

1 The many meanings of rewilding:
2 An introduction and the case for a broad conceptualization

3
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7 KEYWORDS

8 *rewilding, meaning, cluster concept, ecological restoration, wilderness*

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11 INTRODUCTION

12 Even in its nascency, rewilding in the sense of a specific kind of ecological restoration has re-
13 ceived considerable attention, often in the form of introductory, review, or classificatory articles,
14 intended to clean up definitional confusion or delineate the term. This article is also meant as an
15 introduction to the concept, though I take a more catholic approach to rewilding and its mean-
16 ings. In this paper, I aim to (1) offer a general introduction of rewilding and to (2) situate the
17 concept in environmental philosophy. In introducing rewilding, I challenge the way the term has
18 been narrowly focused on specific meanings at the exclusion or omission of others. In the first
19 part of the paper, I work from definitions and typologies of rewilding that have been put forth in
20 the academic literature. To these, I add secondary notions of rewilding from outside of the scien-
21 tific literature that are pertinent to the meanings and motivations of rewilding beyond its use in a
22 scientific context. I defend the continued use of rewilding as a single term, despite its seemingly
23 disparate usages, and I advance a clustered concept of eight overlapping characteristics as a way
24 to conceptualize these. This breadth is necessary to understanding the wider interest in rewilding
25 as an emerging environmental phenomenon.

26 In the paper's second part, I turn to three key issues in environmental philosophy in order
27 to connect rewilding with the historic themes of (1) the exclusion of humans from wild or wil-
28 derness places; (2) the ontological purity of wilderness areas through their non-human origin and
29 history; (3) and cultural landscapes and notions of place. This section, too, is introductory and is
30 meant to articulate some of the questions and avenues of inquiry rewilding, broadly construed,
31 poses. I suggest that rewilding carries on some of the main themes of the wilderness debate, but
32 considering rewilding broadly allows tensions and novel questions to manifest that are important
33 to how rewilding should be discussed and understood going forward.

34
35 I. REWILDING RE-CONCEPTUALIZED

36 In this section, I review some of rewilding's existing definitions and classifications and argue
37 against a concern that the recent uptick in uses of rewilding risks emptying it of substantive
38 meaning. Emerging alongside, and as I will suggest, within, its primary meanings are secondary
39 notions of rewilding, and my aim here is to include these alongside the dominant, conservation
40 usages in an effort to represent rewilding in its full breadth. My interest is in exploring the con-
41 cept rather than in proposing or defending a definition for the term. I do suggest, however, that
42 the additional meanings of rewilding demand that the term is conceptualized more broadly, and
43 so I advance rewilding as a cluster concept, that is, a concept of several overlapping aspects that

44 lacks jointly necessary and sufficient conditions. Conceived of in this way, rewilding as a term
 45 can encompass the various meanings already in circulation, meanings that are necessary to
 46 understanding the cultural interest in rewilding as an emerging environmental phenomenon.

47 *Definitions of Rewilding*

48 How has rewilding been defined to date? Most of its meanings cohere around describing
 49 a specific kind of ecological restoration, though, even this leaves the term broadly and variously
 50 defined. This is evident in the paper by environmental historian Dolly Jørgensen “Rethinking
 51 Rewilding” (2015) that laid the classificatory groundwork by describing six disparate meanings
 52 of rewilding in conservation biology. Jørgensen begins with the “three Cs” definition put forward
 53 originally by Soulé and Noss in 1998. In their definition, rewilding is based on trophic cascade
 54 and island biogeography models that dictate that large predators (carnivores) regulate the food
 55 chain, that they need large, central reserves of land (cores) for hunting and for territory, and that
 56 these reserves need to be connected so populations can move and interchange (corridors). Jør-
 57 gensen fills out the rewilding typology with five additional types: Pleistocene mega-fauna re-
 58 placement; Taxon replacement on islands; Captive breeding and release; Landscape restoration
 59 rewilding; and Productive land abandonment. Because rewilding varies so widely among these
 60 usages, Jørgensen advises against condensing them into a single definition, worrying that using a
 61 single term for such an array of conservation measures “could potentially lead to confusion.”¹

62 Others, however, are more optimistic about finding a single definition for the term. In
 63 another article that reviews its usages in the empirical literature as well as the scientific commen-
 64 taries on rewilding projects, Lorimer et al. (2015) sum up rewilding as “an ambitious and opti-
 65 mistic agenda for conservation” with projects that share an ethos of “maintaining, or increasing,
 66 biodiversity, while reducing the impact of present and past human interventions through the res-
 67 toration of species and ecological processes.”² In one of the few papers to date on rewilding in
 68 environmental philosophy,³ Jonathan Prior and Emily Brady review projects being done under its
 69 mantle and offer a definition of rewilding as “a process of (re)introducing or restoring wild or-
 70 ganisms and/or ecological processes to ecosystems where such organisms or processes are either
 71 missing or are ‘dysfunctional.’”⁴

72 Interest in rewilding and its meanings has not been exclusive to academics or academic
 73 publications. Rewilding’s biggest promoter is in fact a journalist: George Monbiot, whose col-
 74 umns in *The Guardian* and his popular book, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea, and Human Life*
 75 (2013) have introduced rewilding to a broader audience. Monbiot defines rewilding concisely as
 76 “the mass restoration of ecosystems,”⁵ but importantly, this has implications for ecosystems in
 77 question *and* for the lives of humans involved. Elaborated, Monbiot’s definition has two interre-
 78 lated meanings:

¹ Jørgensen, 2015: 485.

² Lorimer et al., 2015: 40.

