

THE WELSH WAY TO WILD



Cynghrair
Ailwylltio Cymru
Welsh Rewilding
Alliance

Welsh Rewilding Alliance
Report 2026



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Jon is a writer and campaigner. He has published features, essays, and profiles on environmental and other issues for The Guardian, Bloomberg Businessweek, The Lead, The Great Outdoors and in 2024 co-edited Right to Roam's book, *Wild Service: Why Nature Needs You*. He was commissioned to write this report on behalf of the group. As the voice behind some of the most engaging conversations about our right to connect with nature, Jon weaves together history, politics, and personal stories to challenge how we think about the landscapes around us.

With a background in journalism and a knack for making complex issues both relatable and inspiring, Jon has become a leading figure in the movement to reconnect people with the land.

Summary

01

Wales has experienced significant and ongoing losses of its natural heritage, **with around 300 localised extinctions since 1800 and 20% declines in overall abundance in the past thirty years.** Two thirds of land designated for the protection of nature are in **'unfavourable' condition, with 55% of protected marine areas also classified as 'unfavourable'.** Wales is currently measured at **37% biological intactness**, making it one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world.

02

The interrelationship of people and nature is central to Welsh culture but has been heavily eroded over the past centuries due to extractive practices, nature-hostile philosophies of land management, and historic policy incentives which encouraged agricultural intensification. Many of these processes were initiated from outside of Wales. Post-Brexit agricultural payment schemes (currently termed the Sustainable Farming Scheme) offer a chance for Wales to decide a new, self-determined trajectory.



03

Within Wales there is overwhelming support for measures which will reverse the trend of ecosystem depletion: making public funding for agriculture contingent on bold, nature and climate friendly land management, rewilding, and reintroducing keystone species like the native Beaver.

However, progress has been halting and schemes designed to address these aims have been diluted. There is currently limited recognition of activities which seek to restore nature at scale through natural processes, despite proven results and cost-effectiveness. This reflects a democratic deficit in the conversation about land management and public environmental support.

04

The smaller size of Welsh landholdings may require networking small to medium sites via nature-rich corridors (e.g. supported through the collaborative layer within SFS) while seeking opportunities to combine sites where possible and appropriate to achieve maximal benefits from landscape scale.

To meet the government's 30x30 commitments **we propose an aim of 5% of land committed to core rewilding with 25% within a spectrum of semi-wild areas**, combining natural processes with nature-based enterprises and premium agricultural products. These goals can be achieved without significant impact on Wales' food security and supported through measures which facilitate the ability of communities to acquire and steward land for nature and other social benefits.

06

As a first step: the Welsh Rewilding Alliance call on the government to commit to payments for natural grazing and wider ecological restoration; reintroduce native ‘keystone’ species like the Eurasian Beaver and the European Flat Oyster; implement a land reform package for Wales, introducing measures like Community Right to Buy, improved statutory rights of access, and a Nature Creation License; and ‘slow the flow’ by creating a nature-based action plan for every flood-affected catchment in Wales.

05

Rural Wales is experiencing widespread depopulation and demographic ageing, as young people flee poor social and economic opportunities.

Despite this, evidence suggests young people value living in the countryside and many would return if conditions changed. Rewilding can form part of a wider strategy of rural repopulation and economic diversification, generating prized roles in conservation and the creative industries, as well as agriculture and forestry. Existing case studies demonstrate **an average uplift in 120% in employment opportunities following rewilding**. These can be bolstered with a rural youth strategy addressing issues such as the lack of affordable housing in rural areas and skill deficits.



