

The background of the entire page is an aerial photograph of a river meandering through a vibrant green landscape. The river is dark and flows from the top left towards the bottom. The surrounding land is a mix of bright green grassy fields and clusters of trees. The lighting suggests a bright, sunny day, with shadows cast across the terrain.

BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: **REWILDING, FARMING** **AND THE TRIPLE CHALLENGE**



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BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: REWILDING, FARMING AND THE TRIPLE CHALLENGE

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SUMMARY

THE ISSUE:

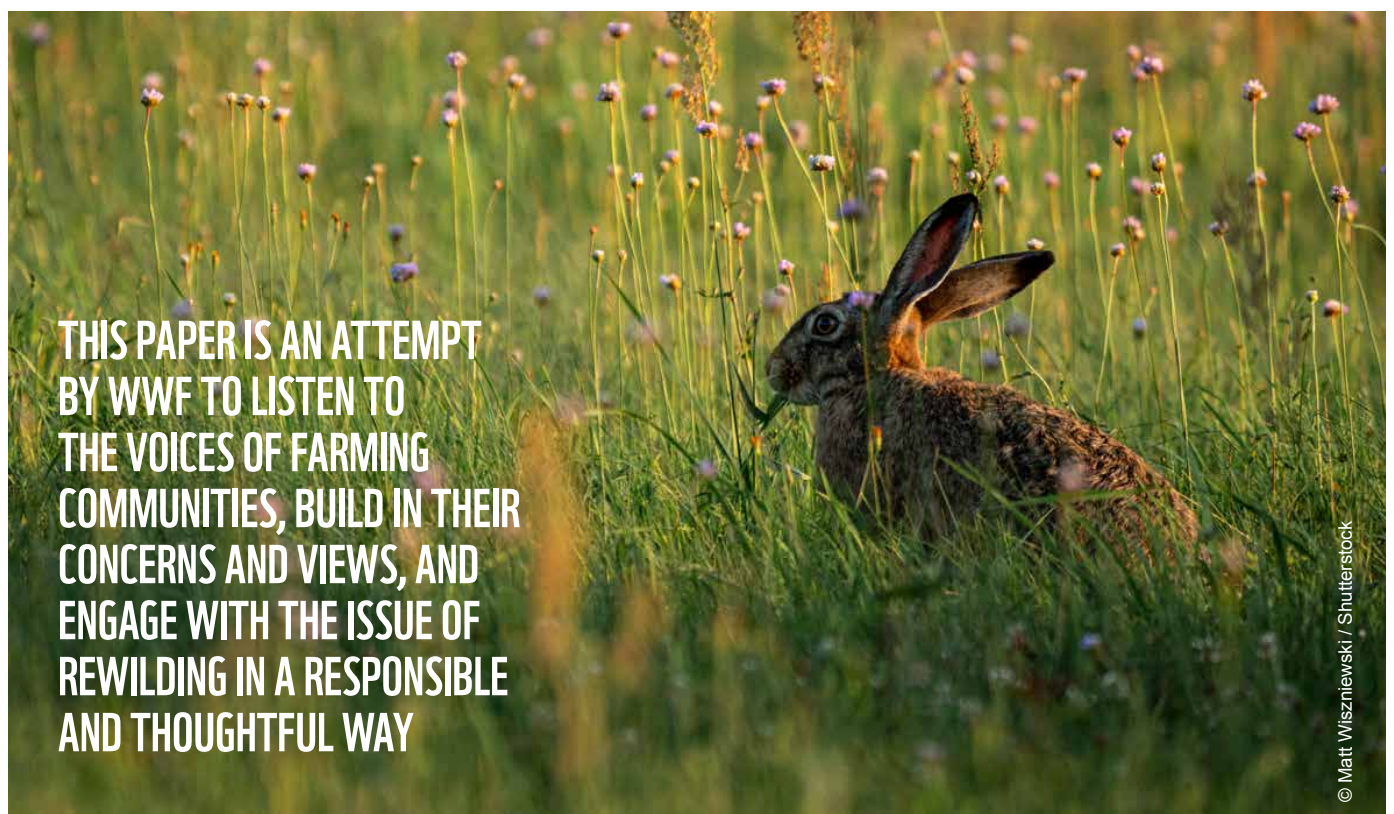
The idea of ‘rewilding’ is increasingly prominent in UK nature conservation. It has the potential for positive impact – contributing to nature’s recovery by restoring its dynamism, and building public support for nature by capturing people’s imagination.

But the term has been applied to a broad range of different approaches, from the introduction of large carnivores to the greening of cities. It is also highly contentious, especially among farming communities. Frequently, rewilding advocates have not adequately engaged with farmers, and have been perceived as ‘elite’ outsiders who do not properly understand rural environments or communities. Much media coverage of rewilding has exacerbated this divide, contributing to a situation in which rewilding and farming are frequently seen as being in conflict with each other. As a result, decisions about rewilding and farming are often perceived as a binary choice.

This conflict and confusion is unhelpful for attempts to address the ‘triple challenge’ – **the urgent need simultaneously to tackle the climate crisis, halt and reverse nature loss, and meet the needs of people.**

‘Rewilding’ has much to offer for restoring nature in the UK. But it will not have the opportunity to contribute significantly to tackling the triple challenge if it is seen as undermining the interests of farmers, who perform an essential role not just in food production but as stewards of the rural environment.

Because the term ‘rewilding’ has been controversial, many environmental NGOs in the UK, including WWF, have been understandably wary of engaging with it. But interest in it continues to grow and it is not realistic or appropriate to avoid it. This paper is an attempt by WWF to listen to the voices of farming communities, build in their concerns and views, and engage with the issue of rewilding in a responsible and thoughtful way.



THIS PAPER IS AN ATTEMPT
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ENGAGE WITH THE ISSUE OF
REWILDING IN A RESPONSIBLE
AND THOUGHTFUL WAY



OUR APPROACH:

This paper attempts to bridge the divide between rewilding and farming in the UK, based on research conducted with farmer discussion groups.

WWF proposes the following approach:

- Rewilding should not be seen as a simplistic binary choice, but instead as part of a broad spectrum of approaches to helping nature recover. That spectrum includes various forms of nature-friendly farming as well as more 'traditional' conservation techniques. Rewilding-type approaches sit towards one end of this spectrum.
- On this spectrum, 'rewilding' approaches involve five broad characteristics:
 - more dynamism and tolerance of ecological change;
 - less active management intervention;
 - greater scale where necessary;
 - more flexibility and tolerance of uncertainty in outcomes;
 - the centrality of people and rural livelihoods.
- The extent to which each of these rewilding characteristics is applied in rural land management can be increased or decreased, depending on what is appropriate in a given geographical context – i.e. the application of 'rewilding' approaches can be done on a sliding scale, not as an 'on/off switch'.
- By using this approach, the decision to label a project as 'rewilding' would become less necessary. The important consideration would be whether these characteristics are being deployed appropriately in a given place.
- Under this approach, 'rewilding' can exist within farmed landscapes, alongside and as part of different farming practices across the country.
- The result would be a graded landscape of farming and other land uses that integrate rewilding to a greater or lesser degree – not a choice between farming and rewilding.
- By depolarising the debate around rewilding and farming, this approach would also allow for more ambitious rewilding proposals to take place where desired, with rewilding principles dialled up to a greater extent in some places.

RESEARCH FINDINGS:

We worked with Professor Alex Inman of Exeter University, who convened five farmer discussion groups in England, Wales and Scotland. We listened to farmer perspectives on rewilding, and discussed the potential of the spectrum-based approach outlined above. We heard a wide range of opinions, on issues including how they perceived rewilding overall, how rewilding relates to other forms of land management, its effect on cultural heritage and identity, and its social, economic and political implications. Prof. Inman captured and analysed these opinions.

Expressed opinions included:

- Most farmers currently see rewilding in black-and-white terms, not as a spectrum.
- Many farmers have a deeply entrenched distrust of ‘rewilder’ motivations.
- Many farmers feel that rewilding is exacerbating a broader lack of recognition for existing good environmental practice.
- Many farmers have practical concerns about the effects of rewilding.
- Many farmers do not accept the ecological merits of rewilding.
- Many farmers are very concerned about land expropriation.
- There is a common association between rewilding and loss of control.
- Many associated rewilding with low financial returns.
- For many, the idea of rewilding challenges their identity as people who conduct productive farming.
- Many farmers perceived rewilding as ignoring the 21st century anthropogenic landscape.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

We compared the farmer perspectives emerging from the discussion groups with our proposed approach to rewilding and, despite differences of opinion, found much common ground. Based on this analysis, WWF suggests:

- A spectrum-based approach that considers rewilding approaches as compatible with – not separate from – other kinds of land management, has potential to reduce conflict with farmers and help find common ground.
- The adoption of a spectrum-based approach makes discussions about whether to label activities as ‘rewilding’ less important. It is unnecessary to use the term where it is not welcome or helpful.
- Environmental organisations and rewilding advocates should more clearly communicate that farmers are part of the solution to nature recovery – indeed, halting and reversing nature loss and reaching net zero will be impossible without them.
- Environmental organisations and rewilding advocates should promote the fact that there is considerable overlap between many forms of farming and rewilding – including through the use of productive grazing livestock systems.
- Existing environmental husbandry undertaken by the farming community should be rewarded and celebrated, which in many cases already incorporates elements of rewilding without being defined as such.
- In return, farmers should not reject ‘rewilding’ proposals out of hand. They should consider the potential of different rewilding projects and whether there is scope to increase the use of rewilding principles as part of their business model.
- Farmers and environmental organisations should identify where they have common cause on the issue of rewilding – especially where they both oppose practices that are environmentally and socially damaging like inappropriate tree-planting, and on topics of mutual interest such as soil health.
- Governments should deliver regulatory and financial frameworks that provide incentives for rewilding approaches to take place alongside farming.
- All parties to the debate around rewilding and farming, including the media, should change the language used to describe these issues to reduce polarisation and enable constructive dialogue. The debate should not be presented in binary terms.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE TRIPLE CHALLENGE

Humanity is faced with a triple challenge – the urgent need to halt and reverse nature loss, tackle the climate crisis, and simultaneously meet the needs of people. Addressing this triple challenge is central to WWF’s vision for the future. Understanding how to meet these linked challenges is the basis for our strategy to deliver a better future for people and nature, in the UK and globally.

