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Back to the future. Retrospectivity, recovery, and nostalgia in rewilding.

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Abstract

In this article, rewilding's orientation towards the past is discussed. A response is given to the criticisms that condemn rewilding for its retrospectivity, either as nostalgically clinging to the past or escaping history. Instead, it is shown how rewilding can embrace nostalgia as part of a critical, (counter-)cultural vision aimed at the transformation of modern culture. Its main goal can be seen as threefold: first, it is aimed at providing a more nuanced assessment of rewilding's contested stance towards the past (and thereby, the future) through the lens of nostalgia. Second, it is demonstrated how, seen through this lens, cultural and ecological aspects of rewilding appear inextricably intertwined. Third, the concepts of 'cultural rewilding' and 'recovery' are introduced as valuable notions within rewilding. In sum, an appeal is provided for rewilders to embrace the past by dedicating attention towards cultural heritage, history, memory, and tradition.

Introduction

In this article, I address rewilding's often-contested orientation towards the past. I argue rewilding's retrospectivity should be recognized as a crucial part and even a strength of the rewilding movement. As of present, there seems to be a tendency among rewilders to negate

or at least downplay the role of the past in rewilding, marking it as a “future-orientated vision” instead (Monbiot 2013, Fraser 2014, Lorimer et al. 2015, Tree 2018, Carver et al. 2021). However, I claim retrospectivity does not exclude a powerful vision for the future; and I propose the framework of nostalgia to assess rewilding’s more complicated stance towards future and past. Throughout, I aim to show how downplaying the role of history and nostalgia(s) in rewilding is not just philosophically unsatisfying, but potentially harmful.

Rewilding has gained momentum among scholars, conservationists, and activists. It is praised as a promising new conservation practice that formulates answers to biodiversity loss, climate change, and habitat degradation, as well as for its potential to deliver human benefits and cultural transformation by reconnecting people to nature and providing a philosophical alternative to modern anthropocentric world-views (Monbiot 2013, Bekoff 2014, Fraser 2014, Lorimer et al. 2015, Drenthen 2018b, Carver et al. 2021). As of present, rewilding has grown into a heterogenous movement involving conservationists, scientists, philosophers, businesses, and ecological, cultural, and spiritual activists, indicating the appeal of the concept within contemporary science and culture (Gammon 2018). Rewilding thus acquired many distinct meanings within different groups, raising some concerns over conceptual confusion, scientific unclarity, and inflation of the term (Jørgensen 2015, Nogués-Bravo et al. 2016). Despite these critiques, many scholars agree rewilding, in all its diversity, follows a common ethos or overarching vision that emphasizes the recovery of “self-sustaining nature” (Lorimer et al. 2015, Tanasescu 2017, Gammon 2018). In 2021, Carver and colleagues proposed a valuable definition of rewilding as “the process of rebuilding, following major human disturbance, a natural ecosystem by restoring natural processes and the complete or near complete food web at all trophic levels as a self-sustaining and resilient ecosystem.” They, too, add “rewilded ecosystems should—where possible—be self-sustaining” (Carver et al. 2021: 1888). However,

when assessing the position of (aspects of) the rewilding movement within modernity, as I aim to do, it is thus important to approach the term with caution, keeping its heterogeneity and many, possibly shifting, meanings in mind.

In addition to critiques on a supposed lack of clarity, rewilding has been under attack from critics who target its retrospectivity, which is often considered a cause for concern (Cronon 1996, Jørgensen 2015, Bone 2018, Wrigley 2020). The first part of this article addresses these criticisms and the responses of rewilders. While I consider some of these responses insufficient, I will refute the criticisms targeted at rewilding's nostalgia on exactly the same grounds: in as far as they fail to account for the complex entanglement between past and future in rewilding. Thus, I argue for a much more nuanced assessment of rewilding's inherent retrospectivity, and propose the rather unusual framework of *nostalgia* as a tool to assess rewilding's stance towards the past.

In the second part of this article I address nostalgia and its ambivalent position within modern culture. I touch on different relevant aspects of nostalgia, stressing its disruptive position in modernity and its potential for delivering a critical stance within hegemonic culture. In the third part I focus on nostalgia in environmental conservation, activism, and rewilding, showing how different groups have employed different nostalgias in the face of environmental breakdown. This part also lays the theoretical foundations for an understanding of the (possible) entanglement of ecological and cultural nostalgias within rewilding practices, which will be a guiding thread in the next part.

In the fourth part I provide a case-study of rewilding in the Scottish Highlands to illuminate the entanglement of different nostalgias in rewilding by way of a telling example. I provide

evidence for some of the main claims in this article, and stress (an understanding of) the local context and history as crucial factors in apprehending the retrospectivity and nostalgia(s) at play in rewilding. I stress the entanglements between ecological, human, and cultural aspects of rewilding and I work towards the introduction of the notion of ‘cultural rewilding’; a critical practice of cultural transformation through reference to nostalgia. The case-study presented here is the Dundreggan Rewilding Centre in the Scottish Highlands, managed by the pioneering charity, Trees for Life. Findings presented here are based on an analysis of communication, policy documents, newspaper articles, and blogposts, as well as successive visits to Dundreggan, three semi-structured interviews and many unstructured conversations with staff members, and participation in activities during spring 2023. In addition, I visited eleven other rewilding and restoration projects in Scotland during the same period; visits and conversations that greatly helped to deepen my understanding of rewilding and the Scottish context, and helped to shape the claims and arguments I present in this article.

To conclude, I re-interpret rewilding as a cultural movement that provides critical answers to modern problems by re-directing and transforming different nostalgia(s) into a vision of recovery for nature and culture in the landscape. Thus, this article could not only be read as a plea for rewilders to embrace culture and dedicate attention towards local heritage, history, and tradition; but also as a plea for both rewilding and nostalgia as critical discursive practices within modernity.

