the proposals, along with grant applications and associated fundraising activities to secure ownership of a suitable area. This resulted in the purchase of a 140 hectare upland site in May 2017 called *Bwlch Corog*, in partnership with the UK-based NGO Woodland Trust⁸. Site management plans are summarized in box 1. Given that ownership of this site has only been recently secured, much of the discussion in Section 4 pertains less to changes in the physical implementation of rewilding activities and more to the proposals WWLF were putting forward in advance of the land purchase.

Cambrian Wildwood Management Plans

- Plant 5000 native broadleaf trees.
- Support regeneration of native habitats e.g. woodland, wood pasture and upland heath.
- Grazing with large herbivores (cattle / wild ponies) to support habitat restoration.
- Reintroductions of small mammals e.g. red squirrel (following feasibility studies).
- Support recolonization by native fauna, birds and invertebrates e.g. pine marten.
- Improve public access.

Box 1: Cambrian Wildwood Management Plans (WWLF 2017)

⁸ See <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/support-us/support-an-appeal/cefn-coch/> [last accessed 10/7/2017].

3.3 Data and Methods

The analysis of this paper draws on long-term engagement with rewilding advocates in Wales, since 2005. This includes 30 interviews and ethnography conducted by author 1 in 2005-8 and 21 interviews by authors 1 & 2 in 2016-7. Interviewees include 4 trustees of the Wales Wild Land Foundation [WWLF], 2 trustees from Rewilding Britain, along with conservation NGO's and farming representatives. This was supported by analysis of relevant textual sources.

A later period of observant participation was undertaken from 2013 onwards in author 1's role as a trustee of the Wales Wild Land Foundation (WWLF)⁹. This enabled informal conversations with trustees on their motivations and ideals, along with insight on various internal debates on public relations and stakeholder engagement. Experience of public events and liaison work with neighbouring land-owners and farming representatives has also been drawn upon.

Analysis centred on the differing constructions of nature involved, the forms of costs and benefits at stake, and the ways in which power was exerted and experienced. Initially undertaken as a purely academic exercise, assessments developed into an action-research relationship. Specifically, trustees and partners were aware of author 1's position as a researcher and invited her participation as a trustee partly on this basis. Subsequently, her role within the organisation and campaign has been to advise and undertake communications and liaison work. This close involvement has required a considered approach drawing on guidance from the fields of participatory research and scholar activism (Kindon et al. 2007; Wynne-Jones et al. 2015). This is in terms of personal biases and allegiances, but also in terms of the impact author 1 has had upon the strategic direction of the organisation. Reflections and

⁹ Before 2013 author 1 had no affiliation with the Wales Wild Land Foundation and came into contact with the group through the earlier phase of data collection.

modifications to the WWLF's approach are, therefore, not evaluated here as something which has changed without any influence from author 1; but neither have processes of critical reflection been uniquely driven through her input. Particular influences upon trustees' decision making are considered through the analysis. Some of the adaptations and reflections discussed have taken place with very minimal input from author 1 (specifically those on language, cultural heritage and carnivore reintroductions), whilst other areas she has been more directly involved in (including farmer liaison and rural livelihood strategies).

To give a sense of author 1's position in relation to the other trustees, the chair has remarked that author 1 can be seen as a diplomatic and moderating influence, particularly on his own thinking (pers. comm. Nov 2017). Others in the group have suggested that author 1 provides credibility (as an academic) and a considered stance which serves the group well in public forums (pers. comm. Feb 2017). Whilst this could imply that her thinking does not align with that of the other trustees, and theirs is a more radical position, the chair has argued that he chose to appoint different people for the skills and perspectives they bring, and the effect they would have on the organisation as a collective entity. This, and wider conversations with other trustees, suggests that the group in fact welcome challenges and advice on their strategy and position, acknowledging a need to adapt in the face of hostilities that have arisen. Moreover, research interviews and engagement activities undertaken with those opposing rewilding has been actively encouraged by WWLF, further affirming their open stance.

In terms of governance processes, trustees meet 3-4 times a year to discuss and vote on strategic decisions and provide updates on ongoing work; although this has been more frequent through the process of land purchase over the last year (2017). Trustees can work relatively independently once a remit is collectively agreed; as has been the case with work on Welsh language and cultural heritage outlined in section 5.1. Some areas of work (particularly

communications surrounding the land purchase) have involved a working group of several trustees, including the chair, who make more regular decisions in response to issues arising.