In the UK, meeting the triple challenge means identifying how it is possible to optimise management of our land, rivers and seas so as to halt and reverse nature loss by 2030, deliver net zero carbon emissions by 2050, and produce food that is nutritious, affordable, and does not ‘offshore’ the environmental impacts of the UK’s needs to other parts of the world. These three pillars are inextricably linked so, inevitably, addressing one will have impacts on the other two. Sometimes, this will provide synergistic results where more than one element of the triple challenge benefits.¹ But it may also involve trade-offs, in which informed choices need to be made between different, competing objectives. This is why dialogues with all interested parties are so crucial as we seek to find collectively agreed, optimal approaches.

WWF’s vision for meeting the triple challenge in the UK is set out in our *Land of Plenty* report.² It describes how to deliver landscapes that are:

‘... bursting with life, where the connections between the food people eat and how it has been produced are re-established, where growers and producers get a fairer share of the market, where nature thrives within and outside farmland and where shifts in diets support high quality livestock production in circular, regenerative systems.’³

We must urgently make this vision a reality if we are to tackle both the nature and climate crises.

REWILDING

When discussing how to meet the triple challenge in the UK, the issue of ‘rewilding’ is both prominent and contentious.

The UK is in the bottom 10% of countries globally for the abundance of nature, with approximately half its natural biodiversity remaining.⁴ With 72% of the UK’s land area used for agriculture,⁵ much of this is associated with historical agricultural practice.⁶ Between 1940 and 1980, the area of England used to produce crops increased by 40%,⁷ and agricultural change has been identified as the most important driver of biodiversity change over the past 45 years.⁸

1 [Eating for Net Zero \(www.wwf.org.uk\)](http://www.wwf.org.uk)

2 [WWF_land_of_plenty.pdf](#)

3 [WWF_land_of_plenty.pdf](#), p.8

4 [UK has ‘led the world’ in destroying the natural environment | Natural History Museum \(nhm.ac.uk\)](http://www.nhm.ac.uk)

5 Hayhow DB, et al. (2019) The State of Nature 2019.

6 This report addresses the relationship between farming and rewilding, and therefore focuses primarily on the terrestrial environment. We recognise the connection and interdependence between land, rivers and sea, but issues relating primarily to the marine environment are not addressed in this report.

7 Environment Agency, Chief Scientist’s Group. (2022). Working with nature. www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-with-nature

8 Burns F, et al. (2016). Agricultural management and climatic change are the major drivers of biodiversity change in the UK. *PLoS one*, 11: e0151595 as seen in Hayhow DB, et al. (2019) The State of Nature 2019

BOTH GOVERNMENT AND PRIVATE CORPORATIONS HAVE PUSHED FARMERS TOWARDS EVER GREATER INTENSIFICATION

This change has been driven not simply by the practices of individual farmers, but by an entire food system and economy, in which both government and private corporations have pushed farmers towards ever greater intensification. The effects of this system on nature and climate have not always been recognised, but they are now well understood. As many farmers agree, the effects of this intensive food system on nature and climate require urgent remedial action.

Against this backdrop, rewilding has been proposed as an approach that does not simply protect what little still exists, but actively increases the diversity and abundance of nature. For some, it offers a positive vision for the future⁹ that is essential for ‘bending the curve’ of biodiversity loss – bringing nature back rather than simply slowing its decline.

Rewilding also has important scientific underpinnings. It represents a more general shift in ecological science away from the idea that nature is in a delicately-balanced static equilibrium, towards a recognition that it is dynamic, ever-changing and often unpredictable.¹⁰ Moreover, it reflects a recognition that intensively-managed nature reserves and conservation practices – though vital – will not be enough to help nature recover on sufficient scale.

But rewilding is not a clear or simple issue. It has no single definition and has been used to describe a variety of different things – ranging from large-scale tree-planting to species reintroductions to the greening of urban spaces.¹¹ Despite attempts to devise a unifying definition of rewilding,¹² the term is still contested and attributed to a wide range of different approaches – not just by conservationists, but by media, businesses, politicians and others.

It is beyond the scope of this report to unpack the history of how rewilding has been discussed in the UK,¹³ but some key arguments can be noted.

Those in favour of rewilding have proposed it as a way to deliver nature recovery that can also address a wide range of modern challenges using ‘nature-based solutions’, including flood management, carbon sequestration and mental wellbeing.¹⁴ It has been suggested as an approach consistent with the UK government’s proposed payment for public goods, Environmental Land Management in England and related schemes in devolved nations, as well as with nature recovery networks and the ‘Lawton principles’ that our nature must be bigger, better, more and joined-up.¹⁵

INTEREST IN REWILDING CONTINUES TO GROW AND IT IS NOT REALISTIC OR APPROPRIATE TO AVOID IT

But it is also controversial. Rewilding is often seen as synonymous with contentious proposals to reintroduce carnivores like lynx. Opponents criticise the idea of rewilding as being ‘anti-farmer’ or as a ‘colonial’ attempt to take over land against the wishes of local communities, potentially depopulating rural areas with echoes of the Highland Clearances.¹⁶ There are fears that large-scale rewilding will negatively impact the UK’s food security and/or lead to increased nature loss overseas, by increasing food imports and offshoring the environmental impacts of food production.¹⁷

For these reasons, many environmental NGOs in the UK, including WWF, have been understandably wary of engaging with the term ‘rewilding’. But interest in rewilding continues to grow and it is not realistic or appropriate to avoid it. This paper is an attempt by WWF to listen to the voices of farming communities, build in their concerns and views, and engage with the issue of rewilding in a responsible and thoughtful way.

9 [When conservation isn't enough: rewilding lost ecosystems - Science in the News \(harvard.edu\)](#)

10 [Restoration, Reintroduction, and Rewilding in a Changing World - ScienceDirect](#)

11 [Rethinking rewilding - ScienceDirect](#)

12 [Principles_of_rewilding_cem_rtg.pdf \(iucn.org\)](#)

13 For a comprehensive exploration of rewilding in Britain, see Wynne-Jones et al (2020): [ConservatSoc18289-4504311_123043.pdf \(conservationandsociety.org.in\)](#)

14 [A Manifesto for Rewilding the World](#) – George Monbiot

15 [Making Space for Nature: \(nationalarchives.gov.uk\)](#)

16 Full article: [Special issue on pastoral landscapes caught between abandonment, rewilding and agro-environmental management. Is there an alternative future? \(tandfonline.com\)](#)

17 [Series 3: How will UK rewilding affect global biodiversity? | TABLE Debates](#)

REWILDING AND FARMING

Within debates about rewilding in the UK, the relationship between rewilding and farming has been particularly contentious. As mentioned above, many in the farming community have perceived rewilding to be a direct attack on their livelihoods and ways of life. It has been interpreted as an attempt to remove people from the landscape, end traditional farming practices (especially upland livestock farming) and release wild species like wolves that many consider to be incompatible with a farmed landscape.

These concerns frequently stem from deeply-held values and identities, founded on management of landscapes that have been shaped by people for centuries.¹⁸

Such concerns have sometimes been aggravated by those promoting rewilding. The characterisation of upland landscapes as ‘sheepwrecked’¹⁹ has had a polarising effect, by setting the rewilding agenda in opposition to traditional sheep farming practices. In other cases, well-intentioned rewilding projects have failed through insufficient engagement with farming communities. This includes the example of ‘Summit to Sea’,²⁰ in which WWF was a partner before withdrawing when it became clear the project did not have community support.

Meanwhile, many communities have experienced farms being bought by external or absentee landowners, businesses or investors, and converted to other uses such as tree-planting. With the term ‘rewilding’ used so flexibly, such projects may be implemented under a broad rewilding banner – contributing to concerns that the rewilding movement is forcing out local people and traditional farming practices.

THE CHARACTERISATION OF UPLAND LANDSCAPES AS ‘SHEEPWRECKED’ HAS HAD A POLARISING EFFECT, BY SETTING THE REWILDING AGENDA IN OPPOSITION TO TRADITIONAL SHEEP FARMING PRACTICES

Of course, ‘farmers’ are not a homogenous group. They differ in a wide range of ways, including scale, geography, land ownership and tenancy, and type of production. Accordingly, the attitudes of farmers towards rewilding are not uniform, either. Some research has explored the different ways in which rewilding is perceived by farmers, and how they influence support and opposition to rewilding proposals.²¹ This research indicates that a diverse range of perceptions leads to ‘a range of attitudes, from enthusiastic support to strong opposition to different rewilding practices.’²²

This paper aims to deepen this understanding, and help identify common ground between rewilding and farming from the perspective of an environmental NGO.

18 Olwig, K. (2016) ‘Virtual enclosure, ecosystem services, landscape’s character and the ‘rewilding’ of the commons: the ‘Lake District’ case’, *Landscape Research*, 41:2, 253-264, DOI: [10.1080/01426397.2015.1135320](https://doi.org/10.1080/01426397.2015.1135320)

19 Monbiot, G. (2014) ‘Feral: rewilding the land, sea and human life’, Penguin

20 [Home | Tir Canol](#)

21 Micolajczak, K. et al (2022) ‘Rewilding – the farmers’ perspective. Perceptions and attitudinal support for rewilding among the English farming community’, *People and Nature*, 4, 1435-1449

22 Micolajczak, K. et al (2022) ‘Rewilding – the farmers’ perspective. Perceptions and attitudinal support for rewilding among the English farming community’, *People and Nature*, 4, 1435-1449

FARMING, REWILDING AND THE TRIPLE CHALLENGE

The frequent polarisation between farming and rewilding outlined above is important to understand, because both are vital if we are to meet the triple challenge – tackling the nature and climate crises while meeting human needs.

