

GEORGE MONBIOT

Feral

*Searching for Enchantment on the
Frontiers of Rewilding*



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If you find yourself in the area and ask Welsh speakers how to find the places I have mentioned, you are likely to be met with some very odd looks.

In the descriptive passages I have tended to use imperial measurements. When discussing scientific findings I have reverted to the metric system.

I

Raucous Summer

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core*

William Butler Yeats
The Lake Isle of Innisfree

Every time I lifted off a turf, the same thing appeared: a white comma, curled in the roots of the grass. I picked one up. It had a small ginger head and tiny legs. Its skin was stretched so tight that it seemed about to burst at the segments. In the tail I could see the indigo streak of its digestive tract. I guessed that it was the larva of a cockchafer, a bronze-backed beetle that swarms in early summer. I watched it twitching for a moment, then I put it in my mouth.

As soon as it broke on my tongue, two sensations hit me like bullets. The first was the taste. It was sweet, creamy, faintly smoky, like alpine butter. The second was the memory. I knew immediately why I had guessed it was good to eat. I stood in my garden, sleet drilling into the back of my neck, remembering.

It had taken me a moment, when I woke, to realize where I was. Above my head a blue tarpaulin rippled and snapped in the breeze. I could hear the pumps working, so I must have overslept. I swung my legs over the edge of the hammock and sat blinking in the bright light, gazing across the devastated land. The men were already up to their waists in water, spraying the gravel banks with high-pressure hoses. There had been some shootings in the night, but I could not see any bodies.

The images of the past few weeks crowded my mind. I remembered Zé, the serial killer who owned the airstrip at Macarão, taking his gunmen into the bar to liven things up, and the man who had been carried out with a hole the size of an apple in his chest. I thought of João, a *mestizo* from the north-east of Brazil, who had spent ten years crossing the Amazon on foot, walking as far as the mines in Peru and Bolivia, before cutting through the forests for another 2,000 miles to come here. 'I have killed only three men in my life,' he told me, 'and all the deaths were necessary. But I would kill that many again if I stayed here for a month.'

I recalled the man who had shown me the strange swelling on his calf. When I looked closely I saw that the flesh was writhing with long yellow maggots. I remembered the Professor, with his neat black beard, gold-rimmed spectacles and intense, ascetic manner, the cynical genius who managed the biggest claim for its scarcely literate owner. Before he came here he had, he said, been Director of the University of Rondônia.

But above all I thought of the man the other miners called Papillon. Blond, muscular, with an Asterix moustache, he towered over the small dark people who had been driven here by poverty and land-theft. He was one of the few, barring the bosses, the traders, the pimps and the owners of the airstrips, who had come to this hell through choice. Before he joined the goldrush the Frenchman had worked as an agricultural technician in the south of Brazil. Now, having found nothing, he was trapped in the forests of Roraima hundreds of miles from the nearest town, as destitute as the others. Here was a man who had leapt over the edge, who had abandoned comfort and certainty for a life of violent insecurity. His chances of coming out alive, solvent and healthy were slight. But I was not convinced that he had made the wrong choice.

I cleaned my teeth, picked up my notebook, then stepped out over the mud and gravel. The temperature was rising and in the surrounding forest the racket of yelps and whistles and trills was dying away. It was now three weeks since Barbara, the Canadian woman with whom I was working, had found a way through the police cordon at Boa Vista airport, and had shoved us, unrecorded, onto a flight to the mines. It felt like months. We had watched the miners tearing out the

veins of the forest: the river valleys whose sediments were paved with gold. We had seen evidence of the one-sided war some of them were waging against the local Yanomami people, and the physical and cultural collapse of the communities they had invaded. We had heard the gunfire that came from the woods every night, as bandits waylaid the miners, thieves were executed, or men who had struck lucky fought over the gold they had found. In the six months since the main rush began here, 1,700 of the 40,000 miners had been shot dead. Fifteen per cent of the Yanomami had died of disease.

Now, because of the international scandal the invasion had caused, the new Brazilian government was clearing the mines, and moving the miners into enclaves in other parts of the Yanomami's land. From there, they knew, they could re-invade their old claims as soon as the rest of the world lost interest. The federal police had cut the supply lines: no planes had landed on the dirt airstrips for several days. The miners were using the last of their diesel and preparing to move. The police were supposed to have arrived the previous day, to confiscate weapons in advance of the expulsions, and the men had spent the morning moving in and out of the forest, burying their guns in plastic sheeting. I had stayed to watch, but the police had not come. Barbara had – Jesus, where the hell was Barbara?

