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Wynne-Jones, Sophie

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SPECIAL SECTION

Rewilding: An emotional nature

Sophie Wynne-Jones 

School of Natural Sciences, Bangor University, Bangor, UK

Correspondence

Sophie Wynne-Jones, School of Natural Sciences, Bangor University, Bangor, UK.
 Email: s.wynne-jones@bangor.ac.uk

Abstract

Rewilding is an emotional subject. It inspires passions and argument in spades. As a form of conservation, rewilding offers exciting possibilities to address ecological crises but it is also a threat for many people, leading to dispute and impasse. This paper explores the role emotions play both to inspire rewilding and in the ensuing conflicts. Informed by emotional geographies and feminist political ecology, the analysis attends to the socio-cultural differences underpinning emotional response and argues that emotions need to be taken seriously to better understand the socio-natural processes underway. Unravelling the work that emotions do, the experience of joy, arising from time spent in nature, is seen to initiate a desire for rewilding amongst activists. By contrast, for opponents, rewilding prompts a sense of anger, which arises in response to a perceived threat to their identity as farmers and associated feelings of vulnerability. Critically, this vulnerability often remains occluded by the dominance of anger within debates, which explains why conflict has become so intractable. However, by attending to the full register of emotions at work, including those that are not always surfaced, and by better understanding the basis of such emotions, an avenue towards greater empathy is proposed.

KEYWORDS

conservation conflict, emotional geography, environmental activism, feminist analysis, rewilding

1 | INTRODUCTION

Rewilding is an emotional subject. It inspires passions and argument in spades. As a form of conservation, rewilding offers exciting possibilities to address the ecological crises of the Anthropocene. It includes ambitions to restore degraded habitats, working beyond designated sites and potentially bringing back lost species, but with a future-orientated mindset (Pettorelli et al., 2019). However, rewilding is also a threat for many people, to their livelihoods and to valued landscapes (Wynne-Jones et al., 2020). This is particularly so in areas of marginal agricultural land, where proponents of rewilding have argued that important opportunities exist for socio-ecological transition (Sandom et al., 2019).

In their analysis of the disputes that have arisen, researchers have centred on the different positions that stakeholders occupy, in terms of their material circumstance; the different impacts rewilding will have upon them; the extent to which

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they have the power to determine such impacts; and their epistemological standpoints (O'Mahony, 2020; Vasile, 2018; Wynne-Jones et al., 2018). Whilst attention to social justice is paramount, it can be difficult to arrive at a definitive sense of right and wrong, as so much of what is at stake is subjective and socially contingent. Equally, responses are deeply personal and often emotional in character (Jørgensen, 2019; Wynne-Jones et al., 2018). However, whilst emotions are a prominent feature of rewilding conflict, they have received limited academic analysis thus far, despite an increasing wealth of scholarship linking emotions and human–nature relations more broadly (Batavia et al., 2021; Lumber et al., 2017; Milton, 2002). It is this gap that this paper seeks to address, following the lead of Jørgensen (2019), to ask “Why do stakeholders feel so differently about rewilding?” and “What role do emotions play both to inspire rewilding and in the ensuing conflicts?”

It is evident that emotions are often deemed to be problematic in rewilding debate, with a need outlined for more “facts” and “evidence” to move us beyond the emotional “baggage” that rewilding carries (Pettorelli, 2017). Emotions can be seen to confuse and dilute “good” objective judgement (Buijs & Lawrence, 2013). For practitioners, heated public debates have promoted a sense that emotions need to be defused or even eschewed in order to make any progress, with emphasis placed instead on more “tangible” evidence of ecological change and socio-economic impacts (Respondents 15 and 19, 2018).

This appears to echo a wider sense of discomfort and uncertainty in how to deal with emotion in conservation. However, as Nelson et al. (2016, p. 304) argue: “conservationists could benefit from a more thorough understanding of how people actually make judgments and decisions, especially the role of emotions.”