1. Rewilding: escaping or embracing history?

Despite rewilding’s widespread success over the last two decades, notably in Europe, the idea has generated various critiques from different groups, including conservationist, ecological scientists, philosophers, and local stakeholders. Criticisms from within conservation usually

reflect scientific concerns over rewilding's more experimental approaches to ecological restoration (Nogués-Bravo et al. 2016). Critiques concerning the inflation of the concept due to its various uses generate debate among ecological scientists and philosophers alike; but many scholars defend the use of the term based on a common ethos, over-arching vision, or set of unifying principles (Lorimer et al. 2015, Tanasescu 2017, Gammon 2018, Carver et al. 2021). Another category of philosophical critiques targets rewilding's "inherent" retrospectivity, which is revealed through the etymology of the word. The prefix "re" comes from the Latin word for 'back'; indicating a desire to look behind, reach back in time, re-turn things to a previous state (Jørgensen 2015, Corlett 2016). Whereas the prefix 're' already appears in ecological *restoration*, the concept of rewilding, however, further complicates the matter.

One of the influential criticisms on rewilding's retrospectivity was delivered by Dolly Jørgensen, who traces the roots of the concept back to the wilderness movement that originated in the United States in the 19th century. Claiming that rewilding refers to an idea of wilderness that is infused with romantic imaginaries, Jørgensen echoes William Cronon's (1996) critique on wilderness as a cultural construct. Cronon targets an idea of wilderness as 'pristine', which was constructed by 19th-century romantics and frontiersmen as an idealized image in opposition to the corruptions of modern civilization. According to the author, this constructed notion of wilderness as 'uncorrupted' or 'untrammelled' paved the way for an understanding of 'Nature' as separate from human culture, invoking a dualistic vision:

This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. (...) To the

extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. (Cronon 1996: 17)

Thus, Cronon aims to show how the wilderness construct provides the philosophical groundwork for the modern dualism between nature and culture, producing a conceptual opposition that may turn out very dangerous when projected back onto the real world. For Cronon, this opposition reveals the desire to *escape from history*, ignoring historical human involvement with the land and desiring to erase all traces of human history from the land. One of the saddest examples of the power of this dualistic imaginary at work is the displacement of indigenous peoples in the process of creating some of the world's first National Parks (e.g., Yosemite and Kruger National Parks in the United States and South Africa, respectively; Plumwood 1998, Ward 2019).

Imaginations of the past thus play a crucial role in the wilderness construct. The notion of 'untrammelled' wilderness is grounded in a certain idea of the past as a time outside of history when nature was not yet spoiled by humankind. Cronon ultimately understands the idea of wilderness as "a flight from history", "a place outside of time", and "the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us" (Cronon 1996: 16). It represents a mythical, pre-historical time-outside-of-time, a point of origin, a paradise lost. Reproduced as the dualism between Edenic myth and history, the wilderness construct fuels nostalgia for a golden age, a lost paradise, where one eternally can start anew (Wrigley 2020). This myth infused North American frontier colonialism, driving frontiersmen farther and farther west to make a fresh start in an 'uncorrupted' wilderness (Ward 2019). At the turn of the 20th century, as the frontier ceased to exist and the romantic wilderness imaginary

became incorporated in the United States' project of nation-building, nostalgia for a golden age was now transformed into nostalgia for the frontier's way of life. According to Cronon, "(t)he mood among writers who celebrated frontier individualism was almost always nostalgic" (Cronon 1996: 13). But this nostalgia "inevitably implied ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward modernity and all that it represented. If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial." (Cronon 1996: 14). Thus, Cronon shows how nostalgia produces an opposition between the past and modernity, invoking certain imaginaries of the past to renounce modern culture. In frontier colonialism, however, the nature-culture dualism is subtly changed into a dualism between two ways of life. Thus, nostalgia for the frontier and nostalgia for a golden age of pristine wilderness may resemble each other; but though they have collided in present ideas of wilderness, they are not entirely the same.

It is of course important to question whether and under what conditions the wilderness critique also applies to rewilding. According to Jørgensen, rewilding is still gravely indebted to a dualistic view of wilderness. Her critique identifies rewilding's focus on baseline reference points as a main issue. Such baselines, Jørgensen claims, are almost exclusively situated in the past, and directed at a time where, bluntly put, "there are more animals and less people" (Jørgensen 2015: 6). Thus, Jørgensen claims rewilders "still want to re-create a wild without people and are oblivious to the problematic nature of the wilderness construct" (Jørgensen 2015: 8). A similar critique permeates Charlotte Wrigley's assessment on Scottish wildcat rewilding, which she describes as a "process of re-enchantment that is rooted in nostalgia through an attempt to reclaim something many humans believe has been lost to the landscape" (Wrigley 2020: 355). Wrigley interprets this nostalgia rewilding draws on as "a collective

longing for a perceived lost way of life—a romantic ideal of wildness—that most people (including conservationists in some cases) have no memory of.” (Wrigley 2020: 355). By reaching back not just beyond memory, but beyond history, rewilding’s nostalgia (always) reproduces the dualism inert in romantic visions of wilderness. Rewilding is thus framed, by these authors, as the successor of the wilderness movement *because it is nostalgic* in general. This view is supported by the fact that wherever nostalgia is addressed in the rewilding literature, it is almost always done so as part of a critique that echoes Cronon’s arguments (e.g., Bone 2018, Ward 2019, Wrigley 2020).

However, many scholars, particularly in response to Jørgensen’s article, explicitly reject the view that rewilding is the direct successor of the wilderness movement. Defenses of rewilding point towards its ‘open-ended’ nature, shifting the emphasis from historical baselines to the restoration of ecological function (Monbiot 2013, Lorimer et al. 2015, Corlett 2016, Prior and Ward 2016, Tree 2018). Additionally, several scholars believe rewilders, notably in Europe, explicitly have moved away from the wilderness perspective; a shift that is reflected in the interest in models of mutualism or co-existence, and in the fact that most rewilding projects today explicitly incorporate the wellbeing of people and communities in their principles (Drenthen and Keulartz 2014, Corlett 2016, Deary and Warren 2017, Tanasescu 2017, Ward 2019, Carver et al. 2021). Moreover, the fact that many rewilders, such as George Monbiot, Rewilding Europe, and Rewilding Britain, emphasize the “future-orientated” aspects of rewilding, indicates rewilding has not failed to reflect on its uneasy stance towards the past. Certain rewilders even discarded the prefix altogether, such as the British ‘wilder’ and author, Isabella Tree (Tree 2018).