³ Prior & Brady, 2017: 34. Others papers addressing rewilding in some capacity include Deliège, 2016; Ward & Prior, 2016; Keulartz, 2016; Drenthen, 2009; Drenthen, 2013; Jamieson, 2008; Hintz, 2007, though these do not necessarily take up the task of defining rewilding. For a review of the conservation biology literature, see Jørgensen, 2015 and Svenning et al., 2016, and for a comparison of rewilding to other kinds of restoration, see Corlett, 2016. For a more general literature review, see Lorimer et al., 2015.

⁴ Prior & Brady, 2017. Ward & Prior (2016) also adopt this definition.

⁵ Monbiot, 2015.

79 (1) Rewilding, to me, is about resisting the urge to control nature and allowing it to
 80 find its own way. It involves reintroducing absent plants and animals (and in a few
 81 cases culling exotic species which cannot be contained by native wildlife), pulling
 82 down fences, blocking the drainage ditches, but otherwise stepping back.⁶

83
 84 (2) The other definition of rewilding that interests me is the rewilding of our own lives.
 85 ...[I]f we have spaces on our doorsteps in which nature is allowed to do its own
 86 thing, in which it can be to some extent self-willed, driven by its own dynamic pro-
 87 cesses, that, I feel, is a much more exciting and thrilling ecosystem to explore and
 88 discover, and it enables us to enrich our lives, to fill them with wonder and en-
 89 chantment.⁷

90 Rewilding for Monbiot is reflexive—that is, it involves his life and the ways he attempts to re-
 91 engage himself with the world around him and the wilder ecosystems he champions.

92
 93 *Plasticity and the Meanings of Rewilding*

94 I take it to be expansions like this that trouble Jørgensen. She argues that rewilding advocates
 95 have “tended to conflate several of the discrete scientific uses of rewilding into one envi-
 96 ronmentalist program”⁸ and points to uses that combine parts of the various scientific definitions
 97 she has elaborated as evidence. The loss of its original, scientific meanings threaten rewilding’s
 98 definitional precision, and more significantly, Jørgensen worries that such uses render rewilding
 99 plastic: used so indiscriminately and inconsistently that by meaning almost anything, it loses its
 100 meaning altogether.⁹

101 Of course, Jørgensen’s observations about the usages of rewilding in environmental and
 102 activist contexts are correct: the term is used more loosely in what she considers non-scientific
 103 discourse than in published articles, and in ways that mix and match meanings from her scientific
 104 typology, even adding new meanings to them, as with Monbiot’s definition. But her concern is
 105 hyperbolic. Far from being definitionally bankrupt, there are salient meanings we can and should
 106 observe emerging from the variety of usages and discourses on rewilding. Lorimer et al. suggest
 107 as much when they write of the “shared ethos” of rewilding projects, even though these projects
 108 indeed span “a range of different goals, contexts, approaches, and tools.”¹⁰ Similarly, Ward and
 109 Prior, responding directly to Jørgensen’s paper, contest her claim that rewilding has become
 110 plastic. They argue instead that the manifold usages of rewilding coalesce meaningfully: “We
 111 believe that the identification of non-human autonomy as being central to ‘rewilding’
 112 brings...coherency and clarity to the term as both a theory and set of related practices.”¹¹

113 There are indeed meaningful things that can be said across the various projects and
 114 usages of rewilding, and identifying these can help clarify the term. But before I expand on re-

⁶ Monbiot, 2013: 9-10.

⁷ This half of the definition comes from an interview in *Orion Magazine* (Sahn & Monbiot, no date) because it is more succinct than Monbiot’s wording in *Feral*.

⁸ Jørgensen, 2015: 486.

⁹ Jørgensen relies here on the work of Uwe Poerksen who has made this point about such terms as *consumption*, *development*, and *modernization*.

¹⁰ Lorimer et al., 2015: 54.

¹¹ Ward & Prior, 2016: 133.

115 wilding's other salient themes, I want to work in the opposite direction: to broaden rewilding
 116 even further to countenance the meanings of rewilding circulating outside of academic discourse
 117 so as to include these in its themes. My motivation for this is in part disciplinary: environmental
 118 philosophy since its inception has been rooted in and motivated by real environmental challenges
 119 as well as in the general philosophical tasks of questioning and inquiry about human engagement
 120 in the world. Even less than other branches of philosophy, environmental philosophy cannot af-
 121 ford to be purely academic: our work must be informed by ecological science and in touch with
 122 environmental concerns, questions, and understandings of broader publics in order to be relevant.
 123 Hermeneutic environmental philosophy particularly takes up the interpretive task of distilling
 124 and illuminating how ongoing environmental debates and meanings reflect ourselves and how
 125 we can understand ourselves in and through our interactions with the non-human world.¹² Situat-
 126 ing my inquiry under this general heading means that it is not only academic definitions that I
 127 take to be important to the work of understanding rewilding, though these might dominate its
 128 usage. Rewilding, more than other environmental terms, has seemed to resonate outside of its
 129 academic usages, and hermeneutic environmental philosophy urges a sensitivity to this. Mean-
 130 ings of rewilding that are developing in a wider environmental discourse will be obscured if we
 131 fail to attend to rewilding as an emerging phenomenon or movement in environmental thought.
 132 These meanings take rewilding to be a self-reflexive act, specifically broadening rewilding to
 133 include humans and human culture directly.

