

REWILDING

A NEW CONSERVATION PARADIGM

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New terminology is gradually entering the vocabulary of the modern conservationist. At the top of the list is **REWILDING**. But, as with many other conservation terms, it is open to the widest of definitions to suit the individuals needs. In essence, rewilding is the restoration and protection of big wilderness areas together with wide ranging, large animals – particularly carnivores.

So where did rewilding come from?

A 1998 paper in the journal *Wild Earth* by Soule and Noss describes how conservationists realised that protecting species in relatively small, isolated areas, (effectively islands), could result in demographic and genetic accidents, environmental fluctuations and catastrophe. The answer was to also have bigness and connectivity. The authors, concerned principally with North America, said three essential features were needed to define rewilding – strictly protected core reserves, that were connected and had carnivores. Carnivores are essential in order to control the population of herbivores and small predators with the authors using the example of the havoc that had been caused by deer that had become out of control in the absence of cougars and wolves. It was also difficult to call a wilderness area truly “wild” where top carnivores such as cougars

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From Top Left clockwise: Grizzly bear, Gray wolf, American Black bear and Cougar

and wolves or bears were no longer present. Michael Soule established the Wildlands Project which has since become the Wildlands Network with the vision of creating four Wildways, (large corridors for wildlife) spanning North America’s coasts: The Eastern, Western, Pacific and Boreal Wildways. The Wildways are constructed by protecting core areas connected to one another by corridors or linkages. These are essentially mosaics of connected public and private lands that provide habitat and safe passageways for wildlife to travel freely from place to place.

Another North American rewilding project proposes replacing the large carnivores and herbivores that disappeared from North America 13,000 years ago. Under the plan, called Pleistocene “re-wilding,” close cousins and counterparts of the lost beasts, obtained mostly from Africa, would be released into large, protected tracts of land and allowed to roam freely. Ideally, such actions would not only give back to parts of North America an approximation of their long-ago megafauna diversity, they would also help save animals such as the African cheetah from extinction. Pleistocene re-wilding is also justified on economic



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From Top Left clockwise: Anatolian leopard, Eurasian wolf and European lynx.



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grounds, with "ecological history parks" in economically depressed regions of the Great Plains, creating management and tourism jobs for people living in the surrounding towns. The argument goes that as it was mostly human disturbance that led to species becoming extinct, it is right for humans to replace them as best as is currently possible.

In Europe, the Anatolian Leopard Foundation was formed in 2009 to investigate the survival of the Anatolian leopard subspecies in the Taurus Mountains of southern Turkey. However, it is now thought that it is probably extinct so the focus has been broadened under the banner of the Rewilding Foundation. While committed to the fundamental of big wilderness areas, the Foundation states that there are opportunities

other than ‘saving’ far away places with large roaming herbivore herds chased about by big predators. They say that Rewilding is about caring for landscape and biological diversity, no matter what scale is involved.

A simple example of how rewilding can work in practice is their Project: “Conserving large mammals and their habitat as incentive for ecological

sustainable development of a Romanian municipality”. In Romania, the traditional way of life, largely a balanced system of livestock herding, agroforestry and wildlife, is threatened by rural abandonment, with new generations seeking their fortune in the cities. The objective of the project is to provide viable socio-economical incentives for the ecologically sustainable development of Vama Buzaului, a county in Transylvania, Romania. The area is reported to have the potential to develop and integrate, green tourism, small business & industry, alternative living, energy production, agriculture and education. The Romanian Carpathians mountains are a mosaic of meadows, forests and gardens great biodiversity. The village of Vama Buzaului is situated next to the protected EU Natura 2000 area of Ciucaş ,which has sizeable large carnivore populations of bear, wolf and lynx. The presence of the wolf, for example, has considerable revenue earning potential as an attractor for eco-tourists.