Hello, we are the Welsh Rewilding Alliance



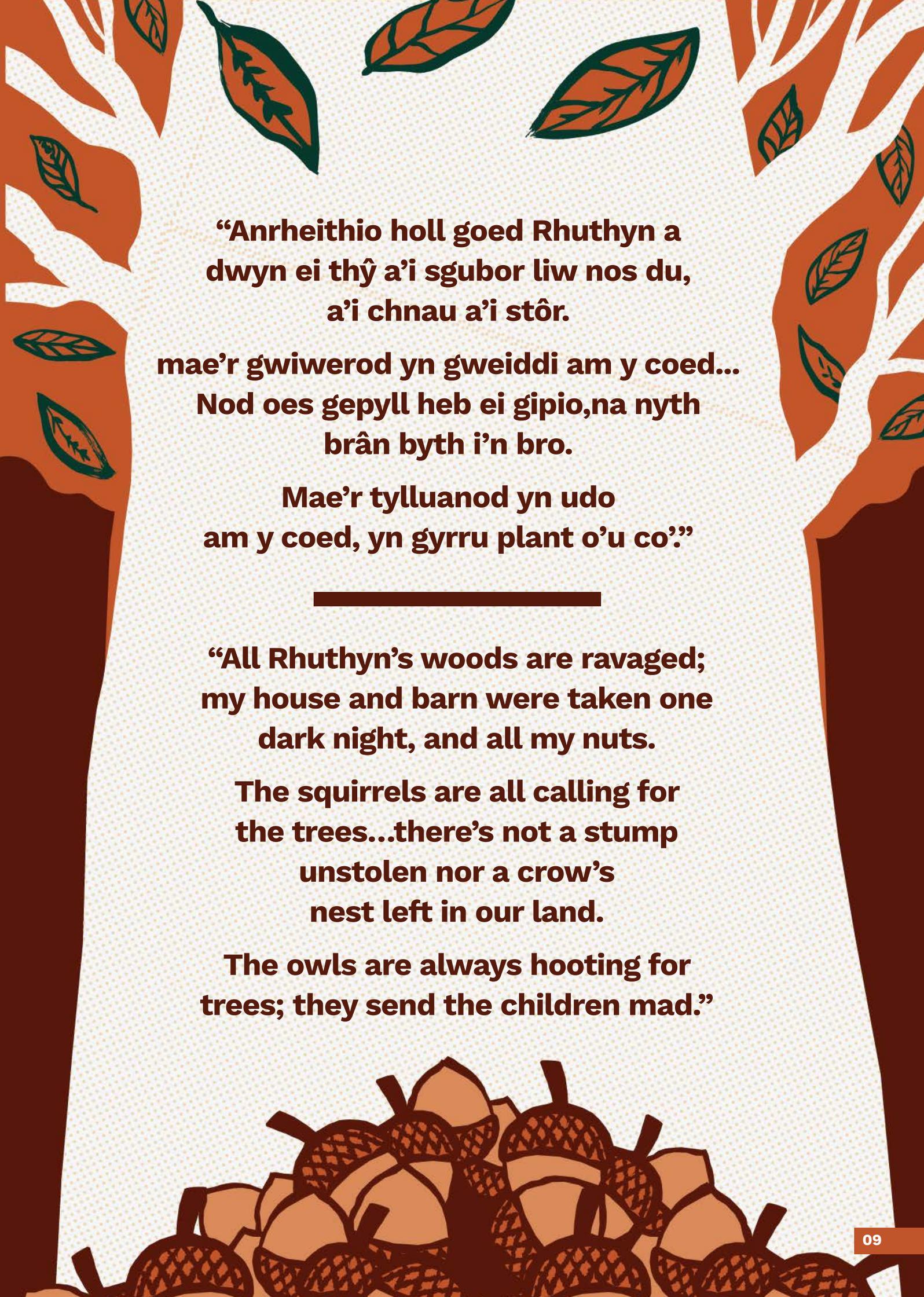
The Welsh Rewilding Alliance is a growing movement uniting organisations, landowners, communities and decision-makers to restore thriving ecosystems, boost rural livelihoods and celebrate Welsh landscapes and our wild nature. We're building the power and momentum needed to deliver rewilding in Wales, by Wales, for Wales.

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The Loss of Wales' Natural Heritage

In the late 16th century, some five hundred years ago, a scurry of Red Squirrels marched from the Welsh town of Rhuthyn.

Their woodland, Coed Marchan, was being destroyed. And so they set off on the two hundred mile journey to London to seek justice for their cause. Arriving at the court, the lead squirrel took to the stand and, in the style of a broadside ballad, issued the following account:



**“Anrheithio holl goed Rhuthyn a
dwyn ei thŷ a’i sgubor liw nos du,
a’i chnau a’i stôr.**

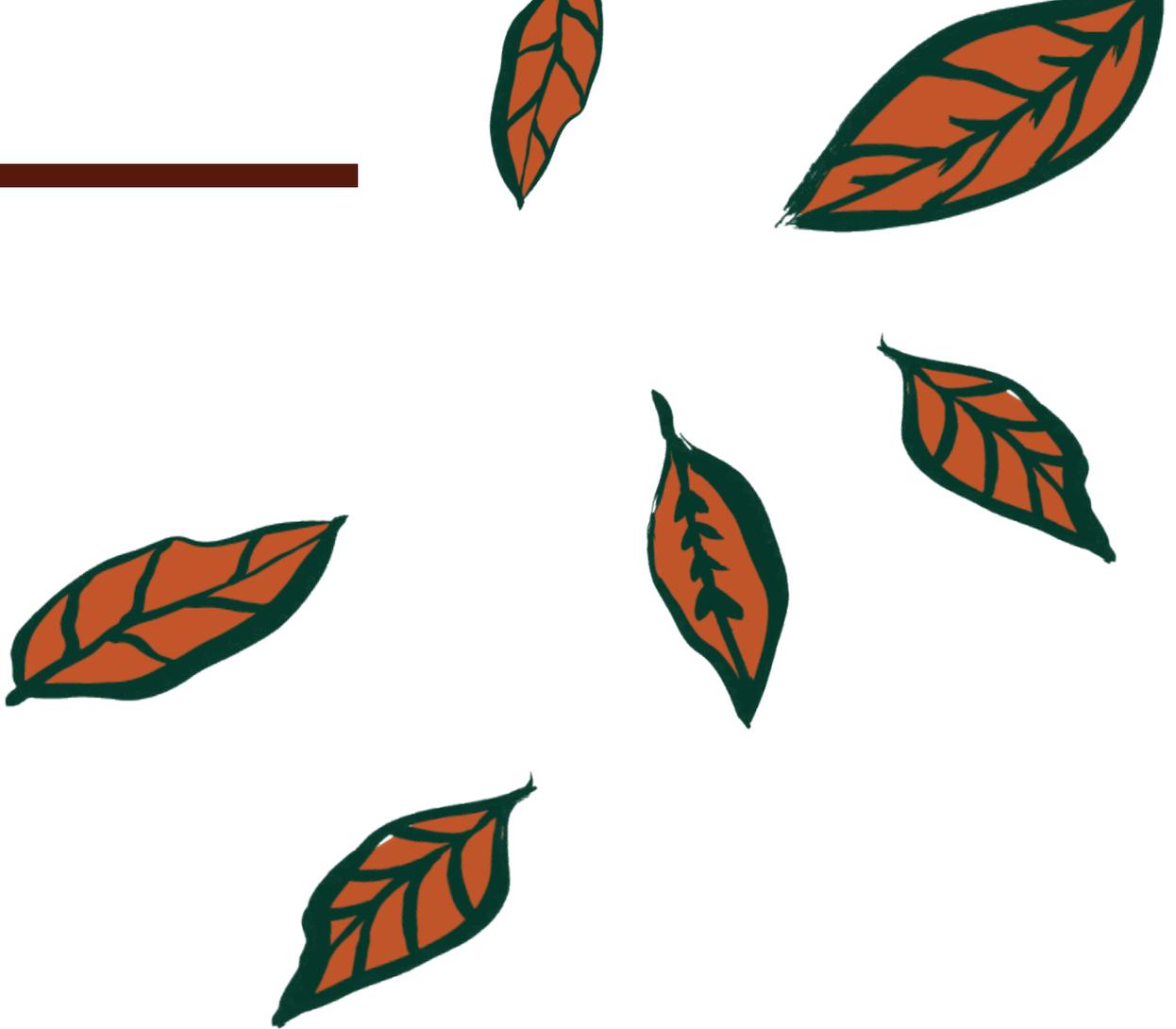
**mae’r gwiwerod yn gweiddi am y coed...
Nod oes gepyll heb ei gipio,na nyth
brân byth i’n bro.**

