Landscape Scale Rewilding Project Management: Exploring rewilding as a multi-project environment [1, 2]

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Abstract

Rewilding has gained growing prominence in recent years as an alternative to established environmental conservation and ecological restoration projects. Strategic rewilding interventions typically involve greater ambition over larger geographical areas, and embrace visionary time horizons, such as 100-years for Durrell's Dalnacardoch Estate and 250-years for Trees for Life's Dundreggan Estate, both in the Scottish Highlands. For initiatives with such mega-timescales, should we be using the word 'project' at all? Perhaps rewilding on this scale and ambition might be better considered as transformational endeavors.

Many rewilding projects do not have short-term fixed outcomes, and deliberately take an agile approach to realize success, enabling more adaptive, place-based collaboration with natural world stakeholders. What works in one location may not work in another due to ecological or climate differences, even at a very local level. Rewilding interventions, like other projects, require attention to context in design and delivery. This paper proposes that long duration rewilding interventions may be considered as portfolios of connected projects and operational activities working at landscape level in collaboration with nature.

Introduction

This conceptual article reflects on the theory and practice of rewilding and project management and poses questions about whether long-term rewilding projects are more akin to programs or portfolios. Three long duration rewilding interventions, referred to as projects, are contrasted with project management concepts – with the key research question being whether such interventions

[1] *Editor's note: Second Editions are previously published papers that have continued relevance in today's project management world, or which were originally published in conference proceedings or in a language other than English. Original publication acknowledged; authors retain copyright. This paper is a revised version of a paper originally presented at the 11th Annual University of Maryland PM Symposium in April 2024. Jones, G. and Murphy, D. F. (2024) The paradox of rewilding projects: exploring rewilding as projects, programs or portfolios. It is published here with the permission of the authors and conference organizers.*

[2] How to cite this paper: Jones, G. W. and Murphy, D. F. (2025). Landscape Scale Rewilding Project Management: Exploring rewilding as a multi-project environment; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XIV, Issue I, January.

might be better described as multi-project interventions that are delivered under an umbrella of program or portfolio management.

Drawing upon secondary academic, practitioner and popular sources, the development of this paper is motivated by a wider research interest in how rewilding undertakings are justified and contributes to an evolving understanding of the development and implementation of rewilding projects.

What is Rewilding?

The idea of "wilderness is perceived in quite different ways, e.g., as a sphere of amorality, a sacred site or as a place of fear, of nature's self-reassertion, of escape from rules and restrictions, or of relief from stressful daily life" (Kowarik, 2018, p. 339).

Differences in the perception of wilderness make it difficult for academics and practitioners to agree on a universal concept of rewilding. Over the past four decades rewilding has nonetheless emerged as alternative language for restoration, and as an alternative approach to conservation that champions the (re-)introduction of megafauna to restore ecosystem biodiversity (Root-Bernstein, Gooden and Boyes, 2018). A specific example is offered by Rackham (2006, p. 14) who refers to "wildwood" as "vegetation before it was affected by settled human activities." Although rewilding is often explained in different ways, Carver *et al.* (2021, p. 1888) make the case for a unified definition:

> The process of rebuilding, following major human disturbance, a natural ecosystem by restoring natural processes and the complete or near complete food web at all trophic levels as a self-sustaining and resilient ecosystem with biota that would have been present had the disturbance not occurred.

Carver *et al.* (2021) also argue that ecosystems are dynamic, so endurance does not suggest an unchanging environment. They present a "3Cs" model of "Cores, Corridors, and Carnivores" as dimensions of rewilding/rebuilding, noting also another set of three Cs – Climate resilience, Compassion and Coexistence (Carver *et al.*, 2021, p. 1884). Alternatively, Corson et al. (2022, p. 1) suggest a simpler rewilding objective of increasing "the ability of ecological processes to act with little or no human intervention, and thus to enhance biodiversity and the supply of ecosystem services."

Others suggest using "restoration" as an alternative (Hayward *et al.*, 2019, p. 258). However, Root-Bernstein, Gooden and Boyes (2018) offer a different perspective:

> In practice, rewilding projects are a multiplicity of things, responding to site history, social context, geography, ecological condition, and feasibility in both physical (how do we move that animal?) and legal senses (are we permitted to move that animal?). Here, we are interested in the forms of production employed by project managers, scientists, and policy makers, to realize rewilding (Root-Bernstein, Gooden and Boyes, 2018, p. 292).

