

## **‘Defining Rewilding for Scotland’s Public Sector’ – Community Land Scotland’s response to the James Hutton Institute paper**

Community Land Scotland welcomes the [recent paper written by the James Hutton Institute and published by the Scottish Government](#) which seeks to define ‘rewilding’ for the public sector. Our response to that paper builds upon [our position paper on rewilding in 2022](#) in which we stated our reservations about the term, which this government paper acknowledges. However we also support the term’s underlying principles as far as they make mutually reinforcing links between communities’ economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability and wider public benefits associated with biodiversity restoration.

We strongly support the Scottish Government’s Environmental Strategy vision that, by 2045, by restoring nature and ending Scotland’s contribution to climate change, Scotland is transformed for the better – helping to secure the wellbeing of Scotland’s people and planet for generations to come<sup>1</sup>. We view land reform - defined as measures that modify or change the arrangements governing the possession and use of land in the public interest<sup>2</sup> - as crucial to its realisation. We contend that diversifying Scotland’s unusually concentrated pattern of rural land ownership to facilitate more community ownership of land is a pre-requisite for ensuring that both the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis are addressed in economically, environmentally, socially and culturally sustainable ways in accordance with the principles of community wealth building and the Just Transition to Net Zero<sup>3</sup>. We further contend that Scotland’s unusually concentrated pattern of rural land ownership has historically contributed to biodiversity loss in Scotland.

Community Land Scotland agrees with the paper that there is an unhelpful level of ambiguity around the term ‘rewilding’ which creates hurdles in discussing environmental action. It is also important to note the diversity of approaches within the broad category of ‘rewilding.’ There is no particular approach which can encapsulate ‘rewilding’ and it is not a codified term, it can range from active management of reintroduced keystone species to a less interventionist approach. There is also considerable overlap with the concept of ecological restoration, and the report indicates that differences between the two approaches are often as much about language as anything else. For example both approaches often acknowledge the impossibility of returning ecosystems to their original state, a distinction between European and North American conceptions of ‘rewilding.’

This James Hutton Institute paper recognises the divisiveness of the term ‘rewilding’ and in seeking to produce a definition for Scotland’s public sector they seek to move beyond this division and ensure that ‘rewilding’ reflects the Scottish context. This is timely, and while the report acknowledges the negative history associated with the term ‘rewilding’ - due to historical events and land management practices which have made rewilding seem disruptive and exclusionary - we are cautiously optimistic that this paper can set a new tone.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Government. (2020) The Environment Strategy for Scotland: vision and outcomes.

<sup>2</sup> Land Reform Review Group. (2014). The Land of Scotland and the Common Good. Page 16.

<sup>3</sup> The Centre for Local Economic Strategies describes community wealth building as “a new people-centred approach to local economic development, which redirects wealth back into the local economy, and places control and benefits into the hands of local people.”



The research undertaken for the paper suggested that the definition of rewilding should be:

"enabling nature's recovery, **whilst reflecting and respecting Scotland's society and heritage**, to achieve more resilient and autonomous ecosystems. Rewilding is part of a set of terms and approaches to landscape and nature management; it differs from other approaches in seeking to enable natural processes which eventually require relatively little management by humans. As with all landscape management, **rewilding should be achieved by processes that engage and ideally benefit local communities, in line with Scotland's Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement**, to support a Just Transition."

There is much in this proposed definition that Community Land Scotland welcomes and that we think can provide a more collaborative basis for engagement between 'rewilders' and local communities. The need to reflect and respect Scotland's society and heritage, and the need to engage and benefit local communities, is essential if rewilding projects are to be sustainable and enduring. There is no question in Community Land Scotland's view that rewilding **must** benefit local communities, not should. These projects may well play an important role in our fight against the climate and biodiversity crises but communities must be able to see themselves in these projects if they are going to be truly sustainable.

We have an opportunity to place people, culture and heritage within rewilding projects. This report provides the basis for this, as it highlights the importance of engaging, empowering, and benefiting local communities in rewilding proposals. We need to ensure that rewilding initiatives have an emphasis on the benefits for both people and nature. There are undoubtedly potential economic opportunities and community empowerment that rewilding can bring, but significant land use change such as this needs to clearly set out how it will empower communities in a meaningful way.

There is also a role for Community Land Scotland in this debate. While we recognise the historic and on-going contemporary issues with some rewilding projects and the language around the term, we also think that to ensure rewilding projects empower communities requires Community Land Scotland to take a more proactive role. With that in mind we propose the following actions:

- We will seek to put out a joint statement with rewilding organisations setting out shared principles of community empowerment in large-scale ecological regeneration projects
- We will maintain open lines of communication with rewilding organisations to offer advice and successful case studies of community-led ecological regeneration
- We will set out best practice examples and raise awareness of how communities can lead and contribute to these projects
- We will articulate what the expectations are if 'rewilders' are seeking to develop projects which rely on significant land use change which has impacts for local communities

**Community Land Scotland**

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