From an ethical perspective, information obtained by author 1 outside a formal research role (i.e. her observant participation as a trustee) was discussed with participants during the production of the paper to ensure guidelines were in place over what could be publicly disclosed¹⁰. This is not to suggest that the paper was co-produced with respondents, rather it is written in the spirit of *critical friendship* (Blackstock et al. 2015) aiming to support and enhance the forms of reflection and reconfiguration that have begun to take place within WWLF and wider movement in question. Equally, a commitment towards those *opposing* rewilding has strongly informed the development of this analysis – which, it is hoped, can usefully inform and facilitate discussions across the current divide (Yorke 2016).

4. Tensions Arising

The following analysis will outline the tensions experienced (Section 4), before moving to assess the way these have been negotiated (Section 5). Discussion is structured around the analytical themes outlined in Section 2, i.e. the different social constructs of landscape and nature, livelihood impacts, and power differentials¹¹. Analysis of tensions draws on the authors' wider research with a range of stakeholders and does not just reflect the understanding of the WWLF trustees and partners. We do, however, indicate the extent to which trustees acknowledge the difficulties outlined (in Section 4) and explicitly discuss how they seek to address them (in Section 5).

¹⁰ Formal interviews and ethnography were undertaken with explicit prior consent from respondents, whereas attaining consent for observant participation is more complex given the ongoing nature of this process, hence the need for retrospective consent giving.

¹¹ Discussions do not reflect a chronological sequence of events, as many issues have occurred simultaneously, although time references are included to help the reader position when particular decisions / instances occurred.

4.1 ‘Anialwch’ or ‘Cynefin’?

Much of the populist media discussion around rewilding in Wales has centred on antagonism with the farming community over conflicting ideas of desirable land-use. The need to ‘*remove domestic livestock*’, as part of the Cambrian Wildwood strategy outlined above, is explained in relation to the ecological degradation associated with intensive livestock husbandry in the uplands since the Second World War (Ayres and Wynne-Jones 2014; Green 2016). This is discussed most notably in Monbiot’s (2013) *Feral* where he described the uplands as ‘*sheep-wrecked*’.

Elsewhere, the Cambrian uplands are described as a wasteland to be improved and replenished by rewilding. Monbiot (2013) refers to the Cambrians as a ‘*desert*’ (c.f. Borrow 1868) and invokes the notion of ‘*ecological boredom*’ to describe his reaction to the lack of wildlife there. This is echoed in WWLF trustees’ own experiences and writings:

“My interest in rewilding... is basically a comparison with what I saw as a child, which was plenty, compared with what I saw in my 20’s, which was a lot less - wildlife, nature, trees... it seemed to me there was something seriously amiss...” (WWLF Interview [11¹²] 2016).

Critically, whilst lamenting a loss of nature, trustees do exhibit some nuance in the extent to which they seek to reconstruct an historic ideal (c.f. Jorgenson 2015):

“The ‘re’ [of rewilding] does suggest that we are trying to take it back to some previous state that we want, and I am not sure that is what we are really doing, we are just trying to let a wild state emerge” (WWLF Interview [16] 2016)

¹² Recent interviews are numbered 1-21, preserving anonymity, whilst earlier interviews are simply referenced by a descriptor of the interviewee.

Yet there is a clear sense of damage and decline in the way they frame the landscape (WWLF Interviews [4 and 15] 2016).

“...the emptiness found in this terrain... can be disappointing... We know from other countries that it doesn't have to be like this.... And we know what used to be here from historical accounts. (Ayres and Wynne-Jones 2014 p23)

In contrast to perceptions of emptiness and degradation, farming representatives react against rewilding because they see exactly the opposite (see also Convery and Dutson 2008; Hochtl et al. 2005).

“We have a glorious landscape, which has been shaped by generations... its values should be celebrated...” (Pori Natur a Threftadaeth 2008)¹³.

“they feel that they provide something of immense value... in terms of a managed landscape... we are part of a culture of shepherding, we are a pastoral society... they are very much the guardians of that tradition.” (Farming Representative Interview [18] 2016)

Whilst a considerable amount of argumentation has centered on the validity and extent of ecological loss perceived by rewilders, and whether a legacy of sheep farming is truly to blame (see e.g. Joyce 2012), WWLF trustees have begun to appreciate that a different line of thinking can be instructive – unpacking the influence of Welsh language and mythology informing the differing stances taken.