134

135 *Emerging, secondary notions: Reflexive and Primitivist Rewilding*

136 Reflexive Rewilding

137 There are two secondary uses of rewilding that are crucial to a broader understanding of
 138 rewilding, the first of which I have already mentioned. Though informed by conservation biol-
 139 ogy and ecology, George Monbiot's vision of rewilding is as much about rewilding human life as
 140 it is about rewilding British landscapes. He writes in *Feral*:

141

142 Some people see rewilding as a human retreat from nature; I see it as a re-involvement. I
 143 would like to see the reintroduction into the wild not only of wolves, lynx, ... and – per-
 144 haps one day in the distant future – elephants and other species, but also of human beings.
 145 In other words, I see rewilding as an enhanced opportunity for people to engage with and
 146 delight in the natural world.¹³

147

148 Monbiot's enthusiasm for rewilding as a conservation practice is interwoven with his own per-
 149 sonal narrative of ecological boredom and the opportunity to rediscover wildness¹⁴ in the ex-
 150 tremely domesticated landscape of the United Kingdom. Such experiences reawaken for him a
 151 "genetic memory"¹⁵ that he insists continues to be part of the psychological endowment humans
 152 have evolved over millennia that equips us for environments much wilder than those where we
 153 live out our lives in the present. Rewilding oneself, or as I term it, *reflexive rewilding*, is a re-

¹² See especially *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics* (2014), Clingerman et al.

¹³ Monbiot, 2013: 11.

¹⁴ I will return to the distinction between wildness and wilderness vis-à-vis rewilding in the paper's second section.

¹⁵ Monbiot, 2013: 60.

154 discovery of this potential by contact and connection with wilder conditions than we are used to,
 155 and is ultimately for the sake of humans.¹⁶ For Monbiot, rewilding as the restoration of defunct
 156 ecologies is the condition of possibility for his human-centric meaning of rewilding: humans
 157 need encounters with a wilder world in order to experience the personal rewilding Monbiot sees
 158 as important for our well-being.¹⁷

159 A very different construal of reflexive rewilding might be found in terms of the personal
 160 micro-biome. Geographer Jamie Lorimer has paired rewilding of ecosystems with the rewild-
 161 ing—or reworming—of one’s gut, both movements in a larger, “probiotic turn” that reconfigures
 162 biopower in the Anthropocene. Like the rewilding of macro-ecosystems, rewilding of the gut
 163 (which individuals achieve through introducing, through various means, symbiotic bacteria or
 164 helminth worms to their body) endeavors to transform the ecosystem by letting a healthier degree
 165 of “wildness” return.¹⁸

166
 167 Primitivist Rewilding

168 Rewilding has another, even more obscure meaning within an anarcho-primitivist
 169 counterculture that exists on the fringe of environmentalism in the United States.¹⁹ There is no
 170 central group to speak of, but this movement for rewilding can be seen in a some small pockets,
 171 wherein rewilding means becoming freer and more self-sufficient, of liberating oneself from the
 172 entanglements of capitalism and domestic life and getting back not to the land but to the wild.
 173 This is the wilding, or rewilding, of human culture, or as I term it, *primitivist rewilding*.

174 One of the larger and better organized primitivist groups, Wild Abundance, operates in
 175 North Carolina.²⁰ Wild Abundance organizes year-round educational programs in eco-
 176 homesteading and holds an annual rewilding, primitive skills, and community building event
 177 around the summer solstice of each year called the Firefly Gathering. Primitivist rewilding in-
 178 volves a specific vision of nature and the relation of humans in it articulated in the Firefly Gath-
 179 ering manifesto:

180 We believe that people, just like the rest of the other-than-human world, fill a special
 181 place in the web of life. We are rooted in the land through our dependency and hunger,
 182 sense of belonging and gratitude, and the responsibilities we feel deep inside.²¹

¹⁶ Even in justifying wolf reintroduction, Monbiot maintains that “if rewilding took place it would happen in order to meet human needs, not the needs of the ecosystem. That, for me, is the point of it. Wolves would not be introduced for the sake of wolves but for the sake of people.” (2013: 179).

¹⁷ Monbiot is only one example; see Bekoff 2014 for reflexive rewilding that considers itself “compassionate conservation” (2014: 60).

¹⁸ See Lorimer, 2017.

¹⁹ Similar self-sufficiency movements exist, to a smaller extent, in Europe, but they tend not to self-describe as rewilding or be as overtly political.

²⁰ Portland, Oregon also has an active rewilding community (Rewild Portland, 2016). Its director, Peter Michael Bauer (also known as Urban Scout), lectures and gives classes on primitivist rewilding and moderates www.rewild.com. See Urban Scout, *Rewild or Die: Revolution & Renaissance at the End of Civilization* (2008). Similarly, Miles Olson, *Unlearn, Rewild* (2012). The Dark Mountain Project, a group of writers and artists interested in the narratives of ecological and economic uncivilisation, sits somewhere between primitivist and reflexive rewilding. See, for instance, its Manifesto, titled *Uncivilisation*: <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/>.

²¹ Bogwalker & Salzano, 2015.

183 On this version of rewilding,²² in order to be whole and fully actualized, humans have to learn to
 184 overcome the artificial and toxic ways we have separated ourselves from nature. Seduced by
 185 lives of “corn syrup, cheap beer, and giant plastic houses...we are separate, primed and prepped
 186 for the particular box that culture finds for us,” their Manifesto argues.²³ The thesis of the Mani-
 187 festo is that such lifestyles alienate humans from nature, and that this alienation implicates us in
 188 and blinds us to the destruction of nature. To remove ourselves from this destructive cycle re-
 189 quires that we re-acquaint ourselves with the natural world by learning skills that enable self- and
 190 community-sufficiency without relying on the standard means of employment and economy.
 191 “We must connect with what it has meant to be human when humans were a functional part of
 192 the web of life,” the Manifesto urges.

