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Embedding rewilding in policy: Perspectives on overcoming barriers and unlocking opportunities

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Abstract

1. Rewilding initiatives are increasing in number across Europe and the UK in response to a growing awareness of substantial nature depletion, despite a lack of policy, guidance and legislation.
2. Ongoing transformations of UK environmental policies offer a 'policy window' in which rewilding could become established as a key strategy for nature recovery.
3. Here, we present the results of discussion sessions held as part of a British Ecological Society Policy Training workshop. A total of 46 participants, academics, practitioners and young people interested in rewilding attended. Our discussion focused on three pre-determined thematic discussion sessions: (1) barriers to rewilding and trade-offs; (2) species reintroductions; (3) facilitating rewilding in policy. Using thematic analysis, four emerging cross-cutting themes were identified from our workshop discussions: (a) environmental stewardship & public engagement, (b) cross-policy approaches, (c) incentivising rewilding and (d) an evidence base for rewilding.
4. *Policy Implications*. Given the UK's considerable biodiversity loss, restoring ecosystem processes and function on a large scale is increasingly urgent, and operationalising rewilding through supportive environmental policy structures should be a key priority for government.

For affiliations refer to page 150.

KEYWORDS
biodiversity loss, environmental policy, human-nature connectedness, nature-based solutions, restoration, species reintroductions

1 | INTRODUCTION

The current biodiversity or extinction crisis has been described as an existential threat to human survival (Ceballos et al., 2017). Biodiversity loss is accelerating with more than 1 million species now threatened with extinction (Ceballos & Ehrlich, 2023; IPBES, 2019). Species population declines and extirpations are predicted to have negative cascading consequences on ecosystem function and services that are intrinsically linked to human well-being (Bogoni et al., 2020; Ceballos et al., 2017). Radical and immediate solutions beyond current conservation strategies are required to reverse biodiversity loss and ecosystem deterioration (Perino et al., 2019). Rewilding presents an opportunity to restore and regenerate healthy ecosystems but remains a controversial approach that has been both promoted and criticised in recent years (Carver et al., 2021; Perino et al., 2019; Svenning, 2020).

Rewilding aims to regenerate self-sustaining, complex ecosystems with interlinked ecological processes that promote and support one another while minimising or gradually reducing human interventions (Carver et al., 2021; Fernández et al., 2017; Jepson & Schepers, 2016; Perino et al., 2019). The rewilding concept recognises that ecosystems are dynamic and recovery trajectories and/or future ecosystem states cannot always be predicted (Corlett, 2016; du Toit & Pettorelli, 2019; Perino et al., 2019). In this way, rewilding strongly contrasts with traditional conservation strategies, such as restoration, that attempt to maintain a prescribed ecosystem state or particular species composition based on historic benchmarks, through active management (du Toit & Pettorelli, 2019, Perino et al., 2019).

Various approaches to rewilding have been developed. Trophic rewilding is closely aligned to the original concept, seeking to restore missing keystone species such as large carnivores or herbivores (Fernández et al., 2017; Saavedra et al., 2023) or to introduce functional replacements including non-native species (Corlett, 2016; Schowanek et al., 2021). Passive rewilding attempts to align natural and anthropogenic systems with minimum human intervention (Nogués-Bravo et al., 2016), emphasising the use of passive ecological succession in abandoned landscapes, the cessation of agricultural activity and the creation of protected unmanaged reserves (Jepson, 2016; Perino et al., 2019). Smaller-scale interventions are also being increasingly referred to as rewilding including: urban rewilding on a microscale via rewilding windowsills, balconies or small gardens and creating micro-forests or green roofs, prompting some scientists to question which types of projects qualify as rewilding initiatives (Schulte to Bühne et al., 2022).

Concerns that rewilding aims to restore wilderness areas to the exclusion of people have also been raised (e.g. Jørgensen, 2015). Wilderness areas are ecologically largely intact landscapes or seascapes, mostly free from human disturbance (Jones et al., 2018; Kormos et al., 2016; Watson et al., 2016), yet rewilding proponents argue that wild areas do not have to preclude human presence. Instead, wilderness areas should be recognised as having lower levels of human use, and with any use not resulting in significant biophysical disturbance to natural ecosystems (Watson et al., 2016). Therefore, successful rewilding initiatives should not be seen as separate from human society (Carver et al., 2021; Perino et al., 2019) and should be seen in the context of varying socio-cultural values and differing perceptions of 'wild' or 'wilderness' (Massenberg et al., 2023; Perino et al., 2019). Involving people in rewilding initiatives may also help address the failing human–nature relationship by fostering greater connection with, and value of, nature (Moxon et al., 2023). Critically, environmental policies, which have so far failed to curtail the disconnect between humans and nature, need to be overhauled to facilitate both psychological and physical connections to nature in the long term (Ives et al., 2017; Richardson, 2023).

