

# The wild frontier

The first view of Oostvaardersplassen, a controversial rewilding project in the Netherlands, is jaw-dropping. Ahead of you, across open water, is grassland stretching into the distance. Dark clouds occasionally drift up from the land and then sink down. Only when one or two birds break away from the main group do you realise that these clouds are huge flocks of geese.

Beyond the geese are animal herds. Nearest are several groups of stocky Konik ponies. Occasionally a stallion charges into a group and is met with another rearing up in defence. New-born foals race about on spindly legs. Beyond them are outlines of huge cattle, and, way beyond, what looks initially like shadows on the land resolves into a unimaginably huge herd of red deer.

The sight resembles nothing so much as the great plains of Africa with their migratory herds of antelope and wildebeest. “The landscape itself bears an eerie resemblance to truly wild savannah in Africa,” says Paul Jepson – see *The Story of Recoverable Earth*, page 32 – senior research fellow in the geography department at the University of Oxford, “with its drifting herds and profusion of bird life – spoonbill, black stork, egret, bittern, bluethroat, marsh harrier and even sea eagle mingle with vast flocks of duck and goose.”

Europe’s first rewilding project is certainly like nothing I’ve ever seen in Europe. It has a dream-like quality, arousing what feels like deep archaic memories as if I’ve always known this landscape but never before seen it. And maybe that is exactly what it is: the visionaries behind this place had in mind “a landscape before humans”, achieved by

allowing herds of large herbivores – the nearest they could find to the extinct megafauna of the Pleistocene epoch – to roam free, letting Nature take its course.

The result, while astounding, is also absurd. What at first appears vast is not vast at all, but 5,600 hectares (22 square miles), a little pocket of land enclosed on two sides by moderately sized towns, with the North Sea to the front and a large fence to the landward side. Last winter, which was unusually harsh, exposed the absurdity to full glare. Every year, about 40% of the animals die, causing local controversy, but this year hundreds of animals, trapped by fencing and with no natural predators, starved to death. Ecologists fell out with animal rights campaigners who threw food to the animals over the fences, and the controversy went first national, then international.

Even though the fresh grass is coming through and the animals are no longer starving when I visit, feelings are still at fever pitch. I meet a photographer taking pictures for a court case hoping to bring charges of animal cruelty against the Dutch State Forestry Service, which is now responsible for this nature reserve. “If our pets were in this condition,” he says indignantly, “we would be prosecuted for neglect. So why not here too?” His view has a lot of support, including a Europe-wide petition. It’s hard to disagree, but simultaneously, over his shoulder, I watch wild horses galloping across the dusty plains while a marsh harrier floats along the water’s edge, and I gasp at the sheer astonishing beauty of it.

Whether Oostvaardersplassen is inspirational or cruelly absurd matters far beyond local



## Ros Coward visits a controversial ecological project

disagreements. The concept of rewilding, supported by Rewilding Europe and Rewilding Britain, gains ground by the day, embraced now even by some traditional conservation organisations. At Abernethy in Scotland, for example, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds is recreating the original Caledonian forest and reintroducing lost species. Other examples include wildlife trusts that have beaver reintroduction schemes, and Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree, who have turned Knepp, their 3,500-acre private estate in West Sussex, over to rewilding.

Most proponents of rewilding acknowledge Oostvaardersplassen as their principal inspiration. In her book *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm*, Tree describes her visit there as “an experience that would revolutionize our decisions”.

Oostvaardersplassen’s influence lies in the fact that it provided the first test of the hypothesis that reintroducing large herbivores like those that roamed Europe before humans hunted them out of existence could in turn bring back the type of ecosystem that is believed to have existed in pre-human times. Oostvaardersplassen started life, like so many parts of Holland, as just another area reclaimed from the sea and destined for industrial development – the working-class towns on either side bear witness to what might have been.

But this area was too boggy for industry and, left as marshland, it attracted first huge numbers of geese and then the attention of Frans Vera, a biologist. He pushed not only for the area to become a nature reserve, but also for the reintroduction of herbivores. He got his way, and what followed was a rapid and astonishing transformation, first

– before the herbivores seriously impacted the ecology – a proliferation of trees, plants and birds; and then – as the herbivores multiplied – a new grassland dynamic. Multitudes of birds appeared, including unexpected ones like fish eagles, as did large numbers of mammals. Now there’s an incredible sense of Nature’s plenitude.