193 Rewilding in this primitivist sense pertains to the individual human and to first-world
 194 human societies rather than ecosystems. This diverges significantly from any of the scientific or
 195 academic meanings reviewed thus far, and even Monbiot’s version of reflexive rewilding—its
 196 nearest cognate—does not share in its radical cultural critique. Unlike primitivist rewilding,
 197 Monbiot’s reflexive rewilding is compatible with the necessities and even luxuries of contempo-
 198 rary lives in the global north. However, that both of these meanings entail some kind of reimag-
 199 ining of not just human-nature relations but also the societal lives of humans in the 21st century
 200 indicates that there is something beyond rewilding as a strategy of ecological restoration that we
 201 should consider.

202 Rewilding in all cases entails a re-envisioning, and what is re-envisioned and how this
 203 looks will vary depending on the type of rewilding. However, I want to suggest that re-
 204 envisioning and its associated discontent are as much a theme of rewilding as are other criteria
 205 more commonly associated with rewilding as ecological restoration. My suggestion is not that
 206 these expanded meanings are well-defined or well-examined with respect to the context of re-
 207 wilding as ecological restoration, nor do I suggest that they should overtake this context. But ig-
 208 noring them misses a shade of meaning to which even the more conventional uses of rewilding
 209 sometimes make allusions, even if vaguely or in an unspecified way. Specifically, these fringe,
 210 or secondary usages make explicit a discontent with which the more mainstream instances of re-
 211 wilding and environmental thinking resonate.²⁴ It is for this reason that maintaining rewilding as
 212 a single term that encompasses this breadth of usages is important.

213

214 *A Cluster Conceptualization of Rewilding*

215 Rewilding, at this point, is not in need of definitional housekeeping: I do not share Jørgensen’s
 216 worry that variety in meanings and usages necessarily waters rewilding down. Instead, we should
 217 embrace this breadth as indicating something about rewilding as a contemporary phenomenon in

²² Rewild Portland articulates similar views in its core values: <http://www.rewildportland.com/about/#more-2>

²³ Though never expressly specified, the details mentioned here (plastic houses, corn syrup, etc.) suggest that the ‘Us’ is meant to refer to those engaged in the consumptive lifestyles of the first world, particularly in the United States.

²⁴ I have in mind writing like Richard Louv’s acclaimed *Last Child in the Woods*, which does not address rewilding directly, as well as writing that does. For instance, Steve Carver suggests that rewilding should be thought as a continuum, ranging from “rewilding lite” to “rewilding max” (Carver, 2014: 10). Wouter Helmer, the co-founder of Rewilding Europe, coined the phrase “Waanzinnige oases,” or insane oases, to describe the character of rewilded, or new, natures (quoted in Drenthen, 2009). Drenthen elaborates: “the[se]...are places where we can escape from the overabundance of societal orders and regulations” (303).

218 environmental philosophy and environmentalism generally. Expanding our inquiry and concep-
 219 tual purview to include and interrogate rewilding in this way takes seriously the hermeneutic ef-
 220 fort of interpreting the state of affairs it finds in this discussion. I suggest, then, that we consider
 221 conceptualizing rewilding in such a way that we can accommodate varieties of its usages and
 222 allow comparison across these varieties without ballooning the concept to meaninglessness, and
 223 for this, I suggest looking to the cluster concept, which philosopher of aesthetics Berys Gaut has
 224 famously advanced in his definition of art.²⁵ Gaut explains: “A cluster account is true of a con-
 225 cept just in case there are properties whose instantiation by an object counts as a matter of con-
 226 ceptual necessity toward its falling under the concept.” That is, a cluster concept is a concept that
 227 has multiple defining characteristics or aspects, none of which is necessary to the definition.
 228 These characteristics count toward something falling under the concept in the sense that if some
 229 of the characteristics are present, the concept is instantiated. There are no jointly necessary and
 230 sufficient conditions, but there are disjunctively necessary conditions in that some criteria must
 231 be satisfied (i.e., characteristics present) for the concept to be instantiated.²⁶

232 What characteristics should count towards a concept? Here, Gaut recites Wittgenstein’s
 233 advice on definitions, “Don’t think, but look!”²⁷ We must attend to the way the concept is pres-
 234 ently used in language when considering what counts as characteristics of a cluster concept. In
 235 this way, Gaut’s cluster account is similar to Wittgenstein’s famous idea of family resemblance,
 236 though in other ways, Gaut differentiates his account from the Resemblance-to-Paradigm defini-
 237 tion of art.²⁸ Still, one of the affordances of the cluster account is that it can include characterist-
 238 ics from other accounts without holding them as exhaustive. I suggest we adopt the same ap-
 239 proach to conceptualize rewilding: we can work from extant definitions and add to these the
 240 secondary notions from non-academic work to yield a broader, more encompassing, if working
 241 concept of rewilding that responds to its various meanings and more general usage.

242 I have tried to capture, in no particular order, the eight, overlapping aspects of rewilding
 243 that comprise it as a cluster concept:

- 244
- 245 1. **Rewilding restores ecosystems.** Rewilding, like restoration, is aspirational: it aims to undo
 246 harms wrought to ecosystems and by so doing, restore them to a state of health and function-
 247 ality. I suspect that Jørgensen sees this aspect as a necessary condition to rewilding, but even
 248 her type Captive breeding and release rewilding would not necessarily satisfy this.
 249
 - 250 2. **Rewilding decreases the degree of human intervention and management of ecology.** Re-
 251 wilding departs from ecological restoration broadly conceived, as restoration often involves
 252 active and ongoing management. Instead, rewilding instead tries to convey an ecosystem back
 253 to a state where it can sustain itself. Mark Fisher’s phrase “self-willed land,” speaks to this

²⁵ Gaut, 2000. See Adajian, 2003 and Meskin, 2008 for discussions of this premise and of the success of Gaut’s ac-
 count. Although I am not attempting a definition of rewilding, Gaut’s cluster definition seems applicable because the
 current gamut of rewilding definitions is not yet broad enough to encompass the range of meanings rewilding en-
 tails, meanings which I take to be important for fully understanding the practices and intentions of rewilding.