Many countries have committed to reversing biodiversity loss through frameworks such as the Kunming-Montreal Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD, 2022) and the European Union Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 (European Commission, 2020), which include ambitious ecosystem restoration targets. In 2024, the EU formally adopted a regulation on nature restoration, which aims to implement measures to restore at least 20% of the European Union's land and sea areas by 2030, and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050 (Regulation 2022/869). Rewilding is gaining credibility with policy makers as a strategy to help countries expand their restoration programmes and reach the Global Biodiversity Framework targets (IUCN, 2023; Jepson & Schepers, 2016; Root-Bernstein et al., 2018). However, there are still limited references to rewilding in policy, in favour of 'restoration' and no European governmental policies that focus solely on rewilding (Martin et al., 2023; Pettorelli & Bullock, 2023). A limited evidence base for effective rewilding is often seen as a barrier to implementing rewilding practices into policy, despite growing evidence that rewilding can recover biodiversity (Hart et al., 2023).

The UK is one of the world's most biodiversity-impoverished countries, ranking in the bottom 10% of countries on the Biodiversity Intactness Index and with 41% of species decreasing in abundance since 1970 (NHM, 2024; State of Nature Partnership, 2019, 2023). Against this backdrop, UK rewilding initiatives have gathered pace. Projects are diverse in scale and participants, from community-run initiatives such as the Felixstow Community Nature Reserve seeking to regenerate 'micro-ecosystems' across gardens, allotments and balconies, to landscape-level coastal realignment schemes across Environmental Non-Governmental Organisation reserves (e.g. Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Wallasea Island). Following its exit from

the European Union, the UK is going through a transformation of its environmental policies, providing a 'policy window' for rewilding (Root-Bernstein et al., 2018; Thomas, 2022). Rewilding offers a new model to recover ecosystems at scale and will be key to the delivery of the UK Government's 25-Year Environment Plan (2018) which states 'new environmental management systems' for the land and sea are needed. Additionally, the Environmental Land Management scheme has ambitions to support landscape-scale nature recovery, providing new funding for rewilding projects (Defra, 2023). On public land, county councils have launched rewilding projects in consultation with the public to support policies such as Biodiversity Action Plans, Green Infrastructure Strategies and Carbon Reduction Targets (e.g. North Somerset Council and Derby Council). However, while there has been some adoption of rewilding by local authorities, much of the UK rewilding discourse and practice has been driven by conservation charities, private land managers/owners and 'guerrilla' rewilders (Sandom et al., 2019; Thomas, 2022). Additionally, as environmental policy in the UK is devolved, there is disparity across the four UK nations, resulting in an 'upward divergence' with Scotland and Wales creating more ambitious environmental policies (Burns et al., 2018). While there is significant scope across the whole of the UK to implement rewilding, the extent to which UK policy can shape the effects of these initiatives requires further attention (Brown et al., 2024).

Here, we conducted an in-person workshop with a diverse mix of people to explore relevant perspectives in the context of rewilding and UK policy originating either from their scholarship (established academics and Early Career Researchers), their experience in the field (practitioners), their concern and/or interest in the topic (young people) or a combination of these aspects. We focused primarily on the UK but consider wider implications for rewilding policy in our discussion.

2 | METHODS

A facilitated one-day British Ecological Society Policy Training workshop was held at the University of Hull on 12th September 2023. The workshop was free to attend and jointly hosted by the British Ecological Society, University of Hull and Yorkshire Wildlife Trust. The workshop was advertised on the British Ecological Society website and internally at the University of Hull. The workshop was aimed at ecologists, scientists or anyone interested in rewilding but particularly aimed at students or Early Career Researchers. A total of 46 participants attended: 24 Early Career Researchers/young persons; 13 established academics; 5 practitioners and 4 attendees for which no category was assigned. No assumption was made of attendees' prior knowledge of UK policy and legislation. A series of 15-min introductory talks by keynote speakers outlined a basic overview of English environmental policy, the importance of stakeholder engagement for policy and case studies of local and international rewilding projects, including: Spurn Point, UK, Noddle Hill, UK and the Primeval Białowieża Forest, Poland (See Appendix S1: Workshop Agenda). Workshop participants were then allocated to seven groups to participate in small group discussions. In these discussions, participants were asked to consider 11 rewilding and policy questions (Table 1) organised across three pre-determined thematic sessions: (1) barriers and trade-offs; (2) species reintroductions; (3) facilitating rewilding in policy. Questions were proposed by the British Ecological Society and reviewed by the lead authors. Participants had 45 min to discuss the questions in each thematic category within their group, recording their key points, written as anonymous qualitative statements on sticky notes. Each group nominated a group chair to keep the discussion to time, collate key points and present a summary at the end of the workshop.