But even in the future-orientated vision of rewilding, the past is difficult to entirely discard. A paper published in 2021 in *Conservation Biology*, authored by thirty-three leading rewilding scientists and pioneers, mentions “future-focused” among the key principles of rewilding, with the authors remarking “[a]lthough rewilding takes inspiration from past conditions, it is focused on future potential rather than recreating past conditions” (Carver et al. 2021: 1886). The authors explain baseline ecologies should be considered as loose reference points rather than rigid instructions, with the past informing rather than prescribing future rewilding decisions. However, a tension between past and future remains prevalent, as somewhat acknowledged by the authors (Carver et al. 2021, see also Corlett 2016, Gammon 2018). Holly Deary and Charles Warren, who conducted a study of the visions of seventeen rewilding estates in Scotland, frame this tension they encountered within most rewilding initiatives as follows:

Although many rewilding advocates specifically reject the criticism that rewilding is a nostalgic, naïve dream of recreating the past, arguing instead that it is future-orientated, many projects do have a historical baseline or reference state (implicit or explicit) which encapsulates the ‘wild’ that they seek. (Deary and Warren 2017: 215)

Formulated as a remark rather than a criticism, the authors reinstate Jørgensen’s point that despite their claims, rewilders, perhaps unwarily, have not completely rid themselves of the presence of the past. Rather, the past appears as an inseparable part of the future, informing but not limiting decisions. Instead of downplaying or exaggerating the role of the past when assessing rewilding, it may therefore be more useful to adopt a view that accounts for the entanglement of past, present, and future threads in rewilding. Moving the discussion away from a “*past versus future*” discourse, I propose to assess the messy entanglements of (different) past(s) and future(s) in rewilding through a concept that allows for such

interrelatedness: nostalgia. This is especially relevant to address rewilding, for, upon a closer look, it is often a version of the *nostalgic* past that critics target. Nostalgia appears as a sentiment that is deeply entangled with the wilderness construct, through its longing for escape, its lamenting over a fleeting way of life, but also through its important place, alongside the idea of wild(er)ness, in romantic culture and philosophy (Oelschlaeger 1991, Löwy and Sayre 2002).

2. Nostalgia: a longing to come home

In the iconic study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia as a *generalized desire for origins* that blurs the distinctions between time and space and between past and future. Nostalgia—from *nostos*, home, and *algia*, pain or longing—is literally a desire for home, situated by the imagination in remote space and/or time. Though only described from the 17th century onwards, nostalgia is probably as old as culture itself. Nostalgic sentiments can be encountered in ancient and medieval literature, in the longing for home permeating the *Odyssey*, but also in literary epics or traditional poetry invoking the image of a long-gone era of heroes, wonder, and enchantment. In 1688, nostalgia acquired a different meaning, when the medical Johannes Hofer observed the phenomenon in Swiss soldiers on campaign and identified it as a serious brain-disease affecting the body. The same illness was later diagnosed in soldiers from different nations (including a large number of Scottish Highlanders). The nostalgic disease, when untreated, was described as potentially fatal, and the only cure was to return home (Boym 2001, Bonnett 2010).

As modernity progressed, so did nostalgia, gradually turning from a disease into a rather fashionable state of mind, an inspirational source for romantic philosophy and art, and a popular theme for folk songs. Not coincidentally, the modern age was marked by increasing

displacements and migrations due to colonization, civil wars, urbanization, industrialization, land enclosures, and steam engines. As more and more people literally became uprooted, so the nostalgic longing for roots increased. Many former family and community homes, however, were seized by the forces of capitalism, colonization, or industrialization, and ceased to exist. As such, the locus of the imagined home shifted from a physical location in space to a fleeting moment in time, and nostalgia became increasingly entangled with the *longing for the past* (Boym 2001).

Romanticism constituted the first large-scale movement that turned nostalgic longing into a form of modernity critique. Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre (2002) identify nostalgia for something lost as the driving force behind the Romantic artistic, social, and political reaction against hegemonic Enlightened modernity. Though Romanticism, like nostalgia, is a constituting part of modernity, it also constitutes a reaction against modern culture in general, and against the modern rhetoric of progress in particular. Greatly dissatisfied with the present, the Romantic movement nostalgically turned to the past. This turn took the shape of reactionary projects, fantastic escapism, dwelling on loss and longing, but also of transformation of the past into future utopias (Löwy and Sayre 2002).

Some authors believe the nostalgic desire for an imagined homeland, emerging within Romanticism, is at *the core of the modern condition* itself (Appadurai 1996, Boym 2001). Dennis Walder (2011) points out the conditions for modern nostalgia are shaped by an experienced lack of roots or belonging, combined with the sense that the present is deficient, the future undetermined, and time is both linear and irreversible. Lack of belonging is a crucial experience for many people in modern society. Nostalgia can be understood as a refusal of this present lack that, paradoxically, arises from the modern experience of being cut off from an

irretrievable past. Nostalgia fights this unease with the ‘longing to belong.’ Thus, nostalgia is both a product of modern rootless, globalizing culture, and an attempt to overcome this lack of roots and belonging by referring to the past as a place of *belonging* and *feeling at home* (Appadurai 1996).

The interpretation of nostalgia as *the longing to belong* calls into question its one-on-one relationship with a longing to return to the past. Nostalgia only shifted from a longing for a place to a longing for a lost time as modern imperialism destroyed many homelands and ways of life (Boym 2001). In that sense, nostalgia provides a valuable tool for resistance against the present situation of being cut-off from connection to one’s homeland that was destroyed by the ideology of modern ‘progress.’ As Boym (2001: 24) points out, nostalgia is a “rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress.” Modern society is constructed around time concepts, which are secular, linear, teleological, and irreversible. Thus, in the modern experience of time, a discontinuity is constructed between a living present and a ‘distant’, historical past. Past and present are firmly segregated by the advancing arrow of history, which is always directed towards the future (Boym 2001, Lorenz 2010). Modernity understands itself as having overcome tradition (including superstition and ignorance), as a radical *break* with the past. Thus, modernity’s self-legitimation is based on a rhetoric of progress, implying a dismissal of the past, tradition, and memory in favor of a future-oriented attitude (Appadurai 1996, Walder 2011).