²⁶ Woods & Moriarty (2001) similarly defend the cluster concept in discussing exotic species.

²⁷ Wittgenstein, quoted in Gaut, 2000: 28.

²⁸ On Gaut’s view, the Resemblance-to-Paradigm account is incomplete because it does not include justifications for
 choosing the particular art works based on the paradigm in question. Additionally, the Cluster Account avoids re-
 semblance, which Gaut views as potentially vacuous: “anything resembles anything in some respect or other, since it
 shares some property with it” (2000: 25).

254 characteristic.²⁹ (This could also apply to primitivist or reflexive rewilding, especially with
 255 Lorimer's claim of rewilding (or reworming) on the scale of the human microbiome.)
 256

257 3. **Rewilding is defended ecologically by trophic cascade theory.** On this theory, the presence
 258 or absence of a species in the food chain, a wolf, an otter, etc. is shown to command an entire
 259 cascade of effects in the ecology of its habitat. There is notable disagreement amongst re-
 260 wilders if cascades are driven by predators or herbivores³⁰ but there is a general commitment
 261 to trophic cascades as regulating ecology.
 262

263 4. **Rewilding (re)introduces species.** Trophic cascades cannot work if too many species are ab-
 264 sent. The reintroduction of locally extinct species, especially high impact, or keystone species,
 265 is one of the most frequent examples of rewilding where human intervention and oversight is
 266 required at early stages to catalyze the process.
 267

268 5. **Rewilding is focused on process** rather than on a specific result or end point, which differs
 269 even from adaptive methods of restoration.³¹ The removal of human impediments to natural
 270 processes and their restoration is key to rewilding. Once these are set in motion, rewilding is
 271 thought to continue in perpetuity through these processes.
 272

273 6. **Rewilding is oriented towards the future.** Though some rewilding projects establish specific
 274 historic baselines for ecosystem functionality (e.g., Pleistocene, pre-agriculture), rewilding
 275 does not aim to recreate landscapes in some idealized past form. This is perhaps best sup-
 276 ported when rewilding is linked with the provisioning of ecosystem services, but this claim of-
 277 ten seems to do rhetorical work in expressing a vision of a future where humans make room
 278 for a wilder, more dynamic and self-regulating natural world.
 279

280 7. **Rewilding involves non-human autonomy.** This aspect could be considered a rephrasing of
 281 aspect 2, especially as described by Prior and Ward: "the restoration of autonomous biotic and
 282 abiotic agents and processes is realised through the (oftentimes gradual) relinquishment of di-
 283 rect human management of the wild organisms or ecological processes in question."³² How-
 284 ever, it is not only or even necessarily the absence of human intentionality in rewilding but the
 285 presence of non-human autonomy that is central.
 286

287 8. **Rewilding reimagines the identities of humans in relation with non-humans.** This criteria
 288 applies most obviously to reflexive and primitivist rewilding, but this can also be seen in sev-
 289 eral other types of rewilding (e.g., species re-introductions; reworming).
 290

291 Again, my aim is not to advance a definition but to point out that the conceptual space rewilding
 292 already claims is broader than current definitions recognize. My suggestion is that, at this point,
 293 rewilding should be understood as a cluster of related characteristics, as this brings out precisely
 294 this quality of rewilding as term emerging in academic and popular use that is still fuzzily de-

²⁹ Mark Fisher has written extensively about rewilding at <http://www.self-willed-land.org.uk>.

³⁰ E.g., Soulé & Noss, 1998 vs. Vera, 2000.

³¹ Cordell et al., 2016.

³² Prior & Ward, 2016: 133.

295 fined. One of the apparent difficulties with these meanings as they are currently applied is that an
 296 aspect of rewilding can refer to different registers (e.g., to the individual, the ecosystem, etc.)
 297 but that because the meanings often apply to both registers simultaneously, they cannot easily be
 298 separated out. In other words, there is not a group of meanings that apply to the ecosystem level
 299 and another group that apply to the rewilded self; some of the same aspects apply—not acciden-
 300 tally—I suspect, to a rewilded self as to a rewilded ecosystem. For instance, Monbiot’s rewilded
 301 self does not easily detach from the rewilded ecosystem that he finds inspiring precisely because
 302 these two registers are interrelated. The rewormed gut, on its own, seems insufficient for rewild-
 303 ing, but for Lorimer, it represents part of a larger rewilding trend of “controlled decontrolling of
 304 ecological controls.”³³ Conceptualizing rewilding as a cluster not only permits for the variety of
 305 meanings that I have surveyed, it also brings into view the complex interrelationships of these
 306 meanings. Additionally, the cluster concept can expand or shrink.³⁴ As we continue to discuss—
 307 in and out of academia—what rewilding means and what counts as rewilding, firmer definitions
 308 and necessary and sufficient criteria may emerge, but at this point, the work I mean to do and try
 309 to encourage in this introduction is not so much border policing as it is reflective deliberation
 310 about what we take rewilding to mean.

