



Norwegian University of Life Sciences
Faculty of Landscape and Society
Department of International Environment
and Development Studies

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Living with the Wild: Rewilding Conflicts and Conservation Politics in Ireland

Å leve med det ville: 'Rewilding' konflikter
og miljøpolitikk i Irland

Dara Sands

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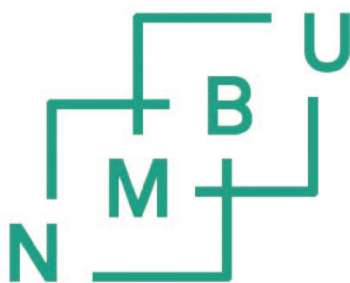
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Abstract

Rewilding is one of today's most widely debated and contested concepts in conservation. To its proponents, it represents a hopeful pathway towards the future that offers myriad possibilities for tackling the pressing environmental dilemmas facing contemporary societies. At the same time, rewilding practices, particularly those involving the (re)introduction of wild animals into human-dominated landscapes, have been criticised for failing to account for the potential impacts of such initiatives on the people living in and around the rural landscapes typically proposed for rewilding. Hence, although support for rewilding appears to be growing, as reflected in the ongoing recovery of wildlife populations across Europe, conflicts over rewilding also appear to be increasing and intensifying. Similar to conservation conflicts, conflicts over rewilding often have significant consequences for social well-being, economic development and wildlife conservation. Thus, there is a need to better understand such conflicts and how they can be effectively and equitably transformed to support coexistence and conviviality between humans and wildlife.

Motivated by a normative aspiration to consider how rewilding can support more just approaches to human-wildlife coexistence, in this thesis I explore why the prospect of living alongside wild animals appears to be such a contentious and divisive issue in the context of rewilding projects and proposals in Ireland. Drawing on different theoretical approaches from the broad fields of conservation science and political ecology, my two main research objectives in the thesis were to (1) identify the underlying drivers of rewilding conflicts and to (2) examine opportunities, or alternatives, for enabling coexistence through rewilding initiatives. To investigate these objectives, I used a multiple case study approach to analyse how the interplay between context-specific historical, socio-political and economic conditions influence conflicts and undermine attempts to facilitate coexistence. More specifically, through three individual but interlinked papers, looking into (1) a historical case study of human-wolf relations in Ireland, (2) a case study of the Red Kite Reintroduction Project in Northern Ireland and (3) a study of rewilding and convivial conservation, the overall aim of the thesis is to critically examine rewilding as a potential pathway for fostering long-term human-wildlife coexistence.

Based on a qualitative research design and data collected primarily through semi-structured interviews, participant observation and document analysis of diverse secondary sources, the thesis illuminates the importance of considering how political-economic forces and dominant ideas about human-nature relations influence conflicts and efforts to promote human-wildlife coexistence through

rewilding. By situating human-wildlife interactions within the context of the larger political-economic and ecological transformations driven by the colonisation of Ireland, the first article reveals how wildlife and certain people can become enrolled in conflicts linked to struggles over the control and management of natural resources. In doing so, the article illustrates the value of historical analysis for contextualising contemporary debate about rewilding and understanding the reasons why wildlife has been eradicated from particular places with long histories of coexistence. Grounded in the historical insights generated by the first article, the second article finds that efforts to encourage coexistence in shared landscapes are undermined by both familiar conservation conflicts and more novel land-use conflicts. Furthermore, the article highlights how rewilding projects involving the return of wildlife into human-dominated landscapes are likely to result in difficult trade-offs between competing and potentially incompatible types of land-use. The article concludes by suggesting that working towards coexistence is as much about establishing and nurturing good relations between different groups of people, as it is about promoting positive relations between people and wildlife.

Following on from the historical and contemporary case studies of rewilding and human-wildlife coexistence presented in the first two articles, article three asks how rewilding might learn from convivial conservation's vision of alternative futures centred around environmental justice and coexistence. Using examples of convivial practices in Ireland, the article argues that embracing convivial conservation's vision of beneficially integrating and (re)embedding the uses of nature into the daily lives of local communities may help mitigate conflicts related to concerns that rewilding initiatives valorise the 'wild' at the expense of local communities. The article proposes that certain ideas and practices related to rewilding have the potential to help support transformational change in biodiversity conservation. However, for this potential to be realised, I conclude that rewilding must learn from convivial conservation's commitment to environmental justice, democratic principles and vision of an abundant post-capitalist world where both human and nonhuman life flourish.

Finally, the thesis ends by making an argument for 'convivial' rewilding as a pathway for addressing rewilding conflicts, promoting human-wildlife coexistence and pursuing just and sustainable futures.

Sammendrag

«*Rewilding*», altså å tilbakeføre naturen til sin opprinnelige ville tilstand, er for tiden et av de mest omdiskuterte og omstridte begrepene innen naturvern. For tilhengerne representerer det et håp for fremtiden som gir utallige muligheter til å håndtere de presserende miljødilemmaene dagens samfunn står overfor. Samtidig kritiseres *rewilding*, spesielt i tilfeller der det innebærer å tilbakeføre eller introdusere ville dyr i områder bebodd av mennesker, for å ikke ta hensyn til konsekvensene slike tiltak kan ha på menneskene som bor i og rundt de aktuelle områdene. Selv om oppslutningen rundt *rewilding* ser ut til å øke, noe som gjenspeiles i pågående forsøk på å øke bestanden av ville dyr over hele Europa, ser det altså ut til at konfliktene knyttet til *rewilding* også øker i omfang og intensitet. I likhet med andre naturvernkonflikter har disse konfliktene ofte betydelige konsekvenser for sosial velferd, økonomisk utvikling og bevaring av dyreliv. Det er derfor behov for forstå disse konfliktene bedre, for å finne ut hvordan de på en god og rettferdig måte kan snus til noe konstruktivt og bidra til fredelig sameksistens mellom mennesker og dyr.

Min motivasjon for denne avhandlingen har vært en normativ ambisjon om å finne ut hvordan *rewilding* kan understøtte mer rettferdige tilnærminger til sameksistens mellom mennesker og dyr. I det videre utforsker jeg hvorfor det å skulle leve side om side med ville dyr ser ut til å være et så omstridt og splittende spørsmål i forbindelse med *rewilding*-prosjekter og -forslag i Irland. Ved hjelp av ulike teoretiske tilnærminger fra bevaringsvitenskap og politisk økologi var mine to hovedmål i avhandlingen å (1) identifisere de underliggende drivkreftene bak *rewilding*-konflikter og (2) undersøke muligheter eller alternativer som kan muliggjøre sameksistens gjennom *rewilding*-prosjekter. Jeg baserte undersøkelsen på flere case-studier for å analysere hvordan samspillet mellom kontekstspesifikke historiske, sosialpolitiske og økonomiske forhold påvirker konflikter og undergraver forsøk på å legge til rette for sameksistens. Det overordnede målet med avhandlingen er å foreta en kritisk gjennomgang av *rewilding* som en potensiell metode for å fremme langsiktig sameksistens mellom mennesker og dyr. Dette gjør jeg gjennom tre enkeltstående, men beslektede artikler: (1) en historisk casestudie av forholdet mellom mennesker og ulv i Irland, (2) en casestudie av Red Kite Reintroduction Project i Nord-Irland og (3) en studie av *rewilding* og «convivial conservation», dvs. bevaring basert på fredelig sameksistens.

Avhandlingen er basert på et kvalitativt forskningsdesign og data som primært er innsamlet gjennom semistrukturerte intervjuer, deltakende observasjon og dokumentanalyse av ulike sekundære kilder. Den belyser viktigheten av å vurdere hvordan politisk-økonomiske krefter og

rådende tankegang rundt forholdet mellom menneske og natur påvirker konflikter og tiltak for å fremme sameksistens mellom mennesker og dyr gjennom *rewilding*. Ved å se samspillet mellom mennesker og dyr i sammenheng med større politisk-økonomiske og økologiske endringer drevet frem av koloniseringen av Irland, viser den første artikkelen hvordan dyrelivet og enkeltmennesker kan bli innblandet i konflikter knyttet til kontroll over og forvaltning av naturressurser. På den måten illustrerer artikkelen verdien av historisk analyse for å kontekstualisere dagens debatt om *rewilding* og forstå hvorfor dyrearter har blitt utryddet fra områder der mennesker og dyr har levd side om side i lengre tid.

Med bakgrunn i den historiske innsikten opparbeidet gjennom den første artikkelen, finner den andre artikkelen at innsats for sameksistens i delte områder blir undergravd av både velkjente naturvernkonflikter og nyere arealbrukskonflikter. Videre fremhever artikkelen hvordan *rewilding*-prosjekter som innebærer tilbakeføring av dyrearter til områder bebodd av mennesker, sannsynligvis vil resultere i vanskelige avveininger mellom konkurrerende og potensielt uforenlige typer arealbruk. Artikkelen avslutter med å antyde at arbeidet for sameksistens handler like mye om å etablere og pleie gode relasjoner mellom ulike grupper av mennesker som å fremme positive relasjoner mellom mennesker og dyr.

I forlengelsen av de historiske og moderne casestudiene av *rewilding* og sameksistens mellom mennesker og dyr presentert i de to første artiklene, spør den tredje artikkelen om *rewilding* har noe å lære av «convivial conservation» når det gjelder ideen om alternative fremtider sentrert rundt miljørettferdighet og sameksistens. Ved hjelp av eksempler på slike praksiser i Irland argumenterer artikkelen for at det å omfavne ideen om å integrere og (gjen)innføre bruk av naturen i dagliglivet i lokalsamfunn kan bidra til å dempe konflikter knyttet til bekymringer om at *rewilding*-prosjekter verdsetter det «ville» på bekostning av lokalsamfunnet. Artikkelen foreslår at visse ideer og praksiser knyttet til *rewilding* kan bidra til å understøtte dyptgående endringer i arbeidet for å bevare biologisk mangfold. For å få til at dette konkluderer jeg med at *rewilding* må lære av «convivial conservation» når det gjelder engasjementet for miljørettferdighet, demokratiske prinsipper og ideen om en rik postkapitalistisk verden der både mennesker og andre arter kan blomstre.

Avhandlingen avslutter med å argumentere for «convivial rewilding», dvs. *rewilding* basert på fredelig sameksistens, som en metode for å håndtere konflikter, fremme sameksistens mellom mennesker og dyr og jobbe mot en rettferdig og bærekraftig fremtid.

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Like many others who have chosen to ride the PhD rollercoaster, there were numerous occasions over the last few years when I seriously doubted I would ever reach the end of what has turned out to be the most challenging but immensely rewarding journey of my life so far. It feels entirely appropriate that one of the final tasks I undertake towards the completion of this journey involves expressing my deep gratitude to the long list of friends, family, colleagues and interviewees who have made this research possible. To borrow a well-worn and clichéd academic phrase, individually thanking everyone on this list is ‘beyond the scope of this section’. Yet, there are a number of people to whom I am particularly indebted for their enduring support, patience and encouragement.

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Dara Sands
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Part Two: Compilation of Papers

Paper 1: Sands, D., 2022. Dewilding ‘Wolf-land’: Exploring the Historical Dimensions of Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence in Ireland. *Conservation and Society*, 20(3), p.257.

Paper 2: Sands, D. Rewilding Contested Landscapes: Lessons for Coexistence from the Reintroduction of Red Kites to Northern Ireland. Submitted September 2022 (under revision).

Paper 3: Sands, D. Rewilding and convivial conservation: examining potential pathways for transforming biodiversity conservation in Ireland. Manuscript.

Part One

Living with the Wild: Rewilding Conflicts and Conservation Politics in Ireland

“If we wish to preserve wild nature, then we must permit ourselves to imagine a way of living in nature that can use and protect it at the same time. Otherwise, we will keep reproducing the very contradiction which has too often made modern humanity such a devastating presence on the planet.”

- William Cronon (1996a, p. 53)

Introduction

On an early morning walk along the lower slopes of Table Mountain in 2015, while studying at the University of Cape Town, a friend pointed out a caracal sauntering along the trail several metres in front of us. Similar to, but smaller than, the Eurasian lynx, the wild cat appeared neither surprised nor perturbed by our presence. Coming from the island of Ireland, however, where wildlife are comparatively scarce and the opportunity for such a meeting is slim, I was surprised, but also intrigued by the encounter. The city of Cape Town and the Cape Peninsula, I would later learn, were home to not only caracals, but to a plethora of wildlife, including baboons, zebras, penguins, and numerous species of snakes and sharks. As a student of conservation biology, I was taught about the complex and costly conflicts that occurred between the people and wildlife who shared this largely urban environment. Yet, despite these challenges, and in contrast to my own experiences in Ireland, it seemed as if coexistence was also an integral part of human-wildlife interactions in Cape Town. Put another way, in a country recently described by the World Bank as the most unequal in the world (Sulla et al 2022) and where conservation plays a key role in perpetuating this inequality (Sinthumule 2018; Thakholi and Büscher 2021), it appeared to me as if the human inhabitants of Cape Town were, nevertheless, collectively committed to 'living with the wild'. This initial impression of multispecies coexistence led to this PhD study, which explores conflicts and the possibility of fostering coexistence in the, quite different, context of rewilding projects and proposals in Ireland.

1.1 Rewilding, conflict and coexistence

In the early years of the United Nation's Decade of Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), rewilding is being championed as a radical strategy for tackling the pressing environmental dilemmas confronting contemporary societies (Perino et al. 2019; Svenning 2020). As a distinctive, but primarily large-scale approach to ecological restoration, rewilding is associated with a diverse range of meanings, practices and actors (Gammon 2018; Hawkins et al. 2022). In its most comprehensible form, however, rewilding is simply about creating more space for non-human life (Wapner 2020). Although it shares this aim with conventional conservation and restoration strategies, rewilding tends to stand apart for one important reason. Whereas conventional approaches to managing and controlling spaces for nature are typically underpinned by mechanistic assumptions about the 'balance of nature' (Ehrlich and Birch 1967; Adams 1997), many rewilding advocates understand ecological systems as dynamic, uncertain and constantly changing and, thus, they seek to allow

nature to “find its own way” (Monbiot 2014: 9). Against the background of heightened concerns about planetary exploitation driven by the unsustainable consumption levels of contemporary societies, particularly in the ‘Global North’ (Díaz et al. 2019), interest in rewilding’s vision of a ‘wilder’ future is consequently growing (Lorimer et al. 2015; Jepson and Blythe 2020).

However, the implementation of rewilding and global restoration efforts at national, subnational and local levels raises a central dilemma regarding “the fundamental clash between the environment and the economy” (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016: 731). Rewilding proponents argue it can resolve this dilemma by contributing economic benefits to rural communities through ecotourism and recreation initiatives (Cerqueira et al. 2015). Yet, empirical evidence from rewilding projects suggests that attempts to promote these livelihood diversification opportunities are not always welcome, indeed they have been strongly resisted in certain places (Vasile 2018; Wynne-Jones et al. 2018). Moreover, similar to conventional approaches to conservation (Redpath et al. 2015), rewilding often appears to be in conflict with existing land-use practices and future development agendas (Drenthen 2015; Deary and Warren 2017). Particularly when involving the return or (re)introduction of charismatic wildlife, rewilding has been heavily contested and a significant source of conflict (Skogen et al. 2008; O’Rourke 2019; Coz and Young 2020). These highly complex conflicts over land, livelihoods and wildlife can have serious consequences for social well-being, economic development and wildlife conservation (Dickman 2010; Barua et al. 2013; Hill et al. 2017). Therefore, it is imperative to understand their drivers and how they might be more effectively and equitably managed.

In the human-dominated environments of the Anthropocene, or rather the Capitalocene (Moore 2017), there is growing recognition that successfully addressing these conflicts will entail careful consideration of the social and political implications of rewilding and restoration (Elias et al 2021; Drouilly and O’Riain 2021). Although it appears that not all rewilding supporters share this concern (Noss 2010), Pettorelli et al. (2019: 9) emphasise that “it is impossible to discuss rewilding without considering its human dimensions, acknowledging that humans are key to the success, and failure, of rewilding initiatives”. In addition, theoretical perspectives from multispecies research may also be of relevance to rewilding in illustrating the importance of understanding how non-human actors, including animals, plants, soils and climate, influence relations between the human actors involved in conflicts over rewilding (Van Dooren and Rose 2012; Haraway 2018).

Approaching rewilding as a dynamic and contested social and ecological process, this thesis sets out to explore how conflicts over rewilding are influenced by the interplay between human and non-

human actors and the socio-political, historical and ecological contexts in which these actors operate.

With the aid of theoretical tools from a multispecies approach to political ecology, I examine conflicts over rewilding in this thesis in the context of two related concepts: coexistence and conviviality. A normative concept based around the idea of humans living alongside wildlife in shared landscapes (Treves and Santiago-Ávila 2020), coexistence is the subject of growing interest in debates about rethinking human-wildlife interactions where the overarching aim is ‘turning conflict into coexistence’ (Frank et al. 2019). While conflict, including the potential for wildlife to negatively impact on human lives and livelihoods, is still considered to be an inevitable component of coexistence (Carter and Linnell 2016), coexistence seeks to expand the horizon of human-wildlife studies beyond its dominant focus on conflict (Bhatia et al. 2020; König et al. 2020). Similar to rewilding, coexistence is interpreted in a variety of different ways, but has no settled definition (Madden 2004; Nyhus 2016). Also similar to rewilding, some argue that the lack of an agreed definition for coexistence, and the related terms ‘acceptance’ and ‘tolerance’, is problematic for conservation research (Knox et al. 2021). However, in highlighting the limitations of a narrow conservation-oriented framing of coexistence, Pooley (2021: 5) proposes a broader conceptualisation that “requires embracing difference and acknowledging power differentials and dynamics”.

Linked to this broader understanding of coexistence is the concept of conviviality (Illich 1973). In recent years, conviviality has been used to promote care and justice-based approaches to urban planning (Hinchcliffe and Whatmore 2008), economic development (Scoones 2022), and environmental conservation (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). In this thesis, I engage with conviviality in relation to the convivial conservation proposal given its central aim of moving ‘from conflict to conviviality’ (Toncheva and Fletcher 2021) and fostering democratic approaches to human-wildlife coexistence (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). Grounded in critical social science and drawing on multi-disciplinary perspectives, this proposal, and the associated CONVIVA research project, aim to promote transformative change in conservation by exploring the historical, socio-political and ecological dynamics of human-wildlife interactions and identifying alternative ways of living with, valuing and knowing non-human life (Massarella et al. 2021).

Although many rewilding supporters also share this commitment to coexistence and transformative change (Carver et al. 2021), to date, these important themes have received relatively little attention in the rewilding literature. Therefore, concerned with the central question of how rewilding conflicts

can be transformed to encourage coexistence, this thesis aims to explore these themes through a multiple case study approach that investigates (1) a historical case study of human-wolf relations in Ireland, (2) a case study of the Red Kite Reintroduction Project in Northern Ireland and (3) a future-oriented study of rewilding and convivial conservation.

1.2 Placing the study in Ireland

The island of Ireland is the primary geographical focus of this PhD's investigation into the human dimensions of rewilding and the aforementioned concepts and themes related to conflict, coexistence and conviviality. Covering a total land area of 84,421 km², it is the 20th largest island in the world. Biogeographically, the island represents a single cohesive mass of land. Geopolitically, however, the island is currently divided into two separate territories, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland that have, according to Brennan et al. (2023:7), “developed (with some exceptions) almost completely segregated environmental governance structures, legal and policy frameworks, and implementation processes”. Although historically the number of wildlife species living in Ireland has been considerably lower than in surrounding areas, including neighbouring Britain (Montgomery et al. 2014), the island has and continues to support many types of wildlife (Maclean 2010). However, following the conquest and colonisation of the island during the 16th and 17th centuries (Smyth 2006), and the radical transformations of the socio-economic, cultural, political and ecological landscapes that followed (Ohlmeyer 2016), a number of iconic species and habitats were eliminated and destroyed. As such, Ireland represents an interesting, and under-researched, setting for exploring rewilding and human-wildlife interactions.

In the present, rewilding has become a pivotal concept in Ireland in relation to calls to recover these ‘lost’ species, such as wolves, lynx and eagles, and to restore former habitats, such as temperate rainforest (DellaSala et al. 2011) and peatland (Flood et al. 2021). In the early 2000s, a number of raptor species were reintroduced to Ireland, including golden and white-tailed eagles and red kites. However, rewilding's entry into discussions about the future of conservation, agriculture and land-use, more generally, appears to have aggravated already existing tensions between actors representing these different interests (Tovey 2016). On an island where approximately 70% of the land is devoted to agriculture, these debates have been dominated by a focus on how proposals to reintroduce wildlife, most notably wolves, and initiatives to create ‘wilderness’ areas will affect farming and the livelihoods of people who live in and around the landscapes proposed for rewilding. Although some view rewilding as a possible way to redress coexistence inequalities between high and

low-income countries (Jordan et al. 2020; Paudel and Sandbrook 2022), against this background of colonialism and contemporary social conflict and political instability (Gravey et al. 2018), the prospect of promoting coexistence in Ireland appears to be a major challenge. This challenge motivates the study of rewilding and coexistence in Ireland presented in this thesis.

1.3 Objectives and research questions

The main aim of this PhD is to contribute original and valuable knowledge to rewilding research and practice by critically examining how conflicts over rewilding might be transformed to coexistence. Through an empirical focus on human-wildlife interactions in Ireland, the study has two main objectives (1) to identify the key drivers of conflicts over rewilding and how these drivers are influenced by different actors and intersecting historical, socio-political, economic and ecological processes and (2) to explore how the concept of conviviality can contribute to fostering coexistence through rewilding. Guided by the overarching question: how can rewilding conflicts be transformed towards coexistence?, I address these objectives by asking the three following research questions, which correspond with the three papers presented in this thesis:

What historical factors have influenced the eradication of wildlife from places with long histories of coexistence, and how can an understanding of these factors contribute to addressing contemporary rewilding conflicts?

How is coexistence, in the context of rewilding projects, influenced by the interplay between different actors and the broader social, historical and political contexts in which these actors operate?

How can insights from the ‘convivial conservation’ proposal contribute to transforming conflicts over mainstream approaches to rewilding and conservation towards coexistence?

1.4 Thesis Structure

This thesis consists of a synthesising chapter (Part One) and three papers (Part Two). At the time of writing, one of the three papers is published in a peer-reviewed journal, one has been submitted and is ‘under revision’, and the final paper is soon to be submitted. The papers are presented in full in Part Two.

Part One, which is divided into six main sections, offers a unified and integrated overview of the study in terms of the background, theoretical framework, methodological approach and main contributions of the thesis. This introduction section has framed the thesis and presented the study objectives and research questions. The second section expands on the introduction and contextualises rewilding in relation to conflict and coexistence by providing an overview of the rewilding literature. The focus in this second section is on critically examining the broader conservation movement through which rewilding has emerged and discussing how rewilding has been repositioned as a coexistence and people-focused approach to conservation. In the third section, I present the theoretical framework used to inform the analysis, which is centred around coexistence, a multispecies approach to political ecology and perspectives associated with convivial conservation. The fourth section provides a detailed explanation of the methodological approach used in the thesis and how my research was conducted, including reflections on why certain decisions were taken regarding fieldwork, data collection and case selection. In section five, I summarise the three academic papers that comprise the thesis. Finally, in section six, I present a synthesis of the main contributions of the thesis and discuss their significance for conservation policy and practice, and for future research on rewilding and coexistence.

2.0 Background: The Trouble with Rewilding

Written over 25 years ago, *The Trouble with Wilderness*, the seminal essay by environmental historian William Cronon, opens with the following provocation: “The time has come to rethink wilderness” (1996b: 7). Adopting a critical constructivist approach, the much-debated essay problematises the uneasy relationship between the idea of ‘wilderness’ and its influence on human-nature relations and conservation, particularly the National Parks model developed in the United States. In concluding that wilderness is a social construct with tangible and profound implications in relation to how it symbolically and materially situates humans, notably indigenous peoples and local communities (Dowie 2011), outside nature, Cronon engages with the works of key figures in the US Wilderness Movement, such as John Muir, Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold. In reaching his controversial conclusion (Hays 1996), Cronon also devotes considerable attention to the writings of the, recently deceased, ‘path-breaking’ conservation activist Dave Foreman, who he critiques for prioritising environmental problems over problems of environmental justice and for reproducing the “dualism at the heart of wilderness” (Cronon 1996: 20).

Although his views on various social issues were somewhat more nuanced than characterised by Cronon (Bookchin and Foreman 1991), Foreman was unequivocal and dogmatic in his commitment to biocentrism and the preservation of natural diversity and the ‘wilderness experience’ (Foreman and Wolke 1992). Hintz articulates this point about Foreman, and other wilderness enthusiasts, as follows, “Despite token nods toward ‘compatible’ human uses in buffer zones, a sharp rhetorical and material dichotomy between ‘true wilderness’ and human-occupied land is forged and relentlessly defended” (2007:181). His devotion to wilderness led Foreman away from the Earth First! movement he co-founded in the 1980s, who, in his words, had become too focused on issues of social and economic justice (Bookchin and Foreman 1991: 78), and towards the Wildlands Project (now the Wildlands Network) he helped establish in 1991 (Foreman 1998). It was here he is believed to have originally devised the term ‘rewilding’ to promote his ‘vision for conservation in the 21st century’ (Foreman 2004). Firmly rooted in the idea of wilderness as spaces free of ‘permanent improvement or human habitation’ (Foreman 2000), Foreman’s vision of rewilding was to establish a network of strictly protected areas across North America that could support ecological and evolutionary processes and facilitate the reintroduction and long-term presence of native wildlife populations (Fisher and Carver 2022).

Foreman and other wilderness advocates were not alone in calling for the creation of this continental-scale rewilding network, however. A group of prominent conservation biologists, including Michael Soulé, Reed Noss, John Terborgh and E.O. Wilson, also supported the idea of large-scale rewilding (Johns 2019), with some arguing that this would require the strict protection of around half of North America (Noss 1992). A paper published by Soulé and Noss, which presented rewilding as “the scientific argument for restoring big wilderness based on the regulatory roles of large predators” (1998: 22), was particularly important for lending scientific authority to the term. Described by Jørgensen (2015: 483) as the “foundational manifesto for rewilding”, Foreman also recognised the significance of the paper and referred to it as being of “landmark importance for the wilderness conservation movement” and a celebrated case of where “science buttresses the wants and values of wilderness recreationists” (2000: 38).

To support their scientific argument for rewilding, which included the reintroduction of the “entire pre-Columbian set of carnivores and other keystone species” (1998: 26), Soulé and Noss presented several examples of how keystone species can positively influence ecosystem function. One example they briefly discuss describes how the extirpation of wolves from Yellowstone National Park ‘impoverished the local biodiversity’, whilst their return helped to reduce browsing pressure by large populations of elk. This well-known example of trophic cascades (Ripple et al. 2001) is often employed as the scientific justification for rewilding (Brown et al. 2011), including in Ireland where it is has been used to promote the idea of wolf reintroduction (Maguire 2022). However, recent research has challenged these findings, with Mech (2012: 143) also stressing that “any such cascading effects of wolves found in National Parks would have little relevance to most of the wolf range because of overriding anthropogenic influences there on wolves, prey, vegetation, and other parts of the food web”. Nevertheless, the simple success narrative surrounding the reintroduction of wolves to Yellowstone, and the dissemination of this story through George Monbiot’s wide-reaching short film ‘How Wolves Change Rivers’, has helped build popular support for rewilding and perceptions of the wolf as “something of a posterchild for rewilding” (Martin 2020: 1). Put another way, if Soulé and Noss’s paper is to be considered the foundational manifesto that solidified rewilding’s place in the conservation science discourse, then the Yellowstone wolf story may be viewed as the foundational myth upon which much popular support for rewilding has been built.

According to Evans (2017: 62), “stories like these – stories of rebirth in which whole landscapes and ecosystems come back from the dead – have a power that the arid language of ‘sustainability’, which

sounds as though its aspirations go just a fraction beyond mere harm reduction, will always lack". In view of growing anxiety about environmental change (Albrecht et al. 2007), rewilding stories about the ecological recovery of entire continents and Yellowstone's 'benign eco-wolves' (Marvin 2012: 8) are interpreted by its advocates as powerful and persuasive stories of "hope, vision and ambition that inspire and empower" (Jepson 2019: 126). At the same time, however, attempts to bring these stories to life through rewilding practices have been contested by those concerned that rewilding aims to erase the (his)stories of communities who inhabit and work in the landscapes rewilders often consider to be 'degraded' or lacking in 'ecological integrity' (Gammon 2019). Thus, although its popularity has grown significantly over the years, so too has the controversy surrounding rewilding, particularly over its troubling roots in the wilderness ideology once championed by Foreman and now widely supported by many in the conservation industry (Wilson 2016; Kopnina et al. 2018).

2.1 Resisting Rewilding

In 2016, a paper was published in *Current Biology* entitled 'Rewilding is the new Pandora's box in conservation' (Nogués-Bravo et al. 2016). One of the main concerns raised by the paper's authors related to the "worrying lack of consensus about what rewilding is and what it isn't" (2016: 87). This concern, which has been repeated by many others (e.g. Hayward et al. 2019), was prompted by the way rewilding has been subject to various interpretations since its emergence during the 1990s. Indeed, since then, the concept has evolved greatly and a diverse range of definitions are now attached to it, including Pleistocene rewilding (Donlan et al. 2005), translocation rewilding (Seddon et al. 2014), trophic rewilding (Svenning et al. 2016) and passive rewilding (Pereira and Navarro 2015). Although attempts have been made to introduce a unified definition of rewilding (Carver et al. 2021), it remains a highly ambiguous concept and has become, to borrow a phrase used in relation to the Anthropocene (Voosen 2012), 'an argument wrapped in a word'. The long-running debates associated with key concepts linked to rewilding, such as 'nature' (Harvey 1996; Williams 2014) and 'wildness' (Leerssen 1995; Ward 2019) indicate this argument will not be resolved anytime soon and that rewilders should instead concentrate on the perhaps more central problems that have undermined rewilding efforts.

Nogués-Bravo et al (2016) highlight one such problem, namely rewilding's potential to generate social conflicts over the coexistence of wild animals and humans. Conflicts between people over wildlife represent a major conservation challenge (Hodgson et al. 2020), with this challenge compounded by the recovery and presence of wildlife in multiple-use landscapes (Boitani and

Linnell 2015; Pooley et al. 2017). To address this notoriously complex problem, they recommended taking “advantage of on-going socio-economic trends (i.e. abandonment of rural regions) to minimize conflicts” (Nogués-Bravo et al. 2016: 90). While they do not elaborate on this recommendation any further, it appears to be based around the basic assumption that the emptying of rural landscapes will reduce the potential for humans to encounter wildlife and, thus, reduce the likelihood of human-wildlife conflicts occurring (Peterson et al. 2010). The implication of this logic is that rural land abandonment represents an opportunity for rewilding to support a particular model of coexistence based around the spatial separation of humans and wildlife (Bull et al. 2019).

The perception that landscape change, specifically land abandonment (Lasanta et al. 2017), represents an opportunity for resuscitating biological diversity and charismatic wildlife is shared by many rewilding advocates (Bauer et al. 2009; Chapron et al. 2014). For example, Pereira and Navarro (2015: v) suggest that the “opportunity for large-scale rewilding in Europe has been developing over the last few decades through the process of land abandonment, particularly farmland abandonment”. Similarly, in presenting their ‘New Vision for an Old Continent’, the Rewilding Europe organisation propose that while “land abandonment is often seen as a major socio-economic problem, it may provide an opportunity for new forms of rural development based on nature and certain valuable attributes of wild landscapes” (Helmer et al. 2015: 171). By taking rural development into consideration, this European approach to rewilding appears, at first, to diverge from Foreman’s myopic rewilding fantasy for North America. However, the post-productivist types of rural development promoted by many rewilders in Europe, which are heavily concentrated on ecotourism (Pellis et al. 2019), also bear a striking resemblance to the ideals of ‘untrammelled wilderness’ embraced by the rewilding movement in the United States.

Leaning heavily on land-sparing models (Monbiot 2022) and premised on the separation of certain human activities from ‘wild’ landscapes, this so-called ‘passive’ approach to rewilding appears to promote an exclusionary form of conservation that lends credibility to concerns that culturally ‘layered’ landscapes and local livelihoods are not valued by rewilders (Linnell et al. 2015; Drenthen 2018). Moreover, there are also distinct parallels between the ‘original’ and ‘passive’ approaches to rewilding in terms of how they often tend to universalise human activity, particularly animal agriculture, as forms of disturbance that negatively impact ecosystems and wildlife (Ceașu et al. 2015). While it is important to stress that alternative conceptualisations of rewilding exist (Carver 2014), this specific form of rewilding, i.e. one that aims to reduce or remove the presence of most

humans in order to create landscapes for nature and a small number of people, appears to be dominant and a significant source of socio-political conflict (Wynne-Jones et al. 2020).

Land abandonment is clearly a key aspect of these conflicts (Holmes et al. 2020), as are concerns that this low intervention, ‘passive’ approach to rewilding is fundamentally incompatible with farming, agricultural production and environmental stewardship (Mikolajczak et al. 2021). Although the rewilding literature often focuses on ‘success’ stories, including those facilitated by human disasters like Fukushima (Lyons et al. 2020) and the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, which is included on Rewilding Europe’s European Rewilding Network map (Gammon 2019), the conflicts, tensions and trade-offs associated with the human dimensions of rewilding are starting to receive more attention. For example, in coining the term ‘clearance rewilding’, Rappel (2021) notes how rewilding has benefited from the rise of neoliberal policies linked to land abandonment and the decline of small-scale farming (Shucksmith and Rønningen 2011). Developing this point further, he argues that rewilding “based on seemingly apolitical land sparing ideas and judgements of farm ‘efficiencies’ contradict social and environmental justice agendas” (Rappel 2021).

As highlighted earlier in this section, issues of social and environmental (in)justice were secondary concerns to the founding fathers of rewilding in the U.S. Despite their rhetorical commitment to transformative change (Carver et al. 2021), there appears to be little evidence thus far to suggest that those who are now driving the rewilding movement differ in this regard. Having said that, however, there are nascent signs that some of those with an interest in rewilding are beginning to engage with the complex and uneven socio-ecological and political-economic processes through which landscapes are co-produced and contested by humans and the rest of nature (Pettersson et al. 2021; Fletcher and Toncheva 2021; Cracknell 2021). For instance, stressing that rewilding inherently involves humans, Root-Bernstein et al. (2017) have formulated ten key questions for rewilding in South America that include pondering how rewilding can potentially align with traditional agricultural systems, such as pastoralism, and indigenous cosmologies.

Moreover, in referring to how European colonisation has advanced cultural models of human-free wilderness in many parts of South America, they also note how some may view rewilding as “a collusion with, or repetition of, colonialism” (Root-Bernstein et al. 2017: 274). Where this cultural model underpins rewilding practices based on the segregation of humans and nature it risks reproducing the injustices associated with colonialism and the neocolonial enterprise. Moreover, pursuing this problematic approach to rewilding also risks concealing alternative possibilities for

reconnecting and living with nature (e.g. Wiskerke 2009; Watts et al. 2017) that could be harnessed in support of a truly transformational approach to rewilding.

