

REWILDING AND FOOD SECURITY

The consequences of banishing farm livestock from marginal areas are complex, and may be regrettable, as SIMON FAIRLIE describes.

Wales, George Monbiot tells us in his new book *Feral*, imports seven times as much meat as it exports — the implication being that the sheep that occupy most Welsh mountainsides supply us with relatively little food. The matter is confirmed in the “*Can Britain Feed Itself?*” tables published in *The Land* Issue 4. The lamb and mutton currently produced on 3.6 million hectare of rough pasture, approximately 15 per cent of the land area of UK, represent about 1.5 per cent of our national diet. The Cambrian mountains close to his former home in Machynlleth, Monbiot claims, have been reduced to a desert in order to contribute to this paltry harvest.

If we were to get rid of most of the sheep from our “sheepwrecked” uplands, as Monbiot advocates, loss of that tiny amount of meat would be a small price to pay for the multiple benefits of rewilding and reforesting the landscape. Subsidised farming would be replaced by a more lucrative tourist economy. Since reforesting would reduce the risk of floods in lowland food producing areas, he reasons that “it is within the range of possibility that hill farming creates a net loss of food.”

All this is convincing enough, but there is one matter that Monbiot fails to address. That sevenfold influx of meat into Wales is supplied through an agricultural system that is widely regarded as unsustainable. It is dependent on chemical fertilisers derived from fossil fuels, on pesticides, on excessive irrigation, on GM crops, on a gas-guzzling distribution chain, and on imported animal feed, notably South American soya. How does rewilding square up with the perceived need for food sustainability, food security and food sovereignty?

The trap here is to view sheep as single function providers of a dedicated commodity, meat, rather than as animals that may have a number of roles to play in a balanced agricultural economy. To take the most obvious example, wool doesn't register in Monbiot's calculation because we now import so-called “fleeces”, made from plastic in sweat-shops in Bangladesh, but in a sustainable and equitable global economy it would make a comeback.

Sheep also play a role in bringing us the sunlight which would otherwise be hogged by a blanket of forest. If you have no grazing animals to keep trees down, then to admit sunlight on any scale you have to use either fossil fuels or fire, both of which are less sustainable than the “woolly mowers”. Wind turbines and solar farms are dependent upon keeping land open to wind and sunlight and so probably is the health of the human psyche. Of course trees are a “good thing”, but you can have too much of a good thing, whether that be trees or sheep.