Farming in the UK is central not only to food security and human wellbeing, but also to the management of many of our landscapes, habitats, attempts to reverse nature loss, and efforts to meet net zero carbon emissions. As outlined above, agricultural change, driven by an intensive food system, has been a key driver of historical biodiversity decline. Agriculture, land use and degradation of peatlands together were also responsible for around 12% of UK greenhouse gas emissions in 2018. In Scotland, agriculture contributes 18% of the country's greenhouse gas emissions.²³ Yet land use has the potential to become a net sink, rather than source, of greenhouse gases, emphasising how important farming is for meeting all aspects of the triple challenge.²⁴

The idea of rewilding, in turn, has a unique ability to capture public imagination in the restoration of nature – something that is important if we are to bend the curve of nature loss in the UK, because public support can contribute to delivering action by both political and corporate leaders. Meanwhile, rewilding's scientific underpinnings – acknowledging nature's dynamism, unpredictability and scale – bring an important dimension to UK nature recovery. The rewilding movement recognises that, while 'traditional' nature conservation techniques are vital, they are not sufficient to deliver the recovery of nature on the scale required: a range of different approaches is needed.

If the tension between farming and rewilding cannot be resolved, it will make it much harder to realise our vision of a future bursting with life, where we meet our net zero targets, where farmers can make a good living, and where people are connected to and value the food they eat.



23 <https://www.gov.scot/news/scottish-greenhouse-gas-statistics-2020/>

24 [WWF_land_of_plenty.pdf](https://www.wwf.org.uk/land_of_plenty.pdf)

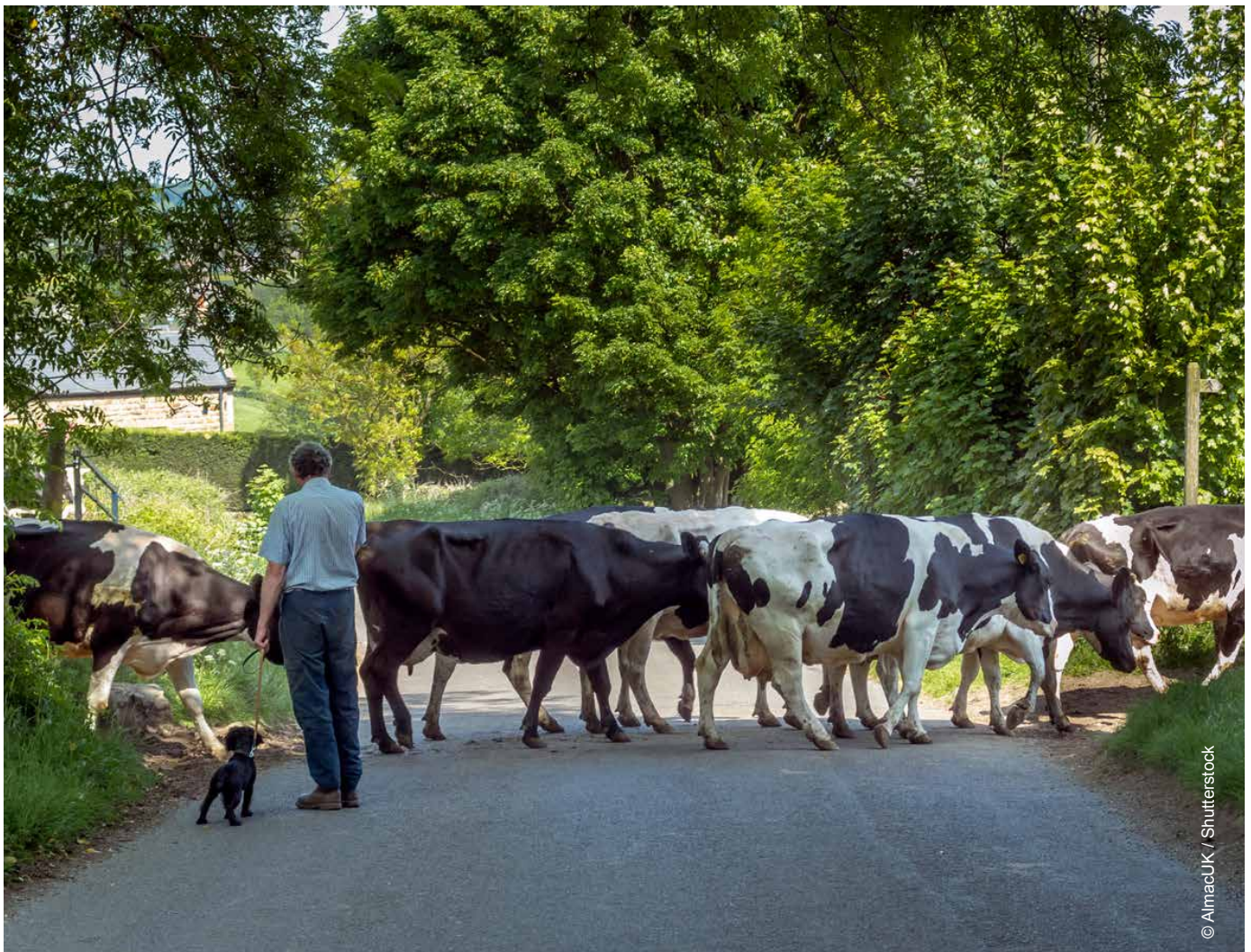
2. BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This research was intended to help bridge the divide between rewilding and farming in the UK. Our aim is to maximise the role farming and rewilding can play in meeting the triple challenge, and to inform WWF-UK's position on how to approach both.

To achieve this, we asked the following questions:

- To what extent are rewilding approaches and farming complementary or opposed?
- To what extent are farmers open to discussion of rewilding ideas?
- Is there a way to approach rewilding that enables farmers and environmental groups to find common ground and work productively together?



WWF-UK'S WORKING POSITION ON REWILDING

To answer these research questions, we began with WWF's working position on rewilding, outlined below. This position gave us a starting point for discussion with farmers about whether it is possible to bridge the divide between rewilding and farming.

Drawing on other attempts to define 'rewilding', including that of Rewilding Britain²⁵ and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN),²⁶ WWF has been using the following working definition:

“The restoration of ecosystems so that people and nature can thrive with less need for managed conservation.

“Using a spectrum of approaches, rewilding aims to: reinstate natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species; and increase the scale of conservation where necessary to enable those processes.

“Rewilding in the UK includes thriving communities of people as integral to its vision. In line with our Better Practice Principles, rewilding approaches must enable local ownership and be supportive of a just transition.”

This definition is founded on five core principles:

1. THE CENTRALITY OF PEOPLE

- recognising that people have been part of nature in the UK for thousands of years. Our approach to rewilding must enable local participation in and leadership of projects, and help deliver a just transition towards new ways of managing the environment.

2. DYNAMIC PROCESSES

- embracing the dynamism of nature and accepting that it is always changing. Rewilding focuses less on the static outcomes of conservation (e.g. particular groups of species or stable target habitats) and more on the dynamic processes (e.g. interaction between different parts of an ecosystem, or 'trophic cascades'; the transition from one type of habitat to another (succession); disturbance; hydrology; geomorphology; and the movement (fluxes) of nutrients in the system.)

3. LARGE-ENOUGH SCALE

- emphasising that while rewilding projects may take place on a range of scales, they need to be big enough to enable relevant dynamic processes in that place. Those processes often operate on a large scale across land, rivers and seas.

4. LESS MANAGEMENT

- promoting a move away from forms of ecosystem management that adopt intensive, ongoing, active human intervention. Where rewilding is considered appropriate, this would involve a paradigm shift in conservation practice towards more 'hands-off' approaches.

5. FLEXIBILITY AND UNCERTAINTY

- seeking to change our collective understanding and acceptance of uncertainty in conservation. This includes avoiding preconceived ideas about the 'right' conservation outcomes, especially in terms of desired target species, allowing nature to take the lead and to recover in ways that may be unexpected.

²⁵ [What is rewilding? | Rewilding Britain](#)

²⁶ [Principles_of_rewilding_cem_rtg.pdf \(iucn.org\)](#)

As important as the definition and principles themselves is how they are used. We have proposed using them as a **central reference point, not a perimeter fence**. By this, we mean that there is not a clear boundary line between approaches that are defined as ‘rewilding’ and those that are not. Rather, some activities will have more rewilding-type characteristics and some fewer. This has several important implications for how we approach rewilding:

- **We see rewilding as part of a spectrum, not a binary black-or-white issue.** So, rather than categorising projects by whether they qualify as rewilding, we think about whether or not it is appropriate to dial up some or all of the rewilding principles. This means for each context, stakeholders would consider whether it makes sense to encourage more ecological dynamism, less management, greater scale, or more flexibility, while retaining a focus on the role of people.
- **This leads to a diverse, graded landscape of different kinds of approach.** An approach based on a spectrum, on which rewilding principles are dialled up or down according to context, does not result in a landscape where ‘rewilding’ and ‘farming’ are distinct and opposed. Instead, it delivers a landscape where a wide range of different approaches make use of rewilding principles to a greater or lesser degree. So, rewilding exists on the same spectrum, and overlaps with, agroecology, nature-friendly farming and on-farm conservation. The spectrum also includes more ambitious rewilding projects in places where it is considered appropriate to dial up the principles further. *(For illustration, see Figure 1, below.)*
- **This means the decision to label a project as ‘rewilding’ becomes less relevant.** A wide range of different projects will have elements of rewilding within them, but there is no boundary line where a project qualifies as rewilding. Some approaches or projects will use rewilding principles extensively and choose to call themselves ‘rewilding’. Others will adopt some rewilding thinking (including as part of a farmed landscape) but choose not to refer to this as ‘rewilding.’ This decision would depend on local circumstances.
- **We see rewilding as part of the toolkit to halt and reverse the loss of nature in the UK.** The ideas contained within rewilding complement other forms of conservation, rather than replacing them. Rewilding offers the opportunity to help reverse nature loss in ways that other approaches have not managed to do – particularly by capturing public imagination, introducing greater dynamism, and reducing the need for intensive management. But a graded landscape of diverse approaches to land management would also include a blend of different kinds of conservation, alongside and within farming, incorporating rewilding principles in a range of different ways.