In the Welsh language there is no direct translation of rewilding. The closest terms identified by respondents -*anialwch* or *diffeithwch*- are best understood to mean wasteland or desert. It is

¹³ A number of conservationists in Wales also subscribe to this perspective, and internal conflict with the conservation sector is acknowledged as a notable dimension of rewilding debates across the UK (Monbiot 2013). However, given that this has had lesser bearing on the work of the WWLF, it is not explored in this paper.

also notable that the Welsh word for culture *diwylliant* means a lack of wildness. Welsh literature and oral traditions speak of a relationship with the land, not a separation and longing for an untouched wilderness. Farming interviewees affirm a conception of the land as home, known through regularly working, walking and observing one's *milltir squar* (square mile). The related concept of *cynefin* was also raised as a much celebrated reference to knowing one's 'patch' and the feeling of belonging associated. The term has its roots as a description of the way grazing animals know their area of mountain land, but it is also used to describe how people come to form an intimate experiential knowledge of place.

As such, the very language for knowing the land in Wales is bound up with cultural practice, husbandry and pastoralism (c.f. Murray 2014 on Gaelic in Scotland). Interviewees conveyed this by referring to areas proposed for rewilding as being comprised of "*a quilt of cynefinoedd¹⁴: interwoven stories, the layered and collective place-making of families and individuals over-generations, co-constituted with the physical landscape*" (National Trust Interview 2007). Rewilding is, therefore, seen to be erasing and disregarding these stories.

The anxiety felt here is about more than a change in land-use practice in the specific location(s) of rewilding projects, but the broader threat this poses to constitutive values. This is in the same way that conservation efforts elsewhere have been accused of marginalizing pre-existing cultural framings (Pickerill 2009; Plumwood 2002; West et al. 2006) and constructing an empty space upon which new visions can be emplaced (MacDonald 1998).

4.2 The Threat to Farming Livelihoods

There is also concern about the economic impacts of undermining upland sheep-farming as an already vulnerable industry and the effect this would have on community fragmentation.

¹⁴ The plural of *cynefin* – which also translates as 'habitat'.

This anxiety has become an increasingly palpable in the wake of the UK's Brexit vote and trustees are keenly aware of this. Assessing the level of threat posed requires consideration of the extent to which the WWLF seeks to actively displace farming activities and the scale of change proposed. The ambition for 3000 hectares (noted above) represents ~1.5% of the total area of the Cambrian Mountains (~2,000km²). In the longer term, trustees have suggested a reasonable target could be 10% of the Cambrian Mountains area (WWLF 2017). They acknowledge that this is not an insignificant figure, but note that it could be comprised of afforested areas, in both public and private ownership, and hence reduce the threat to farmland (WWLF 2016).

In the immediate term, the advance of the Cambrian Wildwood has been restricted to areas of land that are available on the open market¹⁵. The *Bwlch Corog* site was unfarmed for 6 years and for sale since 2014; a point emphasised in media publicity (Woodland Trust and WWLF 2017). Consequently, trustees assert that no forced change of land-use could occur through the project. However, they are mindful that wider pressures on upland farming could effectively force land-use transition, resulting in wider sales of land. This is seen both as an opportunity (to gain land ownership), but also a problem (of rural community decline) to be addressed – as we discuss in section 5.2

Trustees also acknowledge that changes in management associated with rewilding can cause problems for neighbouring farmers. This is particularly in terms of wild fauna dispersion and reintroductions, especially carnivores which predate on domestic livestock. This is an issue that is not just resultant from reintroduced species but also from current populations of foxes for example (pers. comm. neighbouring landowners March 2017). Nonetheless, reintroductions are clearly identified as the greatest concern on this front (Stakeholder

¹⁵ NB. many holdings in the area are owner-occupied.

Meeting July 2017). The focus on reintroductions as a central aspiration for rewilding in Monbiot's (2013) *Feral* gained it much notoriety, but the application of his vision to the Cambrian Wildwood is contested. Whilst Taylor (2005) outlined a vision for reintroducing larger predators to Wales, and the Cambrian Wildwood website initially listed lynx as a possible species of interest, trustees now contend that large carnivores are not on their agenda. Equally, they are mindful of the impacts of habitat succession (i.e. more scrub and trees) on the behaviours and population levels of existing predators. These adaptations are explained further in section 5.2.

4.3 Power and Inclusion

Assessing the WWLF's relative power to assert their vision, two factors are key – their level of resource and their perceived legitimacy. On the first measure, WWLF are a small voluntary organisation, heavily reliant on the unpaid labour of their trustees and chair. They do not have a paying membership base and have relied on charitable donations and appeals to secure the *Bwlch Corog* site. Access to financial support, and resource capacity more broadly, has been very challenging up until their partnership with the Woodland Trust although links to Rewilding Britain have also provided connection to professional fund-raisers and wealthy philanthropists.