This paper seeks to follow Nelson et al.'s (2016) advice in advancing a more careful analysis of emotions and rewilding. It is also informed by feminist scholarship, particularly emotional geographers and political ecologists, to move beyond an understanding of emotions as problematic and an impediment to constructive, “rational” debate (González-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2020; Smith et al., 2009). Instead, emotions are explored as equal “facts” that need to be taken seriously to better understand the socio-natural processes underway within rewilding developments. As Jørgensen (2019, p. 5) outlines, “emotional frameworks matter deeply both in how people mentally understand nature and how they interact physically with it” despite “an idea that humans should be objective and scientific in the relationships with nature”. Whilst stakeholders across rewilding debates might want to talk in terms of “concrete reasons, grounded in economic utility or ecological benefit”, the power of emotions is unavoidable (Jørgensen, 2019, p. 88).

Accepting emotions as a legitimate form of knowledge and expression is fundamental here (Batavia et al., 2021). Emotions have historically been sidelined due to their portrayal as unruly bodily impulses and essentialised connections to gendered (specifically female) and/or cultural (specifically non-Western) standpoints (Batavia et al., 2021). Feminist scholarship has pushed back against such marginalisation, highlighting the critical effects that emotions have at a social and not only individual level, as well as revealing the positionalities that underpin our different experiences and interpretations (Davidson et al., 2005). This involves asking how (and why) the different positions stakeholders occupy influences their emotional responses and what geographies result.

Acknowledging our own positionality is equally critical within feminist scholarship. This paper has been written with an aspiration to develop empathy across the different stakeholders involved, but starting from an entry point of being inspired by the rewilding cause (which I expand upon in section 3).

Following this theoretical framework, the paper focuses on the different emotional experiences of rewilding advocates and those opposing rewilding. I argue that by attending to the full register of emotions at work, and by better understanding the basis of such emotions, an avenue towards greater empathy between stakeholders can be achieved.

The term “emotions” is used throughout to include expressions, moods and feelings. Whilst emotion is the predominant term used in this analysis, it also connected to affect: “[affect] is not an emotion or feeling per se, but the underlying or overarching condition or moment that gives rise to them” (Cunsolo-Willox et al., 2013, p. 16).

2 | WORKING WITH EMOTIONS

Despite discomfort with emotions in some quarters, their role in our relationships with the natural world has received increasing attention in the environmental humanities and social sciences. Emotions are central to everyday forms of co-existence with nature and instances of activism (Haraway, 2003; Lorimer, 2007; Milton, 2002). Rewilding is no exception with a range of associated emotions – from guilt through to hope and fear (Jørgensen, 2019). More widely, hope has been discussed as a response to anxiety and despair at our current ecological crises (Smith, 2014), and the loss and mourning that Cunsolo-Willox and Ellis (2018) describe as ecological grief. Charism and compassion are equally evident as key

emotions through which we identify and relate to non-humans (Batavia et al., 2021; Lorimer, 2007), whilst “negative” emotions impact through the fear dangerous animals arose in us (Jørgensen, 2019) or the repulsion that some species inspire (Castillo-Huitrón et al., 2020).

Castillo-Huitrón et al. (2020) outline two ways of thinking about emotional response, either as an adaptive, evolutionary response or as culturally mediated. Kay Milton (2002) offers a third way, acknowledging the ongoing influence of affect and emotions arising from our direct experiences of the natural world. Cunsolo-Wilcox et al. (2013) describe this as a process of “ecological affect” (see also Singh, 2013). Positive affective experiences in the natural environment are thus explored as a basis for the development of environmental subjectivities (Lumber et al., 2017). Nonetheless, feminist scholars remind us that such emotional responses are socially conditioned as much as they are pre-cognitive (Thien, 2005).

Emotions are also central to conflicts over the environment. Buijs and Lawrence (2013) argue that emotional engagement is often a necessary precursor to constructive debate. But when emotions become a more destructive force, unravelling these processes is vital for conflict resolution. This means acknowledging that the values in dispute are not solely cognitive but also felt (González-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2020). It also involves understanding peoples’ modes of engagement and what brings them to the issues under dispute. Here notable geographies are seen in who can express particular sentiments and feelings, as individual emotions are connected to wider social norms and structures (González-Hidalgo & Zografos, 2020; Sultana, 2011).

Attention to emotional dimensions, and the situated basis of such responses, is therefore essential to understand both environmental conflict and activism. Identifying what emotions occur, for who and why, are consequently central questions in this paper.