2.2 Rewilding: For people and nature?

Conservation and rewilding have frequently been critiqued in a similar, albeit more thorough, manner to that which I have attempted to do so far in this section (e.g. Igoe and Brockington 2007; Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; Jørgensen 2015). Although not always well received by those working in the conservation field (Soulé 1995; Fox et al. 2006), perspectives from human geography, political ecology, environmental history and political science have drawn attention to key social and political issues and, in the process, made important contributions to both strengthening and rethinking certain conservation practices and policies (Redford 2011; Bresnihan 2016; Duffy 2022). In addition, the attention of social scientists has also helped to highlight how the conservation movement is underpinned by pluralistic views and values (Pascual et al. 2021), which include support for a people-centred approach to conservation (Sandbrook et al. 2019). In tracing how conservation's focus has changed over time, Georgina Mace (2014) espoused that such an approach to conservation, namely one centred around the needs of 'people and nature', offers the most promise for ensuring a sustainable and resilient future.

Mace's (2014) other three framings of conservation help illuminate how its primary focus has, until now, been primarily on a combination of (i) 'nature for itself', (ii) 'nature despite people', or (iii) 'nature for people'. Rewilding projects that focus on pre-human baselines, such as Pleistocene Park in Russia (Zimov 2005; du Toit 2019), overlook the diverse ways landscapes have been shaped by people and nature over time (Ellis et al. 2021), and valorise neutrally framed natural science closely align with the 'nature for itself' typology. Meanwhile, rewilding shares common ground with 'nature despite people' on account of its tendency to view people as the problem and through its focus on addressing this real and perceived threat to nature by reducing or removing human interventions (Corlett 2016). Finally, to alleviate concerns that it fails to consider human needs, rewilding is increasingly framed as a utilitarian 'nature for people' approach, where the focus is on ecosystem services and nature-based solutions (Cerqueira et al. 2015; Keesstra et al. 2018). Indeed, in relation to this point, Rappel (2021) argues that "many rewilding schemes are linked to the rise of dubious neoliberal biodiversity and carbon offsetting schemes across the Global South".

These different approaches to rewilding will have important implications for the future of conservation and undoubtedly warrant substantial attention. However, to conclude this section, I

will instead briefly address Mace's (2014) proposal to concentrate on 'people and nature' by considering how rewilding fits within this framing, which, on the surface at least, appears more amenable to coexistence based on people sharing space with wildlife.

In response to critiques of rewilding (Wynne-Jones et al. 2020) and broader calls to consider the role played by Indigenous peoples and local communities in conservation (Dawson et al. 2021), a small but steadily growing body of literature has started to explore different approaches to a more people-centred rewilding (Martin et al. 2021; Corson et al. 2022). For example, Dotson and Pereira (2022) have recently argued that political conflicts over conservation may be resolved by embracing "biodiversity democracy in rewilding". Questioning conservation's tendency to frame rural people as either the 'problem' or 'solution' for tackling biodiversity loss, they promote "biodiversity democracy" as a way of recognising that both urban and rural actors have "legitimate interests at stake in conservation decisions, involving cultural, experiential, economic, and environmental values, even if urbanites live farther way" (Dotson and Pereira 2022: 468).

People living in urban areas unquestionably have legitimate interests in conservation, however, the idea of "biodiversity democracy" is problematic in how it advocates handing decision-making power to urban populations who are less likely to encounter the costs of living with wildlife in the rural areas rewilding favours (Bond and Mkutu 2018; Gulati et al. 2021). Furthermore, examples of "biodiversity democracy" in practice, such as the public ballot on wolf reintroduction in Colorado (Sullivan 2021), described by sceptics as "ballot box biology" (Brasch 2020), suggest that rather than resolving conflicts, such a proposal could deepen and intensify existing conflicts over conservation and rewilding. While attempts to promote democratic decision-making in rewilding are certainly welcome, the implications of such approaches require detailed and careful consideration, particularly in relation to social and environmental justice (Brechtin et al. 2002). These complex issues are further complicated by attempts to frame rewilding as a global strategy for addressing coexistence inequalities related to how the costs of coexistence are disproportionately borne by rural communities living in the Global South (Jordan et al. 2020; Iordăchescu 2021).

While such conflicts over rewilding and conservation appear to be ubiquitous (Balmford et al. 2001; Chapron and López-Bao 2020), shifting the main focus of conservation research from resolving or mitigating conflict towards cultivating coexistence offers fruitful possibilities for considering how humans might live with each other and with animals (Pooley et al. 2021). For instance, in their paper examining the social impacts of the Patagonia Park private-protected area in Chile, Louder and

Bosak (2019) report familiar criticisms about how protected areas can disrupt local systems of production and be detrimental to livelihoods and well-being. In short, by focusing on ‘impacts’, they conclude the park is a source of conflict. However, they also note another important finding that receives less attention. In their interviews with local actors they detect support for conservation, “but a different version where production and non-human nature coexist” (Louder and Bosak 2019: 168). In addition, they document how two park rangers reiterate “the fact that there has always been coexistence of wildlife and livestock” (Louder and Bosak 2019: 168). Although Dotson and Pereira (2022: 468) assert that “indigenous and local practices are not always ecologically friendly”, this different version of conservation, one based around coexistence, reconciling production with preservation, and led by indigenous people and local communities (Gadgil et al. 2021) could offer an alternative pathway for advancing coexistence through rewilding.

As mentioned, recent publications in the rewilding literature suggest there is growing interest in this alternative path. Instead of treating farmland abandonment as a ‘win-win’ opportunity to make space for ‘wild’ nature, this literature is acknowledging the challenges and trade-offs associated with efforts to make space for ‘people and nature’ in shared landscapes (Vogt 2021; Corson et al. 2022; Duckett et al. 2022). The theoretical framework presented in the following section introduces the key concepts and theories I use in this thesis in an attempt to make sense of the complex socio-political, economic and ecological challenges related to rewilding, conflicts and coexistence.

3.0 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

In this section, I elaborate on the key concepts and theoretical perspectives I have drawn upon to explore how conflicts over rewilding might be transformed towards coexistence. I begin the section by situating this topic within the context of broader discussions in the conservation biology and science literature about the future of conservation, paying particular attention to the theoretical thinking that underpins this debate. Next, I introduce political ecology, explaining how it can help to enhance understandings of the social and political dimensions of conservation and how I have used it as an overarching critical approach in this thesis to gain insights into the drivers of rewilding conflicts and to explore possible pathways to fostering coexistence. This overview provides an entry point into the thesis's conceptual framework and a discussion of the three central concepts used in this study – conflict, coexistence and conviviality. I conclude by reflecting on the concept of conviviality and the convivial conservation proposal (Büscher and Fletcher 2020), and its potential for fostering more political, inclusive and transformative approaches to coexistence through rewilding. Building on my background in conservation biology, the theoretical and conceptual tools employed in this thesis reflect an attempt to draw together insights from natural and social science disciplines to engage with the human dimensions of rewilding conflicts and the complex challenges associated with promoting coexistence.

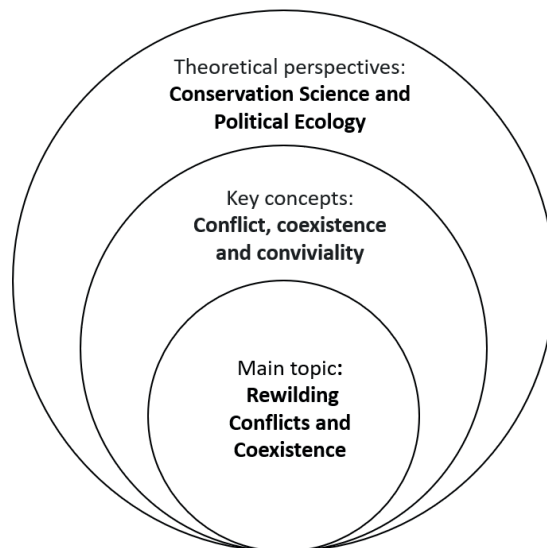


Figure 1. Conceptual and theoretical approach to the human dimensions of rewilding.

3.1 Rewilding and conservation science

The idea of rewilding, as discussed in the previous section, was originally devised in North America in the 1990s by proponents of wilderness-focused conservation (Johns 2019). This group of rewilding pioneers featured a number of prominent conservation biologists who used their expertise and authoritative knowledge of ecology and natural science as the conceptual basis for championing rewilding (Soulé and Noss 1998). A decade earlier, many of the same individuals were also involved with establishing the ‘mission-oriented’ and ‘crisis-driven’ discipline of conservation biology in the USA, the principal aim of which is “the description, explanation, appreciation, protection, and perpetuation of biological diversity” (Meine et al. 2006: 632). Given rewilding’s genesis in conservation biology, this section proceeds by considering how dominant thinking, and dominant actors, in conservation biology and the broader field of conservation science influences conservation practice and policy, and, in turn, the relationship between nature and society.

Focused on understanding, managing, and protecting biodiversity and underpinned by biocentric values (Hunter et al. 2014), conservation biology has been a major influence on global conservation policy, practice, and governance since the 1980s (Soulé and Wilcox 1980; Primack 2006). Described as an “inescapably normative” field (Barry and Oelschlaeger 1996), its origins are typically traced to the formation of the Society for Conservation Biology in 1985 and its accompanying journal *Conservation Biology*, which was first published in 1987. However, as Simberloff (1988) notes, conservation biology, which he prefers to label conservation science, is guided by earlier theories and concepts related to long-established disciplines, such as community ecology, population biology and zoology. Similarly, other conservation fields often perceived or presented as being recent or new, including ecological restoration (Dobson et al. 1997) and rewilding (Jepson and Blythe 2020), share a related historical background in terms of how they build upon earlier work in ecology and the biological sciences to inform contemporary conservation science and practice (Martin 2022).

Equipped with the tools of ecology and the biological sciences, conservation biologists have produced valuable insights and knowledge about the dynamics of natural systems and the drivers of global biodiversity loss (Olson et al. 2002; Cardinale et al. 2012). Moreover, by highlighting the importance of protecting and restoring biodiversity, this knowledge has enabled conservation biologists to advocate for certain conservation policies and outcomes (Meffe and Viederman 1995). For example, conservation’s concern with safeguarding biodiversity in protected areas, a strategy with a long history that has dovetailed with conservation biology’s growing influence, is typically

justified using arguments based on “the best available science...and a strict scientific point of view” (Noss et al. 2012: 2). This one-dimensional view of science is regularly invoked by conservationists, including by proponents of “harmony in conservation”, who contend “there are coherent scientific arguments that the current Aichi target of 17% terrestrial protected areas is inadequate to avoid widespread ecosystem collapse, and that targets should be closer to 50%” (Washington et al. 2022: 689). Likewise, rewilding proponents employ similar arguments to inform and advance their objectives by leveraging scientific knowledge related to keystone species, whose reintroduction, they argue, could potentially help to restore ecosystem functioning and resilience (Svenning et al. 2016).

This tendency to view conservation primarily through the lens of ecology and natural science is an important thread in a lively discussion about the knowledge and values that underpin conservation biology and its goals (Chan 2008; Sandbrook et al. 2011; Kopnina et al. 2018). Informed by conservation thinking promoted by figures such as John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, and Aldo Leopold during the 19th and 20th centuries, conservation biology’s chief architect Michael Soulé (1985) was explicit in prioritising the inherent value of biodiversity and a preference for “wilderness over gardens” when he laid the foundations of the field. A recent survey of the conservation movement indicates there is still considerable support for such science-led, ecocentric approaches to conservation among those trained in biological sciences (Sandbrook et al. 2019). At the same time, however, the survey also highlighted how this ‘traditional’ vision of conservation is strongly opposed by social scientists based on concerns related to its negative impacts on local people.

Regarding the role of science in conservation biology, Soulé (1985: 727) was clear in emphasising “the dependence of the biological sciences on social science disciplines” as a means to assess the social implications of conservation actions. In the ensuing years, a growing awareness that the success or failure of conservation is heavily dependent on social factors has meant the central importance of social science and humanities research for exploring the ‘human dimensions’ of conservation and restoration has been frequently highlighted by scholars from multiple disciplines (Decker et al. 1989; Mascia et al. 2003; Drew and Henne 2008; Higgs 2012; Bennett et al. 2017; Holmes et al. 2021). Thus, although natural science perspectives remain dominant (Evans 2021), social science and humanities research have gradually gained momentum and made important contributions that have both strengthened and challenged the ‘traditional’ approaches associated with conservation biology (Büscher and Wolmer 2007; Sheil and Meijaard 2010; Redford 2011). Yet, as the spotlight on the human dimensions of conservation has grown brighter, so too has the

intensity of polarised debates surrounding the role of people in conservation between some proponents of conservation biology and those associated with a nascent field referred to as the “new conservation science” (Doak et al. 2015).

This debate was sparked by advocates of the so-called new conservation, who called for conservation to “shed the old paradigms” of conservation biology in favour of a more anthropocentric, market-based conservation enterprise that could merge the objectives of conservation and economic development (Kareiva et al. 2011). Questioning the centrality of biological sciences in a field faced with complex, socially-driven problems, new conservationists Kareiva and Marvier (2012) argued for a broader, more interdisciplinary and integrated approach to conservation science informed by a range of disciplines across the biological sciences, social sciences and humanities (see figure 2). Furthermore, in presenting their “modern” approach to conservation science and pointing out what they considered to be the “major shortcomings” of conservation biology, Kareiva and Marvier (2012) also questioned the vision of rewilding promoted by some conservation biologists. Asserting that wilderness and places untouched by human influence do not exist and species, such as wolves and grizzly bears, “will never be as abundant and widespread as they once were” (2012: 968), Kareiva and Marvier instead called for conservation to turn its focus to a future of novel ecosystems, corporate partnerships, and sustainable resource use.

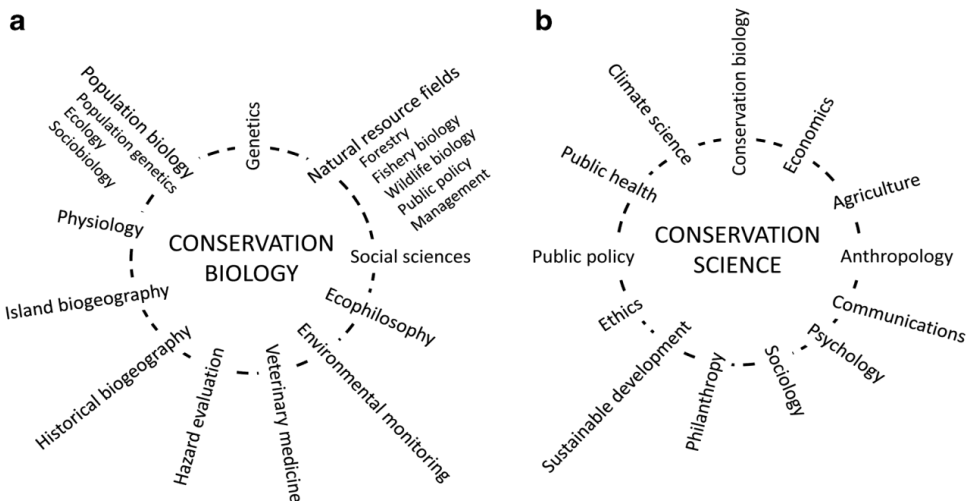


Figure 2. Fields contributing to (a) conservation biology and (b) conservation science (Kareiva and Marvier 2012)

Similar arguments based on shifting conservation away from the ‘fortress’ model and towards a ‘conservation for development’ approach have been advanced since the 1980s (Brandon et al. 1998; Folke 2006). However, in critically re-evaluating the goals, science, and core assumptions of conservation biology, the new conservation triggered a reproachful response from certain proponents of ‘traditional’ conservation. Characterising new conservation as an “economic-growth-based or humanitarian movement”, Michael Soulé declared it “does not deserve to be labelled conservation” (2013: 895). Moreover, rather than acknowledge the prominent position the biological sciences continue to occupy in conservation biology, Soulé (2013) defensively argued the Society for Conservation Biology has included many progressive social scientists among its editors and authors, thus implying that the field is attentive and committed to engaging with the human dimensions of conservation. In what may be understood as a further example of the ongoing ‘dialogue of the deaf’ (Agrawal and Ostrom 2006) between the social sciences and conservation biology, the new conservation’s interpretation of nature as a social construction, a longstanding source of controversy in debates about wilderness (e.g. Nelson and Callicott 2008), was dismissed by some adherents of conservation biology. For example, in querying whether new conservation represents a “surrender to development”, Miller et al. (2014: 3) rejected the premise that nature is a social construct and contended that “Economics is the human construct. Nature is real, no matter how battered”.

In addition to these important divergences over how nature is conceptualised and the evidence base that informs conservation, proponents of new conservation science and conservation biology also clashed over the relationship between conservation and economics. These tensions can be traced back to the foundations of the conservation movement in America at the turn of the 20th century and the contrasting ‘preservation’ and ‘conservation’ approaches advocated by John Muir and Gifford Pinchot (Callicott 1990). Dedicated to preserving what he considered to be cherished wilderness areas in the American West, Muir was vehemently opposed to activities such as logging, grazing and hunting, unlike the more pragmatic Pinchot who supported the wise use of natural resources. On the one hand, Muir’s preservationist and wilderness-based ethic has been a key influence on ‘traditional’ conservation thinking in how it frames humanity as a singular and unwelcome source of disturbance (Crist 2018). On the other hand, some supporters of this more conventional model of conservation also recognise that the ultimate driver of biodiversity loss is not ‘humanity’, but “the fiction that perpetual growth can occur on a finite planet” (Ceballos et al. 2017). Given this deep-rooted concern with development, consumption and economic growth, it is

perhaps unsurprising that new conservation's willingness to engage with corporations, market-based tools and the logic of natural capital is deeply troubling for many advocates of 'traditional' conservation (Doak et al. 2015).

Yet, traditional conservation supporters are not alone in expressing concerns about new conservation. Critical social scientists also disagree with 'conservation through capitalism' (Sandbrook et al. 2019) due to the myriad problems associated with new conservation's embrace of what they describe as the neoliberalisation of conservation (Igoe and Brockington 2007). In addition to drawing attention to the social impacts of neoliberal conservation (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012; Holmes and Cavanagh 2016), critical scholars argue that such an approach not only fails to tackle the root causes of biodiversity loss, but it also reproduces and strengthens the dominant capitalist logics driving the current global ecological crisis (Fairhead et al. 2012; Sullivan 2013; Moranta et al. 2022). Based on this understanding, many critical social scientists question calls for a reconciliation between the capitalist worldviews of new conservation and the anti-capitalist worldviews of traditional conservation through so-called inclusive conservation (Tallis and Lubchenco 2014). Instead, the critical social science position typically advocates for alternative approaches to conservation based around social justice, pluralistic perspectives, diverse knowledges, and transformative change (Alcorn 1993; Matulis and Moyer 2017; Bennett and Roth 2019; Wyborn et al. 2020; Kashwan et al. 2021). In other words, it argues that "it is possible to base arguments for conservation on grounds other than capitalist or scientific rationality" (Adams 2013: 233).

While perspectives from conservation biology and the new conservation science remain the principal influences on global conservation policy and practice, this growing interest in transformative alternatives to dominant approaches to conservation serves as an important point of departure for this thesis. Having briefly outlined the limitations of these dominant approaches, I will next introduce political ecology as the main theoretical influence that has framed my analysis of how rewilding conflicts might be positively transformed towards coexistence and, ultimately, conviviality.

3.2 Political Ecology

In the midst of conservation biology's rise during the 1980s, political ecology also gained ascendancy as a wide-ranging approach to examining how nature-society relations are influenced by uneven power dynamics and the interaction between political-economic and ecological processes (Peet et al. 2010). The term 'political ecology' first appeared at start of the previous decade (Wolf 1972) amid escalating concerns over the deteriorating state of the environment, concerns which set in motion

major international efforts to address environmental decline (Gómez-Baggethun and Naredo 2015). Political ecology's emergence at this time is often portrayed as a reaction against a particular stream of environmentalism encapsulated by the apolitical ecology and neo-Malthusian thinking espoused by prominent biologists such as Paul Ehrlich and Garret Hardin (Peet and Watts 2002; Perrault et al. 2015). Yet, such thinking had little purchase at early global environmental meetings in Stockholm and Cocoyoc where social justice was a central concern and environmental problems, which were linked to rapid economic growth, were understood to be fundamentally political problems (Höhler 2015). According to Neumann (2014: 5), this view aligned with early political ecologists whose "main premise was that ecological problems were at their core social and political problems, not technical or managerial, and therefore demanded a theoretical foundation to analyse the complex social, economic and political relations in which environmental change is embedded".

Guided by this core premise and, what Srinivasan and Kasturirangan (2016) contend is, a mainly anthropocentric approach to environment and development issues, political ecology analysis draws from a diverse combination of theoretical and disciplinary perspectives. For Benjaminsen and Svarstad (2021), key influences on the field are Marxist political economy, human and cultural ecology, poststructuralism, peasant studies, and critical theory. Over the last three decades, political ecology research has also engaged with an expanding number of theoretical approaches, including decolonial theory (Mignolo and Escobar 2013), feminist perspectives (Rocheleau et al. 2013), environmental justice (Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020), degrowth (Paulson 2017), and multispecies studies (Kirksey and Helmreich 2010). Political ecology's concern with the historical context of contemporary problems (Hornborg et al. 2007; Davis 2015) has been a key point of departure in this thesis for understanding how rewilding conflicts in Ireland are rooted in a complex history linked to colonialism and political-economic transformation (Sands 2022).

As an interdisciplinary field, political ecology is also informed by natural science studies in two notable ways. First, knowledge accrued through natural science methodologies can provide an overview of ecological conditions for political ecologists that seek to explain how human actions have shaped environmental change over time (e.g. Blaikie 1985). Second, based on the constructivist position that scientific knowledge is not neutral, but "made in historically specific, socially situated practices" (Castree and Braun 1998: 27), political ecologists critically assess the production and implications of environmental knowledge, particularly formal scientific knowledge (Forsyth 2004). Drawing attention to the role of knowledge in environmental struggles, political ecologists have

shown how dominant discourses, or knowledge regimes, can exclude or side-line the knowledge of local people in environmental decision-making, in the process undermining their claim to resources (Fairhead and Leach 1996; Stott and Sullivan 2000; Agder et al. 2001). In addition to critiquing the ‘abyssal thinking’ (de Sousa Santos 2007) of Western scientific knowledge, political ecologists are also committed to identifying alternative epistemologies for re-imagining nature-society relations (Escobar 1998; Tlostanova and Mignolo 2009; Collard et al. 2015; Gibson et al. 2015).

This twin concern with both understanding the world and working to radically change it, what Robbins (2012) calls the ‘hatchet and seed’ approach of political ecology, is a defining characteristic of the field (Perrault et al. 2015). Over the years, political ecologists have applied this approach to a diverse range of socio-environmental situations, with the critical edge of political ecology’s ‘hatchet’ regularly wielded in the direction of conservation (Neumann 1992; Adams and Hutton 2007). For instance, political ecologists have examined the social implications of protected areas (Lele et al. 2010; Brockington et al. 2012), the interplay between illegal wildlife trade and militarised conservation strategies (Duffy 2022), conservation’s relationship with capitalism (Sullivan 2013), the growing influence of technology on conservation (Redford and Adams 2021), and how ideas about nature, such as notions of ‘wilderness’, are shaped by and through conservation (Fletcher 2010; Bluwstein and Lund 2018). Yet, although conservation occupies a central position in political ecology studies, rewilding, with a few exceptions (e.g. Wynne-Jones et al. 2020), has received relatively little attention from political ecologists despite its growing influence on conservation policy and practice. In this thesis, therefore, I have drawn on insights from political ecology’s long-standing engagement with conservation, and its normative concern with who wins and who loses from conservation, to consider the social and political dimensions of rewilding.

In doing so, however, I’m aware that political ecology and social science studies conducting critical research ‘on conservation’, rather than necessarily ‘for conservation’ (Sandbrook et al. 2013), are often perceived as being against conservation (Brosius 2006; Chua et al. 2020). For instance, always quick to defend his particular vision of conservation, Michael Soulé argued that the post-structuralist turn towards understanding nature as socially constructed, a perspective embraced by many Foucault-influenced political ecologists, represented a ‘covert’ and ‘ideological assault’ on living nature (Soulé 1995). Indeed, post-structuralist forms of political ecology have often encountered such critiques based on the argument that it amounts to ‘politics without ecology’ (Vayda and Walters 1999) due to its perceived inattention to how environmental change is shaped by ecological

factors, such as geophysical, evolutionary, and biological processes. Further sources of frustration regarding how some social scientists engage with conservation are highlighted by Redford (2011), including a tendency to reduce conservation to a one-dimensional elite project that has universally negative implications for local people. These frustrations appear to be aggravated by the impression that political ecologists are quick to critique, but slow to put forward alternatives and policy-relevant solutions (Paulson et al. 2003).

While I share some of these reservations and agree with Walker's (2005: 392) point that "Critique by itself is not engagement", I also recognise that political ecology has considerable potential for revealing alternatives and challenging conservation's 'anti-political tendencies' (Büscher 2010). As Massarella et al. (2021) assert, political ecology and critical social science perspectives can help to politicise and pluralise conservation debates that have become depoliticised through the 'anti-politics' of technocratic decision-making models (Ferguson 1994; Swyngedouw 2011). Further, by problematising how the global capitalist political economy drives conservation problems, and frames solutions to these problems, political ecology can help to illuminate post-capitalist alternatives, or 'seeds', based on non-dominant worldviews and knowledge systems (e.g. Gadigal et al. 1993; Berkes 2017). Finally, relevant to rewilding, and the specific aims of this thesis, political ecologists are also taking an interest in nurturing socially just and sustainable approaches to restoration by, for example, highlighting the need to address unequal power relations between different actors operating at a variety of scales, the underlying issues of (in)equality and (in)justice driving ecosystem degradation, and the constraints restoration and rewilding place on existing land uses and users (Fry 2020; Elias et al. 2021; Osborne et al. 2021).

In this thesis, I take inspiration from these critical-constructive perspectives on conservation. Drawing on theoretical insights from political ecology, I seek to understand the socio-political processes, both historical and contemporary, that influence conflicts over rewilding, while simultaneously exploring alternative pathways for fostering coexistence between people and the rest of nature. Following political ecology's attentiveness to multiple scales and diverse cases, or 'objects' (Robbins et al. 2014), I examine rewilding through case studies into the history of wolves in Ireland, the red kite reintroduction project in Northern Ireland, and the interfaces between rewilding, conviviality and traditional approaches to conservation in Ireland. The unifying thread linking these cases together, beyond their common concern with the political ecology of rewilding in Ireland, is their analytical focus on the concepts of conflict, coexistence and conviviality.

3.3 Conflict, Coexistence and Conviviality: Rethinking Rewilding's Three Cs

Rewilding's original emphasis on reintroducing keystone species and securing large, connected core areas is commonly referred to as the three Cs - core areas, corridors and carnivores. Although the concept of rewilding has evolved considerably over the years (Gammon 2018; Perino et al. 2019), the three Cs, with their basic aim of creating more space for nature, still arguably constitute the main theoretical building blocks upon which arguments for landscape-scale rewilding projects and proposals are built (Brown et al. 2011; Svenning et al. 2016). For example, one of Rewilding Europe's key policies is to restore lost wildlife that are understood to play a 'critically important ecological role'. Meanwhile, Rewilding Britain's (2023) website describes the organisations aim to reintroduce wildlife, 'where appropriate', along with setting aside at least 5% of Britain in 'core rewilding areas', where there "should be minimal or no human impact or extraction of resources". In addition to the growing number of organisations working to translate the 3Cs into practice at national and continental scales, Carroll and Noss (2020) contend this interpretation of rewilding is also a 'key element' in controversial plans to expand the global protected area network (Dinerstein et al. 2017; Büscher et al. 2017; Agrawal et al. 2021).

Yet, as solid as the ecological foundations for rewilding might appear from a certain conservation perspective, they provoke familiar concerns when viewed through the lens of political ecology. Just like conventional approaches to conservation, rewilding involves certain people making decisions about how nature is used or managed, and for whom. Arguments for rewilding based on the 3Cs, and related rewilding rhetoric such as 'non-human autonomy', 'natural processes' and 'self-sustaining ecosystems', tend to mask this reality by placing nature at the front of the rewilding picture and rewilding proponents in the background as neutral facilitators. However, as Harvey (1996: 182) reminds us, "ecological arguments are never socially neutral any more than socio-political arguments are ecologically neutral". Acknowledging that rewilding is an ecological argument driven by politics and people with particular ideas about how nature should be managed raises important questions about who sets the rewilding agenda, who benefits from it, and who carries the costs. Engaging with these questions, which are the bread and butter of political ecologists, requires rethinking the seemingly innocuous picture portrayed by the 3Cs and engaging with one of the most significant challenges facing conservation and rewilding, namely conflict (Messmer 2000; Vedeld et al. 2012; Redpath et al. 2013; Lecuyer et al. 2022).

3.3.1 Conflict

A central theme in political ecology studies of conservation, conflict is one of the three key concepts used in this thesis to analyse the historical, social, and political dimensions of rewilding. Conflict, as described by Libiszewski (1991), encompasses a broad spectrum of empirical phenomena ranging from disputes and disagreements between individuals to intra- and interstate wars. Working across the full range of this highly diverse spectrum, (Le Billon 2001; Stonich 2021; Purwins 2022), political ecology scholars explore how politics and power relations mediate struggles over the environment, or what Martinez-Alier (2003: 71) notably calls “ecological distribution conflicts”. Indeed, through its focus on the complex interplay between conflict and the politicisation of nature, including particular landscapes and wildlife (Holmes 2007; Mariki et al. 2015), political ecology is argued to “offer a distinctive approach to understanding conflicts over resources and environmental change, because it is historically grounded, field-based, and generally engages with both the structural and social dimensions of uneven power relations” (LeBillon and Duffy 2018: 242).

Importantly, political ecology also assumes that conflict is intrinsic to conservation because conservation involves making political choices about land and natural resources - choices that generate conflict because they benefit some while often leaving those who bear the costs disempowered and disenfranchised (Adams 2015). For example, as numerous case studies in political ecology have demonstrated, the establishment and expansion of protected areas, with their associated rules and regulations that define how nature is used, managed, and accessed, is a recurring source of conflict (Hall et al. 2011; Peluso and Lund 2011; Ybarra 2018; Louder and Bosak 2019; Marijnen et al. 2021). Focused primarily on the Global South, this literature has illustrated the negative implications of area-based conservation measures whose roots can be traced to colonial models of conservation developed in, and later exported from, the United States during the 19th century (Agrawal and Redford 2009; Dowie 2011; Collins et al. 2021). Further, it has highlighted the various forms of resistance and opposition that have mobilised in response to exclusionary conservation practices that have displaced local groups, enclosed commons, erased property claims, and prohibited everyday subsistence activities perceived to conflict with conservation’s idea of ‘wilderness’ areas undisturbed by human influence (Scott 1985; Scoones 2009; Dutta 2020; Benjaminsen and Cavanagh 2022). As such, political ecology has shed light on how conflicts arise not only over the material control of natural resources, but also over contested ideas and ways of understanding nature (Peets and Watt 2004; Bluwstein and Lund 2018).

In addition to documenting conflicts linked to the top-down ‘fortress conservation’ model, political ecologists have also drawn attention to contestations surrounding community-based approaches to conservation (Schneegg and Kiaka 2018; Lubilo and Hebinck 2019). Underpinned by the ‘win-win’ logic of the mainstream sustainable development discourse and collaborative and participatory models of conservation (Murphree 2000; Büscher and Whande 2007), community conservation projects aim to contribute to poverty reduction and development agendas by integrating the needs of local communities with the goals of biodiversity conservation (Adams et al. 2004). On the one hand, conservation practitioners have highlighted successful examples of such projects whereby the establishment of inclusive government and non-government institutions has enabled rural communities to support their livelihoods through the sustainable management and use of natural resources (Horwich and Lyon 2007). According to Horwich and Lyon (2007), these small-scale projects, which are characterised by a collaborative, multi-actor approach, are largely ignored in the international conservation and academic literature. This insight points towards an important knowledge gap, one that I engage with in the third paper in this thesis and discuss later in this section in relation to the concepts of coexistence and conviviality.

On the other hand, however, larger and more high-profile community-based conservation initiatives have encountered significant criticism. For example, some conservationists, who tend to view local communities as the problem, rather than the solution, to biodiversity loss, have argued such approaches weaken conservation’s primary mission of protecting biodiversity (Kramer et al. 1997; Terborgh 1999; Woodley et al. 2019). Furthermore, political ecology research has identified numerous ways in which community conservation has acted as a driver of conflict. These include disputes over the unequal distribution of benefits within local communities (Igoe and Croucher 2007), top-down and tokenistic approaches to community participation (Moyo et al. 2016), the dispossession of land and resources from local communities in the name of conservation (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012), and, as argued by Brockington (2004), the imposition of conservation practices on politically weak rural groups by more powerful actors, such as local and central government, and international conservation organisations. Aside from illustrating political ecology’s interest in various types of conflicts linked to conservation, these examples also showcase political ecology’s concern with power asymmetries and understanding how less powerful actors experience conflict and develop strategies of resistance against more powerful actors and interests.

Regarding the key actors and power dynamics in play in rewilding conflicts, Svarstad et al. (2018) provide a useful discussion of three theoretical approaches to power that I have drawn on, to varying degrees, in this thesis. First, the application of an actor-oriented power perspective, which generally views power as being relational and intentionally exercised by different actors in pursuit of particular interests, has been valuable for considering how power is both exercised and contested in relation to rewilding conflicts. Following Svarstad et al. (2018), I explore how power is exercised by two types of actors – those pursuing rewilding (and dewilding) initiatives and those who resist these interventions. Related to this approach, I am attentive to the agency of non-humans in rewilding, primarily wolves and red kites, and how they influence conflicts over rewilding by intentionally exercising agency to assert their interests, e.g. to hunt and defend their offspring - a point I elaborate on further below. Second, drawing on a structural power perspective grounded in Marxist political economy, I also seek to understand how exercise of power by human and non-human actors is conditioned by historically produced social structures (Harvey 1996; Wood 2002). Finally, I also broadly engage with poststructuralist power perspectives, more specifically discursive power, in relation to how power is exercised through the construction of competing rewilding discourses that, as I have argued in the previous section, both reproduce and unsettle hegemonic conservation discourses.

With its general focus on understanding how various types of power influence conflict, political ecology perspectives are significantly different to dominant approaches to conflict in the conservation literature, or more specifically in a substantial literature on human-wildlife conflict (Margulies and Karanth 2018). Recently included as a target for ‘urgent action’ in the Kunming-Montreal post-2020 global biodiversity framework, human-wildlife conflict refers to situations where humans and wildlife have negative impacts on each other (Woodroffe et al. 2005). For instance, humans can negatively impact wildlife by causing habitat loss and by injuring, killing, or ‘persecuting’ animals who threaten, or are perceived to threaten, people’s livelihoods, property, or safety (Nyhus 2016). At the same time, wildlife can inflict serious costs on people through the predation of livestock and game, crop and property damage, trauma and fear, and attacks leading to human injury or death (Barua et al. 2013; Thondhlana et al. 2020; Gulati et al. 2021; Bombieri et al. 2023). Given their adverse consequences for both people and wildlife, these negative impacts are understandably a concern for both conservation and development agendas (Loveridge et al. 2017).