TABLE 1 Workshop discussion questions organised across three pre-determined thematic sessions: (i) barriers and trade-offs; (ii) species reintroductions; (iii) facilitating rewilding in policy.

Discussion questions across pre-determined thematic sessions
Session 1. Barriers and trade-offs
1. What are the barriers to the uptake of rewilding in England? How could these be overcome?
2. How could local communities and stakeholders be involved in the policy-making process for rewilding projects?
3. How can funding be driven into rewilding?
4. How could potential trade-offs between rewilding and other land-use priorities be managed in a Land Use Framework for England?
Session 2. Species reintroductions
5. How confident can we be in species reintroductions?
6. What are the potential problems with illegal species reintroductions?
7. What steps are needed to work towards species reintroductions?
Session 3. Facilitating rewilding through policy
8. How could rewilding projects be integrated into delivering the UK's biodiversity and conservation targets?
9. What collaborations or partnerships would you recommend to facilitate rewilding efforts at a national and local government level?
10. How can we ensure rewilded sites are protected in the long term?
11. What steps would you take to boost urban rewilding delivery and what are the challenges to overcome?

All data were imported into NVivo 14 for qualitative analysis and were coded by the lead researcher using open (emergent) coding; an initial set of codes representing prominent themes and ideas was constructed after reading the qualitative statements provided by the participants. The core authorship team independently coded the data, and the combined set of codes was then compared and verified by the lead author and the co-authors (consensus coding), whereby revisions were made including the creation of new additional codes and merging or subdividing existing codes. Consensus coding helps to reinforce inter-coder reliability, ensuring consistent coding of data with multiple researchers improving validity (Cascio et al., 2019). A full list of the final codes is provided in Appendix S2. This research

was approved by the Faculty of Science and Engineering Ethics Committee at the University of Hull (FEC_2023_98) prior to the beginning of the research and written informed consent was obtained from participants. Participation in the workshop activity was voluntary, and all data were anonymised upon collection. Workshop participants were invited to contribute as authors on this manuscript to acknowledge their insightful contributions to the rewilding discussions.

3 | RESULTS

3.1 | Barriers and trade offs

Current scientific knowledge was discussed by participants with reference to baselines, functional connectivity, scale of ecosystem processes and species geographic ranges. Marine rewilding was mentioned, with one participant stating that integrated thinking was needed to address land–sea interactions. One participant was concerned that rewilding was proceeding without a good evidence base, such as planting trees on peatland under the guise of rewilding. Several participants also highlighted the lack of a clear definition for rewilding: '*What is the goal and definition of rewilding? Need clear targets for what we expect from rewilding across ecological, social, and economic systems which depend on definition*' [BTG1]. Some participants also highlighted that in their experience, many people are actively avoiding the term rewilding as it is contentious and may cause conflict.

Current policy was predominantly seen as a barrier to rewilding by participants. Participants highlighted limited political motivation for rewilding, overlapping policies, unclear policy remits, uncertainty in legislation post-Brexit and conflicting environmental targets. Geographic and demographic limitations of living on a small, heavily populated island were also suggested as a barrier to rewilding, particularly regarding connectivity and the difficulty of finding large tracts of land for rewilded landscapes. Additionally, participants discussed the trade-off between agriculture and nature protection and the need for efficient or intensive land use to make more room for rewilded land.

A large portion of the discussion centred on public perceptions of rewilding, for example the contrast between '*idyllic*' or '*cultural landscapes*' [BTG1/4], such as sheep farms or uplands managed for grouse shooting, and rewilded landscapes seen as '*messy or unnatural to many landowners*' [BTG1]. Perceptions of what is natural, and shifting baselines could also make it difficult for the wider public to understand rewilding. Participants questioned whether rewilding programmes work in an urban environment where perceptions differ over what is '*safe*' or '*tidy*' [BTG4]. A lack of natural history education, low human–nature connectedness and low perceived value of rewilded areas were also emphasised as problems with public perceptions: *'do the general public think that rewilding is [the] wisest use of money?*' [BTG7]. However, it was also stated that since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a much higher use of nature reserves by the public and that the perceived value of rewilded areas is increasing.

Participants discussed the inclusion of community views in rewilding projects to encourage support and maximise the chances of long-term success. For example, ensuring access to nature, including local knowledge in design and implementation, and involving community groups such as local trusts, schools and youth organisations could foster community ownership over rewilded areas. Participants further discussed involving people in decision-making processes via community forums and citizen assemblies, local referendums, grassroots campaigns and citizen science projects, suggesting that: '*keeping up this momentum of public support is essential to push through any rewilding legislation*' [BTG1].