311

312

313 II. REWILDING IN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY

314 With the broader conception of rewilding in mind, in the second part of the paper I turn to some
 315 of the themes rewilding invites. The first and second themes have featured centrally in envi-
 316 ronmental philosophy historically—1) the exclusion of humans from wilderness and 2) the onto-
 317 logical purity and non-human origin of the wild/wilderness—and are unavoidable for rewilding.
 318 The third theme I discuss—3) questions of cultural landscapes and place—represents an import-
 319 ant new area that rewilding opens up for environmental philosophy and considerations of place.
 320 This section, too, is meant as introduction, and so I sketch these themes only briefly to open up
 321 the questions rewilding inherits from this preceding tradition and to indicate novel questions that
 322 emerge when we consider rewilding in its appropriate breadth.

323 1. *Exclusion of humans*

324 To begin, rewilding diverges from the wilderness tradition in name, a difference we can appreci-
 325 ate by heeding Robert Chapman’s distinction of wildness from wilderness. Chapman argues that
 326 we should understand *wildness* as things that “reveal unbounded, limitless life with incalculable
 327 potential for ‘creative’ complexity.”³⁵ *Wilderness* is more specific: it is “in contrast to those areas
 328 where man and his works dominate the landscape... [wilderness is] where the earth and its
 329 community of life are untrammelled by man.” As Chapman notes, this “can be reduced, acre by
 330 acre.”³⁶ That is, there are places of wilderness in the world, often formally designated as such,

³³ Keulartz, 2012 cited in Lorimer, 2017.

³⁴ One strand that I have not considered here is literature. Aaron Cloyd claims that the “expansion of a rewilding conversation... has not reached far enough” (2016: 61) and wants to include fictional and science-fiction literature in the rewilding discourse.

³⁵ Chapman, 2006: 468.

³⁶ Chapman, 2006: 466, 471.

331 and these generally depend on the present and historic absence of humans. *Wildness*, by contrast,
 332 is not exclusive of humans, as ‘creative complexity’ can exist in abandoned city lots that are re-
 333 colonized by vegetation and insect and mammal populations.³⁷ The idea of a self-willed or re-
 334 bounding nature implicit in rewilding corresponds with wildness, differentiated as such, from
 335 wilderness. Prior and Brady, also abiding Chapman’s distinction, write: “wildness is to be found
 336 in humanly populated and cultural landscapes, and experienced at a range of spatial
 337 scales...Rewilding as a specific form of ecological restoration does not require human aban-
 338 donment or erasure of cultural landscapes, unlike wilderness management.”³⁸

339 Thus, as it is more invested in the concept of wildness than it is in wilderness, rewilding
 340 eludes some of the attacks lodged at the wilderness preservation movement and even the concept
 341 of wilderness itself. But it is not free of all of them: the first of these inherited problems is the
 342 question of the exclusion of humans. Unlike the national parks and wilderness areas of the
 343 United States, Australia, and the reserves of sub-Saharan Africa, rewilding is not premised on the
 344 expulsion of people from these areas, so it escapes the charges of ethnocentrism and even geno-
 345 cide that some have argued wilderness areas are tainted by.³⁹ However, already obviously in its
 346 basic justification by land abandonment, many instances of rewilding reproduce the na-
 347 ture/culture dichotomy that has been repeatedly problematized in environmental philosophy and
 348 history. The metaphysical troubles of excluding humans from concepts of nature as well as the
 349 problems that ensue from the nature/culture dichotomy is a central and recurring theme in envi-
 350 ronmental philosophy,⁴⁰ and William Cronon’s argument to these points remains one of the most
 351 influential and relevant to the question of wilderness. Cronon famously argued that rather than
 352 belonging to a realm outside of the human, wilderness is a creation of humans in a very particu-
 353 lar culture and time: a cultural construction that rests on problematically dualistic metaphysics.
 354 Further, he argued that this idea is not only mistaken but pernicious because it sanctions attitudes
 355 about nature as outside our everyday lives and thus falling beyond the scope of our responsibili-
 356 ties. Cronon writes:

357 The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope
 358 of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of
 359 our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our
 360 marks on the world.⁴¹

361 That this point seems to pertain, twenty years later, to rewilding has not gone unnoticed. Jørgen-
 362 sen worries that indeed rewilding reproduces the strategies of wilderness management that
 363 Cronon and others have problematized but that rewilding’s advocates “apparently have failed to
 364 take notice” of these earlier criticisms. However, others dispute that Jørgensen appropriately
 365 characterizes the aims of all or even most rewilding projects. In their response to her paper, Ward
 366 and Prior argue that rewilding, especially in the example they give of beaver reintroductions in
 367 the UK,

³⁷ Indeed, ‘wildness’ often means out of control, chaotic, or bizarre in non-nature related contexts. Parties can be wild; children and emotions can run wild; the early American West was wild, etc.

³⁸ Prior & Brady, 2017.

³⁹ Plumwood, 2006.

⁴⁰ E.g., Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993; 2006; Callicott, 1998; Murphy, 1992; Bannon, 2014; Vogel, 1996.

⁴¹ Cronon, 1995: 484.