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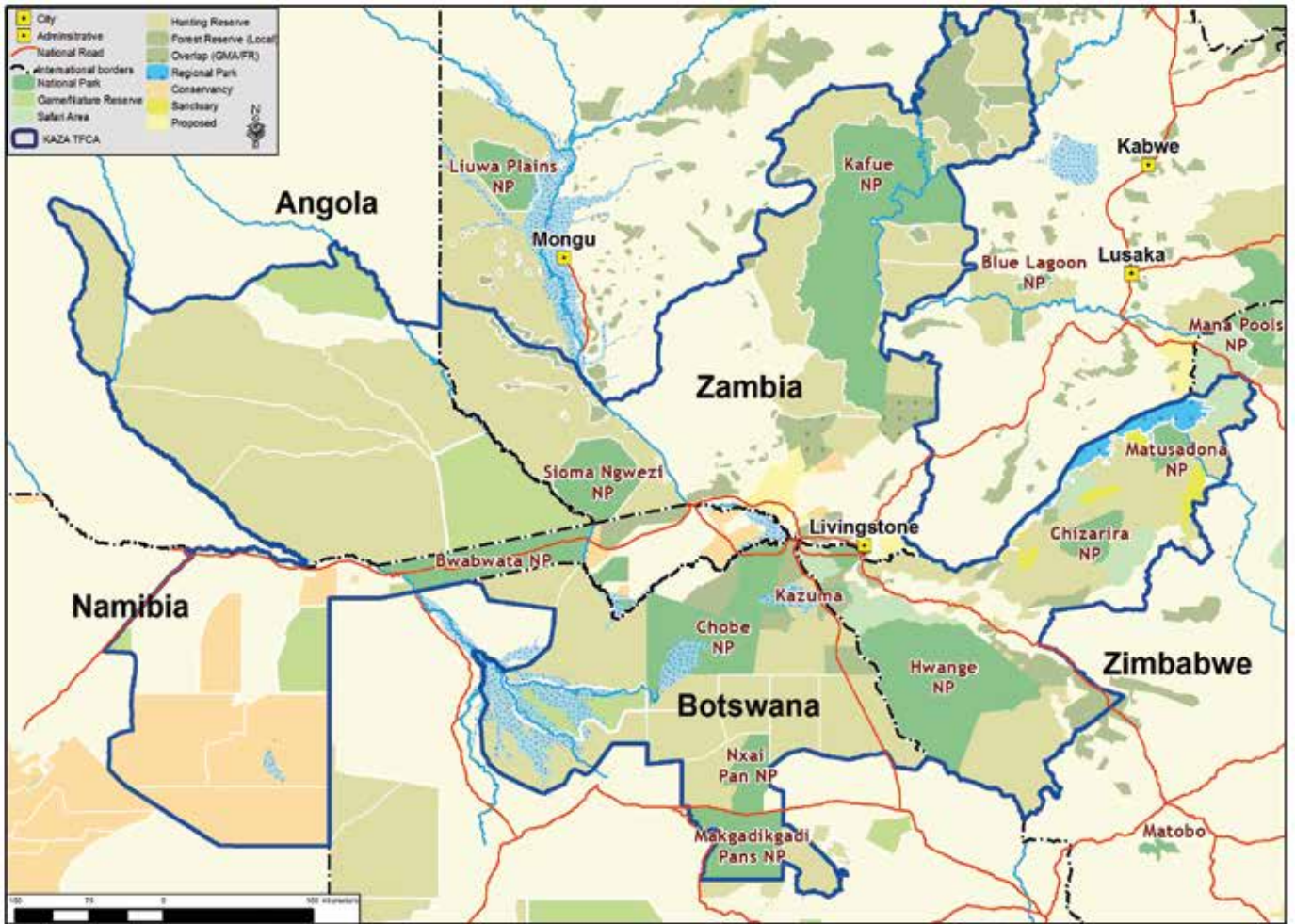
From Top Left clockwise: European bison, European beaver and Chamois.