3 | REWILDING EMOTIONS

The following sections explore three key emotional responses associated with rewilding, namely joy, anger and vulnerability. The insights presented are informed by a combination of 16 standalone interviews with staff and activists from rewilding projects across the UK, undertaken between 2016 and 2018, along with more in-depth ethnographic research in mid-Wales between 2005 and 2020 (for extended methodological and ethical reflections, see Wynne-Jones et al., 2018).

The empirical material presented centres on specific insights from mid-Wales where more sustained data collection and analysis have been conducted. The themes and experiences covered were, however, also apparent in the wider UK data. Further details of what the rewilding projects in mid-Wales entail is outlined in Wynne-Jones et al. (2018).¹ Details of the respondents are outlined in the following sections to position and contextualise the emotional responses discussed.

My own positionality has played a key role as a trustee of one rewilding organisation. This has granted critical access and a closer insight than would otherwise have been possible, but also prompts consideration of my own sympathies. Despite entering into this research aligned with rewilding, the ensuing process has required careful consideration of, and empathy for, the standpoints of actors on all sides, which I have strongly expressed to all respondents and I hope this paper exemplifies. My wider research is, in fact, centred on understanding farmers’ perspectives of various issues and hence my engagement with this stakeholder group is also longstanding. Moreover, the objective of this paper is not to judge the different forms of emotional response as positive/negative; rather, it is my intent to understand the work that emotions are doing and why they are arising, so that the different parties may better engage with one another.

3.1 | Joy

To begin, I consider the perspective of rewilding advocates and how emotions feature in their desire to initiate rewilding projects. In discussions with interviewees, it was striking how their motivations to get involved or initiate rewilding projects were articulated in terms of immersive, physical connections to the natural environment and the resulting affective responses. These sensations were variously discussed in terms of an exhilarating joy, arising from the sensory overload of experiencing abundant life, through to more tranquil expressions of contentedness and inner calm, arising from respondents’ sense of connectedness and completeness whilst in the natural environment (see also Lumber et al., 2017). These experiences and the feelings arising were something that interviewees were craving more of and their involvement and advocacy for rewilding was about fulfilling that need. They wanted more time in nature and for that environment to be in better health in order to support the positive experiences described (echoing Milton, 2002). The potential of rewilding

to satisfy these desires was positioned in contrast to traditional forms of conservation, with rewilding framed as a more ambitious and effective method of restoring and reviving natural ecosystems.

There is a feeling of great satisfaction from being in the wild.

(Respondent 15, 2016)

[T]he meadows were just buzzing with wildlife, it felt much more alive ... that feeling of being in wild nature is very important.

(Respondent 10, 2016)

Here respondents reflect on time spent overseas, which they contrasted (in sensory terms) with the experience of being at home in Britain where they perceived the landscape to be ecologically denuded. Equally, they discussed experiences of nature from their youth and the subsequent changes they have experienced (Respondent 11, 2016). Their craving for “more nature” was not, therefore, about transforming the landscapes of Britain to mimic those of elsewhere, or a preference for different landscape types to those we have here. Instead, their aspirations revealed a deep sense of attachment and care for the landscapes that they hoped to rewild, and a desire to *be* in these places when they are in a more healthy, abundant form (see also Milton, 2002; Singh, 2013). This was later affirmed by reflections on changes experienced at rewilding projects as they progressed, again highlighting the jubilation of wild life, whether this was welcoming a newborn foal or chancing upon patches of wild fruits (field visits and trustee meetings, 2018).

Whilst respondents had often moved into the areas they were now aiming to establish rewilding projects, many had lived in these locations for numerous years (on average around 10 and in some cases over 30 years) and their desires and emotional connections were born of these long-term investments in place. This was expressed as stories told over time, including experiences of being immersed in the landscapes on a regular basis, in both professional and recreational capacities; connecting with the different species, habitats, vistas, sensations and ambience, through the seasons and over years, daydreaming about how much richer and healthier these environments could be (Respondents 11, 15, 16, 2016). It was a discourse of love and responsibility towards environments that were seen as home.

The strong sense of place expressed is in direct contrast to critiques of rewilding, which frame it as an “outside” or “urbanite” imposition on rural landscapes and communities (Jørgensen, 2015). Whilst this may be true for some activists, it is a more problematic label to apply to those in question here. Indeed, whilst some respondents had moved into the area, most had lived in rural locations throughout their lives, even though they were not from agricultural backgrounds. This troubles easy rural–urban, insider–outsider divisions in rewilding debates. Nonetheless, we can contextualise rewilding advocates’ positions (following Thien, 2005) on the basis of their experience in the landscape as either environmental professionals (e.g., conservationists, ecologists, foresters) or in a recreational capacity.