**Mae’r tylluanod yn udo
am y coed, yn gyrru plant o’u co’”**

**“All Rhuthyn’s woods are ravaged;
my house and barn were taken one
dark night, and all my nuts.**

**The squirrels are all calling for
the trees...there’s not a stump
unstolen nor a crow’s
nest left in our land.**

**The owls are always hooting for
trees; they send the children mad.”**



The squirrels' tale, witnessed and retold in Cymraeg by the Denbighshire bard, Robin Clidro, is perhaps the first recorded expression of the Rights of Nature in Britain.¹

In line after line, it details the devastating impacts of deforestation on all the creatures within: the wild cats and owls (“left cold without her hollow trunk”), the hedgehogs and the crows. Yet Clidro’s squirrel did not only speak for its fellow wild creatures. It spoke for humans too. With the woodland gone, the squirrel warned:

¹ Robin Clidro, ‘Marchan Wood’, tr. Gwyn Williams in *Welsh Poems: Sixth Century to 1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974)

**“Crychias ni feirw crochan,
na breci mwy heb bricie mân.
O daw mawnen o’r mynydd
a y glaw, oer a drud fydd.
Annwyd fydd yn lladd y forwyn,
oer ei thraed a defni o’i thrwyn.”**

**“No pot will come to bubbling
no beer will boil without small twigs;
and if peat comes from the mountain
in the rain, it’s cold and dear.
Cold will exhaust the housemaid.
With cold feet and a dripping nose.”**



“The centuries since Coed Marchan was written have seen this fundamental relationship unravel.”

Estovers (hawl casglu cynnud) for firewood, turbary (hawl torri mawn) for the hearth. Such common rights were once the bedrock of rural Wales. Loss of the woodland meant their loss too: no acorns for the commoner’s “old red-bellied sow”; the goats denied their graze of hazel. The squirrel’s message is clear. People. Nature. Their fortunes are interwoven, their fate one and the same. When we think about the meaning of a wilder Wales, this is the Wales we mean.

Yet the centuries since Coed Marchan was written have seen this fundamental relationship unravel. Industrial revolution ensured more than Rhuthyn’s woods would be ravaged, while enclosure and agricultural improvement affected swathes of Wales. Through the 18th and 19th centuries, the uplands were limed and drained, field systems fertilised and simplified. Fences went up, common rights removed; native flora and fauna were rebranded as ‘weeds’ and ‘pests’. Agricultural surveyors, importing fashionable notions from Scotland and England, advocated the piece-by-piece dismantling of ancient Welsh habitats (rhos, cloddiau) less the “mischiefs occasioned by birds and insects” be allowed to harbour there². Their attitudes towards those who relied on the land for subsistence were much the same.



The work of these ideologues set the trend. In the 20th century a further raft of agricultural policies developed (yet again) outside of Wales continued to dictate the practices which took place within it. Extraordinary losses resulted. Conifer plantations, planted hard to the rolling hills, acidified the soils and damaged peatland stores, 90% of which are now degraded³. A third of the remaining ancient woodland was felled.⁴ Today only 15% of Wales is afforested - an improvement on the recent past - but still leaving us with one of the lowest levels of woodland cover in Europe⁵ (two thirds of which is ecologically poor conifer plantation).⁶ In the lowlands, the demands of intensive livestock production mean patchwork fields glow a bright green, thick with artificial nutrients and thin in biological diversity. In the uplands, historic overgrazing has led to vast areas transforming into *Molinia* monoculture, the moor grass spreading for mile upon mile.⁷ In the valleys, both north and south, we confront the scars left by resource extraction, the giant molehills of spoil still chequering the land. Whatever profits were made have since vanished. We count their true costs every day.



²Charles Hassall, 'A General View of the Agriculture of the County of Monmouthshire' (1815)

³Natural Resources Wales, '[National Peatland Action Programme: Year 5 Report](#)' (2025) – these mid-century afforestation schemes were met with resistance and resentment in Wales, leaving a legacy of suspicion towards large-scale tree planting projects in their wake.

⁴IEPAC, '[The Protection of Trees and Woodlands in Wales](#)' (2025)

⁵Senedd Research, '[National Forest: the challenge of woodland creation in Wales](#)' (2021)

⁶IEPAC, Protection of Trees (2025)

⁷Kevin Roberts, '[Review into the Resilience of Welsh Farming](#)' (2014) – stocking numbers have since significantly decreased, paradoxically contributing to an issue of targeted undergrazing, particularly by cattle, to keep the now extensive *molinia* in check.

