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# Future Natural - the unpredictable course of wild nature

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*Without any target or action plan to drive it, Britain is witnessing a re-wilding of its landscapes. These transformations are enriching ecosystems and bringing lyrical power to the land.*

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In the conclusion to his book *Fenced Paradise*, Richard Mabey identifies a missing zone from amongst the many specialised habitat domes at Cornwall's Eden Project. His recommendation would be for a new, uncovered area of the quarry to be left to re-vegetate from the surrounding native species. His experience of that location and the re-vegetation of similar disused industrial sites, suggests that furze (gorse) would be an early returnee, which would produce a characteristic landscape that he delightfully labels the garrigue of Cornwall.<sup>1</sup>

I think Mabey's prescription for the Eden Project should be one for all areas of Britain, missing as they are - for the most part - landscapes that are given the opportunity to decide how they will clothe themselves with vegetation, and to whom they will give sustenance. The exciting aspect of that prescription is the prospect of watching nature do its own thing: the quick returns that are ephemeral; the later returns that stick around; and the opportunistic but inappropriate directions whose moments of glory may succumb to an ultimate course.

## **Wild action – documenting the projects**

Examples do exist in Britain of landscapes regaining greater self-determination, and which can give us inspiration. The Wildland Network has recently compiled a database of re-wilding projects, available on its website (see Ward, Fisher and Carver article). It is worth exploring some of these projects as they indicate a range of circumstance in which this greater self-determination can take place.

In woodland regeneration, time-limited enclosure to eliminate grazing pressure is the simple act that often initiates transformation. Trees for Life in Scotland will beguile you with tales of the springing into dramatic growth of native conifers, infantilised from decades of over-grazing, as well as the flush of new seedlings as constraints are removed to the re-formation of the Caledonian Forest.

In Suffolk, an aim is to defragment two ancient woodlands, Spouses Vale and Arger Fen, through natural re-vegetation of the field that lies between them. In the upland areas of the limestone Yorkshire Dales (South House Moor) in the eastern

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Lake District (Royalty Allotment) and Snowdonia (Cwm Idwal) natural re-wooding is taking place after a few years of a break in livestock grazing.

Water is a potent driving force for native wetland habitat regeneration. The new coastal wetlands at Abbott's Hall Farm and at Wallasea Island, Essex, are a stunning compensation for wetland losses elsewhere (see May, Hall and Pretty article). In smaller scale, Cors Dyfi a new reserve of the Montgomeryshire Wildlife Trust some way inland on the Dyfi estuary, saw a Sitka spruce plantation cleared and the water drainage reversed. A mere eight years on and there is infiltration of wetland again with reeds, bulrush, bog myrtle, flag iris and willow, recolonising from sufficient remnant species around the reserve.

Perhaps outside of a framework of simple transformation, the re-vegetation of a Pembrokeshire coastal farm shows the lengths that have to be taken in realising the return of a particular habitat on farm land – in this instance coastal heath. Fields at Trehill Farm, with their centuries of agricultural improvement, have undergone a stripping-off of topsoil followed by dressing with a sulphur waste product from the local oil refinery to re-acidify the soil. Coastal forbs quickly returned but heath species needed seeding from the brash cut from heathland elsewhere.

The return of natural vegetation cover can accompany the re-introduction of lost mammalian species. Perhaps the example with the highest profile is the Alladale Estate of Paul Lister in the Scottish Highlands (see Roger Sidaway's article). The plan for restoring the original Highland ecology of this former hunting estate began on a small scale to explore the success of habitat recovery, with a replanting of native trees (saplings of juniper, willow, rowan, birch, aspen, Caledonian pine) and a reduction in grazing pressure through a culling of the local deer population. Red squirrel, wildcat, and wild boar will be reintroduced on a 1000 acre site, the aim eventually being to re-introduce these to the whole of the estate, along later with the wild grey wolf, lynx and brown bear. The estate will be enclosed with high fencing to prevent release of carnivores into the wild, but will the open access provisions that exist in Scotland mean that everyone can benefit from this restoration? This is the main challenge for the project – enclosing the predators while keeping access groups content. Alladale will be an opportunity to study how the re-introduction of wolves and other native predators in the longer term can restore a natural balance in the deer population without the need for further culling. Lister is seeking the co-operation of surrounding landowners to double the potential area of wild reserve to 50,000 acres. He believes that this area of land could support two wolf packs (12-15 animals in each pack), three pairs of lynx, and up to 30 brown bears.