The majority of respondents also identified themselves as activists. It was, therefore, notable that respondents expressed their motivations in direct contrast to forms of negative affect that are often associated with environmental campaigns. Specifically, they acknowledged that sadness, anger, guilt and a sense of loss are commonly linked to imperatives for conservation and environmentalism and feelings they had themselves experienced in their previous professional and activist roles. As a consequence, they positioned rewilding as a reaction against those approaches, as a positive intention not environmentalism as negative action-against; a decisive act of optimism in the face of the undeniable grief of the Anthropocene (Jørgensen, 2019).

It is kind of depressing campaigning against forest loss for a long time.

(Respondent 15, 2016)

These emotions informed activists’ own desire to be in the natural world, but also ambitions they had to support wider public access. Consequently, “rewilders” sought to share and connect others with the affective qualities of nature through education programmes, volunteering and visitor opportunities.² Their reflections on these aspects of work revealed a genuine delight at seeing others share the experiences and sensations advocates themselves had been inspired by.

They were excited and happy to be there ... spirits were high ... [they had] the opportunity to run off in to the wild ... For me it was the fulfilment of a dream.

(Excerpt from Cambrian Wildwood Education Programme Report, 2018)

In these terms, nature was seen as a source of joy and fulfilment, which was much needed after decades of reactive campaigning and the associated frustrations. Jepson (2019) has argued that rewilding is associated with a new discourse of environmentalism, which he describes as “the recoverable earth”, wherein new forms of action are prioritised on the premise that we are no longer simply trying to save or sustain nature, but that it can recover and rejuvenate. The insights shared here show the importance of considering this not only in terms of the rationalities it promotes but the deeper felt sensibilities and affective orientations that could be inspired. The central role of joy as an affirmative emotional experience here also resonates with McCarthy's (2016) argument for a greater appreciation of the joy we feel in nature as fundamental to successful environmentalism, in contrast to previous approaches framed in scientific and economic terms.

This differs from Jørgensen's (2019) discussions of hope as an important motivation driving rewilding, in that the focus here on joy reveals a form of emotional response that is reliant upon immersive bodily experience in and with the natural environment. Whilst hope can be felt in the abstract, the experiences of joy described here are more directly stimulated and dependent upon the materiality of nature and not just an imagination of it.

Overall, we can see what a central role emotion has played in nurturing the ambition and orientations of rewilding advocates. However, the prospect of rewilding has stirred a very different set of emotions amongst local farming communities as I outline below.

3.2 | Anger

The intensely emotional nature of farmers' opposition to rewilding is immediately evident in multiple high-profile public responses, from early statements responding to George Monbiot's (2014) book *Feral*, which sets out a broad call for rewilding, through to more recent reactions against specific projects. The tone is defiant and angry, admonishing the unsuitability of proposals and the ignorance of those setting them out. Rewilding is a challenge and rewilders an enemy to be beaten.

[the project] should not exist – it should not be here.

(Farmers' Union of Wales Head of Policy quoted in Farming UK, 2019)

[W]e will not give in to the latest attack on our way of life.

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

Responses here are not solely prompted by concerns about large carnivores. Rather, they are reacting against the idea of a wilder, less managed landscape, with the association that there is less of a role for people therein, which puts the security of farming communities into doubt (presentation by farmer Dafydd Morris-Jones, 2019 at Royal Welsh Show; Respondent 6, 2016).

Experience of public meetings and one-to-one discussions with farmers and their representative bodies show that impassioned anger is far from a staged response. Yet, it is apparent the public communication of this anger is intended to be purposefully emotive, an appeal to morality, communicating the need for others to respond similarly (Horowitz, 2013).

[I]t's vital we protect our communities.

(Llanbrynmair Cllr Jones-Poston quoted in Hearn, 2019)

The language is highly expressive but also calculated. The rhetoric is intended not only to convey indignation but also to shut down further discussion. In this manner we see that emotions are not simply “outworkings” of conflict, but directly harnessed as part of the power relations in play, perhaps offering the only avenue through which farmers can feel powerful.