According to Bonnett (2010), this is one reason why nostalgic sentiments are often looked upon with suspicion and disdain by those in power, for “nostalgia disrupts modernity,” challenging modern ideologies and power structures. This disruptive force is not only due to the creation and re-creation of concrete, subversive memories, but also to nostalgia’s stubborn *refusal to*

forget the past. The refusal to forget has proven to be especially powerful within emancipatory and decolonial movements, where remembering past injustices, displacement(s), and tradition continues to be an important tool in shaping political and cultural resistance (Appadurai 1996, Walder 2011). Nostalgia calls forgotten parts of history into attention. Remembering homelands and ancestral ways of life emerges as a form of resistance against globalization and colonialism that tries to erase local and indigenous histories from the land. Among people who literally have been displaced, colonized, or otherwise oppressed, remembering and honoring the lost homeland is a way of preserving cultural identity, community, and connection to one's roots and forefathers (Bonnett 2015). Similarly, nostalgia for past ecosystems and species can be seen as a way to remember and denounce ecological losses.

Nostalgia, by turning into an act of remembrance of those near-forgotten histories, demands the right to mourn and denounce loss and injustice. Thus, nostalgia turns into a counter-hegemonic tool to denounce the past and present injustices that are overlooked or erased by official history (Walder 2011, Bonnett 2015). Not coincidentally, cultures of the displaced and the oppressed are especially prone to nostalgia. By collecting fragments of the past outside official history, nostalgia, like memory, emerges as the instrument of those that are forgotten or obliterated in the hegemonic historical discourse. As such, nostalgia protects oppressed and erased cultures, identities, and events against the crushing power of imposed forgetfulness.

On the other hand, however, nostalgic sentiments can be equally strong among the people who benefited from past structures of oppression, preventing societal change and justice in the present (Walder 2011). Nostalgia for the colonial empire among former colonials is one example of such sentiment that can hinder social progress. When assessing expressions of nostalgia, it is therefore always necessary to question *which past* (or home) is remembered (or

imagined): a colonial past or an indigenous past, the past of the oppressor or the past of the oppressed. It is equally important to ask *who* is remembering that specific past, and subsequently, *who is blamed* for the loss (Tanner 2021). Nostalgia of a former elite for the colonial empire, for example, may show dissatisfaction with present decolonizing tendencies. Nostalgia from colonized or displaced people for their ancestral, indigenous homelands, on the other hand, can be seen as part of a process of decolonization (Walder 2011).

Nostalgia thus appears a double-edged sword. It exposes a deeply ingrained paradox, for the phenomenon transgresses the boundaries between hegemonic culture and counter-culture, past and future, conservatism and progressivism (Boym 2001, Walder 2011). Like all transgressive movements, nostalgia is hard to contain or stir in a single, ‘right’ direction. Today, nostalgia turned into a defining sentiment for conservative *and* progressive politics, a driving force behind commercial capitalism, and an important tool for emancipation within political, cultural, and ecological activisms (Bonnett 2010, Tanner 2021). As a transgressive force, nostalgia may be expected to show its Janus-faced head everywhere where modernity is called into question, invoking different pasts according to its specific agenda.

3. Rewilding: environmental and cultural nostalgias

As nostalgia pops up where people are displaced and/or hegemonic modernity is called into question, one might well expect to encounter nostalgia in environmental activism and protection. Nostalgia has been identified as a driving sentiment behind the environmental movement (Howell et al. 2019, Willson et al. 2019); in the face of contemporary environmental breakdown, as landscapes are destroyed and climate emergencies force people from their homes, nostalgia is on the rise (Davies 2010). Nostalgia for the natural world manifests as a

longing for lost landscapes and environments, but also as a more generalized desire for a lost *connection* to the natural world. Rewilding ties into environmental nostalgia on two levels: first, through its premise to restore ecosystems to a more natural state; and second, through an implicit or explicit promise to restore the connection between humans and the natural world. The first premise is the goal of ecological rewilding, whereas the last promise is especially prevalent in ‘human rewilding’ or ‘self-rewilding’; a heterogenous cultural movement that aims to (re-)connect humans with their ‘inner’ and/or outer nature, which will be further discussed below (Gammon 2018, Pike 2018).

Rewilding constitutes not only a material act but also a discursive practice of *remembrance* against the forced forgetfulness that follows ecological destruction, species extinction, and shifting baselines. As such, rewilding represents not only an attempt to save wild nature from extinction, but also to *save the wild* from forgetting. Rewilding’s nostalgia therefore can be directed at any kind of reference point where the wild is in danger of being forgotten: at a deeper, pre-historical past, but also at the more recent past, at the historical past, at the dislocated present, or even the future.

Jeremy Davies suggests environmental nostalgia does not so much represent a romance with the past as a *promise of a future homecoming*. According to Davies, the idea of sustainability is shaped by ‘nostalgia for the future’; the longing for a sustainable future that is based on imageries of a stable past. Sustainable nostalgia takes inspiration from the past, but instead of dwelling on the impossibility to return, it projects its nostalgia on the future, longing for a future home-coming (Davies 2010). Environmental nostalgia also disrupts a well-established distinction between two types of nostalgia, made by Boym: *restorative nostalgia*, determined to resolve the longing for the past by restoring the *nostos*, or the lost home, to its former state,

and associated with reactionary politics; and *reflective nostalgia*, which aesthetically dwells on the *algia*, the longing, rather than attempting, to restore the past (Boym 2001). But environmental breakdown in particular blurs the boundaries between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Davies notes, in the face of environmental destruction, “elementary moral commitment demands something closer to ‘restorative’ nostalgia than to arch ‘reflection’” (Davies 2010: 266). Thus, a new category of nostalgia emerges; reflective as well as active, restorative but still progressive. Rewilding and environmental conservation formulate such responses to environmental breakdown that take up an “*elementary moral commitment*”, directing nostalgia towards a new course between restoration and reflection.