To date, efforts to understand and manage these impacts have been mainly guided by the natural sciences, with the focus on identifying various technical, legal, educational, and economic measures to mitigate negative interactions between people and so-called ‘problem’ wildlife (Conover 2001; Redpath et al. 2015). These measures, which include compensation for wildlife damage, translocations, fencing, and lethal control (Packer et al. 2013; Bautista et al. 2019), are also frequently promoted as solutions in the context of rewilding initiatives involving the return of wildlife with the potential to impact human interests (Treves et al. 2009; Bull et al. 2019). However, while such measures are considered important conservation tools, their limitations have been frequently highlighted and conflict has often persisted, or even been exacerbated, in situations where they have been implemented (Bulte and Rondeau 2005; Ogra and Badola 2008; Boitani et al. 2010; Fontúrbel and Simonetti 2011; Evans and Adams 2016; Crowley et al. 2017). Further, it is argued that mitigation strategies based on simplistic and standardised solutions, such as compensation schemes and fences, are insufficient for tackling conflicts that are increasingly understood to be primarily driven by contestations between different groups of people, rather than by conflicts between people and wildlife (Madden and McQuinn 2014; Skogen et al. 2017; Frank and Glikman 2019).

Closer to political ecology’s interpretation of conflict, this alternative way of viewing conflict, i.e. as complex and context-specific social problems that undermine conservation, has attracted considerable interest in a growing literature examining ‘conservation conflicts’ (Redpath et al. 2013; Mason et al. 2018; Baynham-Herd et al. 2018). Within this literature, much scholarly attention has been focused on critiquing the dominant human-wildlife conflict framing for its disproportionate emphasis on negative human-wildlife interactions and for conferring power and agency to wildlife in a manner that conceals the key social, political, cultural, and historical drivers of conflict (Peterson et al. 2010; Massé 2016). To make these human dimensions of conflict more visible, Young et al. (2010) have unpacked the human-wildlife conflict framework into two distinct components: (i) human-wildlife *impacts*, as described above, and (ii) human-human *conflicts*, which occur fundamentally between people over conservation objectives and the management of wildlife and natural resources. This distinction between impacts and conflicts is also acknowledged by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature’s Specialist Group on ‘Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence’, who affirm that “Human-wildlife conflicts are in essence conflicts between stakeholders, and perhaps more accurately presented as ‘human-human conflicts’” (IUCN 2022). Therefore, while I recognise that negative human-wildlife interactions are one component of

conflict, this thesis adopts a similar understanding of rewilding conflicts as being mainly driven by adversarial human-human relations. As Dickman (2010: 465) observes, however, conceptualising conflict in this way requires taking the human dimensions of conflict seriously which means “conservation biologists must move beyond examining species-based conflicts towards considering the wider socio-economic, ecological and cultural conditions under which intense conflicts arise”.

For conservationists trained primarily in the biological sciences, myself included, the prospect of engaging with theories of power and tackling so-called ‘wicked’ conservation problems is daunting (Game et al. 2014). However, if conservation’s call for transformative change is to be taken seriously, then conservationists need to be willing to adapt and change how they approach the many complex challenges facing conservation, including conflict. Indeed, in the context of conservation conflicts, Hodgson et al. (2020: 3) have recently asserted that “a profound change is required in how conflicts are understood, addressed, and managed”. To facilitate such a change, conservationists can look towards and learn from disciplines such as political ecology, but also to a wide range of tools in an increasingly interdisciplinary conservation literature that provide valuable perspectives on power dynamics and frameworks for understanding conflict (e.g. Niemelä et al. 2005; Davies et al. 2013; Harrison and Loring 2020; Shackleton et al. 2023). Among these tools, Harrison and Loring’s (2020) ‘transdisciplinary framework for diagnosing complex conservation conflicts’ has been instrumental in relation to how I have theorised and analysed conflict in this thesis.

Building on a number of other key conflict frameworks (Young et al. 2010; Redpath et al. 2013; Madden and McQuinn 2014; Ostrom 2009), Harrison and Loring (2020) stress the importance of understanding the underlying and deep-rooted causes of conflict. To understand how and why conflicts emerge and evolve over time, Harrison and Loring (2020) propose that the first step in examining conflict should involve tracing the deeper historical context of conflict. Skipping this step, they argue, can result in a partial understanding of conflict because “former yet influential actors and important historic changes to the resource in which the current conflict is based may be missed” (Harrison and Loring 2020: 2). This insight has been crucial for guiding the first paper in this thesis, which draws attention to the emergence of conflict associated with historic changes in human-wolf, and nature-society, relations that followed the colonial conquest of Ireland (Sands 2022). In addition to viewing conflicts as being embedded in history, the framework’s emphasis on looking beneath the surface of conflict into relationships, institutions, power struggles, and issues of trust and inequity has also been highly influential in relation to the approach taken in this thesis.

Finally, Harrison and Loring's (2020) notion of 'conflict as story' has been a particular source of inspiration in terms of how I have viewed rewilding conflicts in this thesis. Reflecting a burgeoning interest in storytelling in conservation science (Fernández-Llamazares and Cabeza 2018), Harrison and Loring (2020) propose that a shift from understanding 'conflicts as problems' to 'conflicts as stories' can facilitate a better understanding of the basic components of a conflict (e.g. how did the story begin and who are the key characters?). Further, they suggest that interpreting 'conflicts as stories' allows for a more nuanced appreciation of how the story of a conflict can be told from multiple perspectives. This approach can help to challenge simple but persuasive hero/villain/victim conservation narratives (e.g. Marijnen and Verweijen 2016) by clarifying and validating the concerns and interests of the main actors involved in conflict, which may in turn help to open up a space to search for common ground and possible solutions. Thus, while I acknowledge that conflicts are problems that have negative outcomes, I also draw on the more positive framing of 'conflicts as stories' as a departure point for exploring the potential for rewilding conflicts to facilitate positive change. A normative aspiration that fits with political ecology's emphasis on the "transformative and emancipatory effects" of conflicts (LeBillon and Duffy 2018: 244), such an approach brings into focus the second key concept used in this thesis - coexistence.

3.3.2 Coexistence

Over the last three decades, coexistence has emerged as an increasingly popular concept in conservation research examining human-wildlife interactions (Nepal and Weber 1995; Hoare and du Toit 1999; Madden 2004; Frank et al. 2019). While the term has a longer history of use in the wider conservation literature (e.g. Budowski 1976; McNeely 1987), the recent focus on coexistence can be linked to a concerted effort by conservation researchers to move 'beyond conflict' and towards alternative conceptualisations of human-wildlife interactions (Bhatia et al. 2020; Pooley et al. 2021). For instance, in contrast to the previously discussed human-wildlife conflict framing, with its heavy emphasis on negative interactions between humans and wildlife (König et al. 2020), it is argued that coexistence offers the potential to recognise the complex, context-specific, and positive ways different groups of humans and wildlife interact with each other (Nyhus 2016). As such, interest in coexistence may be understood as part of a broader commitment toward promoting more diverse, inclusive, and optimistic approaches to conservation (e.g. McAfee et al. 2019; Wyborn et al. 2020; Martin et al. 2022). Yet, similar to rewilding, coexistence has been subject to a wide spectrum of

interpretations and its meanings are frequently debated in the conservation literature (Lute et al. 2018; Glikman et al. 2021).

Incorporating interdisciplinary perspectives from across the social and natural sciences, contemporary debates about coexistence, and associated concepts such as tolerance, acceptance, and cohabitation have yielded a range of different definitions. For example, in the context of large carnivore conservation in Europe, Chapron and López-Bao (2016: 578) define coexistence “as the lasting persistence of self-sustaining large carnivore populations in human-dominated landscapes”. Drawing primarily on community ecology, but also acknowledging the relevance of sociology, anthropology, and political science, they suggest that facilitating coexistence involves reducing competition between humans and large carnivores over space and resources by differentiating the ecological niches they occupy. Also focused on the challenge of how to conserve large carnivores in multi-use landscapes, Carter and Linnell (2016)’s pivotal conceptualisation of coexistence draws attention to the importance of effective, equitable, and socially legitimate institutions for governing both human-wildlife and human-human interactions. At the same time, however, they use examples of large carnivores adapting to human-shaped environments to support their central argument that the key to fostering long-term coexistence rests with accepting that humans and wildlife have the ability to co-adapt to each other. In short, from this point of view, coexistence is understood to be co-produced through co-adaptation by both humans and wildlife.

As intended by Carter and Linnell (2016), their conceptualisation has provided an important foundation for the growing number of theoretical and empirical engagements with coexistence. Their influential definition of coexistence, for instance, has been widely cited in numerous studies of coexistence across diverse social, historical, cultural, and ecological contexts (e.g. Arbieu et al. 2019; Mekonen 2020; Sage et al. 2022). Further, their definition has also been broadened based on the recognition that coexistence is not a challenge that is exclusive to human relations with large carnivores, but rather is one that applies to a wide range of human-wildlife interactions. Thus, building on Carter and Linnell (2016), Pooley et al. (2020: 2) describe coexistence as “a sustainable though dynamic state, where humans and wildlife co-adapt to sharing landscapes and human interactions with wildlife are effectively governed to ensure wildlife populations persist in socially legitimate ways that ensure tolerable risk levels”.

At first glance, this appears to be a dense and perhaps elusive definition. Yet, when its individual components are extracted and examined in more detail, as Pettersson et al. (2021) have done for

example, it offers a useful starting point for thinking critically about coexistence. The papers comprising this thesis engage with the three components of coexistence in this definition that I consider to be the most interesting and relevant in the context of rewilding: sharing landscapes, tolerable risk levels, and effective and socially legitimate institutions. In the remainder of this section, I discuss these three different components of coexistence and how they intersect with the previously discussed tensions surrounding rewilding.

The first and most basic component of coexistence focuses on humans and wildlife sharing landscapes. In contrast to dominant conservation policies premised on the spatial separation of humans and wildlife, such as protected areas and rewilding's core areas, coexistence's emphasis on land sharing challenges the assumption that human-dominated environments are unsuitable for wildlife (Chapron et al. 2014; López-Bao et al. 2017). Further, by promoting the idea that wildlife populations can persist in multi-use landscapes outside protected areas (Dorresteijn et al. 2014; Linnell et al. 2020; Pettersson et al. 2022), coexistence appears to unsettle arguments for land-sparing strategies associated with rewilding that treat 'wild' ecosystems and human land uses, like farming, as being incompatible (e.g. Navarro and Pereira 2015; Monbiot 2022).

Yet, as Crespin and Simonetti (2019) note, fostering coexistence in landscapes used for farming and other human activities is notoriously difficult due to the prevalence of conflicts in such contexts - a complex challenge I engage with in the second article in this thesis. To tackle these conflicts, Linnell et al. (2020) assert that a wide range of active management policies are needed, rather than the "practically meaningless" passive management strategies called for by some rewilding supporters. Conflicts linked to land sharing approaches to conservation and rewilding have also been discussed by Adams (2020) and they clearly represent a significant barrier to coexistence, which is recognised in the coexistence literature. Indeed, a number of authors have argued conflict and coexistence should not be viewed dichotomously as sitting at opposite ends of a spectrum, but rather that conflict is an integral and potentially valuable characteristic of coexistence that can facilitate the development of novel human-wildlife relationships in shared landscapes (Yurco et al. 2017; Hill 2021; Bhatia 2021). Likewise, in this thesis, I do not consider coexistence to mean the absence of conflict. Instead, I recognise that nurturing coexistence entails negotiating conflict and acknowledging the risks associated with forging new relationships with wildlife, or as Auster et al. (2022) put it, to "renewing" coexistence.

While rewilding is often framed as a ‘win-win’ approach to conservation, the second component of coexistence stresses that living alongside potentially dangerous or destructive wildlife requires dealing with and managing risk to a “tolerable” level (Carter and Linnell 2016). As described earlier, wildlife present a possible risk because they can adversely impact human interests (Salerno et al. 2020). These risks, it is argued (Treves and Bruskotter 2014), have the potential to undermine people’s tolerance of wildlife, with tolerance defined by Brenner and Metcalf (2020: 262) as “accepting wildlife and/or wildlife behaviours that one dislikes”. When risks associated with wildlife manifest as negative impacts, such as depredation of livestock or crop damage, and these impacts are not accepted or tolerated by people then conflicts can arise that have negative consequence for people and wildlife (Woodroffe et al. 2005).

From this perspective, negative relationships between humans and wildlife appears to be a significant barrier to tolerance, and hence coexistence. However, a number of studies have found that tolerance levels are instead heavily influenced by human-human factors (Zajac et al. 2012; Kansky et al. 2021). For example, questioning the commonly held notion that negative human-wildlife encounters directly affect tolerance levels, Inskip et al. (2016) found that tolerance depends on people’s beliefs about tigers and their perceptions of how wildlife risks are managed by the relevant authorities. Further, Lute and Gore (2019) also suggest that perceptions of risk are an important consideration in relation to the level of trust between local people and decision-makers responsible for mitigating and addressing risks associated with wildlife. According to Frank and Glikman (2019), if local actors perceive that these risks are not managed appropriately and that their needs and interests are subordinated to those of wildlife then support for wildlife conservation, and coexistence, will suffer. Redpath et al. (2017: 2159) echo this point, arguing that people’s willingness to coexist with, or tolerate, dangerous wildlife is likely to be compromised if they perceive wildlife “are imposed on them and they have to bear the risks of living with such species only to benefit distant elites”. Similar to the earlier conclusions made about conflict, these insights suggest that fostering human-wildlife coexistence requires facilitating some form of human-human coexistence, or “people-people reconciliation” (von Essen and Allen 2019).

This understanding draws attention to the third component of coexistence – establishing effective and socially legitimate institutions capable of addressing conflicts between people over wildlife. Institutions, as defined by Vatn (2007), are the conventions, norms, and formally sanctioned rules that structure much of our daily lives and choices. While Young (2002) points out there is

considerable variation in the significance of institutions from one situation to another, it is widely recognised that conservation institutions, from state-governed protected areas to locally-defined stewardship practices, play a critical role in guiding and governing nature-society relations, and in regulating conflict (Holmes 2014; Duffy 2017; Bennett et al. 2018; Rai et al. 2019).

In the context of rewilding, Jepson (2016) argues the diverse institutions that determine conservation policy and practice in Europe have normalised an “impoverished nature” and represent a significant barrier to rewilding. Framing rewilding as an “asset for institutional adaptation”, Jepson calls for the creation of experimental rewilding sites in or close to urban areas that can “more actively confront these barriers and open new institutional spaces” (2016: 121). For Jepson (2016), these experimental sites should be designed, managed, monitored, and explained by multi-actor interest groups. However, there is uncertainty about how much influence people would have over the governance of such sites given rewilding’s emphasis on ‘autonomous nature’ (Marris 2021). Indeed, as Ward (2019: 51) acknowledges “allowing for the independence and self-governance of non-human nature... means Rewilders will also have to grapple with ways of *living with* the ‘unscenic and terrible beauty of rewilding’ and potential human-wildlife conflicts”.

Yet, it is important to emphasise that it is not only ‘Rewilders’ who will have to contend with these conflicts, but a wide range of different interest groups. For institutions to be effective in steering human-wildlife and human-human relations away from conflicts over rewilding and towards socially legitimate forms of coexistence, Pettersson et al. (2021) propose they must operate in a manner that is perceived to be adaptable, just, trustworthy, and accountable. On the one hand, some argue that institutional frameworks based on top-down approaches and coercive policies are essential for supporting the recovery of wildlife populations (Treves et al. 2017). Yet, within the literature, there appears to be a growing recognition that the types of institutions that are the best ‘fit’ for promoting legitimate forms of coexistence are those primarily centred on flexible, collaborative, and community-centred models (Redpath et al. 2017; Armitage et al. 2020). As mentioned earlier, participatory-based approaches do not guarantee legitimacy because, as Lecuyer et al. (2021: 6) explain, “participation is laden with difficulties of poor process design, lack of resources, different understandings and expectations of processes and outcomes” (see also Nepal and Weber 1995; Bixler et al. 2015; Salvatori et al. 2020). However, at the same time, many scholars argue that those who are most affected by conservation should have the capacity to not only influence the rules of conservation, but to change them, which suggests institutions that empower local communities are

an important condition for promoting coexistence (Brown 2003; Rai et al. 2021). These arguments have been valuable for considering the role of institutions in relation to coexistence and rewilding conflicts in this thesis.

Bringing together the theoretical perspectives on coexistence and conflict discussed in this section so far, they illustrate the importance of engaging with the social and political dimensions of rewilding. Further, they also point towards a need to develop alternative ways of navigating conflict and promoting coexistence in shared spaces that integrate the needs of people and wildlife. To conclude this section, I examine the concept of ‘conviviality’, along with the ‘convivial’ conservation proposal, as an alternative pathway for potentially realising inclusive and equitable approaches to coexistence through rewilding.

3.3.3 Conviviality

In the overview of political ecology presented earlier in this section, I noted how the field emerged during the 1970s in the context of debates about the implications of mainstream approaches to economic development (Gómez-Baggethun and Naredo 2015). Economic policies focused on perpetual growth were a core issue in these debates, with concerns about the long-term sustainability of such policies inspiring radical critiques of dominant approaches to economic development. For example, proponents of social ecology critiqued notions of ‘limiting growth’ under a capitalist system driven by corporate power and dependent on continuous growth for its survival (Clark 1997). Instead, they support the fostering of, what Murray Bookchin (1991) referred to as, an ‘ethics of complementarity’ among humans and between humanity and non-human life by establishing a decentralised, creative, ethical, and ecological society.

A closely related proposal was formulated by Ivan Illich in the early 1970s focusing on the transformation of our contemporary capitalist society into a ‘convivial’ one. Illich (1973a: 11) advanced this vision of societal ‘reconstruction’ in his book ‘Tools for conviviality’, explaining that conviviality meant the “opposite of industrial productivity” and referred to the “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and the intercourse of persons with their environment”. Put differently, Illich viewed conviviality as a way to “provide guidelines for action” towards a good life based on “convivial living, which could generate a new flowering of surprises far beyond anyone’s imagination and hope” (Illich 1973b: 51). In the years that followed, Illich’s ideas remained on the margins of mainstream conservation and development discourses as a very different set of ideas associated with neoliberalism became deeply entrenched (Harvey 2007). However, growing calls for

transformative change and new ways of thinking about nature-society relations have sparked renewed interest in the concept of conviviality (Escobar 2018; Kallis et al. 2018; Büscher and Fletcher 2019; Scoones 2022).

Building partly on Illich's idea of conviviality and from wider discussions about transforming conservation policy and practice, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) recently introduced 'convivial conservation' as a radical alternative to mainstream approaches to conservation. Following Brockington et al. (2012), Büscher and Fletcher identify two key, interlinked characteristics of 'mainstream conservation' they consider to be "foundational issues" because "neither truly addresses the integrated socio-ecological roots of the biodiversity crisis" (2019: 4). The first concerns conservation efforts that promote a material and symbolic separation between people and nature, a nature-culture dichotomy they argue is highly problematic because it imposes a dualistic worldview that justifies the exploitation of both human and non-human nature. The second relates to how this same dichotomy is reproduced and amplified through conservation's complex relationship with capitalism, specifically conservation's "willingness to sleep with the enemy" (Adams 2017), as reflected in its turn to market-based strategies, such as ecotourism, payments for ecosystem services, and biodiversity credit trading schemes (Alvarado-Quesada et al. 2014). Departing from a political ecology perspective grounded in a critique of capitalist political economy, Büscher and Fletcher's (2020) convivial conservation proposal rejects both of these positions. In doing so, it advocates for an approach to conservation built on a politics of equality, structural change, environmental justice, and, highly relevant to this thesis, fostering human-wildlife coexistence.

Similar to the definition of coexistence discussed earlier, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) are also concerned with how coexistence can be enabled in shared landscapes or what they refer to as 'promoted areas'. In seeking to unravel the nature-culture dichotomy by moving beyond protected area strategies based on separating people and nature, Büscher and Fletcher (2020: 164) conceive of promoted areas "as fundamentally encouraging places where people are considered welcome visitors, dwellers or travellers rather than temporary alien invaders upon a nonhuman landscape". Following a comparable logic to those who critique the term 'human-wildlife conflict' for its negative framing of human-wildlife relations (e.g. Peterson et al. 2010), Büscher and Fletcher suggest that replacing the negative sounding 'protected from' with the more positive 'promoted by and for' represents an important discursive shift towards the "building of long-lasting, engaging and open-ended relationships with nonhumans and ecologies" (2019: 286). To build these 'convivial' relations,

Toncheva et al. (2022) found that bottom up, localised, and democratic decision-making, as advocated by convivial conservation, were an important factor in promoting human-bear coexistence in Bulgaria. As such, it appears that convivial conservation fits well with and can contribute to the challenge of identifying effective and socially legitimate institutions for coexistence.

Regarding how coexistence is conceptualised in the conservation literature and by convivial conservation's proponents, another interesting point of comparison relates to the question of non-human agency. Within the conservation literature, there is growing interest and debate about the extent to which animals influence conservation efforts through their behaviours, or agency (Wallach et al. 2020; Pooley 2021; Edelblutte et al. 2023). Further, some argue that recognising and celebrating non-human autonomy is a defining feature of rewilding (Prior and Ward 2016). Going a step further, social science and humanities scholars interested in 'post-human' and 'more-than-human' perspectives argue in favour of 'decentering the human' and blurring the distinctions between nature and society (e.g. Haraway 2013). Engaging with these debates, Büscher and Fletcher (2020:131) agree animals have agency but contend that it is distinct from the "unique form of political agency" possessed by humans. Thus, while they aim to undo the nature-society dichotomy, they contend that nature and humans hold unique characteristics that should be highlighted, one of which is humans "capacity to function as intentional, *political* actors" (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 167). An important implication of this argument, and one that underpins my theoretical approach in this thesis, is that animals are understood to have agency they can exercise with intent, but they are not viewed as political actors - humans are. This perspective aligns with contributions from the conservation literature that highlight how so-called human-wildlife conflicts are fundamentally political problems between different groups of people (Redpath et al. 2013; Pooley et al. 2017; Hodgson et al. 2020).

Questions of power and politics are also at the centre of the convivial conservation proposal's theory of change. Indeed, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) argue that power is one of three key elements, alongside time and actors, which must be addressed to operationalise convivial conservation. Favouring a co-constitutive understanding of structural power and the power of agency, Büscher and Fletcher (2019: 7) advocate for a concurrent approach to transforming conservation based on micropolitical practices and "more organised efforts to effect large-scale structural change". In terms of how this change can be attained over time, their second element, they call for short-term and longer-term actions geared towards imagining and building "alternative economic spaces" (Büscher and Fletcher 2019: 8). The third element involves dealing with different

actors, and the different positions they take across multiple spatial and temporal scales. Critiquing conservation's focus on local actors, rather than the extra-local actors largely responsible for driving biodiversity loss, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) distinguish four different categories of global conservation actors: (i) upper classes, (ii) land-owning capitalist classes, (iii) middle and lower classes, and (iv) lower rural classes. These categories have been useful for thinking about the relations between the different actors involved in rewilding conflicts. Moreover, Büscher and Fletcher's (2020) emphasis on considering how local actors and local democracy are influenced by the power of 'outside' actors is also a valuable insight. At the same time, I'm also cognisant of the pitfalls of romanticising and homogenising 'local communities' into a single monolithic group in a way that obscures contradictions and different perspectives, positions, agendas, and interests (Chua et al. 2020).

In constructing my analysis of rewilding in Ireland, I have also reflected on critiques of convivial conservation. For instance, following on from the above point about the importance of recognising differences between people and differences between how people experience non-human nature, Krauss (2021) detects a failure to meaningfully consider gender and the importance of facilitating the equitable participation of women in conservation. As Armitage et al. (2020) point out, this is a widespread problem in conservation that has significant consequences because it omits crucial voices and perspectives from conservation decision-making. In addition to gender, Krauss (2021) argues that convivial conservation must also engage with Indigenous knowledges and intergenerational justice if it is to be operationalised as a decolonial option. These are important factors in relation to this study's interest in exploring how inclusive and convivial approaches to rewilding can be fostered.

Further, given colonialism's longstanding influence in Ireland, Krauss's (2021) arguments in favour of decolonising conservation are also highly relevant to this thesis. Contributing to the debate on the need to decolonise conservation (e.g. Adams and Mulligan 2003; Mabele et al. 2021), Krauss (2021) argues for a dual understanding of decolonisation as a process that aims to dismantle power asymmetries and hierarchies of difference that emerged through colonialism by "using decolonial thinking and writing to identify and address ongoing injustices which are rooted in the past, and linked to land and resources". The potential of 'Ubuntu' as one such 'decolonial option' has been explored in the context of southern Africa using the principles of convivial conservation, with Mabele et al. (2022) asserting that it could help promote decolonial, equity-focused conservation.

Drawing on these perspectives, I use the case study of human-wolf relations to explore how colonial ways of thinking have influenced historical changes in nature-society relations in Ireland, and the case study of red kites to examine how these relations are affected by the “residues left by colonization” (Krauss 2021). In the third article in this thesis, I argue that convivial ways of thinking can help to illuminate ‘decolonial options’ and facilitate a more convivial approach to rewilding.

To conclude this section, I would like to briefly raise what I consider to be a salient point regarding Büscher and Fletcher’s (2020) interpretation of rewilding. In concluding their discussion of rewilding, Büscher and Fletcher (2020: 68) assert that “rewilding is a strategy promoted by *both* new conservationists and some of their neoprotectionist critics as ‘a model for conservation in the Anthropocene’”. While I tend to agree with this conclusion, I do not agree that rewilding can be reduced to two positions, i.e. ‘new conservation’ and ‘neoprotectionism’. As previously discussed, a diverse array of ideas, discourses, and practices are attached to rewilding, which Büscher and Fletcher partly acknowledge. Yet, in characterising rewilding as a strategy associated with two positions they reject, Büscher and Fletcher appear to be rejecting rewilding as a radical alternative to dominant approaches to conservation. Although this is perhaps not their intention, my research shows that rewilding has potential beyond these two positions and, in certain contexts, may be congruent with convivial conservation. Interested in exploring this potential through the critical-constructive lens of political ecology, this thesis combines perspectives on conflict and coexistence from the conservation literature with the core elements of convivial conservation in order to better understand how a more convivial approach to rewilding can be developed and implemented. I begin the next section by describing the ontological and epistemological perspectives that underpin this theoretical approach.

4. Research Approach

4.1 Epistemological orientation and methodological choices

On paper, the broad fields of conservation science and political ecology share a commitment to interdisciplinary research that integrates natural science and social science perspectives (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2021; Miller et al. 2023). Yet, as discussed in the previous section, the task of advancing interdisciplinarity is far from straightforward (Fox et al. 2006; Barry and Born 2013). For instance, engaging with Vayda and Walters' (1999) scathing and well-known critique of political ecology, Little (2003:20) contends "the pendulum in political ecology has probably swung too much towards the political and, in turn, has downplayed the importance of ecology". Meanwhile, Newing et al. (2011) acknowledge that some progress has been made towards promoting more interdisciplinary approaches in conservation science, but lament that this progress has been "disappointingly slow". One reason for this slow progress, they argue, relates to key differences between the natural and social sciences in terms of their ontological and epistemological orientations. Hence, promoting a more interdisciplinary approach to conservation requires an understanding of these differences, which requires dealing with philosophical questions about the nature of reality (ontology) and how knowledge about reality is produced or acquired (epistemology) (Evely et al. 2008).

According to Moon and Blackman (2014), ontology and epistemology are of key importance to conservation science. To illustrate the importance of ontology, they refer to a generalised dichotomy between realism and relativism, explaining that it is useful for researchers to reflect on their interpretation of reality, i.e. as existing independent of human experience (realism) or as socially constructed and "built up from the perceptions and actions of social actors" (relativism) (Bryman 2016: 16). To some conservation researchers the differences between realism and relativism may seem trivial and inconsequential, yet these differences have material implications and are at the heart of debates about wilderness, conservation, and, ultimately, rewilding (Callicott and Nelson 2008). The previously mentioned controversy surrounding the concept of wilderness, for instance, was underpinned by different ontological perspectives, with some 'realists' asserting that "social relativism can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws" (Soulé and Lease 1995: xvi). As Proctor (1998) points out, however, such debates are not just about ontology, but also epistemology because they concern ideas about 'nature', the 'environment', and 'wilderness' and the attendant cultural and political meanings of these concepts.

Turning once again to Moon and Blackman's (2014) helpful 'Guide to understanding social science research for natural scientists', they emphasise how conservation research is profoundly influenced by epistemological assumptions about what is considered to count as valid, justifiable, or 'true', knowledge about reality. For conservation researchers who are trained in natural sciences and often more comfortable with quantitative research, Newing et al. (2011: 8) suggest "the only valid form of scientific knowledge is that which has passed the test of statistical significance; anything less is unsubstantiated conjecture". Linked to an objectivist epistemology and positivist philosophy of science, this approach is questioned by social scientists who lean towards a more constructivist epistemology that posits "Scientific knowledge should not be regarded as a representation of nature, but rather as a socially constructed interpretation with an already socially-constructed natural-technical object of inquiry" (Bird 1987: 255). In calling for the emergence of more inclusive epistemological perspectives, Trisos et al. (2021: 1205) take this point a step further, arguing that conservation researchers and "many ecologists still rationalize that organisms and ecosystems can be understood when stripped of their human-related histories of unequal social, economic and ontological relations". Such critiques of the epistemological structures that underpin conservation, and their relation to a 'colonial mindset' rooted in Eurocentric ecological knowledge (Griffiths and Robin 1997; Mokuku and Mokuku 2004; Collins et al. 2021), tend to be informed, albeit rarely explicitly (e.g. Escobar 1999), by an ontological and epistemological perspective located between realism and relativism, and positivism and constructivism, namely critical realism (Bhaskar 2013).

Likewise, this study of the human dimensions of rewilding conflicts and coexistence has been guided by critical realist thinking about ontology and epistemology. Influenced by ideas emanating from the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, critical realism was developed in the 1970s by the late Indo-British philosopher, Roy Bhaskar, and other social theorists (see Bhaskar and Hartwig 2010) in response to positivism's reductive shortcomings (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen 2020). Reacting against the so-called epistemic fallacy "that the world is uniform, flat and repetitive, undifferentiated, unstructured and unchanging" (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2006: 6), Bhaskar's (2014) early work on critical realism introduced an ontological perspective that viewed reality as being stratified into three nested domains: the real, the actual, and the empirical (Gorski 2013). In contrast to positivism's general focus on measuring events or objects in the empirical domain, and strong constructivism's apathy towards the real domain, critical realism recognises that there is a reality, which is composed of actual events, experiences, impressions, and underlying structures, and that empirical research can

be conducted about this reality (Patomäki and Wight 2000). Albeit, informed by epistemological relativism, critical realists accept that reality can never be fully understood because knowledge is fallible, historically specific, and socially constructed, and thus must be “subjected to the widest possible critical examination” (Guba and Lincoln 1994: 110).

Given my primary focus in this thesis is on understanding how fostering coexistence through rewilding is influenced by social and political factors, the realist ontological position of critical realism is highly relevant because it grounds this work in an understanding of a biophysical reality and non-human world that “is far from being merely our own invention” (Cronon 1996: 8). Critical realism’s conceptualisation of a stratified reality is valuable for thinking about how coexistence is determined by events in the actual domain that are real, but not easily observed, such as human perceptions of institutions and wildlife risk (Fletcher 2017). As Cockburn (2022) points out, critical realism’s stratified ontology also requires interdisciplinary research to facilitate the discovery and critical analysis of underlying mechanisms in the real domain that cause social and environmental problems.

Critical realism’s concern with explaining the underlying structures and mechanisms of a phenomenon through epistemological scepticism is highly relevant to this study’s objective regarding the underlying drivers of conflicts over rewilding. Discussing the interface between political ecology and critical realism, Forsyth (2001: 3) argues that the “emergence of orthodox explanations for environmental problems can be traced to a combination of historic scientific practice based on the search for positivist and universal laws, and the experience and agendas of the societies that created the science”. On the one hand, critical realism has provided this thesis with a useful framework for identifying and analysing how such practices and agendas hinder coexistence, and how causes of conflicts over rewilding are related to these practices (Puller and Smith 2017). Further, Bhaskar’s sixth and seventh level of ontology, which refer to “re-enchantment” and a world understood in terms of categories of non-duality respectively, are also highly relevant to rewilding, conviviality, and the pursuit of epistemologies that challenge orthodox explanations of environmental problems (Bhaskar and Callinicos 2003). Noting that Bhaskar’s critical realism is primarily concerned with scientific forms of knowledge, Collier (1994) highlights the value of non-scientific arguments, related to storytelling, care, mutual aid and a good life, which have also been taken into consideration when collecting and analysing the data in this study. Finally, critical realism’s orientation towards

methodological pluralism and transformative social and environmental change fits well with this study's, interest in exploring alternative approaches to conservation (Bhaskar 2010).

4.2 Research Design

A critical realism position is compatible with the application of diverse methods to explore and analyse phenomena that are observable and measurable in the environment, and phenomena that are less visible and difficult to observe, such as social, political, historical or economic structures and processes (Doolittle 2015). To understand how these phenomena interact in complex socio-ecological systems to foster social and environmental change, an integration of methodologies is valuable and, some argue (e.g. Norgaard 1989), essential for synthesising the composite of “structure and agency, of individual and institutional, of the macro and the micro” (Moran-Ellis et al. 2006: 52).

Yet, having introduced the terms methods and methodologies in the previous sentences, it is necessary to briefly emphasise the difference between the two: methods are the tools of data collection and analysis used during the *doing* phase of research, whereas methodology refers to decisions made by the researcher during the *design* phase about what they want to do, how they want to do it, and why it is considered appropriate (Moon et al. 2019). As Moon et al. (2019) explain, reflecting on and explaining decisions about methodology is important for supporting the design of quality social science for and on conservation because “method alone is not sufficient to allow us to make strong claims about what we have done” (Wolcott 1990: 93). Thus, having begun this section by describing the philosophical position this study is grounded in, I will now elaborate further on the methodological approach I have applied, before turning to the *doing* phase of the research.

Methodologically, this thesis is a qualitative study of the human dimensions of rewilding conflicts and coexistence. A qualitative research approach was chosen because it facilitates the in-depth and holistic study of processes, structures, meanings, and relationships within specific contexts (Cresswell and Cresswell 2017). Further, they offer a flexibility that “typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases” (Patton 2014: 67). Appropriate for the exploratory ‘how’ and ‘what’ questions I examine in this thesis, qualitative inquiry acknowledges that “we can never achieve a complete ‘scientific’ understanding of the human world. The best we can do is to arrive at a truth that makes a difference, that opens up new possibilities for understanding” (McLeod 2001: 4). In this study, I have strived to open up new possibilities for understanding how coexistence might be fostered through rewilding by using a case study approach.

4.3 Case study approach

According to Gerring (2004: 352), the case study is best defined as “an intensive study of a single unit with an aim to generalise across a larger set of units”. Unpacking this definition further, and momentarily setting aside the issue of generalisability, a ‘unit’ can be understood to signify a spatially bound phenomenon that is observed at either a single point in time or over an extended, but delimited, period of time (Gerring 2004). However, following George and Bennett (2005), Helmcke (2022) notes the importance of recognising that a case is not a fixed geographical location with natural spatial and temporal boundaries, but rather a phenomenon of scientific interest that the researcher chooses to study with the aim of developing theory. While the ‘local’ and unique character of a chosen phenomenon or event can make general theory-building difficult, a case study approach can be useful for developing theory from an understanding of the particular context in which certain phenomena or events occurred (Yin 2011; Tight 2017).

For this research, I have employed a case study approach to explore cases of rewilding conflicts and coexistence in Ireland. I consider the case study to be a useful and relevant approach because, as put by Verschuren (2003: 128), it is a way of doing research that embodies “a holistic rather than a reductionist approach”. Further, it allows the researcher to shed light on the complex social relations, power dynamics, and nature-society interactions that have shaped social and environmental change over time and space (Robbins 2012; Benjaminsen and Svarstaad 2021). Thus, with the aim of developing novel theoretical insights and knowledge about this topic, I have investigated three “building block” studies (George and Bennett 2005) of rewilding conflicts and coexistence: (i) a historical study of human-wolf relations in Ireland, (ii) a study of the red kite reintroduction project in Northern Ireland, and (iii) a study of rewilding and convivial conservation’s potential for transforming conservation in Ireland.

