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This should be Scotland's rewilding election

In the baking summer of 2003, I had a job on a boat taking tourists through the third strongest whirlpool in the world. Rushing between Scarba and Jura on Scotland's Atlantic Coast, Corryvreckan¹ produces towering standing waves and a foaming swirl of water which the Admiralty describes as "very violent and dangerous".

5 "No vessel should," it says, "attempt this passage without local knowledge."

In the mornings, before taking daytrippers round the north end of Luing where, usually, we'd be greeted by a playful dolphin I named Bill the Bottlenose, on out through the perilous straits and into the ocean beyond, we'd often stand on the pontoon as the skipper, Duncan, gave careful advice to a queue of sailors. He was the local knowledge.

10 My job mostly consisted of making tea and pointing at things: diving gannets and guillemots², ancient metamorphic rocks, the house where George Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Once, as we passed through the raging Corryvreckan, we watched a mighty battle for the skies above us between a pair of golden eagles, a family of buzzards, and a rave³ of ravens.

15 Duncan had the hard task of navigating us safely through the maelstrom. And watching him do it taught me something about politics too. Sometimes, keeping a boat steady doesn't mean chugging along slowly. Sometimes, to stay safe, you need to accelerate hard, to fight against the current lest it sweeps you to peril, or to turn and face the storm, before it envelops you.

20 For more than a decade now, the Scottish National Party government has attempted to steer Scotland calmly in a straight line, towards its ultimate goal, balancing the various competing interests which make up the nation. Where it does good work, it does it slowly, carefully. But as life on Earth drowns in a whirlpool of destruction, pointing the boat away from it and gently puttering isn't nearly enough.

The hills are bare now

A vast swathe of Scotland is grouse moor: intensively farmed patchworks of heather, burned back again and again by landowners desperate to stop any life from flourishing but that which they can persuade millionaire holidayers to shoot.

25 For centuries, Scotland's Highlands were seen by Britain's elites as a scary and wild place, home of the Jacobite uprisings⁴, Gaelic speakers and snow. But the Victorians tamed the image, with propagandistic art of empty hills and lumbering stags, Prince Albert's purchase of Balmoral⁵, and the invention of the breech-loading shotgun for slaying grouse. Soon, the stunning landscape became a theme park for first British, and then global elites.

30 This process has always been subject to protest, perhaps most elegantly in Robert Burns's⁶ "Song Composed in August": "Now westlin⁷ winds and slaughtering guns bring Autumn's pleasant weather."

But largely, we were taught to love this tyrannised dominion: to fetishise⁸ the heather rather than seeing it as the lonely remains of once mighty forest, to believe that the silence is magical, rather than a

¹ *Scarba* and *Jura* are Scottish islands; *Corryvreckan* is the strait between them

² seabirds

³ flock

⁴ *Jacobite uprisings*: Scottish rebellions

⁵ the British royal family's residence in the Scottish highlands

⁶ *Robert Burns* (1759-1796): a Scottish poet

⁷ western

⁸ to obsess over

35 disastrous absence of birdsong and wolf howl. We were persuaded to let the soils wash into the sea, the few remaining predators be trapped or shot, the land be tamed, and life drained away.

And it's still draining. My skipper's favourite story from his years at sea was the time in the 1980s that the Hebrides⁹ family of killer whales performed a glorious dance around his boat. But the West Coast community of orcas, with their distinct sloping eye patches, haven't had a calf since monitoring began in 1992. While individuals can live for 90 years, pollution appears to have rendered them infertile. The eight remaining family members will probably be the last of the Hebridean orcas.

40 It is not just the whale song that has disappeared. The average species' abundance in Scotland has fallen by a quarter since 1994. The seabirds I would point out to tourists as they dipped and dived back in 2003 are in peril, having declined by 38% from 1986 to 2016. The onomatopoeically named kittiwakes have declined by 72% during my lifetime. As a child, I got good at spotting the familiar fluttering of a kestrel. But in the 25 years since, their population has fallen by 80%. More than one in ten of Scotland's species is threatened with extinction from these islands.