This working approach to rewilding gave us a starting point from which to enter discussions with farmers, to understand better their positions and concerns and to identify where there could be scope for more supportive and productive engagement between rewilding and farming.



A SPECTRUM OF NATURE RECOVERY APPROACHES

A spectrum of nature recovery encompasses a range of approaches, from a variety of nature-friendly farming techniques to approaches that are more likely to be described as ‘rewilding’. ‘Rewilding’ itself is also on a spectrum, as described by Rewilding Britain.²⁷

The case studies below are presented to illustrate this spectrum.²⁸ They include examples that are focused on productive farming but with elements of nature recovery built in, as well as examples that are more rewilding-focused but that nevertheless include elements of farming, especially management of livestock. These examples show how, despite the polarised national debate around rewilding, there is significant overlap between different types of approach. See also Figure 1 for an illustration of this spectrum.

LARK RISE ARABLE FARM, CAMBRIDGESHIRE²⁹

Over the past 30 years, tenant farmer Tim Scott has created habitats across Lark Rise Farm, including grass margins, large hedgerows and beetle banks. He retains over-wintered stubble to feed birds, uses fewer inputs and varies crops. This has boosted numbers of insects, especially butterflies, and bats which experienced a 70-fold increase over 20 years. The number of farmland birds has grown, bucking the national decline, including species on the IUCN’s Red List such as grey partridges and lapwings. This has been achieved while remaining a productive arable farm.

LODGE FARM MIXED FARM, SUFFOLK³⁰

Since 2005, cousins Brian and Patrick Barker have utilised environmental stewardship schemes to enable nature recovery alongside high-output arable production. They have reduced inputs and maintained soil structure, with two thirds of the farm in winter cropping of wheat and oilseed rape, and one third in spring cropping including beans, spring barley, oilseed rape and ryegrass as their main break crop. They have also used contract mob grazing with a local sheep farmer to reduce tractor, fuel and fertiliser use. Alongside benefits for nature, this model has improved the water retention of the soil and increased resilience to prolonged hot, dry weather. The farm is also less susceptible to other external shocks, including fluctuating fertiliser and insecticide prices.



27 [Examples of rewilding | Rewilding Britain](#)

28 The examples presented here are intentionally all in England, to demonstrate that a range of different approaches are possible within each nation of the UK. We recognise that a full range of good practice is possible and necessary across all the UK nations.

29 [Rethink Farming – Tim Scott – Nature Friendly Farming Network \(nffn.org.uk\)](#)

30 [Lodge Farm case study \(nffn.org.uk\)](#)

HILL TOP FARM, YORKSHIRE DALES³¹

Here, Neil Heseltine has adapted his approach to farming in the uplands, centred on the integral relationship between livestock and the environment. He has moved from predominantly sheep to belted Galloway cattle, with a focus on both improved biodiversity and sufficient forage. The change has reduced grazing pressure and improved grass growth, eliminating additional feed costs. The resulting higher profit margins and lower overhead costs mean the farm is now profitable where it was not before. The benefits for nature have included increased numbers of threatened species like skylarks, redshanks, curlews, barn owls and brown hares.



© Joop Zandbergen / Shutterstock

WILD KEN HILL, NORFOLK³²

At Ken Hill, the Buscall family is combining productive agriculture with 'rewilding' approaches. The farm is divided approximately into thirds: one third managed for productive regenerative agriculture; one third devoted to 'traditional' conservation of coastal wetland; and one third designated as 'rewilding' involving free-ranging red poll cattle, Tamworth pigs and Exmoor ponies. The rewilding area is designed to allow the development of a wood pasture environment, and includes the reintroduction of beavers (currently in an enclosure).



© Nigel Akehurst / Shutterstock

31 [Hill Top Farm case study \(nffn.org.uk\)](https://nffn.org.uk)

32 [Wild Ken Hill Rewilding Project | Rewilding Britain](#)

KNEPP ESTATE, SUSSEX³³

Knepp is one of the best-known examples of ‘rewilding’ in the UK. Here, Charlie Burrell and Isabella Tree have adopted a ‘naturalistic grazing’ approach to rewilding on almost the whole estate. They use free-ranging longhorn cattle, Tamworth pigs and Exmoor ponies as proxies for extinct wild herbivores. There is some production of ‘wild meat’ but stocking densities are kept low. By keeping managed herds of livestock there is a clear overlap with traditional livestock farming. However, the clear prioritisation of nature recovery over production indicates it is further towards the rewilding end of the nature recovery spectrum.



WILD ENNERDALE, CUMBRIA³⁴

Here, a partnership between the main landowners (Forestry England, National Trust and United Utilities) has focused on a landscape-scale approach to nature recovery. This approach has involved reduced sheep numbers and the introduction of Galloway cattle. Tree planting has taken place alongside natural regeneration, as well as river restoration, wetland creation, deer control and removal of non-native spruce. This has supported farming, forestry and tourism under the ‘Wild Ennerdale’ brand. Nature recovery successes include the return of salmon to the rivers and thriving populations of marsh fritillary butterflies. The scale and focus of Wild Ennerdale suggest it is towards the ‘rewilding’ end of the nature recovery spectrum.



33 [Knepp Castle Estate Rewilding Project | Rewilding Britain](#)

34 [Wild Ennerdale Rewilding Project | Rewilding Britain](#)

Figure 1:
Illustrative spectrum of nature recovery

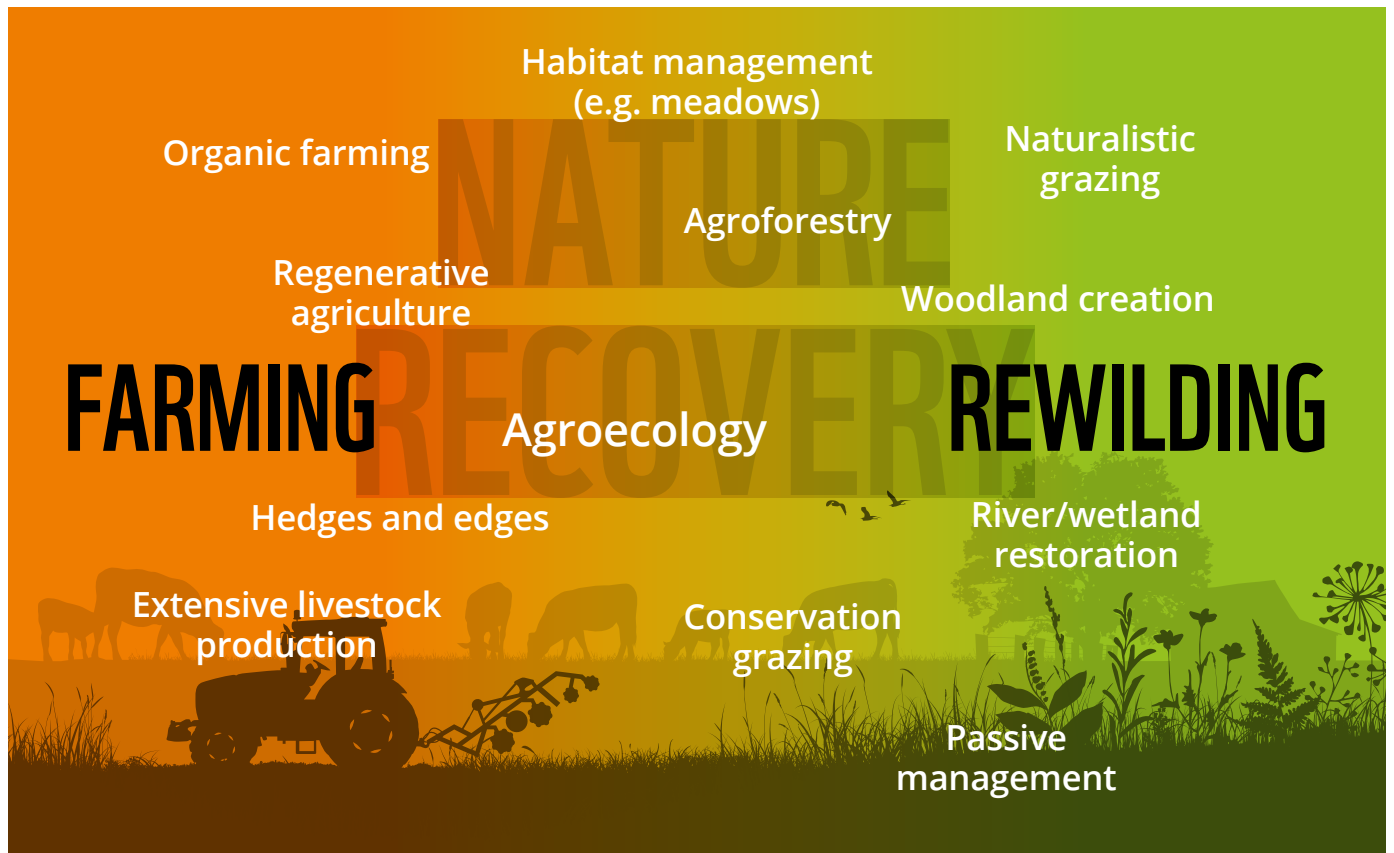


Figure 1, above, depicts the spectrum of nature recovery. It does not capture the full range and complexity of different approaches, but does illustrate how rewilding, conservation and farming overlap in significant ways. All are part of, and reliant on nature, without clear boundaries between them.

3. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this research, WWF worked with the UK Farmer Group Discussion Network, coordinated by Professor Alex Inman of the University of Exeter. This network provides access to a wide range of farmer groups across the UK, representing a broad cross-section of opinion within the farming community covering all livestock and arable farming systems.

WWF's decision to commission this research reflects the importance attached to understanding and reflecting the views of farmers in shaping our work – especially in relation to the contentious issue of rewilding.

Prof. Inman convened five discussion sessions with network members in November and December 2022, in Cumbria, Essex, mid-Wales, Shropshire and south-east Scotland.

In total, 52 network members took part, representing a broad range of farm types, sizes, farming systems and tenure arrangements (both owner occupiers and tenant farmers).

The sessions were conducted as semi-structured focus groups, and encouraged participants to express what is most significant to them in relation to rewilding specifically, and nature conservation and recovery more generally. The discussions followed a course according to participants' views, rather than a predetermined set of questions and answers.

WWF's Dr Benedict Dempsey also responded to questions about WWF's views and position on rewilding, outlining the working definition and principles described above. Prof. Inman recorded all discussions, and used them to produce the findings outlined below.



4. RESULTS

Here, we outline the key findings emerging from discussions with the farmer groups.

In reading these results, it is important to note that they are an attempt to represent faithfully what farmers said in the discussion groups. Reporting these statements does not necessarily mean WWF agrees with all of them. However, it is important to draw on these views to discuss potential ways forward, as we do in Sections 5 and 6 below.

HOW REWILDING IS PERCEIVED BY FARMERS

Most farmers currently see rewilding in black-and-white terms, not as a spectrum.

Most farmers did not recognise the idea that rewilding sits on a spectrum, with principles that can be dialled up and down as outlined above. Rather, they perceived it to represent the most ‘extreme’ expression of rewilding principles – involving land abandonment and the introduction of keystone species.

**‘I SEE WOLVES, PREDATORS DETRIMENTAL TO LAMBS, SHEEP STUCK IN BRIARS’
(SHROPSHIRE)**

**‘GOVERNMENT POLICY IS PUSHING PLANTING WHOLE FARMS WITH TREES WHICH IS NOT THE WAY TO GO’
(SCOTLAND)**

**‘MOST OF THE REWILDING IDEAS WE HEAR ABOUT INVOLVE HIGH PROFILE PROJECTS TAKING SWATHES OF LAND OR WHOLE FARMS’
(ESSEX)**

**‘IF YOU SAID TO ME REWILDING COULD BE MARGINS IN FIELDS OR SMALL PARTS OF FIELDS, THAT’S NOT HOW THE GUYS IN THIS ROOM WOULD SEE IT BECAUSE OF HOW THE MEDIA HAVE HANDLED IT, HOW SOME OF THE NGOS HAVE HANDLED IT AND SOME OF THE POLITICAL ORGANISATIONS WITHIN AGRICULTURE HAVE HANDLED IT’
(ESSEX)**

However, when presented with the idea that ‘rewilding-type thinking’ might include less ambitious proposals – in line with existing approaches to nature-friendly farming – they had far less aversion to it.

**‘IF YOU SAID THIS IS ABOUT DOING A BIT ON SOME OF OUR FARMS, THEN THAT IS A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT DISCUSSION’
(ESSEX)**

Farmers in Wales explicitly articulated that ‘every farmer will give 3% of their land straight away but not 10%... we’ve all got poor corners, bad ground that we’d be glad to get shot of’.

Some farmers also questioned whether the emphasis of rewilding was in the right place. While they felt that large keystone species were ‘being pushed by the rewilders’ they considered non-visual issues such as soil biology to be a more important goal in need of attention.

So, while it’s likely that conservationists and rewilding advocates would wish to push farmers to do more for nature, these comments illustrate there is at least a starting point for discussion.

Many farmers have a deeply entrenched distrust of ‘rewilder’ motivations.

It was possible to detect deep scepticism from many farmers regarding the underlying motivations of rewilding advocates. For many, it was associated with socio-economic and class inequality, and a feeling was expressed that the rewilding agenda is being driven by financial self-interest and personal self-aggrandisement rather than altruistic reasons.

‘REWILDING PUTS OUR BACKS UP BECAUSE IT’S WRONG, PEOPLE DOING IT ARE NOT AFTER ANYTHING OTHER THAN THE PUBLIC MONEY THEY’RE GAINING FROM IT. PEOPLE HIGH UP IN THE MEDIA, IN ALL THE DIFFERENT SOCIETIES ARE USING IT AS A WORD TO ATTRACT FUNDING. THAT’S NOT HOW IT SHOULD BE, IF PEOPLE WANT TO HELP WILDLIFE, THE MONEY SHOULD BE THERE FOR DOING YOUR BIT FOR THE ENVIRONMENT... IF YOU CALLED IT GENOCIDE OF FARMERS, THEY WOULD STILL SIGN UP TO IT IF THERE WAS MONEY AVAILABLE’

(CUMBRIA)

‘SOME PEOPLE HAVE MADE A THING ABOUT REWILDING, HAVEN’T THEY? WRITTEN BOOKS ABOUT IT AND MADE MONEY OUT OF THE WHOLE PROJECT BY DOING TALKS AND TOURS AND ALL THAT SORT OF CARRY ON... AND I BELIEVE THEY INHERITED THE LAND AT NIL COST. THEY HAVE CREATED A MYTH THAT REWILDING CAN BE A PROFITABLE ENTERPRISE’

(ESSEX)

‘IF YOU LOOK AT THE REINTRODUCTION OF SPECIES AND WHO’S PUSHING THIS, IT’S ALL PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS WITH A DREAM’

(SCOTLAND)

‘THE IDEA THAT AREAS ARE CREATED WHICH BECOME A GLORIFIED PARK WHERE EVERYONE FROM LONDON TROOPS UP TO SEE THE LYNX IS NOT GOOD’

(SCOTLAND)

‘IS IT THAT PEOPLE WANT TO BADGE THEIR NAME AS HAVING REINTRODUCED LYNX?’

(SCOTLAND)

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN REWILDING AND OTHER FORMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

Many farmers feel that rewilding is exacerbating a broader lack of recognition for existing good environmental practice.

Many within the farmer groups expressed a strong sense that they do not receive recognition for the current environmental outputs they deliver.

'THERE ARE ABOUT 100 FARMERS IN WALES WHO DESERVE TO BE CRITICISED AROUND WATER QUALITY BUT WE HAVE 17,500 THAT ARE DOING A DAMN GOOD JOB BUT THEY ARE ALL GETTING BRANDED THE SAME. WE'VE GOT TO FIND A DIFFERENT WAY TO WORK TOGETHER WHICH AVOIDS BLAME'
(WALES)

The term rewilding is exacerbating this frustration as the farmers perceive it to suggest both explicitly and implicitly that 'farming is bad' and requires a paradigm shift away from the current model. In their eyes, rewilding comes from an assumption that farming has destroyed nature, an idea with which they disagree.

'IT WOULD BE BETTER TO SAY LET'S INCREASE FROM WHERE WE ARE RATHER THAN SAYING EVERYTHING IS DAMAGED AND WE HAVE TO GO BACKWARDS'
(SCOTLAND)

This sentiment reflects a broader challenge for conservationists and rewilding advocates: to highlight that the way farming systems have functioned in recent decades has contributed to significant biodiversity decline (as described above), without blaming farmers for those systems, and while also acknowledging the human-made nature of UK landscapes and recognising where farmers have supported biodiversity. This is a complex picture. It requires honest and nuanced discussion, and the avoidance of a blame game.



Many farmers have practical concerns about the effects of rewilding.

The idea that rewilding introduces an element of unpredictability and dynamic uncertainty into a landscape heightened farmer concerns over the spread of weeds (e.g thistles, ragwort, docks) from rewilded areas.

**‘ONE YEAR’S WEEDS MEANS SEVEN YEARS WEEDING’
(ESSEX)****‘WHAT WE DO THROUGH AGRI-ENVIRONMENT SCHEMES IS PROVIDING MANAGED NATURE - WE WOULD NEVER EVER CALL IT REWILDING. THE WHOLE LANDSCAPE IS MANAGED, IT HAS TO BE... REWILDING MEANS LOSING CONTROL’
(SCOTLAND)****Many farmers do not accept the ecological merits of rewilding.**

Discussions revealed a deep-seated scepticism which challenges the ecological benefits of a rewilding future. In the Shropshire meeting, an argument was put forward that the UK ewe flock has reduced (mainly in the uplands) from 23 million to 16 million since foot and mouth, yet there has been no corresponding improvement in environmental condition.

One farmer in Shropshire reported that he had recently consulted experts over how to manage a piece of common land. The experts had concluded that grazing animals are crucial to the survival of certain bird species such as skylarks and meadow pipits which require closely grazed grass swards. Numerous viewpoints expressed the opinion that stock reduction from current levels will lead to gorse and bracken intrusion with negative implications for butterflies and birds which ‘can’t get in there to nest’. Some also perceived scrub intrusion to be associated with poor tree establishment and survival.

‘NOTHING BUT FERNS AND BRACKEN... THE WALKERS DON’T COME TO SEE THAT’

In Cumbria, there was a strong sense that grazing numbers are not the problem and that high wildlife production is being maintained with current stocking densities. They asked for data proving this is not the case. In Essex, farmers looked back with fondness to the days of mixed farming where livestock were seen as crucial for biodiversity.