”Conifer plantations, planted hard to the rolling hills, acidified the soils and damaged peatland stores, 90% of which are now degraded.”

We are all too familiar with the consequences. In Wales, a great depletion is firmly underway: 300 species extinct since the 1800s, 20% declines in overall abundance in the past thirty years, 18% of our remaining species on the red list, two thirds of areas theoretically protected for nature in reality in an ‘unfavourable’ condition.⁸

Creatures like the native Wildcat, cited in Clidro’s poem, have joined Lynx, Wolf, White-tailed Eagle, Red-backed Shrike, Corncrake, and Nightingale on the register of national extinction. Red squirrels hold on by a thread. Unique flora, like the ethereal Lili’r Wyddfa and bright-beaded Rigid Apple Moss, could soon disappear.



⁸*State of Nature: Wales (2023)*



Today, only



is afforested

“In the marine environment, nearly half of Wales’s ‘protected’ waters are currently classified as ‘unfavourable’.”

In the marine environment, nearly half of Wales’s ‘protected’ waters are currently classified as ‘unfavourable’. The majority of our rivers are in poor ecological condition, with signature species like the Atlantic salmon undergoing astonishing 70% declines in the past decade.⁹

Scenes once familiar off our shores are now witnessed, if at all, through David Attenborough documentaries – something for faraway places, rather than sources of enchantment at our door. Pick out any antiquated natural history book in the National Library: you’ll soon find examples of the ordinary extraordinary of this now-vanished everyday.

⁹ Stuart Rees, *‘One barrier at a time for our Atlantic Salmon’* *Natural Resources Wales* (2024)

¹⁰ Alec Moore, *‘We gathered centuries-old written records to show the seas around Wales once teemed with life’* *The Conversation* (2024) / *‘Rare angelshark filmed in Welsh waters ‘for first time’*, *BBC Cymru* (2021)

¹¹ H. E Forest, *A handbook to the vertebrate fauna of North Wales*, *Witherby and Co.* (1919)

A million herring caught in a single night near Aberystwyth in the mid-18th century. Angelsharks, once “plenty” in Cardigan Bay, today inspire triumphant BBC reports when a single individual is sighted.¹⁰ Consider one account from 1919, just a century ago, which swore mackerel came so thick below Little Orme’s Head that the quarrymen “caught hundreds by merely wading in for a few yards and throwing them ashore with their hands.”¹¹ Such richness feels implausible, even unimaginable today. We have become numb to a horizon defined by emptiness, deadened to the possibility it can be any other way.





“Atlantic salmon undergoing astonishing 70% declines in the past decade.”



What Wales Wants

At 37% in the Biological Intactness Index, Wales, like the rest of the UK, holds the bleak accolade of being one of the ‘most nature-depleted countries in the world’.¹²

The stories behind such numbers are complex and not unique to Wales. We do not invoke them out of a desire to blame, nor depress. Still, they illustrate a simple fact: the relationship between ourselves and nature has come badly unstuck. Something needs to change.

For much of their history the people of Wales have had little control over what that change could be (Clidro’s squirrels had to march to London to have their plight heard, after all). Agricultural policy, one of the main determinants of our ecological fortunes, was not devolved until the late 1990s, and local control was secondary while resource was directed by the European Union’s Common Agricultural Policy. No longer.

This year Wales rolls out its first true domestic agricultural scheme in living memory, defining what will happen across much of the landscape, 90% of which is currently in agricultural use.

It should be an exciting, celebratory moment. A fresh start. An opportunity to demonstrate boldness and carve out a distinctive path. Instead, the public debate became rapidly hijacked by an unhelpful and often poorly informed discussion about the merits of a proposal for recipients to maintain 10% tree cover (where appropriate) on their land.

¹² *State of Nature: Wales (2023)*



Biological Intactness

National Farmers' Union Cymru threatened a boycott. The BBC mislabelled the policy a 'tree planting scheme'.¹³ Farming Influencers claimed, without evidence or reason, that it would "ruin" the country. Once again, a national conversation about national spend to achieve major national objectives became a binary and overcharged story about a single emotive issue, while the majority of the country, and those of many farmers with more nuanced critiques and contributions, was sidelined.¹⁴ As a consequence, interventions which might have formed the basis for a richer, more diverse landscape were dropped or diluted before they could get out of the door. Another lever for significant nature recovery in Wales: gone.

As a result of the narrowing of this conversation, efforts to reimagine the status quo remain stuck in the mud. The government is nowhere close to achieving its commitment to protect and restore nature in 30% of Wales by 2030, an international agreement to which the Welsh Government is a firmly committed party.¹⁵ While non-governmental projects aimed at restoring natural processes have come under attack.¹⁶

At the center of this controversy is the word that forms the foundation of this Alliance: rewilding.

This approach aims to achieve the large-scale restoration of nature, to a point where it can largely take care of itself (and by extension – us) again. Rather than attempt to protect a single at-risk species, or preserve islands of habitat in aspic, rewilding aims to restore the dynamic, natural processes which make up the web of life: for instance by reintroducing lost 'keystone' species whose activities pave the way for other species to thrive.¹⁷

Consider the role of just one, once-native keystone species, the Eurasian Beaver, whose habits of transforming unpromising streams into complex wetlands is second to none. Those who have welcomed this creature back into their land are witnessing first hand the miraculous results of its labours. Beaver dams produce a mosaic of pools with varying depths and flow speeds, each a niche species habitat in its own right.