Evaluating the perceived legitimacy of their vision, the successful appeal to purchase *Bwlch Corog* suggests substantive public buy-in to their proposals. However, serious challenges have emerged in relations with the farming community. Trustees are aware that this could serve to undermine the project, due to discontent amongst neighbouring landowners and community members, but also due to the national political presence of farming representatives. This problem is not unique to this case (Arts et al 2016; Convery and Dutson 2008), and as with

other struggles over rural land-use futures, the ‘outsider’ status of rewilding advocates has often been a key focus in retaliations:

“over the past half century we have witnessed the arrival of countless environmental fundamentalists... seemingly oblivious to the fact that their new-found paradise is already occupied by people whose connection with the land is deep rooted, dates back thousands of years, and is embedded in their language and culture.” (Nick Fenwick [Farmers’ Union of Wales] 2013)

Other responses have spoken directly to narratives of indigenous oppression elsewhere, describing rewilding as: *“akin to the herding of American Indians onto reserves, in order to satisfy a romantic whim...”* (Derek Morgan [Chairman of Farmers’ Union of Wales] in Forgrave 2013).

Whilst suggestions that Welsh farmers can be equated with First Nation Peoples elsewhere are problematic, indigeneity is a characteristic that has been repeatedly invoked in discussions (e.g. Roberts 2017). As in other moments of threat (see e.g. Gruffudd 1995), there is a mythic valorisation of rural communities as a cornerstone of Welsh identity and history (c.f. Schwartz 2006). Here it is necessary to appreciate a deeply engrained sense of marginalization and subsequent defensiveness attached to Welsh identity (Williams 1978), born of difficult histories and the taint of colonialism outlined in section 3. This is particular acute in relation to issues of land acquisition, given past experiences of compulsory purchases for reservoirs and forestry (Gruffudd 1995; Meeting with Farmers’ Union of Wales [FUW] July 2017).

The trouble with rewilding is, therefore, framed as differing ethnic groupings being aligned with particular social constructions of nature and serious justice questions posed with regards to the impact of one group’s ideas on another’s. Here-in rewilders are cast as the oppressing

group (a contention WWLF are keenly aware of). However, a counter-argument has been raised that farmers are in-fact the privileged landed gentry, benefiting undeservedly from public subsidy (Monbiot 2013), directly contesting the framing of vulnerability and loss that is constructed by appeals to ‘indigeneity’; although it is perhaps notable that WWLF have not echoed Monbiot’s claims.

Beyond the hyperbole, a more nuanced picture emerges. Farmers in Wales are not in the same position as communities elsewhere without legal title to their land, although histories of forced removal are noted (c.f. Brockington et al. 2006). Neither are they *all* in receipt of large amounts of subsidy or owners of extensive portfolios of land (WRO 2010).

Reflecting on the debates unfolding, we see that the exercise of power (in the legitimisation of arguments put forward) is strongly dependent upon the use of oppositional categories centring on notions of belonging, worthiness, and being in/out place (c.f Kinsman 1995). Moreover, some have contended that difference and controversy have been played-up in these debates, and the emotional appeal of divisive frames used strategically to effect authority (Land-Use Stakeholder Interview [21] 2017).

5. Ways Forward?

Given the explosive, populist, and often deeply personal nature of the issues outlined, WWLF trustees have acknowledged a need to rethink their approach. In many instances these are changes and decisions that have been made in consultation with project partners (Woodland Trust) and collaborators (Rewilding Britain), demonstrating a wider shift in thinking. In particular, Rewilding Britain have now explicitly sought to replace earlier publicity gained from controversy with a more diplomatic approach (Rewilding Britain Interview [19] 2017),

whilst interviewees from across the UK acknowledge the current polarization of rewilding debates as highly unproductive (see also Yorke 2016):

“Debate gets side-tracked into different visions fighting their different corners...Overall though there is a lot more common ground amongst different groups than the public debate tends to imply...” (Land Manager Interview [9] 2016)

In the following section we assess the extent of the adjustments and compromises made.

