Rewilding as reparative and restitutive justice

Andrea Natan Feltrin

Natan, a PhD candidate at the University of North Texas, specializes in environmental ethics and multispecies justice. His work, rooted in his studies at the University of Milan and research on beaver reintroduction at the University of Stirling, focuses on rewilding and ecological coexistence.

This article argues that rewilding should be conceptualized as reparative and restitutive justice for the harm inflicted upon the more-than-human world by human supremacy. Extending the framework of social justice to ecological ethics will help to address the exploitation of ecosystems and other-than-humans. Rewilding must go beyond biodiversity restoration, and aim to dismantle human hegemony, restore autonomy to ecosystems and thus enable true multispecies coexistence.

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Rewilding has become a widely recognized strategy and philosophy in environmental recovery, celebrated for its potential to restore ecosystems with a proactive mindset, offering hope in addressing biodiversity loss. Often defined as the reintroduction of keystone species and the large-scale restoration of landscapes to a more ‘untamed’ state – while not denying its application on smaller scales – it is viewed by many as a crucial tool for countering the relentless damage caused by human activities. Projects like the return of the European bison to Poland or the revitalization of wetlands in the Netherlands are frequently hailed as success stories in ecological restoration (Pettorelli *et al.*, 2019).

However, this framing limits rewilding to an instrument for ecosystem recovery, neglecting its deeper ethical imperatives. What if rewilding were understood not only as a solution to biodiversity loss but also as a form of *reparative and restitutive justice* for the moral and historical wrongs we have inflicted upon the more-than-human world? Reparative justice focuses on healing and repairing harm, whilst restitutive justice aims to restore what has been lost or taken. While this can be a significant legal and political distinction in a human context, in the context of rewilding the lines between restitution and reparation blur. Here, the ethical imperative is not only to compensate for

past harms but to actively enable the self-determination and flourishing of ecosystems and species. In this way, *giving back* means restoring the possibility for the autonomous unfolding of other-than-human individuals and collectives – and thus the acts of repairing and returning merge.

Ecological restitution

This article calls for a reconceptualization of rewilding as a form of ecological and multispecies restitution, grounded in a commitment to addressing the exploitation of ecosystems, species and individual other-than-humans by human supremacy. Historically, the concept of restitution has predominantly been applied within the realm of social justice, used to redress human-centric wrongs such as slavery, colonialism and Indigenous dispossession (Barkan, 2000). Extending this framework to include ecological ethics requires acknowledging that humanity, particularly through extractivist capitalism and colonial practices, has devastated not only human communities but also the living planet (Crist, 2019). Multispecies coexistence must reject human supremacy across all cultures, recognizing that nature – arguably the most severely marginalized and tyrannized entity on a planet dominated by more than eight billion humans – must be at the core of any justice discourse. Our ethical obligation goes beyond merely halting environmental harm; it necessitates actively restoring ecosystems and other-than-human species that have been violently diminished in richness, beauty and integrity. This entails restoring their capacity for flourishing, self-determination and autonomy (Woods, 2017).

In human contexts, reparative justice is a well-established ethico-political framework, particularly for addressing the legacies of slavery, colonialism and Indigenous dispossession (Domínguez and Figueroa, 2023). It often involves concrete actions, such as financial compensation or land restitution, aimed at repairing historical wrongs – not to erase the past but to create a fairer foundation upon which to rethink and re-envision a future together as a human community. The underlying principle is that those who have inflicted harm – or their successors – carry an ethical responsibility to repair the damage done, in order to create the possibility of justice in the present and for future generations. However, most discussions of reparative justice remain anthropocentric, focusing primarily on human relationships and human communities.

In recent years, scholars like Kyle Whyte have expanded the theoretical framework of reparative justice to include environmental justice, particularly in the context of colonial conservation practices. He critiques the history of conservation efforts that, while framed as protecting nature, have often perpetuated systems of domination (Whyte, 2024). Indigenous peoples were frequently displaced from their lands under the guise of protecting wilderness, severing the deep relationships they held with their ecosystems. This forced separation not only harmed Indigenous communities but also contributed to environmental degradation, as colonial practices disregarded the knowledge systems that had long managed these landscapes sustainably (Whyte, 2018). While social justice and ecological understanding have merged to create the

generative field of environmental justice – a field that has helped reframe conservation from a less Western perspective by acknowledging the role of stewardship – the entire discourse on conservation still risks remaining overly anthropocentric (Coolsaet, 2020). Shifting towards ecological restitution as an integral part of rewilding can bridge the gap between human-centred and more-than-human justice.

Rewilding, when reframed as ecological restitution, recognizes the deep interconnections between social and ecological justice without hierarchically placing the former above the latter. Reparations must go beyond restoring ecosystems to a so-called 'pristine' state; they must focus on giving back the possibility for the biological community to thrive spontaneously, with humanity as part of that community – not as a master, but as a keystone species. This distinction between humans acting as a keystone species and the concept of human supremacy is essential. While keystone species play a crucial role in maintaining ecological balance, human supremacy imposes a harmful, hierarchical relationship over nature. Viewing humans as a keystone species within a rewilding framework means recognizing our role in ecosystems as one that can enhance biodiversity and contribute to resilience, without assuming dominance or control over the broader ecological community.