Though nostalgia within environmental conservation is, as in rewilding, refuted by many practitioners, a number of recent studies have shown the positive effects of nostalgia on environmental protection. Nostalgia has been identified as a powerful motivating factor, encouraging place attachment, increasing people’s well-being in nature, and strengthening the relationship between people and the natural world (Balaguer et al. 2014, Higgs et al. 2014, Willson et al. 2019). In certain cases, however, nostalgia may impede environmental restoration, and especially rewilding. When people hold nostalgic attachments to landscapes that are already ecologically depleted, nostalgia can hamper rewilding goals. This is known as *shifting baseline syndrome*: people often associate the landscapes of their youth with a desired view of ‘nature’, without considering the environmental deterioration that already happened before their lifetime (Vera 2010). Shifting baselines are a cause for conflict between residents and rewilders when the former hold attachments to their childhood landscapes, whereas the latter aim to restore the ecosystem to a much older (or newer) state. Shifting baselines explain how nostalgia can attach itself to different epochs, within or beyond personal or intergenerational memory (Appadurai 1996). George Monbiot provides the well-known

example of Wales, where attachments to the grassy hills is hindering rewilding efforts, though the barren hills are the result of fairly recent over-grazing and the ecosystem would be much healthier when returned to forest (Monbiot 2013, Drenthen 2018b).

Drenthen (2018b) identifies this conflict as a tension between ‘heritage’ and ‘rewilding’ approaches to landscapes. This tension is not just informed by baselines referring to different historical moments, but by *normative* perspectives that “do not just differ on which ‘landscape features’ are considered valuable, but also involve different normative narratives about ourselves and our place within the landscape” (Drenthen 2018b: 10). The author identifies rewilding as a movement that proposes a new and challenging interpretation of the landscape in less anthropocentric terms, not by advocating an escape from history, but by enriching a historical landscape with non-human elements. Whereas (historical) baselines cannot account for this normative and hermeneutic difference, the concept of nostalgia, however, provides a useful framework in addressing such conflicts. Nostalgia accounts for the invocation of elements of the past in shaping (critical) assumptions about the present (Walder 2011). Through the nostalgic lens, baselines are transformed into normative assumptions and narratives. Nostalgia therefore can be a helpful tool in addressing the version(s) of the past represented by the baselines rewilders hold onto, without downplaying rewilding’s future-oriented agenda or critical stance towards modernity. Seen through the lens of nostalgia, the integration of different nostalgias within the landscape emerges as an important challenge that allows rewilders to adopt an inclusive concept of ‘border-land’ wildness, that has been identified as an important step in decolonizing rewilding (Ward 2019).

Human rewilding or self-rewilding constitutes another, albeit related response to contemporary feelings of loss and displacement. Human rewilding, encompassing such diverse practices as

bushcraft, foraging, forest bathing, storytelling, basket-weaving, hunting, navigating, or mountaineering, remedies human alienation from nature by restoring the reconnection between the individual and the natural world. Often (though not always), this type of rewilding invokes the recovery of (some) elements of a pre-modern past; certain movements within human rewilding, such as primitivism, are associated with counter-culture (Oelschlaeger 1991, Pike 2019). Though human rewilding is relatively overlooked in the research literature on (ecological) rewilding, there are close ties between ecological and human aspects of rewilding (Seraphin 2017, Gammon 2018). Dave Foreman, one of North American rewilding's 'founding fathers', is associated with primitivist circles (Cronon 1996). Sarah Pike provides a valuable study on the entanglement between environmental and cultural rewilding activism amongst neo-pagans and primitivists in the 1990s. Pike identifies different nostalgias-at-work that support a vision of (human) rewilding, such as "nostalgia for an earlier time when they imagine humans lived more harmoniously with the more-than-human world" (Pike 2019: 145) or "nostalgia for a purer past (both one's own childhood and a cultural pre-Christian past, when humans are imagined to have existed more harmoniously with the nonhuman natural world)" (Pike 2019: 139). She points out how through these nostalgias, "[a]ctivists construct binary oppositions between the destructive practices of civilisation and the liberating promise of "the wild"" (Pike 2019: 145) to sustain a counter-cultural stance "against civilization." Thus, early rewilding activists adopted certain binary oppositions—between modern civilization and the 'wilder culture' of the past—sustained by nostalgia, as part of their resistance against modern culture. In certain narratives, however, these binaries are underpinned by a set of uncritical or colonial assumptions in which pre-modern societies are essentialized into a 'wilder' way of life, undermining a counter-hegemonic stance (Seraphin 2017). Such assumptions are inspired by romantic notions, going back to primitivist philosophy and early cultural anthropology, such as the concept of the 'noble savage'; an idea to refer either to the historically indigenous tribes

of Europe, the ‘native’ peoples in the European colonies, or the people living in remote rural areas in Europe. Thus, in the nostalgic image of the ‘noble savage’, past and present became conflated as nostalgia, which was not targeted at a specific point in time but at a *specific way of life* that could be found everywhere where modern civilization had not yet corrupted it (Oelschlaeger 1991, Seraphin 2017, Bone 2018). In this light, examining the values and assumptions behind dichotomies invoked in (human) rewilding is important to not reproduce colonial assumptions expressed through notions like the ‘noble savage.’ Once more, the task consists of critically questioning the nostalgic imaginaries that inform rewilding.

These questions are relevant for rewilding for at present, some contemporary ecological rewilding projects started to adopt aspects of human rewilding (Gammon 2018). Examples in Britain include Embercombe, which now offers the UK’s first rewilding training, but also organizes spiritual retreats and ‘community rewilding’ activities like ancestral fire making, and Trees for Life, which will be discussed in the next part. Whereas practices and methods may be different, human and ecological rewilding’s agendas *are* intertwined. Restoring connection between humans and nature is only truly possible in ecologically healthy environments, when there is still nature left with which to reconnect. As the scientist and indigenous philosopher, Robin Wall Kimmerer, has pointed out, restoring nature in the long run is dependent on restoring a relationship with nature, for “[it] is relationship that will endure and relationship that will sustain the restored land” (Robin Wall Kimmerer 2013: 338). In light of these premises, the following part provides an analysis of how a rewilding project merges ecological and human rewilding within an outspoken historical and human-inclusive approach by reuniting different nostalgic narratives into a unified, future-orientated vision.