She had set off yesterday to find a Yanomami village in the mountains and said she would be back that night. But no one had seen her. I cast around, through the shanties and bars the miners had erected, among the groups of men in the bottom of the pits, without success. I found my friend Paulo, a mechanic who had defended the indigenous people in arguments with the other miners, and we struck up the valley to look for her. The river ran orange and dead, choked by the forest clay disturbed by the mines. Around it, the valley was a wasteland of pits, spoil heaps and toppled trees. The miners who worked a stake called Junior Blefé told us that Barbara had passed through the previous day but had not returned. A man with a drinker's face and a black eye knew how to find the village and agreed to guide us. We set off, running, into the mountains.

Soon after we entered the darkness of the forest we began to find the prints of Barbara's plimsolls, a day old, overlain by the naked tracks of the Yanomami. I kept my eyes on the ground, but every so

often Paulo would stop and shout. 'Look at that water, look at those trees: so beautiful, isn't that beautiful?' I would stand and gaze for a moment, and see trees weighed down above clear water by moss and epiphytes, damselflies pausing in spots of light.

We ran on, following Barbara's footprints, slipping on the clay path. By midday we started to climb steeply; my breath came as if drawn through a sheet. Soon I saw light ahead of us: we were reaching the top of a mountain. From its crest we saw women on the far side of the valley, dressed only in loincloths, moving through banana groves, carrying baskets of fruit. Hills stepped away into silence, forested, undisturbed. We remained hidden among the trees for a few minutes, then we walked down to the lap of the valley and up into the gardens, calling out in Portuguese that we were friends. They stood still and watched us come close. I put out my hands and they shook them with shy grins.

'White woman,' I said. 'Have you seen the white woman?' I mimed Barbara's height and long hair.

They laughed and pointed up the slope behind them, into the forest. We began to run again, over the mountain and down into the next valley. We stumbled, exhausted, along the valley floor, tripping on roots, blundering into trees. We turned a corner of the path and stopped.

In the glade beside a stream a crowd of people sat or knelt, the honey of their skins cooled by the stained-glass light of the forest. The women wore feathers in their ears, the painted spots and stripes of wildcats; and jaguar's whiskers: stems of dried grass piercing their noses and cheeks. In the middle of the circle, radiant as a flower in the green dark of the forest, was Barbara.

She turned and smiled. 'Glad you could make it.'

The young Yanomami people led us along the path until we came to their *malocas*: round communal houses thatched almost to the ground with palm leaves. I took off my shirt and shoes – everyone else was nearly naked – and sat down. Children clustered around me, grinning and giggling, hiding their faces when I looked at them. They tugged at the hairs in my armpits: the Yanomami do not possess them. Someone gave me a plug of green leaves, and when I pushed it under my lip and sucked I forgot that I was hungry.

A young man came through the crowd and gestured that I was to help them build an extension to the communal *maloca*: they wanted me to climb to the top of the roof and tie on a tarpaulin they had been given by the miners. I stayed on the roof for a couple of hours, mending holes under his direction. When I came down I asked Barbara why he was so bossy.

'He's the chief,' she said.

'But he's only eighteen.'

She looked around. 'All the older men are dying or dead.'

In the living space of the *maloca*, the hammocks were filled with the sick. As I sat beside a feverish boy, two old women broke through the screen of banana leaves, shuffling on their haunches, roaring and sweeping sticks across the ground, their eyes screwed shut. I was hit on the ankles before I could get out of the way. The women stamped around the hammock, screaming, beating the air with their sticks.

The roaring continued for most of the day. I was later told that female faith healers were almost unknown among the Yanomami: only the absence of men could account for it. The old women led me to the hammock of a teenaged girl and showed me what I must do. I stamped and shouted, sweeping my arms through the air, scooping something from the surface of her body and pushing it away from the *maloca*. Urged on by the two women, I danced and yelled faster and louder, stamping and leaping over the hammock, until I almost fainted and fell into the arms of the healers.

When I had recovered and washed in the stream, the women brought me food laid out on a banana leaf: baked plantains, toadstools and beetle grubs, foetally curled, still writhing. My hand hovered over the leaf. 'Go on,' they gestured. I picked up a grub and opened my mouth.

I leant on my spade, staring at the ground. On that raw December day soon after I had arrived in Wales, I was struck by the smallness of this life. Somehow – I am not quite sure how it happened – I had found myself living a life in which loading the dishwasher presented an interesting challenge.