¹³ Stefan Messenger, 'Climate: NFU Cymru leaders boycott tree planting scheme', BBC Cymru (July 23, 2023)

¹⁴ See for instance, the [contributions](#) of Nature Friendly Farming Network Cymru to the SFS discussion. Search Sustainable Farming Scheme at [nffn.org.uk](#)

¹⁵ Welsh Government, 'COP15: Minister calls for 'game-changing' global biodiversity deal in Montreal', press release (December 11, 2022)

¹⁶ 'Farmers' Union of Wales wants rewilding project scrapped', BBC Cymru (July 31, 2019)

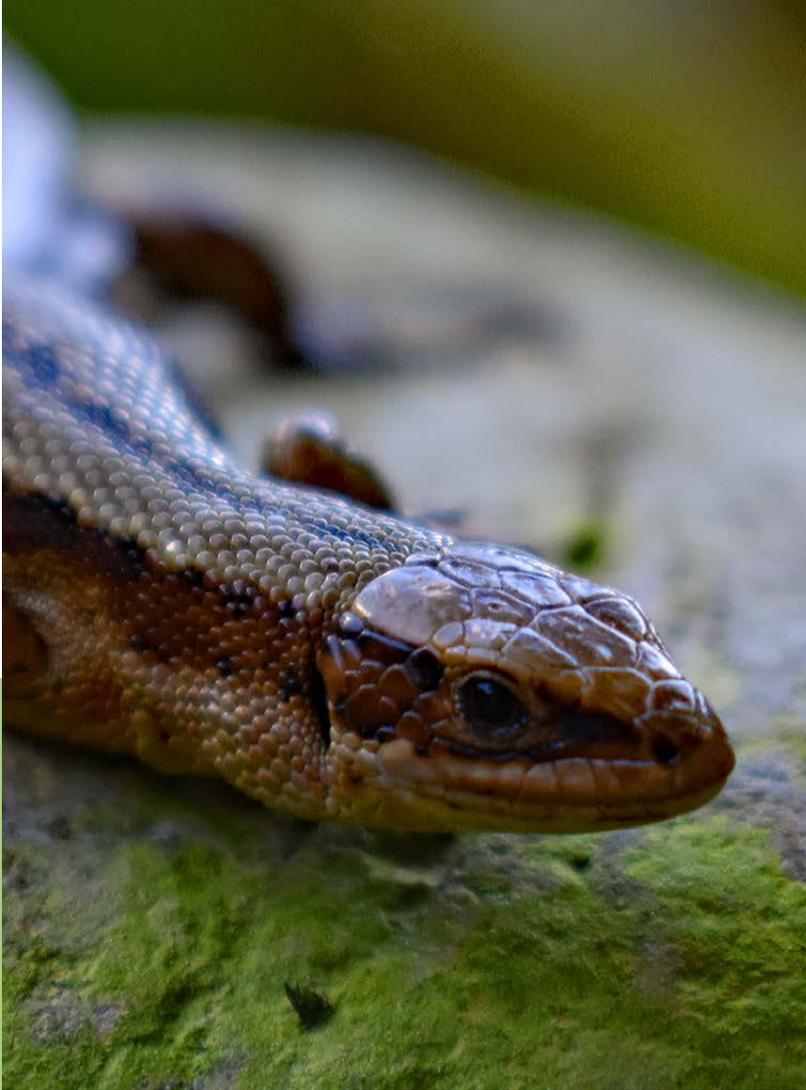
¹⁷ For a fuller definition and guidelines on rewilding, see: Locquet, A., Derham, T., Kun et al. 'Guidelines for rewilding' IUCN (2025)



Within and among these pools butterflies, dragonflies and other aquatic invertebrates thrive, with the waters providing ideal larval nests.



“The population of frogs, toads, and newts explodes. In the deepest pools, trout, salmon and eel prosper.”



“75% of those polled in Wales expressed their support for rewilding.”

The population of frogs, toads, and newts explodes. In the deepest pools, trout, salmon and eel prosper. This abundance creates a natural larder for a sweep of reptiles and birds, which perch and nest in the novel forest of decaying, regenerating, drowning trees. This habitat framework supports innumerable human needs too: filtering run-off, regulating water volumes, and reducing average flows by as much as 60% (translation: far fewer flood events).¹⁸

If all this is highly cost efficient from the perspective of ecology, water quality, and water management, it also corrects a historic failing: we in Wales, like elsewhere in the UK, wiped out the native beaver for its fur, meat and the castoreum from its scent glands.

From one species to another: mea culpa. It's time to bring the beaver home again. In fact, just about everyone in Wales agrees. In a recent YouGov poll, 75% of those polled in Wales expressed their support for rewilding, with 82% favouring the reintroduction of native species, of which 94% welcomed the reintroduction of beavers – the highest level of support in the UK.¹⁹

¹⁸ Puttock et al. *“Beaver dams attenuate flow: A multi-site study,”* Hydrological Processes (2021)

¹⁹ YouGov / *Rewilding Britain* (June 13, 2024) | YouGov (March 3, 2025)

Though late to the party - Wales is the last country in Europe to reintroduce the beaver - Welsh Government has also cautiously embraced the idea. But actual progress has been painfully slow, with only four managed enclosures and no licensed wild releases at the time of writing. This is partly, again, due to opposition from National Farmers' Union Cymru, who condemned recent legislation to recognise and protect the species as "highly premature" and "irresponsible".²⁰

On the ground, many farmers are more pragmatic, and will welcome beaver if they're supported to manage issues, as well as embrace the opportunities for regulating water through the ever wetter winters and ever drier summers. Climate change, and with it the significant escalation in major flood events across Wales, means such transitions are increasingly a 'must', not just a 'nice to have'.²¹

²⁰ Written Statement of Huw Irranca-Davies, Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs: 'Welsh Government supports the managed re-introduction of European beaver in Wales' Welsh Government (September 26, 2024) with NFU Cymru response: Joe Rees Jones, 'News from the NFU' Abergavenny Chronicle (November 1, 2025) [Note: subtitle mislabelled as 'badgers']

²¹ Flooding already regularly affects around 148,000 people in Wales, which is predicted to increase to 200,000 by 2050. 245,000 properties are already at risk. Major flood events, such as those at Monmouth in 2025, have huge social and economic impacts and affect both commercial and residential viability long term. See more at: Welsh Government, 'The National Strategy for Flood and Coastal Erosion Risk Management in Wales' (2020)

Rewilding Is Repopulation

Other objections to rewilding stem less from the pragmatics of land use and speak to issues of power and culture instead.

