

# Re-wilding or *hyperwilderness* - plus ca change?

Mark Haywood

Centre for Landscape & Environmental Arts Research

University of Cumbria

E-mail: [mark.haywood@cumbria.ac.uk](mailto:mark.haywood@cumbria.ac.uk)

Re-wilding is an important way in which certain land managers, nature conservationists, national park authorities and others envision the future state of landscapes and nature reserves under their control. In some instances areas of land are allowed to revert 'naturally' to form some type of 'semi-natural' landscape. In others, specific land management practices, sometimes classed as 'traditional' are reintroduced to establish the preferred state of wildness. I have coined the term *hyperwilderness* to describe private re-wilding ventures which simulate 'wilderness' in an artificial tourist driven context. In South Africa, particularly in the malaria free zones of the Eastern Cape, there has been a rapid recent increase in the number of private re-wilding projects as white farmers shift from cattle farming to various forms of tourism based on indigenous wildlife. Inevitably this has also led to rising social tensions - Provincial Land Affairs and Agriculture Minister, Gugile Nkwinti has described game farms as "elitist" and said there had been a 're-colonisation of the countryside'. [Groenewald: 2005]. The paper considers the history of re-wilding sites based on former 1820 Settler farms, or 'manors'. Many Settlers migrated to South Africa after losing their traditional commonlands in the British Isles through the Enclosure Acts and the Highland Clearances. In the latter peasants were evicted from their smallholdings in order to create large grouse and deer hunting estates. In South Africa re-wilding, whilst ecologically desirable, can appear socially contentious by attempting to erase the history of colonial occupation, through yet another manifestation of the colonial gaze. The land reverts to indigenous bush, indigenous species are reintroduced, the farmer becomes invisible as the farm disappears, but so too do indigenous people, who are either excluded by game fences and economics, or become semi-invisible servants working in lodges which are often Hollywood inspired versions of colonial fantasy architecture.

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Re-wilding is an increasingly important means by which land managers, nature conservationists, national park authorities and others envision the future state of landscapes and nature reserves under their control. In some instances areas of land are allowed to revert 'naturally' to form a 'semi-natural' landscape; in other cases certain land management practices, sometimes termed 'traditional', are reintroduced to establish the preferred state of wildness. Both forms of landscape may be usefully viewed as 'hybridised' (after Bhabha).

Academic analyses of re-wilding usually focus on state sponsored initiatives that possess an earth sciences, or ecological perspective, but the following distinctive characteristics of private re-wilding offer useful insights to researchers of visual culture:-

1. These ventures are more politically contentious
2. Their marketing as luxury as tourist destinations facilitates semiotic and iconological deconstruction
3. Small scale, comparative autonomy and lack of bureaucracy enable these ventures to develop more dynamically than large, state sponsored initiatives.
4. Comparison with historical notions of wilderness highlights the term's shifting status and meaning.

CLEAR, the Centre for Landscape & Environmental Arts Research, initiates transdisciplinary projects where artists collaborate with researchers from other disciplines. My account arises out of preliminary research for a new project, *Wildness and Hyperwilderness* which will consider contemporary emotional and intellectual investment in 'wilderness' through a series of paired case studies. These include two complexly linked instances of 're-wilding' - one in the north of Scotland, the other in the Eastern Cape.

I intend to use historical, iconological and philosophical analyses, but will begin with etymology. The ecologist George Peterken coined two precise, but unwieldy alternatives to 'wilderness': *past-naturalness* - the non-recoverable state of terrain before humans modified it, and

'future-naturalness' - what it might become if it ceased being a managed landscape. [Mabey, 1997:185]

I prefer to term the latter *formal re-wilding*, because even when not 'managed', these are intentional products, with monitoring and formally defined boundaries. This neologism also generates a complementary antonym, *informal re-wilding*, to describe unplanned manifestations of *wildness*, for example where wild animals infiltrate, or contest urban space. We intend to study both forms of re-wilding, but the present account only concerns *formal re-wilding*. I have also coined a useful term for private re-wilding tourist ventures that simulate 'wilderness' - *hyperwilderness* - a term whose Baudrillardian allusion highlights their simulation and inherent artificiality.

