

Rewilding: Culture and Conflict

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A. Context: Rewilding in Britain

Rewilding is an approach to landscape restoration which seeks to create self-regulating ecosystems through fulfilment of three key principles: creation of core habitats to function as biodiversity strongholds; provision of corridors permitting dispersion between cores; and establishment of viable carnivore populations (Fig. 1).

From its beginnings in the hands of Michael Soule, Reed Noss and David Foreman in North America, practitioners have adapted rewilding to the populated cultural landscapes of Europe, with the aim of mitigating climate change, creating robust local economies and capitalising on abandonment of rural areas as an opportunity to re-establish a diversity of habitats and migration routes. The launch of Britain's Rewilding Network, the spread of small-scale 'citizen rewilding' and increasing interest in nature-based solutions to mitigate the fallout of climate change mark the next decade as a critical period for the future of this novel approach to ecological recovery in the UK.

While the fervour inspired by the climate crisis spurs proponents to radical action, stakeholders fear for the future of an iconic cultural landscape. With Britain's post-Brexit environmental objectives still in the moulding, this is a critical time to analyse the resistance to rewilding in Britain, and to seek an approach which reconciles the agendas of proponents and detractors.

In this short research project, I analysed a combination of current literature and public debate, to elucidate the basis for opposition to, and differing priorities in, rewilding of British landscapes.

4 Top-down rewilding

"...the character of landscape is pre-defined by an assumed, behind-the-scenes, spatial logic leading to the management of nature as a bounded scenic property, an (estate) of nature with its own economic system and services."⁵

Imposing rewilding projects in existing cultural landscapes through land acquisition and enclosure creation (e.g. Ennerdale, Haweswater)⁵ assumes incompatibility of the objectives of landowners/farmers and rewilders. Reduction of resident-owned and communal land drives concerns for the longevity of local culture and autonomy. Parallel to this trend, the success of the Knepp Estate wilding, and the increasing popularity of citizen rewilding, suggests that, with sufficient guidance, corridor creation could proceed by, not despite, the actions of existing communities.

5 Baseline states

"The very thing about rewilding means that there will be an attempt to go back in time. It can't go back ... we can only go forward."⁶

Previously, rewilding has received criticism for its flexibility in specifying its desired ecological state. Frequently quoted baselines are Pleistocene or pre-colonisation, despite the difficulty in ascertaining to what degree such ecosystems were influenced by human activity. While modern rewilding is forward-thinking, the question of an ecological benchmark remains relevant due to its connection with the cultural history of a landscape. Species reintroduction may be strongly opposed where the species in question are no longer embedded in local culture. Furthermore, the rapidity with which particular land uses become entrenched in tradition can eclipse longer-term trends in land use change.

The disparity between current emphasis of the cultural importance of sheep production in the Lake District, and the relatively recent history of varied land use revealed by Pearsall and Pennington^{7,8} illustrates this effect (Fig. 3).

