

Do the public want to see wilder landscapes? A study of the Cambrian Mountains, Wales

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Rewilding promises a transformation of landscapes, and a change in how humans should relate to and value these landscapes. Different people will have different preferences for what the landscape should look like, the kinds of land forms, land uses and species they would like to see. Underlying all these are different priorities, values, assumptions and ideologies of what counts as ‘natural’, ‘ugly’, ‘traditional’, ‘appropriate’, ‘fair’. **Our aim** was to find out what the different visions for the landscape were within a rewilding project, where they conflicted and where there was consensus, and what values underpinned this. **Our study site** is the Cambrian mountains of west Wales which have been shaped by a long history of human activity, most notably sheep farming. Some have described this area as ‘sheepwrecked’. It sits within the Summit2Sea rewilding project, led by Rewilding Britain and funded by the Endangered Landscapes Project.

We selected 38 images representing different aspects of the current or potential future landscapes of the Cambrian mountains. This included species currently present (e.g. red kite) and those that could be reintroduced (e.g. boar), various farming and leisure activities, different forms of landscape (grazed moorland, plantation forest, coppice, oak woodland). We asked 67 people in the Cambrian mountains to order these images from those they would most like to see, to least like to see, and to explain their preferences. We analysed the results to find statistical clusters - distinct visions of the landscape around which the respondents tended to coalesce, and which images produced most division and consensus. Our **findings** are that there exist 3 distinct visions for the Cambrian Mountains.

Vision 1: Socio-ecological rebalancing. This vision is about moving away from monocultures, and associated ecological, economic and political problems, towards a more diverse landscape. Extensive farming, grazing, conifer plantations, large scale power infrastructure and quarrying were considered ecologically destructive and to some extent economically unfair. By contrast, highly favoured images included iconic local species and species that might be reintroduced (boar, lynx), eliciting a positive visceral reaction. These species were seen as a natural part of the landscape. Reintroductions were seen as disruptive, in a positive sense. This vision is about creating healthy, balanced, diverse landscapes and a new relationship between humans and nature. Respondents favoured small-scale, local, sustainable economies and land uses, such as traditional coppicing.

Vision 2: Managing farming heritage landscapes. This vision is about recognising, valuing and maintaining the role of traditional farming in shaping the Cambrian mountains, for economic, cultural and environmental reasons. The most favoured images were associated with traditional farming. Respondents associated with this vision stated that “Wales is farming” and it “wouldn’t be Wales without the sheep”. These activities managed the land to produce “traditional” and “tidy” landscapes. To maintain this cherished landscape and associated biodiversity, there should be neither over-grazing nor under-grazing. By contrast, species reintroductions were “difficult to manage” destructive threats, which didn’t belong and produced untidy landscapes. Similar sentiments were expressed regarding inappropriate housing, power developments or quarrying. Dams and rewilding were seen as externally created threats to local landscapes and cultures.

Vision 3: Animals and aesthetics. This vision favoured animals, of any kind, and disliked infrastructure. Unlike the other visions, it didn’t express clear linkages between landscape aesthetics and economic, cultural, ecological and political processes. It is the least statistically important vision in the study.

Areas of agreement:

All visions were positive, to varying degrees, on images of oak woodlands, bees, dry-stone walls, and butterflies.

All visions were negative, to varying degrees, on images of holiday parks, new-build houses, 4x4 trialling, quarrying, logging, and electricity pylons.

Most divisive images



Socio-ecological rebalancing



Managing farming heritage landscapes



Animals and aesthetics



Conclusions:

Both vision 1 and 2 see the Cambrian landscape as produced by human activities, particularly sheep farming. This was either a destructive monoculture (vision 2), or a cherished traditional landscape (vision 1). Both vision 1 and 2 see strong links between the land uses (e.g. sheep grazing), the resulting land forms (e.g. grazed moorland) and the underlying values and political economy, but interpret these links differently. These are informed positions, based on different values. Rewilding is well known – many respondents mentioned it, but we never brought it up. It was either a positive opportunity (vision 1) or an external threat to landscape and culture (vision 2).