

Nature without nurture?

Two decades ago, conservationists in the Oostvaardersplassen, the Netherlands, started an unusual experiment. In an area reclaimed from the sea with dykes (a polder), they let domestic livestock form semi-wild populations. The idea was to let the animals regulate themselves, without human intervention. They are not fed if their wild food runs low. Disease is left untreated, and there's no attempt to protect animals from bitter winters or dry summers. Proponents argue that this is the best conservation method in many areas, even the lowlands of north-west Europe. But not everyone is convinced. Mention the idea to a practical conservationist or policy-maker, and the response could be either effulgent enthusiasm or, equally likely, something unprintable. Advocates claim that free-ranging cattle and ponies will create a semi-open wooded parkland landscape, similar to the New Forest. Some claim that this parkland would be much as our landscape was before Neolithic people altered it, but this is also hotly contested.

Lobbyists, such as the Wilderness Foundation, have energetically promoted this approach in the UK, so English Nature commissioned the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology to investigate. We assessed three case study sites with contrasting landscapes where this approach, called naturalistic grazing, might be an option. We tried to cover as many ecological, economic and cultural scenarios as possible, gathering information from a scenic upland, a lowland English farm, and a stretch of coast that is important for conservation. This was very much a 'what if' study, because UK animal-welfare legislation wouldn't allow managers to leave domestic animals so much to their own devices. For example, animals that ran out of food would have to be fed. We also have legal commitments under the Convention on Biological Diversity (as well as moral obligations) to actively manage areas that are particularly important for wildlife.

In our study sites, managers needed to balance conservation against the

landscape's value as an amenity. An important role of nature reserves is to provide areas with a sense of wilderness. So moving away from conspicuously artificial practices (eg, fenced-in stock) can be important. But sometimes management is needed to keep just that sense of the wild, particularly in upland areas. Ennerdale in Cumbria, for example, attracts visitors to its spectacular craggy mountains. If conifer woodlands were allowed to grow back, some of these views would vanish.

In other words, removing conservation management is a separate issue to managing for wildness. The idea that habitats should be returned to a wild state often seems linked to people's feeling that semi-natural habitats are somehow deficient, because they are partly man-made. But our treasured wild places in Britain are in fact ancient cultural landscapes, not wild in the sense of natural or untouched.

There is also no evidence that we'd actually get 'natural half-open parkland' from naturalistic or wilderness grazing in



Would letting horses, cows and deer run wild help conservation?

Kathy Hodder and James Bullock say it's not that simple.

the lowlands. In the Oostvaardersplassen, more than 20 years after cattle, ponies and deer started grazing, the fertile soil supports a lot of these herbivores on a close-cropped turf. Patches of scrub that had colonised the edge of the area before it became part of the grazing reserve are still there, but the ponies have killed most of the trees by stripping their bark. And there is no sign of tree or scrub regeneration. There would probably need to be a big population crash among the grazers to start this process, and there is no way of accurately predicting the landscape that might emerge.

Advocates of naturalistic grazing would have us believe that large area conservation and removing conservation management are part of the same package. This is not so. Enlarging and linking nature reserves so whole landscapes can be managed is better than trying to conserve biodiversity in small fragmented sites. If we are to conserve biodiversity in Europe, this approach is likely to be essential. Extensively, rather than intensively, managed herds of large

herbivores would undoubtedly play an important role in these networks and large reserves. But it is not clear what added benefit leaving them entirely unmanaged might bring.

Throughout the UK and Europe there are now excellent opportunities for developing large interconnected nature reserves, such as Wild Ennerdale in Cumbria and the planned expansion of Wicken Fen. There are concerns about how to maintain biodiversity in such large areas within limited budgets. But replacing management targets for species and habitats with a vague notion of 'natural process' conservation cannot be the solution, for many reasons. For one, 'natural process' is sadly something of a misnomer: nature reserves will be affected by pollution, exotic species, falling groundwater levels, and will lose key species, to name just a few 'unnatural' problems. Perhaps 'naturalistic' belongs in the aspirant language of conservation politics—good for rallying support—but less useful when vision statements are converted into practice.

Want to know more?

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