5.1 Reimagining – Language and Myth

Acknowledging the tensions outlined in Sections 4.1 and 4.3, WWLF trustees have sought to find appropriate terminology to connect with the Welsh-speaking community. Whilst *tir gwyllt* (literally ‘wild land’) is used for the title of the Foundation, in many ways it suffers from the wrong associations— *gwyllt* is often used to signify something that is out of control or dangerous. For the translation of Cambrian Wildwood, *wild* is omitted altogether with *Coetir Anian* referring simply to natural woodland. *Anian* refers to a sense of natural order and creation. This is an attempt to move away from notions of abandonment and waste, to embrace a sense of health and vitality. These considerations are evident in WWLF’s work since ~2014.

More recently, trustees have begun to use the term *di-ddofi*¹⁶ which they have coined to denote a process of the land being ‘de-tamed’. *Di-ddofi*, it is suggested, does not erase the histories of the landscape, by acknowledging the labour taken to ‘tame’ it, but tentatively poses an avenue for discussing some relaxation of farming practice in appropriate locations (pers. comm. WWLF trustee May 2016). These efforts have been led (unsurprisingly) by a trustee who is a first language Welsh speaker, and strongly supported by Woodland Trust staff who have

¹⁶ See <http://www.coetiranian.org/di-ddofi/> [last accessed 19/9/16].

substantive personal experience and commitment in this area. Responses from farming stakeholders indicate measured appreciation at efforts to engage with the Welsh language, but equally highlight a need to do more than acknowledge the ‘heritage’ value of farming. Rather there is a need to ensure the *continued* survival of families on the land (Meeting with FUW July 2017) – a point we address in section 5.2.

A second area of reframing that WWLF trustees have explored is through connections to ancient Celtic stories brought together in a collection known as *The Mabinogion* (Davies 2007). *The Mabinogion* has strong Welsh appeal, but also offers a wider set of connections for people of diverse backgrounds and affinities. These stories have been used in web material ¹⁷ and community events where traditional storytelling, folk music and art have been used to communicate and celebrate the proposed Wildwood (c.f. Cloyd 2016). This is something that several trustees have been engaged in, acting on their personal and professional interests in the arts and mythology, which have been an important inspiration in their own associations with ‘the wild’. Presenting this in more public orientated terms, their rationale is as follows:

“The stories of the Mabinogion show a relish of danger and an admiration of wild animals such as the boar, eagle, wolf and bear. Many people in Wales feel deeply connected to this narrative.” (Ayres and Wynne-Jones 2014; p28)

Their utilisation of such mythic framings suggests potential for the advance of a more cosmopolitan and inclusive vision of identity and identification with the landscape (following Lorimer and Driessen 2016), which does not rely on essentialist categories of ethnic identification and enables more relational and fluid identifiers to be advanced (see Massey 2005).

¹⁷ See <https://www.cambrianwildwood.org/species> [last accessed 25/7/17].

This is important for trustees, not only strategically, but also in terms of their own emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging, which have come under threat in the exchanges over the acceptability of rewilding proposals. Many trustees have lived and worked in the local community for large proportions of their adult lives, and hence being cast as an outsider with no sense of insight, attachment or credibility is very unsettling. This is particularly so given that their connection is to the land itself, with a deep sense of place associated. Demarcations of Welshness or otherwise are therefore seen as an exclusive marker; a point that is all the more frustrating when individuals feel themselves to be Welsh to varying degrees. In light of this, it is perhaps unsurprising (but not unproblematic) that efforts to assert their place attachments sometimes slip into more aggressive tones:

“Sheep farming in this country goes back a few hundred years. I think if you go deep enough into our culture and ancestry, we have a really deep native relationship with wild forest areas and with the wild animals that are native to this country...I just don't agree that sheep farming is really part of our traditional culture.” (WWLF Interview [15] 2016)

Here-in, the appeal to Celtic roots is framed as a more genuinely ‘native’ connection, directly contesting the identification of farming as the dominant cultural narrative of the landscape. Again we are returned to framings of belonging and authenticity as a means to assert legitimacy. Whilst such reactions are clearly defensive, the apparent undertones of what is or isn't part of ‘our cultural heritage’ deserve care. Notably, this comment is not an isolated one and not a direct reaction to a particular event, rather it reflects a longer term of frustration built up through repeated negative engagement with farmers in the community.

The emphasis on going *back* to find a deeper sense of origin and authenticity can be compared with more problematic understandings of rewilding offering a fixed and exclusive political vision where-in certain nationalities or ethnicities are valorised by their association with particular landscapes, which Lorimer and Driessen (2016) have cautioned against. Of course, it could be argued that such intransigence and exclusion is exactly what WWLF trustees are being challenged with, by the farming community. However, rather than asserting sympathy with either ‘side’, or attempts at adjudication, perhaps what is most productive here is to appreciate the reinforcing cycle of debates framed in this way.