[W]e are used to oppression... [the proposals are] privileged middle-class romanticism.

(Powys Cllr Elwyn Vaughan, quoted in Farming UK, 2019)

Redlawsk (2002) outlines how emotional response is critical to initiate engagement with issues and campaigns, to promote deliberation, but beyond a critical threshold emotional response can lead people to retrench and withdraw from dialogue and reflection (see also Buijs & Lawrence, 2013). Negative emotions particularly increase people's reliance on stereotypes and

reduce their receptiveness (Redlawsk, 2002). So, whilst anger has the potential to be transformative, it can also perpetuate more intractable forms of conflict, which appears to be the case here, with rewilding now discussed as “toxic” and deep fractures starting to arise in local communities. Can more careful analysis of emotion help us move beyond this seeming impasse?

3.3 | Vulnerability

Whilst anger appears to dominate the debate, it is underpinned by a range of other emotions, arising in response to the impacts rewilding has had on farmers’ sense of purpose and esteem. Considering the framing of debates in the media and insights from farming respondents, it is apparent that farmers are being made to feel threatened. They are no longer represented as valued custodians of the land as they might once have been, but as “sheep wreckers” (Monbiot, 2014), causing environmental decline through overgrazing. Farmers value their relationship with land and the impact they have on it through the work of farming. This feeling of responsibility and pride is important to their identity and wellbeing (Saxby et al., 2018). Yet it is refuted by the framing of rewilding proposals (pers. comm., farmer DMJ, July 2019; Respondents 5 and 6, 2016), making them feel disempowered and denigrated instead.

At the same time, farmers have been cast as welfare claimants, dependent on farm subsidies to keep their businesses viable (see Wynne-Jones, 2016). The pride they might otherwise feel, identifying as a good farmer, is replaced with rebuke. For example, enquiring about the emphasis of a one-day conference on rewilding, and whether he felt comfortable attending or not, one farmer expressed his anxiety in the following terms; asking whether he would have to listen to people “putting him down” *again*:

Will you be selling us down the road again?

(Farming stakeholder, pers. comm. at Rewilding workshop, 2018)

Whilst rewilding is often presented as a business opportunity that could benefit farmers (Wynne-Jones et al., 2018), the undertone is one of implicit criticism. In some instances, criticism has been much more overt, particularly in the writings of Monbiot (2014) who dominated a lot of early debates (Wynne-Jones, 2016). Responding to such rebuke, farmers feel that their work and contributions are not valued. The conversation on rewilding is one that they do not feel welcome to participate in shaping:

[O]bviously farmers in this area are irrelevant to them.

(Tegid Jones, farmer, quote by BBC, 2019)

At worse, there is a deep anxiety that rewilding is intended to replace farming and the associated communities and culture, particularly given international comparisons where “abandoned” landscapes have become the focus of rewilding efforts.

Discussions at a community workshop (hosted by Rewilding Britain in July 2018) exemplified these concerns, but also the difficulty farmers had in expressing the associated emotions. Here, emotional response was explicitly considered, yet respondents were notably uncomfortable in owning their feelings, preferring to suggest how people in general might feel, or framing difficult feelings in a more medicalised discussion of mental health, rather than “I feel ... hurt, defeated, purposeless, undermined ...”.

Anger, in contrast, has been an easier emotion for farmers to express. It has made them feel powerful, with one observer describing the experience of a public meeting as akin to watching the farmers going into battle and key spokespersons being framed as “heroic” by their peers (pers. comm., conservation professional, July 2019). The apparent “safety” of anger for farmers has been discussed by Bryant (2020) in terms of “toxic masculinity”. This is not simply the product of farmers being predominantly male and of a particular (older) generation, as many rewilding advocates would fit a similar demographic. Rather, the culture of farming, as an embodiment of stoicism and strength, has made it socially less acceptable to reveal and explore forms of vulnerability in an emotional sense. As feminist scholars argue, there are notable geographies to the emotions we do and do not express (Davidson et al., 2005; Sultana, 2011).