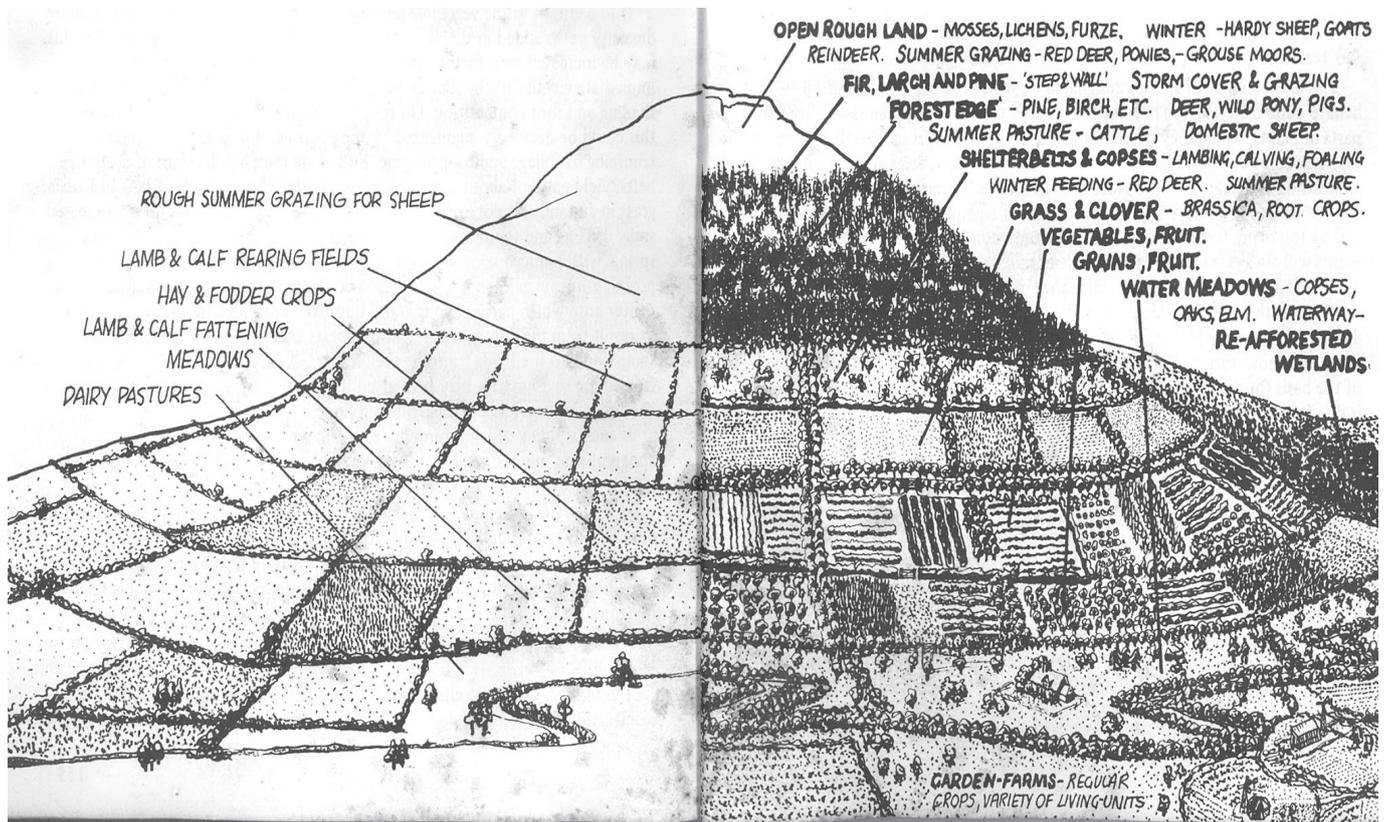
Thomas Compton

The Cambrian mountains in 1820. Already sheepwrecked?

But the most crucial role for sheep in many traditional agricultural economies has been to harness surplus nutrients from the *saltus* — the outlying wasteland too poor or distant to cultivate — and transfer them to the *ager*, the arable fields.¹ This is still the case in parts of France and other European countries where flocks are shepherded by day and brought back to the *bergerie* at night to deposit their manure. It used to be the case through much of Southern England where sheep were grazed on downland by day and folded at night on fallow arable land. In South Wiltshire in 1794 “the first and principal purpose for which sheep are kept ... is undoubtedly the dung of the sheep fold.” In Dorset in 1812 “the Sheep-Fold is held in as high estimation in this country as in any part of the world. It is considered by most of the farmers ... as an indispensable requisite in the cultivation of the arable land.” In Bedfordshire “the manure of sheep is worth a farthing each per sheep per night”.²

Nowadays, in Britain, sheep are rarely folded and never shepherded, since arable fields can be sprayed with artificial nitrogen and superphosphate. In the lowlands they are pastured continuously in enclosed fields. In upland areas they are dumped on a hillside and left to fend for themselves.

In fact it is likely that in many upland areas sheep never were folded for manuring purposes. I have no evidence for this happening in Wales, and the Board of Agriculture County Reports for England, published around 1800,³ tell us that Herdwicks and other sheep in Cumberland and Westmoreland were “un-shepherded” and let loose on the wastes and commons for most of the year, though they were often brought down to enclosed land before the snows came (a fact which those farmers claiming compensation for the loss of their sheep in the last winter's bad weather ought to mull over).



This illustration of an archetypal Welsh mountainside by Tony Farmer was originally published in *Land For the People*, edited by Herbie Girardet (Crescent Books, 1976). It depicts, on the left, what one might expect to see nowadays, and on the right what one might hope to see if people farmed the land intensively and organically. The triangle at the top, above the enclosed fields is the rough grazing area that is the main candidate for rewilding — Zone 5 in the permaculture classification. This area, in reality, is far bigger than represented here, since it could continue for miles on the other side of the mountain. Tony Farmer's projection has it stocked with a variety of semi-feral animals and plants, resulting in an increase in the biodiversity and the water retaining capacity of the land, without any conscious attempt to "rewild".

The reason why they were never folded in upland areas is not because there was no arable cultivation. There was plenty throughout Wales, and there is evidence of fields having been cultivated on the rewilded farm that George Monbiot visits in his book. It is more likely because these upland areas followed a form of "convertible husbandry" where enclosed fields were grazed for ten years or more and then were ploughed up for a spell of arable production before being put back to grass. This cycle could provide enough fertility for the modest output of grain necessary to maintain the local economy without resorting to the more labour intensive business of bringing in nutrients from the outlying *saltus*. This was during a period when England and Wales were relatively underpopulated with only 5.5 million people in 1750, while the population of France was 22 million. Many of France's mountain areas had experienced population pressure for several centuries: hence the innumerable terraces carved out of Mediterranean hillsides.

The most reasonable conclusion from all of this is that sheep are used to retrieve nutrients from outlying areas when other less labour intensive methods of fertilising arable fields are insufficient to meet demand. The population of England and Wales is now 56 million, 10 times what it was in 1750 and it would be something of a challenge to provide for the needs of this sizeable population through organic production. We would need every bit of fertility we could lay our hands on, not to mention the meat and wool, and it is unlikely that we could afford to let vast tracts of what is currently sheep pasture revert to wilderness.

In this sense any widespread rewilding of upland Britain is probably dependent upon the continued existence of industrial agriculture and in particular chemical fertilisers. Or conversely, one argument in favour of intensive chemical agriculture is that it allows a measure of rewilding. This is the basis of the "spare not share" school of thought, which argues that it is wiser to intensify agricultural production in certain areas through the use of chemicals, plastic coverings, irrigation, GM crops etcetera in order to "spare" land for nature elsewhere, than to attempt to "share" land with nature through more benign farming methods such as organics and low input agriculture.