4. Embracing cultural history: a case-study of rewilding in the Scottish Highlands

In spring 2023, the “world’s first Rewilding Centre” opened its doors in Dundreggan, a flagship rewilding estate of the charity Trees for Life. A pioneer rewilding organization in Europe, Trees for Life was founded in 1993 with the aim to restore the Caledonian Forest that once covered most of the Scottish Highlands, a primal forest dominated by Scots pine (*pinus sylvestris*) and other native tree species such as oak, birch, and rowan. Due to centuries of extensive logging and sheep grazing, however, the hills that were once dominated by trees were almost entirely laid bare, and in the early 1950s, < 1% of the ancient wood was left, scattered in isolated patches. Since its foundation, Trees for Life has planted close to 2 million trees, erected deer-fences to protect young saplings, and has committed itself to involve people, too, stressing the importance of local communities and educational resources in a future vision of “a revitalised wild forest in the Scottish Highlands, providing space for wildlife to flourish and communities to thrive” (Trees for Life 2023b).

The plans for the Dundreggan Rewilding Centre reflect this vision. The Centre is promoted as an educational gateway into the forest and the ‘wild outdoors’, providing hiking trails and information for visitors about rewilding, nature, and wildlife in the area. Additionally, a significant part of the Centre is dedicated to the local culture, heritage, and history of Dundreggan, notably through Gaelic language, place-names, and stories. Following two successive rounds of community consultation in 2019 and 2020, attention to Gaelic in the Dundreggan Rewilding Centre was identified as an important issue for local residents (Murphy 2020). Thus, the Centre, apart from endorsing rewilding, incorporated the additional goal to stimulate local heritage through attention to Gaelic language and culture. To do so, they consulted Gaelic historians to develop a Gaelic strategy for the Centre; resulting in a study of Gaelic place-names and stories, attention to wider cultural practices of the Highlands, and the adoption of a bilingual communication policy (Trees for Life 2023a). On Trees for Life’s

website, Laurelin Cummins-Fraser, the Centre's director, explains how the Centre's purpose is connected to Gaelic, for "the landscape and its ancient connections to Gaelic will encourage people to 'rewild' themselves by connecting with nature and exploring the heritage of our Highland based Rewilding Centre." (Trees for Life 2023c). The quote connects the *ecological* rewilding of the Highland landscape to the *human* rewilding of visitors and residents through a *cultural* revival of heritage. These entanglements only can be fully understood, however, within the historical landscape where they were forged.

Scottish Gaelic was the dominant spoken language in the Western Highlands and Islands (a region known in Gaelic as the *Gàidhealtachd*) up until the 19th century. Today, Bòrd na Gàidhlig, the main Scottish organization for promoting Gaelic, estimates around 87,000 people in Scotland speak some Gaelic; though for the overwhelming majority it is now a second language (Bòrd na Gàidhlig 2018). Gaelic language and culture increasingly disappeared from the Highland landscape between the 18th and the early 20th century, during a process of forced land enclosures that became widely known as the Highland Clearances (though Scottish Clearances may be a more appropriate term, as the clearances affected the Lowlands as well [Devine 2018]). During this period, the traditionally organized and highly place-based society of the Gaels, founded on substantive agriculture and clan ties, was rapidly merged into the new ideology of capitalism and production for global markets. Influenced by new Enlightened philosophies emphasizing wealth and productivity (such as those of Lord Kames and his much more famous pupil, Adam Smith), former clan leaders emerged as big landowners who turned their hereditary clan lands, tended for generations by clansmen, into sheep pastures, which was deemed the most profitable use for the terrain of the Highlands of the time (MacKinnon 2018). To make room for sheep, people were forced from the land into the more marginalized areas along the coast, the industrial cities of the south, or the overseas colonies (Devine 2018).

Iain MacKinnon indicates the Clearances as a process of “decommonisation”, that occurred as a result of “domestic colonization” within the more remote areas in Britain, following the logic of the Empire (MacKinnon 2018: 278). Whereas historians refuted a formerly rather popular narrative in the Highlands that the English were responsible for the Clearances, there is still a widespread sense (however historically disputed) that an ‘English’ worldview or way of life, including capitalist and imperial attitudes, was responsible for the destruction of Gaelic society (Devine 2018). MacKinnon nuances this view in his analysis of the ‘decommonisation’ of Gaelic lands, describing internal colonization as “a long process of territorial, political and cultural marginalisation within Scotland” that paved the way for the introduction of “a new form of individualised relationship with land” (MacKinnon 2018: 284–285). Thus, as elsewhere in the world, ‘internal colonization’ occurred in two steps: first, as a process of marginalization of certain areas; and second, as the individual’s claim on these areas justified by marginalization. The process of marginalization was enmeshed with attitudes towards ‘wasteland’ or ‘wilderness’ that extended not only to geographical areas, but was “accompanied by attitudes of cultural and racial superiority typical of colonial relations—the natives were said to be ‘lazy’, ‘filthy’ or ‘savages’” (MacKinnon 2018: 288). By constructing a binary opposition wherein certain areas were framed as ‘wilderness’ and their inhabitants as ‘savages’, the economic powers of the Enlightenment legitimated the seizure of these areas for individual profit by bringing them ‘under cultivation.’ Thus, a dualism between ‘civilization’ and ‘wasteland’ influenced the marginalization of remote and traditional areas on a symbolic and cultural level, resulting in the expulsion of Gaelic language and culture from ‘civilized’ life, including, in many places, schools, medical care, politics, and broader cultural institutions (MacKinnon 2018, Devine 2018). In less than two centuries, Gaelic culture and language were pushed back into the margins of modern civilization, while the Highland landscape underwent

rapid change due to intensified logging, the introduction of high numbers of sheep and later deer, and the parting of most of its people.

Albeit ironically, (English) romantics obtained a taste for Highland culture during the Victorian age, resulting in an obsession with tartan, bagpipes, and highland games. Seen through the nostalgic lens of romanticism, a lost Highland culture became now equated with the positive aspects of wilderness, and the Highlander emerged as a ‘noble savage’ in the Victorian imagination (Bone 2018). In the late 19th century, more serious ethnographers and historians, among them Gaels and foreigners, took an interest in collecting and studying Gaelic stories, place-names, and habits, which still serve as valuable sources of information on Gaelic today (e.g., John Gregorson Campbell or Alexander Macbain). Since the 1980s, Gaelic culture and identity have known a modest revitalization, partly tied to the revival of Scottish nationalism, and the narrative of the Clearances percolated politics and social activism, even trickling down into environmental conservation (Toogood 2003). Through this route, the echoes of the Clearances made their way into rewilding, with opponents and defenders of rewilding invoking the past to support their claims in the debate concerning rewilding and land-use.