45 But these stats hide an even grimmer reality, for these are the declines since the 1980s and 1990s, when things were already dire. The UK's hedgehog population is thought to have been around 30 million when my father was a child in the 1950s, and had fallen to 1.5 million by the time I was playing in the woods in the 1990s.

50 Go back further, and we find even more loss: half-tonne sturgeon used to swim up Scotland's rivers. The European sturgeon, once a famous source of caviar, is now critically endangered. Bears lumbered up our glens and the great herring runs shaped much of our coastal economy.

55 We should be clear about what these numbers mean. Our politicians are allowing the life around us to be slaughtered. Continue on our current course, and we will go under. And so we have to choose: mass extinction, or widespread rewilding: accelerate away from the whirlpool, or be sucked in.

Rage, rage, rage against the killing off of life

"We can't address exponential loss with incremental change," said Peter Cairns of the charity Scotland, the Big Picture, as he introduced what can only be described as a vast online rally this week on behalf of the new Scottish Rewilding Alliance, which calls on Scotland to become the world's first rewilding nation.

60 Showing pictures of iconic Highland landscapes, he said: "These bare glens, rivers and mountains are for the most part ecological vacuums, geological wonders surrounded by centuries of dewilding. Gone are the complex woodland and vegetation communities that once shaped them. Gone are many of the animals which once lived here. And gone, too, are many of the people who once lived here. So much of Scotland's beauty and drama lies dormant, muted, some might say dying."

65 Scotland, he pointed out, has become one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

But his message wasn't a negative one. Speaking to a live online audience of 2,500 people, he pointed out that this is now the UN decade of habitat restoration. Desperately clinging onto a few nature reserves isn't enough, he said – "we need rewilding".

70 "Rewilding," he said, "is anything which counteracts more dewilding, anything that joins up and enriches habitats, rather than further degrading them, anything that results in more wildlife, and not less wildlife."

It "is about acknowledging that a peatland or forest, or a wetland, or a river, is less a physical entity, and more a set of dynamic processes, with no predetermined end point".

75 And Cairns highlighted some recent, positive, stories: allowing ecosystems to flourish often means restoring keystone species which have been killed off. Beavers have been brought back to Scotland despite government resistance, building dams which restore wetlands and temperate rainforests. Apex predators¹⁰ like osprey and white-tailed eagles have been brought back in recent decades, unleashing processes called trophic cascades, which help life flourish.

⁹ a group of islands

¹⁰ *apex predator*: a predator at the top of the food chain

“Young forests are on the march for the first time in generations, peatlands are being restored, natural processes are being allowed to shape and govern the landscape.”

80 River restoration systems have allowed burns¹¹ straightened out a century ago to meander again, reconnecting to their floodplains and leading to “more trees, more flowers, more insects, more fish, cleaner water, less flooding”.

85 In recent years, rewilding projects have taken off across Scotland, from Cumbernauld in the central belt to the Assynt peninsula in the far north-west. Literally growing from the ground up, this is a social movement that’s rushing fast towards the Scottish election in May.

Popular support

And it’s a social movement with widespread popular support. A poll released this week showed that 76% of Scottish people are in favour of rewilding, with only 7% opposed.

90 The problem for the Scottish government is that its cabinet secretary for the rural economy, Fergus Ewing, is part of the 7%, telling the NFU¹² in 2018 that lynx reintroduction – desperately needed to control deer numbers – would happen “over my dead body”.

95 When government ministers stand against the overwhelming will of their people on an issue in the run up to an election, two things can happen. Sometimes, the ruling party manages to distract people from the issue in the run up to the vote. Other times, those concerned about the question manage to drive it to the centre of public attention, and force a change.

In May, the people of Scotland will elect our parliament for the next half decade. This is our chance to demand that the Highlands and uplands are uncleared, the wetlands are restored, our rivers and oceans allowed to thrive, and that our apex predators – lynx, then wolves – are brought back.

Because if we wait another five years, it will be too late for so much of our wildlife.

(2021)

¹¹ rivers (Scottish)

¹² National Farmers’ Union