The natural world has endured centuries of exploitation, and ecosystems themselves have been victims of human supremacy. To repair this damage, rewilding must aim for more than preserving biodiversity for human benefit or securing a 'sustainable' future under human hegemony (if such a future were even possible within ecological boundaries). Instead, human hegemony must be dismantled for a just multispecies coexistence. Rewilding must confront the historical injustices embedded in our relationship with the natural world, acknowledging how ecosystems and other-than-human species have been systematically exploited and marginalized. In a political sense, nature is often treated as the 'largest minority' – an oxymoron that underscores the paradox of how the vast majority of life on Earth is silenced and disregarded, its voice unheard and its agency suppressed under human supremacy.

The question of whether removing human influence entirely from certain regions would yield better outcomes for biodiversity is complex. While there may be cases where human absence promotes ecosystem recovery, rewilding does not necessarily require the complete withdrawal of human presence. Rather, it calls for transforming the nature of human engagement. Importantly, this does not imply that all human influence is inherently negative. Indigenous land stewardship offers a powerful counterpoint to the notion that all human presence leads to degradation. Indigenous peoples have historically practiced forms of coexistence that supported biodiversity, yet these practices differ fundamentally from extractive or colonial approaches. However, even acknowledging the value of sustainable human practices, it remains crucial to recognize that in some instances, the most ethical choice may be for humans to deliberately withdraw from certain areas. Such decisions should be based on the ecological needs of the land, not on the assumption that all spaces *must* be co-inhabited by humans. This withdrawal, however, must be just, with the

burden shared equitably and not disproportionately placed on those who have historically suffered from structural injustices.

For centuries, extractivist practices have inflicted harm on the natural world, treating it as a resource to be dominated rather than a community to be respected. Rewilding, therefore, should serve as a form of reparations, aimed not only at ecological restoration but at returning autonomy and agency to ecosystems and other-than-human species. By restoring the natural world's ability to thrive independently of human control, rewilding becomes an essential step in addressing these long-standing injustices (Taylor, 2013). This approach underscores the importance of acknowledging that humans, including Indigenous peoples, have played complex roles in both shaping and disrupting ecosystems. Humans have been implicated in past extinctions, such as those of the Pleistocene megafauna. Yet the focus should not be on assigning blame but on recognizing the diversity of human relationships with nature, some of which foster sustainability and resilience.

A powerful example of rewilding as restitution can be seen in the *Kulan Rewilding Project* in Kazakhstan (Kaczensky *et al.*, 2018). Once abundant across Central Asia, the kulan (*Equus hemionus*) – a subspecies of Asian wild donkey – was driven to near extinction by Soviet agricultural policies that transformed steppes into monocultures. This project is not solely about restoring the kulan as a species; it also addresses the broader ecological harm caused by industrial agriculture. By integrating Indigenous ecological knowledge and collaborating with local communities, the project acknowledges that the destruction of the steppe was both ecological and social, disrupting long-standing practices of balance with the land. In this way, rewilding serves as a process of both ecological and cultural reparation, offering a model for how multispecies justice can be achieved. However, while such isolated examples provide hope and demonstrate the potential of rewilding, they should be seen as stepping stones toward a much bolder and more ambitious restoration goal.

Multispecies coexistence cannot be based on current ecological baselines, which have been severely diminished due to centuries of exploitation. Even though 'ecological shifting baseline syndrome' can make us feel comfortable with moderate achievements in conservation and restoration, palaeontology reminds us of what has been lost because of *Homo sapiens*. Australian philosopher Thom van Dooren (2014) rightly points out that we should not view reality from a detached and timeless ecological standpoint, but from what he calls 'Cenocentrism' – recognizing that all life forms existing now are directly related to those that passed through the geologically recent bottleneck of the fifth mass extinction. This rich assembly of the Cenozoic community, which has been the cradle for our species, is now under threat of decimation because of humans. This destruction began with the megafauna extinctions and has continued into the present acceleration of ecological decline (Dawson, 2016). While we cannot turn back the clock to an imagined past, we must reject this baseline of destruction and address both the long history and present reality of ecological degradation. In this framework, rewilding is not merely about restoring biodiversity; it is about actively

confronting the systems of extraction and domination that have ravaged the natural world.

Rewilding as an ethical imperative

At the heart of reconceptualizing rewilding as ecological justice is the principle of giving back. This involves recognizing that ecosystems are not static entities to be 'fixed' by human intervention but dynamic communities that have been violently wronged. In thus reframing rewilding, we must prioritize restoring the autonomy of ecosystems and recognizing the agency of other-than-human species (Heyd, 2005). This goes beyond simply allowing species to flourish within human-managed parameters; it requires relinquishing human control and enabling ecosystems to regenerate on their own terms. Ultimately, rewilding must be understood not only as an ecological strategy but as an ethical imperative. The natural world has endured centuries of marginalization, treated merely as a resource for human exploitation. As such, nature must be recognized as the most severely discriminated against entity on this planet, and rewilding should be driven by a commitment to multispecies justice that must direct public opinion, policies and laws. This requires actively repairing the harm humans have caused and ensuring that ecosystems and species have the autonomy to thrive.

As the planet confronts dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change, rewilding offers a pathway to a more just and equitable world for humans and other-than-humans. By embracing rewilding as a form of reparative and restitutive justice, we acknowledge our ethical obligation not only to halt the destruction of ecosystems but also to repair the relationships we have broken with the natural world. In doing so, we move beyond human supremacy and toward a future where humans and other-than-human species can coexist as equals in a shared planetary community.

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