

Rewilding in the United Kingdom: Activities, Outcomes, and International Comparisons

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Executive Summary

Rewilding has become a central theme in UK environmental policy and public discourse, driven by biodiversity decline, climate-change pressures, and a growing recognition of the need to restore ecological processes at landscape scale. UK rewilding initiatives encompass upland peatlands, lowland estates, coastal wetlands, and increasingly, urban environments. Evidence from Rewilding Britain, WWF-UK, NatureScot alongside key academic research shows that rewilding can deliver measurable benefits for biodiversity, carbon sequestration, flood mitigation, rural economies, and public wellbeing.

Compared with other countries—such as Norway, the Netherlands, the United States, and Costa Rica—the UK’s rewilding movement is distinctive for its high population density, complex land-ownership patterns, and intense agricultural land use, which shape both opportunities and constraints. The UK is a global leader in community-driven and partnership-based rewilding, but lags behind in large-carnivore reintroduction, scale of wilderness areas, and policy coherence.

1. Introduction

Australia and the United Kingdom differ radically in location population density and available land but share a core concern, the need to recover and restore what the US would call wilderness. Pushback by business, agricultural and development lobbyist and those with other agendas cites population growth, energy demands and increasingly urban demographics. This needs to be core and has a place in the following discussion.

Rewilding is broadly defined as the restoration of ecosystems to a point where natural processes can operate with minimal human intervention. Rewilding Britain describes it as “the large-scale restoration of ecosystems to the point where nature is allowed to take care of itself.”

In the UK, rewilding has gained momentum due to:

- **Severe biodiversity decline**—56% of UK species declined between 1970 and 2013.
- **High land-use pressure**—over two-thirds of the UK is agricultural land.
- **Climate-change impacts**, including flooding, heatwaves, and coastal erosion.
- **Public interest in nature recovery**, wellbeing, and green urban spaces.

This report synthesises current UK rewilding activities, evaluates their outcomes, and compares them with international approaches.

2. The State of Rewilding in the UK

2.1 Drivers of UK Rewilding

Biodiversity Loss

The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. The APSE report highlights the dramatic decline in species abundance and the shrinking of wild spaces accessible to children—down 90% since the 1970s.

Climate Change

Rewilding Britain’s research shows that rewilding can reduce carbon emissions, enhance carbon sequestration (e.g., through peatland and woodland restoration), and help species adapt to climate-driven habitat loss. As in many reviews of climate impact, there are winners and losers with for

example species of butterflies now seen in southern England whose natural habitat was traditionally much further south.

Flood Risk

Rewilding Britain's 2016 report demonstrated that natural flood-management approaches—such as restoring wetlands and reconnecting rivers to floodplains—can significantly reduce downstream flood risk. Small projects reintroducing beavers has demonstrated their phenomenal ability to rebalance water courses and improve agricultural land at risk from flooding

Public Health and Wellbeing

Urban rewilding research shows strong links between biodiversity, mental health, reduced crime, and improved air quality. Linking nature exposure to improved well being has been demonstrated in a range of studies with a direct impact on the burden on overstretched mental health services.

2.2 Key UK Rewilding Initiatives

2.2.1 Landscape-Scale Projects (Rural)

NatureScot's review identifies major UK case studies:

- **Wild Ennerdale (England)** – A partnership-led project restoring natural river processes, native woodland, and grazing regimes.
- **Cairngorms Connect (Scotland)** – One of the largest habitat restoration projects in the UK, focusing on peatlands, forests, and montane ecosystems.
- **Forsinard Flows (Scotland)** – Peatland restoration of international significance.
- **Holnicote Estate (England)** – Natural flood-management through river restoration and wetland creation.
- **Wild Ken Hill (England)** – A mixed model combining regenerative agriculture with rewilding.

These projects demonstrate the UK's strength in collaborative, multi-stakeholder governance, often involving NGOs, landowners, local communities, and government agencies.

2.2.2 Coastal and Marine Rewilding

Rewilding Britain's *Wilder Seas* report (2025) outlines strategies for marine recovery, including:

- Kelp-forest restoration
- Seagrass meadow expansion
- Marine protected areas

2.2.3 Urban Rewilding

Urban rewilding is increasingly recognised as essential for public health and biodiversity. A 2025 scoping review highlights:

- The importance of private gardens as micro-rewilding sites
- The role of education, training, and environmental planning in influencing behaviour

London's Rewilding Task Force defines urban rewilding as reinstating natural processes and missing species to benefit both wildlife and people.

2.3 Barriers to Rewilding in the UK

2.3.1 Land-Use Conflicts

WWF-UK's 2023 report emphasises tensions between rewilding advocates and farming communities, who often perceive rewilding as a threat to livelihoods.

2.3.2 Fragmented Land Ownership

The UK's patchwork of small landholdings complicates large-scale ecological restoration.

2.3.3 Policy Ambiguity

While the UK has ambitious nature-recovery targets, rewilding is not embedded consistently in agricultural or planning policy. Many local authorities are stretched and unable to meet both population demands and fund specific projects to rewild areas in the face of demands for cost of living and welfare support.