5.2 Livelihood Opportunities

Addressing concerns around livelihood impacts noted in 4.2, several adjustments have been made. Firstly, with regards to predators, it is apparent that WWLF’s trustees have been inspired by the potential of reintroducing wolves and lynx due to their role as keystone species and charismatic qualities (WWLF Interviews [15 and 16] 2016), but they are receptive and pragmatic in their thinking on this:

“At the moment we don’t talk about introducing wild predators, because at the moment in Wales it is impractical ... It just won’t work...” (WWLF Interview [15] 2016). This is as much in terms of the lack of suitable habitat for the animals as it is a response to concerns from farmers. Notably, this is a point that the majority of trustees have considered and adjusted their thinking on, in response to widespread concerns and media coverage of this issues. In place of larger carnivores, the focus over the last two years has been on smaller and less divisive species such as pine marten and red squirrel (WWLF 2017). Strategically, this also builds on the well regarded work of the Vincent Wildlife Trust [VWT] to support pine marten populations in the

area¹⁸. However, experience of lengthy deliberation with trustees on these, and several related matters suggests that decisions demonstrate more than tactical thinking and reflect genuine efforts to negotiate and reflect, to the extent that their own ideals may become suspended.

“I can completely empathise with farmers being anti-the idea...[of carnivore reintroductions] I think it is something worth exploring for the future but there are lots of stages on the way and maybe we will never reach that point.” (WWLF Interview [16] 2016)

The clear step-back from large predator reintroductions does now appear to have been accepted by the majority of the farming community, indicating that this is not an area of continuing struggle, although the alienation resulting from initial proposals was significant (Stakeholder meeting July 2017; Meeting with FUW July 2017). Another aligned shift in trustee thinking is an acceptance that some predator control (of species currently present) may be necessary if the changing landscape at Bwlch Corog causes problems for neighbouring farmers (WWLF trustee discussions March-July 2017). Unlike the rethink of their positioning on large predators, this is not a publically orientated statement but rather a negotiated response to concerns from project neighbours. It is also a position that many trustees find unpalatable, but one that is accepted as the wisest practical stance to maintain workable relations. Nonetheless, it does leave unanswered questions over how the balance of wild versus domestic animals will be managed into the future.

More broadly, modifications are also apparent in terms of how the Wildwood is proposed to fit as part of the regional landscape:

¹⁸ See <http://www.pine-marten-recovery-project.org.uk/> [last accessed 26/7/17]

“...we still need to take account of the wider land-use... farming therefore provides the context in which the project will sit” (Ayres and Wynne-Jones 2014 p26)

“...the project is not seen as a blueprint for the rest of the landscape of upland Wales...”
(Woodland Trust and WWLF 2017)

Bwlch Corog is discussed as a site to explore new approaches, which may be of interest to other landowners wishing to adapt and diversify. This reappraisal of the project’s emphasis is in direct response to anxieties noted about community vulnerability. It clearly aligns with Woodland Trust’s wider approach to working with farmers in Wales, but also demonstrates a more considered tone that had emerged from WWLF prior to their partnership with Woodland Trust (Rewilding Britain and WWLF Meeting March 2016). This is an area where author 1 has had particular influence, informed by her work with farming stakeholders, but the need to scale down the project vision is something that the chair proposed in the first instance (as early as 2013).

Asserting the potential for new income streams (from improved tourism and educational activities) has become a central argument for the project over the last four years with notable emphasis on the opportunity this could offer for farming families. This focus was absent in Taylor’s (2005) earlier proposals and WWLF trustees initial aspirations (WWLF chair interview 2007) which were more centred on visions of ecological and spiritual rejuvenation rather than economic potential, demonstrating a shift in framing.

“Cambrian Wildwood aims to create opportunities for diversifying and strengthening income streams in the local economy which could help farm families stay on the land running viable businesses” (Ayres and Wynne-Jones 2014 p27).

As with the majority of points raised thus far, these adaptations have primarily been in the project vision and modes of engagement, as a means to garner wider appeal and approval for the project in the lead up to securing a target site. It has not yet been possible to assess whether or how this discursive reframing will translate into practical implementation. Nonetheless, it is apparent that an approach centred on rural economic rejuvenation is similarly being championed by rewilding advocates across Europe, where rewilding is asserted as a solution rather than a threat to declining rural communities (Lorimer et al. 2015; Navarro and Pereira eds. 2015; Rewilding Europe 2016). Rewilding Britain have also recently clarified their definition of rewilding to make 'people communities and livelihoods' one of their four core principles and are working closely with entrepreneurs to explore avenues for developing 'nature-based' economies.