368 acknowledge[s] the implicit entanglement of non-humans and humans in conservation
 369 endeavours, and celebrate[s] non-human autonomy in rewilding as fundamental to the
 370 creation of experimental, forward looking conservation futures...[such examples do not]
 371 cleave humans from Nature (or vice versa), instead they offer the opportunity to create
 372 unique, and ecologically surprising hybrid landscapes.⁴²

373
 374 Another possibility for rewilding vis-à-vis human/nature arises out of Eric Katz's argu-
 375 ment that rather than pernicious, this dualism is morally important because it delimits the sphere
 376 of human action in the non-human world. Katz writes: "We humans—overly impressed with our
 377 power to manipulate the natural universe—must learn that the proper way to treat autonomous
 378 nature is different from the way we treat our artifacts... We leave nature alone."⁴³ While such an
 379 austere division between humans and nonhumans has not met wide acceptance in ecological res-
 380 toration,⁴⁴ rewilding, in some cases, shares this commitment to an autonomous nature that is
 381 valuable precisely because it is not made artefact by human intervention and management.
 382 Whether rewilding will relapse into the dualism of nature and culture as Jørgensen suspects,
 383 celebrate and accentuate this division as Katz would have it, or overcome or transform this rela-
 384 tion as Ward and Prior hope, remains an open question: at this point, there are examples of re-
 385 wilding that support all three claims.⁴⁵ Moreover, this unanswered question opens a fruitful
 386 avenue for inquiring normatively, *how* humans should or should not be included in rewilding.
 387 Even if not all rewilding advocates adopt primitivist pursuits or center rewilding around human
 388 practices, primitivist and reflexive rewilding emphasize active re-engagement with non-human
 389 nature and suggest that at least part of the task of rewilding is reimagining the way these borders
 390 are circumscribed.

391
 392 *2. Ontological purity: Non-human origin and history*

393 A separate but related concern stems from the significance environmental philosophy and think-
 394 ing in the west accords to history and the extra-human origin of wilderness. This problem for
 395 wilderness and nature restoration is most notable in Robert Elliot's claim that ecological restora-
 396 tions amount to faking nature because even a perfect, visually indistinguishable restoration lacks
 397 the ontological purity of real wilderness, which was neither generated nor disturbed by humans.⁴⁶
 398 At first glance, this concern does not seem to pertain to rewilding because rewilding admits of its
 399 own messy historical status and as such, rewilding areas are not assumed be pristine or un-
 400 touched by humans. Because they are not strictly attempts at restoration, rewilded areas seem
 401 safe from the accusation of fakery. But rewilding still values history, especially pre-human his-
 402 tory, and we might wonder if rewilding does not perform the same glorification of past ecologies
 403 that restoration has been accused of, only pushing the baseline further into the past. Indeed, much

⁴² Ward & Prior, 2016: 135.

⁴³ Katz, 2002: 138.

⁴⁴ Jordan (2003); Hourdequin (2016), e.g., have notably urged more moderate and reconciling views on restoration. Higgs's concept of wild design (2003) is especially relevant.

⁴⁵ Respectively: 3Cs rewilding potentially realizes Jørgensen's fears (see Hintz, 2007); The Oostvaardersplassen in the Netherlands celebrates the site's non-human origin as a recovery of a natural baseline (Vera, 2000 & 2009); and the beaver reintroductions Ward and Prior highlight provide an example of the third.

⁴⁶ Elliot, *Faking Nature*, 1982.

404 of the controversy surrounding rewilding to date has been over questions of *historical* ecology.
 405 Jozef Keulartz observes: “Far from abandoning history altogether and dismissing the past as an
 406 inaccurate indicator for the future, the rewilders try to reach back to a deeper history,”⁴⁷ and he
 407 points to two of the major debates, from Europe and North America respectively, to indicate the
 408 historical questions that carve up the competing versions. In Europe, rewilding communities
 409 have split over ecological questions of historic tree cover and composition: Were the pre-
 410 agricultural landscapes of Europe a high-forest of closed canopy, or following Frans Vera’s con-
 411 troversial wood-pasture hypothesis,⁴⁸ a more open, mosaic patchwork of scrub, grass, and wood-
 412 land? In North America, the premise in question, known as the overkill hypothesis, holds that
 413 Pleistocene humans hunted megafauna into extinction. If, as other theories contend,⁴⁹ humans
 414 were not directly responsible for these extinctions, the ethical justification for Pleistocene rewild-
 415 ing is seriously undermined.⁵⁰

416 These historical arguments, as well as lesser debates about baseline and proxy species
 417 selection,⁵¹ emphasize the restoration of ecological integrity and function based on some particu-
 418 lar past state and even specific species lineage.⁵² Even rewilding not so focused on facts of his-
 419 torical ecology (e.g., reflexive and primitivist rewilding) nevertheless often identifies some past
 420 configuration of human/nature relations worth recovering. There is a tension, then, in many if not
 421 most cases of rewilding, between, on the one hand, a repeated disavowal of the role of history
 422 and historical ecosystems, and on the other, a fixation on specific historical facts or conditions, a
 423 tension that indicates an unanswered question about if or how history informs visions of rewild-
 424 ing. Have the issues of history, authenticity, and purity that have troubled restoration debates
 425 really been put to rest by rewilding’s claims at future orientation, or does the spirit of Elliot’s
 426 concerns about extra-human origin, if not his exact arguments, persist in some motivations for
 427 rewilding?

428 3. *Cultural landscapes and place*

429 Whereas the first two themes follow directly out of previous debates in environmental philoso-
 430 phy, the final theme—cultural landscapes and human places—responds to new dimensions re-
 431 wilding adds to questions of natural and human history.⁵³ Although rewilding does not necessa-
 432 rily require the exclusion of humans, many rewilding projects tend to counteract human presence
 433 and jurisdiction, and as rewilding proceeds, human traces are likely to be effaced.⁵⁴ This is al-
 434 ready evident in some places: the abandoned landscapes of Central and Eastern Europe are al-

⁴⁷ Keulartz, 2016: 393.

⁴⁸ Vera, 2000.

⁴⁹ See Wolverton, 2010.