When parts of Eurasia were first distinguished as wilderness, the known, cultivated, or utile became divorced from, and privileged over, the wild, 'natural' and (perhaps most significantly) the 'uncontrolled'. The Classical world's attitude to wilderness is illustrated by Siukonen who notes that Calcidius's commentary on Plato's cosmology *Timaeus*, used *silva* (the Latin word for 'forest') to describe primaeval matter still in its unformed stage. [Siukonen, 1996:1] Calcidius did so because the uncultivated was so irrelevant to the Roman mind that a specific word didn't exist to describe this condition; the lacuna survives in the modern Italian equivalent, *scene di disordine o confusione*. [Nash, 2001:1-2] In fact all contemporary Romance languages still lack a word for wilderness - they can only describe it through absence or negation. Perhaps similar inferences may be drawn from the origins of 'veldt', as virtually the entire Netherlands had become farmland by the early seventeenth century. The etymological roots of wilderness came from Norse and fed into Mediaeval English, where by the twelfth century it had come to mean a 'place of uncontrolled animals', [ibid.]



Figure 1

Thomas Cole, *Daniel Boone at the Door of his Cabin on the Great Osage Lake, Kentucky*, 1826.

Wilderness was where civilised man was *in absentia* and it is all too easy to see how such polar opposition informed later colonial discourse. Wilderness and the colonial project became

inextricably linked in an increasingly complex series of associations. Here too lie the seeds of related values and perceptions - wilderness as 'other', or as a form of Kantian unknowable

'Freinatur' that could only be imagined at its transitional moment of 'becoming'. Artists had no reason to depict wilderness before the arrival of civilised man, whereas the 'discovery' that initiated its transformation into 'landscape' was an event to be celebrated. For several centuries famous explorers' triumphant moments were a popular subject among artists in many nations.

'Landscape' may be regarded as an antonym of wilderness for it refers to a site of cultural and emotional occupation that cannot be wholly 'natural'. Historically the 'discovery' of wilderness was usually the first step in a transformative process of invasion, mapping, colonisation and ultimately, assimilation that turned it into one's 'own' landscape. Nineteenth century South Africa and North American painters frequently portrayed colonists in relaxed poses, at ease in terrain that was being turned into landscape. The title of Cole's painting indicates that though the lake retained a form of its traditional Indian name, it was now firmly located in the recently created state of 'Kentucky'.

'Wilderness' is a fluid, multivalent term - despite all Britain's landscapes having been shaped by five or six millennia of continuous human exploitation, tourist brochures often describe Scotland's Cairngorm mountains as 'the last great wilderness in Europe'. [Gilchrist, 2005] However US geographer, John Rennie Short (whose definition of 'wilderness' infers an absence of military-spatial control) wrote that since the suppression of the Highland Rebellion in 1746 there has been 'no wilderness on the British mainland that corresponds to the American West, or the Australian outback'. [Short, 2001:57] This was because the Highlanders' defeat at Culloden led to an English army of occupation and the Ordnance Survey of the Highlands, which mapped the region for the first time. Today large scale Ordnance Survey maps of the UK are used in all manner of outdoor recreational activities, but many users are unaware that *ordnance* originally referred to artillery, and was derived from *ordinance*, 'an authoritative order'. [OED] The topographical artist Paul Sandby, who worked on the Survey and later co-founded the picturesque movement, set Highland elements such as clansmen and Highland cattle into English landscapes as tropes of 'wildness' (imitating Salvator Rosa's earlier use of Neapolitan *banditti*).

The Highland tribes had survived on banditry for centuries, but this was ended by the English army of occupation. [Britannica] In 1775 Dr Johnson visited the Highlands and noted that 'where formerly there was an insurrection, there is now a wilderness.' [Short, 1991:57-8] In the century after the 'Forty-Five' the hardships that had directly ensued from defeat, were as naught compared to those brought by the Highland Clearances that *created* Johnson's 'wilderness' through the forcible removal of the peasantry and their replacement with sheep, conifers, or deer and grouse hunting estates. Today the Highlands of Scotland is one of the few places in the world whose population is significantly lower than it was two centuries ago.