To put this in a wider context, rewilding proposals have come at a time when the farming sector is clearly struggling in the UK, with an increasing spotlight on environmental issues connected to farming practice and then Brexit resulting in huge uncertainty over future market and policy conditions. All of this has meant that farmers’ traditional remit as food producers is changing dramatically. Their confidence has unsurprisingly been shaken. Beyond this case study, there is steadily growing acceptance that UK farmers are struggling with the negative framing of discussions around future land

use and their role therein, to the extent that it is having a marked impact on their wellbeing. As a consequence, there have been increasing calls for rewilding advocacy to be more sensitive to the way farmers feel.

There is a need to stop kicking local farmers [...] it does no good to the argument in favour of the environment by lambasting those who are the backbone of so many of our communities.

(Powys Cllr Elwyn Vaughan quoted in Hearn, 2019)

Fear and anxiety are not uncommon as a response to rewilding, whether this is a fear of dangerous animals or fear for the future way of life of communities affected by rewilding (Jørgensen, 2019). Rewilding does make us vulnerable, often in unequal ways, and these vulnerabilities need to be acknowledged and mediated (Vasile, 2018). What the discussion here has highlighted is the way vulnerability can underpin anger, which has both intensified and closed down conflicts. Whilst anger can make the differences between stakeholders seem unbridgeable, appreciation of the vulnerabilities triggering such responses may enable a more considered approach, built on an empathy for the full range of emotions stakeholders are feeling.

4 | CONCLUSIONS

This paper explores the role emotions play both to inspire rewilding and in ensuing conflicts, to better understand the difficulties experienced and whether attention to these dimensions offers a way towards resolution. It contributes to recent work that goes beyond economic and ecological utilitarian perspectives to argue that emotions matter and are an unavoidable dimension of rewilding (Jørgensen, 2019).

For those advocating rewilding, joy arising from time spent in nature is seen to nurture their ambitions. As such, rewilding is outlined as a new way of doing conservation that is fundamentally different in the emotional registers it appeals to (supporting Jepson, 2019). These insights expand our understanding of the emotions motivating conservation action in the Anthropocene, and affirm the importance of positive ecological affect in inspiring care and responsibility for nature (Lumber et al., 2017; McCarthy, 2016; Milton, 2002). In contrast with Jørgensen's (2019) discussions of hope as a motivator for rewilding, the experiences of joy described here are dependent upon direct experience of the materiality of nature and not just an imagination of it. However, such responses are far from universal and the situated basis of advocates' experiences and imaginaries, as conservation professionals and/or from enjoying nature in a recreational capacity, is clearly underlined.

By contrast, for opponents, rewilding is seen to prompt a sense of anger, which arises in response to a perceived threat to their identity as farmers and associated feelings of vulnerability. Whilst anger appears most visible, the importance of surfacing vulnerability is emphasised here to better understand what is at stake and how rewilding advocates might better empathise with, and seek to address, the vulnerabilities outlined. The dominance of anger in these debates is linked to the types of emotions farmers feel most comfortable expressing due to social norms around their identity (following Bryant, 2020). This has made conflict particularly heated in this case, but it also highlights the implications for farmers' mental health if rewilding is compounding wider insecurities they are currently facing – but struggling to deal with.

If farmers feel vulnerable and angry, conflict will not be averted by presenting them with more “facts” to weigh to arrive at an optimal solution. Instead, there is a need to work to reverse the negative emotions that rewilding provokes for them and to become more attuned to how these emotions arise. Avoiding framings of rewilding that stigmatise or blame farmers for environmental harms is critical here. Moreover, for those advocating rewilding, it is important to acknowledge the emotional basis of their own priorities and aspirations.

Emotion must, therefore, not only be recognised but embraced as central to the explanation of why rewilding matters and why it has become so problematic. As Horowitz (2013) outlines, the challenge is not to find agreement through “rational” deliberation, but to appreciate and gain respect for each other's opposing positions and the emotional facets underpinning and reinforcing these standpoints. On both sides, there are distinct emotional geographies at work, and these differences are not easily undone. The critical question, therefore, is not “Who is right and what is the most ‘optimal’ land use?” But “Can you listen, can you feel empathy?”

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Sophie Wynne-Jones  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2745-3803>

ENDNOTES

¹ See also <https://www.cambrianwildwood.org/> and <http://www.summit2sea.wales/> for developments since 2018 [Last accessed May 2021].

² See <https://www.cambrianwildwood.org/people/> [Last accessed May 2021].

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