Another viewpoint is offered by Peeren (2019, p. 840) who acknowledges that rewilding is contested and submits that rural wildness has no fixed meaning and is even contradictory, given that the meaning of wilderness is land untouched by humans. Peeren then explores whether rewilding projects are speculative "wild experiments" not tied to either the cultivated rural landscape, or authentic wilderness, or even "unruly, unconventional 'cosmopolitan' or 'ecomodernist'" ways of combining rural and wilderness (Peeren, 2019, p. 840). A fair conclusion is that words like wild, wildness and wilderness have a breadth of meanings, and it therefore follows that rewilding will have a similarly broad interpretation.

Traditionally conservation has a narrower meaning, with a focus on single species or habitats in isolation (Carver *et al.*, 2021, p. 1888). Rewilding seeks a wider influence, focusing on ecological restoration with a reliance on nature-based solutions (Carver *et al.*, 2021). Although there are different interpretations of what rewilding is, most depictions are centered around rewilding as an attempt to transform an environment to a state that it might have been without settled human activities, whilst acknowledging that transformation will require careful thinking and leadership around human (non-)intervention. Environmental interventions, like other projects, require attention to context in project/program/portfolio design and delivery (Lejano *et al.,* 2007).

Both Root-Bernstein, Gooden and Boyes (2018) and most mainstream media reports describe these interventions as projects, but are they actually projects?

What is a Project?

The Project Management Institute (PMI) provides us with a simple accessible definition of a project – "a temporary endeavor undertaken to create a unique product, service, or result" (Project Management Institute, 2021b, p. 245). At a high level, rewilding is an intervention for a result. The project management professional bodies, Association of Project Management (APM) and PMI, articulate the purpose of a project as creating "value" for the organization and wider stakeholders (Project Management Institute, 2021a, p. 31).

Value is the "worth, importance or usefulness of something" (Project Management Institute, 2021a, p. 5), although stakeholders may have different perspectives. Stakeholders exist beyond the organization; societal value embraces communities and the natural environment (Project Management Institute, 2021a, p. 25). When referring to project benefits, the focus nonetheless is largely inward: on business value to the organization (Association for Project Management, 2019, p. 3), sustaining and growing the organization from an efficiency and organizational structure perspective (Project Management Institute, 2021a, p. 5), and purportedly delivering wider value from change through projects (Association for Project Management, 2019, p. 3). This provides a justification challenge for projects that are community or partnership driven, where different perceptions of value are articulated across a diverse set of stakeholders.

Blignaut, Aronson and de Wit (2014) suggest that there are competing stakeholder views of land-use between the economic and the ecological. Even within these viewpoints, there is not a single notion of economics, or a single idea of wilderness. Drechsler, Watzold and Grimm (2022) observe that biodiversity loss – which rewilding seeks to reverse – is driven primarily by economic land-use changes. Perhaps a contributor to this loss is the lack of policy guidance and prioritization on

rewilding as a form of land-use (Jones and Comfort, 2019; Segar *et al*. 2021). Regardless, local stakeholders need to be involved in land-use decisions so that they do not feel that decisions are "imposed" on them by external actors (Thomas, 2022). Further, it is not practical or desirable to rewild by removing people from the land. Local stakeholders need to be engaged in bottom-up decision-making to root rewilding projects in their communities (Wynne-Jones *et al*. 2020; Atchison *et al*. 2024).

PMI's body of knowledge, when discussing benefits management, focuses on stakeholder participation in evaluating "success factors" and considers this as being core to measuring project success (Project Management Institute, 2021a, p. 32). Value is the "ultimate indicator of success" (Project Management Institute, 2021a, p. 34), and benefits are a component of value. Both PMI and APM refer to benefits and value as reasons for undertaking projects and equate success with the measurement of benefits and value. Given that value is a key success indicator, realizing 'success' is therefore core to understanding 'value'.

Project Justification

Justification is central to the business case for projects. PMI outlines business justification analysis methods that are used for appraising project viability and decisions (Project Management Institute, 2021b, p. 175). These methods are used to forecast a future state of intended benefits and outcomes. Outcomes can have a high degree of uncertainty for a rewilding project, given that rewilding involves collaboration with the natural world. In the Wild Ennerdale rewilding intervention in North West England, the focus has been on the process rather than the endpoint. Asked what it would look like in ten years' time, the initiators replied: "We don't know. It's going to look like whatever it looks like" (Root-Bernstein, Gooden and Boyes, 2018, p. 296). At face value, the inability to forecast the benefit value appears to be a barrier to project justification. Summers and Welsh (2015) suggest that this is a limitation of commonly accepted definitions of what a project is, with the focus being on the views of the profession and organizations.