“We aim to engage those who own and derive their income from the land in a way in which both rewards them for acting as stewards of a healthy natural ecosystem and ensures that local knowledge of the land and its nature are valued and respected” (Rewilding Britain 2017).

This is explained in part as a personal response from experiences of undertaking community-based development elsewhere, and a resultant desire to eschew exclusionary forms of conservation for both ethical and pragmatic reasons, but also as a commitment to the communities in which they themselves live (Rewilding Britain Interview [20] 2017; WWLF Interviews [15 and 16] 2016).

The tone set by this approach has resulted in positive feedback from farming representatives given direct link to questions of economic sustainability and the more open tone set for community participation (Stakeholder meeting July 2017; Meeting with FUW July 2017).

However, despite the ostensibly inclusive vision this offers there is some evidence of a more divisive position emerging at times from WWLF trustees:

“I don’t see it as anything about making landowners change their management, I think it is about where land becomes available, and I think more and more land will become available because upland farms lose money...” (WWLF Interview [15] 2016)

Statements such as this infer that there is no need to engage the farming community. Instead rewilders can simply bide their time and wait until pressures of subsidy decline and market changes make marginal farming unviable (see also Taylor 2005). This sits uneasily alongside the buoyant narratives about vibrant rural communities discussed above.

Rather than portraying farmers as potential partners, who can make their own decisions about whether or not to engage, an aggressive inevitability is communicated where-in upland farming is depicted as obsolete and undeserving of continued public support. This connects with long-term debates in Wales over the focus of farming subsidies and what – or indeed *whether* – farming can deliver in terms of public benefits (Wynne-Jones 2013; Wynne-Jones and Vetter 2018). The tone set challenges the perceived dominance of farming culture as the primary determinant on land-use decisions, in the same way that appeals to different historic and mythic referents discussed above (5.1) similarly aim to unsettle narratives about farmers’ connection to the land and privileged status as custodians of Welsh identity (c.f Gruffudd 1994).

Unsurprisingly some interviewees have retaliated, perceiving these sentiments as a form of uncaring arrogance given the implications for the farming families in question.

“It is marrying this kind of elitism that comes across from the rewilding movement with the more pragmatic approach of, ‘okay let’s let go of some of the sheep farming...’ I don’t like the ‘them-and-us’ aspect.” (Land-Use Stakeholder Interview [17] 2016).

These lines of argumentation show marked differentials in who rewilding is for and who gets to decide. Again we see the critical importance of finding ways to connect and reach out, rather than retreating into defensive and insular thinking or seeking to undermine the validity of different stakeholder's worth in these difficult debates.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

We began this paper with the question of whether rewilding could overcome tensions, often experienced in conservation, arising from exclusionary visions, impacts and processes. Through the evidence presented we have unravelled how these issues are playing out in the case of the Cambrian Wildwood. The reconfigurations observed demonstrate that advocates here have actively sought to mitigate difficulties, in part strategically, but also to some degree by rethinking their own sensibilities and preferences; although this is a messy process that has often proceeded reactively, sometimes fuelled as much by frustration as by considered planning. Nonetheless, this is markedly different from the experiences of imposition and intransigence recorded elsewhere in the conservation literature (Dowie 2011; Plumwood 2002; West et al. 2006), and supports claims from other emerging cases where rewilding has been evaluated (if somewhat cautiously) in more positive terms (Prior and Ward 2016; Deary 2016). Whilst Jørgensen (2015) is right to express reservation, it seems that some degree of reflexivity is occurring amongst rewilding advocates.

In particular, efforts to develop more equitable socio-cultural imaginaries and economic opportunities have been demonstrated, exploring possible solutions to concerns raised about the exclusive visions and negative livelihood impacts that rewilding poses for resident communities. This has been done by connecting with Welsh cultural narratives and linguistic references, retreating from aspirations for large carnivores, and positioning rewilding as an economic opportunity at a time of impending hardship for farm-businesses. Evaluating the

relative success of these efforts, we note that in contrast with experiences of past losses and efforts to incorporate cultural histories into aspirations for ecological rejuvenation (see e.g. Deary 2016), experiences in Wales emphasize the ongoing needs of current communities. As such, whilst constructing inclusive imaginaries is important, this needs to work alongside efforts to ensure the continued viability of rural livelihoods.

