

# **RAMBLERS CYMRU**

## **POLICY STATEMENT on 'REWILDING'**

### **Policy**

- Ramblers Cymru supports the general concept of deliberate action to restore damaged ecosystems, particularly where this will benefit native flora and fauna, provided it does not detract from the walking experience. We particularly support schemes to increase biodiversity on Wales's mountains and moorlands, and projects to encourage the regeneration of native woodlands. We believe that the concept of rewilding provides a positive vision for restoring our mountain and moorland ecosystems.

### **Guidelines**

- While generally supporting the concept of 'rewilding' we recognise that it has the potential to impact on the Welsh landscape (including designated areas), visual amenity, wildlife interests and the walking environment.
- We recognise that 'rewilding' can lead to loss of access as public paths and access land become scrubbed over, and that farmers may not have the resources to keep rights of way and access routes clear of vegetation. We shall determine our response with particular regard to the effect on public access.
- We believe that 'rewilding' needs to be done through collaboration with land-management interests and we shall be mindful of the interests of land managers, farmers and commoners who could be adversely affected by 'rewilding' proposals.
- We expect to be consulted on all 'rewilding' proposals which affect our interests and on animal re-introductions.
- We generally support the re-introduction of native species in Wales but will consider any proposal on its individual merits with particular consideration of the effect on public access.

### **1. Introduction**

Ramblers Cymru supports the general concept of deliberate action to restore damaged ecosystems, particularly where this will benefit native flora and fauna (which is what we understand 'rewilding' to mean). This idea is at the heart of many, but not all, proposals for rewilding. Ramblers Cymru is particularly supportive of schemes to increase biodiversity in Wales' mountains and moorlands, where decades of poor land management have led

to denuded landscapes, and of projects to encourage the regeneration of native woodlands.

Some rewilding projects focus on species re-introduction. Ramblers Cymru recognises that the debate around species re-introductions is particularly sensitive and needs support from land management interests, in particular, farmers. For this reason our policy on animal re-introduction is dealt with separately from that on the general principle of rewilding (see paragraph 9).

Ramblers Cymru is aware that both rewilding and species introductions have the potential to impact on the Welsh landscape (including designated areas), visual amenity, wildlife interests and the walking environment. The walking environment includes areas visible from rights of way, permissive footpaths, access land, and the National Trails of Wales. Whilst in general we would expect the impact to be positive, there may be instances where this is not the case.

## **2. General**

A charitable objective of the Ramblers is to protect and enhance, for the benefit of the public, the beauty of the countryside, and to maintain the health and sustainability of the outdoor environment for future generations to enjoy.

Part of the Ramblers Cymru Vision is to protect, improve, and enhance the attractiveness of the places that people enjoy to walk.

Accessibility is also an important issue for Ramblers, and the potential impacts of rewilding or species re-introduction schemes on accessibility are discussed in paragraphs 6 and 9 below.

## **3. The Issue**

The wide open spaces of the moorlands and mountains of Wales are much valued for active leisure and recreation, and thus provide significant health benefits.

But most of our upland areas lack the rich biodiversity we should expect to see whilst out walking. We are used to walking where the lack of natural regeneration is clear to see. Indeed, most of our uplands are denuded and out of balance with nature. They are often inappropriately grazed, drained, forested, and fenced.

In principle, the concept of rewilding provides a positive vision for restoring our mountain and moorland ecosystems, but this needs to be done through thoughtful collaboration with land management interests to be successful.

## **4. National Policy**

**Natural Resources Wales (NRW)** has produced an internal briefing paper which confirms that rewilding, as a concept, should be supported, but

recognises that it may have both benefits and possible dangers (eg: damage to the environment if it is carried out in an inappropriate way). Its approach to schemes is guided by the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources, as defined in the Environment Act Wales 2016; and by its other duty to promote well-being by promoting the social, economic, environmental and cultural development of Wales.

The **Welsh Government's** policy on biodiversity is set out in its Nature Recovery Action Plan published in 2015. Its key objectives include the following which could relate to rewilding –

- Safeguard species and habitats of principal importance and improve their management
- Increase the resilience of our natural environment by restoring degraded habitats and habitat creation
- Regarding the possible reintroduction of species which have become extinct in Wales, the Welsh Government believes they should be considered on a case-by-case basis, and supports the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Guidelines for Re-introductions and Other Conservation Translocations.

## **5. Common Land and Farming**

Ramblers Cymru needs to be mindful of the interests of land managers and farmers, who could potentially be adversely affected by rewilding. These may include commoners who enjoy rights such as grazing and ancient rights of estovers (the right to take wood), pannage (feeding pigs in woodland) and turbarry (digging peat). This is particularly the case due to the large amount of Common Land in Wales which constitutes nearly 40% of all open access land. The current uncertainty over farming subsidies could have a major impact on rewilding in both a positive and negative way.

## **6. Access Rights**

Mountain, moor, heath, and down may have been mapped as open access land if they qualify due to their vegetation, openness and boundaries. This access land has rights for walkers, as does all registered common land (which may also have rights for horse-riders). Where this land is rewilded, the vegetation cover may change in numerous ways, such as scrub and trees growing, vegetation changing from semi improved to unimproved, wet and boggy areas caused by beavers or removing ditches, some of which may enhance the walker's experience, or may be detrimental to it.

In many open-access moorland areas the only paths which exist are sheep paths which, with the removal of sheep, would disappear.

Similarly public rights of way (PRoW) may be affected by rewilding, such as those in previously grazed areas being affected by scrub, which if not kept clear by regular use or cutting, may become blocked. Although it is the landowner's responsibility to keep all PRoW on the land clear, it is recognised

that many farmers may not have the resources. These farmers need to be considered when confronted with rewilding projects.

Other linear routes including desire lines on hills may also be affected by rewilding.

## **7. Dealing with Proposed Schemes**

Ramblers Cymru will expect to be consulted on: -

- rewilding proposals that might affect the use of public footpaths, all other rights of way, and open access land,
- schemes which might have an impact on the Welsh landscape,
- schemes involving the re-introductions of animals.

These proposals will normally be dealt with by Ramblers Cymru Areas and Groups, following the guidelines in this policy statement, on a case-by-case basis.

## **8. Planning and rewilding**

It is uncertain whether any rewilding schemes will require planning permission.

If planning applications are made for rewilding schemes, or animal re-introductions, then these should be responded to by the relevant Area or Group as per current procedures.

## **9. Animal re-introductions**

Based on the current Ramblers Scotland policy statement, Ramblers Cymru is generally supportive of the re-introduction of native species in Wales, but this is on a case-by-case basis.

There is currently discussion on the re-introduction of the beaver in Wales by the Bevis Trust. We are supportive of Article 22 of the European Habitats Directive which allows for the re-introduction of individual native species. However, any re-introduction requires proper studies to be made by the government, led by Natural Resources Wales (NRW).

Our decision on whether to support these individual re-introductions will be based on the evidence of these studies.

## **10. Taking the policy forward**

As rewilding schemes become more prevalent in Wales, and Welsh Government policy evolves, Ramblers Cymru policy will be reviewed by Welsh Council as necessary.