

Public Attitudes towards Rewilding Projects

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### Abstract

Rewilding is a large scale conservation approach that focuses on setting aside large plots of land for ecosystem restoration. E.O. Wilson, a distinguished sociobiologist, proposes that half of the earth should be devoted to wildlife reserves. Each rewilding reserve provides habitat and protection for the world's keystone species by imitating the biological resources and species interactions of that region. Various rewilding projects are already in operation around the world, although rewilding is a relatively new field of conservation. However, in order to ensure future success of both current and prospective projects, the general public must approve of rewilding. Therefore, I would like to formulate and conduct a survey that investigates public attitudes towards specific rewilding projects both before and after their implementation. A handful of previous studies have collected statistics on public opinion towards conservation or rewilding, but none of these studies have compared general support both before and after exposure to a detailed project. Due to similarities in research, my survey will follow a comparable format to the aforementioned studies. This survey may serve as a general template that can be modified for each future rewilding project.

## Public Attitudes towards Rewilding Projects

### **Introduction**

Only 10 percent of Earth's species are currently protected on paper (Mingle, 2015). As the human population grows and more people begin to migrate towards urban environments, we must develop a conservation approach that designates large plots of land for the restoration of our keystone species. This relatively new conservation method is called "rewilding."

E.O. Wilson, a renowned sociobiologist, largely developed this field through his "Half Earth" proposal, which suggests that half of the planet should be set aside as wildlife reserves (Mingle, 2015). He argues that this proposal is practical, for a concentration of people within metropolitan areas will open up land for ecosystem restoration. Scientists predict that by 2100, 90 percent of the human population will be living in cities (Lynn, 2015). Although Wilson's plan could theoretically work, nothing will come about unless the general public is in favor of large scale conservation efforts.

Various rewilding projects have already been implemented around the world. Each project aims to restore ecosystems that existed as much as 13,000 years ago by reintroducing the major keystone species to reserves that span thousands of square miles (Mushegian, 2008). Some existing projects include Oostvaardersplassen, a 6,000-hectare reserve around the Dutch countryside, and Pleistocene parks (Marris, 2009).

Many of these projects are built or supported by single people. Frans Vera was responsible for Oostvaardersplassen by introducing the proper species to the reserve, such as Konik horses and Heck cattle. Each species substituted their natural ancestors from the same region (Marris, 2009). In addition, M.C. Davis has been working on the "Piney Woods" reserve,

a longleaf pine forest that has been reduced by 97 percent of its original size. Due to his efforts, the region currently conserves Florida's black bears and the gopher tortoise (Hiss, 2014).

These individuals have made significant progress in initiating various rewilding projects. However, in order for large scale conservation to proceed and for the "Half Earth" goal to be achieved, rewilding must be approved by the general public. I would like to investigate public attitudes towards specific rewilding projects both prior to and following their implementation. The success of rewilding efforts in the future is entirely dependent upon public perceptions of conservation.

## **Background**

A few studies have successfully collected statistics on public opinion towards rewilding. Most studies involved a detailed survey that was distributed to a diverse sample of individuals. In 2009, a survey was sent to 4000 random households in Switzerland. All responses were classified under four human-nature relationships: nature lovers, nature sympathizers, nature-connected users, and nature controllers (Bauer et al., 2009). While the survey managed to gauge general differences in public opinion towards wildlife and rewilding, it did not investigate attitudes towards a specific rewilding project. Thus, the survey was missing public opinion associated with a practical scenario, such as a reserve in close proximity to one's own home.

Another study from Europe aimed to analyze public support for a specific rewilding effort in the Eastern Carpathians region. The rewilding within this particular area is geared towards migratory species between Slovakia and Poland. The study claims that the first year of the project was spent surveying public support towards rewilding (Helmer et al., 2015). Although

the study mentions general approval of the Eastern Carpathians restoration, there is no specific data provided to account for the opinion of those who opposed the project. Additionally, no follow-up survey was conducted following the implementation of the rewilding. I would like to measure support towards rewilding projects both before and after they have been introduced through the use of a thorough survey.

Similarly, a study conducted in 2005 sought to investigate public attitudes towards a proposed wolf restoration in the southern Rockies. Researchers interviewed 1300 voters by phone in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. Overall, 64 percent of the voters favored reestablishment while 33 percent opposed it (Meadow et al., 2005). This study most closely matches the intended methods of my proposal, for the study thoroughly investigated public attitudes towards a specific and realistic rewilding project. However, just as the previous study, no follow-up survey was given following the proposed wolf restoration. I would like to compare the attitudes of the same, controlled sample throughout the proposition and establishment of the rewilding project.

