

How far are schemes for Pleistocene Rewilding motivated by disenchantment with humanity?

Schemes of Pleistocene rewilding stem from a disenchantment with humanity's impoverishment of nature. As Chrulw suggests, the very justification of its schema relies on the distinction between a pauperised present and a plentiful past. Disenchanted with the current 'pest and weed' dominated North America - a somewhat post-Pleistocenal dystopia of dullness and dysfunction - Donlan et al. propose that the 'active restoration of large wild vertebrates' and their ecological functions will heterogenise and once again reinvigorate that which is anaesthetised. Donlan evinces the Bolson tortoise and the African elephant; the former a reptilian species once abundant throughout the Texan-Oklahoman corridor yet extirpated in the late Pleistocene; the latter, an ecological proxy species to the extinct American mammoth. He posits that the tortoise would 'encourage landscape heterogeneity through constructing burrows that form ecological niches' and the elephant would 'promote fertile grasslands' and increase the abundance of 'large seeded temperate and tropical American flora' through its frugivorous, grazing behaviours. In essence, megafaunal rewilding is motivated by a desire to rekindle from the fallen fragments of a disenchanting present that archetypal image of North America as 'a fresh, green breast of the New World.'

The motivation to rewild precipitates from a disenchantment with humanity on its current ecological path. Donlan et al. strengthen the justification behind rewilding by eliciting the loss of regulatory ecological interactions since the Pleistocene extinction event. The extirpation of apex predators such as the grey wolf has facilitated population increases in its ungulate prey, increasing herbivory and thus reducing the abundance of flora and vegetation. Such pauperisation of continental megafloora has aesthetic, ecological and economic implications; the loss of passerine birds, the reduction in mountain slope stability and the decline of flood plain sediment and nutrient dynamics. Furthermore, the loss of large predatory canids from North America has contributed to increasing populations of white-tailer deers, a species which interacts symbiotically with the black-legged tick that transmits Lyme disease to humans. Pleistocene rewilding is thus a rhetoric of polarities, drawing its motivation from the disenchantingly deep chasm separating the past and the present, the untainted and the degenerate, the healthy and the riddled. This primary scientific motivation behind Pleistocene rewilding - the restoration of ecological and evolutionary processes - feeds a secondary desire: that of dissolving the political paralyses of climate change mitigation. Pleistocene Park, an experimental wildlife preserve in north-eastern Siberia, intends to convert the moss-dominated tundra back to a glacial, grassy steppe environment by reintroducing proxy, extant species such as moose, reindeer, bison and Yakutian horses. Within the 600 square kilometre buffer-zoned preserve, Zimov proposes that sufficient reintroduced densities of large herbivores and their grazing behaviours, will disturb the dominant mosses and enable stabler-soiled grassland to once again return. Zimov postulates that the dual workings of these stabler, high-albedo soils and the megafauna, trampling the soil and fresh snowfall, would contribute to maintaining low ground temperatures, thus preventing the carbon within the permafrost being released into the atmosphere.

Schemes of Pleistocene rewilding are motivated by a disenchantment with current conservationism and its reactive, rather than proactive, agenda. According to Donlan et al. the discipline is increasingly categorised as 'doom and gloom' because the scientific community has 'acquiesced to a default goal of exposing and merely slowing the rate of biodiversity loss...of halting insular extinctions' rather than actively plotting against them. As Soulé poignantly writes:

‘without significant conservation interventions, the speciation of large vertebrates on a global basis is largely over.’ (Soulé, 1980). Rewilding, and its creation of megafaunal sites of refugia, are thus motivated by somewhat anarchistic desires; its contingent surfacing as staunch opposition to the morbid apathies of current conservation governance. Shaking the very foundations, as Donlan further argues, would increase the ‘public understanding of ecological and evolutionary history. That through conscious, ‘aesthetic experience’ of the wild and its charismatic megafauna, the uninspired, urbanised masses might once again come to realise nature, and to proactively support and engage in its conservation. Such schema to reinvigorate interest within the spaces of urbanity further suggests that pleistocene rewilding manifests itself in a disenchantment with the over-fascination with remote ecosystems, to such an extent that proximate ones are slighted. The western ideology, or as Cronon writes, the ‘fetishising of the sublime’ - of the Edenic, unfallen tropical rainforest and the roadless ‘Big Outside’ - serves to reproduce a cultural myth that wildness only exists where people don’t. Pleistocene rewilding works against this implausible peopleless landscape by making the wild an everywhere. Through its redefinition and re-spatialisation of the wild, rewilding serves to dissolve the strictures of such a disenchanting binary between humans and nature. Indeed, in 1976, Bataille, in opposition to the ‘utilitarian horrors of industrialised modernity’ envisioned a prehistoric people who did ‘not separate their godlike selves from animals, as we moderns do, but rather effaced the human image amidst powerful figures of animals akin to divinity.’ Rewilders, too, realise the shared experience of evolution between animal and human, one evidenced in ancient cave art and the myriad sports teams named after mammalia. Thus pleistocene rewilding is motivated by a desire to realise Carson’s adage: ‘man is a part of nature, and his war against nature is inevitably a war against himself.’

The nostalgic desires of Pleistocene rewilding precipitate from a disenchantment at humanity’s loss of values and ethos. Indeed, spaces of rewilding simulate a regression into a partial, idealised history, a heterotopia distanced both spatially and temporally from the disillusioned present. Such nostalgia is rooted in the writings of the American pioneers Thoreau and Turner. Writing in 19th Century America, Thoreau would imbue the wild with a sense of the spiritual sublime: ‘no pain here, no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future.’ The wild was a land wherein the rationalising influences of logic and knowledge briefly acceded to enchantment and myth. In similar vein, Turner would posit that American democracy and national character had evolved out of, and due to, the wild unsettled lands of the frontier and its first European settlers whom - freed from the feminising tendencies of civilisation - had uncovered the American mantra of rugged individualism. Such reminiscence resurfaces within the rhetoric of rewilding. In opposition to the ‘feminising tendencies’ of modernity and its ‘dull, empty hours’ Donlan et. al’s rhetoric is diffuse in a language of masculinity and sure-footedness, a language of the Frontier: ‘we can no longer accept a hands-off approach...are you willing to settle for an American wilderness that is severely depauperate relative to just 100 centuries ago?’ The attempt to realise, once again, the megafaunal species of North America thus draws on a long-held desire to ‘restore to American nature - and thus to the overall health, vitality and esteem of the people and nation - some of its lost grandeur.’

The proposed schemes of Pleistocene rewilding are rooted historically in an era of disillusionment, the post-war years where, as Ted Hughes would poignantly write, people had ‘had enough...enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods...the id...the angelic powers. They’d seen it all turn into death camps and atom bombs.’ Amidst such disillusion, the romantic fallacy of humanity’s originary innocence began to be criticised. The Homosapien of prehistory was no longer seen as a noble savage, but as a predator descended from animalia. Central to

such self-criticism was the Pleistocene 'Overkill Hypothesis' in which it was posited that sophisticated human hunters entered North America via the Bering land bridge and 'within a thousand years [had] exterminated the naive North American megafauna.' As Chrulew writes, throughout the 1960's 'the picture of Homo sapiens as a mentally unbalanced predator threatening an otherwise harmonious natural realm...became widely disseminated not only through novels', such as *The Silent Spring*, 'but also films, and television.' (Chrulew, 1996) Thus, out of the rhetoric of rewilding seeps a language of guilt, loss and redemption, Donlan writes: 'humans were probably at least partly responsible for the extinctions [and] by default or design, we will [continue to] constrain the breadth and future evolutionary complexity of life on Earth' (Donlan, 2004) Agamben furthers this sense of culpability by proposing that Pleistocene rewilding provides 'the ideal milieu for a drama of human origins', distinctly embroiled in the 'central mythical structure of Christianity' - the paradise, fall, redemption narrative.' As such, humanity is presently at the self-induced Fall, suspended in a limbo between the distant melancholias of a dewilded past and the utopian dreams of a rewilded future. The desire to rewild emerges from this 'zoologically impoverished' limbo land; Donlan, Zimov and the like, drawing motivation, not only from scientific curiosity, but so too from the very human impulses of self-disenchantment and subsequent atonement.