‘I REMEMBER OUR MUCK HEAP, IT WAS A HAVEN FOR WILDLIFE, YOU GOT EVERYTHING THERE’

The Scottish farmers were particularly vocal about what they see as a lack scientific evidence informing the rewilding agenda in the UK. They called for more data demonstrating the link between different land use profiles and ecosystem service delivery including carbon sequestration and increased biodiversity. The Allerton project³⁵ run by the Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust was cited as an example of good science. Rewilding is also interpreted as likely to stimulate predator numbers which they believe will have an adverse effect on ground nesting birds and other animals such as hedgehogs.



'I REALLY ENJOY SEEING NATURE ON MY FARM AND IT REALLY FRUSTRATES ME WHEN I SEE PREDATORS GROWING TO THE LEVEL WHERE THIS IS NEAR DISAPPEARING'
(SHROPSHIRE)

'WE AS HUMANS NEED TO MAINTAIN MANAGEMENT OVER NATURE... SONGBIRDS HAVE DISAPPEARED BECAUSE THE SPARROWHAWKS AND MAGPIES KILL THEM'
(SHROPSHIRE)

The historical role of gamekeepers to control predator numbers was recommended as vitally important in any future scenario. However, predator control is considered to have been made impossible by the decisions to protect species such as badgers, buzzards and more recently beavers.

'IF YOU ARE INTRODUCING ANIMALS YOU HAVE TO BE ABLE TO CONTROL THE NUMBERS, WHICH BRITAIN SEEMS UNABLE TO DO'
(SCOTLAND)

The Scottish farmers made a suggestion that a team of gamekeepers could be established in an area/region/district to manage predators if prey species drop below a target level.

These views are strongly-held and must be accounted for in discussions about rewilding and farming. In some cases, for example the potentially beneficial role of grazers in maintaining grassland ecosystems, there is likely to be alignment between farmers and rewilding advocates. Other perceptions may be at odds with beliefs and evidence generated in the conservation community, for example about the causes of decline in species such as farmland birds. Where these differences in belief exist, they underpin some of the conflict between farmers and 'rewilders'. They require open, evidence-based discussion to resolve.

THE SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF REWILDING

Many farmers are very concerned about land expropriation.

In several of the discussions, rewilding was strongly associated with rural class dynamics. Specifically, it is frequently seen as an instrument through which tenant farmers are being disadvantaged by their landlords and where wealthy external interests – 'hedge fund managers' – are displacing rural communities.

'WE HEAR STORIES ABOUT ORGANISATIONS WHERE TENANTS ARE BEING EASED OUT, I WON'T SAY KICKED OUT, SO THAT THE ORGANISATION CAN REWILD THEIR LAND TO TICK A BOX'
(ESSEX)

There is a common association between rewilding and loss of control.

Overall, farmers considered existing agri-environment schemes (Environmental Stewardship, Countryside Stewardship, etc) to involve unnecessary bureaucracy, a loss of control over their land and a risk of unwanted micro-management. They perceived rewilding to involve the same issues.

'REWILDING IS LIKE A NATIONALISATION OF THE LAND, TAKING LAND INTO PUBLIC OWNERSHIP'
(CUMBRIA)

Cases of late payment have also been widely reported by the farming community (and acknowledged by the various UK payments agencies). Our meetings with farmers clearly indicated that this legacy of distrust makes them very cautious regarding the notion of entering into future rewilding agreements, particularly when these agreements are perceived as operating over an extended timeframe.

Many associated rewilding with low financial returns.

The farmers perceived rewilding as requiring long-lasting changes in their land-use and management practices. For them to contemplate long-term commitments, the financial incentive will need to be higher than the current 'income forgone' payments they receive through agri-environmental schemes, and payments will need to be guaranteed over a long-term period. However, this would need to be done in a way that did not simply increase the attractiveness to external investors of buying up farms. Farmers currently view environmental payments through the lens of schemes such as Countryside Stewardship, which are income forgone orientated, short-term (5-10 years) and where payments have not always been timely. They are also associated with paperwork and high transaction costs.

'INCOME FORGONE IS BOLLOCKS, THERE NEEDS TO BE A MARGIN AND IT NEEDS TO BE LONG-TERM'
(ESSEX)

'ESTABLISHING ANNUAL BIRD SEED MIXES IS NOT EASY BUT WE'LL GIVE IT A GO... BUT I'M NOT GOING TO PUT 10-15% OF MY FARM INTO IT BECAUSE YOU KNOW LONG-TERM IT WON'T PAY'
(ESSEX)

'AT THE MOMENT, COUNTRYSIDE STEWARDSHIP IS A MARGINAL EXERCISE IF YOU'RE INTO IT'
(SHROPSHIRE)

'WE ALL FEEL WE WANT TO BE HELPING. IT'S JUST THE BURDEN, THE COSTS AND THE CONSEQUENCES'
(ESSEX)



THE EFFECTS OF REWILDING ON IDENTITY AND HERITAGE

For many, the idea of rewilding challenges their identity as people who conduct productive farming.

Perhaps the strongest push back from the farmers to the idea of rewilding stems from a perception that they will be compromised in their ability to pursue what they define as productive farming, i.e. optimising livestock production or growing crops. Where rewilding is positioned as preventing optimal farming it is likely to receive strong resistance, but where it is positioned as not compromising the production system it will land much more favourably.

One farmer in Cumbria explained he is able to graze heather moorland using belted Galloway cattle (crossed with a Charolais bull) which are the only breed hardy enough to live in that environment while still producing an excellent beef animal for sale *'as good as anyone's in the market'*. He feels he is *'farming the hill properly as well as generating a rich environment which is a form of rewilding... not lynx and wolves but it is producing lapwings, black grouse and other creatures'*.

Another farmer from Scotland proudly explained he is now mob grazing some of his ground (letting grasses grow taller and then knocking down with cattle) for productivity and soil health outcomes, not environmental per se although he likes the environmental benefits that are being generated.

'WHAT WE WANT IS FARMING WITH NATURE, NOT REWILDING'
(CUMBRIA)

'WE'VE BUILT WETLANDS, THERE ARE FIELDS WE'VE LET GO TO WOODLAND WHICH HAVE REWILDED BUT WE DON'T CONSIDER OURSELVES AS REWILDERS, WE ARE NOT THOSE PEOPLE, WE ARE INTENSIVE ARABLE FARMERS, THAT'S WHAT WE DO AND WE ARE PROUD OF THAT. WE HAVEN'T DONE THE REWILDING TO THE DETRIMENT OF THE FARM, IT'S STILL A VIABLE ARABLE UNIT'
(ESSEX)

There was a strong sentiment within all the meetings that rewilding needs to be rebranded and questions were asked as to whether the term itself should cease to be used.

'IF YOU WANT ANY ACTION ON THE GROUND, YOU'VE GOT TO BREAK THROUGH FROM THE TERM REWILDING. CALL IT FARMING WILDLY'
(CUMBRIA)

'GET RID OF THE TERM REWILDING AND CALL IT WILD CORRIDORS'
(SHROPSHIRE)

'THE TERM REWILDING IS TOXIC - PEOPLE HAVE BEEN INVOLVED WITH IT BECAUSE THEY WANT TO SELL MORE BOOKS'
(WALES)

Many farmers perceived rewilding as ignoring the 21st century anthropogenic landscape.

The discussions revealed a general perception that rewilding is trying to exclude rather than include humans within the mix. The farmers articulated a strongly held view that all areas in the UK (even remote locations) are inhabited by human communities, a situation which is perceived as incompatible with a rewilding vision.

‘REWILDING MEANS BACK TO THE IDEA OF POST ICE AGE, PRE STONE AGE WHERE THERE WERE A FEW THOUSAND PEOPLE’

(CUMBRIA)

‘WE HAVE AN IMPRESSION THAT REWILDING IS TRYING TO RECREATE WHAT WAS HERE FIVE OR SIX CENTURIES AGO, BUT BACK THEN THE POPULATION OF BRITAIN WAS UNDER A MILLION PROBABLY. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE AND IMPRACTICAL TO BRING BACK THE BIG ANIMALS THE REWILDERS WANT’

(SCOTLAND)

‘IT IS IDEALISTIC TO THINK PREDATORS WILL EAT WILD ANIMALS. THEY WON’T... THEY’LL EAT THE EASIEST ANIMALS THEY CAN GET. THEY’RE NOT GOING TO CHASE A DEER ALL DAY WHEN THEY CAN JUST PICK UP A SHEEP OR PIG’

(SCOTLAND)

‘WITH BEAVERS, THEY’RE NOT EATING BARK, THEY’RE EATING MAIZE OR CARROTS. THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS WHICH ARE IMPRACTICAL WITH THE REWILDING ARGUMENT. THEY’VE MOVED FROM WHERE LIFE IS HARD TO WHERE LIFE IS EASY’

(SCOTLAND)

The Scottish farmers asserted that sea eagles have caused a reduction in lamb numbers with no compensation to the producer for their loss of income. The extent to which sea eagles are responsible for any significant loss of lambs is an issue where conservationists and farmers may broadly disagree – and is therefore another area where open, evidence-based discussion is needed.

In addition, farmers in Cumbria reacted to the notion that areas like the Pennines are low food producing areas and are therefore more appropriate for a rewilding future. They argue the uplands produce the breeding stock for lowland farms to fatten – particularly sheep.

None of the five farmer groups engaged could identify a region in the UK where they thought a deeper rewilding vision (further up the spectrum) would be regarded as appropriate. Indeed, a consensus emerged that rather than attempt a regional land-sparing outcome ‘you’d be better off getting everyone to do something’. This reflected the broader perception that rewilding and farming were incompatible.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, we draw upon the issues and opinions raised by the farmers in the discussion groups, and relate those opinions to WWF's position on rewilding outlined above. We explore and discuss whether there is scope for progress in bridging the divide between rewilding and farming – before making firm conclusions and recommendations in the next section.

