

Is rewilding a good idea?

"REWILDING" MEANS RESTORING animals—often predators such as bears and wolves—into wilderness areas. Supporters say rewilding gives certain species a greater chance of survival and increases the biodiversity of an ecosystem. Critics argue that rewilding is still experimental and it's impossible to know or understand its effects on an environment.

What do you think?

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THIS TOPIC. On the Internet, search:

- "Rewilding the American West"
- "Rewilding North America debates"
- "The paradox of rewilding"
- "8 big pros and cons of wolf reintroduction"
- "Wild Earth Guardians"



YES FROM OUR READERS
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■ We, mankind, are constantly displacing animals in the name of progress and we need to be far more aware of the effects on the wild animal population.

—Dave Pedegana

■ I think if they are able to live independently and under protection from poachers and hunters, then yes. As a human being, I would rather be free than penned up.

—Sandi Hocamp

■ Humans were foolish and irresponsible by eliminating them from their original habitat and now we must correct this selfish wrong.

—Scottie Marvel

NO FROM OUR READERS
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■ Rewilding apex predators will have a very extensive ripple effect. What will they eat? Is there enough room for natural competition, without having hikers, joggers and trash cans or ranch animals becoming targets? This needs extensive research before we intervene inappropriately.

—Maria E. Feny-Aredes

■ Wolves just killed 19 elk cows and young in Yellowstone. They didn't eat a single one. This is not working as they intended.

—Vaughn Koopman

■ If they were raised in captivity: no. They become dependent on humans. [It's like] serving them up on a silver platter.

—Marie Ann Purdy

YES FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



John Davis works with Wildlands Network (wildlandsnetwork.org) and The Rewilding Institute (rewilding.org).

REWILDING IS OUR best hope for stemming the mass extinction crisis that threatens half the species inhabiting Earth today.

Simply stated, rewilding entails restoring wild nature on a grand scale: bringing back key species we have thoughtlessly eradicated, reviving essential ecological processes like pollination and carbon storage, and reconnecting habitats so wildlife can move safely through the landscape. Rewilding emphasizes the recovery of large carnivores—gray and red wolves, cougars, jaguars, grizzly bears, wolverines—that were driven out by people, but that scientists now recognize as being vital to the health of our natural communities. If we restore such wide-ranging carnivores and protect the wild pathways they need to survive, we enhance the diversity of life on our planet, create strongholds against unwanted invasive species and nourish the natural environment that supports our own population, too.

In practice, rewilding means bald eagles, peregrine falcons and California condors returning from the brink of extinction; gray wolves restoring riparian habitats in Yellowstone National Park; and reintroduced red wolves regulating deer herds in North Carolina.

Rewilding also means grizzly bears grazing Rocky Mountain prairies for the first time in decades, Mexican jaguars hunting javelinas in Arizona's Sky Islands and cougars reclaiming old haunts in the Badlands and Black Hills of the Dakotas.

And rewilding means wild salmon once again running rivers after dams are removed, and native forests reclaiming abandoned agricultural lands while ecologically sustainable farming provides us with wholesome food and fiber.

In North America, rewilding advocates are collaborating with communities to restore wildlife in wilderness areas throughout the East and West, piecing together conservation and recreation corridors along the Pacific crest, Rocky and Appalachian mountains, Great Plains, north woods and southeast coastal plain.

Working with our neighbors—both human and wild—we can restore North America's great natural heritage for the future. **C**

NO FROM EXPERTS IN THE FIELD



Martha F. Hoopes is associate professor of biological sciences at Mount Holyoke College (mtholyoke.edu).

THE UNIQUE ASPECT of rewilding involves introducing new species, usually top predators and important plant-eaters, with the hope of restoring ecosystem functions that operated during the Pleistocene epoch, before humans ate the big animals. It's this aspect that makes me very nervous.

In a simple food chain, we expect predators to eat herbivores, which in turn eat plants. Without the predators, the herbivore numbers swell and the plant abundances can dwindle. So, if we are losing native predators or herbivores, restoring them may help restore balance to our natural systems. But what if the predators and herbivores disappeared thousands of years ago from a world with different climates, soils and communities? And what if we replace them with modern substitutes from another continent?

Real ecosystems are complex, which is why rewilding gives me nightmares about invasive species. The Nile perch, a top fish predator, destroyed hundreds of unique species of fish after it was introduced to Lake Victoria. When we research a pest to find the best exotic species to control it, we often make mistakes and cause negative effects on native species (try Googling "cane toads"). If we choose rewilding species specifically because they can restructure systems, we should expect any miscalculations to have fantastically big non-target effects.

Rewilding schemes often focus on reintroducing predators or keystone species (the species without which a system cannot survive). But reintroducing keystones doesn't make sense because any currently functioning system must have its keystones or the system would already have imploded. In fact, rewilding introductions could have devastating non-target effects on current keystones.

Finally, predators can have the devastating effects of the Nile perch, but they also can run afoul of humans. We are the new top predators in many systems, and predators from other continents scare us, which means we kill them or fight the conservation policy, neither of which leads to success. **C**

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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