⁵⁰ For this ethical argument, see Donlan et al., 2005.

⁵¹ See Vera, 2009 for discussions about the shifting baseline syndrome and species selection in European rewilding.

⁵² Lorimer & Driessen, 2011.

⁵³ This is but one avenue that rewilding opens up; other I might have taken include biosecurity, concepts of nativism and exoticism of species, living alongside problematic wildlife, etc., but this avenue also serves the themes of this issue on rewilding.

⁵⁴ This is more obvious in the context of Europe, where all landscapes are cultural landscapes, but these questions pertain to North American as well. E.g., Marion Hourdequin and David Havlick address the erasure of significant cultural landscapes in ecological restoration (2011); James Feldman’s *A Storied Wilderness* considers the role of spontaneous rewilding in a recently inhabited site in northern Wisconsin.

435 ready spontaneously rewilding,⁵⁵ and in the UK, rewilding and its supporters challenge the per-
 436 petuation of rural ways of life. Shepherding in particular has been targeted as Monbiot has made
 437 sheep the culprit for the despoliation of England's landscapes. Writing about rewilding in the
 438 low countries, Glenn Deliége observes that rewilding conflicts with traditional conservation and
 439 nature management efforts that have often included or revolved around human practices. What
 440 will become of the visible evidence of past human inhabitation, practices, and ways of life that
 441 define these cultural landscapes and make them recognizable places of dwelling? Again, not ne-
 442 cessarily, but in some cases, rewilding threatens to erase human histories from the landscape,
 443 especially, as Deliége emphasizes, the specificities that render a place of significance for its
 444 "particular, concrete reality."⁵⁶

445 However, rewilding is alluring to some precisely for these reasons; that is, because it
 446 seems to redeem an otherwise highly managed, overly human world. Many advocates of rewild-
 447 ing ask why we should continue to value and privilege human narratives at all when they have
 448 been the vehicle for enormous ecological destruction and have been used to justify the exclusion
 449 of the nonhuman.⁵⁷ Indeed, as biocentrists are likely to suggest, there are moral and pragmatic
 450 reasons for rewilding these landscapes.⁵⁸ Primitivist rewilders, perhaps citing separate reasons,
 451 might also applaud the erasure of some of the more exploitative and unsustainable human devel-
 452 opments, even if undermining the sense of place and the grounding human identity.

453 The kernel of indifference towards cultural landscapes evident in many instances of re-
 454 wilding raises a more fundamental question of how compatible rewilding is with human appro-
 455 priations of place at all. Could rewilding really uphold such a name if it fit squarely and easily
 456 within our existing interpretations of place and environment? Such a neutered version seems like
 457 it would do an injustice to the reason it fascinates: its disregard and even antagonism to our at-
 458 tempts to make meaning of it. Martin Drenthen makes precisely this point about wilderness:

459 We post-moderns are deeply aware of the contingency of all...appropriations of nature,
 460 and therefore long for something that lies beyond our interpretations. We value wildness,
 461 precisely because it does not suit our moral order; we desire wilderness as something
 462 radically other...which both has to and cannot be properly appropriated.⁵⁹

463 Rewilding does not sit easily in our understandings of place, which are steeped in human belong-
 464 ing and history, and the reason why it entices many might also be explained by Drenthen's point
 465 about wilderness. Rewilding rekindles an interest in the nonhuman, that which is outside of us,
 466 that which surpasses the human; it questions the *idea* that landscapes should be meaningful, that
 467 our appropriation of meaning matters at all.

⁵⁵ Referred to by Jørgensen as Productive land abandonment, spontaneous rewilding occurs when traditional land-
 scapes become wilder on their own when the practices (usually agricultural) that once maintained them are discon-
 tinued. See Navarro & Pereira, 2012.

⁵⁶ Deliége, 2016: 419, original emphasis.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Foreman 1998; Woods, 2007; Donlan et al., 2005; and the writings of Mark Fisher. Relatedly, Val Plumwood criticized the cultural landscape concept for obscuring nonhuman actors (Plumwood, 2006).

⁵⁸ Soulé and Noss claimed, when introducing rewilding, that conservation plans cannot weigh biology and socio-
 economic considerations equally but that "Biology has to be the 'bottom line'" in order for it to succeed. (1998: 25).
 See Donlan et al., 2005 for moral arguments.

⁵⁹ Drenthen, 2005: 333

468 Again, we see that these ideas are in tension. Not all visions of rewilding eschew mean-
 469 ingful landscapes; some, instead, see rewilding as contributing to them.⁶⁰ On this and on the
 470 other two themes, the various meanings clustered around rewilding open up mixed and some-
 471 times contradictory avenues and commitments. My efforts in introducing rewilding in such a
 472 way have been to argue for a broader conception of the term that can countenance these various
 473 usages without immediately trying to resolve them. By entertaining the secondary meanings of
 474 rewilding and taking its definitional untidiness as itself a notable phenomenon instead of trying
 475 immediately to clear away the seeming conceptual confusion, we open up all of the usages of
 476 rewilding to examination, and the tensions I have pointed to here become questions for deliber-
 477 ation, discussion, and reflection. These, I suggest, are fruitful, and perhaps linkages will emerge
 478 from the disparate meanings that would not have been considered otherwise. Finally, in introduc-
 479 ing rewilding in this way, I mean to suggest that environmental philosophy should engage the
 480 concept not by policing its definitional borders, not by dismissing aspects of rewilding outright,
 481 but with continued discussion, interrogation, and sensitivity.

482

483

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487

488

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⁶⁰ E.g., Monbiot's visions of rewilding, also Ward & Prior's.

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