Valuing costs and intended benefits is recognized as a forecasting challenge in project management from psychological optimism bias to political-economic strategic misrepresentation (Flyvbjerg, 2008). Kreiner (2020, p. 401), in his analysis of Hirschman's Principle of the Hiding Hand, argues that the uncertainty of forecasts means that all projects encounter challenges and difficulties due to gaps between forecasts and experienced reality. Forecasts may miss wider benefits, unintended or unidentified at project concept. They may also omit third party benefits. This suggests a possible gap between the structure of project management professional guidance, such as PMBOK, and Hirschman's concept of projects as pursuit, an "ongoing experimentation" (Kreiner, 2020, p. 405), or might the use of Agile Project Management methodology enable this perceived gap to be closed.

It may also be that project management guidance is focused on corporate dimensions that require translation or conversion of project values to encompass social or environmental benefit. For example, looking at models of project progress and performance, the focus is on the iron triangle (time, quality and cost) and quantifiable measures, typically associated with cost and schedule in delivering the project scope (Project Management Institute, 2021b).

Project Context

Returning to the Root-Berstein, Gooden and Boyes (2018) suggestion that rewilding projects are a multiplicity of things, it is important to note that these 'things' may involve discrete interventions that involve varying forms of nature separated over long periods of time, and connected through a wider strategic ambition. Perhaps there is a multiplicity of projects within a higher level of governance. Returning to PMI, the definition of a 'program' encompasses "related projects, subsidiary programs, and program activities that are managed in a coordinated manner to obtain benefits not available by managing them individually" (Project Management Institute, 2021b, p. 245). For rewilding, this may be aligned with the vision articulated by Carver et al. (2021, p. 1888) of a "self-sustaining and resilient ecosystem" at program level, with the restoration of processes or species reintroduction held at individual project level.

Where rewilding interventions are significant, or when an organization has multiple interventions (or part of a wider range of activities), a single rewilding undertaking may be better managed as a portfolio, with "projects, programs, subsidiary portfolios, and operations managed as a group to achieve strategic objectives" (Project Management Institute, 2021b, p. 244).

In the following section, we explore these challenges by considering three century- long project examples, and we ask whether they may actually be programs or portfolios of multiple projects.

Project Examples

Dalnacardoch Estate: In 2023, the Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (Durrell) unveiled a 100-year rewilding project on the Dalnacardoch Estate in the Scottish Highlands Cairngorm National Park (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, 2023b). The extent to which PMI's "temporary endeavor" definition of a project (Project Management Institute, 2021, p. 245) applies to a 100-year rewilding vision is perhaps first tested by looking at the work of the Durrell organization.

Durrell is developing several rewilding sites across ten different countries. At the highest level, the Dalnacardoch Estate may be considered one of a portfolio of several rewilding interventions. However, rewilding sites are grouped into one of four operational pillars within Durrell (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, 2023a). Rewilding may be an operational function within Durrell, although the language of the Dalnacardoch Estate vision aligns with the definition of a "self-sustaining and resilient ecosystem" (Carver et al., 2021, p. 1888).

Looking to land ownership for further guidance, we can see that Dalnacardoch is not owned by Durrell. It is leased for the project duration, suggesting that the intervention, even with a 100-year timespan, is a temporary endeavor. Next, we should consider the activities intended for Dalnacardoch. They are multi-disciplinary initiatives, from ecological restoration and fauna (re-) introduction to community activities and education initiatives (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, 2023b). At this level, it becomes apparent that there is a mix of project and operational activities involved here. One of Durrell's other pillars is conservation training (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, 2023a). Although the 100-year timescale is essentially temporary, the intervention is multi-project and draws on the wider operational capability of Durrell. In

announcing the 100-year rewilding 'project', Durrell positioned it strategically as a portfolio (Project Management Institute, 2021, p. 244), and described it as a transformational moment, a "landscape-scale restoration project" that has taken several years to locate (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, 2023b).

Dundreggan: is an initiative of the charity Trees for Life which has an ambition of reviving the Caledonian Atlantic rainforest west of Loch Ness and the Great Glen in the Scottish Highlands, connecting loosely linked projects sharing the same ambition across the region. Dundreggan is their "flagship project" which was initiated in 2008 and is now described as one of "several ongoing projects" (Trees for Life, 2023b). There is evidence of operational functions: an onsite tree nursery, cafe, event spaces and accommodation. There is also a rewilding center, which is multidisciplinary, bridging rewilding and Gaelic history. Like Durrell, training is an important feature of the intervention. Notwithstanding the 250-year vision (Couling, 2017), agile concepts are observed with Trees for Life's ethos of innovation and desire to develop "ground-breaking" rewilding approaches (Trees for Life, 2023a).

