



Leo Mercer

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## Arguing about rewilding at the Conservative Party conference

*Coverage of the Conservative Party conference might have been consumed with the leadership contest, but the real policy discussion took place in the fringe events. Leo Mercer writes about his experience of bringing his expertise on rewilding to a panel event with the Conservative Environment Network, and outlines the challenges of changing policy through evidence-based research.*

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The 2024 Conservative conference was held in late September in Birmingham. The agenda and most conference goers were occupied with the machinations of the Tory leadership election – where James Cleverly, Kemi Badenoch, Tom Tugendhat and Robert Jenrick sought to swoon their colleagues through hustings, set piece speeches and distribution of kitschy personally branded merch – ranging from “the Tugendhat hat” to “Kemi apples” and “no leaks here James Cleverly water bottles”.

Dodgy merch, set piece speeches and politicking aside, the catalogue of fringe events is where the real magic of a political conference occurs. These events usually include an MP/local councillor and representatives from interest groups/NGOs and civil society. Here, in a more relaxed less time-pressured environment is where ideas, policies and research that may shape the political agenda are thrashed out.



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This year, the LSE co-sponsored a panel event with the Conservative Environment Network which discussed the role of rewilding in meeting nature recovery and emissions reduction targets in the agricultural and land use sectors. The other panellists were Alastair Driver (Director of Rewilding Britain), Tom Bradshaw (President of the National Farmers Union – NFU), Aphra Brandreth (MP for Chester South and Eddisbury), and Sir Robert Buckland (former Justice and Wales Secretary).

## The reception of rewilding

The issue of rewilding is a thorny one (sorry for the terrible pun). The view of farmers, as prosecuted by the NFU, is that rewilded land impinges on “food security” (a measure of how self-sufficient a nation is) by taking agricultural land out of production and is “done too, not with” local communities. Conservationists point out that the UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries on earth, with around 53 per cent of biodiversity intact and dire statistics across most environmental indicators. The mucky job of politicians is to mediate between the concerns of conservationists, farmers and communities and develop policy that supports food production, nature recovery and emissions abatement – including whether, and to what extent, rewilding plays a role in this process. It is the job of researchers such as myself, and colleagues from across the LSE to communicate the latest evidence and help to find a way through these policy questions that limits trade-offs and maximises benefits.

As a researcher, my role on the panel was to share data and insights into the current state of the UK environment and the evidence that exists regarding the climate mitigation potential of rewilded land. Sentiment from the other speakers was mixed. Brandreth (MP for Chester South and Eddisbury) and Buckland (former Justice and Wales Secretary) were cautiously supportive of rewilding. They acknowledged the importance of reversing trends in nature decline, and there was tacit recognition of the role rewilding can play in nature recovery. But it was framed as a zero-sum game with agriculture. This view point holds that because both require land, increasing one (rewilding) comes at the expense of the other (agriculture) with nature recovery and food production considered to be mutually exclusive.



*Rewilding is needed as an additional tool within the tool kit – it is not a silver bullet.*



Bradshaw (President of the National Farmers Union) connected the question of whether we should pursue rewilding to the wider food systems transition and trade policy by ensuring that British farmers are not undercut by imports with lower environmental and animal welfare standards. All participants highlighted the necessity of high-quality data in order to create accurate baselines upon which land managers can measure progress against.

Driver (Director of Rewilding Britain) spoke forcefully about the state of the UK's environment and how “we have been backsliding on biodiversity” – he argued we need something more than conventional nature restoration (such as reforestation or peatland restoration) and that the new agri-environment schemes are not turning the dial on nature decline. Rewilding is needed as an additional tool within the tool kit – it is not a silver bullet. Buckland argued the Landscape Recovery Scheme (tier three of the Environmental Land Management Scheme – ELMs) is successful because it developed bespoke funding arrangements between the Government and land managers rather than a prescriptive top down approach.



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The discussion was interesting and cordial and each panellist represented their constituents well. One area where we violently agreed on were the rumours that the agricultural budget may be cut, potentially by as much as £358m due to an underspend in the **Farming and Countryside Programme**. It was noted by all panellists that in order to meet the statutory **Environment Act**

targets, the **30x30 nature conservation target** and future **carbon** budgets; we needed to be investing in farmers to deliver on these goals – not taking away funding.

## The role of species reintroduction and rewilding regulation

Questions from the audience largely centred on the issue of species reintroduction. This is unsurprising as this is the lightning rod for rewilding. Reintroducing extinct species is one of the core principles of rewilding, as it helps to restore trophic relationships within an ecosystem – hastening recovery and healthy functioning. However so-called **beaver bombing** (unlicensed reintroductions) has put many farmers and rural communities offside with the entire approach which does not always prescribe reintroductions. Although unmentioned, the prospect of the **Eurasian lynx** or **wolves** being reintroduced to rewilded landscapes was an undercurrent of discussion that was surfaced through questions on beavers.



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Points were made by audience members that rewilding projects should be implemented with the support of local communities where possible. There was other discussion about the need for a UK-based definition or minimum standard for what constitutes a rewilding project. This can in turn stimulate private capital flows into rewilding projects which is currently held up because of limited government oversight. It was noted by Driver that the prior Conservative Government was amenable to developing a definition or minimum standards but ultimately got cold feet.



*The space we have left for nature is isolated, in poor condition and fragmented – and under continual pressure from*

## *agricultural practices, urban expansion and infrastructure development.*



The ability to bring together a diversity of voices and thrash out ideas of consequence is what party conference fringe events are all about. The topic under discussion fit this billing perfectly. The UK's natural environment is heavily modified and degraded. The space we have left for nature is isolated, in poor condition and fragmented – and under continual pressure from agricultural practices, urban expansion and infrastructure development.

So it is right to discuss whether rewilding could play a role in helping to achieve the UK's statutory environmental and climate targets and whether this is a sensible use of the UK's limited land when trying to balance food production, nature recovery and emissions abatement. However, it remains to be seen whether discussions such as these will shift the dial on rewilding. Those on the panel supportive of rewilding were likely preaching to the converted in the audience and there will remain strident critics of the approach. However, as researchers – all we can do is highlight the evidence – and let the politicians do the mucky business of decision making.

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### About the author



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Leo Mercer is a Policy Analyst at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment based at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He works on a variety of UK net-zero policy areas, including carbon pricing, just transition, the voluntary carbon market and decarbonisation of the land use sector.

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