

**Countryside Alliance written evidence to the  
Environmental Audit Select Committee inquiry into  
“The Future of the Natural Environment after the EU Referendum”**

**9 September 2016**

**Executive Summary**

1. Whether ‘rewilding’ involves the withdrawal of land management or a change in management such as the reintroduction of extinct flora and wild animals, or managed coastal and river flooding, any departure from existing land management practices should be assessed on a case by case basis.
2. Given that there is no general understanding of ‘rewilding’, a general policy would be deeply misguided and damaging to environmental, economic and social wellbeing of the countryside.

**Introduction**

3. The Countryside Alliance works for everyone who loves the countryside and the rural way of life. Our aim is to protect and promote life in the countryside and to help it thrive. With over 100,000 members we are the only rural organisation working across such a broad range of issues.
4. The Countryside Alliance welcomes this inquiry and the opportunity to submit evidence on the future of the natural environment after the EU referendum. The questions set out in the terms of reference for this inquiry are extremely broad and include many policy areas that are of interest to our members. At this stage we will limit our written evidence to the questions relating to ‘rewilding’.

**The Concept of ‘Rewilding’**

5. There is no single definition of ‘rewilding’. It can refer to a complete withdrawal of land management practices, but generally it is used to describe a change in management practice involving the ‘proactive restoration’ of land, habitat and wildlife to its uncultivated or unmanaged state. The objective of ‘rewilding’ is equally difficult to define as there is uncertainty about what point in time a given environment was considered to be ‘wild’ and this will vary from area to another.
6. Despite what the name suggests, ‘rewilding’ often involves a change, or even intensification, of land management practices rather than a natural transformation. The value of this concept for debates around the natural environment must therefore be questioned, particularly when the types of land management practice that are described as ‘rewilding’ are so varied.
7. ‘Rewilding’ has been used to describe the reintroduction of extinct flora and wild animals, afforestation on moorlands, managed coastal and river flooding, and the deintensification of farming methods. These land management practices can be successful but they can also be detrimental and have unintended consequences and as such ‘rewilding’ cannot be considered as a single, coherent and consistent approach to land management.
8. One common theme of ‘rewilding’ land management practices is that they result in changes to the existing landscape, habitat and wildlife which are difficult, or even impossible to reverse. ‘Rewilding’ therefore cannot be considered as ‘conservation’ in the traditional sense of conserving the environment and is often pursued as an ideological, rather than practical, response to the challenges of managing the natural environment.

9. There is no clear understanding of public attitudes towards 'rewilding' nor is there proper understanding about this concept in public consciousness. Given that the British countryside is admired at home and around the world because of the way it is currently managed, there would be concern about any changes that impacted on the existing landscape, habitats and wildlife.
10. Rather than assess 'rewilding' as a concept, individual 'rewilding' land management practices should be assessed on their own merit including their environmental, economic, and social impact. This should include consideration of existing land management practices, particularly farming and shooting.

### **Environmental Factors**

11. The landscape of the British countryside and the habitats and wildlife sustained by it, are the result of existing land management practices which have developed over many centuries. The balance that this existing management has created could be threatened by a withdrawal or change of management practices if 'rewilding' was promoted by the Government.
12. The promotion of 'rewilding' land management practices such as the reintroduction of extinct flora and wild animals could lead to a reduction in biodiversity and impact upon non-target species. For example, lynx and wolves are just as likely to prey on ground nesting birds and livestock, as they are on wild deer. This was demonstrated in July this year when a lynx escaped from Dartmoor Zoo, killing four lambs belonging to a local farmer, before being recaptured. Impacts on biodiversity have been shown in areas where the population of wild boar has increased as ground shrubs have been destroyed and serious damage caused to sapling trees, creating monocultures where only the wild boar are thriving.
13. The conservation work of many farms and shooting estates needs to be considered carefully within this debate as 'rewilding' land management practices are likely to be detrimental to this work. There is a large amount of evidence that shows where land is managed for the benefit of game, other species naturally flourish and many shoots undertake conservation work for its own sake. Shooting providers in the UK spend nearly £250 million a year on conservation work and time spent on conservation on shooting land totals 3.9 million work days; the equivalent of 16,000 fulltime conservation jobs. In the UK as a whole shooting providers have management responsibilities over some 14 million hectares; about two-thirds of the total rural land mass.
14. The withdrawal of management would lead to the transformation of habitats with possible reduction in biodiversity. This has been shown in studies of moorland managed for grouse shooting. A Natural England evidence review into The Effects of Managed Burning on Upland Peatland Biodiversity, Carbon and Water (Natural England, 2013) concluded that burning and predator control correlated with higher densities of red grouse, golden plover, curlew, lapwing, redshank and ring ouzel. Welsh moorlands were once the most productive grouse moors in the UK supporting an abundance of other wild birds. Since management for grouse shooting ceased, they went into serious decline. Studies on a former grouse moor in Berwyn show what can happen in just 20 years with lapwing becoming extinct, golden plover declining by 90 per-cent, and curlew declining by 79 per-cent. All three species are now listed as being of conservation concern, with both curlew and lapwing red-listed by the British Trust for Ornithology.
15. The vast majority of bird species listed on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP), including grey partridge, ring ouzel, thrush, bittern and sky lark require a managed habitat to help their survival. The grey partridge has benefitted from The Peppering Partridge Project in East Sussex which has brought about a remarkable increase in