### **Predicting nature's accidents**

In all these transformations, unpredictability could never be a factor that is obviated, and it is ever so with nature. We trust to the future that giving a freer rein to the forces of nature will pay dividends in improved integrity for ecologically functional landscapes. This future natural state was articulated by George Peterken, when he set out a vision for the natural evolution of new temperate wildwoods in Britain.<sup>2</sup>



Arable reversion land at the Knepp Estate in West Sussex is already contributing to the rewilding of this ancient parkland.

Photo: [www.knepp.co.uk](http://www.knepp.co.uk)

Peterken accepted the unpredictability by pointing to the contemporary factors such as extinctions, and climate and soil changes that meant that this woodland would never be a re-creation of the past – the original natural woodland. The concept of future natural is thus wider than just woodland, certainly embracing wetland restoration, and maybe even habitats such as heathland where other factors are sometimes able to prolong its often short existence in the absence of our interference.

It is that latter point – the active involvement and management by people and their instruments - which marks out a divergence in views about how a future natural state can be achieved. Already there is a presumption for natural reseeded and re-wooding over tree planting for new wild woodland, with recourse to the latter only when the location lacks a sufficient seed bank or source. But a different course was given a big push when Frans Vera published his theories about the relationship between woodland regeneration and wild herbivores, and the establishment of a major demonstration project in Holland's Oostvaardersplassen – a place which receives much attention in this issue.

### **Becoming parasitized?**

It is easy to see the seductive nature of Vera's theories, as they sit effortlessly within the landscape management orthodoxy of conservation professionals in Britain. Not unsurprisingly, significant progress has been made in a few short years on the animal welfare issues in preparing the ground for adoption of the approach here, as reported in this issue by Matthew Oates. Where perhaps less effort has been applied is in understanding and realising the state of landscape

vegetation to which this herbivore pressure can be re-introduced, and which has any hope of survival if we contribute to get the balance wrong. Can the balance ever be 'right' or 'natural' if what we have to do is fence in these surrogate wild herbivores rather than allow for their natural passage? I am often reminded of the wisdom of Leopold, writing some 60 years ago, when he said "By grazing all the woods we eventually exterminate the woods".<sup>3</sup>

I should make less of this divergence and instead recruit it to the diversity of transformative approaches that a future natural state can arise from. An important factor for this future natural state will be its relationship with the land around it. As is becoming clear across the world, isolated enclaves of wild nature are less effective than if they are networked together by wildlife corridors<sup>4</sup>, and bounded by buffering with semi-natural land.<sup>5</sup> The key for all of these aspects of future natural will be our exploring of it with an open mind and heart, managing our expectations of it, as much as we should resist over-managing the processes themselves.

Returning to Richard Mabey's concluding remarks in *Fenced Paradise*, he throws in a natural horror to his vision of the natural re-vegetation of an area of the Eden Project quarry: the gorse becomes parasitized by common dodder, a climbing and twining plant common to the SW that he likens to a serpent. Dodder barely roots in its life cycle and gives nothing back. Mabey gives us a brutal caution when he says that people have much in common with dodder when we do not consider equably our relationship with the natural world.

## References

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3. Leopold, A. Do we want a woodless countryside? In: Calicott J.B. & Freyfogle E.T., (1999) *For the Health of the Land*. Island Press
4. Humphrey, J., Watts, K., McCracken, D., Shepherd, N., Sing, L., Poulson, L., Ray, D., (2005) *A review of approaches to developing Lowland Habitat Networks in Scotland*. Scottish Natural Heritage Commissioned Report No. 104 [www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned\\_reports/f02aa102\\_2.pdf](http://www.snh.org.uk/pdfs/publications/commissioned_reports/f02aa102_2.pdf)
5. Forestry Commission, (2005) *Keepers of Time - a statement of policy for England's ancient & native woodland*. [www.forestry.gov.uk/keepersoftime](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/keepersoftime)

*The Wildland Network is preparing a conference to explore the key dimensions of the concept of Future Natural. See [www.wildland-network.org.uk](http://www.wildland-network.org.uk) for details as they emerge.*

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