Some adversaries of rewilders frame rewilding as a new sort of clearance that aims to clear local residents, among them crofters, farmers, and gamekeepers, from the land in favor of an idea of unpeopled wilderness (even invoking terms as ‘green lairds’ and ‘green clearances’, Salter 2022). While such critiques are often formulated by local stakeholders with other interests in the landscapes, narratives are not just shaped by general notions about nature and culture, but by the history of the landscape itself. They are infused with different nostalgias that get conflated in the arguments: first, nostalgia for the fleeting practices of sheep farming or game keeping as ‘traditional’ ways of life (though in reality these were mainly introduced

after the Clearances, and thus may be considered a case similar to shifting baseline syndrome); and second, nostalgia, at the brink of memory, for Gaelic culture and identity, refusing to forget the injustices of the past. These nostalgias are materialized and entangled in the landscape, e.g., in the ecology, place-names, ruins, and sheep farms. Rewilders, however, typically invoke yet another type of nostalgia in the landscape; nostalgia for a deeper past, represented by a more primal idea of nature that may or may not get conflated with the unpeopled wildernesses of the romantic imagination (Schama 1996, Bone 2018, Wrigley 2020). In Scottish rewilding, this primal idea is symbolized by the Caledonian Forest; and while its primordality may, in some instances, seek to overpower other nostalgias, it does often co-exist with different nostalgias in the landscape, as the examples below will show.

In response to local narratives and concerns, many rewilding projects in Scotland incorporated people as a crucial aspect of rewilding (Deary and Warren 2017). The Scottish Rewilding Alliance chose “A brighter future for nature & people” as its website catchphrase, and Highlands Rewilding, the project of entrepreneur Jeremy Leggett, claims its mission is “to help rewild and re-people the Scottish Highlands” (Scottish Rewilding Alliance 2023, Highlands Rewilding 2023). Similarly, Trees for Life states in its mission statement: “Integral to our success is the involvement of people.” (Trees for Life 2023b). The organization takes this approach even further by not only involving present and future residents, but also the people—and the landscape—of the past. They educate the public about the past in Dundreggan, explaining how the baseline ecology of the landscape shifted after the Clearances. However, they take this view one step further in promoting a narrative in which the Clearances were *responsible* for (part of) the environmental deterioration of the Highlands. In this version of the story, it is the displacement of people from their lands that allowed for intensified logging and grazing in the first place. Against the nostalgia of crofters, the organization cultivates

another nostalgia defined by cultural practices: the nostalgia for a Gaelic society that sustained a healthier ecology and relationship with the landscape. Roddy Maclean, one of the Gaelic consultants for the Centre, shows the power of this narrative in a blogpost aimed at convincing the Gaelic community of the benefits of rewilding through relating an encounter with Finlay MacRae, the Forestry Commission's head forester at the time:

In his parting comments to me back in 1993, Finlay MacRae compared the situation of Gaelic to the Caledonian forest. '*Nach e an aon rud a th'ann? Aren't they the same?*' he said. Once dominant, both had shrunk to a historical low and many people now lived their lives, even in the Highlands, without hearing Gaelic or seeing a native pine wood. But neither had become extinct and human intervention could return both to a situation of prominence once more, where both language and forest would inspire us, inform our daily lives and make us happy. (Maclean 2022, italics in the original quotation)

Through the equation of the fate of the Caledonian Forest with the fate of Gaelic culture, rewilding the forest is framed as an act of cultural revitalization. The nostalgic image is composed of entwined natural and cultural elements, and reviving either one supports the emancipatory act of revitalizing the other. In this view, nature and culture do not exist as separate entities, but are entangled in a unified historical landscape that supports wild nature alongside cultural flourishing. The primal nostalgia for the wild Caledonian Forest merges with cultural nostalgia for a thriving Gaelic society, assimilating the seemingly paradoxical narrative frameworks of wildness and heritage. Yet this recognition of the entanglement of natural and cultural elements is more than an accounting for the historical nature of the Highland landscape. This awareness is deeply ingrained within Gaelic culture itself; a culture that was utterly dependent on and oriented towards the landscape. The landscape shaped Gaelic

practices of agriculture, of seasonal migration with the cattle, of the building and roofing of houses, the dyes and colors of clothing, the setting of stories, the rich Gaelic tradition of poetry and song about the landscape, and the language itself, with its highly diversified vocabulary for certain natural features such as a hill or a burn (a small stream). In turn, Gaelic culture shaped the landscape on a material level through agriculture, the construction of roads and buildings, hunting and foraging, and on a symbolical level through the act of name-giving. As two staff members of the Centre explained to me, Gaelic place-names and stories reveal the history of the landscape through reference to wildlife that was present in the past (*Creag an Fhìr-eòin*, rock of the golden eagle; *Allt Feàrna*, elder burn), provide clues about historical land use (place-names indicating shielings, the seasonal camps on the higher hill slopes where cattle were brought for grazing during the summer months), or indicate something about the way the landscape was experienced (*Sithean Mullach*, fairy hill). A visitor information board accompanying a map of Gaelic place-names in Dundreggan, explains how Trees for Life understands this connection:

Rewilding is all about place and how we seek to understand, respect and work within it. In Glenmoriston, Gaelic place names, stories and songs reveal a rich and thriving landscape. The map is alive with ancient tales and beliefs, other ways of understanding and using the land, and of a people deeply connected to their environment. We need to nurture and share these stories today, to make wise choices for the future of the landscape. (wall text, *A living landscape / Tìr bheò*, Dundreggan Rewilding Centre)

Looking to the past thus informs future choices for rewilding, not only through the study of past ecologies, but also through an ethnographic-historical investigation of “*other ways of understanding and using the land*” and of a culture “*deeply connected to their environment*”

(A living landscape / *Tir bheò*, Dundreggan Rewilding Centre). These premises differ from general assumptions tied to a romantic view of ‘wilder’ cultures by their ties to concrete time and place. Through this firm emplacement in the landscape, Trees for Life circumvents some of the risks associated with a *generalized* idealization of pre-modern cultures as ‘noble savages’, such as cultural appropriation or essentialization.