3.2 | Species reintroductions

Participants identified much uncertainty relating to our current scientific knowledge for species reintroductions. For example, unpredictable ecosystem effects, especially in the context of environmental change, and a limited knowledge base for the marine environment: '*Species are moving anyway as a result of climate change, so we don't know what species and habitats we will have in 20 years, which might make reintroducing certain species unsuccessful*' [SRG7]. However, participants also identified examples of successful species reintroductions in other countries (e.g. wolves (*Canis lupus*) and lynx (*Lynx lynx*)), and some participants were optimistic that lessons from these case studies could be applied to the UK. Further, research from successful case studies could be used to predict what might happen following a species reintroduction.

'*Smaller*' species for reintroduction were considered by participants, including insects (e.g. dung beetles, butterflies), and some plant species, with one participant suggesting we could be more confident when introducing species of a lower trophic level. Many participants suggested that we should focus on smaller species reintroductions, as '*they are equally important in their own right'* [SRG2], and because the spatial requirements for large charismatic megafauna could not be met in the UK. Participants perceived apex predators and larger species to present a greater challenge for species reintroductions overall. However, some participants also stated larger species were more likely to make a difference to ecosystems: '*Introduction of small species are 'easy wins', but do they really make a difference to ecosystems? Which is better, safe and ineffective, or bold and effective?'* [SRG1].

Negative perceptions of species reintroductions were largely based on risk. Participants were worried that there would be unpredictable or unexpected ecosystem effects, disease risk and/or the risk of invasive and non-native species introduced through 'guerrilla' rewilding. Ethical concerns were also raised; for example if reintroduced species do not survive, become genetically inbred, or if they thrive and require population management through culling. Monitoring was therefore considered a key component of building a scientific evidence base, but participants highlighted ongoing costs needed for long-term

monitoring, and a need for pre- and post-introduction monitoring to record ecological, social and economic effects of rewilding projects.

To facilitate species reintroductions, participants discussed the need to understand public perceptions of rewilding actions and areas of potential human–wildlife conflict. Participants felt that reintroductions could be divisive, particularly across economic or social divides (e.g. '*wealthy landowners*' [BTG3] reintroducing species) or where limited efforts at public consultation have been made, giving no opportunity for expectation management. Although consultation and community support from the outset of a project were seen by most participants to be central to successful reintroductions, some participants advocated for an initial level of secrecy to ensure biosecurity and reduce human disturbance. However, it was also stated that there has been a lack of trust among some communities following cases of escapes as part of closed reintroductions (where species are kept in enclosures), for example with beavers or where there have been guerrilla reintroductions.

Where species reintroductions are taking place, participants discussed the need for policies that would mitigate human–wildlife conflict and support the long-term success of reintroductions. For example, through legal protection of reintroduced species and commitments for long-term monitoring. Alternative economic opportunities were raised as a potential enabler, providing finance through tourism or payments for ecosystem services, but with most points regarding funding related to compensation schemes (e.g. to farmers): '*People affected need long-term commitments to compensation and a voice beyond government cycles*' [SRG1].

3.3 | Facilitating rewilding through policy

Participants largely felt that current policy was not fit for rewilding and needed adapting to align with rewilding concepts and projects. Government protections were seen as: '*massively limiting given [the] dynamic nature of rewilded areas. Most rewilded areas are currently privately owned because of the limiting nature of many types of protected areas*' [FRG1] and generally '*too slow*' [FRG2]. A new conservation designation was proposed for rewilded land that could reflect habitat connectivity and be more adaptable over time than, for example, current Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The focus of current policy on prescriptive and static species lists or habitat assemblages was raised as a potential barrier and that instead a bespoke rewilding category was needed. However, participants also discussed where there could be synergies with current nature conservation targets and frameworks. For example, targets for habitat restoration and Biodiversity Net Gain, and also '30×30', the commitment to protect and conserve a minimum of 30% of land and sea for biodiversity by 2030. Better alignment with climate adaptation and mitigation goals through the use of nature-based solutions and blue carbon, and embedding natural capital and ecosystem services into the rewilding discussion was also mentioned.

Participants discussed incentivising rewilding, including incentives for local businesses to make spaces more wildlife friendly (e.g. green roofs, green infrastructure), landowner subsidies for green space and Landscape Recovery Projects. Getting funding was seen as a challenge by some participants, but others mentioned schemes such as incubator funds (e.g. from Rewilding Britain) to remove barriers to rewilding projects. The role of industry and the responsibility of the private sector in limiting biodiversity loss were also highlighted as potential facilitators through, for example, novel partnerships (e.g. between whisky distilleries and oyster restoration) and Corporate Social Responsibility. Participants also mentioned the multiple incentives rewilding itself could provide: '*Highlight rewilding initiatives as providing multiple cultural, environmental, agricultural and economic roles*' [FRG4].