Many dispossessed Highlanders emigrated to colonise the 'wildernesses' of the Southern hemisphere. This sad irony leads to the central part of my account, the export/import cycle of occupation, dispossession and wilderness tropes between Scotland and South Africa, as embodied in the intertwined histories of Alladale Wilderness Lodge in Ross & Cromarty and the Shamwari Game Reserve in the Eastern Cape. The Alladale Lodge was built in 1877 on what, is by UK standards, a very large shooting estate. In 2003 it was purchased by English millionaire Paul Lister, who wanted a location in which to realise his personal fantasy of 'creating a wilderness'. [BBC] He controversially plans to reverse the flow of history by re-introducing long extinct native predators such as the Eurasian lynx, the brown bear and the grey wolf.



Figure 2  
Alladale Wilderness Lodge (*photo Haywood*)

Lister's inspiration was Shamwari, [ibid.] formed in 1990 by a merger of four 1820 Settler farms. Exhausted farmland was returned to thornbush, but the modest farmhouses were converted into extravagant colonial fantasies that owed more to Hollywood than history. Internal fences were removed and the reserve's perimeter redefined by a game fence. Indigenous ruminants were reintroduced and, when well established, lions and leopard were added. Tourist money flooded in.

The majority of South Africans whose ancestors were not 1820 Settlers can be forgiven if they forget that 'English' in this context was an indicator of language, not ethnicity. The five thousand 'English' Settlers were economic migrants from marginal regions around the British Isles (including Scotland and Ireland), many of whom had lost their livelihoods through the Clearances and Enclosure Acts. Many were also unwitting pawns, lured by cheap assisted passages and false promises to create a frontier buffer zone between the Cape Colony and the lands of the Xhosa. One inducement was a government originated myth that the region was similar to the Scottish Border country and a lot of Settlers took sacks of oats to fruitlessly sow in soils that are today best known for their pineapples.

An equally unlikely import was the word 'manor', the official term for the Settlers' plots of land. Like 'wilderness' it had originated in mediaeval England, where it was a unit of land, a feudal lordship consisting of the lord's demesne (estate) and land rented by his tenants. Thus in a perverse etymological twist dispossessed peasants who had lost their lands through the British Enclosure Acts and Highland Clearances, became 'lords of the manor' and began to turn wilderness into their 'countryside'(of course it is 'countryside', not urbanisation that is invariably the true enemy of wilderness). The Settler farmers' conquest of the Eastern Cape was conceptually aided by artists who imported European academic conventions of representation. Northern hemisphere painters' fondness for evoking sublime spiritual values through vast empty landscapes, when exported to the far vaster landscapes of the South, inadvertently created the impression of uninhabited wildernesses that were ripe for occupation.

This aesthetic assimilation was often further assisted by academic training which advocated a Gainsborough inspired palette conceived for depicting verdant English landscapes. The artificiality of aesthetic tropes of the picturesque and Romanticism facilitated the process of

physical appropriation, initially transforming alien 'other' into ever less exotic familiar by endeavouring to make the landscape around the colonial homestead virtually indistinguishable from that of the mother country. As if these forces were not sufficient, the influential nineteenth century English art critic, John Ruskin actually advocated the projection of British landscape onto the 'blank' canvases of the colonies by urging the nation to seize 'every piece of fruitful waste ground she can set her foot on.' [Darby, 2000:157]



Figure 3  
Mark Haywood, *Mappa Mundi: the Prospect from Bias Cross*, 2002.