For Castree (2005: 541), case study research is valuable because it “shows the world to be persistently *diverse* (...) Yet it shows that this diversity arises out of multiscaled relations such that it does not emerge *sui generis*”. I have chosen to investigate multiple cases in this study, not necessarily to enable generalisability, but because I am interested in understanding how coexistence has been influenced by the unfolding of these diverse ‘multiscaled relations’ across spatial and temporal scales. Further, following Simons (2009), I have chosen to investigate three cases as a means to identify multiple perspectives, explore contested viewpoints, and to demonstrate the influence of key actors and interactions between them in my broader case study about rewilding conflicts and coexistence.

As such, I approach each of the three cases as “an edited chunk of empirical reality where certain features are marked out, emphasized, and privileged while others recede into the background” (Lund 2014: 224).

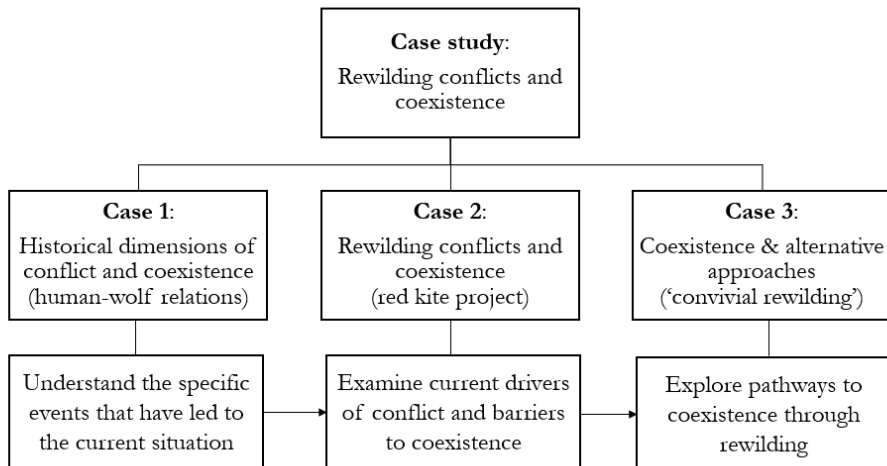


Figure 3. A case study approach to rewilding conflicts and coexistence.

There are five primary reasons why I consider the three overlapping cases I have chosen to be interesting, innovative, and relevant to this study of rewilding conflicts and coexistence in Ireland: (i) presence of rewilding conflicts, (ii) relative absence of coexistence, (iii) legacies of colonialism, (iv) interest in conservation in Europe and the global North, and (v) access to the ‘field’.

First, rewilding projects and proposals are a significant source of conflict in Ireland. Yet, thus far, these conflicts have been understudied and are rarely acknowledged in the conservation literature. This is particularly noteworthy considering the amount of scholarly attention devoted to contestations over rewilding in England (Mikolajczak et al. 2022), Scotland (Martin et al. 2023), and Wales (Wynne-Jones et al. 2018). One notable exception is O’Rourke’s (2014) exploration of conflicts surrounding the reintroduction of the white-tailed sea eagle to Ireland, which highlighted the strong social aspects of this conflict and the importance of ensuring that local communities have a fair say in decision-making about the places where they live and work. However, in the face of enthusiastic and well-meaning calls to restore “Ireland’s tattered ecosystems” by restoring species

thought to have once been present on the island (Fogarty 2023), the complexity of rewilding conflicts is poorly understood, thus, there is a timely need for research on these issues.

Second, beyond providing rich and nuanced insights into the historical and socio-political dimensions of rewilding conflicts, all three cases contribute to a better understanding of coexistence by illuminating positive human-wildlife interactions. In doing so, they respond to calls for detailed and in-depth research into coexistence (Carter and Linnell 2016). Further, they not only provide valuable knowledge regarding the question of how coexistence might be encouraged in places where it does not exist (Pooley et al. 2021), but they also, particularly the ‘wolf’ case, deepen our understanding of the historical reasons why coexistence with certain species has been, for lack of a better word, terminated. The eradication of wolves, white-tailed sea eagles, golden eagles, red kites and other raptor species, along with the earlier loss of brown bears, means contemporary Ireland is a place where there is relatively limited experience of living alongside potentially destructive wildlife. There are of course well-documented conflicts over wildlife management in Ireland (e.g. O’Hagan et al. 2016; Stein and Neijman 2021). However, the situation contrasts sharply with continental Europe, where the recovery of wildlife populations is generating conflict, but also opening a space for coexistence and possibilities “to achieve sustainable and legitimate conservation governance and rural development programs” (Pettersson et al. 2021: 15).

Third, all three cases provide an opportunity to engage with and contribute to important debates about conservation and the legacies of colonialism. In recent years, critical scholars (e.g. Agrawal 1997; Collins et al. 2021; Hart et al. 2021) have illustrated how colonial legacies shape conservation policies and practices in ways that perpetuate inequalities and injustices through, for example, acts of “green grabbing”, which refers to “the appropriation of land and resources for environmental ends” (Fairhead et al. 2012: 237). In their discussion of settler colonialism and the US conservation movement, for example, Eichler and Baumeister (2021: 209) argue that conservation “must more deliberately and thoroughly grapple with the legacy of its deeply settler colonial history if it is to, in actuality and not merely in rhetoric, achieve the aim of being more equitable”. Grappling with the legacies of colonialism is clearly a pertinent concern in relation to rewilding’s close association with the US ‘wilderness movement’ (Ward 2019). Further, although much attention is correctly focused on the implications and impacts of European colonialism on the Americas, Africa, Asia and Australia, the three cases I investigate, read together, allow for an examination of the specific form

of British colonialism imposed in Ireland during the early modern period and how it influences conservation debates in contemporary Ireland.

Fourth, and linked to the previous point, the international conservation movement is generally associated with efforts to protect charismatic wildlife and ‘pristine’ habitats in the high-biodiversity ecosystems of the Global South. Yet, as Pettorelli et al. (2019: 9) point out, “rewilding is predominantly discussed in the context of developed countries”. The same authors note that living with nature in places characterised by urbanisation and industrialisation could be beneficial but could also lead to harmful and unpredictable outcomes. The cases in this thesis were selected to demonstrate the complex challenges that arise from living alongside wildlife in a so-called ‘developed’ country and how these challenges are rooted in historical processes. Further, given the costs of coexistence are overwhelmingly experienced by those living in the Global South (Braczkowski et al. 2023), the cases also allow me to draw much-needed attention toward the social and environmental justice implications of conservation and rewilding. Although the cases are varied, they are bound together by this shared concern with identifying the factors that influence coexistence in the human-dominated landscapes of the Global North.

Fifth, and finally, the cases were chosen because, at the outset of the study, I was confident of gaining access to the people, institutions, and documents I wanted to examine to answer my research questions regarding the case of rewilding conflicts and coexistence in Ireland. According to Yin (2009: 26), “You need sufficient access to the potential data, whether to interview people, review documents or records, or make observations in the ‘field’”. During the early stages of the research design process, I considered selecting cases related to wolf management in Norway, largely on the basis of perceived convenience and ease of access to the ‘field’. However, I quickly recognised the difficulties associated with selecting cases about the human dimensions of rewilding in a country where I lacked familiarity with the language, culture, history, and politics, all of which represented significant barriers to access. I considered these barriers to be much less of an issue in Ireland, where I grew up and lived for the majority of the first thirty years of my life. As such, my experience of living, studying, and working in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and pre-existing relationships with important ‘gatekeepers’, were important factors in selecting the cases.

4.4 Methods and data collection

According to Wellington (2015), the process of collecting data in qualitative research tends to be exploratory and characterised by an evolving ‘as you go along’ approach that typically produces large amounts of data. The exploratory nature of this thesis has yielded, what at times felt like an overwhelmingly, vast amount of detailed and rich primary and secondary data about rewilding conflicts and coexistence that has been collected using several methods. Adopting a philosophical position that aligns with critical realism, Campbell (1999) argues that because all methods are imperfect, multiple methods are needed to generate and test theory and to improve our understanding over time of how the world operates. Hence, I have used multiple methods in this thesis as a way to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon I am investigating and to temper weaknesses or biases associated with a single method approach (Maxwell 2013).

As outlined in Table 1 below, I employed three broad qualitative methods to collect the core data needed to investigate the historical, social and political processes that influence the human dimensions of rewilding: (i) document analysis, (ii) interviews and (iii) observations. Each of the three methods, along with the reasons why they were chosen and how they were used, is described in the sub-sections that follow.

Table 1. Overview of data collection process followed in this thesis.

Paper	Case	Methods and data	When and where
1	History of human-wolf relations	Documents: diaries, letters, survey reports, maps, poems. Literature view of scientific, historical and popular literature on Ireland, colonialism and wolves. Unstructured interviews (n=5) with experts on Irish history, conservation and rewilding. Observations: visits to locations in Ireland associated with wolves via Irish language place-names.	June 2019 – August 2021 Ireland (2 field visits = 4 weeks) and Norway

2	Red kite reintroduction project	<p>Documents: project reports, media coverage, environmental legislation, annual reports, minutes from relevant committee meetings, conservation strategy reports.</p> <p>Interviews (n=20) with relevant actors representing conservation NGOs, conservation volunteers, farmers, non-farming landowners, politicians, wildlife authorities, farming representatives.</p> <p>Observations: unstructured approach used during field visits to red kite release area in Northern Ireland.</p> <p>Walking interviews.</p>	<p>Nov 2021 – June 2022</p> <p>Ireland (3 field visits = 10 weeks) and Norway</p>
3	'Convivial' rewilding	<p>Documents: environmental policy, media coverage, conservation strategy reports, agricultural policy, academic literature on conservation in Ireland.</p> <p>Interviews (n=5): building on the interviews from paper 2, five further interviews were conducted with farmers and alternative conservationists.</p> <p>Observations: visits to national parks, proposed national park sites and other protected areas.</p> <p>Conducted participant and non-participant observation at several conferences, seminars and events.</p>	<p>June 2019 – Dec 2022</p> <p>Ireland (one further field visit to those listed above = 2 weeks) and Norway</p>

4.4.1 Document analysis

I began collecting data in the form of documents for this study in June 2019 with the aim of cultivating what I quickly realised could only ever be a rudimentary, fragmented and incomplete understanding of the complex historical context of my case study. Taking inspiration from Vayda's (1983) progressive contextualisation method, my intention was to investigate the historical factors influencing coexistence by treating the event of the wolf's extirpation from Ireland as a point of departure and then tracing the wider factors that influenced and led up to this event. Thus, with the specific objective of answering my first research question in mind, I conducted archival field research through multiple visits to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland and Queen's University Belfast's Special Collections and Archives department during which I took photographs of relevant documents. Archival research methods were used because they facilitate the investigation of documents and textual materials, including digital texts, and provide a means to obtain detailed insights about historical drivers of social and environmental change (Ventresca and Mohr 2017). However, as I will explain below, the process of identifying and interpreting relevant documents for the first case, and later cases, presented a number of challenges.

Documents serve a variety of purposes in qualitative research. For Bowen (2009: 29), one purpose relates to how documents can "help researchers understand the historical roots of specific issues and can indicate the conditions that impinge upon the phenomena currently under investigation". Regarding the first case, I was initially interested in documents and archival records that would provide insights into the history of human-wolf relations in Ireland. However, shortly after commencing my search for such documents, I observed that the vast majority I found in the archives that referred to wolves in some way were written by actors attached to the colonial regime. As Cavanagh (2017: 67) points out, documents of this nature should be treated with caution because they reflect the "perhaps fabricated, erroneous, prejudiced, or misconstrued representations of colonial officials".

Reflecting on this point at the time, I was uncertain about how to navigate these documents due to concerns that their use could unintentionally amplify and lend legitimacy to the deeply racist views of their authors. Further, drawing inspiration from Farrell's (2017) examination of colonisation in Ulster from the perspective of its "indigenous" population, I was concerned that building the case on such data would conceal an important side of the story that I wanted to explore in more detail. Therefore, interested in obtaining documents that could shed a light on 'non-colonial' and 'non-elite'

human-wolf relations, I reached out for advice to existing contacts I had previously established while living in Ireland and studying at Queen's University Belfast. Unstructured interviews and discussions with these contacts, and further contacts they provided, reassured me about using colonial documents, albeit carefully, and directed me towards a variety of documents that better reflected alternative perspectives and counter-narratives. Documents found in the National Folklore Collection, many of which have been digitised by the Dúchas project, were particularly useful for gaining insights into how people 'on the ground' thought about and developed ways to coexist with wolves. To build a broader understanding of human-wolf relations and long-term social and environmental changes in Ireland, data from the documents were supplemented with a literature review based on peer-reviewed and grey literature, with Mitchell and Ryan (2007), Smyth (2006), Hickey (2011) and Bourke and McBride (2016) being particularly useful texts for this purpose.

While documents were not as central to the second case, they nevertheless provided vital insights into the historical and political dynamics that influenced the planning, implementation and management of the red kite reintroduction project in Northern Ireland. Publicly available documents regarding the project, such as project literature and online media coverage, were relatively straightforward to access. Moreover, providing insights into the diverse factors determining conflicts and coexistence, reports about wildlife crime and environmental legislation were also accessed via the internet, as were a wide range of relevant and useful documents on the Northern Ireland "planning portal" website, such as technical reports, consultation responses and public comments. Documents I deemed to be relevant, but that were not available in the public realm for reasons that were not always clear, were accessed via Freedom of Information (FoI) requests. Although FoI requests involve long waiting times, they helped uncover important documents, including project reports and minutes from committee meetings where the project was discussed by different actors, that contained rich data about the red kite project.

Many of the documents collected for the first two cases were relevant to the aims of the third case, particularly its focus on the history of conservation practice and policy in Ireland. However, to enable a more detailed understanding of this history, a review was conducted of the peer-reviewed literature. This literature review provided an enhanced understanding of debates surrounding conservation and land use in Ireland and helped to identify potential factors that hinder efforts to promote coexistence. From this starting point, I collected a diverse range and substantial number of documents, produced by different actors with different interests, that I considered relevant to

rewilding and conservation conflicts in Ireland, including media reports and interviews, environmental policy reports, agricultural policy strategies, transcripts of government debates about conservation and agriculture, and government-commissioned and independent reviews of conservation and environmental governance in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

4.4.2 Interviews

Interviews are one of the most common methods used for producing data in qualitative research. According to Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009: 3) interpretation, they are "not a conversation between equal partners", but rather a tool used by the researcher for the "purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewees in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena". For reasons I will elaborate on in more detail below, my conception of and approach to interviews in this study, all of which were conducted with informed consent, was slightly more flexible and nuanced than this interpretation and differed in two key ways.

First, while acknowledging the asymmetrical power relations involved in qualitative research interviews (e.g. Kvale 2006), I attempted to cultivate a more conversational style in the 30 interviews I conducted over the course of this study, such that they often tended to blur the lines between the formal and informal (Swain and King 2022). This approach was partly informed by my perceived understanding of the sensitivities surrounding questions about land, conservation and, more specifically, the illegal killing of red kites, in a study area where I was positioning myself as a conservation researcher. As such, in the spirit of conviviality, building trust and "having a blether", as advocated by Staddon (2021), interviews were conducted in an honest, respectful and relaxed manner and, where possible given restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, held in everyday and informal locations, including pubs, fields and, on several occasions, around the kitchen table. Facilitating this approach meant I had to discern when it was appropriate to audio record interviews, and when it was instead more suitable to forgo my digital recorder and make detailed handwritten notes. On more than one occasion, however, I found myself in a situation where my decision to take notes during interviews, which usually lasted for about one hour, resulted in potentially useful data being lost because the extended length of some interviews (over three hours) made it difficult to take coherent and detailed notes.

Further, the sampling strategy I selected, which combined purposive and snowball sampling (Suri 2011), was also influenced by Staddon's (2021) call to foreground the diverse stories and experiences of people who work 'on the ground' in conservation and other forms of land-management. Hence,

in addition to the elite interviews carried out with staff from conservation non-governmental organisations (n=4), academics (n=5), government officials (n=3), farming representatives (n=2) and politicians (n=2), interviews were also conducted with conservation volunteers (n=3), farmers (n=6), non-farming landowners (n=3) and a 'stakeholder' group I refer to as alternative conservationists (n=2). Although my general approach to these interviews was consistent with the conversational style I have just described, it was necessary to employ different forms of interviews, ranging from in-depth and semi-structured to unstructured interviews, depending on the differential roles and 'levels' of the actors interviewed. For instance, at the beginning of the first fieldwork period for the red kite case study, a key informant provided me with the contact details of a high-level government official who they thought could offer important insights into the reintroduction project. Upon contacting the individual via email, and explaining the nature of my project, as I did with all interviewees, they agreed to speak with me 'off the record' by phone. Throughout the fieldwork period, a similar sense of reluctance, hesitation, and at times outright suspicion, was expressed by a number of interviewees, which I believe reinforced the need to adopt a more open and informal approach to interviews.

Second, regarding the purpose of the interviews, my original aim was, as per Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) interpretation, to obtain broad descriptions into the life world and everyday activities of the people I interviewed, along with more specific insights into conservation and rewilding. However, achieving this aim was heavily reliant on my capacity to successfully recruit interviewees, which proved to be significantly more challenging than I initially anticipated. As mentioned earlier, my assumption that access to interviewees would be relatively straightforward was one of the reasons for selecting the case study location. I felt confident in this assumption based on the fact that I had a previously established network of key informants, gatekeepers and acquaintances that I could readily utilise to open certain doors. Key informants operating in conservation, farming, academic and media circles, for instance, made invaluable contributions to my research by taking part in interviews, informing the development of an adaptable interview guide and helping me to 'break the ice' by sharing details and information about other potential interviewees. Moreover, beyond helping to gain a better overall understanding of my case, insights shared by key informants were useful for revealing important themes and issues I had largely overlooked during the research design process.

Yet, my attempts to gain a deeper understanding of these themes, which concerned hunting, renewable energy and tourism, were often frustrated as I was largely unsuccessful in my attempts to

arrange interviews with relevant actors who I hoped could share their experiences and views on such themes. For example, interested in exploring a key issue raised in interviews by several conservation actors regarding conflicts between conservation and hunting interests, I contacted an individual who I viewed as a gatekeeper at the European Federation for Hunting and Conservation (FACE) to request information about hunting organisations in Northern Ireland. I was subsequently provided with the email address of a representative from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), who initially agreed to an interview following an invitation via email, which included a description of the research project. However, on the day of the interview, I was contacted by the representative who abruptly advised they would no longer be taking part in the interview.

Similar challenges were encountered when I attempted to recruit specific interviewees from the tourism and renewable energy sectors in Northern Ireland. Although I always assured anonymity to potential interviewees, interview requests sent via email were often unacknowledged and promises to return phone calls were often unfulfilled. However, the failure to recruit actors from these sectors was somewhat offset by my success in obtaining various documents that offered possible hints and explanations as to why a researcher critically examining the political tensions between conservation and other sectors would not necessarily be embraced with open arms. At the same time, my access problems could equally be attributed to how I presented myself and my research project, which may have been considered uninteresting, irrelevant or a low priority in the eyes of potential interviewees.

Aside from these challenges, however, interviews were useful not only because they allowed me to gain a better understanding of the topic from the perspective of interviewees, but because they provided important insights into the broader “life world” inhabited by interview subjects. As Denzin (1991: 68) explains, “What the subject tells us is itself something that has been shaped by prior cultural understandings”. To explore how cultural understandings of and relationships with the environment shape the views and experiences of those living in the study area, I conducted four walking interviews (Jones et al. 2008). One of the interviews was carried out in Glenveagh National Park, where Golden Eagles were reintroduced in the early 2000s, and the other three were conducted in and around the red kite release area in County Down. Walking interviews, according to Kinney (2017: 3) “are regarded as an inclusive process compared with the traditional sit-down interview process because it is viewed more as a partnership, thus reducing power imbalances”. During these interviews I ask predetermined questions relevant to the topic, but I also inquired about features of interest and the history of the landscapes where the interviews took place. The

interviews helped uncover important dynamics about the relationships between interviewees and particular landscapes, and between interviewees and the social actors responsible for the management of these landscapes and wildlife.

4.4.3 Observations

Complementing the data collected through interviews and documents, the use of diverse methods of observation over the course of my research have been enormously helpful for gaining insights into debates about rewilding and conservation in Ireland. Following Ciesielska et al. (2018), I was interested in observing both physical places and interactions between the actors engaged in rewilding discourse and practices, along with their activities, goals and motivations. Field visits to national parks and proposed national park areas in Ireland, where I collected useful observational data by taking photos and making extensive notes, allowed me to observe physical places in the shape of conservation sites and the types of recreational and economic activities practiced within these landscapes. Further, observations gathered in the field encouraged reflection on the particular ideas and policies that influence the make-up of particular landscapes and to consider why rearranging human-shaped environments to make space for rewilding and conservation is a source of tension.

By conducting participant and non-participant observation (Ciesielska et al. 2018) at various events, seminars and conferences, I was not only able to identify some of the key issues associated with the tensions surrounding rewilding, but also broader concerns related to conservation and environmental governance. While these observations were not gleaned from the immersive methods more readily associated with participant observation (Musante and Dewalt 2010), they nonetheless helped to illuminate how different actors attempt to either advance or shutdown certain ideas, values and policies regarding the environment. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, I attended the Cambridge Conservation Initiative's (CCI) Rewilding Symposium in January 2019, during which I gained important insights into rewilding by listening to and recording presentations and through informal conversations with other conference participants. Later in the same year, attending the launch of the Environmental Justice Network Ireland (EJNI) in Belfast afforded me with a valuable opportunity to observe how dominant approaches to environmental governance were being challenged and resisted by a diverse group of actors. Although it was not possible to travel during most of 2020 and 2021 due to the pandemic, the shift to online events meant I was able to obtain further insights by attending and participating in various conferences and seminars focused on rewilding and conservation matters.

Finally, social media made it possible to observe and interact with a wide range of actors, including rewilding organisations, individual rewilding advocates, environmental activists, conservation NGOs, farming groups and politicians, among many others, who were relevant for my research. As Toivonen et al. (2019: 298) point out, “social media provides a rich source (of data) for studying people’s activities in nature and understanding conservation debates or discussions online”. Based in Norway for the majority of the research study period, I used social media platforms, primarily Twitter and Facebook, to bridge the geographical gap between Ireland and Norway by observing and engaging in debates about rewilding and conservation in Ireland. This was useful for developing a basic understanding of the different positions and perspectives of different actors, who use social media, regarding rewilding. Insights garnered from social media observations were recorded in the form of field notes, which Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018: 381) contend “are an essential component of rigorous qualitative research”. The documents, interviews and observations described in this section represent the empirical evidence upon which I have developed my analysis of the human dimensions of rewilding conflicts and coexistence.

4.5 Data analysis

The data collection process recounted above occurred in tandem with the entangled, fluid and, at times, arduous processes of data analysis and writing-up my findings. According to Newing (2011), qualitative analysis is characterised by a constant interplay between thinking, writing and the data itself, such that analysis cannot be set apart from the inextricably intertwined, but simplistically labelled, writing-up process. Further, Maxwell (2013) asserts that decisions about how data will be analysed should be informed by the other components of a research project through an interactive approach to qualitative research that involves constantly moving between the different components of one’s research design. Thus, with the aim of employing a data analysis strategy compatible with my research questions, theoretical framework and methodological positions, I have used a grounded theory-inspired approach (Strauss and Corbin 1997) to interpret the empirical materials gathered and to generate theoretical insights in the interest of transforming rewilding conflicts towards coexistence and conviviality.

In what was admittedly not an entirely successful attempt to avoid being overwhelmed by large quantities of unanalysed data, I commenced the analysis process shortly after I began collecting data. Regarding the documents collected for the first case and paper 1, the initial step in my analysis consisted of printing, reading and annotating documents with descriptive comments, e.g. referring to

the historical period documents pertained to and noting ideas, issues and themes relevant to the case. Following this step, I used coding as a categorising strategy to organise the data according to key themes that emerged as my analysis and understanding of the case progressed and became more refined. Although I experimented with the software package NVivo, I opted to follow Cupples and Kindon's (2014) recommendation to first time qualitative researchers and do the coding manually using paper, folders and different colours of highlighter pen. A similar strategy was employed to analyse the documents, observations and field notes collected for the second and third cases, whereby I made use of annotations, coding and 'in-process memos', which were valuable analytical tools "for exploring connections between different events and processes or for developing new interpretations of previous observations and understandings" (Emerson et al. 2011: 125).

When conducting interviews, both in the field and digitally using Microsoft Teams, I also made detailed notes on paper immediately afterwards, or as soon as practically possible, to record my thoughts and reflections about the interviews. For Patton (2014: 693), the "period after an interview or observation is a critical time for reflection and elaboration. It is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data obtained will be useful. This kind of post-interview ritual requires discipline". Although I was not always as disciplined as I could have been when it came to following this ritual, an issue I address in the discussion below, memos and notes were exceedingly useful for capturing details and observations that may otherwise have been forgotten. The time-consuming task of manually transcribing the interviews I recorded was also important in this regard as it provided me with an opportunity to become intimately familiar with the interview data. Hence, in addition to reading and coding interview transcripts, the process of listening to, thinking about and transcribing interview recordings proved valuable for analysing the data and for triangulation purposes because it allowed me to check for patterns and inconsistencies between the documents, observations and interviews (Jonsen and Jehn 2009). However, while qualitatively analysing these different sources of data, as outlined here, has allowed me to work towards an in-depth understanding of the research topic, it is important to acknowledge the study's methodological limitations and the constraints and ethical issues I encountered during the research process.

4.6 Methodological limitations and ethical reflections

Thus far, I have spent this section presenting and justifying the choices made during the design and "doing" phases of this study. Yet, as Jalongo and Saracho (2016: 85) succinctly remark, "no one designs a flawless study". Based on experiences gained during this research project, I would strongly

argue that this truism equally applies to the doing phase of qualitative inquiry. Thus, to conclude this section, I will identify and reflect on what I consider to be the main limitations of this study, along with the key ethical challenges I have faced at different stages of the research.

Starting with ethical concerns and considerations, this study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and formal requirements for handling research data developed by the Norwegian University of Life Sciences. As project manager, I was responsible for securing the approval of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD) before I started interviews because my study involved collecting and storing the personal data of interviewees. Beyond successfully fulfilling these mandatory ethical requirements, I also followed the recommendation of Banks and Scheyvens (2014: 161) in striving to ensure that my research respected “the participants’ dignity, privacy and safety”.

One tool at my disposal for pursuing this aim was informed consent, which refers to “when a potential participant freely and with full understanding of the research agrees to be part of the project” (Banks and Scheyvens 2014: 164). Before beginning the recruitment process for interview participants I was under the impression that this would be relatively straightforward. However, obtaining informed consent proved to be more complicated in practice. For instance, when contacting potential interviewees, I would initially provide a brief overview of my research project and the purpose of the interview. To safeguard the privacy of participants, I also informed them they would not be identifiable. If they responded positively, I would then seek their written consent by sending a consent form, which contained more detailed information about the project and interview, which I asked them to read, sign and return to me if they agreed to be part of the project.

Employing this formal, time-consuming and somewhat bureaucratic approach meant I could be confident that interviewees were freely participating in the project, but I was less certain if they fully understood its aims or about how I would protect their confidentiality. Introducing the research and its aims at the start of all interviews largely addressed the uncertainty regarding the former, however, resolving the latter ethical dilemma concerning anonymity proved more difficult. While Banks and Scheyvens (2014: 168) suggest it is “wrong to assume that all participants want anonymity”, I adopted the default position that all participants did want anonymity. Therefore, where I was concerned that individual interviewees could be identified in the dissemination of my research findings, particularly to people living in the study area, I sought their approval and consent by sharing copies of draft papers with these participants before attempting to publish this material.

In addition to the difficulties associated with obtaining informed consent from contemporary interview participants, I was also initially uncertain about how to approach the “ethical gray zones” (McKee and Porter 2012: 60) of historical and archival research. Indeed, when I commenced this phase of the research, I gave no thought to the type of ethical responsibilities a researcher may have to the individuals, communities and events represented in the archives and documents they employ as data. However, as mentioned above, shortly after beginning fieldwork, I started to reflect on how I would interpret this data and on whose lives and voices I would emphasise and privilege and for what reasons. Ultimately, my decision to critically mark out the lives of certain colonial actors was based on my personal ethical commitment and responsibility to social justice, conviviality and decolonial approaches to knowledge production, which superseded any perceived ethical obligations I might have to these actors as a researcher.

At this point, it seems appropriate to briefly reflect on my subjectivity and position in relation to the research context. As Helmcke points out (2022), recognising, reflecting and being transparent about one’s positionality is an essential component of any political ecology research. Further, Boyce et al. (2022: 3) stress that being “unable to acknowledge how values shape and drive their research also limits conservation scientists ability to navigate toward solutions amidst conflict”. My family background and upbringing, university education, personal and professional relationships and left-leaning political orientation have clearly influenced how I have designed this study and how I have made sense of the data I have collected. My decision to focus on conflict, coexistence and conviviality was partly based on my scholarly interest in these concepts, and partly because of a deeper concern with social conflicts, reconciliation and peace-building that I attribute to my upbringing in Northern Ireland. However, although I consider Ireland to be home, in the field I often felt like I was perceived as something of an outsider since I was a researcher affiliated with a Norwegian university who was asking questions about a topic related to an external idea, i.e. rewilding. This perception may have affected how some people viewed my interview requests and how some interviewees opted to answer or, on occasion, avoid certain questions, particularly those concerning sensitive matters and illegal activities.

Yet, while my influence on the research context had the potential to raise validity threats, Maxwell (2013: 125) maintains it is impossible to eliminate the influence of the researcher and that “trying to minimize your influence is not a meaningful goal for qualitative research”. Instead, establishing validity, reliability and trustworthiness in qualitative research is, according to Morse et al. (2002: 18),

dependent on the ability of researchers to be responsive and “remain open, use sensitivity, creativity and insight, and be willing to relinquish any ideas that are poorly supported regardless of the excitement and the potential that they first appear to provide”. Of the many proposed tests that exist for checking validity, I will quickly highlight four strategies I have used at different stages of the research process. First, adopting Maxwell’s (2013) interactive approach to qualitative research design reflected my commitment to methodological coherence (Morse et al. 2012). Second, during the doing phase of the research, I collected and analysed data concurrently, and used triangulation to check data against other sources. Third, by constantly checking and rechecking the data, new ideas emerged that helped me develop the study’s theoretical foundation. Fourth, and finally, the peer review process and publication of paper one helped to enhance the study’s validity.

In the spirit of critical self-examination, I would like to conclude this section by briefly addressing one further limitation, which largely relates to my evolving competence as a qualitative researcher. As Patton (2014: 67) remarks, the researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry, which means the “credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing the fieldwork – as well as the things going on in a person’s life that might prove to be a distraction”. Beginning this project in September 2017 with a background in natural sciences, I had no practical experience in qualitative research meaning it was necessary to grapple with a steep, slow and demanding learning curve. One consequence of this process was that time emerged as a major constraining factor on this study. The negative implications of this factor were further compounded by unwelcome distractions and delays associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which we all experienced to varying degrees. These delays meant it wasn’t possible to conduct and analyse more interviews, which I believe would have strengthened the validity of the research and provided a better understanding of the issues under investigation. At the same time, however, I have also come to appreciate how, as Shepherd (2008) wrote, “the thing to be known grows with the knowing” and that research can only ever provide a partial picture of the phenomena under investigation.

5. Summary of Papers

Presenting the papers according to the order in which they were written during the PhD, the following section provides a brief overview of the three papers included in this dissertation. Beginning with the historically focused Paper 1, the papers are also arranged in sequential chronological order to illuminate how changes and continuities in social, cultural and ecological conditions have influenced human-wildlife coexistence over time. The nuanced understanding of the historical dimensions of rewilding advanced in Paper 1 provides an important foundation for developing Paper 2's analysis of contestations associated with efforts to facilitate coexistence in relation to present rewilding projects. Building on the insights generated by the first two papers, Paper 3 then draws on the idea of 'convivial conservation' to explore how conflicts related to rewilding, conservation and, more broadly, land use might potentially be transformed to promote just and sustainable pathways to coexistence. In short, the aim of this section is to demonstrate how the three individual papers answer the study's research questions and meet its two objectives.

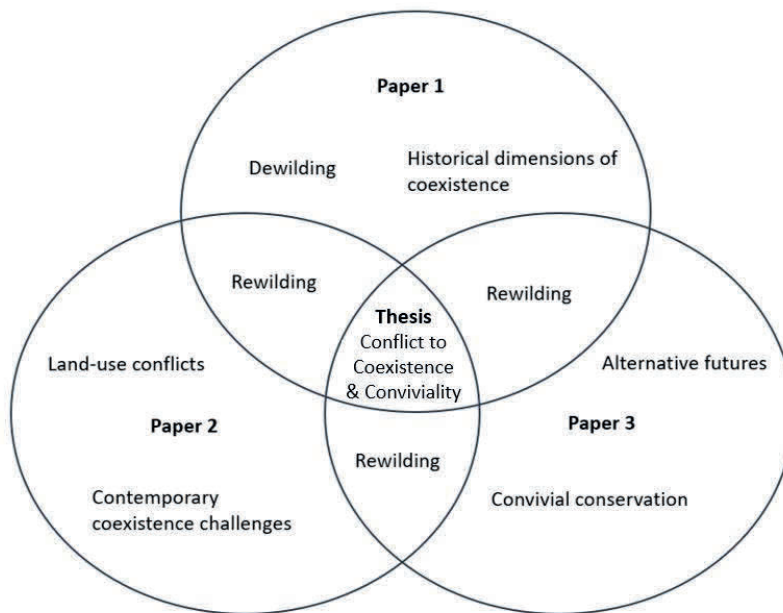


Figure 4. Overview of papers in relation to the study objectives

Paper 1: Dewilding ‘Wolf-land’: Exploring the Historical Dimensions of Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence in Ireland

Research Question 1: What historical factors have influenced the eradication of wildlife from places with long histories of coexistence, and how can an understanding of these factors contribute to addressing contemporary rewilding conflicts?

This paper explores the historical dimensions of human-wildlife interactions in the PhD’s main study area, the island of Ireland. In the paper, I engage with current rewilding debates about wolf reintroduction in Ireland by examining how historical processes of social and environmental change have influenced human-wolf relations. By adopting a *longue durée* approach to the history of human-wolf coexistence and conflict in Ireland, the paper considers how rewilding can benefit by employing a wider and more nuanced understanding of history. Drawing on analytical perspectives from environmental history, the paper is primarily informed by written sources, both documentary and literary, including colonial correspondence, survey reports and poems, and scientific and popular literature related to rewilding and wolves.

The paper initially shows how the prevalence of certain cultural practices, land-based livelihood strategies and attitudes were integral in sustaining a long history characterised by coexistence. In tracing this history, however, I challenge conceptualisations of coexistence based on ideas about humans living in harmony with nature by emphasising the complexity of human-wolf relations, including the potential for wolves to negatively impact upon human interests. The paper then turns its focus to the ‘dewilding’ of wolves from the island during the early modern period and to analysing the reasons why human-wolf relations were fundamentally transformed at this time. Situating this shift from coexistence to conflict within the context of the larger political-economic and ecological transformations driven by the colonisation of Ireland, I demonstrate how the destruction of wolves occurred in parallel with a concerted effort to subdue a diverse Gaelic Irish society. Coupled with the process of colonisation, the paper highlights how the imposition of new ways of relating to and valuing non-human nature associated with Ireland’s integration into an expanding capitalist world-system were key factors that put an abrupt end to a previously uninterrupted period of coexistence.