In *Wilding*, Tree tells of a similar experiment at Knepp. There, Konik ponies, deer, wild boar and the same Heck cattle as at Oostvaardersplassen – bred to closely resemble in their DNA the now extinct aurochs – were turned loose. A varied landscape of forest, grasslands and wetlands has emerged, with the same extraordinary explosion of wildlife. Knepp now has a third of all the UK’s nightingales. In both experiments, Nature was left to reveal itself. And what it revealed was the crucial role grazing animals have in releasing Nature’s dynamic. “Animals”, says Tree, “are the key to biodiversity dynamism. The impact of free-roaming grazing animals in a landscape was to put it into action.”

The discovery of such ecological dynamism is so exciting that you would expect it to carry all before it. But the contradictions and absurdities of some aspects of rewilding that last winter Oostvaardersplassen exposed to international scrutiny actually threaten to derail the movement. One of these absurdities is the dizzying preoccupation with restoring ‘authentic’ prehuman ecology including ‘original prehuman megafauna’, which can lead into questionable pursuits. A massively influential rewilding project in Siberia led by Russian scientist Sergey Zimov includes the ambition to ‘de-extinct’ the woolly mammoth and the sabre-tooth tiger. In the 1980s, Zimov created an area known as

Photograph: Jeffrey Van Daele [www.jeffreyvandaele.com](http://www.jeffreyvandaele.com)



Activists feed the horses, deer and cattle over the fences of the Oostvaardersplassen nature reserve © Pierre Crom / Getty Images

Pleistocene Park, where large grazing herbivores have been introduced to restore the steppe grasslands. While awaiting the necessary scientific breakthrough to bring back the mammoth from its DNA, tanks are used to imitate the heaviness of the mammoth to flatten the grass and break up the tundra.

Close up, Zimov's ideas are less absurd than they sound. As well as having successfully recreated the glory of the steppe landscape, there's a solid scientific experiment here about the value of grasslands as opposed to arctic tundra in the fight against climate change. And Zimov's reintroductions – of elk, bison and cattle resembling aurochs – have had the same explosive effect on biodiversity as the reintroductions in Oostvaardersplassen. Nevertheless, he might be accused of theme park rewilding, using highly artificial means to recreate 'original' Nature. And bringing back extinct species has the additional danger of making people blasé about protecting existing species if they believe anything extinct can eventually be brought back to life.

But rewilding's more serious problem is much more prosaic: fencing. Or, rather, what fences symbolise, which is the question of how rewilding projects fit alongside their current, very far from wild, surrounding neighbours. Fencing is rewilding's Achilles heel, as Oostvaardersplassen's recent problems exposed. It's the only current solution because, outside the fences, agricultural, urban and development interests have claims on the land and invariably take priority.

Currently there is no readiness among these interest groups to accept rewilding, especially the reintroduction of species or the presence of migrating herbivores. Beavers, which can change whole landscapes, and wolves, which might threaten livestock, are particular objects of hostility, while

motorways, towns and other land uses mean that large herbivores must be prevented from fanning out in search of food. But fences are controversial, opening up accusations that rewilding is a rich person's zoo. At Oostvaardersplassen, the herds cannot migrate out, and predators such as wolves, which are currently spreading across Europe towards the Netherlands, cannot get in.

The only way forward seems to be to find practical solutions. Speaking of Oostvaardersplassen, the environmental campaigner George Monbiot says: "I know they would like to operate in a larger area but can't. The major problem is evidently the lack of predators. Without predators, you get overgrazing and long slow deaths of animals from starvation. This seems to me to demand intervention, mimicking the effect of predators by keeping herbivore numbers down." Knepp has already quietly adopted the solution by limited culling, selling the high-quality meat to support the enterprise.

A longer-term, bolder solution is to create eco-corridors between rewilded areas. Originally Oostvaardersplassen was conceived as connected to other areas – including via an 'eco-bridge' over a motorway – but the initial political support for this has weakened due to the cost. Jepson says that the failing therefore lies not with the project, but with the politics: "The Oostvaardersplassen is a constrained system, but early this was recognised and the reserve was included in the Dutch ecological network plans. The decision not to complete the corridor was political, so in my view the starvation events are as much a political as a natural outcome."

Monbiot's proposal that herbivore numbers be controlled to mimic predation, and Jepson's call for long-term political solutions, both suggest that it is not that the ideas of rewilding are wrong, but that practical responses are needed to accommodate such a radical and different vision of Nature conservation. None of this is going to be easy, but watching the wild horses and the flocks of birds at Oostvaardersplassen, I hope they'll succeed.

Rewilding projects, Monbiot says, challenge existing conservation values, which are defensive. In contrast, the biodynamic energy unleashed by rewilding projects bears witness to a vision of how to do conservation differently, to let Nature alone to flourish. Rewilding, he says, opens up the ecological imagination and shows that other landscapes can exist. **R**

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