2.3.4 Public Misunderstanding

Media narratives often frame rewilding as synonymous with predator reintroduction, which can polarise debate. Recent reintroductions of wolves to secure areas has created tensions with landowners and birds of prey such as buzzards acting to protect nesting sites have come under scrutiny with the argument that buzzards happen to be a native species. In other instances, video of young birds of prey being destroyed by landowner staff have hit the headlines.

3. Outcomes and Impacts of UK Rewilding

3.1 Ecological Outcomes

Biodiversity Recovery

Case studies show increases in:

- Woodland bird species
- Invertebrate diversity
- Beaver-related wetland species (in areas with licensed reintroductions)

Habitat Restoration

- Peatland restoration improves carbon storage and water quality.
- River re-meandering enhances fish spawning grounds.
- Natural regeneration expands native woodland cover.

3.2 Climate-Change Mitigation

Rewilding Britain's *Rewilding and Climate Breakdown* report (2021) shows that rewilding can:

- Reduce emissions from degraded peatlands
- Increase carbon sequestration in woodlands and wetlands

3.3 Socioeconomic Impacts

Rural Economies

Rewilding Britain's *Rewilding and the Rural Economy* report (2021) highlights:

- New employment opportunities in eco-tourism, land management, and nature-based enterprises
- Increased visitor spending in rewilded landscapes

Community Engagement

NatureScot's review stresses that successful projects require:

- Continuous engagement
- Transparent communication
- Shared decision-making

4. International Comparisons

4.1 Norway

NatureScot includes Norway as a comparator case study. Key features include:

- Large, sparsely populated landscapes
- Strong tradition of outdoor life and ecological stewardship
- Rewilding often linked to restoring natural grazing systems and predator–prey dynamics

Compared with the UK, Norway has:

- **Greater land availability**
- **More intact ecosystems**
- **Less conflict over land use** (though predator issues remain contentious)

4.2 The Netherlands

The Netherlands renowned worldwide for the **Oostvaardersplassen** experiment, which pioneered “trophic rewilding” using large herbivores. Key differences from the UK:

- Highly interventionist management
- Strong public scrutiny
- Smaller land area but bold ecological experimentation

4.3 United States

The US leads in:

- Large-carnivore reintroduction (wolves in Yellowstone)
- Wilderness-scale restoration
- Federal-level conservation frameworks

The UK differs due to:

- Lack of large wilderness areas
- Higher population density
- Greater agricultural dependency

4.4 Costa Rica

Costa Rica is a global leader in:

- Forest restoration
- Payments for ecosystem services
- National-level biodiversity policy

The UK could learn from Costa Rica’s policy coherence and economic incentives for landowners.

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1 Strengths of UK Rewilding

- Strong civil-society leadership (Rewilding Britain, Wildlife Trusts)
- High levels of public engagement
- Innovative urban rewilding research and practice
- Successful partnership models (e.g., Cairngorms Connect)

5.2 Weaknesses

- Limited land availability
- Policy fragmentation

- Farmer–rewilder tensions

5.3 Opportunities

- Post-Brexit (the 2016 removal of the UK from the European shared market) agricultural reform
- Growing public support for nature recovery
- Expansion of marine rewilding

5.4 Threats

- Climate-change acceleration
- Economic pressures on landowners
- Political shifts reducing environmental ambition

6. Policy Recommendations

6.1 For the UK Government

- Embed rewilding principles in Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS).
- Provide long-term funding for landscape-scale restoration.
- Support community-led rewilding initiatives.

6.2 For Local Authorities

- Integrate urban rewilding into planning frameworks.
- Expand green corridors and nature-friendly design.
- Support citizen-science monitoring.

One city Norwich in Norfolk on the east coast of the UK has recently elected a Green local oversight. This is a unique moment for a local authority to commit to these and other green policies with the mandate of an electorate whose voice is expected to be heard

6.3 For Landowners and Farmers

- Adopt flexible, hybrid models combining regenerative agriculture with rewilding.
- Engage in collaborative landscape partnerships.
- Explore nature-based enterprise opportunities.

6.4 For NGOs and Research Institutions

- Continue producing evidence-based reports.
- Facilitate dialogue between farmers and rewilding advocates.
- Expand monitoring frameworks.

7. Conclusion

Rewilding in the UK is at a pivotal moment. The country faces profound ecological challenges, but also possesses an active and committed rewilding movement, strong public support, and a growing evidence base demonstrating the benefits of restoring natural processes. Compared with other nations, the UK excels in collaborative, community-driven rewilding but lags in scale and policy integration. Furthermore, current uncertainty fuelled by global players such as the war in the middle East and Ukraine inevitably dilute such policies in the face of demands for better defence funding.

Notwithstanding: To fulfil its potential, the UK must adopt a more coherent national strategy, strengthen partnerships with farming communities, and expand both rural and urban rewilding efforts. The international comparisons show that while the UK cannot replicate the vast wilderness areas of the US or the policy coherence of Costa Rica, it can lead the world in people-centred, partnership-based ecological restoration.

References

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(As per requirements for HOPE publication, I utilised some aspects of AI to fact check and provide a structure for the report.)