This agile approach extends to collaborations with other organizations, landowners, and local communities. As explained by Murphy and Gale (2023), there is often a blurring of the boundaries between collaborative projects and cross-sector partnerships. Trees for Life has strategic and conservation partners with related projects, such as a seed collection project that is delivered in partnership with Woodland Trust Scotland (Trees for Life, 2023a).

Wild Ennerdale: is one of the longest running ecological restoration projects in Great Britain (Rewilding Europe, 2017). Located in the English Lake District, it is a collaboration between three landowners – the National Trust, the Forestry Commission and United Utilities. The project timescale is 500 years with a focus on process rather than a fixed outcome: "it's going to look like what it's going to look like" (Root-Bernstein, Gooden and Boyes, 2018, p. 296). It is a transformation of thinking from disjointed individual land ownership approaches to a coordinated collaborative landscape scale approach (Rewilding Europe, 2017). Perhaps rather than a project, it may be considered a partnership of connected land management interests undertaking a transformational program (Murphy and Gale, 2023). This aligns with the language used to describe Wild Ennerdale: "…widely recognised for its partnership working, future natural approach and for pioneering innovative ways of upland management which blur boundaries between forestry and farming…" (Forestry England, n.d.).

Returning to the reflection on whether Wild Ennerdale is a project, its Stewardship Plan suggests "ongoing" activities rather than temporary endeavors. Further, there is no endpoint. At the same time, there are broad concepts of change and "direction of travel" indicative of 'could', not 'will', acknowledging that collaborating with nature is unpredictable. Again, we see the agile concept of adaptability in the approach, which is described as "opportunistic as we continue to learn", rather than prescriptive and fixed (Wild Ennerdale, 2018).

Discussion

Jorgensen (2015, p. 486) suggests that rewilding is a "plastic" word – "developed in scientific language for discrete ideas that then move into daily use and take on different meanings according to the context." Rewilding can also be described as an adaptive approach to fit the (funding) needs of a project (Project Management Institute, 2021a, p. 15). This fluidity of meaning enables a wide interpretation of rewilding, along with malleability of project ambitions into a funding framework, particularly given that "externally funded projects themselves are best viewed as evolving, problem-solving systems" (Murray and Bannister, 2004, p. 385). In the Wild Ennerdale example, the partners are clear that they are vision led and will not become funding driven. If a funding call offers an opportunity to meet their objectives, they will apply, but they will not adapt their vision to pursue a funding prospect. Perhaps there may also be an analogous 'plastic' use of the word 'project'. These examples are likely referred to as projects because the word 'project' resonates with wider stakeholders than the language of program or portfolio.

With each of the rewilding examples we observe elements of operations not normally associated with projects, but may form part of portfolios, such as the café at Dundreggan and the training courses planned for Dalnacardoch. In addition, each example is aligned with their organizational strategy and intent. This naturally suggests a portfolio approach given that portfolios are suited for longer term interventions that require senior management attention (Project Management Institute, 2017).

Rewilding involves collaborations with nature and all its unpredictability. This requires retrospection, adaptability and continuous improvement associated with agile methods derived from the principles of the Agile Manifesto "responding to change over following a plan" (Agile Business Consortium, 2014). This is exemplified at Dalnacardoch with the intent to use ongoing ecological audits to inform the long-term strategic vision (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, 2023b).

Collaboration goes beyond nature. Rewilding requires partnership working across disciplines and across private ownership rights. We see this with Dalnacardoch's immediate engagement with neighboring properties and other potential partners (Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, 2023b). This, aligned with the practice of early and ongoing stakeholder identification and inclusion, is essential to "optimal delivery success" (Murphy and Gale, 2023, p. 8). Added, it is evident elsewhere in the Cairngorms National Park where competing views on land use have led to opposition over the reintroduction of beavers (MacArthur, 2024). Wild Ennerdale overcomes these potential conflicts through its partnering approach and landscape-scale strategies (Rewilding Europe, 2017).

Conclusion

The rewilding examples considered in this paper are multi-decade interventions that may be called projects simply because the term is better understood by most stakeholders than alternatives such as program or portfolio. The reality of these rewilding examples is that they are initiatives of a scale and duration that outstrip not only project timescales, but most organizational planning horizons. Their ambitions are strategic and transformative, typically associated with programs and portfolios. They combine multiple activities, some of which appear to be operational, normally associated with portfolio management, rather than project management, with a need for adaptability that would best be facilitated by more agile methods.

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