## **Methods**

I plan on systematically determining public perceptions of a specific rewilding project by developing a detailed scientific survey. This survey will then be distributed to a large sample of houses surrounding a proposed rewilding site, prior to its implementation. My survey will follow a similar template to some of the surveys used in the aforementioned studies. Therefore, it will begin by classifying one's responses under four different categories of human-nature relationships, as used in Switzerland's study (Bauer et al., 2009). This will assist with statistical

analysis as attitudes towards rewilding are correlated with particular predispositions towards wildlife and nature.

The survey will then examine public opinions towards the concept of rewilding and the importance of conservation on a basic level. Finally, the survey will lead into a section regarding a specific rewilding project, most likely one in relatively close proximity to one's home. This will measure if first-hand exposure is a significant factor in public attitudes towards conservation. In this section, questions will touch upon the logistics of the project, such as the goals and purpose of the rewilding, particular species being introduced to the region, steps towards implementation of the project, and the expected timeline of the project's introduction.

Following a considerable interval of time, as the rewilding project is fully implemented within that region, a similar survey will be sent to roughly the same sample of people. Using a similar overall sample will reduce the variable of incomparable responses, so that surveys from both before and after implementation of the project can be fully compared.

### **Expected Results**

I expect that following distribution and analysis of the initial survey prior to the project's implementation, there will be various strong correlations between different components of the survey. For example, I expect that those who are classified as "nature lovers" or "nature-sympathizers" will be in support of conservation and rewilding, as well as in favor of the specific rewilding project. I predict that those who are classified as nature-connected users will be in favor of conservation and rewilding, but perhaps less supportive of the specific project. I expect this result because if they are classified by their own relationship with nature, a rewilding

site may restrict their ability to be immersed in nature, as this will be a wild and protected area. Therefore, they may support the concept of rewilding due to their love for wildlife, but reject the implementation of the specific project due to personal consequences.

Finally, I expect that those who are classified as nature controllers will have less positive opinions towards conservation and rewilding, for both of these concepts emphasize the intrinsic value of wildlife, separate from its relationship to humankind. Similarly, I predict that these individuals will not be in favor of a specific rewilding project in close proximity to their home, for this would restrict their ability to control the region and reap personal benefits from the land.

Upon comparison of the the surveys from before and after implementation of the project, I expect that individuals may be more or less supportive of rewilding after first-hand exposure to the project. After learning about the rewilding effort through personal experience, they may find newfound value in the process. On the other hand, they may note personal inconveniences that detract from their perceived value of rewilding. Either way, statistical data of this comparison will shed light on the public attitudes of individuals in close range to a rewilding project. I hope to publish my findings as a scientific article so that the statistics and correlations can be used to direct future rewilding efforts.

## **Conclusion**

For most environmental initiatives, the promotion and support of the project by a focused group of people is not enough to enact widespread, global change. Similarly, although half of the earth could theoretically be set aside as wildlife reserves, this goal is impossible without general public support. Through the use of this survey, which can be adjusted to fit numerous rewilding

projects, researchers can measure public attitudes towards each respective project. Over time, such studies can be used to track general trends in support for conservation and rewilding efforts, for the human threat to endangered species and degraded ecosystems will only grow stronger without large scale efforts to protect them.



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## **Budget**

The majority of the cost of this research project will be due to time. Unless surveys are delivered to individuals in-person rather than by mail or phone, travel costs will not be a large factor. However, I will spend a lot of time designing a survey with specific questions that can categorize each response under a different human-nature relationship. Additionally, it will take a lot of time to distribute the survey to hundreds of people within the given sample. I propose that this initial survey should be conducted within the 12 months leading up to the preliminary implementation of the project. This process will be repeated about a decade later, ensuring that the project has been fully established and developed within the region before the survey is administered once again.

Due to this extended timeline of the project, with mostly statistical analysis and the first steps towards publication taking place in between surveys, I think a set wage of \$12/hr should be established for the project. Assuming I am working full-time 5 days a week, and that it takes altogether about three months to develop the survey, administer it fully, and conduct a full statistical analysis, I believe a reasonable budget is around \$5,760.