“Rewilding is inherently about both nature and about people.”

The legacy of the 19th century ‘improvement’ schemes and postwar initiatives which imposed (often poorly executed) afforestation schemes from Whitehall has left a long, bitter shadow in rural Wales. Perceptions of rewilding have at times become entangled with more recent fears about the role of carbon offsetting companies in purchasing Welsh land. These are in turn seen as posing a threat to rural communities and the Welsh language. This association is reinforced by the lingering belief that rewilding entails the expansion of non-native, closed-canopy forest (rather than a wide mosaic of habitats alongside natural woodland regeneration) and follows a model of so-called ‘fortress conservation’ which aims for pristine wildernesses entirely devoid of people.

This is neither our view, nor our approach. Our belief, like those of the Clidro squirrels, is that rewilding is inherently about both nature and about people.





“We share our nation with many forms of animated life.”

²² We are thinking here of examples like the 80-acre site of our Alliance partner at [the Grange](#) in Monmouthshire or, outside of Wales, community-powered wilding projects like Moor Barton in Dartmoor

We are keystone species in our own right, and can serve as analogues for species which have not, or cannot yet be introduced. We support models of ecological restoration which will strengthen, not displace, rural communities: bringing opportunity, access, and diversity.

Our motives are neither financial nor ideological. Rather we have come together through a simple view: that we share our nation with many thousand forms of animate life, and our trajectory should not - cannot - be one of its incremental, ongoing eradication. Rewilding

works best at scale and has consequently become associated with large third sector, private, or community owned landholdings in England and Scotland, or extensive public lands in Europe. In Wales, where the average landholding is around half the size of its neighbours and public land constitutes less than 10% of total ownership, rewilding may explore a different approach: working at larger scales in the marine environment and on land where circumstances permit, with a constellation of small to medium sized sites elsewhere.²²



In time, these could be joined together through nature-rich corridors, supported via the collaborative layer within the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) to achieve the ecological benefits of connectivity and scale. Approached in this way, sites dedicated to ‘core’ rewilding could be achieved with little impact on food security while providing significant sites of nature recovery in every region.²³

Smaller scale initiatives also makes raising the capital to fund community buyouts a less daunting task.²⁴ Wales currently lags far behind Scotland (and now England too) in developing mechanisms to favour and support community ownership of land, or to easily access seed funding to achieve those ends. That’s why land reform should be part of the policy picture in Wales: allowing local people, if they desire, to access, purchase and shape how land is managed. Like the work of the beavers, we’ve seen how powerful this can be, with anchor projects giving rise to local guardianship groups acting in service to the land.²⁵

Perhaps in a near future we will once again gather on weekends as a community; to tend trees, restore bogs, record species, and share our stories, joys, and griefs.

²³ See factbox on ‘Food’ in this report

²⁴ Evidence suggests that once rewilding projects are established they are much more cost-effective to run than traditional conservation. See, e.g. £10,000 an acre to restore the land, from ground zero, over 25 years as a total per acre cost. A third of work was done by vols. This equates £400/Ha per year

²⁵ See examples in our ‘Grange Project’ case study. Outside of Wales, this approach is being spearheaded by innovative wilding projects like Moor Barton in Dartmoor

“The outlook for the traditional agricultural sector is equally concerning. 8,000 agricultural jobs were lost in the decade between 2010-2011.”

The social role of nature restoration - and rewilding's role within it - is only growing in significance. The current trajectory of rural Wales is continued depopulation and 'gerontrification'. That is to say, the majority of its young people have left, plan to leave, and will be replaced - if they are replaced at all - by the ageing and retiring. There are over 200 rural wards where population has been decreasing in the last decade - a trend which is set to continue - while surveys taken in 2021 indicated that 40% of young persons in rural Wales anticipated moving outside of Wales over the following five years.²⁶ 'Outside Wales' is instructive: because when the young leave the countryside they often leave the country entirely. As one young man surveyed in rural Camarthenshire put it: "Everyone is old and dying. All the youth that can leave, do leave, for university or work. The only youth who are left are here because they don't have the capability to leave."²⁷ The outlook for the traditional agricultural sector, which currently defines much of our land-based economy, is equally concerning. 8,000 agricultural jobs were lost in the decade between 2010-2011 (equivalent to one sixth of the entire agricultural labour force), with a 13.6% decrease in the six years between 2015 and 2021 alone.²⁸



²⁶ Michael Woods, 'Rural Youth Out-Migration and Population Change in Wales' Wales Centre for Public Policy (2023) & Woods, Utz. 'Young People in Rural Wales: Survey Report' Aberystwyth University (2021)

²⁷ Cited in Woods & Utz, 'Young People in Rural Wales' (2021)

²⁸ Katie Devenish, 'The Farming Sector in Wales: Research Briefing' Senedd Research (2022) | Alex Phillips, 'Improving the Sustainable Farming Scheme for people, nature, and climate', Institute of Welsh Affairs (2024)



40%
of young people
expected to
leave Wales.