A cross-policy approach (working across different government departments and between different administrations) was highlighted by participants to facilitate rewilding. '*Rewilding minds*' [FRG6] by embedding learning about the natural environment in the education system, was seen as a key step by some participants, focusing on young people and providing tools to enable local environmental stewardship. Collaboration with healthcare providers to promote the benefits of access to nature for well-being (green prescribing) was mentioned, alongside enhancing urban air quality and urban shade. Most participants viewed access to nature and rewilded spaces as important: '*Rewilded areas should be close to cities! Not just in the middle of nowhere. Need to be accessible and can then be included in urban greenspace commitments*' [FRG1] and linked to nature policy commitments and environmental stewardship. In the case of urban rewilding, participants thought public perceptions of '*unmanaged*', '*abandoned*' or '*wilder*' [FRG4/7] urban spaces may need to move towards more positive views. Participants thought enabling community involvement with rewilding projects could help address negative perceptions and build connections between communities and rewilded spaces. Small-scale initiatives and actions were mentioned such as limiting mowing, protection of street trees and rewilded gardens and were considered in a rewilding context as part of a bottom-up approach.

To measure progress or success, frameworks for monitoring rewilding on a large scale at all stages of a rewilding project were considered essential by participants. Some participants suggested that citizen science efforts could be used for monitoring as part of a wider programme with multiple tools. However, it was unclear from the discussion how 'successful' rewilding would be measured. A '*wilderness metric*' [FRG5] or restoration target was suggested, but without clarity on the goal or the endpoint of rewilding actions. Some participants stated that scientific evidence was needed to demonstrate that initiatives lead to increased biodiversity, as large assumptions are currently made about success.

3.4 | Emergent cross cutting themes

Our analysis revealed that workshop participants across all discussion sessions had largely positive attitudes towards rewilding, and they thought rewilding was a much-needed conservation approach

to recover ecosystems and reverse biodiversity decline. Participants highlighted that rewilding could help the UK achieve biodiversity restoration goals and provide multiple social, cultural and economic benefits. Comparisons across the three pre-determined thematic discussion sessions revealed repeating codes, suggesting a set of emerging cross-cutting rewilding policy themes: environmental stewardship and public engagement, cross-policy approaches, incentivising rewilding and an evidence base for rewilding (Figure 1).

Environmental stewardship and public engagement were emergent themes capturing participant views on both how to ensure communities and stakeholders are supported to participate in rewilding through activities such as stakeholder consultation '*from the very beginning of reintroduction projects*' [SRG1], '*community workshops*' [FRG4] and '*citizen science*' [FRG4] and also the need for strengthening human–nature connection due to a '*lack of education and connection to nature*' [BTG1] and an '*intergenerational disconnect*' [BTG6]. Cross-policy approaches were seen as necessary in all discussion sessions to support scalable rewilding, with '*lack of shared purpose*' [BTG5] and '*long term commitments*' [SRG1] seen as policy barriers, but collaboration at '*multiple scales*' [FRG4/6] seen as a key enabler. To incentivise rewilding, compensation to reduce human–wildlife conflict from species reintroductions [SRG1/3/5], habitat restoration funds, Biodiversity Net Gain and novel ideas such as rewilding 'subscribers' [BT6] were identified. In this way rewilding could help build a green economy '*inspiring value in next generation*' [FRG4]. Creating an evidence base for rewilding emerged from all discussions, with current knowledge and experience viewed by some as a barrier to rewilding [BT3/5], as a requirement for successful species reintroduction in terms of understanding impacts [SR1/4] and as a measure against progress towards achieving biodiversity goals [FRG5].

4 | DISCUSSION

There is growing interest in rewilding as a way to reverse the dramatic decline of native UK biodiversity (Cary & Wartmann, 2024; YouGov, 2021). Post-Brexit, the UK has opportunities to implement rewilding, with efforts bolstered by nature recovery targets, visions for a 'wilder landscape' and specific initiatives such as the Environmental Land Management Scheme. Our study explores the barriers to implementing rewilding initiatives, key questions around species reintroductions and how we can facilitate integrating rewilding into policy, from the perspectives of academics, practitioners and young people with an interest in rewilding. Our study highlights potential challenges with current policy but also highlights policy windows and how community engagement and stewardship can drive forward rewilding in the absence of political leadership.