HOW REWILDING IS PERCEIVED BY FARMERS

It is clear from the discussion groups, and from other sources, that the term 'rewilding' is deeply problematic for most farmers. It is associated with the idea that farming is considered part of the problem, rather than part of the solution to nature recovery. It has become synonymous with approaches that advocate 'land-sparing' or the complete cessation of farming.

By extension, 'rewilders' themselves are frequently perceived as antagonistic towards farmers. They can be seen as either naïve 'outsiders' who don't understand rural landscapes, or as only being interested in their own self-advancement or enrichment. This sense is embedded within a broader socio-economic, cultural and class-based concern about how traditional farming communities are being affected by outside influences.

For conservation organisations like WWF, a potential response to these concerns would be to avoid use of the term 'rewilding' entirely. However, we argue that the term is now so popular and widely used – in media and policy as well as science – that it is unrealistic to avoid it. Precisely because rewilding is contentious, it is important for WWF to have a clear public position on it.

'REWILDERS' THEMSELVES ARE FREQUENTLY PERCEIVED AS ANTAGONISTIC TOWARDS FARMERS. THEY CAN BE SEEN AS EITHER NAÏVE 'OUTSIDERS' WHO DON'T UNDERSTAND RURAL LANDSCAPES, OR AS ONLY BEING INTERESTED IN THEIR OWN SELF-ADVANCEMENT OR ENRICHMENT

We propose that placing rewilding approaches on a nature-recovery spectrum, as set out above, can help to mitigate many of the concerns expressed by farmers.

By viewing rewilding as part of a spectrum – on which the underlying rewilding principles can be dialled up or down – it ceases to be a polarising black-or-white issue. Rather, we hope, farmers can see their own practices to enhance nature as part of the spectrum. That spectrum runs from leaving small areas of farmed land to nature, through types of nature-friendly farming and agroecology, to rewilding at the most ambitious end of the spectrum.

We believe that doing this will reduce conflict around the term, because it situates the most ambitious forms of rewilding in their appropriate place on the spectrum, where the rewilding principles are dialled up to the maximum. In other places, it clarifies that many forms of 'rewilding' will take place within or alongside farming – for example farm-level nature restoration, or the use of domestic livestock as part of a grazing system – that will deploy rewilding principles to a lesser extent.

We hope that this approach makes clear that people in general, and farmers in particular, are seen as an important part of the future, not as 'the enemy' – and therefore reduce the level of mistrust between farmers and rewilding advocates.

Finally, we believe this approach helps to inform how the term 'rewilding' can be used. Rather than fixating on whether a project is 'rewilding' or not, this approach breaks down the sharp distinction between rewilding and other forms of conservation and nature restoration. Projects may use rewilding principles to a greater or lesser extent, and whether they choose to call themselves 'rewilding' becomes less important.

HOW REWILDING RELATES TO OTHER FORMS OF ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

The discussions revealed deep frustration among many farmers that their existing good practice is not being recognised, and that rewilding is exacerbating a broader view that ‘farming is bad.’ Though acknowledging that some farmers may be irresponsible, the groups felt strongly that the vast majority are responsible stewards of the environment.

It was also clear that many are not convinced of the merits of rewilding as a way to deliver nature recovery – and that traditional farming methods are a better way to maintain nature in landscapes that have been managed for centuries.

On these issues, we suggest again that the spectrum-based approach we propose can help. Rather than polarising discussions and reinforcing the idea that ‘farming is bad’, it protects the role of farming within a mixed landscape of diverse approaches. It incorporates the recognition that people are a part of nature, and that the UK is a heavily modified environment of human landscapes. This includes, in particular, the recognition that livestock can be an important component of some systems – with grazing animals performing a valuable role in ecosystems as well as producing food. At the same time, it enables environmental organisations to push farmers to do more for nature – something that is vital to address the ongoing biodiversity crisis.

The finding that many farmers doubt the value of rewilding for nature recovery, and the broader concern of loss of control, is an area where open communication, evidence-based research and discussion are needed. The discussion groups provided valuable insights that conservationists and rewilders should heed. They also revealed views that are at odds with accepted evidence in the conservation sector, for example in relation to the impact of intensive agricultural systems on biodiversity, and on the relationship between predators and other species.

Addressing these discrepancies is important. We hope that, if it is possible to depolarise discussion of rewilding and farming, this research and discussion will become easier to achieve and lead to more shared, collaborative work.

SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF REWILDING

The farmer discussions identified a wide range of concerns that rewilding is exacerbating trends in which farming communities are losing control to bureaucratic systems, and/or being unable to make ends meet. This relates to broader concerns about the role of external investors and green finance, with farmers pushed out and farms sold to absentee ‘hedge funds’ for ‘rewilding’ projects.

These issues are too complex to unpack in full in this report. However, it is essential that environmental NGOs and their allies display a strong commitment to community-led projects, and to ensuring social justice and equity are fully integrated into discussions around meeting the triple challenge. For WWF, this commitment set out in our Better Practice Principles, which form part of our approach to rewilding.

Importantly, the discussions indicated there may be several areas where ‘rewilders’ and farmers could be allies on these issues. For example, both are opposed, under most circumstances, to large-scale plantations of non-native trees, and both are opposed to ‘greenwashing’ in which socially and environmentally irresponsible projects are presented as sustainable. These are issues on which rewilding advocates and farmers can work together.

Another area where environmental NGOs and farmers are potential allies is in pushing for properly funded environmental schemes that actually meet farmers’ needs while also contributing to meeting the triple challenge. WWF supports the

introduction of Environmental Land Management schemes in England³⁶ and proposals for similar schemes in Scotland and Wales. However, these need to be more ambitious and they need to work for farmers, so that nature and climate can be addressed alongside food production while enabling a just transition for people working in the sector. This is an area where WWF and others are already working extensively with farmers,³⁷ but much more is needed.

Significantly, some farmers stated that when they are not properly supported financially, it is additional environmental management that is the first thing to go. While farmers may wish to manage their farms for nature, they said, if given no choice they are likely to increase production to increase their incomes, even if this has negative environmental impacts. This situation may be a legacy of farm payment schemes that have disincentivised environmental management. It is vital to break this down so farmers have proper incentives for delivering environmental benefits. This serves to reinforce the recognition that a properly-functioning payments system is in the interests of both farmers and rewilding advocates.

THE EFFECTS OF REWILDING ON IDENTITY AND HERITAGE

There was a clear sense that most farmers in the discussions felt strongly that their job is to produce goods – especially food in light of current food security concerns and the cost-of-living crisis. In addition to the practical view that it is important to produce food, there was also an identity associated with managing the land in a productive way. This identity came through particularly strongly with upland farmers, whose pride in managing livestock was clear.

In this context, if rewilding is perceived to mean the abandonment of farmed land and the cessation of production, it will be considered unacceptable by many farmers on both practical and cultural grounds. However, despite concerns about food security, farmers in the discussion groups were not generally opposed to other kinds of non-food production such as crops for alcohol or fuel.

Rewilding advocates therefore need to show farmers that adopting rewilding-type approaches in some places is not in opposition to food production. It should also be possible to challenge farmers on arguments about food security – for example in relation to the amount of production dedicated to animal feed, biofuel, alcohol or exports that do not contribute effectively to addressing food security concerns.

The farmers also tended to consider rewilding to be unacceptable if they perceived it to ignore the fact that landscapes have been shaped by people over generations, or if it implies a return to pre-human conditions.

As with issues discussed above, we propose that a spectrum-based approach to nature recovery mitigates many of these concerns. This approach highlights that people are part of nature, not separate from it, and that the landscapes we see today are shaped by human activity. It is possible to accept this, and also explore ways to dial up the principles of rewilding by introducing more dynamism, scale and uncertainty and reducing the intensity of management.

In taking this approach, it is possible to see different forms of farming and rewilding as existing on the same spectrum. Rewilding does not mean stopping farming, but rather the process of scaling up those rewilding principles in ways that make sense for a particular place. Only in some places would it be appropriate to scale them up to the most ambitious levels. And whether or not an approach is labelled as ‘rewilding’ becomes less important.

Finally, our proposed approach mitigates the concern that rewilding is past-facing, or seeking a return to a pre-human system. While rewilding does draw from an understanding of past conditions under which different species evolved, it also highlights the inherent dynamism of nature – including the reality that recreating past conditions is not possible, especially because of the effects of climate change. On this basis, rewilding is not about going back to the past but instead moving forward into a future where rewilding principles help nature to recover – and in which people and farming are still central.

36 [Enhancing-the-environmental-land-management-schemes.pdf \(wwf.org.uk\)](#)

37 [A Consensus on Food, Farming and Nature launches – Nature Friendly Farming Network \(nffn.org.uk\)](#)

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To conclude, we return to the research questions outlined above:

- To what extent are rewilding approaches and farming complementary or opposed?
- To what extent are farmers open to discussion of rewilding ideas?
- Is there a way to approach rewilding that enables productive progress and common ground?

As outlined above, the farmer discussions revealed many ways in which farming and rewilding are considered to be opposed – especially where rewilding is seen to involve the cessation of farming or an attack on farming identity and cultural heritage.

We also found that farmers were keen to discuss the work they are already doing to protect and restore nature – although they did not generally think about this as rewilding, and use of the term tended to be rejected.

Based on these discussions, however, we suggest that the proposed spectrum-based approach to nature recovery, which includes rewilding, may offer a way to approach the issue of rewilding with farmers that enables progress and identifies common ground.

To enable this, we make the following recommendations and commitments:

WWF WILL PROMOTE A SPECTRUM-BASED APPROACH TO NATURE RECOVERY THAT INCLUDES REWILDING, AND ENCOURAGES OTHERS TO DO THE SAME.