The invasion of Roraima, which I had witnessed almost twenty years before, represents everything I hate. The miners, many of whom

had been expelled from their own lands in the north-east of Brazil by businessmen and corrupt officials, were driven to the mines by poverty and desperation. But those who had organized it, who had the capital to build the airstrips and buy the machinery, were driven to kill and destroy by greed. Had the government of Brazil not changed, had the miners not, after several more months of procrastination, been expelled from the Yanomami's land, the tribe would have gone the same way as most of those in the Americas: to extinction. The old government knew this. Genocide was not its intention: simply an unavoidable, and unregretted, consequence of its policy.

And yet, even while I stayed in the goldmines and experienced the horrors of the invasion, I was drawn to what I hated. The mines exploded the metaphors by which we live. In the rich nations we trade in ciphers for gold, and seek them through specializations so extreme that we are in danger of losing many of our faculties. In the mines gold was gold, and the men got their hands dirty in all respects. Conflicts were resolved not through legal instruments or on the sofas of television studios, but by shoot-outs in the forest. It was rawer, wilder, more engaging than the life I had led; and the life I would lead thereafter.

J. G. Ballard reminded us that 'the suburbs dream of violence. Asleep in their drowsy villas, sheltered by benevolent shopping malls, they wait patiently for the nightmares that will wake them into a more passionate world.'¹ We still possess the fear, the courage, the aggression which evolved to see us through our quests and crises, and we still feel the need to exercise them. But our sublimated lives oblige us to invent challenges to replace the horrors of which we have been deprived. We find ourselves hedged by the consequences of our nature, living meekly for fear of provoking or damaging others. 'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.'²

Much of the social history of the past two centuries consists of the discovery, often grudging, that other people, whatever their language, colour, religion or culture, have similar needs and desires to ours. As mass communication has enabled those whose rights we formerly disregarded to speak for themselves, to explain the impacts on their lives of the decisions we make, we become increasingly constrained by a necessary regard for others. Just as potently, we now know that little

we do is without environmental consequence. The amplification of our lives by technology grants us a power over the natural world which we can no longer afford to use. In everything we do we must now be mindful of the lives of others, cautious, constrained, meticulous. We may no longer live as if there were no tomorrow.

There are powerful and growing movements in many nations of people who refuse to accept these constraints. They rebel against taxes, health and safety laws, the regulation of business, restrictions on smoking, speeding and guns, above all against environmental limits. Like the people who promoted the invasion of the Yanomami's lands, they kick against the prohibitive decencies we owe to others. They insist that they may swing their fists regardless of whose nose is in the way, almost as if it were a human right.

I have no desire to join these people. I accept the need for limitations, for a life of restraint and sublimation. But I realized, on that grey day in Wales, that I could not continue to live as I had done. I could not continue just sitting and writing, looking after my daughter and my house, running merely to stay fit, pursuing only what could not be seen, watching the seasons cycling past without ever quite belonging to them. I had offered too little to that life, the life of the spirit,

Which is not to be found in our obituaries
Or in memories draped by the beneficent spider
Or under seals broken by the lean solicitor
In our empty rooms³

I was, I believed, ecologically bored.

I do not romanticize evolutionary time. I have already lived beyond the lifespan of most hunter-gatherers. Without farming, sanitation, vaccination, antibiotics, surgery and optometry I would be dead by now. The outcome of mortal combat between me, myopically stumbling around with a stone-tipped spear, and an enraged giant aurochs is not hard to predict.

The study of past ecosystems shows us that whenever people broke into new lands, however rudimentary their technology and small their numbers, they soon destroyed much of the wildlife – especially the larger animals – that lived there. There was no state of grace, no

golden age in which people lived in harmony with nature. Neither do I wish to return to the hallows and gallows of the civilizations we have left behind.

Nor was it authenticity I sought: I do not find that a useful or intelligible concept. Even if it exists, it is by definition impossible to reach through striving. I wanted only to satisfy my craving for a richer, rawer life than I had recently lived. Yet somehow I had to reconcile this urge with the life I could not abandon: bringing up my child, paying my mortgage, respecting the rights and needs of other people, restraining myself from damaging the natural world. It was only when I stumbled across an unfamiliar word that I began to understand what I was looking for.

So young a word, yet so many meanings! By the time 'rewilding' entered the dictionary, in 2011,⁴ it was already hotly contested. When it was first formulated, it meant releasing captive animals into the wild. Soon the definition expanded to describe the reintroduction of animal and plant species to habitats from which they had been excised. Some people began using it to mean the rehabilitation not just of particular species, but of entire ecosystems: a restoration of wilderness. Anarcho-primitivists then applied the word to human life, proposing a wilding of people and their cultures. The two definitions of interest to me, however, differ slightly from all of these.