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A special opportunity for the Vama Buzaului community is the reintroduction of the European (lowland) bison in the region, including the Ciucaș Natura 2000 reserve. Fabian Roth, a village council member and manager of the Zimbri Park (Bison Park) next to the village, has developed a bison herd consisting of stock from Poland, Austria, Italy and France. The herd has experienced the birth of several calves and, if proved to be scientifically appropriate, it is planned for a group of at least 30 animals to be released in the surrounds of Vama Buzaului. The rare bison would be another attraction for eco-tourists.

A more substantial rewilding project is also under development in Romania, in the southern Carpathian Mountains. Three existing protected areas, which together offer a wide variety of ecosystems and cover 225,000 hectares, are the starting point. Within this, a wilderness area of at least 100,000 hectares is planned with missing species such as the European bison and beaver being reintroduced. Deer and chamois would be allowed to flourish in the absence of hunting. Eco-tourism and other business opportunities would be developed within the surrounding communities to bring greater prosperity to the region.



Kavango Zambezi Map

The rewilding area is within the larger South Western Carpathians Wilderness Area project, run by WWF Romania and covering 11 Protected Areas, which offers scope for further expansion over time for the rewilding activities.

There are examples of forms of rewilding in Africa. The developing Kavango Zambezi (KAZA) Transfrontier Conservation Area is due to link 36 national parks, game reserves, community conservancies and game management areas covering parts of Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. By creating corridors between conservancies, areas with an over abundance of elephants, as in Botswana, will obtain some relief as dispersal of their populations to areas where historic poaching has devastated their numbers, such as in Zambia and Angola - effectively a form of rewilding – occurs. KAZA will be able to boast

the largest contiguous population of elephants in Africa with around 250,000 individuals and so is sure to become a major tourist destination bringing economic prosperity to the region.

Near the end of 2013 in Kenya, the Cabinet Secretary for the Ministry of the Environment, Water and Natural Resources Professor Judi Wakhungu was reported in the press as saying that idle land should be used to create space for wildlife. It was suggested that county governments, communities and individual land owners should sell or lease such land to the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS) to host growing wildlife populations while KWS were directed to intensify translocation of wildlife from areas whose ecological systems were overstretched to free areas to ensure vibrant growth of their numbers. In January, it was announced that 15

Black rhinos were to be moved into a special part of the Sera Community Conservancy in the Samburu East District of Northern Kenya, thereby adding to the rewilding of an area that would have historically supported free roaming black rhinos.

A more controversial form of rewilding being suggested in North America is the introduction of currently available species that are closely related to extinct species. The reasoning goes that as little as 13,000 years ago elephants, lions, cheetahs and camels roamed across North America so why shouldn't their close cousins and counterparts be brought into specially protected areas, particularly in the Great Plains region which is in desperate need for economic rejuvenation. The lack of these key species is reported to have led to a loss of biodiversity with species such as

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rats and dandelions among other pests and weeds gradually over-running the landscape. Founder stock would mainly come from African and Asian species currently held in captivity and the resultant populations would act as a buffer against the rapid decline of many species being experienced in Africa and Asia. It would, it is suggested, also offer a refuge from the effects of global climate change that could affect Africa in particular, or economic and political strife all of which could lead to the eventual extinction of the worlds remaining camels, elephants, cheetahs and lions.

Europe offers many opportunities for this type of rewilding as many of its lost species still survive or have close wild or domestic relatives elsewhere in the world. The European bison, Musk ox and Fallow deer have already been re-established. Scientists are suggesting that the Asiatic lion, leopard, spotted hyena, dhole, (Asiatic wild dog), Asiatic elephant and Asiatic wild ass could be established in appropriate current or new protected areas throughout Europe.

Humans have, and continue to be, largely been responsible for the loss of a huge number of species from North America and Europe and are increasingly threatening African and Asian wildlife. Rewilding is a way of reversing this trend.

Perhaps a more controversial approach to rewilding is the use of the latest scientific and technological developments to save all-but-extinct species or re-introduce extinct species to their former habitats. This is termed “De-extinction” and is the subject for the July-September edition of SWARA. ●

PHOTO BY: JULIA LANGFORD



From Top clockwise: Asiatic wild ass, Asiatic lion and Dhole Cat.