- Rather than encouraging the idea that rewilding is a binary choice that we either do or don't do, rewilding advocates should promote a more nuanced position that there are many different forms of rewilding, and rewilding principles can be scaled up or down to different degrees in different places.
- This approach would break down the divide between rewilding and other forms of land management.
- It would make clear to farmers that discussion of rewilding does not necessarily mean accepting it in its most ambitious form, where rewilding principles are scaled up to their maximum.
- It would contribute to reducing the stigma around the term and enable more constructive conversation, including about how 'rewilding' approaches can coexist with other types of conservation and different forms of farming.
- Importantly, it would also enable advocates of the most ambitious forms of rewilding to promote their visions more effectively – by showing where those visions sit in the context of other kinds of approach, making acceptance more likely.

WWF WILL CLEARLY COMMUNICATE THAT FARMERS ARE PART OF THE SOLUTION TO NATURE RECOVERY.

- This should include giving more credit in public to those farmers who are already effectively protecting and restoring nature.
- It should include a clear recognition that ‘rewilding’ does not mean removing people, and that the involvement of farmers is crucial to delivering the triple challenge in the UK.
- At the same time, it is necessary to continue to discuss evidence that modern farming systems have driven nature loss, and to push farmers to do more where necessary.
- This should include being careful with language and narrative about nature loss, to avoid giving the impression that farmers do not care about nature.
- This would reduce the sense, keenly felt by farmers, that they are being held responsible for destruction of nature and/or being unfairly criticised.
- More generally, it should include more consistent recognition that people are part of nature, and that our landscapes have been shaped by humans over thousands of years.
- This is required to build trust with farmers over time.

WWF WILL PROMOTE THE FACT THAT THERE IS CONSIDERABLE OVERLAP BETWEEN MANY FORMS OF FARMING AND REWILDING.

- As part of a spectrum-based approach, it is clear that many practices combine both farming and rewilding principles.
- For example, the use of farmed livestock as proxies for extinct wild herbivores is common practice in many conservation and rewilding projects, yet livestock farmers continue to feel that rewilding is opposed to their way of life.
- It is important to break down this divide, highlight the overlap, and reduce the perceived demonisation of livestock farming so that a constructive conversation can take place.

WWF CALLS ON FARMERS NOT TO REJECT ‘REWILDING’ PROPOSALS OUT OF HAND.

- While environmental organisations should do more to promote the value of farming, in return it is important for farmers to give a fair hearing to ‘rewilding’ proposals.
- If a spectrum-based approach is adopted, farmers should be open to discussing whether it is possible for them to scale up rewilding on their farms, and move slightly up the spectrum.
- Farmers should also be willing to acknowledge more ambitious rewilding proposals and discuss whether there is scope for them in some places, as part of the mix of approaches needed to recover nature while tackling the climate crisis and meeting human needs. This acknowledgement would not imply that rewilding should be dialled up to the maximum everywhere.

WWF WILL WORK WITH FARMERS AND OTHER ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANISATIONS TO IDENTIFY WHERE WE HAVE COMMON CAUSE ON THE ISSUE OF REWILDING.

- Our discussions indicated several areas in which, contrary to perceptions, rewilding approaches and farming may have aligned interests.
- For example, monoculture forestry plantations, and their presentation as ‘rewilding’, may be against the interests of both farmers and rewilding advocates.
- Similarly, overly-prescriptive government schemes were highlighted as a problem by farmers, who advocated for more flexibility – something that aligns with rewilding principles that include a more flexible approach to environmental outcomes.
- As mentioned above, rewilding advocates and farmers may also find common ground on the contentious issue of livestock farming, if domestic farm animals are used to deliver aspects of rewilding within a wilder-farming approach.

WWF CALLS FOR GOVERNMENTS TO DELIVER FRAMEWORKS THAT ENABLE REWILDING APPROACHES TO TAKE PLACE ALONGSIDE FARMING.

- Incoming public payment regimes and other frameworks being brought forward by governments in the UK must work for farmers, providing long-term, flexible support at the scale and budget necessary to drive participation and ambition.³⁸
- The principle of ‘public money for public goods’ must be delivered in a way that focuses on environmental outcomes across farm and landscape levels, while also being mindful of farmers’ economic realities. This includes, for example, uncertainties associated with reductions in existing schemes, tenancy agreements, input costs and pressures from external interests.
- Land-use frameworks should drive democratic accountability, enabling different groups to take part so as to avoid overly prescriptive, top-down decision-making.
- While meeting the needs of farmers and delivering public goods for nature and the climate, frameworks should ensure there is support for approaches that scale up rewilding principles to the more ambitious end of the spectrum, in places where people choose to do so.

WWF CALLS ON ALL PARTIES IN THE DEBATE AROUND REWILDING AND FARMING, INCLUDING THE MEDIA, TO CHANGE THE LANGUAGE USED TO DESCRIBE THESE ISSUES.

- The polarisation of farming and rewilding is perpetuated by a narrative that sees the two as being in opposition. This is inaccurate and unhelpful.
- Those involved in the national conversation around rewilding should promote the idea that it is not a binary, black-and-white issue, but rather part of a spectrum of different approaches.
- More attention should be given to the fact that many farming approaches include elements of rewilding principles, and many rewilding approaches include elements of farming.
- Changing the national conversation around rewilding in this way would not mean there will be no disagreement, but would mean genuine productive discussion would be more likely to take place.

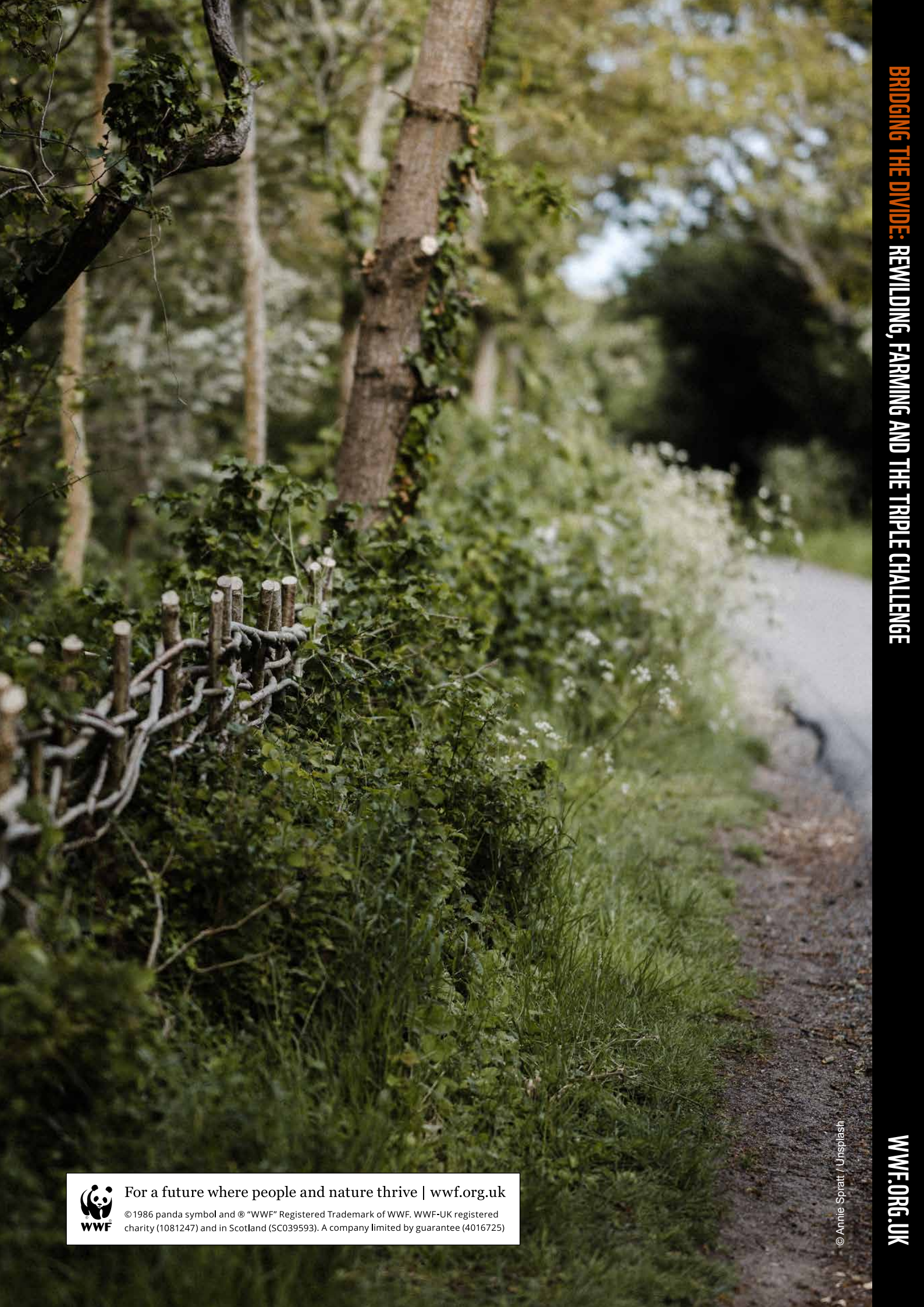
38 [Enhancing-the-environmental-land-management-schemes.pdf \(wwf.org.uk\)](#); Proposals for a new Agriculture Bill – WWF Scotland Briefing, March 2023; Land of our future, WWF Cymru, July 2023, [WWFreportENGfullJULY_web.pdf](#)

WWF-UK would like to thank the farmers who took part in this research. We commit to integrating their views into how we approach the issue of rewilding, as outlined in these recommendations. We genuinely believe there is significant opportunity to work together with farmers on tackling the nature and climate crises while meeting the needs of people.

Indeed, for all our sakes, it is essential.



**IF WE CAN FIND COMMON GROUND ON
A POLARISING ISSUE LIKE REWILDING,
IT PROVIDES HOPE THAT WE CAN MEET
THESE CHALLENGES TOGETHER**



BRIDGING THE DIVIDE: REWILDING, FARMING AND THE TRIPLE CHALLENGE

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