Figure 4  
William Henry Simpson, *Driving Ostriches in the Twilight*, c.1900

I'll briefly consider one such probably painting, possibly made a few kilometres from Shamwari, which successfully merges British and African landscapes. As an alumnus of the Royal College of Art, who moved to South Africa as Professor of Fine Art at Rhodes, I feel some empathy with William Henry Simpson, who trained at the Royal Academy and migrated in 1881 to teach at the then Grahamstown School of Art. Despite being a fine painter of botanical studies and one of the few colonial painters to portray indigenous plants in their natural settings, this landscape conspicuously lacks the aloes that dot all the hills around Grahamstown. Aloes are so synonymous with the Eastern Cape that they now feature on the province's licence plates. Even if aloes had not been present at this spot, one might expect such a painter to add a few, both for their strong sculptural form and to enhance the sense of locale. One might also expect a botanical painter to be particularly drawn to the aloe's tall flower stalk, whose red petals glow with spectacular intensity in the red light of the setting sun.

A possible explanation for their omission is that whereas Simpson's botanical studies recorded Linnaean differences and made alien 'other' knowable (or at least measurable), *Driving Ostriches* demonstrates *erasure* of significant difference. The viewer is transported from the Eastern Cape to an exoticised, but ultimately familiar, Scottish heath, or English moor. In addition for me (though I would not posit this as a formal reading) the mounted Settlers driving once unruly ostriches in brisk orderly fashion behind the Xhosa farm hand (in ragged European dress) evoke the suppression of the Scottish Highlands. A more sustainable reading might be that the painting hints at a local longing for control and order in a region which had experienced been nine Frontier Wars between 1779 and 1878, and was currently highly aware of the Anglo-Boer War being conducted to the north.

Present-day *hyperwildernesses* such as Shamwari differ crucially from the condition of wilderness, because no matter how environmentally authentic, re-wilding cannot erase the cultural memory of what remains hybridised as a historical 'landscape'. Shamwari and Alladale are sites of colonial occupation whose present owners have returned, or want to return them to a notional state of wilderness. Given the comparatively small size of these reserves this can only be done through spatial control and constant stock monitoring that maintains a stable balance of predator, ruminant and grazing. Ironically it is in these latter respects that these private ventures most resemble wildernesses such as Antarctica, which we are now endeavouring to preserve through restricted access and close scientific monitoring for signs of change.

The rising tide of wilderness appreciation over the past century and a half has been in inverse proportion to its increasing scarcity. In his influential study, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Frazer Nash noted,

As a rule nations that have wilderness do not want it, and those that want it do not have it. Nature appreciation is a "full stomach" phenomenon that is confined to the rich, urban and sophisticated. [Nash 2000:343]

Whereas wilderness appreciation is inadvertently elitist, the private *hyperwilderness* is actively marketed as an exclusive tourist commodity. Appreciation and preservation of wilderness has been primarily driven by wealthy individuals and so, not surprisingly the new *hyperwildernesses* rely on luxury tourism. Shamwari now describes itself as 'one of the world's most exclusive game reserves', proudly citing the late Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed as being among its early visitors.

From the Swiss Alps to the Kruger it has been repeatedly demonstrated repeatedly that local peoples are the least appreciative of local wildernesses, and will remain so unless its preservation can be demonstrated to be economically beneficial to them. [ibid:342-356] Shamwari undeniably creates a few decent jobs for local people, but its impact is arguably negligible when

local black unemployment is above 70%. The land is unable to support all its occupants and one can draw tragic parallels with the Highlands after the failure of the

Forty-five. Sadly the outcome may be equally disastrous as land ownership is an increasingly controversial issue. Farm murders are common in the Eastern Cape and there has been talk of Zimbabwe style land seizures. Provincial Land Affairs and Agriculture Minister, Gugile Nkwinti has described game farms as 'elitist' and said there has been a 're-colonisation of the countryside'. [Groenewald, 2005]

Meanwhile wildlife ventures are multiplying rapidly in the Eastern Cape, which lies below the malaria zone, thus obviating tourists' need for suppressants whose potential side-effects have triggered further waves of health hysteria in the northern hemisphere. Another commercial advantage is that valuable ruminants such as buffalo are free from the bovine TB that is endemic in the Kruger - at the Cape Game Auctions held outside Grahamstown, where surplus stock is sold on to other game reserves, local animals achieve the highest prices. For these reasons, and the increasingly evident decline of European style farming due to drought and low beef prices, the amount of private land in the Eastern Cape dedicated to wildlife ventures is increasing by up to 25% a year. [Zavis, 2005] In November 2005 a report from ECARP (Eastern Cape Agricultural Research Project), Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, stated that game farm development was undermining land reform; at least 116 households, a total of 529 residents had been evicted from farms as a result of conversion into game farms. [ibid.]