Low wages, social isolation, and high barriers to new entrants make imminent reversal of this unlikely. The median age of the ‘key decision maker’ farmer in Wales is 61; with only 3% under the age of 35.²⁹ Like our ecosystems, the prospects for rural Wales remain locked in a classification of ‘unfavourable, declining’.

It’s not that young people don’t want to continue farming. 10% of those surveyed expressed an interest in just that – higher than the current agricultural workforce in Wales (7.4%). But many would like other opportunities too. 18% sought careers in conservation and environmental management. While over a third wished to work in the creative industries.³⁰ Rewilding can support jobs in these areas, and overlaps with the skillsets of agriculture and forestry. A Rewilding Britain analysis of rewilding projects found an average uplift of 120% in employment, across Wales and England, compared with previous land use over a 10 year period (in Scotland it increased by 412%).³¹

This was accompanied by a massive increase in voluntary opportunities, which are particularly significant for older populations in the countryside. As Dr Neil Hudson, MP for Penrith and the Border, has written: ‘To level up rural areas, we need to rewild them.’³²

There is a significant appetite for such jobs, with the current generation prizing careers which contribute to a greener future (52% of 16-18 year olds rate such jobs as ‘higher value’).³³



Nearly half these young people looked to skip higher education altogether and access the green job market directly. An expansion of rural anchor institutions like the recently established Black Mountains College, with an ethos and programme which appeals to the young and ecologically passionate, could provide a pathway to match that passion with training, certification and direct employment opportunities across rural Wales, without having to leave rural Wales to achieve it.³⁴

²⁹ Farmers’ Union of Wales, ‘A Mandate for Future Farmers’ (2025)

³⁰ Statistics from: Woods & Utz, ‘Young People in Rural Wales’ (2021)

³¹ ‘412% increase in jobs at Scotland rewilding sites, research shows’, Rewilding Britain (2024)

³² Neil Hudson MP, ‘To level up rural areas, we must rewild them’ Conservative Home (2021)

³³ ISEP, ‘Almost half of UK school leavers want a green job now’ (2025)

³⁴ For more on Black Mountains College, see: blackmountainscollege.uk | Further Education courses at BMC include diplomas in Nature Restoration, Regenerative Farming and Agroecology, Forestry, Coppicing, and Regenerative Horticulture. Further Education is largely free in Wales. Recently the College has also offered an undergraduate degree in ‘Sustainable Futures: Arts, Ecology, and Systems Change’.

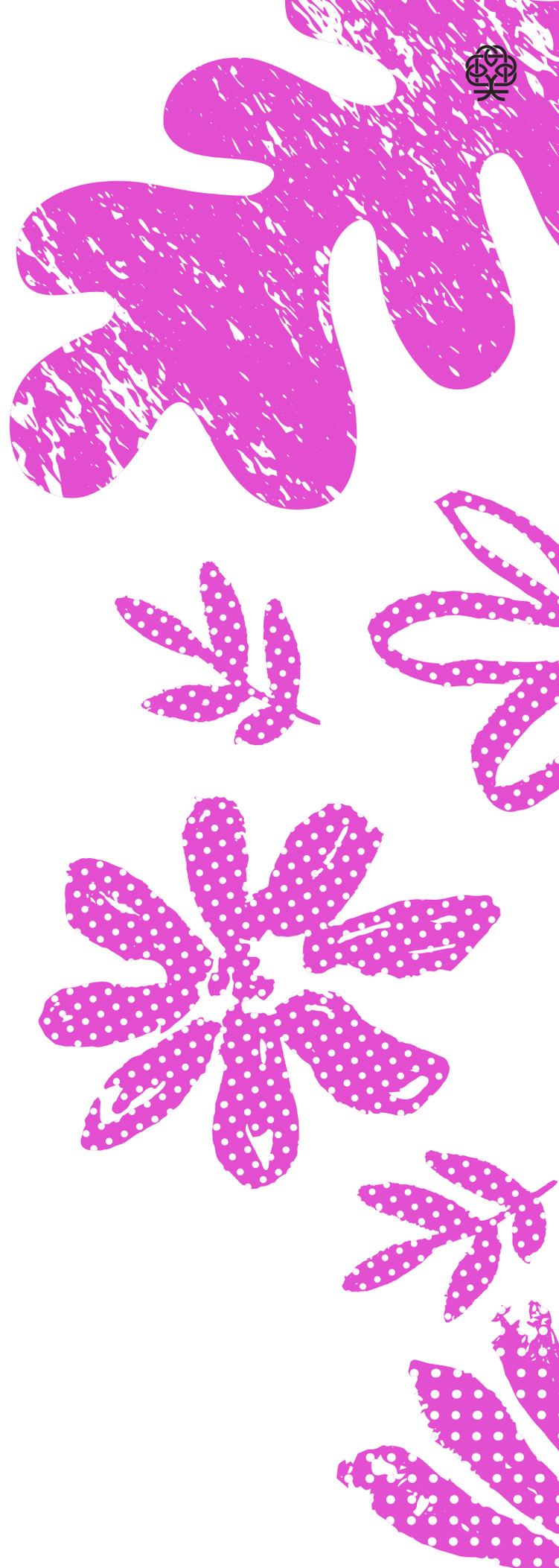
³⁵ Woods & Utz, ‘Young People in Rural Wales’ (2021)

“To level up rural areas, we need to rewild them.”

There is nothing inevitable about rural decline. Detailed research by Aberystwyth University found that 75% of young people enjoy living in rural Wales, and as many as 57% who have already left could be tempted to return if sufficient opportunities for employment, housing and social life were made available.³⁵

The ‘pull’ home is even stronger for those who speak the Welsh language.