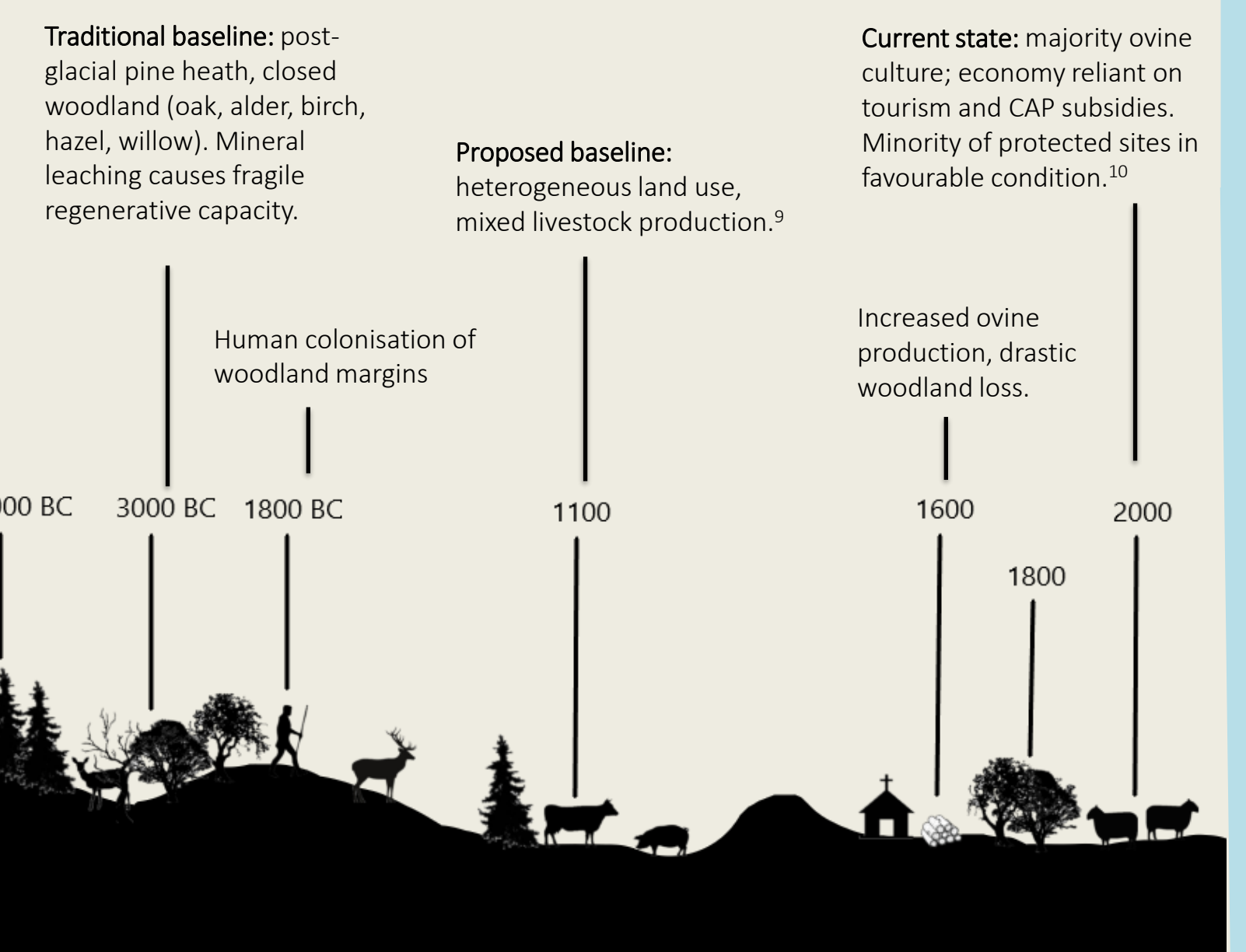


Figure 3: Land use changes in the English Lake District. Post-glacial pine heath and fragile closed woodland, tipped into decline by the arrival of megalithic peoples (1800 BC), experienced a shift to mixed land use (bovine and swine production, managed woodland, shielings) and, later, large-scale timber extraction (c. 1600). Woodland restoration catalysed by the writings of the Romantics (c. 1800) occurred alongside increasing homogeneity of livestock production, producing the relatively recently sculpted landscape of the present day.^{7,8}

B. Elements of a Conflict

Analysis of the current rewilding discourse revealed five key elements of conflict:

1. Conflation of **vision and mechanism**, exacerbated by disagreements over the meaning of rewilding;
2. **Transference of wilderness ideals** to cultural landscapes;
3. **Dislocation of people and nature**, aggravated by the concepts of enclosure and environmental redress;
4. Prevalence of **top-down rewilding initiatives** and their effect on individual and cultural autonomy;
5. The question of **baseline states**, both ecological and cultural.