numbers, from only three pairs in 2003 to 292 pairs in 2014. The Project has been a success due to local farmers working together to increase habitat for the birds as well as effective fox control which would not have been possible under a 'rewilding' approach.

### **Economic Factors**

16. The countryside is a living and working environment and 'rewilding' land management practices must take account of the economic activity that takes place in the countryside.
17. 'Rewilding' land management practices that involve the reintroduction of extinct flora and wild animals could be harmful to the livelihoods of farmers, shooting estates and rural businesses. The introduction of lynx and wolves creates the possibility for increased risk for predation of livestock but there are also less obvious consequences of 'rewilding' such as river dams created by beavers flooding farm land and damaging crops.
18. In many cases the economic advantages of 'rewilding' do not outweigh the potential loss of income to existing businesses. Lynx and wolves tend to shun contact with humans so it is unlikely that their reintroduction would be a viable means of boosting rural tourism and a significant benefit to local communities without significant government subsidy. Contrast that with the contribution currently made by sporting estates to the approximately £2bn Gross Value Added (GVA) which shooting generates for the UK economy as a whole.
19. Shooting is an important part of the economy, both through direct spending and the stimulus to wider economic activity which helps to sustain communities, especially in hard-pressed rural areas. Shooters themselves spend money on guns, ammunition, shooting clothing and accessories, travel, accommodation and payment to the providers. They also supply downstream businesses with goods and services, producing a trickle-down effect as every one of these transactions creates further economic activity, including employment, as firms buy from local retailers and suppliers. The number of jobs recreated by 'rewilding' land management practices and the trickle-down economic benefits are often far less than the traditional land management of farming and shooting.
20. In many cases, 'rewilding' land management practices result in the loss of agricultural land or reduction in productivity of the land. If the UK wants to become more self-sufficient in food production as part of measures to improve food security then this must be taken into consideration. Agricultural land that is flooded as part of managed river and coastal flooding will be difficult to restore to productive use if there is a change in policy and reintroduction schemes can also contribute to making the land less productive by increasing predation and damaging habitats.

### **Social Factors**

21. It is essential that the possible introduction of 'rewilding' land management practices, are subject to proper consultation to ensure that the impacts, particularly on the local community, are considered. 'Rewilding' must not be imposed on local communities against their wishes and as well as consultation it is also essential that there is consent from local people.
22. Existing land management practices such as farming and shooting are vitally important for the social and economic life of many rural communities; this importance increases in the most remote areas. A move towards 'rewilding' land management practices would not only affect the landscape, habitats and wildlife but also local communities who depend on existing land management practices for jobs and economic support.

23. Shooting in the UK supports the equivalent of 74,000 full-time jobs; of these 35,000 jobs are supported directly by shooting providers. The remainder are supported indirectly through purchases from suppliers by both individuals and businesses, and as a result of spending wages and company profits. Furthermore, the wages earned and suppliers' profits are ploughed back into the local economy benefiting many activities not directly associated with shooting, and, by providing employment, helping to underpin the social fabric of the countryside. The gamekeeper fills his vehicle with fuel at the local garage, spends his wages locally and sends his children to the local school.
24. Shooting provides a source of income that runs in harmony with the rural community. Added bonuses are the social aspects of the shoot which bring together both local people of all backgrounds and visitors, and often provide a focus in dispersed communities where the opportunity for social interaction may be limited.