Access to beautiful nature is also one of the key factors identified by young people in decisions to return or stay. The answers are clear. The desire is there. The answer to our social and ecological problems is the same: we need a diversification of rural life, just as we need a diversification of habitat type. Clidro’s squirrels warned us that ecological monocultures soon make for social monocultures. With the right will, we can reverse the trend.



To abandon its rural fatalism, Wales could declare itself Europe's first Rural Youth Nation.





To abandon its rural fatalism, Wales could declare itself Europe's first Rural Youth Nation: outlining a policy package of draws and rewards which build on our pioneering example of the Well-being of Future Generations Act and initiatives like One Planet Development (OPD). OPD is a unique Welsh success story: it has provided comparatively affordable, low-impact housing opportunities while achieving significant ecological benefits, often on degraded land. But complex planning and stringent eligibility criteria, as well as the effective requirement for upfront capital, have limited its ability to scale (only 38 projects were approved between the scheme's launch in 2010 and evaluation in 2021). The definition of 'land-based enterprise' could be adapted to recognise other socially and ecologically valuable employments, while requirements for on-site food production (which are not always suited to conditions, nor the maximally beneficial land use for nature and carbon) could be adjusted for other goals – e.g. biodiversity uplift via rewilding.³⁶



Work in place-based environmental restoration could be explicitly covered by rural enterprise dwelling exemptions. A state-supported network of co-operative housing projects could further help address the rural housing shortage, providing cheap rental accommodation to young people who stay, arrive, or return; with the added benefit of addressing social isolation. Mechanisms to self-start such co-operatives could be streamlined. Tax support, fee waivers, and maintenance grants for attending rural college courses covering core skills could provide an added draw while providing the future workforce for a new conservation economy.

³⁶ For a comprehensive evaluation of One Planet Development, including achievements and barriers to entry: 'Review of One Planet Development in Wales 2010 - 2021' One Planet Council (2022)



Which Way for Wales?



Landscape change is coming to Wales, whether we choose it or not. Economics, demographics and climate change are making the need for adaptation inevitable.

The question is the kind of transition we want: history has taught us that if the people of Wales don't define what we want for our future, others may define it for us. We have lived through too many of the unjust transitions which have resulted. We have no desire to see another.

But such change need not be defined by fear. In place of the familiar, bleak ecological indicators, in place of the fatalism of rural decline, we can craft a new story and shape a different future. Fear can become opportunity, anxiety turned to agency. This future can be wilder and richer. More resilient and more peopled. More in touch with the long sweep of Welsh history and heritage.

It calls back to a landscape which would have been familiar to us before industrialisation and 'improvement': of *ffridd*, *rhos*, *perllan* and, yes, *gwyllt*. To journey there, we must pass through another landscape, older still: a landscape of imagination and possibility, abundance and thrill.



One which invites disruption in the order of things, helping us see them anew. That otherworld which has long been beside us – *Anwn*.

Many of us have grown up hearing stories from Welsh myths and legends, from our parents and our grandparents. They tell of an abundance we have never experienced in our lifetime.

Rainforests hide in the gorges of the Prysor. Vibrant uplands in the Rhinogau remain rich in their dress of bilberry. Fresh heaths restored by community guardians now churr with an invisibility of nightjars.



Now it is our turn to take the stand. We think of the losses already witnessed; the marvels of regeneration we have seen. What stories will we tell our children, in this land where the well-being of Future Generations is state sanctioned; sacrosanct? That choice is ours.

Old firing ranges, incidentally rewilded by the prevalence of unexploded ordnance, provide uneasy 'before' and 'afters', their burst of flowers and young trees powerfully demonstrating what an alternative landscape can be. At the first rewilding sites in Wales, lost species are already returning.

There is joy in this: evidence that life is quick to prosper when given even a marginal chance. All it requires of us is commitment: to bring all we have pushed to the margins, to the brink, and sometimes to extinction, back into the centre. To live with us and beside us, just as they have always been.



Five Principles



For nature, for people:

Nature recovery must benefit Wales, its communities, and its future.

For Wales, within Wales:

We advocate for Wales, within Wales, for people and nature.





Nature is for everyone:

We support improving access to land and water and democratising how they are managed and protected.

Nature's value is intrinsic:

There is a moral right to protect and reintroduce native species, while helping people co-exist with them again.



We look forward:

The past is a guide, but many futures are possible: we are not seeking to return to any one point.

Five Starting Points for Change



Pay for natural grazing and ecosystem restoration

Embed rewilding and natural process-led approaches in the Sustainable Farming Scheme. Reward land managers who restore ecosystems and not just fragmented habitats, creating a meaningful contribution to the 30% land-for-nature target.

Lead by example

Empower Natural Resources Wales to manage the public estate in ways that show-case large-scale restoration, beginning with upland reserves and uneconomic forests, adopting a Wilder Forests approach.





Bring back lost species

Create and adopt a national keystone species reintroduction strategy for land and sea, starting with beavers and oysters, to ensure we see their return to the major river catchments and in-shore waters of Wales within the next 5 years.

Empower communities

Create a Community Right-to-Buy for land, as part of a commitment to a Land Reform Act for Wales, and a Nature Creation Licence for the ocean, giving local people the power to restore ecosystems and build green jobs.



Slow the flow

A nature-based action plan for every flood affected region in Wales, supporting habitat and flood management across the catchment.



Be Part of a Wilder Wales

A wilder Wales where land connection strengthens nature, communities, and future access.



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**Thank you
Diolch**



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