The terminology comes from a number of sober academic studies but the philosophy is vociferously advocated by right wing think tanks, notably the Hudson Institute under its food policy director Dennis Avery, a global warming sceptic and long-standing critic of organic farming.⁴ Needless to say, the Hudson Institute has been funded by Monsanto, Cargill, Con-Agra, Dupont, Syngenta and the rest of the agro-industrial complex.⁵ The apotheosis of the "spare not share" approach can be found in James Lovelock's deeply pessimistic *Revenge of Gaia*, which seriously proposes that the world should be divided into three distinct zones: an area of intensive highly productive agriculture, a megalopolis where the masses are fed on "junk food made from any convenient organism" and a wilderness "given entirely to Gaia and left to evolve wholly without interference or management".

The first step on the road to this dystopia is to get rid of inefficient hill-farmers. Monbiot, fortunately, is disturbed

to realise that his enthusiasm for rewilding involves the destruction of livelihoods and communities, and proposes a solution that pays farmers to stop farming, but allows those who wish to farm to continue to do so.

Given the vigour of his polemic against sheep farming, the rewilding that Monbiot proposes for the uplands is modest — no more than a voluntary reduction in the number of sheep to allow marginal land to return to “tumultuous nature” which in most cases (provided the niche occupied by sheep is not filled by deer) would mean more trees. You do not have to be an enthusiast of rewilding to see that this might be salutary.

What is worrying about Monbiot’s book is that any further publicity and credence that it gives to the rewilding agenda may slide down to the more productive lowlands where the trade off between rewilding and food security is a good deal more significant. This is certainly not what Monbiot intends; he states clearly: “I would argue against a mass rewilding of high-grade farmland, because of the threat this could present to global food supplies”.

Nonetheless there are already schemes that call themselves rewilding occurring on much more productive land, for example in formerly drained fenland, and on the Knepp estate in Sussex, which Dave Bangs has described as a “rich man’s playground” and a “fortress of relatively preserved nature.”⁶ The current enthusiasm for wildflower meadows, feral hedges, abandoned field margins and so on lies somewhere along a seamless spectrum of wildness that leads from intensive monoculture to total wilderness. Rewilding is a seductive concept to people who may have little understanding of how agriculture works. It is promoted by professional conservationists whose brief does not include balancing the benefits of environmentally friendly management against the need for food sovereignty and food security. If and when enthusiasm for rewilding spreads across the more intensively farmed parts of the country, the trade-off between wildness and productivity will become increasingly significant.

For example, ‘wildflower meadows’ are an understandable reaction to the current pressure on dairy farmers to feed their stock on heavily fertilised ryegrass silage and maize, rather than on the more or less naturally occurring hay crop. However, the managers of these meadows are advised, and sometimes bribed, by conservationists to deliberately impoverish their fields by removing biomass without replacing the nutrients, and in some cases to bulldoze off the top-soil and cart it away. They are told to sow a plant called yellow rattle in their grass crop because it is parasitic on grass: according to an early 20th century botanical manual yellow rattle “comes in the first place because the herbage is poor, while the herbage is poorer for it’s coming.”⁷ Much of the hay from wildflower meadows is currently burnt, composted or mulched because it is mown too late to be of any value to livestock.



Sheep may one day be banned from their mountain strongholds, but they are increasingly being welcomed as urban lawnmowers. Here 24 Ouessant sheep are maintaining a French electricity grid installation, and another small flock is currently cropping the grass in a park in the centre of Paris.

All of this is a deliberate waste of resources to secure environmental benefits and yet we import soya to feed ruminants. The more we rewild in Britain, the more food we will need to import and the more we are likely to *dewild* land in countries that provide us with substitute food. Conserving our natural environment at the expense of other people’s is a neo-colonialist agenda. There is an environmental price to pay for having so foolishly allowed England to become one of the most overpopulated countries in the world, but that price should not be paid by people and environments in other countries.

Nonetheless, while rewilding in lowland Britain does pose a potential threat to our ability to produce food, its impact should not be exaggerated. “We lose little” says George Monbiot “by allowing nature to persist in small fallow corners and unexploited pockets of even the most fertile places.” In any case, there is a far more pressing problem: well over a million acres are devoted to the rearing of horses that do no work at all. Instead of pulling carts they get carted around in horseboxes pulled by umpteen horse power Land Rovers. The best way to rectify this idiocy is to introduce a law forbidding anyone who keeps a horse to own a car or a tractor. It would be good if the rewilding lobby started campaigning for this.

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3. *Ibid*, vol 1, pp 200 and 239.
4. Eg Rhys Green et al, “Farming and the Fate of Wild Nature”, *Science*, 307, 2005, pp 550-555.
5. www.hudson.org ; see also en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson_Institute
6. Dave Bangs, “The Richness of Nature”, *The Land* 4, 2007.-8
7. F Edward Hulme, *Familiar Wild Flowers*, Cassell 1902, vol 1 p157.