1 Vision and mechanism

"A thoroughly rewilded landscape ... would eventually expunge the ... traditional landscapes of their cultural influence and activity, rendering them ... foreign."¹

- The previous decade of development in rewilding is marked by a shift in objective, from wilderness creation to ecological restoration of cultural landscapes, as rewilding is adapted for application to the European situation.
- Great diversity in the character of rewilded landscapes, and correspondingly in mechanisms employed, has caused widespread disagreement over the meaning of rewilding.
- This confusion, coupled with association of the term with the push for untouched wilderness in American rewilding, and with land abandonment occurring in mainland Europe (Fig. 2), has permitted a conflation of vision and mechanism. Specifically, rewilding initiatives in Britain, by virtue of sharing with their European and American counterparts the vision of self-regulating ecosystems, become associated with rewilding mechanisms better suited for regions requiring obligate abandonment or with scope for natural reestablishment of large fauna.
- Emphasis of a service-oriented approach, specifying outcomes including flood management and climate change mitigation, has already begun, and would benefit from a process-based definition of rewilding (Fig. 1).

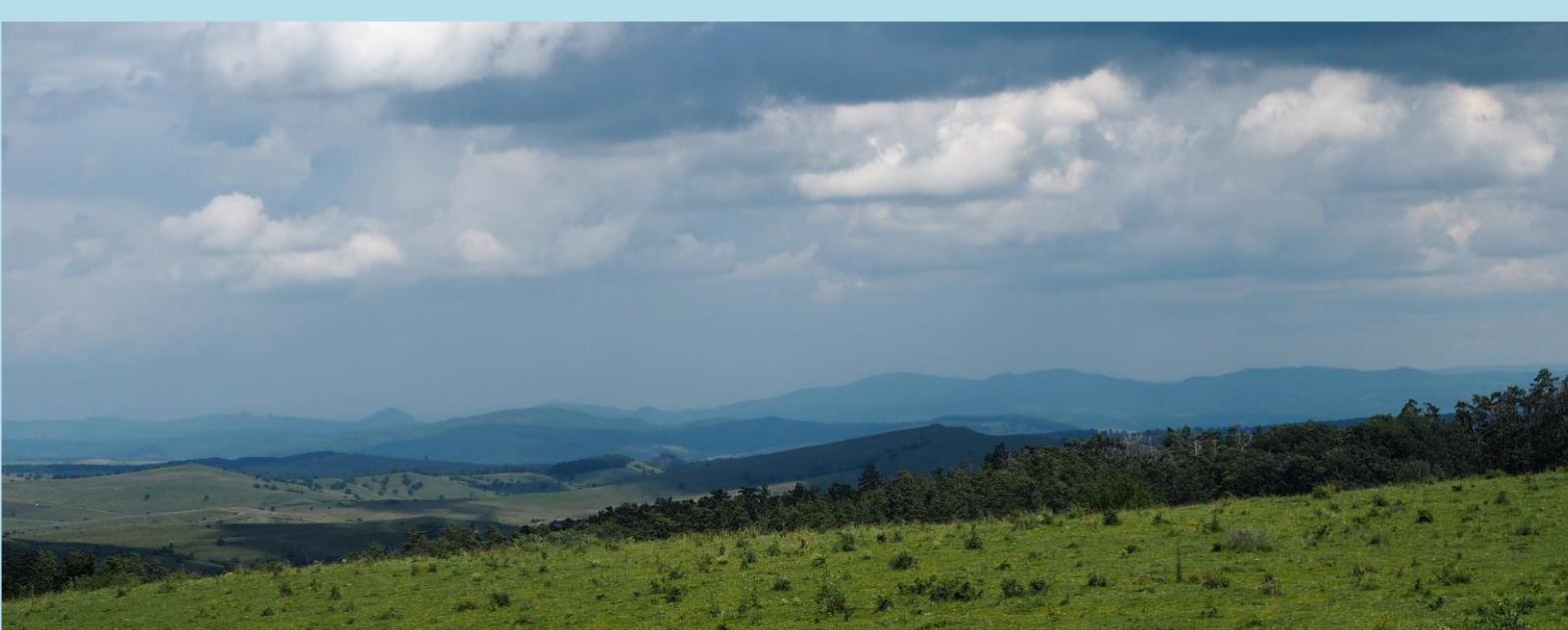


Figure 2: Active influence, or land abandonment? Cultural landscape, or untouched wilderness? Much of rewilding debate concerns the place of people within wider land. In Europe and Britain, rewilding has come to be associated with land abandonment, such as that occurring in Transylvania (pictured) as a result of migration to urban areas following the 1989 revolution.