The paper concludes by offering several important lessons regarding the value of historical perspectives for addressing contemporary rewilding conflicts and efforts to promote sustainable, inclusive and socially just approaches to coexistence through rewilding initiatives. Beyond providing the historical and political context for Papers 2 and 3, Paper 1’s conclusion, particularly its call to

imagine alternative, convivial pathways for human-wildlife relations, also serves as the point of departure for the discussion of rewilding and convivial conservation presented in Paper 3.

Paper 2: Rewilding Contested Landscapes: Lessons for Coexistence from the Reintroduction of Red Kites to Northern Ireland

Research Question 2: How is coexistence, in the context of rewilding projects, influenced by the interplay between different actors and the broader social, historical and political contexts in which these actors operate?

This paper deals with Research Question 2 by analysing how attempts to facilitate coexistence through the Red Kite reintroduction project in Northern Ireland are influenced by the interplay between different actors, local and extra-local, and the broader social, historical and political contexts in which relations between these actors play out. With the aim of understanding why coexistence appears to be such a significant challenge for rewilding projects, Paper 2 shifts the PhD's focus from the polarised debates surrounding wolf reintroduction to the return of the ostensibly less contentious red kite, a large bird of prey eradicated from Ireland several centuries ago. The paper's findings are drawn from semi-structured interviews with diverse stakeholders, including conservationists, local politicians and people living within the red kite reintroduction area, and a variety of secondary sources, including media coverage, project assessments and technical reports.

By critically examining how the rewilding project was planned and implemented and how it has evolved following the red kite's reintroduction in 2008, the paper highlights how efforts to encourage coexistence in shared landscapes are undermined by both familiar conservation conflicts and more novel land-use conflicts. Regarding the drivers of conservation conflicts, the top-down approach adopted by the conservationists and government officials who orchestrated the reintroduction initially provoked some resistance to the project, which served to constrain coexistence. However, by drawing on insights from multispecies research approaches in political ecology, the analysis also illustrates the difficulties associated with enabling meaningful local participation in the context of rewilding projects that involve highly-mobile species, such as red kites. To address this challenge, the paper argues rewilding projects must work towards forging coexistence by building trust, acceptance and support through patient, deliberative engagement with the different actors affected by rewilding initiatives, whilst also showing consideration for the non-human lives that are central to rewilding efforts.

Regarding the dynamics between rewilding and land-use conflicts, the paper demonstrates how competing development agendas and ineffective institutions represent significant barriers to achieving coexistence. Although local actors living alongside the red kite appear to hold generally positive views about them, there has been limited local cooperation with wildlife authorities and law enforcement in relation to persecution incidents that are considered to be an important part of the reason why the red kite population has struggled to re-establish itself. How such unresolved tensions between local communities and the state, particularly regarding the legitimacy and authority of environmental governance and security institutions, influence coexistence is highlighted as an important area for future research. Finally, the paper briefly touches upon how red kites, viewed by some as welcome symbols of ‘wildness’, have become enrolled in conflicts over wind energy developments and the future use of the local landscape in County Down, Northern Ireland.

The findings from this paper build on the conclusions presented in Paper 1 by further emphasising the complex challenges associated with human-wildlife coexistence. Furthermore, they highlight how rewilding projects involving the return of wildlife into human-dominated landscapes are likely to result in difficult trade-offs between competing and potentially incompatible types of land-use. The paper concludes by suggesting that working towards coexistence is as much about establishing and nurturing good relations between different groups of people, as it is about promoting positive relations between people and wildlife.

Paper 3: Rewilding and convivial conservation: examining potential pathways for transforming biodiversity conservation in Ireland

Research Question 3: How can insights from the ‘convivial conservation’ proposal contribute to transforming conflicts over mainstream approaches to rewilding and conservation towards coexistence?

Following on from the historical and contemporary case studies of rewilding and human-wildlife coexistence presented in Papers 1 and 2, the objective of this paper is to explore how rewilding might learn from convivial conservation’s vision of alternative futures centred around environmental justice and coexistence. Engaging with debates about transformative change in biodiversity conservation, the paper has two main aims. First, based on a literature review exercise, it aims to examine key similarities and differences between rewilding and the convivial conservation proposal. Second, drawing on interviews, historical literature, policy documents and media reports, it explores

how perspectives related to convivial conservation and the idea of conviviality more generally could contribute to advancing just approaches to coexistence through rewilding projects in Ireland.

The discussion examining rewilding in relation to convivial conservation identifies key divergences that suggest the two are largely incompatible. It highlights how ‘mainstream’ approaches to rewilding differ from convivial conservation in how they tend to embrace the market-based schemes associated with ‘new conservation’. Moreover, the paper provides examples of rewilding projects in Ireland that are grounded in the exclusionary ‘neoprotectionist’ approach that has been heavily critiqued by proponents of convivial conservation for perpetuating injustices against often marginalised communities.

The paper’s second objective sought to examine how the convivial conservation paradigm can contribute to a positive change towards more just, inclusive and socially legitimate approaches to mainstream conservation and rewilding. By reviewing the history of conservation in Ireland and discussing examples of rewilding projects, the paper illustrated how conservation has been a recurring source of tension and conflict between different actors. Conflicts over conservation are renowned for their complexity (Redpath et al. 2013), with historically rooted cultural sensitivities around land in Ireland adding a further layer of complexity to these conflicts. Yet, with their emphasis on local knowledge production, democratic decision-making, community empowerment and environmental justice, the alternative approaches to conservation and nature-society relations highlighted appear to offer a possible pathway for addressing these conflicts. In addition, embracing convivial conservation’s vision of beneficially integrating and (re)embedding the uses of nature into the daily lives of local communities, similar to the convivial alternatives discussed in Ireland, may help mitigate rewilding conflicts related to concerns that rewilding initiatives side-line the communities living in and around proposed rewilding areas. Further, the briefly explored historical perspectives may contribute to expanding rewilding’s focus on the past beyond ecosystems without people and towards an understanding on how past societies lived with non-human natures in more convivial ways.

Finally, although associated with controversy and dismissed by some, I contend that certain ideas and practices related to rewilding have the potential to help support transformational change in biodiversity conservation. However, for this potential to be realised, I conclude that rewilding must learn from convivial conservation’s commitment to environmental justice and vision of an abundant post-capitalist world where both human and nonhuman life flourish.

6. Conclusion

Marketed internationally as ‘the land of one hundred thousand welcomes’, Ireland is celebrated throughout the world as an open and hospitable society. Yet, in this apparently welcoming environment, the prospect of living alongside wild animals, aside perhaps from the ‘Celtic Tiger’ (Kirby 2016), appears to be a highly contentious and divisive issue, particularly it seems in relation to rewilding. Departing from this basic observation, this thesis set out to explore three interlinked questions about rewilding and coexistence.

First, curious about how relationships between people and wildlife have been shaped by history, particularly the relationship between people and wolves, I explored a historical case study of ‘dewilding’ in Ireland that asked: What historical factors have influenced the eradication of wildlife from places with long histories of coexistence, and how can an understanding of these factors contribute to addressing contemporary rewilding conflicts? Second, an interest in understanding how contemporary rewilding projects pursue coexistence prompted the question: How is coexistence, in the context of rewilding projects, influenced by the interplay between different actors and the broader social, historical and political contexts in which these actors operate? Finally, motivated by a personal concern for the future and an active commitment to advancing environmental justice, I asked: How can insights from the ‘convivial conservation’ proposal contribute to transforming rewilding conflicts towards coexistence? In short then, this study is guided by a normative aspiration to consider how rewilding can be reimagined in support of multi-species coexistence and convivial futures.

6.1 Main findings

In exploring different aspects of these questions, this thesis makes three main contributions for transforming rewilding conflicts towards coexistence and possibly towards conviviality. First, it illustrates how attempts to foster coexistence between people and wildlife through rewilding projects can generate complex conflicts and present significant social, political and environmental challenges. The second and third contributions, however, demonstrate how rewilding also holds promise for ‘reckoning with ruination’ (Collard et al. 2015) and building abundant and convivial futures, for both human and non-human life. However, the part rewilding will play in promoting such futures, I argue, is largely dependent on it rejecting imaginaries of pre-human ‘wilderness’ and embracing the vision of convivial conservation by aligning with what Büscher and Fletcher (2020) refer to as the ‘Sea of Alternatives’ currently challenging the hegemony of the ‘Capitalocene’ (Moore 2017).

Bringing the three main findings from the thesis together, they represent a tentative pathway for re-orienting rewilding in the direction of such convivial futures. As a first step, the historical perspectives presented demonstrate how a critical engagement with the past is crucial for addressing a key concern that rewilding's focus on certain historic baselines constitutes an attempt to "erase human history and involvement with the land and flora and fauna" (Jørgensen 2015, p. 487). In tracing the dynamic history of humans and wolves in Ireland, this thesis challenges rewilding policies and practices that either fail to recognise the role of humans in shaping past environmental change or reductively frame past human activities as forms of disturbance. This approach to history used in this thesis can help broaden rewilding's understanding of human-wildlife interactions beyond the negative interactions associated with human-wildlife conflicts to include positive relations between people and wildlife. The thesis supports this claim by showing how looking backwards can reveal insights about how past societies were able to negotiate coexistence with wildlife in diverse ways that enabled them to fulfil their livelihood needs. Moreover, in drawing attention to processes of human-wolf co-adaptation, the findings illustrate how coexistence with wolves may ultimately be viewed as a choice made by people who appeared to accept wolves were part of the world they mutually inhabited.

At the same time, the thesis emphasises the value of historical analysis, or more specifically what some refer to as historical political ecology (Mathevet et al. 2015), for revealing the political and economic processes that have profoundly influenced decisions about coexistence and the place of wild animals in human societies. In the context of early modern Ireland, the decision to eradicate wolves was made by colonial rulers and administrators who were primarily concerned with the conquest and control of people and non-human nature, rather than coexistence (Sands 2022). As a consequence, prior ways of living with wild animals were transformed under colonial rule, in addition to the violent transformations of language, lifestyles, livelihoods and landscapes that occurred during the early modern period. By often focusing its attention on the recovery of ecological conditions from the Holocene, however, particularly the conditions that existed prior to the colonial period (Lorimer et al. 2015), rewilding essentially masks colonialism's significant and enduring influence on human-wildlife relations in Ireland and in other parts of the world (Adams and Mulligan 2003). To remedy this, rewilding advocates must address the ongoing social and ecological injustices that are rooted in the past by joining proponents of convivial conservation in calling for the decolonization of conservation.

Decolonizing conservation, as highlighted by Krauss (2021), requires the fundamental transformation of the dominant hierarchies of difference constructed during the colonial period that limit alternative approaches to conservation. In relation to conservation, confronting and breaking down the legacies of colonial power structures entails promoting radical ‘decolonial options’ (Mignolo and Escobar 2013) that foreground local and indigenous knowledge systems and decision-making (Mabele et al. 2021). While the focus of such debates is often on countries in the Global South (e.g. Domínguez and Luoma 2020), there is growing interest in the relationship between colonialism and conservation in Europe, including what Hechter (1977) refers to as ‘internal colonialism’ in Scotland (Toogood 2003) and England (Fowler 2020). In Ireland, however, where McVeigh and Rolston (2021) are convinced that the circuits of colonialism and imperialism remain deeply embedded, debates about how to decolonize conservation remain largely peripheral. As such, the first main contribution of this thesis is to argue that engaging with and taking debates about decolonization seriously is a necessary starting point for advancing the idea of ‘convivial’ rewilding in Ireland.

Related to this first contribution, the second step on the pathway to ‘convivial’ rewilding involves recognising that efforts to promote coexistence between humans and wildlife requires dealing with conflicts between rewilding advocates and actors with competing interests and priorities. This insight also has a broader significance in the context of growing interest in land-sharing approaches, such as convivial conservation’s ‘integrated conservation landscapes’ proposal, which seek to reconcile the needs of humans and wildlife in spaces beyond the borders of protected areas (Fischer et al. 2014). As mentioned earlier, Crespin and Simonetti (2019) stress that such approaches largely overlook both the potential for conflicts to occur between people over wildlife and how coexistence might be achieved through conflict transformation. As the empirical findings presented in this thesis show, attempts to foster coexistence between people and wildlife in shared landscapes can indeed lead to contestations over the planning, implementation and management of rewilding projects (Sands, under revision – Paper 2). At the same time, the findings also highlight the complexity of these conflicts.

The conflict transformation framework proposed by Madden and McQuinn (2014) offers one valuable approach for understanding and addressing complex conflicts over rewilding and coexistence. However, it is also worthwhile considering an issue that Büscher and Fletcher (2020) suggest is critical in relation to conflicts over land sharing – the production of space. In addition to

being a social and political practice, Adams (2020) reminds us that conservation is also fundamentally spatial in how it creates, secures and controls territory for non-human lives. In response to a hegemonic capitalist system, one that Lefebvre (1976: 21) submits is sustained by “occupying space, by producing space”, conservation has been primarily concerned with creating spaces to protect nature from the depredations of capitalism. The consequences of this approach have been well-documented, however, both in terms of how it has generated conflicts over conservation (Brockington et al. 2012; Büscher et al. 2017) and how it has facilitated the persistence of capitalism (Fairhead et al. 2012).

This thesis has identified similar problems in relation to how rewilding projects seek to accommodate wildlife in human-dominated landscapes. At the same time, it has also highlighted how making space for novel wildlife can have significant implications for existing land uses, and land users, and for future land use proposals, such as renewable energy developments. In other words, it has shown there are costs associated with coexistence and sharing space with wildlife. Aware of these implications, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) put forward an integrated approach for meeting (and changing) the needs of people, wildlife and ecosystems that begins by examining “the spatiality of human-environment conflicts” in target landscapes and identifying “potential landscape modifications that could aid in solving these”. Following this process, they then propose mapping out different landscape development trajectories with local and certain extra-local stakeholders that take “conviviality as the central objective”. The key to this process, they contend, is recognising that “many interactions between environment and people already happen, in shared, fragmented spaces”, that lie outside protected areas (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 192).

Based on the findings in this thesis, however, it is possible to anticipate several major barriers to implementing such an approach in practice, particularly in relation to rewilding. The most obvious perhaps is that the nature-society interactions promised by rewilding are not “already happening”. Efforts to (re)introduce novel and unfamiliar wildlife through rewilding projects will not only generate novel, unfamiliar and uncertain interactions between people, wildlife and the environments they share, but they will also rearrange and reshape existing interactions. Insights from the extensive literature on conservation conflicts emphasizes how these changes are likely to lead to conflicts, which, as Redpath et al. (2013) stress, are extremely difficult, if not impossible, to ‘solve’.

Taking seriously the agency of the non-human actors involved in rewilding further complicates efforts to address these conflicts. For example, the two main non-human actors considered in this

thesis, wolves and red kites, are capable of migrating over large areas and, thus, transcending socially-constructed representations of space, such as local development areas, national borders and the boundaries of protected areas. In their original argument for rewilding, Soulé and Noss (1998) imagined that such wide-ranging species would be supported within a vast network of core areas and wildlife corridors where there would be little need for human management. Yet, as I have illustrated in this thesis, the idea that humans and wildlife can and must be separated to ensure the survival of the latter is not only illusory, but it is grounded in a dualist perspective that has long provided the moral justification for the exploitation and domination of certain people and the rest of nature.

Integrating wildlife into human-shaped landscapes, as Büscher and Fletcher (2020) and many rewilders aspire to do, represents a powerful and highly symbolic way to overcome and unsettle this dualist framework. However, as Wapner (2020: 105) stresses, such an approach will mean that “People need to accept the inconvenience and hardship that comes from caring about the lives of other creatures. Reintroduced wolves *will* eat cattle; wildlife corridors *will* endanger people as predatory animals roam closer to humans; (...) containing agricultural and urban expansion *will* create pressure to use land more efficiently”. To some, these inconveniences and hardships simply may not be acceptable and, thus, could be a source of significant conflict. Moreover, as discussed in paper 2, determining whether or not they are acceptable to all relevant stakeholders is not straightforward because of the difficulties associated with employing participatory processes in relation to highly mobile species. In line with scholars who have highlighted the importance of effective institutions for enabling coexistence, Cumming et al. (2006) argue that managing such scale mismatch problems requires the development of flexible institutions. As such, although the second contribution of the thesis stresses the importance of better understanding conflicts over rewilding, the third contribution lies in the conceptualisation of conflict as a necessary and positive force for advancing the conditions needed to support coexistence and conviviality.

Before developing this point further, it is important to stress that conflict and resistance to conservation is often highly destructive and the source of legitimate grievances and serious injustices (Marijnen et al. 2021; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2022). Moreover, as discussed earlier in the thesis, rewilding has aggravated existing conflicts and provoked new conflicts, which have been and continue to be costly for those involved (e.g. Wynne-Jones et al. 2018). However, conflict is also an integral part of the struggle to decolonise conservation, to forge a convivial future and, in the context of this study, to nurture human-wildlife coexistence through rewilding. Indeed, conflict is at

the heart of the convivial conservation proposal, with its call to “develop and rigorously champion a critical-constructivist position that directly challenges the integrated social and environmental consequences of capitalist production and the human alienation from nonhuman processes that this production promotes” (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 204)

The findings in this thesis offer a snapshot of how actors operating “outside the flows of Capital” (Gibson-Graham 1997: 89) are seeking to foster coexistence and promote incremental change by challenging dominant and more powerful interests. Furthermore, the thesis illustrates how what I have described as conservation alternatives, may be better understood as alternative approaches to development in how they confront dominant ideas of sustainable development and green growth by championing, for example, rural livelihoods, food sovereignty and ecological stewardship. Community-driven, place-based and concerned with environmental justice, these alternatives are fundamentally in conflict with those referred to by Büscher and Fletcher (2019) as the ‘land-owning capitalist class’ and the ‘political and economic elites’ who oversee the system that drives biodiversity loss while simultaneously ‘greenwashing’ this destruction by promoting and financially supporting certain conservation initiatives.

In recent years, rewilding has been increasingly used as a vehicle by some of these interests to justify continuing down a neoliberal pathway characterised by unsustainability and inequality. This has been possible, I contend, because the rewilding movement has generally failed to critically engage with the historical, political and social dimensions of rewilding and conservation. As a consequence, and akin to mainstream conservation strategies, rewilding efforts have been a source of damaging conflicts rather than coexistence. On the surface, these controversies surrounding rewilding appear to be a significant barrier to fostering coexistence, which is a fundamental problem with rewilding that may be difficult to overcome. Yet, instead of arguing for rewilding to be rejected because of this problem, I propose that rewilding’s capacity to stimulate difficult conversations about the past, present and future of society-nature relations renders it a valuable concept for supporting diverse and liveable futures. Although wary of adding yet another meaning to the rewilding lexicon, the notion of convivial rewilding may be fruitful for advancing inclusive and just forms of coexistence and for challenging and ‘shutting down’ rewilding strategies grounded in the colonial and capitalist logics. More optimistically, in this thesis, I have aimed to show that human-wildlife coexistence is possible and that shifting from ‘clearance rewilding’ to ‘convivial’ rewilding could be crucial for supporting the pursuit of abundant and equitable futures.

6.2 Potential directions for future research

This thesis has filled several important knowledge gaps regarding the human dimensions of rewilding conflicts and coexistence. In the process, it has also uncovered a number of promising directions for future research on rewilding, human-wildlife interactions and convivial conservation. To conclude this thesis, I will highlight three possible directions for future research.

First, further studies are warranted that explore the historical dimensions of human-wildlife interactions to determine the underlying drivers of conflict between people over wildlife in different contexts. Such studies should follow Pooley's (2021: 3) call to look "beyond direct impacts of wildlife on humans and vice versa, and negative interactions, and look harder at non-rational factors influencing decision-making, including cultures and histories of human-wildlife interactions". As highlighted in this thesis, those promoting rewilding have largely neglected the root causes behind the destruction of wildlife and ecosystems, which serves to undermine claims about rewilding's transformative potential (Carver et al. 2021). Historically focused research could help to address this by illuminating the historical factors that adversely influence human-wildlife interactions in the present, which in turn could contribute towards "Reckoning with Colonial-Capitalist Ruination" as advocated for by Collard et al. (2014: 327). Further, although this study engaged with the history of human-wildlife interactions in Ireland, comparative analyses between different parts of the world could also prove useful for examining the linkages between the traditional knowledge systems and local practices that have supported coexistence and the historical forces that have disrupted them.

Second, future research should focus on the social implications of efforts to facilitate coexistence in relation to rewilding activities, mainstream approaches to conservation and green transformation agendas. As Newell et al. (2021: 903) point out, "Transitions talk is ubiquitous". However, there is an urgent need to ensure that questions about justice and power are at the centre of these conversations about transformations towards sustainability (Martin et al. 2020). Likewise, it is equally important to consider how transitions to coexistence through rewilding projects could potentially exacerbate existing injustices and inequalities by, for example, limiting the livelihood opportunities available to both current and future generations of people. In demonstrating how the pursuit of coexistence can conflict with green development initiatives, such as wind energy, this thesis highlights a need for case studies that examine the potential trade-offs between conservation and development agendas, as well as the reasons why coexistence might be resisted by actors with divergent priorities and obligations.

Third, there is a pressing need for research that explores and amplifies the multitude of ways people and wildlife successfully negotiate coexistence in diverse local contexts. Such studies should take inspiration from Brockington and Duffy's (2010: 480) proposal "to look for conservation strategies that are untouched by neoliberalism" and focus on uncovering lessons that can support transformative approaches to conservation, such as convivial conservation. According to Massarella et al. (2022: 66), "Much can be learnt from the myriad alternative ways of governing nature that do not rely on western scientific knowledge, that prioritise place-based and collaborative approaches, and that provide a basis for non-market, redistributive sources of locally controlled conservation funding." Focused inquiries into how these alternatives enable coexistence could be fruitful for producing conservation research that is relevant and useful for conservation practitioners (Laurance et al. 2012). Moreover, by showing that coexistence is possible, such studies could also be crucial for strengthening broader efforts to "construct different worlds beyond the boundaries of neoliberal capitalism" (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 147).

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Part Two: Compilation of Papers

Paper 1

Dara Sands

**Dewilding ‘Wolf-land’: Exploring the Historical Dimensions
of Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence in Ireland**

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Dewilding 'Wolf-land': Exploring the Historical Dimensions of Human-Wildlife Conflict and Coexistence in Ireland

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Abstract

Fostering coexistence between people and wildlife is crucial to both the conservation and restoration of wildlife populations across the globe. Yet, so far research exploring human-wildlife conflict and coexistence has been largely ahistorical, with little focus on the historical trajectories through which human-wildlife interactions have shifted from coexistence to conflicts which have led to wildlife eradication in the past. This paper responds by examining the historical drivers of change which disrupted a long history of human-wolf coexistence in Ireland. Drawing on an extensive review of primary historical sources and secondary literature and applying analytical tools from environmental history, the paper first illustrates the diverse practices and attitudes which helped sustain a continuous period of coexistence up to the seventeenth century. The paper then illustrates how coexistence unravelled during the early modern period following the island's integration into an expanding global capitalist system under a colonial regime who redefined Ireland as a primitive 'Wolf-land'. By engaging with the historical dimensions of human-wildlife interactions and drawing attention to how wildlife has become enrolled in past social conflicts, the article highlights the importance of historical perspectives for informing current strategies aimed at positively transforming human-wildlife conflict towards inclusive and socially just forms of coexistence.

Keywords: Rewilding, human-wildlife conflict, coexistence, wolves, Ireland, environmental history Abstract in


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INTRODUCTION

...it is vital, when encountering a serious problem, not merely to try to solve the problem in itself but to confront and transform the processes that gave rise to the problem in the first place. (Harvey 1996: 401)

Concerned with the reasons why wildlife has been eradicated from places with long histories of human-wildlife

coexistence, this article seeks to provide insights into the historical dimensions of contemporary conflicts surrounding proposals to reintroduce wolves into Ireland. Calls for the wolf's return to Ireland follow the ongoing recovery of large carnivore populations across continental Europe (Chapron et al. 2014) and reflect growing support for rewilding, one of the most influential approaches today to environmental conservation (Perino et al. 2019). Although it remains a highly diverse (Gammon 2018) and often divisive concept (Jørgensen 2015), many rewilding advocates consider the reintroduction of functionally important wildlife, including predators such as wolves, essential for contributing towards global conservation targets to reverse biodiversity loss and restore self-regulating ecosystems (Soulé and Noss 1998; Svenning et al. 2016). Moreover, faced with an accelerating ecological crisis (Díaz et al. 2019), some argue that rewilding offers a transformative pathway for reimagining human relationships with the rest of nature through a shift which,

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according to Wapner (2020: 59), “involves individually and collectively pulling back and reducing humanity’s footprint on the more-than-human world”.

Yet the prevalence of conflicts among people with different, and often opposing, interests and attitudes to wildlife poses a major challenge for both rewilding and the conservation of existing wildlife populations (Dickman 2010; Redpath et al. 2013). The 2007 reintroduction of white-tailed sea eagles to Ireland after an absence of over a century, for example, led to a high-profile social conflict involving conservationists, farmers, politicians, and tourism interests (O’Rourke 2014). Furthermore, calls to reintroduce wolves to Ireland by the Green Party in the Irish Parliament in 2019 have faced strong resistance, with opposition framed around concerns about a lack of suitable habitat and the negative impacts of a potentially dangerous predator on rural communities, agricultural interests, and existing conservation projects.

Rewilding projects and proposals involving reintroductions inevitably generate concerns given wildlife can have significant material and non-material impacts on human lives and livelihoods, particularly on people living in rural areas (Thondhlana et al. 2020; Lecuyer et al. 2022). However, research has highlighted how such conflicts over wildlife conservation, commonly referred to as human-wildlife conflicts, are primarily driven by social and political issues and are often rooted in contentious human-human relations (Madden 2004; Hodgson et al. 2020). The importance of understanding the human dimensions of these conflicts is increasingly recognised in the rewilding literature (e.g. Wynne-Jones et al. 2018; Fry 2020; Drouilly and O’Riain 2021) and in recent studies of human-wildlife interactions, which have drawn attention to the different ways conflicts over wildlife are influenced by institutions, political economic structures, social constructions of landscape, power relations, and diverse values, attitudes, and interests (Skogen et al. 2017; De Silva and Srinivasan 2019; Fletcher and Toncheva 2021).

Over the past decade, research within this field has also started to broaden its focus from conflict and negative interactions with wildlife towards the challenge of advancing socially just and inclusive forms of human-wildlife coexistence (Frank et al. 2019; Pettersson et al. 2021). Whilst coexistence has been conceptualised in numerous ways, in the context of large carnivore conservation, Carter and Linnell (2016: 575) refer to it as a “dynamic but sustainable state in which humans and large carnivores co-adapt to living in shared landscapes where human interactions with carnivores are governed by effective institutions that ensure long-term carnivore population persistence, social legitimacy, and tolerable levels of risk”. Definitions of coexistence which foreground humans and wildlife sharing landscapes in this way could be argued to be of little relevance to rewilding given its associations with wilderness and minimising human presence (Ward 2019). However, where the human dimensions and environmental-justice implications of rewilding are recognised (Holmes et al. 2020), fostering coexistence emerges as a key challenge, particularly in areas where the experience of coexistence no longer exists (Pooley 2021).

So far, however, research into the human dimensions of human-wildlife conflict and coexistence has been primarily concerned with examining the contemporary social and political contexts in which human-wildlife interactions play out. In contrast, the historical dimensions of human-wildlife conflict and coexistence have received relatively little attention, despite broad acknowledgement of the utility of historical analysis for understanding how and why particular human-wildlife conflicts have emerged and escalated over time (Lambert 2015; Pooley et al. 2017; Bennett et al. 2017). In addition, historical knowledge is regarded as being vital for informing ‘future-oriented’ conservation and restoration agendas such as rewilding, with perspectives about local histories of human land use (Alagona et al. 2012; Higgs et al. 2014).

Identifying this historical blind spot in their transdisciplinary framework for diagnosing complex conservation conflicts, Harrison and Loring (2020: 4) stress that conflicts typically “exist on longer temporal scales than many people may at first realize”. Furthermore, they also point out the importance of recognising that “previous episodes of conflict result in an ‘aftermath’ that affects future episodes” (2020: 4). Conceptualising conflicts in this way, i.e. as arising through history and having legacies which can significantly influence the present, demands taking the past seriously to better understand the historical processes and dynamics which possibly act as key underlying drivers of contemporary rewilding and human-wildlife conflicts (Madden and McQuinn 2014).

Environmental History and Human-Wildlife Interactions

Environmental history—a broad interdisciplinary field concerned with how interactions between nature and human cultures have changed through time (Hughes 2008)—offers a potentially fruitful approach for exploring histories of coexistence and tracing the deeper temporal scales of conflicts and identifying links between past and present contestations. Studies of environmental history typically examine the reciprocal relationship between human societies and nature across three themes or levels of analysis: (1) nature and how it shapes human actions, (2) the way socio-economic activity, including political economy, power relations, and modes of production, influences environmental change, and (3) the evolving history of environmental thought and ideas about nature (Worster 1988). Instead of placing people at the centre of history and subordinating the rest of nature to the role of ‘neutral’ background, environmental history, according to Cronon (1993: 13), contends “that human beings are not the only actors who make history. Other creatures do too, as do large natural processes, and any history that ignores their effects is likely to be woefully incomplete”. This commitment to treating human life and history as being rooted in and entangled with the non-human world (Aisher and Damodaran 2016) is especially pertinent in the context of criticism of rewilding

for reproducing and perpetuating troubling nature-culture dichotomies linked to top-down approaches to biodiversity conservation (Denevan 1992; Agrawal and Redford 2009).

Guided by this principal assumption, studies of environmental history aim to develop more comprehensive and nuanced understandings of past social and environmental change by documenting shared stories about human and non-human natures and their dynamic and evolving relationships with the world around them (Grove et al. 1998). Interpreting history as the co-evolution of people and nature is relevant to contemporary conflicts over wildlife conservation because it can help reveal the different actors, interests, events, ideologies, politics, and other historical forces which have influenced past transformations in human-wildlife interactions from tolerance and coexistence to conflict and extermination (Lambert 2015). For example, exploring the history of human-wolf relationships in Japan, Walker (2009) explains how the eighteenth and nineteenth century campaigns to eradicate the “Japanese wolf” were driven by the emergence of dominant new ways of relating to and valuing the natural world based on its control and commodification. Repeated in various forms across the world (e.g. Coleman 2008), this transformation and simplification of previously complex human-nature relations—a process referred to by environmental historian Carolyn Merchant (1983) as the ‘Death of Nature’—has been identified as a crucial turning point in human interactions with the rest of nature and is widely regarded as a, if not the, root cause of the current ecological crisis (Büscher and Fletcher 2020; Hickel 2020).

Hence, drawing on environmental history’s three broad categories of analysis (Worster 1988), with a particular emphasis on critically evaluating how different ideas, knowledge, and ways of viewing and using nature have changed over time, this research sets out to investigate how and why human-wolf relations in early modern Ireland shifted from coexistence to conflict. The primary aim of the article is to identify the historical factors which disrupted a long history of coexistence and to determine how these factors generated conflict and legitimated the extirpation of wolves from Ireland. Adopting a *longue durée* perspective of human-wolf relations, the paper first traces the various ways human societies and wolves negotiated coexistence in Ireland up to the seventeenth century. The paper then turns its focus to the early modern period and examines how wolves became entangled in an escalating human-human conflict. The paper concludes by arguing that viewing human-wildlife interactions through the lens of environmental history can offer valuable insights into how people coexisted with wildlife in the past, and provide important perspectives into the root causes of conflict over wildlife in the present.

METHODOLOGY AND MATERIALS

Data Collection and Analysis

Applied to the case of human-wolf relations in Ireland, environmental history’s broad framework has been deployed

as a method to guide both the paper’s analytical approach and as a starting point for considering the different types of data needed to address the paper’s main aim, as outlined above. According to van Dam and Versteegen (2009: 28), “the classic sources of information for the historian, environmental or otherwise, are texts.” Thus, preliminary data collection for the paper involved a close examination of the existing literature on the history of wolves in Ireland and archival field research to gather historical texts related to wolves and human-nature interactions, which was conducted during June and July 2019 at various libraries and public archives in Ireland. Additional material and sources were then collected over the course of August 2019 to December 2020 using keyword searches in online databases and digital libraries, including JStor, Google Scholar, HathiTrust, The National Archives, University College Cork’s (UCC) Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT), and University College Dublin’s (UCD) National Folklore Collection.

From this process, key texts and secondary sources were selected based on their relevance to the paper’s aim, encompassing an extensive range of books, travel accounts, letters, diaries, maps, poems, manuscripts, surveys, tenancy contracts, and legislative records. Although caution and a critical perspective are required when interpreting historical evidence, particularly that deriving from the colonial period which potentially reflects culturally prejudiced and racist worldviews, this material provided detailed insights into the history of interactions between people, wolves, and environmental change in Ireland. The dataset was then organised thematically, according to environmental history’s three themes, and into two historical periods—1) the period of coexistence in pre-colonial Ireland and 2) the early modern period, which marked the escalation of human-wolf conflict.

Next, the historical data were analysed using a grounded theory approach similar to Cronon (1983) in order to identify the historical factors which influenced the breakdown of human-wolf relations in early modern Ireland. Adams’s assertion that “many conservation conflicts are underpinned by differences in ideas about nature” (2020: 248) was instructive in centring the analysis around understanding how the shift from coexistence to conflict was determined by the emergence of new ways of thinking about nature associated with the early modern period and what Moore (2017: 594) refers to as “early capitalism’s environment-making revolution”. By interrogating the historical production of environmental knowledge (Turnhout 2018) and the ways in which dominant ideas shape human-nature relationships, the article takes inspiration from

Collard et al. (2015: 327)’s vision for advancing abundant socioecological futures by confronting violent past processes of “colonial-capitalist ruination”.

Study Area

Although Ireland has received relatively little attention in the literature on human-wildlife interactions (O’Rourke 2014), it has the potential to offer important insights into the historical

dimensions of human-wildlife conflict and coexistence. Human societies in Ireland have lived alongside and interacted with wildlife for c. 10,000 years and the presence and distribution of the island's contemporary wildlife populations have been significantly influenced by past human activity (Mitchell and Ryan 1997). For example, since the Mesolithic, people have introduced a wide range of wildlife into Ireland for a variety of reasons, e.g. as sources of food and materials (Montgomery et al. 2014) and owing to their symbolic and cultural importance (Warren 2022). Yet direct exploitation (Evans et al. 2012) and the conversion of natural habitats to support human development (McCormick 2014) have also contributed to the decline and extirpation of many wildlife populations from their historical ranges (D'Arcy 1999). In recent years, calls to reintroduce wolves and the reintroduction of birds of prey, including white-tailed sea eagles, golden eagles, and red kites, have sparked nationwide debates and attracted considerable interest from the general public (O'Toole et al. 2002). Environmental history can provide such debates with important historical context, and as Adelman and Ludlow (2014: 389) note "Ireland has a large literature and enviable source material upon which to build environmental histories." Even so, coherently tracing the complex history of human-wolf interactions in Ireland remains a challenging task and entails making broad generalisations about how and why this relationship has changed over time.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Navigating Human-Wolf Coexistence in Pre-Colonial Ireland

Located in the northern Atlantic off the coast of western Europe, the island of Ireland served as the dynamic setting for a long history of human-wolf coexistence until relatively recent times. Prior to the last Ice Age (c. 26,000 to 11,700 years ago), during which time the island was connected to Britain and Europe by ephemeral land or ice bridges and mostly covered by an extensive ice sheet, wolves (*Canis lupus*), and other large carnivores including brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) and spotted hyena (*Crocuta crocuta*), were present in Ireland (Monaghan 2017). Whilst many mammal species did not survive the unstable environmental conditions which characterised the last Ice Age in Ireland (Montgomery et al. 2014), wolves may have sustained a viable population throughout owing to their ability to successfully adapt to a variety of habitats, provided sufficient food is available (Darimont et al. 2003; Watts et al. 2010; Gable et al. 2017). Although now most often associated with woodland and protected areas and considered synonymous with remote wilderness (López-Bao et al. 2017), Mech (2017) contends that, where human societies allow it, wolves could live almost anywhere.