The lack of an operational definition for rewilding has frustrated practitioners, policy makers and academics, creating a barrier for

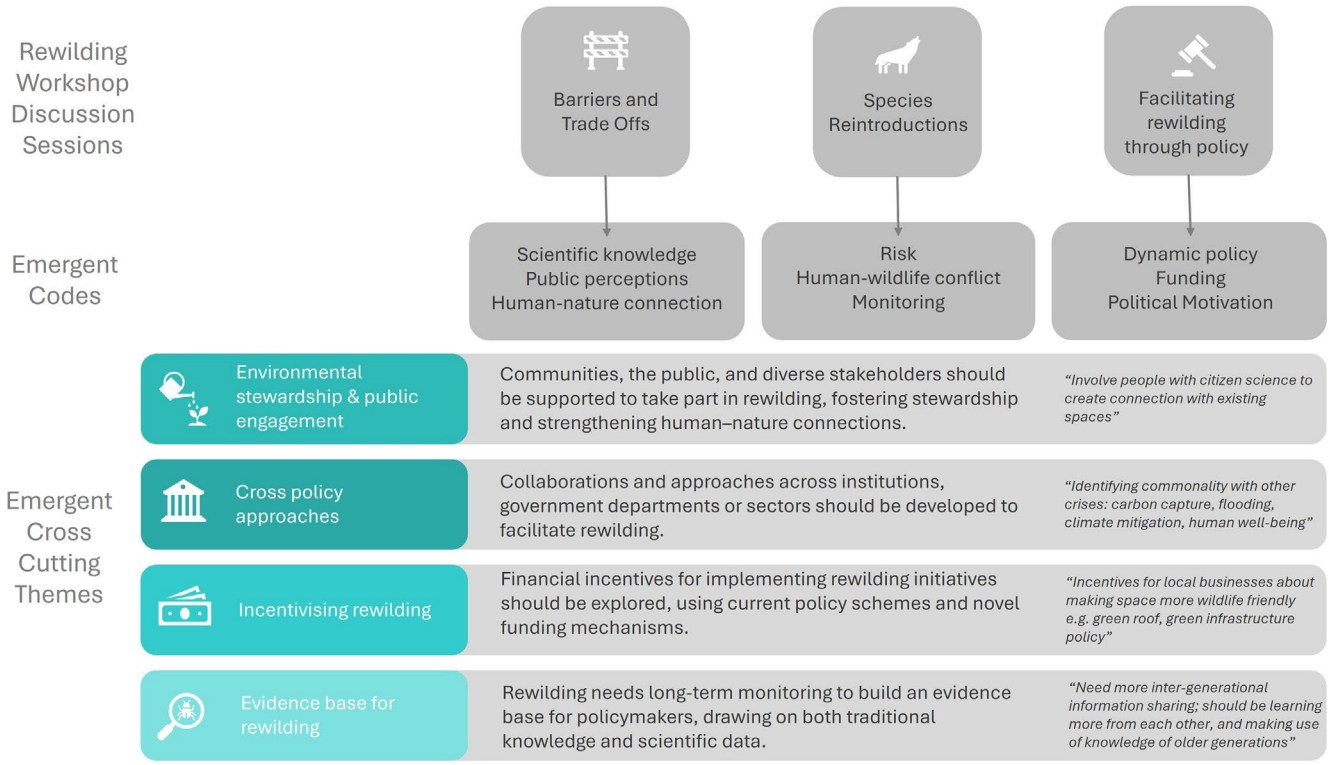

FIGURE 1 Three pre-determined rewilding workshop discussion sessions on (1) Barriers and Trade-Offs, (2) Species reintroductions and (3) Facilitating Rewilding in Policy resulted in emergent codes for each session and emergent cross-cutting themes across the workshop discussions (a) environmental stewardship & public engagement, (b) cross-policy approaches, (c) incentivising rewilding and (d) an evidence base for rewilding.

advancing practice and delaying the integration of rewilding into national and international biodiversity conservation frameworks (Pettorelli et al., 2018; Schulte to Bühne et al., 2022). However, the recent unifying definition of rewilding proposed by Carver et al., (2021) may aid the creation of effective rewilding policies and make use of any future policy windows (Pettorelli et al., 2018; Schulte to Bühne et al., 2022; Thomas, 2022). Participants in our study highlighted that there may be differing definitions and goals of rewilding within current UK rewilding initiatives, but the rewilding concept is gaining traction regardless.

As the number of rewilding initiatives has increased, caution has been advised against progressing some rewilding projects in the absence of scientific evidence and limited understanding of long-term effects (Hart et al., 2023). Our workshop participants highlighted that, in many cases, we may lack good baseline and monitoring data for rewilding projects, which could delay policy support. Even though rewilding trajectories may be uncertain and open-ended, long-term monitoring of efforts is needed to deepen our understanding and provide evidence that can be presented to policy makers to inform and support future projects (Mutillod et al., 2024). Some scientists recommend the rapid development of systematically monitored national networks of experimental rewilding projects to facilitate the collection of targeted evidence at the science-policy interface (Hart et al., 2023). While this may be a long-term ideal for the UK, robust monitoring and evaluation can provide the evidence to demonstrate the ecological and socio-economic value of rewilding initiatives (Pettorelli et al., 2018). Additionally, monitoring can further enable the evaluation of the progress towards policy targets achieved through rewilding, e.g. UK national nature recovery targets and Global Biodiversity Framework targets.