2 Transference of wilderness ideals

- Putatively resulting from the association of early rewilding with large-scale wilderness, a clear distinction between the differing objectives, and methods, for the rewilding of cultural landscapes and wilderness areas, is rarely drawn. Due to the difficulties inherent in defining landscapes as cultural² or as true wilderness, it may be of benefit to describe landscapes as either *linked* or *visited*.
- Linked landscapes can be described in brief as those locations where the prospects of a permanent population are entwined with the ecological trajectory of the land, whereas the visited landscape is characterised by minimal human presence, and preservation for inspirational value or major ecosystem services.
- The question of which landscape type should be prioritised in British rewilding boils down to a question of culture. In other words, will the rebound of nature occur more successfully with or without an active human influence?
- Conflict between the two objectives has led to, among other effects, condemnation of semi-wild meat production as a morally reprehensible measure for herbivore population control.² This risks delegitimizing rewilding in Britain, where geography precludes natural reestablishment of large carnivores, and assisted reintroductions are long-term goals.

3 Dislocation of people and nature

"In such a world, wildlife conservation is a colluding cousin to devastation of community, cultural degradation and alienation, mass migration to cities and the growth of wage-slave labour in a globalised economy."³

- An increasingly urban population, creation of enclosed nature reserves, and an environmental conscience which demands reparation for past bouts of human-driven ecological depauperation, drive a dislocation of people from the wild. This is coupled with disenchantment: the loss of the unpredictable and transcendent from experience of nature.⁴
- Besides fuelling rationalization of rewilding in terms of ecosystem services,⁴ this disenchantment, in concert with enclosure creation, risks dismissal of linked landscapes as implausible end-goals for rewilding, at the expense of community and heritage.
- Establishment of enclosed parks and reserves as token gestures of ecological redress, framed as a compensation for ongoing environmental damage, risks perpetuating those damages and the view of industry and nature as independent entities.