The rewilding of natural ecosystems that fascinates me is not an attempt to restore them to any prior state, but to permit ecological processes to resume. In countries such as my own, the conservation movement, while well intentioned, has sought to freeze living systems in time. It attempts to prevent animals and plants from either leaving or – if they do not live there already – entering. It seeks to manage nature as if tending a garden. Many of the ecosystems, such as heath and moorland, blanket bog and rough grass, that it tries to preserve are dominated by the low, scrubby vegetation which remains after forests have been repeatedly cleared and burnt. This vegetation is cherished by wildlife groups, which prevent it from reverting to woodland through intensive grazing by sheep, cattle and horses. It is as if conservationists in the Amazon had decided to protect the cattle ranches, rather than the rainforest.

Rewilding recognizes that nature consists not just of a collection of

species but also of their ever-shifting relationships with each other and with the physical environment. It understands that to keep an ecosystem in a state of arrested development, to preserve it as if it were a jar of pickles, is to protect something which bears little relationship to the natural world. This perspective has been influenced by some of the most arresting scientific developments of recent times.

Over the past few decades, ecologists have discovered the existence of widespread trophic cascades. These are processes caused by animals at the top of the food chain, which tumble all the way to the bottom. Predators and large herbivores can transform the places in which they live. In some cases they have changed not only the ecosystem but also the nature of the soil, the behaviour of rivers, the chemistry of the oceans and even the composition of the atmosphere. These findings suggest that the natural world is composed of even more fascinating and complex systems than we had imagined. They alter our understanding of how ecosystems function and present a radical challenge to some models of conservation. They make a powerful case for the reintroduction of large predators and other missing species.

While researching this book I have, with the help of the visionary forester Adam Thorogood, stumbled across an incendiary idea that seems to have been discussed nowhere but in a throwaway line in one scientific paper.⁵ I hope it might prompt a reassessment of how our ecosystems function, and of the extent to which they are perceived as natural. There is, we believe, powerful circumstantial evidence suggesting that many of our familiar European trees and shrubs have evolved to resist attacks by elephants. The straight-tusked elephant, related to the species that still lives in Asia today, persisted in Europe until around 40,000 years ago,⁶ a mere tick of evolution's clock. It was, most likely, hunted to extinction. If the evidence is as compelling as it seems, it suggests that this species dominated the temperate regions of Europe. Our ecosystems appear to be elephant-adapted.

Even so, I have no desire to try to re-create the landscapes or ecosystems that existed in the past, to reconstruct – as if that were possible – primordial wilderness. Rewilding, to me, is about resisting the urge to control nature and allowing it to find its own way. It involves reintroducing absent plants and animals (and in a few cases

culling exotic species which cannot be contained by native wildlife), pulling down the fences, blocking the drainage ditches, but otherwise stepping back. At sea, it means excluding commercial fishing and other forms of exploitation. The ecosystems that result are best described not as wilderness, but as self-willed, governed not by human management but by their own processes. *Rewilding has no end points, no view about what a 'right' ecosystem or a 'right' assemblage of species looks like. It does not strive to produce a heath, a meadow, a rainforest, a kelp garden or a coral reef. It lets nature decide.

The ecosystems that will emerge, in our changed climates, on our depleted soils, will not be the same as those which prevailed in the past. The way they evolve cannot be predicted, which is one of the reasons why this project enthalls. While conservation often looks to the past, rewilding of this kind looks to the future.

The rewilding of both land and sea could produce ecosystems, even in such depleted regions as Britain and northern Europe, as profuse and captivating as those that people now travel halfway around the world to see. One of my hopes is that it makes magnificent wildlife accessible to everyone.

I mentioned that there are two definitions of rewilding that interest me. The second is the rewilding of human life. While some primitivists see a conflict between the civilized and the wild, the rewilding I envisage has nothing to do with shedding civilization. We can, I believe, enjoy the benefits of advanced technology while also enjoying, if we choose, a life richer in adventure and surprise. Rewilding is not about abandoning civilization but about enhancing it. It is to 'love not man the less, but Nature more'.⁸

The consequences of abandoning a sophisticated economy, supported by high crop yields, would be catastrophic. Before farming began in Britain, for example, these islands appear to have supported a maximum of 5,000 people.⁹ Had they been evenly dispersed, each person would have occupied 54 square kilometres, an area slightly larger than the city of Southampton (which now houses 240,000 souls).¹⁰ This, it seems, was as many people as hunting and

* This term was coined by Jay Hansford Vest.⁷ It has been championed by Dr Mark Fisher, whose work has been influential in shaping this book.

gathering could sustain. (Even so, Mesolithic men and women severely reduced the numbers of large animals.) The fantasy entertained by some of the primitivists I have met, of returning to a hunter-gatherer economy, would first require the elimination of almost all human beings.