Current conservation policy is largely based on schedules or lists of protected species and habitats and invasive/ non-native species (e.g. the European Union Habitats and Birds Directives and the Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the North-East Atlantic (OSPAR) Marine Protected Area Network). This current policy approach is preservationist, focusing on fixed and arbitrary ecological baselines and 'compositionalist', focused on set species assemblages and habitat types (Pettorelli et al., 2018; Sandom et al., 2019). Our workshop participants viewed current policy as a barrier, as it neglects ecosystem connections and larger scale thinking required for rewilding. Current conservation policy has been criticised for constraining rewilding by enforcing the implementation of management measures that maintain a static view of habitat and species range, community compositions and structure against 'reference conditions' (Jepson, 2016; Pettorelli et al., 2018; Sandom et al., 2019). Under scenarios of global environmental change, these reference conditions may be impossible to achieve (Pettorelli et al., 2018) and could prevent the recognition of natural succession processes as a measure of successful rewilding (Broughton et al., 2022). Additionally, reference conditions can already be in a degraded state. Forcing the maintenance of these conditions limits recovery potential and trajectory of rewilded areas. Therefore, there is a pressing need for creatively integrating rewilding with policy without diluting the fundamental principles of rewilding (Hart et al., 2023). Rewilding is a process to enable ecosystems to reach their own dynamic, self-perpetuating states, which contrasts with restoration approaches that often work towards a historically derived endpoint (du Toit & Pettorelli, 2019). Within the rewilding model, rather than positioning people as managers tasked with returning systems to such a pre-defined state, people are enabled to engage as co-inhabitants of dynamic landscapes, where uncertainty, change and ecological agency are embraced. Education and public awareness are therefore central, to building understanding of this ecological unpredictability and support tolerance for novel or unexpected outcomes, cultivating stewardship grounded in humility and reciprocity rather than control.

Our workshop participants emphasised that conservation policy-making should be dynamic, long-term in outlook, integrated across policy areas and include different sections of society (e.g. public and private sector alignment). Policy makers are becoming more interested in Nature-Based Solutions, solutions to societal challenges that involve working with nature (Seddon et al., 2020), to tackle environmental problems (e.g. climate change, extreme flood events, food and water insecurity) (Tafel et al., 2022). Increasingly, rewilding is being proposed as an initiative to expand the portfolio of Nature-Based Solutions (Cromsigt et al., 2018; Schmitz et al., 2023) and could be an effective way to attract finance from business and public sector agencies and to build coalitions between conservationists, policy makers and the private sector (Cromsigt et al., 2018). However, to align Nature-Based Solutions with rewilding, further thought will be needed on which metrics would be used to measure success, and how challenges between conflicting policy objectives might be addressed. Here, our participants highlighted the synergy between rewilding and Nature-Based Solutions for achieving climate mitigation and adaptation targets but did not reflect on the practical integration of the concepts. Current Nature-Based Solutions for climate change mitigation and adaptation focus on protecting and restoring plants (e.g. trees and seagrasses), and soil and sediment microbes (Schmitz et al., 2023), but do not fully consider ecosystem processes and trophic functions. Therefore, a further change in policy thinking will be required to recognise trophic rewilding and the introduction or population recovery of wild animals and large herbivores as an instrumental part of natural solutions (Cromsigt et al., 2018, Schmitz et al., 2023).

Species reintroduction remains a controversial topic in the UK, with policy responses precautionary and slow (Gaywood, 2018). The UK Government has recently stated its prioritisation of habitat restoration over species reintroduction (UK Government, 2023), despite recommendations and evidence that species reintroductions could make a significant contribution to the government's targets on nature recovery (Bolam et al., 2021). Evidence provided to policy makers in support of species reintroductions would need to include feasibility and impact assessments, long-term management plans and clear communication with and consultation of local communities and landowners. The divisive nature of species reintroductions

was highlighted by our participants, with the reintroduction of apex predators in the UK being particularly challenging in terms of societal acceptance, supporting findings by Holmes et al. (2020). Some studies of large carnivore reintroductions show generally positive attitudes, but with communities closest to the reintroduction being the wariest (Smith et al., 2015). Thus, local community engagement and involvement in species reintroduction efforts are necessary for a successful programme. Indeed, for any rewilding initiative to succeed, society and nature need to be fully integrated (Carver et al., 2021).