Rising temperatures and the gradual transformation of much of Ireland's post-glacial landscape from open tundra to temperate woodland provided suitable conditions for human

settlement towards the end of the Ice Age (Mitchell 2006). Whilst there is some evidence of human presence in Ireland around 12,500 years ago (Dowd and Carden 2016) and possibly much earlier, the current evidence indicates that the first human settlers arrived at the beginning of the Irish Mesolithic period,

c. 10,000 years ago (Woodman 2015). Living in small, mobile groups, Mesolithic people were well-adapted to their local environments and settled in riverine and coastal locations to facilitate the optimal exploitation of a wide range of resources and movement by boat via the sea and island's inland waterways (Tune 2020). Although human population densities remained low throughout the Mesolithic, the subsistence and cultural practices of Mesolithic hunter-gatherers are thought to have played a potentially significant role in reshaping the island's woodland ecosystems through, for example, introducing species such as wild boar and domestic dogs (Warren 2022).

Evidence of wolf remains from Mesolithic sites suggests hunting constituted an important element of the earliest interactions between humans and wolves (Hickey 2011). Yet while the Mesolithic comprises c. 40% of Ireland's total settlement history (Mallory 2013), little is known about the specific ways in which human-wolf relationships evolved during this period. Considering the deep roots of human-wolf interactions beyond the island's shores (Shipman 2015; Pierotti and Fogg 2017), it seems highly likely that Mesolithic people arriving in Ireland from surrounding areas would have already been intimately familiar with wolf behaviour. As such, in Mesolithic Ireland, human-wolf relationships were likely multifaceted, with wolves perceived as competitors for the few prey species found on the island at this time, valuable scavengers, a source of food and fur, and important animals in the formation of nature-centred, animistic belief systems (Ingold 2000; Overton and Taylor 2018). Moreover, as early human cultures who shared a range with wolves are thought to have viewed the wolf with reverence and even as behavioural role models (Fritts et al. 2010), it is possible that similar attitudes may have been held by some people in Mesolithic Ireland.

The shift from the Mesolithic to the Neolithic period, beginning in Ireland c. 6,000 years ago, is defined by the adoption of agriculture and widely considered one of the most significant transformations in human history (Whitehouse et al. 2014).

Major anthropogenic changes to Ireland's landscapes were initiated by the introduction of domestic plants and animals, including cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs, along with wild species such as red deer (Cooney 2012). In many past landscapes where people lived alongside wolves, the arrival of livestock farming is thought to have motivated campaigns to eradicate wolves (Boitani 1995). However, in Ireland the emphasis instead appears to have been on reducing the negative impacts of wolf predation on an expanding mixed-agricultural economy, rather than on wolf elimination. For example, evidence from seventh and eighth century law-tracts indicates wolf-hunting was institutionalised and viewed as an important public duty to control wolf numbers and protect livestock (Kelly 1997). Rathes, or ringforts, and stone wall enclosures were ubiquitous features in the Irish landscape, particularly in the Early Medieval

period, and offered protection against both human and wolf predation (Stout 1997). Moreover, guardian animals, including large dogs (McCormick 1991; O'Reilly 1889) and powerful wolf-fighting bulls (Kelly 1997), were used to protect livestock. Patterson (1994: 83) also suggests that pigs, in contrast to cattle and sheep, could be left safely untended in their woodland habitat during winter by early farmers as they could defend themselves against wolf attacks.

Meanwhile, the gradual clearance and exploitation of Ireland's woodlands for agriculture and grazing, and to provide the wood vital for the development of early human societies (Perlin 1989), created more open landscapes with greater visibility (O'Connell and Molloy 2001). As wolf hunting success appears to be influenced by their ability to closely approach potential prey undetected, i.e. utilising the element of surprise (Kunkel and Pletscher 2001), the reduction in woodland cover may have helped farmers and shepherds protect livestock from wolf predation. In other parts of the world where there has been continuous coexistence between people and wolves, the use of such diverse practices, along with experiential knowledge of wolf behaviour, has been documented to successfully reduce human-wolf conflicts (e.g. Laugrand and Oosten 2014; Kikvidze and Tevzadze 2015).

With regards to historical attitudes towards wolves, the proliferation of megalithic tombs, most likely centres of religious ceremony, across the Irish Neolithic landscape points to a potentially major change which took place during this period in terms of ways of thinking about the non-human world (Bradley 2019). According to Russell (2011), the spread of agriculture was integral in transforming how human societies thought about other animals based on dualistic cosmologies which saw certain animals categorised as either 'wild' or 'domestic'. Yet, as Cummings (2017) argues, overstating the changes associated with the introduction of agriculture risks obscuring the potential continuities in practices and belief systems developed by Mesolithic hunter-gatherers (Warren 2022). For example, evidence of wolf-teeth pendants uncovered from Neolithic caves, places associated with death, the unknown and the supernatural, indicates that wolves were still viewed as spiritually important animals, at least by some (Dowd 2015). Moreover, a letter written in 1713 suggests that wolf teeth were considered "very lucky things" up to the eighteenth century (Fairley 1975: 183). It therefore appears that old and new ways of culturally relating to wolves prevailed in parallel, due in part to the continuation of Mesolithic practices and ideas into and beyond the Irish Neolithic.

The historical emergence of negative attitudes towards wolves, and the non-human world in general, is often attributed to the advent of Christianity and its supplanting of more pluralistic ways of relating to nature (Lopez 1978). In tracing how the anthropocentrism of Christian discourse has influenced this change, White (1967: 5) explains how writings about the legends of saints, "especially the Irish saints", have long been used to show "human dominance over creatures". Yet in Ireland, where Christianity was introduced c. 1,500 years ago, early Christian poetry (Kinsella 1986)

and a rich body of hagiographical literature about the lives of saints (Plummer 1997) also appear to convey a strong ethic of stewardship, care, and reciprocity towards nature and wild animals, including wolves (Bratton 1989). Whilst there are many such examples within this historical material, one notable example involves a wolf nursing the infant Saint Ailbe, who later in his life protects the mother wolf and her cubs (McCone 1984).

Similar themes are also evident in Irish mythology, including the legend, *Cath Maige Mucrama*, about high-king Cormac Mac Airt who was raised in a cave by wolves as a child. Interpreting this story, Ó Cathasaigh (1977) suggests Cormac's return to human society and 'civilisation' represents a return from an unknown and otherworldly place characterised by the wolf's presence. The wolf's association with 'wild' and unfamiliar cultural spaces is also reflected in an Irish term for the grey wolf, *cú glas*, which was used to describe a person who existed beyond the sphere of civilised human society. Put another way, the wolf, according to Charles-Edwards (2000: 222) was the "characteristic outsider". While cultural constructions of the wolf vary across time and space, many cultures share closely related views of wolves representing the autonomy of a natural world existing outside the realm of human order and control (Lopez 1978).

Following the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland in the twelfth century and the island's designation as a lordship of the English Crown (Davies 2000), such conceptualisations of wolves as belonging outside society were extended to the human inhabitants of Ireland by colonising invaders convinced of their own cultural superiority (Connolly 2016). As postcolonial scholar Edward Said (2012: 20) observes, from this point in time onwards, "an amazingly persistent cultural attitude existed toward Ireland as a place whose inhabitants were a barbarian and degenerate race". This attitude was notably articulated by Giraldus Cambrensis, a royal clerk who visited parts of the island with the Norman invaders in the 1180s. In his influential *Topographia Hibernica*, Giraldus describes Ireland as a country "secluded from civilized nations" (Wright 1905: 70) and the Irish as "a people living off beasts and like beasts. A people that still adheres to the most primitive way of pastoral living. For as humanity progresses from the forests to arable fields, and towards village life and civil society, this people is too lazy for agriculture" (quoted in Leerssen 1995: 30). The intention of Giraldus's narrative was to construct differences in Irish customs and habits as markers of inferiority in order to legitimise military conquest as a justifiable exercise in reforming a supposedly 'primitive' people and underdeveloped island (Hadfield and McVeagh 1994).

The Norman conquest of England a century earlier and the introduction of a distinctive hunting culture, which saw the enclosure of vast areas of common land, is attributed to the decline and extermination of wolves in England by the fifteenth century (Pluskowski 2010). The Norman conquerors of Ireland attempted to impose a similar hunting culture by introducing game, including rabbit and fallow deer, and creating "landscapes of lordship" (Liddiard 2000) dominated

by castles, manorial settlements, and large deer parks where hunting was predominantly an exclusive elite practice (Murphy and O'Connor 2006; Beglane et al. 2018). However, by the fourteenth century, climate deterioration, crop failure, the Black Death, and military defeats had combined to significantly reduce Anglo-Norman control in Ireland (Simms 2000; Fagan 2019). Subsequently, although English-administered territories remained along the southern and eastern coast, the 'Old English' descendants of the Anglo-Norman invaders became largely absorbed into the customs and culture of a Gaelic Irish world in which human-wolf coexistence successfully endured up until the beginning of the early modern period.

Dewilding Human-Wolf Relations in Early Modern Ireland

Entering the early modern period (c. 1530 to 1750) in the sixteenth century, wolves and humans had coexisted for c. 10,000 years in Irish landscapes coproduced over millennia by dynamic interactions between cultural and natural processes (Aalen et al. 1997). Romantic assumptions about harmonious, conflict-free human-wolf relations are undoubtedly misplaced, however, as from the introduction of farming onwards, wolves posed a potential threat to livestock and were viewed by some as dangerous animals for this reason (O'Sullivan 2009). Evidence also suggests that humans occasionally served as a "meaty prey species" (Walker 2013: 45) for wolves, with the Annals of Connacht documenting in 1420 that "wolves killed many people this year" (Freeman 1983). Yet the development of effective strategies to mitigate adverse wolf impacts, a degree of societal tolerance, and the likelihood that wolves exercised their own agency and adapted their behaviour to avoid encountering people (Carricondo-Sanchez et al. 2020) appear to have been important factors in supporting coexistence. By the end of the seventeenth century, however, Ireland's wolf population was in terminal decline following the erosion of the practices, attitudes, and knowledge systems which had historically sustained coexistence.

This critical turning point in human-wolf relationships took place alongside fundamental changes to the island's diverse ecosystems, economies, cultures, demographics, settlement patterns, and political structures (Canny 1976). Against the backdrop of the coldest sustained spell of the Little Ice Age (Ludlow and Crampsie 2018), these rapid transformations were initiated by an English colonial regime intent on finally securing full territorial control over Ireland (Rolston 1993). Following the Reformation and Henry VIII's break from Rome, the Tudor monarchy viewed Ireland's geopolitical location as a strategic threat, as the island represented a potential launchpad for invasion by their European rivals, but also as a stepping stone for supporting English imperialist aspirations across the Atlantic in North America (Horning 2013; Ohlmeyer 2016). Faced with resistance by the rulers of a "literate, highly organized" (Connolly 2009: 10) Gaelic Irish society, England's strategy for subduing Ireland involved military conquest,

dispossession, displacement of local populations, and a 'plantation' policy involving the resettlement of confiscated Irish land by English and Scottish settlers who, it was reasoned, would put it to more productive use under private ownership (Smyth 2006). According to Wood (2002: 153), the ultimate goal of this new form of market-oriented colonial capitalism "was to establish an English-style commercial order, a new kind of economy based on new social relations on the land, new relations between landlord and tenant, like the ones driving improvement in England".

A prerequisite for 'clearing the ground' to create this new order was to again exaggerate the differences between an ostensibly primitive, less rational people and the 'improved' lands of southeast England and qualities of reason and civilisation attributed to the colonisers. For example, a transhumance pastoralism system, known as 'booleying' in Ireland, which was a mainstay of rural economies and based on the seasonal migration of livestock and people between upland and lowland pastures and developed in response to specific ecological conditions (Costello 2020), was condemned as a sign of a savage and 'nomadic' people. As Richards (2003: 198) explains, "Pastoralism was equated with barbarism—an attitude that colored British attitudes toward other pastoral peoples around the world as the British empire expanded." In 1608, Lord Deputy Arthur Chichester, motivated by a desire to convert Irish pastoralists into settled rent-paying tenants, articulated this view by demanding the Ulster Irish be "drawn from their course of running up and down the country with their cattle...and are to settle themselves in towns and villages" (Russell and Prendergast 1874: 10).

The presence of wolves in Ireland was also used to justify the interventions of colonisers who had successfully 'tamed' England's landscapes by eliminating wolves. Although Ireland was known to England since prehistoric times (Bradley 2019), efforts to reinforce the colonial perception of Ireland as a backwards and barbaric 'wilderness' saw it disparagingly referred to as a 'Wolf-land' (Harting 1880) and a "horrible desert...where the she wolf still littered" (Macauley 1848: 136). Indeed, wolves were a recurring concern to the colonial regime, and according to travel-writer Fynes Moryson, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, Ireland's wolf population had "... so much grown in number as sometimes in winter nights they will come to prey in villages and the suburbs of the cities" (Falkiner 1904: 222). Examining the history of human-wolf relations in France, Moriceau (2011) discerns "crisis periods", such as times of war, when wolf populations and wolf attacks proliferate owing to reduced hunting pressure, which may account for increasing wolf numbers during this period of social upheaval in Ireland. Whether or not the Irish wolf population was growing, however, the 1610 writings of English politician and propagandist Thomas Blenerhasset suggest both wolves and Irish rebels were considered the most serious threats to English and Scottish settlers and the forging of "our new world" (quoted in Farrell 2017: 27).

Throughout the seventeenth century, Irish rebellions were brutally suppressed, most notably by Oliver Cromwell's

New Model Army during the 1649–1653 ‘war that finished Ireland’. Smyth (2006: 161) estimates that the population of Ireland may have been reduced by around one-third during this time, from 1.8 million in 1641 to 1.2 million by 1654, as a result of the combined effects of war, famine, and plague. Inescapably entangled in this conflict over territorial control of Ireland, a conflict which transformed the island’s “biologically diverse bogs and forests into rationalised sites of capitalist monoculture” (Deckard 2016: 150), wolves were targeted by professional bounty hunters and through numerous pieces of legislation providing substantial rewards for their extermination (Harting 1880). Significantly, rewards were also offered for hunting down Irish rebels and priests (Bishop 2018). Furthermore, newly drafted laws also sought to suppress local traditions, knowledge, and customs (Cullen 1986), including the Irish language, about which Fynes Moryson declared “if no such tongue were in the world I think it would never be missed either for pleasure or necessity” (quoted in Kew 1998: 107).

This simultaneous othering of humans and wolves in Ireland occurred within the context of a period described by Gómez-Baggethun (2021: 3) as arguably “the most prominent episode in the history of attacks on indigenous cultures and related knowledge systems”. The animistic beliefs of so-called traditional societies were deemed incompatible with the mechanical and dualistic philosophies of an early modern scientific revolution which sought to render the natural world more amenable to human manipulation (Merchant 1983). A sixteenth century account of a fire-breathing wolf of “huge size” attacking English soldiers who had desecrated an Irish church indicates animistic conceptions were once prevalent in

Ireland too, and wolves were perceived by some as being endowed with magical properties (O’Sullivan-Bearé 1970: 4).

Yet to the English colonisers such thinking was ‘irrational’ and as pioneers of the new scientific rationalism they considered it their duty to bring order and control to Ireland and the rest of the ‘New World’ (Foster 1997).

At the forefront of this ‘civilising mission’ in seventeenth century Ireland was the surveyor Sir William Petty—dubbed the “father of English political economy” by Karl Marx and the “chief scientist of dispossession” by Simon Schama (2012: 215). Petty’s scientific surveys of confiscated Irish land rendered bioculturally diverse territories into homogenous ‘empty’ spaces which could be readily controlled, commodified, and redistributed (McNally 1990; Mrozowski 1999). Through this mapping process, place names in the Irish language, including many referring to wolves (Hickey 2011), were renamed in English, thus obscuring prior relationships with the land (Plumwood 2003). The massive redistribution of land, power, and property which followed Petty’s surveys in the 1650s facilitated resettlement by a new hegemonic landowning class, who transformed the physical landscape, enclosed once-communal lands, and promoted a shift to a commodity-based capitalist economy (O’Hearn 2001).

In the dawning ‘Age of Improvement’, wolves were perceived as an intolerable threat to the interests of this elite class of landlords. Moreover, similar dualist perspectives were

also extended to other forms of human and non-human life considered to stand in the way of the rise of modernity, including a Gaelic Irish society influenced by enchanted conceptions of the natural world (Gillespie 1997). The consequence of these perspectives for the wolf was a systematic dewilding campaign involving relentless hunting and the implementation of leases binding tenants to kill wolves (McCracken 1971). In combination with these direct pressures, growing competition for land forced displaced Irish peasants into marginal areas and on to mountain slopes (Whelan 1997), where they adopted a “pig and potato” economy (Nally and Kearns 2020), which pushed wolves into increasingly shrinking spaces in the Irish landscape. As a result, Ireland’s wolf population appears to have been in terminal decline by the end of the seventeenth century. While a small number of individuals may have survived longer, as intimated by various claims about where Ireland’s last wolf was killed, “there is no sign that the beasts were anything but scarce after 1707” (Fairley 1975: 183).

CONCLUSION

Researchers examining the human dimensions of human-wildlife interactions frequently highlight the importance of understanding how contemporary conflicts over wildlife are influenced by the past (Pooley et al. 2017; Hodgson et al. 2020). Yet so far the focus of this research field remains largely ahistorical and centred around how interactions between humans and wildlife are shaped by, through, and within their immediate contexts. By exploring the historical dimensions of human-wolf relations in Ireland, this article has showcased the potential value of historically informed perspectives for understanding how and why wildlife has become enrolled in complex and deep-rooted social conflicts.

With humans and wildlife increasingly coming into contact and rewilding and restoration agendas gaining considerable momentum across the globe, such historical perspectives have the potential to provide several important lessons for efforts to positively transform human-wildlife conflicts in the direction of sustainable, inclusive, and socially just coexistence. Firstly, historical knowledge can help illuminate the diverse cultural beliefs, knowledge systems, attitudes, and practices which helped past societies navigate coexistence with wildlife who had the potential to negatively impact human livelihoods and well-being. For example, to protect human interests from wolves in Ireland, predator control was widespread and necessary and appears to have been practiced since the earliest encounters between humans and wolves. Thus, although rewilding is typically framed as offering triple-win outcomes for people, nature, and climate, the challenge of coexisting with wildlife is well-known and history suggests it will be necessary for reintroduction strategies to integrate measures to control ‘problem’ wildlife in order to mitigate negative impacts and promote social legitimacy.

Secondly, looking beyond narrow approaches to ‘managing’ human-wildlife conflict, the past can also offer rich and

detailed insights into complex local histories of human-wildlife coexistence. According to Van Dooren (2014: 12) the extinction of species represents a “slow unravelling of intimately entangled ways of life”. Yet, through historical knowledge of placenames, folklore, and spiritual beliefs pertaining to wildlife, it may be possible to help re-establish connections between past and present societies, whilst also providing an important reminder of how wildlife has influenced the historical co-production of cultural landscapes. The past also offers a window into lost worlds in which local and indigenous cultures often viewed animals as possessing magical properties, with Holmes et al. (2018) arguing that such perspectives warrant wider consideration within conservation debates. The meaningful integration of local historical knowledge of wildlife and landscapes into rewilding decision-making processes may, therefore, help facilitate coexistence and counteract claims that rewilding seeks to erase human history and involvement with the land (Jørgensen 2015).

Finally, examining the historical dimensions of human-wildlife interactions directs focus to the historical episodes and past forces which underpin contemporary conflicts over wildlife conservation and rewilding. In the case of early modern Ireland, looking back reveals how the island’s systematic colonisation and integration into an expanding capitalist world-system was characterised by the exploitation and domination of non-human nature and some human beings. Understanding how such past changes have altered histories of coexistence in Ireland, and other places around the world, is crucial for confronting and dismantling the deep ideological legacies of colonialism and capitalism, and for ensuring they are not reproduced through rewilding and other forms of conservation. Moreover, through deeper engagements with enduring legacies of the past, researchers may discover opportunities to imagine alternative, convivial pathways for reconceptualising and decolonising human-wildlife relations in a manner which promotes coexistence and flourishing, bioculturally diverse futures.

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The author declares no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

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All relevant data are included within the paper.

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Paper 2

Dara Sands

**Rewilding contested landscapes: Lessons for coexistence
from the reintroduction of red kites to Northern Ireland**

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Rewilding contested landscapes: Lessons for coexistence from the reintroduction of red kites to Northern Ireland

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Abstract

Growing interest in rewilding is currently translating into a wide range of ambitious projects and proposals involving the (re)introduction of wildlife to rural landscapes beyond protected areas. However, accommodating unfamiliar wildlife in rural areas that support a wide range of human activities poses a significant challenge in terms of how to facilitate coexistence between wildlife and rural communities in socially legitimate ways. Based on semi-structured interviews with relevant actors, field observations and a range of secondary data sources, this paper explores this challenge by investigating the socio-political dimensions of the red kite reintroduction project in Northern Ireland. The article demonstrates how efforts to encourage coexistence can be undermined by both long-standing and novel contestations over multiuse landscapes in the Northern Irish countryside. Further, the article argues that fostering coexistence through rewilding initiatives hinges on building local trust, acceptance and support for rewilding initiatives, which requires patience and deliberative engagement with many actors, especially when the species reintroduced is highly mobile. The paper concludes that working towards coexistence is as much about establishing and supporting good relations between diverse groups of people, as it is about promoting positive relations between people and wildlife.

Keywords: Human-wildlife interactions, rewilding, Northern Ireland, red kites, coexistence, conservation conflicts

1. Introduction

Between 2008 and 2010, 80 red kites (*Milvus milvus*) were released into the skies above south County Down through a conservation project billed as Northern Ireland's first species reintroduction. Spearheaded by the Northern Ireland branch of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the project set out to create a self-sustaining red kite population, raise public awareness about conservation issues and encourage the local and wider community to take inspiration from the recovery of the large, charismatic raptors. In other words, the project implicitly aimed to encourage coexistence between red kites and the rural communities who suddenly found themselves living alongside the returning birds.

On 15 April 2021, the project was proclaimed a success by Northern Ireland's then Environment Minister, Edwin Poots, whose government department had issued the license to reintroduce the birds thirteen years earlier. The Minister's assertion, and similar success claims articulated by the RSPB, suggested the project's objectives, and thus coexistence, had been achieved. Yet, as the findings presented in this paper illustrate, the process of planning, implementing and governing of wildlife reintroduction projects is fraught with uncertainty and poses complex challenges – challenges I contend remain largely unaddressed in the context of Northern Ireland's contested rural landscapes. Accordingly, this paper argues that identifying and understanding these challenges, which are closely related to issues of power, trust and justice, is crucial for developing inclusive coexistence strategies that meaningfully consider the current and future needs of people and wildlife.

These issues warrant close attention in light of growing interest in the concept of coexistence in debates about conservation and human-wildlife interactions (Pooley et al. 2021; König et al. 2021). A highly diverse concept (Frank et al. 2019), coexistence is often characterised by its focus on supporting the long-term persistence of humans and wildlife in shared spaces (Carter and Linnell 2016). As such, some conservation scientists and practitioners view coexistence as a positive frame for reorientating conservation thinking away from dualistic ideas based on separating humans from nature, most commonly through protected areas, and towards alternative approaches to conservation that support pluralistic ways of living with nature (Madden 2004). For instance, criticizing dominant approaches to conservation, Buscher and Fletcher (2019: 4) have advanced a vision of "promoted areas", which they conceptualise as "fundamentally encouraging places where people are considered welcome visitors, dwellers or travellers rather than temporary alien invaders upon a nonhuman landscape" (Buscher and Fletcher 2020: 4). In practical terms, this entails devising conservation strategies that satisfy the needs and interests of people and wildlife in shared spaces (Perfecto et al. 2009; Caillon et al. 2017).

Yet, as pointed out by Linnell et al (2015: 984), conservation policy in Europe has traditionally emphasised land sharing strategies based on an appreciation that European landscapes have been co-produced through the “deep, complex, and ancient intertwining of nature and culture”. Indeed, there is a growing literature tracing these linkages and the prominent role wildlife play, and have historically played, in the co-production of what are typically referred to as cultural landscapes, both in Europe and in other parts of world (e.g. Lorimer 2010; Dorresteijn et al. 2014; Bluwstein 2022). Moreover, the recent recovery of wildlife populations within these landscapes is interpreted by some as evidence of how certain wildlife species have the ability to successfully adapt to human-shaped environments (Chapron et al. 2014) According to López-Bao et al (2015: 871), the return of wildlife to rural landscapes in Europe demonstrates that “wilderness (is) not required”.

At the same time, however, it is well-documented that wildlife can significantly impact human lives and livelihoods in ways that often give rise to complex conflicts between different groups of people (Redpath et al. 2015; Hodgson et al. 2020). While wildlife are increasingly found in urban settings (Alagona 2022), these negative impacts tend to be disproportionately borne by people who live and work in rural landscapes (Jordan et al. 2020). In recent years, proposals to (re)introduce wildlife to these areas through rewilding initiatives have gained considerable momentum (Svenning 2020), with rewilding even referred to as a pathway for transformative change in the coexistence of humans and nature (Carver et al. 2021). However, for people living in and around rural areas, the arrival of unfamiliar and potentially dangerous wildlife is not always considered a welcome change, but rather a source of uncertainty and a possible threat to preserving landscapes valued for different reasons, e.g. for agriculture or recreational activities (Wynne-Jones et al. 2020; Vasile 2018). Furthermore, as Adams (2020: 5) observes, attempts to convert these so-called marginal rural landscapes into spaces for rewilding and conservation “can be a significant source of conflict between conservationists, landowners and recreational users”.

Such conflicts over rewilding and wildlife reintroductions are the subject of a growing field of research exploring the human dimensions of conservation (Rakotonarivo et al. 2021; Hansen et al. 2022). This broad field of study has highlighted how conflicts over the management of wildlife are largely driven by political and social problems related to, for example, uneven power dynamics, weak legitimacy of institutions, low public trust in politics and decision-making, the unequal or unfair distribution of costs and benefits and unresolved historical issues (Young et al. 2016; Salvatori et al. 2021; Watkins et al. 2021). Moreover, this research has illustrated the tensions between conservation objectives and the

objectives of other types of land use, e.g. agriculture (Hill 2015) and, increasingly, renewable energy developments (Jager et al. 2021).

The diverse field of political ecology can contribute valuable insights for coexistence studies in relation to how political and social processes influence conflicts over wildlife reintroduction projects and conservation more generally (Robbins 2020). Guided by an explicitly normative focus on social and environmental justice (Martinez-Alier 2003; Svarstad and Benjaminsen 2020), political ecology scholarship has illustrated the social impacts associated with top-down conservation interventions that fail to consider the different ways people relate to, value and experience their environments in specific spatial contexts (West et al. 2006; Louder and Bozak 2019). Further, political ecologists have shown how unjust conservation activities have precipitated various acts of resistance against conservation, such as the deliberate killing of protected wildlife (Holmes 2007; Hübschle 2017).

By engaging with the political dimensions of conservation and rewilding (Elias et al. 2021), political ecology can help to shed a light on the underlying drivers of conflicts over wildlife in a way that goes “beyond the technical” (Adams 2015: 68). For Hodgson et al. (2021:12), political ecology’s concern with power relations means its “potential application to conservation conflicts is there vast, as environmental injustices, power struggles and inequalities are argued as key drivers in their development and manifestation”. Moreover, political ecology’s turn to more-than-human perspectives and multispecies research approaches (Margulies and Karanth 2018; Tschakert 2022) offers valuable insights for moving studies of coexistence ‘beyond the human’ by considering how wildlife interact with, adapt to and effect change in environments shared and shaped by people and wildlife.

This paper engages with the politics of human-wildlife coexistence in a place where it does not exist (Pooley 2021) by examining the planning, implementation and governance of the red kite reintroduction project in Northern Ireland. Informed by political ecology’s broad theoretical and analytical tools, the paper explores how coexistence with red kites is influenced by socio-political processes and relations between different actors with different interests. The paper proceeds by contextualising the red kite project in Northern Ireland as part of a wider reintroduction programme in the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland. After describing the paper’s methods, I then discuss how the project was planned and explore the challenges that have arisen since the reintroduction commenced. The paper ends by arguing that working towards coexistence is as much about establishing and maintaining good relations with people, as it is about promoting positive relations between people and wildlife.

2. Background: The Red Kite Project in Northern Ireland

In late August 2008, a man entered a local pub in rural County Down and proceeded to boast about having shot “one of those f**king English birds” (interview data). The bird he was referring to was a four month old red kite, one of 27 released in Northern Ireland in July 2008 as part of a reintroduction project that was initially funded for three years and led by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB). The shot bird was the second to have died following the original release a few weeks earlier, with the first death suspected to have been caused by a collision with overhead power lines. It was the shooting, however, that attracted widespread media coverage and condemnation, with the RSPB’s then Director of Conservation, Mark Avery, expressing “shock” and declaring “The message needs to be sent out that these birds should be a treasured addition to our countryside and not a target for illegal shooting” (Young 2008). Yet, although the small red kite population now appears to be largely viewed as a welcome presence in the south Down countryside, the shooting incident and reference to the outsider “English” birds served as a stark reminder that learning to live alongside red kites would pose a challenge for human communities still learning to live alongside one another in a society gradually transitioning away from generations of deeply-rooted sectarian conflict (O’Leary and McGarry 2016).

The red kite’s return to Northern Ireland in 2008 represented the culmination of over a century of conservation efforts to first protect and then restore the birds throughout their historic range, first, in England and Scotland, and later in Ireland. Thought to have once been widespread in both town and countryside across much of the UK (Carter 2019) and Ireland (O’Toole 2013), red kites were driven to the brink of extinction in the UK during the 18th and 19th centuries (Lovegrove 2007). A small remnant population survived in central Wales and in 1903 the naturalist and ornithologist John Henry Salter established the ‘Kite Committee’ in an attempt to prevent the red kite’s local extinction within the UK (Davies 1993). Supported by the RSPB and English government agency the Nature Conservancy, red kite numbers in Wales progressively increased from the 1940s onwards after falling to less than 10 pairs in the 1930s. In 1989, the RSPB and the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (formerly the Nature Conservancy Council) collaborated to re-establish red kite populations in England and Scotland (Evans et al. 1999), leading to the release of close to 1,000 birds at nine different sites between 1989 and 2013.

Meanwhile in Ireland, a small group of conservationists from the Golden Eagle Trust (GET), Northern Ireland Raptor Study Group (NIRSG) and Irish Raptor Study Group (IRSG) began to assess the possibility of an ‘all-Ireland’ red kite reintroduction project in 2005. The Golden Eagle Trust, who were instrumental in the earlier reintroduction of golden eagles to Ireland in 2001 and white-tailed sea eagles in 2007,

initially approached Birdwatch Ireland to run the red kite project in the Republic of Ireland and the RSPB to lead the project in Northern Ireland. However, after discussing the project at board level, Birdwatch Ireland got “cold feet” and declined the opportunity due to uncertainty about how red kites might impact other birds of conservation concern in Ireland and the possibility that the reintroduction might fail (interview data). As a result, the Golden Eagle Trust undertook the management of the project in the Republic of Ireland, releasing 160 red kites in counties Wicklow and Dublin between 2007 and 2011. In Northern Ireland, the RSPB, who were familiar with the challenges encountered by red kite reintroductions in other parts of the UK (Smart et al. 2010; Molenaar et al. 2017), were also initially reluctant to manage the project. However, after the Golden Eagle Trust suggested they would proceed with the project whether the RSPB were involved or not, the RSPB, in partnership with the Golden Eagle Trust and the Welsh Kite Trust, agreed to manage the Northern Ireland project, which they described as the “final piece in the red kite reintroduction jigsaw across the UK and Ireland” (RSPB 2009: 14).

3. Methods

3.1 Case Study Selection

Political ecologists typically engage with conservation policy and practice by selecting local case studies as points of departure for understanding how conservation is influenced by interactions and power dynamics between different actors and processes across multiple scales (Benjaminsen and Svarstad 2021). Yet, as Helmcke (2022: 267) observes, such studies rarely clarify “why and how the particular case was chosen, how it matters, what it exemplifies or how it is relatable to other cases or processes”. With this in mind, this section proceeds by reflecting on the characteristics of the case study investigated in this paper and highlighting its broader relevance to studies of coexistence and the politics of rewilding.

As mentioned previously, political ecology research has made important contributions to conservation by highlighting the troubling social impacts of exclusionary conservation activities on indigenous people and local communities, particularly in the global South (Kashwan et al. 2021). However, political ecologists have been somewhat slower to direct their critical gaze towards conservation and rewilding in countries in the global North. While this situation is gradually changing (e.g. Martin et al. 2019; Wynne-Jones et al. 2020), the ascent of high level conservation strategies in these countries, such as the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) and the EU Biodiversity Plan 2030, point towards a pressing need for more in-depth research on the social implications of these initiatives in Europe.

Northern Ireland represents an intriguing and understudied region for examining the challenges associated with fostering coexistence between people and reintroduced wildlife. Located within the

island of Ireland, but part of the United Kingdom since 1921, Northern Ireland has been largely overlooked by researchers exploring the political and social dimensions of conservation (but see, for example, Tovey 2016). On the one hand, this is perhaps unsurprising given the low importance attributed to nature conservation in a post-conflict setting where the intertwined objectives of peace-building and economic development have been the main political priorities (Yearley and Milton; Byrne et al. 2008; Brennan et al. 2023). On the other hand, however, this research gap in Northern Ireland is notable given the growing scholarly interest in wildlife reintroduction projects in other parts of the UK and Ireland (e.g. O'Rourke 2014; Coz and Young 2020; Auster et al. 2022). In comparison, fifteen years after the birds were initially released, there has been no research into the red kite project in Northern Ireland. This case study, therefore, has been chosen with the intention of addressing these sizable knowledge gaps in Northern Ireland. In particular, it aims to illuminate the socio-political factors that influence coexistence in order to better inform future wildlife reintroduction projects in Northern Ireland and elsewhere.