For the same reason I do not think that extensive rewilding should take place on productive land. It is better deployed in the places – especially in the uplands – in which production is so low that farming continues only as a result of the taxpayer's generosity. As essential services all over Europe (and in several other parts of the world) are cut through want of funds, farm subsidies in their current form surely cannot last much longer. Without them, it is hard to see how farming in these places can be sustained: for good or ill, it will gradually withdraw from the hills.

Some people see rewilding as a human retreat from nature; I see it as a re-involvement. I would like to see the reintroduction into the wild not only of wolves, lynx, wolverines, beavers, boar, moose, bison and – perhaps one day in the distant future – elephants and other species, but also of human beings. In other words, I see rewilding as an enhanced opportunity for people to engage with and delight in the natural world.

Feral also examines the lives we may no longer lead and the constraints – many of them necessary – that prevent us from exercising some of our neglected faculties. It explains how I have sought, within these constraints, to rewild my own life, to escape from ecological boredom. I am surely not alone in possessing an unmet need for a wilder life, and I suggest that this need might have caused a remarkable collective delusion, from which many thousands of people now suffer, that seems to be an almost perfect encapsulation of the desire for a fiercer, less predictable ecosystem.

If you are content with the scope of your life, if it is already as colourful and surprising as you might wish, if feeding the ducks is as close as you ever want to come to nature, this book is probably not for you. But if, like me, you sometimes feel that you are scratching at the walls of this life, hoping to find a way into a wider space beyond, then you may discover something here that resonates. I seek to challenge

our perceptions of our place in the world, of its ecosystems and of the means by which we might connect with them.

In doing so, I hope to encourage a positive environmentalism. The treatment of the earth's living systems in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has been characterized by destruction and degradation. Environmentalists, in seeking to arrest this carnage, have been clear about what people should not do. We have argued that certain freedoms – to damage, to pollute, to waste – should be limited. While there are good reasons for these injunctions, we have offered little in return. We have urged only that people consume less, travel less, live not blithely but mindfully, don't tread on the grass. Without offering new freedoms for which to exchange the old ones, we are often seen as ascetics, killjoys and prigs. We know what we are against; now we must explain what we are for.

Using parts of Wales, Scotland, Slovenia, Poland, East Africa, North America and Brazil as its case studies of good and bad practice, *Feral* proposes an environmentalism which, without damaging the lives of others or the fabric of the biosphere, offers to expand rather than constrain the scope of people's lives. It offers new freedoms in exchange for those we have sought to restrict. It foresees large areas of self-willed land and sea, repopulated by the beasts now missing from these places, in which we may freely roam.

Perhaps most importantly, it offers hope. While rewilding should not become a substitute for protecting threatened places and species, the story it tells is that ecological change need not always proceed in the same direction. Environmentalism in the twentieth century fore-saw a silent spring, in which the further degradation of the biosphere seemed inevitable. Rewilding offers the hope of a raucous summer, in which, in some parts of the world at least, destructive processes are thrown into reverse.

Nevertheless, like all visions, rewilding must be constantly questioned and challenged. It should happen only with the consent and enthusiasm of those who work on the land. It must never be used as an instrument of expropriation or dispossession. One of the chapters in this book describes some of the forced rewildings that have taken place around the world, and the human tragedies they have caused. Rewilding, paradoxically, should take place for the benefit of people,

to enhance the world in which we live, and not for the sake of an abstraction we call Nature.

Researching this book has been a great adventure: this is the most bewitching topic I have ever explored. It has taken me to wild places, brought me into contact with wild life and wild people. It has exposed me to some of the most riveting findings – in the fields of biology, archaeology, history and geography – I have yet encountered. It has wrought deep changes in my own life. At times investigating these issues has felt like stepping through the back of the wardrobe. This story begins slowly, with my efforts to engage more fully with the ecosystems on my doorstep, to discover in them something of the untamed spirit I would like to resurrect. If you would care to push past the coats, you can join me there.