No matter how comprehensive the visual 're-wilding' of a landscape, its linear history cannot be rewound to some pre-historical state. Less than a kilometre north of Paul Lister's intended private 'wilderness' lies the hamlet of Croick, where in 1845, exactly a century after the start of the Highland Rebellion, over eighty homeless members of tenant farmer families, who had been evicted from Glencalvie, lived for months beneath tarpaulins in the churchyard. The poignant messages they scratched on the church windows are still there today. Although some of the twenty-two messages were added in later years, many can easily bring tears to one's eyes. The most striking graffito is the fifteenth, which is only legible in parts and enigmatically reads as follows:-

GLENCALVIE IS A WILDERS.... BELOW SHEEP THAT ....TO THE .... CROICK



Figure 5  
Commemorative plaque outside Croick Church

Inside the church is a fascinating visitor's book in which emigre Scots from all over the world have tried to complete the missing words. The plight of the Glencalvie crofters was brought to the attention of a reporter from *The Times* whose story of 2 June 1845 alerted the British people to the tragic underside of the so-called 'agricultural improvements' that had been underway in the Highlands for several decades.

Today the evicted crofters are long gone, but their ghosts and the sheep who replaced them remain. Memories linger too, and on a nearby plaque describing the tragedy, the word 'sheep' has been emphatically obliterated (see ill. above). However a recent shift of power in Scotland is indicated by the principal obstacle to Lister's planned re-wilding being the 2003 Scottish Right to Roam Act (one of the first to be enacted by the country's newly created parliament) which prohibits the enclosure of private land with exclusionary game fences as at Shamwari.

In South Africa private re-wilding, however ecologically desirable, can sadly also be perceived as perpetuating the colonial project by other means. In addition to the socially contentious thwarting of historically disadvantaged people's desire for farmland, others may see re-wilding as an attempt to erase the visible history of occupation. The land reverts to indigenous bush, indigenous species are re-introduced and the colonial farmer's visible presence diminishes as the former farm disappears from view. Also out of sight are the indigenous people, who are either excluded by game fences and economics, or become semi-invisible servants working in lodges that are Hollywood inspired versions of colonial fantasy architecture.

Re-wilding land does not revert it to some imaginary Edenic state by erasing history and culture, instead it adds yet another stratum to the layers of that land's occupation. In both Scotland and South Africa successive layers of tragedies and mistakes, ideals and compromises have created these landscapes, and their traces will remain. Far from creating 'wilderness', re-wilding reminds us that landscapes are cultural products whose true value lies in their being palimpsests of history and identity.

## Postscript

The privately re-wilded hyperwilderness is a very recent phenomenon, but history does not stand still. At the start of 2007, in one of those bizarre incidents where televisual hyperreality effortlessly exceeds the probabilities of fiction, Shamwari became the location for a BBC reality TV show where minor celebrities 'trained' for a month to become game rangers . . . .

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Mark Haywood is a UK based artist, writer and art educator working with CLEAR, the Centre for Landscape & Environmental Arts Research, University of Cumbria. He has an MFA from the University of Northumbria and a PhD from the Royal College of Art. His principal research area is the creation of aesthetic values, with a particular interest in the shifting aesthetic values associated with various types of landscape.

Dr Haywood's previous posts include several years as Professor of Fine Art at Rhodes University, during which time he co-founded the !Xoe site-specific event at Nieu-Bethesda, as well as curating or participating in national and international exhibitions, including the *AREA2000*, Kjarvalsstadir National Art Museum, Reykjavik, Iceland. He is very active on the international conference circuit and his most recent publication is *The Wide Blue Wonder: essays on cyanophilia*.