3.2 Study Area: County Down, Northern Ireland

The primary geographical focus of this study is south County Down, where 80 red kites were released within the grounds of Castlewelling Forest Park between 2008 and 2010. Predominantly rural, the south Down landscape is characterised by the sprawling Mourne Mountains and an encircling patchwork of rolling drumlins and cultivated lowlands that link the mountain range to the sea and to the northern part of the county (Evans 1967). The landscape has a long history of supporting local livelihood practices, such as extensive livestock and arable farming, fishing and quarrying. However, the long-term sustainability of these sectors is uncertain due, in part, to changing agricultural practices and policies associated with a globalised agri-food system, which have contributed to a sizable decline in the number of full-time farmers in the area (DAERA 2022). Moreover, in recent decades, the area's popularity for tourism and recreation has increased significantly, which has led to

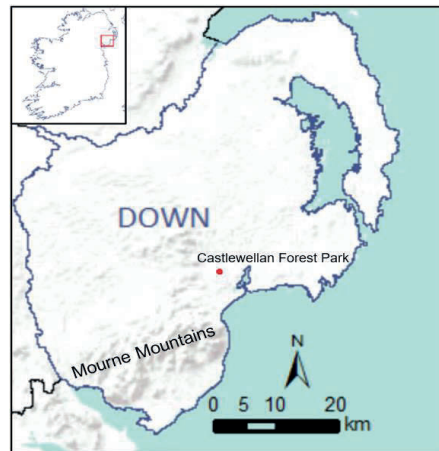


FIGURE 1 Map of study area, including general location of red kite release site

tensions between different interest groups over access to the countryside and how it is managed (McComb et al. 2017).

The biodiversity value of south Down's landscapes have long been heralded by conservationists who have strived to safeguard its diverse habitats, species and geology through a complicated array of environmental designations. This process commenced in 1966 with the designation of the Mourne Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), a designation that encompassed not just the mountain range, but also large swathes of the surrounding countryside and many nearby towns and villages. Proposals to establish a national park in the area have been strongly resisted, with Willock and Guyer (1986: 123) linking opposition to national parks in Northern Ireland to fears that such designations would "insist on high environmental standards and thereby hinder local economic development and would-be industrial entrepreneurs". Prior to the red kite's return, an assessment of local ecological conditions conducted by the RSPB indicated that the area could support the long-term presence of a self-sustaining red kite population based on food availability, habitat suitability, e.g. topography and trees for roosting and nesting, and the presence of an indicator species – the common buzzard. While historical evidence (Evans et al. 2012), including local place-names such as Eagle Mountain and Eagle Rock, suggests that various raptors were once present in the area, in the present, knowledge and experience of living with wildlife has been largely lost following the eradication of these species.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

This study's findings are drawn from a combination of primary data sources collected during three short fieldwork stays in the study area, totalling 10 weeks, between November 2021 - June 2022 and from secondary data sources accumulated through a longer-term engagement with conservation politics in Northern Ireland. Primary data sources comprise of observations and semi-structured interviews. Following Ciesielska et al. (2018), observations in the study area contributed to developing an understanding of the relationships between red kites and the local communities sharing the south Down landscape. Observations were made during walks in the study area with interviewees and informal conversations with local residents, and recorded in the form of detailed field notes, which Phillippi and Lauderdale (2018: 381) refer to as "an essential component of rigorous qualitative research".

With the aim of obtaining in-depth insights into how the red kite project is viewed by those involved with the project and by those living and working in the study area, a total of 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Semi-structured interviews were also undertaken because their flexibility encourages interviewees to share their opinions on what they consider to be most important within the

topic of discussion (Brinkmann 2018). As such, while the red kite project was the central topic of the interviews, the interview questions were also focused on broader issues related to rural development, conservation policy and human-wildlife interactions. The extent to which these various issues were explored in the interviews depended on the background of the interviewees, who were selected using a combination of purposive and snowballing sampling approaches (Miller et al. 2023). Interviewees were selected on the basis that they were considered to be representative of particular groups and interests, including conservation NGOs (n = 4), government officials (n = 3), farming representatives (n = 2), farmers (n = 6), non-farming landowners (n=3) and politicians (n = 2).

For the purpose of this particular study, this sample was sufficient for capturing some of the complexity of the issues under investigation. However, my attempts to recruit interview participants from the renewable energy and hunting sectors were unsuccessful, which is a possible limitation of this study, particularly since these sectors are often linked to conservation conflicts (e.g. Marino et al. 2023; Balotari-Chiebao et al. 2023). Consent was obtained from all participants and interviews were conducted in accordance with the Norwegian University of Life Science's ethical guidance for research. Lasting between 30 minutes and three hours, based on the interest and availability of the interviewee, interviews were either recorded and transcribed or documented through notes taken during and after interviews concluded. Out of the 20 interviews, 13 were conducted in-person, five of which were 'walking interviews' (Evans and Jones 2011) carried out in the landscape where the red kites were released. Partly as a result of restrictions associated with the Covid-19 pandemic and partly to accommodate the availability of interviewees, seven interviews were conducted using Zoom video calls.

To supplement, enrich and triangulate these primary data sources, I collected and analysed a substantial number of official and unofficial documents. Documents were primarily obtained from digital sources, which "can provide the researcher with access to a variety of views and insights not accessible through traditional fieldwork methods" (Scheyvens 2014: 98). Project literature on the RSPB's website, along with social and print media coverage, facilitated a basic understanding of the project's objectives and the wider narratives surrounding the reintroduction. A number of technical reports, planning documents and project assessments that are not publicly available online were obtained via Freedom of Information (FOI) requests. FOI requests typically involve long waiting times but they proved useful for obtaining important documents that contained detailed information about the red kite project. To identify the level of political interest in the project and ascertain whether it had generated discussion among Northern Ireland's politicians, a keyword search, using 'red kite' and 'reintroduction', was

conducted on the Northern Ireland Assembly AIMS Portal website (<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/>). The Northern Ireland Planning Portal website (<https://epicpublic.planningni.gov.uk/publicaccess>) also proved useful for obtaining technical reports and consultation responses that shed light on how the project was perceived by different actors.

Typical of qualitative methods, the data collection process described above occurred in tandem with the intertwined process of data analysis (Newing 2011). Drawing on a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1997), the empirical material was manually coded following the identification of key themes relevant to my research objectives (e.g. environmental governance, wildlife crime, participation, renewable energy, ecotourism). As interviews were conducted and transcribed, they were colour tagged and cross-referenced with the documents and field notes through an iterative process that allowed for the identification of new themes and refinement of important issues related to the existing themes. This approach subsequently informed the narrative structure that emerged from the data, which is presented in the following section.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Reintroducing Red Kites 'From Above'

On 19 July 2008, the RSPB's Red Kite Officer and a newly appointed Red Kite Information Officer attended one of the busiest agricultural shows in Northern Ireland, the Castlewellan Show in County Down, to promote the red kite reintroduction project. Unbeknownst to the majority of people visiting the event, 12 red kites had already been released into the surrounding countryside, and an additional 15 birds were scheduled to be released the following week. Prior to this, the Red Kite Officer, appointed in February 2008, had spent several months informing local farmers about the project and offering reassurances that red kites would not pose a threat to local people or their livelihoods. At the Castlewellan Show, however, the RSPB staff encountered strong resistance to the project, "The abuse from farmers was shocking. I mean, 'what the eff are you bringing these effing birds in for? If I effing see them on my land, they'll be shot'" (interview data). To understand why the red kite project was contested by some in a way that suggested fostering coexistence would be a significant challenge, it is instructive to first trace how the project was planned in order to identify who was, and wasn't, involved in the decision to reintroduce the birds.

In December 2008, Northern Ireland's then Environment Minister Sammy Wilson asserted the RSPB had developed the red kite project in adherence with the International Union for the Conservation of

Nature's (IUCN) guidelines for species reintroductions. According to the IUCN guidelines relevant at the time, before any reintroduction is carried out proposed projects "should be fully understood, accepted and supported by local communities" (IUCN 1998: 9). In this sense, the IUCN guidelines are grounded in notions of 'community-based conservation', which aim to centre local people in conservation decision-making in order to build trust and deliver effective, long-term and socially just outcomes. However, in planning the red kite project, the RSPB do not appear to have made a meaningful effort to gain the support, trust or acceptance of the local community, nor were they formally required to do so by the government agency, the Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), who granted the red kite release licence. As one landowner remarked, "I think the RSPB sort of turned their focus to interacting with the local groups when the kites arrived, rather than prior to it. I don't think anyone was asked if they would like them or not, it was just decided that it was going to be a good thing. I suppose it was generally perceived as being uncontentious, but perhaps naively so" (interview data).

Conservation interventions imposed 'from above' have long been considered problematic for failing to take into consideration the diverse ways local communities relate to, use and value nature and the environments in which they live (e.g. Escobar 1998; Pascual et al. 2021). Indeed, Adams (2013: 238) proposes that "If conservation is to take seriously diverse ideas about what nature is, it is local people who should be the originators of restoration projects, the arbiters of what nature, their nature, should be like." In the context of initial efforts to foster coexistence in the study area, largely overlooking the views of those living and working in the South Down countryside was counterproductive as it led to resentment among some individuals and groups.

On the other hand, however, the RSPB did succeed in securing the support of the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU), although it is unclear if they did so before or after the initial reintroduction in 2008. Formed in 1917 to represent the interests of farmers in Northern Ireland, the UFU have, according to Greer (1996: 123), "played a vital intermediary role in regulating rural society". Concerning the red kite project, the UFU stated in 2009 that, "From the outset, the Ulster Farmers Union have been positive towards the red kite reintroduction project maintaining an excellent dialogue and working together effectively with RSPB Northern Ireland". Yet, the UFU's support for the project was not shared by some farming and landowning interests, as evidenced by the hostile reaction at the agricultural show in Castlewellan and a request in November 2008 by Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) politician Jim Shannon to the Environment Minister to reconsider the project.

Whilst Environment Minister Wilson declined this request, the government agency responsible for issuing the red kite release licence, the EHS, also had serious concerns about the project. These concerns, however, were not related to ensuring the inclusion of local voices. Rather, their major concern was what they considered to be inconclusive evidence supporting the red kite's historical presence in Northern Ireland and whether the available evidence would stand up to scrutiny in a court of law if the reintroduction was challenged. This uncertainty was stalling the approval of the red kite release licence, which the RSPB had initially applied for in March 2007. Following a presentation in May 2007 by the RSPB's Country Director in Northern Ireland, James Robinson, to the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside (CNCC), the CNCC, a statutory advisor, recommended the project should be approved citing, amongst other reasons, "that the re-introduction would have a positive impact on rural regeneration with a spin-off for stimulating the economy through tourism".

However, it would be another year before the licence to release red kites into Northern Ireland was approved on 15 May 2008, by another former Environment Minister Arlene Foster. The approval was largely contingent on the RSPB alleviating the EHS's doubts about the past existence of red kites in Northern Ireland, which they attempted to do by publishing an article of historical evidence that concluded red kites were once "probably present" in County Antrim in Northern Ireland (Price and Robinson 2008: 5). This dispute over the historical presence of red kites was underpinned by dichotomous ideas about native versus alien species, which continue to operate as a core guiding principle in conservation management (Davis et al. 2011). However, this fixation on the past, which was dictated by the IUCN guidelines, appears to have been at the expense of the essential work of ensuring the project was compatible with the needs and interests of local people in the present.

At the same time, discussions with conservationists working on the ground revealed a self-awareness regarding the importance of garnering local support for the project. But they also highlighted the complex socio-ecological challenges associated with planning the release of a highly mobile, widely dispersing bird that "can turn up just about anywhere" (Carter 2019: 111). From the conservationist's perspective, releasing 80 young birds into Northern Ireland represented a significant challenge in terms of anticipating where the birds would establish nesting territories and, thus, identifying the human communities who would be affected by their return. This problem was explained in relation to one of the red kite projects in the Republic of Ireland, "You can't anticipate where the birds are going to settle. In Dublin, we did all our community engagement work in one area, but many of the kites were killed in that area through rodenticide poisoning. So, the kites shifted 30 to 40 km west to a completely different

area. Then we had to start from scratch” (interview data). The RSPB faced similar challenges in the context of the rural landscapes of County Down, challenges that do not always appear to be recognised in guidelines and studies that advocate participatory processes involving engagement with all actual and potential stakeholders who may be affected by reintroduction programmes.

Moreover, although participatory processes are widely viewed as an important tool for promoting inclusive and sustainable conservation practices, in Northern Ireland, McAlister (2010) points out that public participation and community engagement are still relatively novel concepts. Northern Ireland was ruled by the UK government in Westminster between 1972 and 1998 and again between 2002 and 2007 following the collapse of the devolved power-sharing government. During these periods of ‘Direct Rule’ from Westminster, opportunities for people in Northern Ireland to democratically participate in and influence environmental decision-making were severely restricted. Indeed, research into contemporary environmental governance in Northern Ireland has identified persistent concerns regarding the performance and legitimacy of institutions tasked with managing and protecting the environment (Brennan et al. 2017). Similar shortcomings regarding the failure to account for local interests can also be identified in the EHS’s technocratic and ‘top-down’ approach to the red kite project.

4.2 Fledgling human-wildlife encounters in a multiuse landscape

As of July 2022, people and red kites have coexisted and shared a space in the rural landscapes of County Down for 14 years. Although a relatively short period of time, complex relationships have nevertheless been forged between the small bird population and diverse groups of people with different interests and relationships to the landscape. To the farmers and landowners interviewed, none of whom reported experiencing or hearing of any adverse impacts on local livelihoods, red kites now appear to be generally perceived as an accepted, or at least tolerated, addition to the countryside. Moreover, several interviewees living and working in the study area expressed a strong emotional attachment to the birds, and viewed the red kite as a welcome and celebrated symbol of wildness. These insights suggest the RSPB have had some success regarding their objective to “inspire people by successfully reintroducing a beautiful bird” (RSPB website).

However, red kites have also become a source of tension and conflict. Not because the birds are perceived as being particularly dangerous or intimidating, but rather because their continued presence in the study area is dependent on changing or curtailing certain human activities and land use practices. Prior to the reintroduction, the RSPB’s population models predicted the red kite population would

exceed 90 breeding pairs by 2019. However, the red kite population in County Down has not expanded as expected. Instead it has remained well below both what the models predicted and the level of what is considered to be a self-sustaining population of 50 breeding pairs, a number described by one conservationist as being “effectively imposed on all us by the IUCN” (interview data). Thus, with ecological conditions in the study area appearing to remain favourable, efforts to establish a self-sustaining red kite population have been primarily constrained by a range of complex social factors.

In attempting to address these factors, the RSPB, who are responsible for monitoring the birds until a self-sustaining population is established, have continued to play a central role in shaping human interactions with red kites in the study area. For example, between 2017 and 2020, the RSPB worked to support positive interactions and improve local coexistence conditions through a three-year project called ‘RKites’ that aimed to “engage local people, especially young people, to become passionate about this majestic species”. Mainly focused on local actors with a direct link to the local landscape and red kites, the project’s 15 targets centred around training volunteers to carry out monitoring work, giving school talks, organising public information events and exploring how red kites could contribute to the local rural economy. In addition, one target aimed to address illegal persecution, primarily in the form of shooting and poisoning, which had been described as a “huge threat” to the red kite population in the RSPB’s funding application for the project. More specifically, the target aimed to reduce the number of red kites being illegally targeted by working “towards directly changing attitudes of previous persecutors...leading to an overall reduction in the annual number of birds of prey being illegally targeted” (project report).

According to the evaluation report produced at the project’s conclusion in September 2021 by consultancy firm RPS Group, the majority of the project’s targets were successfully achieved. This included the target related to “persecution incidents” following a decline in known red kite mortalities from three in both 2017 and 2018 to two in 2019. However, the reported success of the project was somewhat undermined one month later in October 2021, when the RSPB published their annual Birdcrime report, which documented 137 known incidents of bird of prey persecution across the UK and declared 2020 the “worst year on record” since recording began in 1990.

Furthermore, the Birdcrime report stated that specific concerns about the impact of persecution on the vulnerable red kite population in Northern Ireland had prompted the RSPB to introduce investigation resources in the region in order to address the problem of red kite persecution and wildlife crime more generally. The RSPB subsequently appointed an investigations officer in Northern Ireland towards the

end of 2021, with the job listing prioritising a degree in ecology or conservation over investigative, criminology or wildlife crime based experience. The appointment of the investigations officer demonstrated that the RSPB were aware the problem of illegal persecution had not been addressed despite the claims of an evaluation report that promoted a distorted 'success narrative' in relation to the Northern Ireland red kite project.

The creation of the novel investigations officer role in Northern Ireland represented the latest step in a long-running campaign to tackle illegal wildlife persecution in the region - a known problem that existed before the red kite project and one associated with conflicts over the management of other raptors (e.g. Ruddock et al. 2007). In an effort to deter wildlife crimes, the Partnership for Action Against Wildlife Crime (PAW NI) was established in Northern Ireland in May 2007, bringing together a diverse range of statutory and non-government organisations, including the RSPB NI, the Countryside Alliance Ireland (CAI) and the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC). According to the RSPB's 2007 Birdcrime report, the launch of PAW NI and its dedicated Raptor subgroup, along with the Police Service of Northern Ireland's (PSNI) appointment of its first full-time Wildlife Liaison Officer, demonstrated a commitment to put "wildlife crime firmly on the Northern Ireland crime agenda". This commitment was further illustrated by the inclusion of red kites on schedule A1 of the amended Wildlife (NI) Order 1985 and schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Natural Environment (NI) Act 2011, which made it a criminal offence to harm red kites and their nests.

However, similar to other parts of the UK (e.g. Wellsmith 2011), limited resources and funding, weak enforcement and the low political prioritisation of both wildlife and environmental crime have, thus far, hindered efforts to effectively address the threat illegal persecution poses to red kites and other raptors in Northern Ireland. In addition, negative perceptions of government officials and 'unelected outside' authorities perceived to be limiting the autonomy of landowners in the study area (interview data) has meant that local actors have often been unwilling to engage with efforts to tackle wildlife persecution. The implications of these social dynamics for efforts to advance coexistence were succinctly articulated by one conservationist, who explained "You can say this hasn't been done, or that hasn't been done, but when you have a handful of individuals who are prepared to go out and poison or shoot birds - and you can't catch them because nobody will talk - it's very difficult" (interview data). This insight possibly accords with the findings of Skogen et al. (2022), who found that the unwillingness of hunters to report illegal wolf killings in Norway is predicated by a lack of trust in environmental institutions and a general anti-elite sentiment.

In addition to targeted persecution, a number of other factors related to how different groups of people interact with and view the local landscape have also combined to constrain the red kite population, and thus coexistence, in the study area. For example, the conservationists interviewed were in agreement that, although the deliberate poisoning and shooting of red kites by individuals is an important concern, secondary poisoning of red kites was an equally, if not more, pressing problem. Regarding the poisoning of red kites, and other raptors, conservationists shared the view that “a lot of these people are not intentionally targeting the birds. They’re after foxes and crows to protect their livestock and unfortunately buzzards and kites are getting hit as well” (interview data). This appeared to be the case in relation to the poisoning of a pair of breeding red kites in April 2018, which were found at a nesting site around 15 km from where the birds had originally been released in County Down. Results from a toxicology screening indicated both birds had been killed by Carbofuran, a highly toxic pesticide that, despite being banned for over a decade, is still frequently encountered in cases of illegal wildlife poisoning in Ireland and across the globe (Richards 2011).

Prior to the red kite’s reintroduction in 2008, poison had been identified as a key threat due to its role in the bird’s historical extirpation from Ireland and most of the UK (Lovegrove 2007). Indeed, the RSPB publication examining the past presence of red kites in Northern Ireland noted that “As highly gregarious scavengers, and relatively fearless of man, they were particularly susceptible to poisoned baits and were easily killed in large numbers” (Price and Robinson 2008: 4). Moreover, the historical decline of other raptor species across Ireland during the 19th century has also been partly attributed to the so-called traditional use of poisoned baits by gamekeepers and farmers (D’Arcy 1999). In the present, wildlife populations, including red kites, continue to be adversely affected by poisons used to control and eliminate the undesirable impacts of wildlife on human interests (Ogada 2014). In particular, excessive pesticide use has had detrimental consequences for wildlife populations, with scavenging birds, such as vultures and red kites, especially vulnerable to pesticide exposure (Plaza et al. 2019).

Tracing the global shift in pest control methods that followed the Second World War, Perfecto et al (2009) characterise the emergence and proliferation of petroleum-based biocides and synthetic pesticides as a key event that engendered a significant change in agricultural practices. This change, they argue, saw the role of “farmers change from stewards who maintained the health of their farms to warriors who vanquished their enemies on the battlefield of the farm” (Perfecto et al. 2009: 47). In the UK, the Ministry of Agriculture actively supported this change through the promotion of scientific and technical approaches to farming, advocating the idea that “the land is the farmer’s factory, it must be

maintained in a state of high efficiency if farming is to continue and prosper” (O’Kane 2011: 109). Agricultural policies centred around efficient production, such as the ambitious 2013 agri-food strategy ‘Going for Growth’ in Northern Ireland, have subsequently become important drivers of economic development. However, they have also contributed to a dependence on agricultural chemicals for controlling pests, which has had negative implications for the health of environments shared by both humans and wildlife (Hüesker and Lepenies 2022), including in non-agricultural land use contexts (e.g. Kearns and Prior 2013). In Northern Ireland, the potentially damaging long-term effects of agricultural chemicals were highlighted by the recent discovery of a dead sparrowhawk poisoned by pp-DDE, a compound formed by the degradation of DDT - a pesticide banned in the UK since 1986 (PAW NI 2022).

Whilst poisons and pesticides remain a threat to Northern Ireland’s small red kite population, the establishment of a feeding station in County Down in 2021 by a local farming family could be an important step in supporting and perpetuating coexistence with the birds. Feeding stations in other parts of the UK have been beneficial in providing red kites with a safe source of food and offering people an opportunity to view the birds up close (Brettell 2016). Forming part of a broader habitat restoration and ecotourism initiative, the red kite feeding station in County Down represents an attempt to balance modern farming practices with sustainable resource use and biodiversity conservation. Further, a conservationist working on the red kite project described the initiative as “a massive opportunity to educate the local community” and suggested the RSPB would “keep an eye on the feeding station to see if it alters the kite’s behaviour” (interview data). However, plans to develop the ecotourism component of the project have encountered setbacks due to neighbour objections and stringent planning regulations regarding building in the countryside.

Contestations surrounding a wind farm proposal in the study area provide a further example of how the returning red kites have become entangled in political struggles over the future of the multiuse landscape. Plans to construct a wind farm on lands used for agricultural grazing in south County Down were submitted in March 2015 by ABO Wind NI, an affiliate of a larger German wind energy firm. However, since then, over 4,000 letters have been registered objecting to the plans, with concerns raised including the visual impact of the wind farm and the possible threat it poses to tourism development and birdlife in the area. The RSPB have also challenged the wind farm plans, citing its “potential to significantly impact upon populations of red kites in Northern Ireland” (consultation letter). Renewable energy developments can have negative impacts on wildlife (Jager et al. 2021), and at least two red kites have been killed following collisions with single wind turbines in County Down since 2017.

Responding to these concerns, a technical report submitted in support of ABO Wind's application claimed the wind farm will have "no impact on the red kite population", arguing instead "that ongoing and un-tackled persecution is having a crippling effect on long term population growth" (technical report), effectively blaming the RSPB for failing to address the persecution problem discussed above.

Moreover, the same report prepared by Woodrow Sustainable Solutions on behalf of ABO Wind questioned the EHS's decision to grant the red kite release licence back in 2008. In attempting to circumvent planning regulations related to the protection of native species, the report argued the red kite project in Northern Ireland should not be considered a reintroduction of a native species but "must be treated as a conservation introduction of a non-native breeding species to the region" (technical report). As previously mentioned, the EHS had shared a similar view regarding the historical status of red kites in Northern Ireland and were concerned about the legal merits of their decision to grant the licence. Subsequently, following the questions raised about their decision to approve the reintroduction licence, the EHS, now known as the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA), dropped their previous objection to the wind farm project in relation to its possible impacts on red kites.

Meanwhile, the RSPB have maintained their opposition to the wind farm while publicly lobbying in support of a climate change bill, which includes a commitment to promote renewable energy developments in Northern Ireland. These seemingly incompatible positions highlight the difficulties associated with reconciling the development of renewable energy landscapes with the conservation and restoration of certain species (Gasparatos et al. 2017). This tension was noted by one conservationist who, in reference to wind energy firms, remarked, "they don't want another species they have to take account of" (interview data). In practice, taking account of the red kite's presence means conducting lengthy surveys to determine the frequency of occurrence of red kites within and around proposed development sites. As such, similar to land designations, the arrival of reintroduced wildlife who are afforded legal protection has the potential to generate conflicts with certain types of development projects, such as wind farms. To reduce conflict in such situations, working to build trust and develop collaborative governance institutions prior to the reintroduction of wildlife may help contribute to fostering coexistence (Saif et al. 2022).

5. Conclusions

Elias et al argue "Restoration that ignores or erases local people's claims to land and resources, and the meanings they attribute to their landscapes, poses grave risks" (2021:1). In the context of this paper's discussion about how the red kite project was planned, the failure to take these risks seriously is

evidenced by the decision to adopt a problematic externally driven approach that did not consider the legitimate concerns and diverse needs, values and interests of the local community. Local support is widely viewed as a crucial factor in enabling successful conservation outcomes, thus it is perhaps unsurprising that the top-down 'from above' approach provoked some opposition to the red kite project. In theory, planning rewilding projects according to the IUCN species reintroductions guidelines and employing more empowering approaches based on partnerships and collaborative governance arrangements (Glasbergen 2007) may help facilitate coexistence by resolving disputes and building long-term support among the local communities who live in areas targeted for rewilding.

In practice, however, as this paper's findings illustrate, centering local communities in rewilding decision-making is not a straightforward or easy process. Indeed, there are a number of significant barriers to both identifying the local actors who are most likely to be affected by species reintroductions and ensuring they are empowered to lead discussions about rewilding plans from an early stage. For example, underlying social conflicts between people with different interests, agendas and, particularly relevant in the context of the 'post-conflict' setting of Northern Ireland, may impede efforts to ensure a wider and more diverse range of local voices are included when planning rewilding initiatives. In Northern Ireland, these tensions are compounded by deep concerns about environmental decision-making at national and local levels, exemplified by a planning system recently described as being increasingly characterised by "professional corruption in the eyes of the public" (NI Assembly 2022). According to conservation biologist and rewilding pioneer Reed Noss (2010: 424), conservation decision-making should not be entrusted to local people because "local agencies are controlled by politicians and powerful economic interests...and lack appropriately trained personnel for managing ecosystem conservation". Yet, rather than justify imposed models of conservation, these issues call for reform of the culture and practices of ineffective environmental institutions and rethinking and forging new relationships between local communities, policy-makers, wildlife authorities and conservation organisations.

At the same time, however, the planning and implementation of rewilding initiatives is further complicated when taking into account the often-overlooked agency of the wildlife species who are also at the centre of rewilding. As demonstrated in this contribution, the difficulty of identifying who is a relevant 'stakeholder' is amplified when rewilding initiatives involve the return of species with the capacity to spread far beyond the confines of the areas in which they were initially released. As such, engaging all stakeholders at the local level prior to the reintroduction of a species simply may not be

feasible when the species in question, like the red kite, has the ability to travel over vast distances and across political borders. In these cases, wildlife authorities and conservation organisations responsible for wildlife reintroductions must recognise that the unsolicited return of wildlife may be rejected where they are perceived as being imposed. Working collectively with rural communities to improve coexistence conditions and enhance their adaptive capacity to such species may help nurture positive interactions and prevent conflicts from arising over wildlife management and governance.

This shows there can be little doubt that the pathway towards coexistence is highly complex. Conflicts will inevitably arise where the return of wildlife results in difficult trade-offs between different and potentially incompatible kinds of land use. In relation to rewilding interventions, care and careful planning may reduce the prevalence of conflicts that negatively impact the well-being of human and wildlife populations. However, Hill (2021: 2) proposes, that conflict should nevertheless be not only considered as a necessary component of human-wildlife coexistence, but as “a catalyst for reflection and change”. In this sense, working to positively transform these conflicts could help contribute to fostering novel and mutually beneficial ways for diverse human communities to live alongside each other and wildlife.

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Paper 3

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**Rewilding and convivial conservation: Examining potential
pathways for transforming biodiversity conservation in
Ireland**

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Rewilding and convivial conservation: Examining potential pathways for transforming biodiversity conservation in Ireland

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Abstract

Growing concerns about the unsustainable and unequal impacts of human activity on global biodiversity are driving urgent calls for transformative changes to mainstream approaches to conservation and the political and economic systems within which conservation practice and policy is embedded. Against this background, rewilding and convivial conservation have been put forward as two possible pathways for promoting human-wildlife coexistence and transforming conservation. Thus far, however, there has been relatively little focus on the linkages between the two approaches in terms of how they potentially complement or conflict with each other. This article aims to address this gap in two main ways. First, by reviewing and comparing the literatures on rewilding and convivial conservation in order to identify key synergies and differences between the ideas and practices associated with the two approaches. Second, by examining conservation and rewilding practices in Ireland and considering how convivial conservation can potentially facilitate a positive change towards just, inclusive and socially legitimate approaches to mainstream conservation and rewilding. While biodiversity loss is often reductively linked to the activities of rural populations in Ireland, the paper argues that attempts to convert rural landscapes into spaces for mainstream forms of rewilding and conservation risks generating conflicts and alienating those living and working in rural areas who are engaged in struggles that have much in common with key elements of the convivial conservation proposal. In doing so, it contributes important insights to debates about the politics of rewilding, coexistence and transformative approaches to conservation.

Keywords: Human-wildlife coexistence, rewilding, convivial conservation, environmental justice, Ireland

Introduction

Growing concerns about the unsustainable and unequal impacts of human activity on global biodiversity are triggering calls for transformative changes to prevailing approaches to environmental conservation (Massarella et al. 2021; Sandbrook et al. 2022). Yet, rather than tackle the political and economic systems that are increasingly recognised as being the fundamental drivers of biodiversity loss (Ives and Fischer 2017; Otero et al. 2020), global conservation efforts continue to favour a combination of mainstream strategies centred around protected areas and market initiatives that have not only been largely unsuccessful in halting biodiversity loss, but have also been widely critiqued for their negative social implications (Duffy 2014; Holmes and Cavanagh 2016; Adams 2020). The failure of such approaches to address the structural causes of biodiversity loss and social inequality, exemplified by celebrity-endorsed campaigns to set aside half the Earth's surface in protected areas (Wilson 2016), point towards the importance of identifying and supporting alternative models of conservation based around collaborative, inclusive and just forms of multispecies coexistence (Colloff et al. 2017; Kashwan et al. 2021; Massarella et al. 2021).

Against this backdrop, rewilding and convivial conservation have been put forward as two possible alternative pathways toward transforming conservation. Originally devised by members of the 'wilderness' movement in the United States (Johns 2019), rewilding has been the subject of extensive academic debate and is now one of conservation's most prominent fads (Redford et al. 2013). A highly diverse, contested and shape-shifting concept (Gammon 2018), at its most basic, rewilding aims to enhance biodiversity, often through the (re)introduction of ecologically significant and charismatic wildlife (Svenning et al. 2016). To some its proponents, rewilding represents a radical idea that can help pave the way to transformative change (Carver et al. 2021). At the same time, other advocates seek to render rewilding amenable with mainstream conservation, climate and economic policies (Pettorelli et al. 2018; Carroll and Noss 2021; Dasgupta 2021). Moreover, uncertainty over how efforts to create 'wild' spaces through rewilding will affect people living in and around the rural landscapes that are of particular interest to rewilding advocates has fuelled considerable controversy (Holmes et al. 2020). Yet, perhaps more than any other conservation concept, rewilding has also successfully transcended the academic and policy arenas to spark passionate public conversations about the future of humanity's relationship with the rest of nature (Jørgensen 2019; Wynne-Jones 2022).

A more recent proposition, the convivial conservation proposal aims to promote environmental justice, biocultural diversity and human-wildlife coexistence by challenging and transforming the economic and

political structures through which dominant approaches to conservation have emerged (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). Framed as an “explicitly political approach to conservation” (Büscher and Fletcher 2019: 2), supporters of convivial conservation take inspiration from other complementary visions for transforming mainstream economic development models, such as ‘doughnut economics’ (Raworth 2017), ‘degrowth’ (D’Alisa et al. 2014) and ‘well-being economies’ (Diener and Seligman 2004). Specific measures advocated by convivial conservation include monetary payments to individual community members living in or alongside important conservation areas, challenging relationship between conservation organisations and corporations that are deemed to legitimise unsustainable business practices and forging integrated conservation spaces that “enable humans to ‘truly live’ with biodiversity” (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 161). The implementation of these practices and ideas is the focus of an expanding body of interdisciplinary scholarship that aims to critically examine human-wildlife interactions in diverse geographic contexts by drawing on theoretical perspectives from convivial conservation (e.g. Toncheva et al. 2021; Mabele et al. 2022; Sandroni et al. 2022).

Given this burgeoning interest in both rewilding and convivial conservation, and their shared overarching focus on reversing biodiversity loss, it is somewhat surprising that there has been relatively little dialogue between the two approaches. As such, this article seeks to address this gap in two main ways. First, by critically reviewing and comparing the literatures on rewilding and convivial conservation in order to identify key synergies and differences between the ideas and practices associated with the two approaches. Second, by examining conservation and rewilding practices in Ireland and considering how convivial conservation can potentially facilitate a positive change towards more just, inclusive and socially legitimate approaches to conservation and rewilding. In doing so, the paper contributes to an emerging literature on the human dimensions of rewilding and convivial conservation.

To begin contextualising and developing the paper’s main argument, the next section examines the rewilding and convivial conservation literatures and illuminates key convergences and divergences between the two approaches. After providing an overview of the methods and data, the paper turns to the three elements Büscher and Fletcher (2020) contend must be ‘dealt with’ to facilitate convivial conservation: power, time and actors. Applied analytically, these concepts are first used to examine the history of mainstream and alternative approaches to conservation in Ireland. Building on this context, the paper then focuses on rewilding’s emergence in Ireland and its relationship to both mainstream and alternative modes of conservation, which, we contend, have much in common with convivial

conservation. The paper concludes by reflecting on this discussion and considering how tensions surrounding conservation and rewilding might be positively transformed through convivial thinking.

Reading rewilding through the lens of convivial conservation

While rewilding is still a relatively novel concept, its general aim to restore and protect species and habitats is essentially the same as the one that has long-occupied more conventional conservationists (Samojlik et al. 2018; Martin 2022). Yet, despite their mutual goals, some working within these longer-established conservation fields argue that rewilding is a “major issue” and “should not be accepted within scientific, policy or conservation discourse” (Hayward et al. 2019: 258). As touched on already, one of these much-discussed issues concerns the range of different meanings attached to rewilding, which, according to Hayward et al. (2019), distracts from and undermines existing conservation efforts. Related to this point about rewilding’s ambiguity, the same large group of authors also highlight a further, arguably more pressing, issue regarding the social dimensions of rewilding. For Hayward et al. (2019: 258), rewilding is a highly controversial approach to conservation, particularly among rural stakeholders, because it “aims to exclude human interventions...thus not recognising human agency as a legitimate part of the resulting ‘rewilded’ system”.

The concern that rewilding projects aim to remove people and erase human imprints from rural areas with long histories of land use is a defining feature of debates about rewilding (Jørgensen 2015; Navarro and Pereira 2015; Mikolajczak et al. 2021). Although proponents of convivial conservation have been somewhat slow to engage with rewilding debates, Büscher and Fletcher (2020: 67) share this concern about rewilding project’s that seek to “cordon off spaces” for nature. Citing the examples of the Oostvaardersplassen rewilding project in the Netherlands and continental-scale rewilding proposals emanating from North America (e.g. Foreman 2004), Büscher and Fletcher (2020) begin their brief discussion of rewilding by arguing that such initiatives reproduce and deepen a troubling distinction between humans and nature (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 67). Highly critical of conservation strategies based on separating certain people from nature due, in part, to their negative consequences for rural communities, Büscher and Fletcher (2019: 4) call instead for a shift towards ‘promoted areas’, which they describe as “fundamentally encouraging places where people are considered welcome visitors, dwellers or travellers rather than temporary alien invaders upon a nonhuman landscape”.