Moreover, whilst there is an acknowledgement that WWLF are working towards a better compromise, the solutions put forward are not a panacea and in many instances trustees have struggled to maintain a diplomatic approach. Specifically, difficulties are seen to persist in the exercise of power, as actors seek to legitimate themselves in unfurling debates to gain control over whether and how rewilding proceeds. Here-in binaries of inclusion and exclusion are central to argumentation, with associated markers of belonging, authenticity and origin deployed and opposed to evoke judgements on entitlement, worthiness and authority. Whilst rewilding is embracing a more peopled vision, there is still contestation around who is involved and how they are included. Critically, our analysis does not seek to adjudicate whose claim is the more legitimate, but attends to the ways in which discursive tools are employed, their effects and informing rationales.

Practitioners are clearly aware of the need to move beyond polarising framing, yet it appears that retreat into oppositional categories is all too easy, redrawing divisions. Understanding these continued failures is important; particularly given connections to wider aspirations for inclusive forms of environmentalism (Lorimer 2015) and cosmopolitan conceptions of place (Massey 2005). Lorimer and Driessen (2016) caution that rewilders need to consider whether their imaginaries of wildness are reinforcing notions of ethnic purity; debates in Wales reinforce that this is a critical axes of struggle through which rewilding needs to be reworked.

In order to better understand difficulties surrounding the construction of identity, notions of rootedness and legitimate voice, our findings show that emotional response is central (concurring with Madden and McQuinn 2016). Fear, frustration, loss and attachment are fundamental, both in terms of the way they are used strategically to wield power in debate and the way they bubble-up reactively sparking a more antagonistic and defensive stance, shutting down capacity for empathy and consideration. Rewilding is a strategic issue, it is at the nexus of many debates over rural land-use futures across Europe and particularly in the current UK context, but it is also deeply personal. Tactics and politicking have only so much bearing; rewilders need to be attentive to how differing stakeholders *feel* (including themselves) before they can work through the difficulties arising. Rewilding goes beyond rational thinking and careful planning. It is about identity, who we think we are and how we co-constitute our sense of self. We, therefore, recommend this as an area of ongoing focus for research in this field.

With so much at stake, and with such unruly affective dimensions in play, the processes of negotiation embroiled in rewilding cannot be easy. Nor should they be, if rewilding is to be a plural vision that allows and does not erase the multiple voices at work (Pickerill 2009). Many of the individuals involved hold hybrid positions, in their backgrounds, their livelihoods and professional experiences and cultural allegiances. But, as we have seen here, this does not make for an un-fractured cosmopolitan vision where previously oppositional identities smoothly cohere (see also Schwartz 2006).

Despite growing acknowledgement of the need to seek common-ground, there are limits in terms of how much commonality can be achieved. The evidence presented cautions that substantive compromise is often required and full sharing of values is potentially beyond possibility. Nevertheless, as actions to undertake practical management at *Bwlch Corog* move forward, an aspiration to be better neighbours, to be civil and cooperative in day-to-day

exchanges, would seem to be a goal that can operate across persisting difference¹⁹. This needs to be more than a strategic approach to ‘PR’, this is about people dealing with the social viability of living together with differing aspirations for the land; acknowledging that whilst we might not fully agree, we can’t cope with fighting about it every time we meet.

Within Wales, rewilding appears to provide a space to rework and re-engage longstanding questions of relatedness to community, land and notions of home (Williams 1978; Jackson and Jones 2014). Whilst much attention has centred on how rewilding could reconfigure our relationships with nature (Monbiot 2013; Lorimer 2015, Prior and Ward 2016) this case puts in stark perspective the point that this is –inescapably- a question of how we approach our relations with each other (c.f. Holland 2016).

What does this mean for practitioners beyond Wales? Rewilding Europe (2016) offer a seductive and laudable vision of ‘wild nature’ acting as a fulcrum for transnational European identities and buoyant renewal (see also Lorimer and Dreissen 2016; Jepson and Shepers 2016). Our case offers some caution on how this could progress by highlighting the hard, emotional work involved and the impasses and sense of loss experienced. We have also shown that this may involve stepping back from some aspirations, so that community consultation and involvement is not a one-way process of assimilation. Equally, there is a need to consider the differing status and ability of affected stakeholders to advance their arguments. Uneven power dynamics have a critical role which, as the case here has shown, are often messy and not easy to pin-down to traditional or expected categories.

¹⁹ This was a point made by a neighbouring landowner.

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