

Rewilding: a policy journey

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Rewilding foregrounds the restoration of ecological dynamics and recovery of bio-abundance. Whilst it has long been recognised that interactions between composition, structure and function determine both bio-abundance and diversity in ecosystems, much European nature conservation law foregrounds the 'compositional' aspect. In this presentation, I will explore the reasons for this and argue that whilst this focus has created powerful environmental institutions and law it has also produce barriers to rewilding in practice. Since 2016 I have been engaging with colleagues in Rewilding Europe and the UK to create a more enabling policy environment for rewilding. This experience has revealed the varied nature of these barriers, which include policy narratives, perceptions of policy 'risk', animal identities and the challenge of specifying ecological dynamics in law. After characterising these barriers, I will argue that a mix of 'pioneer' rewilding projects', the rise of a broader restoration agenda and nature-based solution discourse, together with the 'institutional fluidity' surrounding Brexit is creating an exciting opportunity to 'reboot' and 'revitalise' European nature conservation and with this our applied ecological sciences.