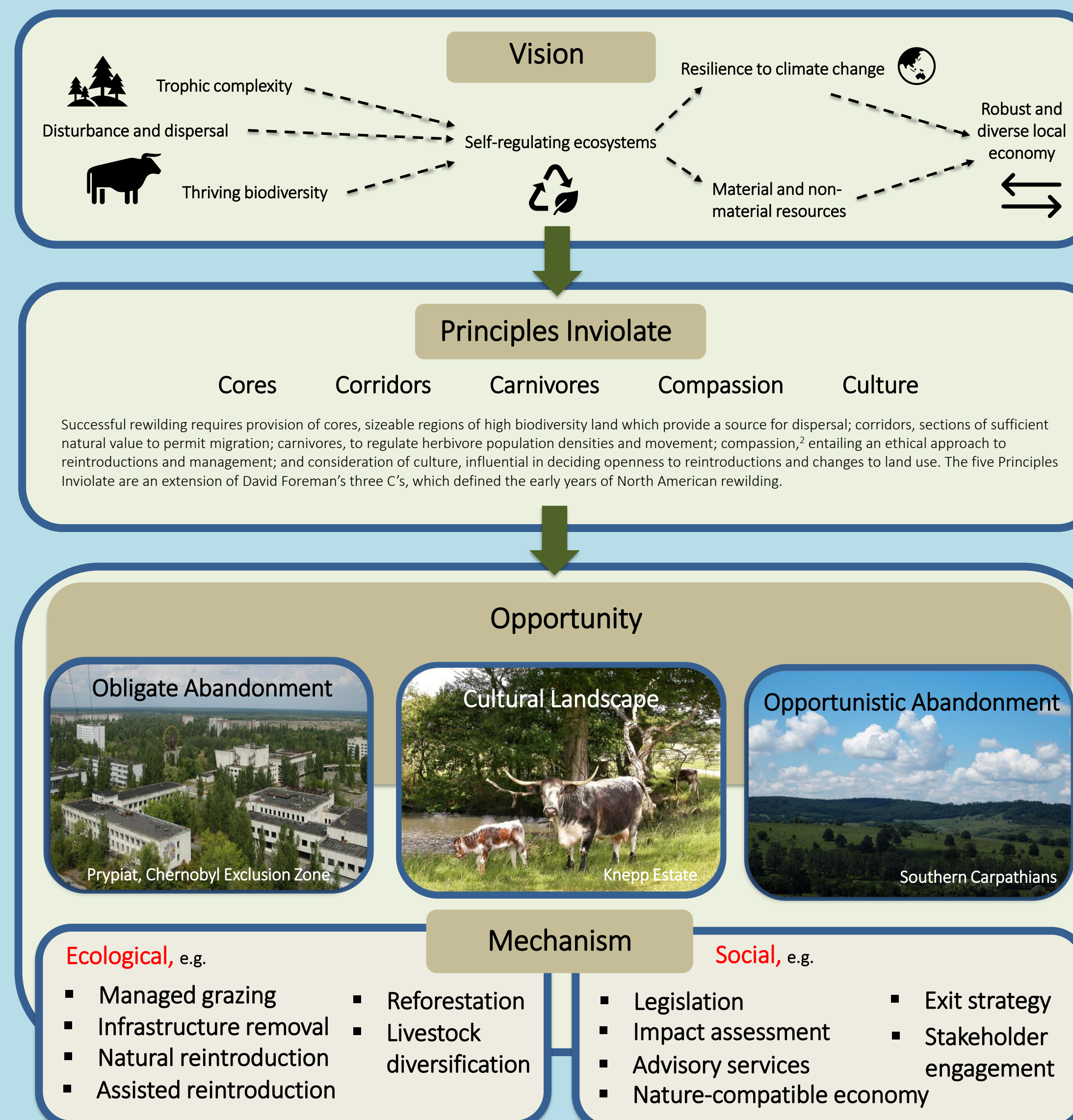
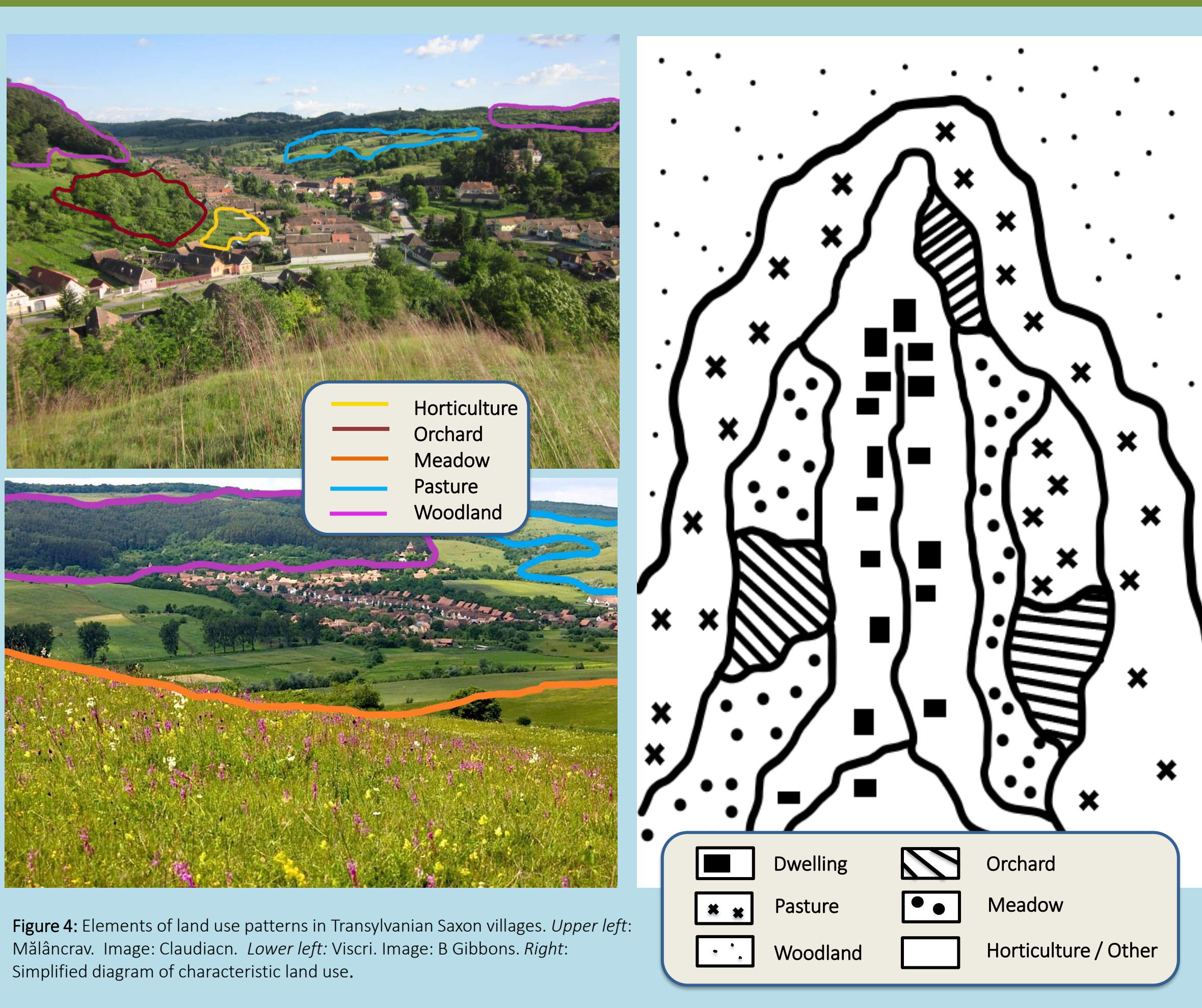