The vision of promoted areas put forward by Büscher and Fletcher (2020) and supported by other proponents of convivial conservation (Mabelea 2022; Massarella et al. 2022), contrasts sharply with the conservation spaces some rewilding advocates aspire to create. For example, drawing on contentious

ideas about pristine and untrammelled wilderness, early rewilding activists in North America devised the concept to support their efforts to massively expand a ‘fortress conservation’ model propagated throughout much of the globe (Soulé and Noss 1998). Meanwhile in Europe, where conservation policies have traditionally sought to integrate human activities and cultural values within protected areas (Pullin et al. 2009), Linnell et al. (2015: 983) argue that discourses associated with wilderness and rewilding are “leading to the promotion of a far more dualistic ideal, where humans and their interactions with nature are viewed as ‘pollution’ in an otherwise ‘pure’ nature”. With citizens in many parts of Europe demanding a stronger political response to the twin problems of climate change and biodiversity loss (Buckley et al. 2017), this dualistic ideal is starting to translate into stricter conservation policies (European Commission 2013, 2020). As Iordăchescu (2022) points out, however, the implementation of such policies has the potential to significantly impact those living in or near rewilded conservation spaces in ways that could provoke resistance to conservation.

Yet, by way of illustrating the diversity of ideas and practices associated with rewilding, many of its advocates argue that people are an integral part of nature and clearly share convivial conservation’s interest in fostering coexistence between people and wildlife in shared landscapes (Seddon 2014; Perino et al. 2019; Wynne-Jones et al. 2020; Auster et al. 2022; Thomas et al. 2022). For instance, rejecting Jørgensen’s (2015) claim that rewilding excludes people in time and space from nature, Prior and Ward (2016: 135) argue that rewilding compels us to recognise “that human and non-human worlds are inextricably entangled”. Further, DeSilvey and Bartolini (2019: 107) question Lorimer and Driessen’s (2016) assertion that rewilders seek to decouple people and nature, suggesting that rewilding “can perhaps be seen as an act of prospective re-coupling”. In their discussion of rewilding, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) also observe how rewilding is conceptualised as a strategy for pursuing ‘post-wild’ futures where people and nature coexist in novel ecosystems and multi-use landscapes. However, although this more people-focused understanding of rewilding appears to fit better with convivial conservation, and indeed restoration (Choi et al. 2008), Büscher and Fletcher (2020) remain unconvinced about how it addresses the divide between people and nature.

While their discussion of rewilding ends on this point, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) point towards a key problem with conservation strategies that seek to recouple the needs of people and nature by embracing market-based solutions underpinned by the inherently exclusionary and unjust logics of capitalism. Despite the growing emphasis on the social dimensions of rewilding (Martin et al. 2021; Drouilly and O’Riain 2021; Martin et al. 2023), this problem has received little attention in rewilding

circles. Instead, similar to community-based approaches to conservation (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2022), people focused rewilding projects are typically promoted as ‘win-win’ opportunities for reversing biodiversity loss and diversifying local livelihoods, often through ecotourism ventures (Hall 2019). However, harmonising conservation and development goals through such approaches poses complex and well-documented challenges, including the uneven distribution of benefits (Nelson et al. 2021), the displacement of socially and economically marginalised communities (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012) and, as Fenix (2018) argues in the case of Rewilding Lapland, the deepening neoliberalisation of nature.

Given their shared concern with conservation and livelihood promotion, these social issues pose a significant challenge for both convivial conservation and rewilding projects that strive to include people. Yet, there is a key difference in how the two aim to address these issues. Grounded in the values, logic and language of ‘green development’ (Adams 2019), rewilding that aims to benefit people and nature is generally promoted using orthodox economic arguments that reduce biodiversity to monetary values and goods and services for human use. According to Jepson and Schepers (2016:2), valuing nature in this way can help to develop “new natural assets that connect with modern society and economy and promote innovation, enterprise and investment”. This approach has been employed by Rewilding Europe, who have partnered with the European Investment Bank to provide commercial development finance to support nature-based enterprise and production, particularly in rural areas “where the commercial value of natural capital is poorly understood” (Rewilding Europe 2022).

Viewed in this way, rewilding represents an opportunity for establishing novel environmental markets based on the commodification of ‘wild’ nature (Dempsey 2016). In this sense, rewilding, to paraphrase McAfee (1999), aims to ‘sell nature to recover it’ by aligning with the same dominant political economic system linked to the current decline of biodiversity and to the historical ‘dewilding’ of species and habitats rewilding proponents aim to bring back (Sands 2022). Historical perspectives illustrate how the commodification of nature and natural resources through rewilding initiatives should not be understood as a modern phenomenon since human societies have created markets for nature long before the rise of capitalism (Polanyi 2001; Kallis et al. 2013). Furthermore, it is also important to highlight that many rewilding advocates remain highly critical of market-based conservation schemes that ignore biophysical limits (Foreman 2004; Miller et al. 2013). At the same time, however, Rappel (2021) calls attention to the “many emerging rewilding schemes” that are being marshalled in support of capitalist development through “the rise of dubious neoliberal biodiversity and carbon offsetting schemes”.

In contrast, the convivial conservation proposal is driven by the goal of advancing a post-capitalist future that seeks to “imagine conservation outside the capitalist box” (Büscher and Fletcher 2022:7). Based on an understanding of capitalism as an “economic system whose hallmark is creative destruction” (Castree and Henderson 2014: 18), it firmly rejects the capitalist logics of market-based neoliberal conservation and the alienating and technocratic ways it governs and mediates relationships between people and nature. Instead, inspired by similar proposals for convivial futures beyond capitalism (e.g. Scoones 2022), convivial conservation focuses on employing diverse ‘tools for conviviality’ (Illich 1973) with the aim of integrating and (re)embedding more democratic modes of conservation into the daily lives of local people and politics, as opposed to conservation being “something we do only in protected areas or when donating to an NGO” (Büscher and Fletcher 2020: 174).

To operationalise their vision of convivial conservation, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) propose a theory of change that involves dealing with three key elements: power, time and actors. While the first element, power, is largely absent from the rewilding discourse, Büscher and Fletcher (2020) argue that a co-constitutive understanding of structural power and the power of agency is necessary for organising and mobilising efforts to effect structural change. Linking power to their second element, time, Büscher and Fletcher (2019: 8) contend that short-term actions to facilitate structural change must be accompanied by a long-term commitment to imagining and creating “alternative economic spaces” based on equality and radical ecological democracy. Many rewilding advocates share a similar commitment to developing alternative conservation spaces for people and nature. However, in contrast to convivial conservation, their focus tends to be on creating spaces that integrate rewilding *within* existing economic, political and social structures (Jepson 2018; Thomas 2022b), rather than challenging them.

The way many rewilding proponents think about actors, Büscher and Fletcher’s (2020) third element, also differs significantly from the convivial conservation paradigm. Rewilding efforts are currently being driven by a diverse group of human actors, including conservation NGOs, private individuals, public bodies, charities, trusts and environmental activists (Bekoff 2014; Holmes et al. 2020). The primary concern of these actors is to restore natural processes and biodiversity in a manner that, according to the IUCN’s *Guiding principles for rewilding* “should be inclusive of all stakeholders and embrace participatory approaches” (Carver et al. 2021: 8). While Büscher and Fletcher (2020) share this concern with promoting more democratic and participatory approaches to conservation, they aim to shift the focus of conservation interventions from local actors to the extra-local actors who disproportionately contribute towards driving biodiversity loss (McDonald et al. 2020). Distinguishing between four

categories of global conservation actors, upper classes, land-owning capitalist classes, middle and lower classes, and lower rural classes, Büscher and Fletcher (2019: 9) argue that convivial conservation “should target actors according to their differential responsibilities and accountabilities in relation to both the direct and indirect impacts their actions have on biodiversity, as well as the relative power these actors possess within broader structures of capitalist accumulation”. In short, instead of focusing conservation interventions on those at the bottom of the global capitalist system, convivial conservation aims to target and shut-down the higher-level actors responsible for driving biodiversity loss.

By contrast, those promoting rewilding have shown little interest in confronting these elite actors, instead they have generally preferred to emphasise the importance of nonhuman actors. Grounded in the ‘ecology of chaos’ (Worster 1990), rewilding’s focus on acknowledging non-human autonomy could potentially be harnessed in support of convivial conservation’s aspiration to celebrate the links between humans and nonhumans. However, for this to be possible, rewilding advocates would need to accept Büscher and Fletcher’s (2020) assertion that conservation is a social practice driven by the unique and unequal political agency of human actors, rather than the autonomy or agency of nonhumans. Doing so need not necessarily mean rewilding must abandon its commitment to nonhuman life, rather it could be a means of strengthening this commitment by critically interrogating the actors and broader social, historical, economic and political structures responsible for diminishing human and nonhuman life.

Guided by Büscher and Fletcher’s (2020) conceptualisation of power, time and actors, the paper aims to explore the challenge of transforming in the context of the island of Ireland. Specifically, it examines how convivial conservation’s commitment to post-capitalist futures and environmental justice can help foster a transformative approach to rewilding. Following an overview of the methods and data I base my analysis on, the paper will proceed by exploring the rise of mainstream conservation in Ireland and identifying some of the limitations associated with its main strategy of creating protected areas.

Methods and data

The analysis in this paper is built on empirical material collected in Ireland, and about Ireland, between 2017 and 2023, which has been organised into three primary categories: interviews, observations and documents. In total, 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with interviewees including government officials, conservation NGOs, farming representatives, conservation volunteers, farmers, politicians and non-farming landowners. Interview questions were centred around conservation policy and practice, rewilding, environmental governance and rural development. In addition to interviews, informal conversations and observations were recorded during visits to national parks, proposed

national park sites and other protected areas around Ireland. To enable a detailed understanding of conservation in Ireland, primary data were supplemented by a wide range of relevant documents, including media reports and interviews, environmental policy reports, agricultural policy strategies, transcripts of government debates about conservation and agriculture, and government-commissioned and independent reviews of conservation and environmental governance in Ireland and Northern Ireland. Following a grounded theory approach, analysis centred on the different actors involved in conservation, how they wield and experience power and how conservation influences ideas about nature over time.

Contending with conservation in Ireland

Like many other parts of the world (Grove 1995), conservation in Ireland has been significantly influenced by colonial thought and ideas about nature. Such thinking can be traced back to colonial legislation introduced in the seventeenth century for 'preserving' forest resources (Falkiner 1904), through to the nineteenth century 'conservators' who were entrusted with the efficient management of fisheries (Joynt 1861). As Ó Ruadhain (1956: 84) points out (see also Foster and Chesney 1998), it is possible to trace conservation's origins in Ireland back much further to "ancient laws that encouraged conservation of natural resources". Yet, in present day Ireland, conservation is rarely associated with these precolonial ways of thinking about and managing nature (Laviolette and McIntosh 1997). Instead, it tends to be linked to the unresolved legacies of colonialism, which Leonard (2007) suggests have tainted many conservation debates in the context of, what he calls, postcolonial Ireland.

These linkages are evident in the myriad ways conservation in Ireland has been influenced by the ideas of external actors from conservation institutions in Britain, Europe and, increasingly, North America. For example, in the Republic of Ireland, British conservation organisation the National Trust provided the model for An Taisce, the 'National Trust for Ireland', which was founded in 1948. Around the same time, the National Trust also established a Northern Ireland Committee, which played an instrumental role in the creation of nature reserves in the region, with the first implemented in 1967 at Murlough Bay in County Down (Hendry 1977). In addition to Irish conservation organisations formed as offshoots of British ones, a number of conservation groups founded in Ireland later joined forces with larger British organisations to strengthen their conservation efforts. For instance, the Ulster Society for the Protection of Birds (USPB) amalgamated with the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) in 1966. According to Tovey (1993), this process has contributed to Britain functioning as the important 'core' society to which many conservationists in Ireland look to for guidance about how to practice

conservation and as a standard for measuring conservation 'progress', or the perceived lack thereof, in Ireland compared to Britain.

Government involvement in conservation in Ireland has also been largely based on drawing on externally conceived ideas and attempting to implement them through top-down policies in diverse rural contexts (Wilcock 1995). From the 1930s onwards, different interest groups urged government action to curb threats to wildlife and the countryside posed by urbanisation, industrial development and, later, the emergence of a commercially driven agri-business sector (Varley 2016). With the aim of protecting certain landscapes and providing public access to the countryside, early government responses to these pressures included the creation of various types of 'parks', such as the Bourn Vincent Memorial Park in Killarney in 1932 and Northern Ireland's first forest park at Tollymore, County Down, which was opened by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1955. Proposals to establish national parks that would integrate traditional socio-economic and cultural activities were also debated in the 1940s and 1950s (Leslie 1945), but none were created until the 1980s.

Nevertheless, during the 1960s and 1970s, mainstream conservation efforts in Ireland achieved notable gains in creating new protected areas following the enactment of wide-ranging legislation by the state. The creation of these spaces was underpinned by the "notion that nature was precious and humanity destructive, (which) led in time to the view that nature needed to be separated from the rest of the landscape and protected against the things people did there" (Adams 2004: 69). In Northern Ireland, the introduction of the Amenity Lands Act (NI) 1965 led to the designation of eight landscapes as 'Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty' (AONB), which were to be managed by local government authorities with the aim of conserving and enhancing their scenic value (Wilcock and Guyer 1986). Meanwhile, three years after joining the European Union, the Wildlife Act 1976 gave the Republic of Ireland government new powers to protect wild flora and fauna through the creation of nature reserves (Buckley 2004). As Figueiredo (2008: 159) notes, the conversion of rural landscapes into state-governed spaces for nature conservation during this time was a consequence of multiple factors, including industrialisation, urbanisation and pressure from "international agencies and scientific bodies, as well as from society as a whole".

However, entrusting the state with responsibility for nature conservation and environmental protection inevitably created, what Yearley and Milton (1990) describe as, "the essential dilemma". Like most other countries (Escobar 2011), conservation is a secondary concern to political leaders in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland who consider economic growth and development as their top priority,

alongside maintaining security (Barry 2009). Yet, to encourage economic development, the state in both regions has supported sectors and industries associated with environmental harm, such as intensive agriculture (Emmerson et al. 2016) and mining (O’Faircheallaigh 2017). As numerous studies of environmental governance failures in Ireland have shown, actors, or “veto-players”, from these more powerful sectors have been able to take advantage of weak government institutions and influence environmental policies to accommodate their interests (Turner 2006; Tovey 2007 Laffan and O’Mahoney 2008; Torney and O’Gorman 2019).

During the 1980s and 1990s, mainstream conservation actors in Ireland responded to this situation by lobbying the state to implement stricter conservation policies. For instance, Lang (1988: 168) critiqued the Irish state’s reluctance to prioritise conservation, lamenting that “Ireland was far behind every other country in Europe in setting up nature reserves”. Similar criticism was also directed towards environmental authorities in Northern Ireland on account of their perceived lack of progress in creating new designated areas for conservation (Wilcock 1995). In 1990, for example, Westminster complained that the region was “already many years behind Great Britain in nature conservation” (House of Commons Environment Committee 1990). With protected areas increasingly viewed by governments as important symbols of “modernity, progress and development” (Brockington and Wilkie 2015: 1), state actors and agencies subsequently intensified their efforts to create new spaces for conservation on state-owned property in Ireland. In the 1980s, five national parks and the vast majority of the country’s nature reserves were created in the Republic of Ireland. In Northern Ireland, meanwhile, 16 Areas of Special Scientific Interest (ASSIs) were established in the early 1990s, including one that covered the entirety of the largest freshwater lake in the United Kingdom, Lough Neagh (Wilcock 1995).

Yet, although state authorities attempted to present protected areas as the solution to the island’s environmental problems, the essential dilemma of how to reconcile economic development with environmental protection remained unresolved and began to deepen during the 1990s. With government policy in the Republic focused on supporting economic growth by attracting foreign investment through a highly favourable tax regime (Kirby 2016), a new set of upper class and elite actors emerged. Economic growth was also perceived to be the most pressing issue in Northern Ireland, where neoliberal policies were considered the solution to decades of conflict and social inequality (Nagle 2009). As Brockington et al. (2008) note, increased state engagement in nature conservation during this time coincided with a period associated with a growing emphasis on deregulation and neoliberal economic policies. Instead of challenging the rationalising logics of neoliberal capitalism, mainstream

conservation actors embraced them, which Brockington et al. (2008: 13) contend paved the way for the creation of “spaces within states for the purposes of controlling people and resources” (Brockington et al. 2008: 13).

In Ireland, North and South, this process of claiming new spaces for nature conservation has been controversial for several reasons. First, conservation authorities have generally employed top-down and technocratic approaches to designating protected areas in Ireland, an approach described by Tovey (2016: 113) as being “profoundly undemocratic”. Attempts to legitimize this strategy through the use of scientific knowledge have produced mixed results in an Irish context where the countryside functions as a highly contested and culturally sensitive space (Garavan 2009). Secondly, this process has been a key driver of conflict between conservation actors and other interest groups over, as Wandersorde-Smith and Watts (2014: 68) put it, “who gets to decide how land is used, by whom, and for what?”. The implementation of the European Union Habitats Directive in Ireland during the 1990s and early 2000s, for instance, provoked fierce resistance from farming organisations concerned about how efforts to incorporate ‘priority habitats’ in Ireland into the EU’s Natura 2000 network would hinder agricultural activity, conflict with the property rights of private landowners and reduce the value of land (Laffan and O’Mahony 2008; Connaughton 2019). Interviewees emphasised that these issues have not been satisfactorily addressed and expressed concerns about government plans to greatly increase protected area coverage across Ireland: “There’s possibly a growing push to bring the countryside back to some imagined past. It does affect the relatively small number of people who work the land and have done so for generations and who feel that they are on some level custodians of the land” (interview data: landowner, 16.02.22).

Finally, and related to the previous point, conservation’s protected area strategy has not succeeded in halting biodiversity loss in Ireland. In Northern Ireland, many protected areas remain in “unfavourable condition” (DAERA 2022). To the frustration of many conservationists, the situation is largely the same in the Republic of Ireland: “We had presumed that, with the 1997 Habitats and Birds regulations and designations of SACs (Special Areas of Conservation) and SPAs (Special Protected Areas), all these habitats would improve...We’ve got this Natura 2000 site in place, things would be great...But the habitat condition has deteriorated since then” (Conservation NGO -LOT). These sentiments were corroborated by a recent review of the state’s National Parks and Wildlife Service, which identified major strategic, structural, capacity and resource issues with the agency and stressed the need for institutional reform in combination with an overarching strategy to address the “systemic direct and

indirect drivers of biodiversity loss” (Stout and Ó Cinnéide 2021). Similar issues have also been frequently highlighted in Northern Ireland (Brennan et al. 2017), where, unlike in the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, central government have retained primary responsibility for nature conservation. In the absence of effective state-led conservation in both jurisdictions, recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of non-government, private and community-based actors involved in conservation activities that can be placed under the broad banner of rewilding.

Rewilding in Ireland: conflicts and coexistence

While the conservation agenda in Ireland has been largely dominated by the state agencies and long-established NGOs discussed in the previous section, these actors have played a more peripheral role in relation to rewilding’s emergence in Ireland. For example, conservation NGOs, with a few notable exceptions like the Irish Wildlife Trust, have generally tended to avoid using the term. Instead, they have continued to frame their conservation and restoration activities using more scientific and technical sounding alternatives, such as ‘Nature Recovery’ and ‘Nature Positive’. To conservation organisations who, according to Yearley (1991), rely on scientific knowledge as the basis for their legitimacy and authority, rewilding appears to be considered problematic because, as articulated by the Director General of the National Trust, it has “become an emotive term and it’s not particularly helpful” (McGrady 2020). Yet, considering there has been relatively little empirical research examining attitudes towards rewilding in an Irish context (Norman 2022), the decision to eschew rewilding may also be viewed as a further example of conservation actors in Ireland following the lead of their counterparts in Britain, where the rewilding debate has become highly polarised and politicised (Thomas 2022a).

In Northern Ireland, for instance, rewilding has been described as a “complete and total failure” by Edwin Poots, the former Minister of the government agency responsible for conservation, the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (McCann 2021). However, this interpretation is not informed by rewilding projects in Northern Ireland, of which there are few examples, but rather draws on the Minister’s perceptions of rewilding in Scotland. Associating rewilding with the clearance of people from the Scottish Highlands (Smout 1993; Dolton-Thomas 2021), the Minister’s view of rewilding as a threat to farmers, rural livelihoods and food production appears to be based on rewilding practices linked to the wilderness ideal. Evidence supporting this perception of rewilding can be identified in rewilding discourses that frame rural land abandonment as an opportunity to rewild landscapes described as ‘ecological deserts’ and ‘sheep-wrecked’ (Monbiot 2014; Navarro and Pereira 2015). As

mentioned, some rewilding proponents have responded to such concerns by framing rewilding projects in more inclusive terms (Holmes et al. 2020). Nevertheless, in Ireland, there are examples of rewilding projects that are more closely aligned with dualistic conservation models that seek to replace one set of human activities, such as livestock keeping, commercial forestry and hunting, with rewilding related activities, such as ecotourism, scientific research and recreation.

The explicit aim of the privately owned Dunsany Nature Reserve in the Republic of Ireland, for example, is to advance a vision of wilderness. A member of Rewilding Europe's European Rewilding Network, the recently established reserve aims to transform what was previously a 750-acre agricultural landscape into a space for 'wild' nature through the intentional removal of animal agriculture. By advocating the exclusion of livestock farming in this way and, in the process, terminating agreements with farmers who previously grazed their animals in the reserve, this approach to rewilding may be interpreted as one that validates concerns about the incompatibility of livestock farming and rewilding. Furthermore, by removing all livestock farming, this form of rewilding represents a radical departure from traditional land management strategies and conservation policies in Ireland, which treated small-scale livestock grazing as integral to the island's cultural landscapes (Aalen et al. 1997). As such, this approach to rewilding appears to support Linnell et al. (2015)'s concerns about the growing influence of dualistic ideas that separate people and nature on European conservation policy.

Projects and proposals based around the conversion of agricultural land to spaces for rewilding have led to conservation debates in Ireland being increasingly focused around livestock numbers and grazing. On one hand, many rewilding advocates argue that 'overgrazing' is a key factor that is inhibiting the island's ecological integrity and preventing the recovery of Irish 'rainforests' and 'native' woodland (Daltun 2022). Calls to remove or reduce livestock numbers, which are also linked to concerns about the impacts of livestock production on climate change (O'Mara 2021), have subsequently provoked tensions between rewilders and farmers. Whilst it's unlikely these complex conflicts can be easily resolved, possible solutions may be found in land management strategies that seek to combine rewilding with small-scale agricultural practices in ways that consider the history, culture and ecology of particular landscapes, e.g. 'agricultural wilding' (Vogt 2021; Thomas et al. 2022). However, such approaches may not receive the political support from state and corporate actors more concerned with promoting the expansion of the agri-food industry (Gladkova 2020) and reducing the number of small farms, which have long been perceived as a barrier to protected area expansion (Ó Ruadhain 1956; Wilcock 1995).

Yet, on the other hand, the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) and White-tailed Sea Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) reintroduction projects in Ireland offer examples of how it might be possible for rewilding and farming to coexist. Founded in 1999, the Golden Eagle Trust (GET), a conservation NGO dedicated to the restoration of Ireland's lost native birds and their habitats, has played a central role in both projects. Following initial assessments focused on the availability of suitable habitat conducted by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the Irish Raptor Study Group (IRSG), the GET released the first Golden Eagle chicks into Glenveagh National Park in 2001 (McAuliffe 2018). In addition to assessing the ecological feasibility of the reintroduction, the GET placed considerable emphasis on addressing the human dimensions of the project prior to the first releases. For example, in an attempt to promote inclusive governance processes, three key stakeholder groups, comprising hill sheep farmers, the Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) community and tourism interests, were represented on the project steering group (O'Toole et al. 2002). A similar partnership-based approach was attempted prior to the release of the first White-Tailed Sea Eagles into Killarney National Park by the GET in 2007. However, although the project team have since been able to develop a relationship with farming interests conducive to supporting coexistence, representatives from the Irish Farming Association (IFA) in Kerry initially opposed the project (O'Rourke 2014).

Like many rewilding projects involving the reintroduction of raptors or large carnivores, concerns about the White-Tailed Sea Eagle project were primarily framed around potential impacts on livelihoods related to the loss of livestock. Yet, according to O'Rourke (2014: 133), in private, the IFA were "also very concerned about the potential threat eagles posed to the development of lucrative wind farms in the area". This insight suggests that, in addition to the issues associated with reconciling rewilding and farming, an expanding renewable energy sector linked to government's climate change commitments presents a further challenge for rewilding (Jager et al. 2021). Indeed, the effects of wind energy developments on birds (Fernández-Bellon et al. 2019) means rewilding projects are increasingly seen to be in conflict with the expansion of wind energy. A rewilding project billed as Northern Ireland's first species reintroduction involving Red Kites (*Milvus milvus*), for instance, has generated conflict between the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB NI) and renewable energy company, ABO Wind NI (Sands *under review*). Thus, with both governments in Ireland committed to increasing the amount of electricity generated from renewable sources by 2030, novel land use conflicts between rewilding and renewable energy developments may intensify and potentially impede future efforts to promote coexistence between humans and rewilded species.

Transforming conservation and rewilding conflicts using convivial perspectives

Building on Illich's (1973) vision of a convivial, post-industrial society, the convivial conservation proposal is presented as a transformative alternative to the mainstream approaches to conservation explored in the previous sections (Büscher and Fletcher 2020). As the discussion of rewilding projects in Ireland illustrates, depending on the actors involved, there is considerable variation in how rewilding initiatives are being implemented. As such, it fits within both dominant conservation paradigms centred around separating certain people from nature and approaches based on people sharing space and resources with wildlife in multi-use landscapes. Similar to mainstream conservation, however, these different approaches to rewilding are contested and associated with conflicts that limit the possibility of encouraging coexistence and convivial relations between humans and wildlife, and between different groups of people. The aim of this section, therefore, is to examine how such conflicts might be transformed by exploring alternative conservation approaches in Ireland that appear to be amenable with convivial conservation.

First, however, it is necessary to briefly reflect on the meaning of conservation. While conservation is associated with diverse ideas, practices and worldviews (Pascual et al. 2021), Sandbrook (2015: 565) proposes that it can be broadly defined as "actions that are intended to establish, improve or maintain good relations with nature". This broader conceptualisation opens up a space for considering the range of different ways that actors operating outside the formal circles of the 'conservation industry' value and relate to the rest of the living world. In particular, it can help draw attention to the conservation actions of local communities, both in terms of how they promote positive, place-based relations with nature and how they resist unsustainable developments that pose a threat to these relationships (Tovey 2007; Gorman 2022). Foregrounding local people, and their livelihoods and knowledge systems, in conservation decision-making in this way is central to convivial conservation's call to transform the current growth-based development model that has inflicted considerable harm on local communities, and the nonhuman places that support their well-being and shape their cultural identities (Price et al. 2021; Büscher and Fletcher 2022).

Furthermore, this approach aims to empower through conservation rather than impose, which has inevitably led to conflicts and local resistance to conservation interventions (Bennett and Dearden 2014). While such negative perceptions of conservation are clearly prevalent in Ireland (Tovey 2016), it is also abundantly clear that there is widespread support for alternative approaches to conservation that are rooted in communal values, ecological stewardship and an ethic of care for specific landscapes

(Barry 2000). With approximately 70% of Ireland's total land cover dedicated to agriculture, many of these alternatives are being driven by conservation-minded farmers. In Northern Ireland, for example, a 'Nature Friendly Farming Network' was created in 2018 to unite farmers who share a passion for nature, wildlife and sustainable farming. Inspired by agroecology-based approaches to farming and landscape-scale conservation (Perfecto et al. 2009), the farmer-led Network was established in response to concerns about the detrimental social and environmental impacts of state-sponsored farming policies intended to promote agricultural intensification (Gladkova 2020). In advancing a vision of coexistence based on reconciling food production with habitat and wildlife conservation, the Network represents an alternative to the capital-intensive agricultural system championed by the state and corporate interests, and also to conservation models based on partitioning people and nature.

Against a similar backdrop regarding concerns about agricultural intensification (McGurn and McKay 2020), or 'the wrong type of farming', a related 'Farming for Nature' group has also been established in the Republic of Ireland, alongside a number of other similar initiatives. Amongst the many conservation activities attempting to integrate smaller-scale mixed farming with nature conservation, such as the BurrenLIFE project (Williams et al. 2009) and the Hen Harrier Project (Moran et al. 2021), the organisation Talamh Beo ('living from the land') is particularly noteworthy in relation to convivial conservation. Established in 2019, Talamh Beo, like convivial conservation, aims to challenge the dominant model of development by proposing an alternative system that redistributes decision-making power for food and agricultural policies away from global agribusiness corporations and towards 'farmers, communities and citizens'. As members of the European Coordination Via Campesina, which is part of the larger La Via Campesina global food sovereignty movement, Talamh Beo's alternative vision for the future is centred around supporting local food production as a pathway towards resilient, living landscapes where rural communities and ecosystems thrive together. As such, this vision aligns with calls for just transformations to more sustainable farming landscapes (Young et al. 2023), but appears to conflict with certain rewilding initiatives, such as Dunsany Nature Reserve, that view animal-free agriculture as the way forward to a sustainable future.

Sharing this interest in promoting good relations between people and nature, the efforts of organisations like Talamh Beo are buttressed, albeit indirectly, by a growing environmental justice movement in Ireland. Although its original focus in the 1980s was on fighting against 'environmental racism' in the United States (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016), environmental justice is now a central concept in debates about conservation (Martin et al. 2013), including the convivial conservation proposal. In

Ireland, the discourse of environmental justice was largely absent until quite recently (Davies 2006). However, it is now used by a wide range of actors in both rural and urban contexts, including grassroots activists, researchers, NGOs like Friends of the Earth, and newly-created groups such as the Environmental Justice Network Ireland. While these actors rarely use the language of conservation, their struggles, which all have their own character owing to the specific contexts they arise in, share many defining features of the convivial conservation movement by working to uncover the power dynamics in questions of rural sustainability and conservation. They make clear that it is not a depoliticised and universalised “human” category destroying the more-than-human world, but a specific economic system and class of people who occupy the higher levels of Büscher and Fletcher’s (2020) four classes of conservation actors. The efforts of largely rural based groups to resist the unsustainable activities of these elite actors plays a vital role in protecting local biodiversity, contributing to climate action, upholding a local democracy, and pointing towards alternative development models.

Similar to other parts of the world, struggles for environmental justice in Ireland have been focused on resisting mining projects, illegal waste disposal, air and water pollution, industrial agriculture, and a range of other issues that are ultimately related to environmental governance (Allen 2004; Cirefice et al. 2022). Alongside concerns about the inequitable distribution of environmental harm, participation and recognition in environmental decision-making are at the centre of these various struggles. Although the state are obliged to ensure public participation in environmental decision-making in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, multiple barriers are present that constrain meaningful participation and exclude certain groups and voices (O’Neill et al. 2022). This problem is compounded by misrecognition and epistemic injustices, whereby certain dominant knowledge systems and worldviews are prioritised and imposed over others, which Massarella et al (2022) contend are key issues in social struggles over the environment. According to the same authors, putting epistemic justice at the heart of convivial conservation, means questioning “hegemonic worldviews while making visible other ways of knowing, forms of politics and modes of environmental governance (Massarella et al 2022: 61). In relation to environmental justice, Vermeulen presents a similar argument and calls for recognition of alternative epistemologies and ontologies and “a more upfront confrontation with the socio historical causes of oppression brought about by coloniality” (2019: 90).

This dual emphasis on ‘reckoning with the past’ (Collard et al. 2015) and recognising alternative conceptualisations of human-nature relations is facilitating efforts to reimagine and decolonise conservation practice and policy in diverse local contexts (Price et al. 2021; Jolly et al. 2022). In Ireland,

where the legacy of colonialism endures in complex ways (McVeigh and Rolston 2021), examples of such alternatives can be located by looking back in time and on the margins of contemporary society. For example, *Meitheal*, an Irish concept and cultural practice based on reciprocity, mutual assistance and social cooperation involved groups of people working closely together in rural areas to complete livelihood related activities, such as harvesting crops and cutting turf (O’Dowd 1981: McMahon 2019). Resembling the *Ubuntu* philosophy discussed by Mabelea et al. (2022) in the context of convivial conservation in southern Africa, the success of *Meitheal* as a form of social organization was contingent on the production and inter-generational transfer of detailed knowledge about local environmental conditions and sustainable land management practices (O’Dowd 1981). Whilst romantic depictions of past societies living in harmony with nature should be treated with caution, *Meitheal* and numerous other examples of alternative ways of living with nature that were once prevalent in Ireland, such as ‘rundale’ (Yager 2002) and ‘booleying’ (Costello 2020), warrant further and more detailed consideration. Nonetheless, these alternatives offer possibilities for developing a conservation movement in Ireland that not only aims to ‘establish, improve and maintain good relations with nature’, but one that also seeks to re-establish convivial relationships between people and the land through the recovering of ‘lost’ knowledge systems premised on living *with* nature.

Conclusion

In this paper, I initially set out to examine how rewilding and convivial conservation potentially complement or conflict with each other as two radical pathways for transforming conservation. Based on my findings, it is clear that certain approaches to rewilding are largely incompatible with the convivial conservation proposal. For instance, the mainstream approaches to rewilding championed by organisations like Rewilding Europe diverge from convivial conservation in terms of how they seek to coexist with, rather than confront, market-based initiatives and a capitalist political economy. Further, some of those who are promoting rewilding in Ireland aim to protect nature from the depredations of capitalism by embracing and justifying an exclusionary form of conservation that has been heavily critiqued by proponents of convivial conservation.

The paper’s second objective sought to examine how the convivial conservation paradigm can contribute to a positive change towards more just, inclusive and socially legitimate approaches to mainstream conservation and rewilding. By reviewing the history of conservation in Ireland and discussing examples of rewilding projects, I have illustrated how conservation has been a recurring source of tension and conflict between different actors. Conflicts over conservation are renowned for

their complexity (Redpath et al. 2013), with historically rooted cultural sensitivities around land in Ireland adding a further layer of complexity to these conflicts. Yet, with their emphasis on local knowledge production, democratic decision-making, community empowerment and environmental justice, the alternative approaches to conservation and nature-society relations highlighted appear to offer a possible pathway for addressing these conflicts. In addition, embracing convivial conservation's vision of beneficially integrating and (re)embedding the uses of nature into the daily lives of local communities, similar to the convivial alternatives discussed in Ireland, may help mitigate rewilding conflicts related to concerns that rewilding initiatives side-line the communities living in and around proposed rewilding areas. Further, the briefly explored historical perspectives may contribute to expanding rewilding's focus on the past beyond ecosystems without people and towards an understanding on how past societies lived with non-human natures in more convivial ways.

In relation to the conservation of peatlands in Ireland, Flood et al. (2022: 327) argue that small-scale initiatives and activities, similar to those discussed in this paper, "provide capacity-building, innovative solutions, and 'bottom-up inspired futures' (that) are critical to achieving the transition to a more sustainable society". Although associated with controversy and dismissed by some, certain ideas and practices related to rewilding have the potential to help support such a transformation. However, for this potential to be realised, rewilding must learn from convivial conservation's commitment to environmental justice and to a vision of an abundant post-capitalist world where both humans and nonhumans flourish.

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