The majority of our workshop participants perceived community participation as a necessary and desirable aspect of rewilding, in line with other studies (e.g. Harrington & Russo, 2024; Holmes et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023). Some workshop participants were worried that having community participation too early in the process would increase human disturbance at the rewilding sites and/or promote more conflict if communities were not supportive of rewilding efforts, particularly in the case of species reintroductions. So far, there has been limited analysis of how to manage stakeholder conflicts that could emerge in rewilding efforts, and the likely policy impact these conflicts could have (Butler et al., 2021; Drouilly & O'Riain, 2021). Adopting a set of guiding principles for inclusive and transparent engagement while addressing the concerns of stakeholders is vital to ensure that rewilding efforts are successful in the long term (Carver et al., 2021). However, constructive and informative dialogue that is mindful of local power relationships is often difficult to achieve, with rewilding initiatives being perceived as being imposed upon the community, or selective participation occurring where debate is stifled (Hawkins et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2023). Community forums, citizen assemblies, local referendums, grassroots campaigns and citizen science projects were possible routes suggested by our workshop participants, to more meaningful community engagement and greater representation in rewilding policy development.

Our participants were hopeful that greater community participation in rewilding efforts would increase support for rewilding by strengthening a connection to nature. Nature connectedness is a psychological concept that measures the closeness of an individual's relationship with the natural world (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). The UK was recently ranked the lowest of 14 European countries for 'nature connectedness' and well-being (Richardson et al., 2022), which is linked to the impoverished state of UK biodiversity and the so-called 'extinction of experience' (Soga & Gaston, 2016). Participation in rewilding initiatives could foster greater human–nature connectedness by providing opportunities to develop experiential, emotional and cognitive connection, thereby encouraging understanding and appreciation of nature (Carver et al., 2021). Wildlife gardening has been shown to be one method of reversing the 'extinction of experience' (Garfinkel et al., 2024) and could be more widely implemented through urban rewilding schemes, further driving nature engagement. Our participants emphasised that access to rewilded spaces was an important factor in building connection to, and stewardship of, nature. Thus, the continuation, inclusion and expansion of policies that target human–nature connection such as the UK cross-government Green Social Prescribing Programme, should be a key priority. Cross-cutting rewilding policies with an emphasis on education, health care and urban greenspace commitments could support people to engage in nature-based interventions and activities to improve their mental and physical health, while recovering biodiversity.

Globally, government responses to climate and environmental issues have been perceived negatively by younger people (Hickman et al., 2021). The UK Government is committed to leaving the environment '*in a better state than we found it and pass on to the next generation a natural environment protected and enhanced for the future*' under the 25 Year Environment Plan (HM Government, 2018), which demonstrates an awareness from government of environmental intergenerational equity. However, young people are often neglected in environmental decision-making processes, even though they represent the transition between present and future generations (Knappe & Renn, 2022; Wallis & Loy, 2021) and despite a strong desire to input into decisions about their future (Devenport et al., 2021; Lim et al., 2017). Here, 24 out of 46 workshop participants self-identified as Early Career Researchers or young people, offering some insights into younger persons' perspectives on rewilding. The need to engage young people in rewilding was discussed by our participants in the context of growing human–nature disconnection, but also in terms of inspiring the next generation. Rewilding offers an opportunity to incorporate a novel, innovative and energetic approach to conservation and nature restoration, beyond traditional conservation actors (Wynne-Jones et al., 2020). Ensuring young people have access to youth platforms for decision-making at local, national and international levels (e.g. UK Youth Parliament) can enable discussion and foster greater advocacy for embedding rewilding in policy. Younger generations are ideally placed to champion rewilding policies focusing on the long-term health of future ecosystems they will inherit.

5 | CONCLUSION

As rewilding initiatives progress, it is important to identify windows of opportunity to influence conservation policy, enabling rewilding to be recognised as a complementary approach that will help us meet biodiversity recovery targets. Our study, exploring the perspectives of a diverse group including academics, practitioners and young people has highlighted the barriers to policy uptake of rewilding, but also the facilitating factors. Our participants recommended that current conservation policy should be revised to enable a more dynamic view of nature under both restoration and global change scenarios. Innovative methods including embedding rewilding into nature-based solutions frameworks, engaging novel partnerships and providing incubator funding would contribute to wider implementation of rewilding approaches. Robust monitoring and evaluation of initiatives are needed to provide evidence to policymakers of the effectiveness of rewilding to achieve conservation

and socio-economic objectives. Critically, the inclusion of younger generations in decision-making processes will be necessary to advance the rewilding vision.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Charlotte R. Hopkins and India Stephenson conceived the idea. Core authorship team: Charlotte R. Hopkins, Esther E. Brooker, Kristy A. Adaway, Charlotte E. Trotman, Clare E. Collins, Clare Cowgill, Matthew C. Morgan and Dylan Thompson-Jones analysed the workshop data. Charlotte R. Hopkins, Esther E. Brooker, Kristy A. Adaway, Charlotte E. Trotman, Clare E. Collins, Clare Cowgill, Matthew C. Morgan and Dylan Thompson-Jones led the writing of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the drafts and/or participated in the workshop discussions and gave final approval for publication.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

Appendix S1. Workshop agenda.

Appendix S2. Coding structure.

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