Instead, Trees for Life exchanges this romantic nostalgia for a more critical, self-reflective nostalgia that is grounded in place and historical time. It endorses a rewilding vision that is not about re-instating wilderness, nature, or even wildness, but about “place and how we seek to understand it” (wall text, *A living landscape / Tir bheò*, Dundreggan Rewilding Centre). Place gathers different narratives, histories, and nostalgias, disclosing meaning and narratives in its material and symbolical features (Drenthen 2018a). In many places in Scotland, the landscape serves as the (only) reminder of Gaelic townships or summer dwellings, disclosing scattered stone ruins, overgrown roads, and slight changes in vegetation indicating the lost people of this place. The past pops up again and again in the landscape, revealing its presence in a disruptive moment, constantly challenging the romanticized vision of wilderness as an unpeopled place. By highlighting and reinforcing these disruptive elements of the landscape, Trees for Life engages in a disruptive practice of remembering and validating people and ways of life that were marginalized by modern hegemonic culture.

Trees for Life thus engages in a valuable attempt to decolonize rewilding by replacing a general idea of wild(er)ness by a *local* vision that constructed in correspondence with community demands, local traditions, and local nostalgias. Its example shows how rewilding can transgress from ecological rewilding not only into human rewilding, but also into a new form of rewilding, which can be understood as *cultural rewilding*. Cultural rewilding merges elements of

ecological and human self-rewilding, but surpasses both by promoting a transformative vision for modern culture. It works not on the level of the individual, but on the level of the collective, creating and re-creating cultural artifacts (e.g., stories, art, songs, poetry, tools) and skills that are able to challenge modern hegemonic worldviews. Cultural revitalization *in a place-based context* plays a pivotal role in cultural rewilding to re-cover material and symbolical elements of the landscape that un-cover these “other ways of understanding and using the land” (wall text, *A living landscape / Tìr bheò*, Dundreggan Rewilding Centre). Cultural rewilding is nostalgic in its inclination to reach back to traditional knowledge and culture, but its nostalgia is part of a counter-cultural stance in modernity, emancipating the voices of those societies, cultures, and worldviews that have been oppressed, erased, or otherwise rendered invalid over the past centuries of colonization. In Dundreggan, different nostalgias (for the primal forest, for the Gaelic past, for the sustainable future) are united in a place-based vision on rewilding that takes the profound understanding of a concrete place as a starting point. Thus, Trees for Life’s vision provides distinctive threads of emancipatory resistance to different aspects of hegemonic modern culture: environmental destruction, cultural oppression and colonization, and a lack of responsibility for the future.

Conclusion: towards recovery

Nostos is commonly translated with the English word ‘home’, but ‘homecoming’ would be a more approximate translation. Among the Ancient Greeks, *nostos* referred to a tale of homecoming. The *nostoi* were known as a work of literature relating the homecomings of the great heroes after the Trojan War. Rather symbolically, most of these tales are now lost, and the *Odyssey*, relating Odysseus’ excruciating difficulties on his way home, is the only *nostos* that remains. Maybe it should come as no surprise, then, that modernity always seems to be in need for tales of homecoming. What if modern nostalgia does not only originate in the loss of the physical home, but in the loss of *nostoi*, stories that show us how to come home again?

But critical nostalgias generate just that: new stories of homecoming in an age that renders this homecoming impossible. Rewilding formulates one type of such a story by adopting, channeling, and transforming different kinds of nostalgia. Like nostalgia itself, rewilding should therefore be addressed as a phenomenon that mainly indicates a present human need: a desire for roots and a sense of belonging. Rewilding's preoccupation with the past is inspired by the nostalgic longing for renewed belonging in a world where a sense of home has been lost, where people feel uprooted and adrift. Nostalgically reaching back to place-based cultures that seemed to possess this sense of belonging is one way in which cultural rewilding tackles this modern sense of cultural uprootedness. Reaching back to healthier ecologies that would sustain our future home is another answer formulated by ecological rewilding. On the other hand, rewilding may disrupt modern homes and a sense of belonging in the landscape, for 'feeling at home' is dependent on distinct baselines and nostalgias situated in the landscape by different stakeholders (Deary and Warren 2017, Drenthen 2018a). Where rewilding is working to recover a home for certain species or people, it thus also may unsettle the home of others. Therefore, accounting for new and old nostalgias, that are tied to a sense of belonging, is an important part of rewilding's challenge. Only through painstaking attention to local and place-specific culture and history, will rewilding be able to guide future generations of beings back home.

Meanwhile, as rewilding challenges traditionally defined views of nostalgia, it also may force us to adopt different conceptualizations of nostalgia. While eluding the categories of restorative and reflective nostalgia, rewilding offers a hopeful idea of *recovery* on different levels: ecological, individual, and cultural. Whereas restoration indicates the desire to restore a landscape or a culture to its previous state, sacrificing the future for a romanticized past, and

reflection stays stuck in dwelling on the past, blind for the power of the future; *recovery*, on the other hand, indicates a retrieval and revaluation of parts of the past into the present. Recovery does not imply blind idealization or essentialism, nor a need for completeness or a static baseline, and neither does it sacrifice the future to the past. Rewilding's nostalgia at its best therefore may be understood as part of this third, new and future-orientated category of nostalgia as *recovery*: reflectively restoring ecosystems and parts of human culture without adopting either reflection or restoration as its main goals, but aiming towards the holistic recovery of the landscape through the thoughtful appreciation of the past.

Perhaps this notion of 'recovery' is what truly sets rewilding apart from other types of (ecological) restoration. Recovery implies not only reaching back towards the past, but also healing. It is this second meaning of the word that most rewilders on the ground are so willingly working towards: the healing of ecosystems, of human and non-human individuals, of human culture, and perhaps most important of all, of the relationship between humans and the land. As a cultural movement, rewilding may be seen as a new *nostos*, a story of homecoming, providing future opportunities, clues, and storylines for recovery, reconnection, and renewed belonging in an uprooted age.

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