Figure 1: Process-based rewilding framework. An initial vision guides each initiative. Adherence to the five principles of cores, carnivores, corridors, compassion and culture defines a restoration attempt as rewilding. The opportunity, which frequently arises in Europe as a result of land abandonment (left and right), while in Britain rests almost exclusively in restoration of cultural landscapes (centre), determines the subset of ecological and social mechanisms appropriate for the situation. (Images: (l) Petr Pavlicek/IAEA (cc-by-sa/2.0); (c) Patrick Roper (cc-by-sa/2.0))



C. The Carpathians: a solution?

- Strongholds of traditional agriculture in the southern Carpathians, Romania, provide a model for land use patterns which can complement and inform rewilding of the English Lake District, and pastoral Britain as a whole.
- Stratified mosaics of dwellings, horticultural zones, meadows and managed woodland surrounding the Saxon villages of the Tarnava Mare preserve connectivity between ecological cores and peripheral valleys (Figs. 4, 5).
- These land use patterns, when adapted to local climate and ecology, form a blueprint for the coexistence of agriculture with ecological recovery.

Figure 5: Mesendorf, a traditional Saxon village in the Southern Carpathians. Visible is the stratified organisation of dwellings, orchards, meadow, pasture and woodland characteristic of the region.



D. Recommendations

The findings of this project suggest that rewilding in Britain could benefit from:

- Establishment of a rewilding **advisory service** to support landowner- and citizen-managed rewilding initiatives with practical guidance.
- Expansion of the Rewilding Network, with a view to **facilitating corridors** between privately owned holdings.
- Diversification** of livestock and crop production, using the traditional agricultural methods of Europe's biodiversity strongholds to inform land use patterns.
- Legitimation of sustainable semi-wild meat production** as an interim method of herbivore population regulation, to support ecosystem construction prior to carnivore reintroduction.
- Thorough reconstruction of both ecological and cultural histories of sites of interest, with **early stakeholder involvement** to identify community objectives.
- Focus on **rewilding cultural landscapes** as biodiversity corridors to complement regeneration of existing wild cores, without recourse to enforced enclosure.

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Acknowledgements

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