

When Humans Make the Wilderness

How an unusual rewilding experiment turned into an ethical minefield.

By Valentine Faure

AUGUST 10, 2020



They arrived as if from another age, as if they remembered what had been there before the roads and buildings and cars. Ducks walking in the empty streets of Paris, a herd of fallow deer grazing on lawns in East London; buffalo walking along an empty highway in New Delhi.

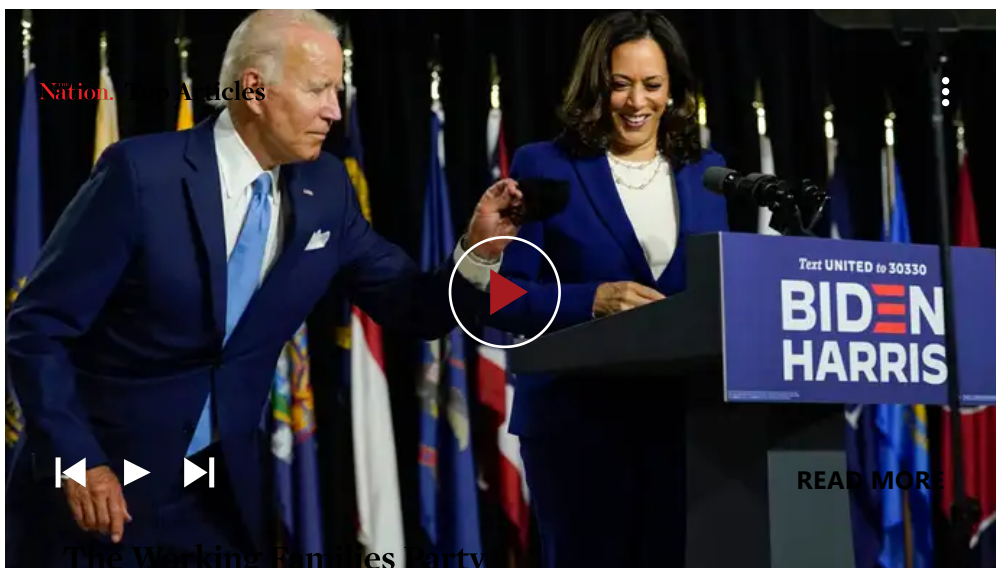
Over the past few months, the Covid-19 pandemic has frozen the world's economy and forced half of humanity into confinement. Amid the calamity—over half a million deaths, untold economic and social dislocation—some pointed to unprecedented opportunities: to try degrowth strategies, end predatory tourism, or curb emissions. The animal resurgence, in particular, captured the public imagination. Many of us, clinging to the possibility of anything resembling a silver lining, were quick to share on social media these images of wildlife

reasserting itself, like postcards from a possible future in which we might have finally learned a valuable lesson about our impact on the world we inhabit.

There's precedent for wildlife flourishing when humans are out of the picture. Thirty years after the Chernobyl disaster and the subsequent evacuation of 350,000 people, the site has become home to a thriving population of wolves, bears, and bison and now hosts more than 200 bird species. Now we are stricken with a pathogen that originated in animals; nature seems to be defying human primacy like never before. As the border between the categories we call civilization and the natural world dissolves, it's time to ask ourselves, what is our responsibility to the creatures with which we share the planet?



Blurred lines: The coronavirus lockdown drew many wild animals into human-dominated spaces, like these goats wandering through a Welsh town. (Photo by Christopher Furlong/Getty Images)



Endorses Biden and Harris

There's a saying that God created the earth but the Dutch created the Netherlands. Until 1968, an expanse of land now called Flevoland, a few miles from Amsterdam, didn't even exist; for thousands of years, there was only the sea. But in the Netherlands, human beings must negotiate with water, and thanks to an ambitious drainage plan put into place in the 1950s, the province emerged from the bottom of the North Sea.

The part known today as the Oostvaardersplassen, or OVP, was initially intended for industry, but before the first building could sprout, a wetland ecosystem emerged spontaneously. Intrigued, a young ecologist named Frans Vera set out on an unprecedented ecological experiment: turning 14,800 barren acres into a place where, with the help of a few animals, nature would be restored to a long-forgotten preagricultural state.

At the time, most scientists believed that in Europe and elsewhere, the natural world looked like a virgin forest and that open habitats like grasslands were the result of human labor. All nature, the thinking went, eventually evolves into a closed forest when left to its own devices.

But Vera thought animals had a role to play and that European wildlife once enjoyed a more diverse ecosystem, thanks to the presence of large now-extinct herbivores that roamed the continent hundreds of thousands of years ago. Wild horses, bison, and aurochs had allowed the space to remain open and accommodate a vast biodiversity—and they could do so again, he believed. God created the planet, and the Dutch created the Netherlands, but Vera would become the god of the OVP.

To put his theory to the test, in 1983 he introduced 34 Heck cattle (a breed of large wild ox bred to resemble aurochs) to the Oostvaardersplassen. Twenty koniks (semiferal horses bred to approximate the tarpan, an extinct type of wild horse) were added the next year and 44 red deer a few years later. The idea was to let natural forces restore biodiversity without intervening. This practice is now known as rewilding, a conservation method that, instead of protecting nature and what remains of it, aims to re-create extinct ecosystems without human interference through the reintroduction of key species.



The mastermind: Ecologist Frans Vera engineered the controversial OVP experiment. (CC BY-SA 4.0)

You've read 1 of 3 free articles.

Subscribe for unlimited access.

Already a subscriber? [Log in.](#)

There would be no vaccinations or other medical interventions for the animals. He wanted to see what happens when we simply let nature take its course.

Rewilding is a way, as the philosopher Virginie Maris wrote, to “limit the human empire” in the so-called Anthropocene, the proposed

SUBSCRIBE

geological epoch that begins with human activity’s first significant impacts on the planet. Journalist and Pulitzer Prize winner Caroline Fraser, the author of *Rewilding the World*, calls the practice “the most exciting and promising” method of nature conservation. The best-known and most successful example of rewilding is in Yellowstone, where wolves were reintroduced in 1995, resulting in a cascade of tremendous ecological benefits. In Argentina and Chile, Tompkins Conservation, first led by the man who founded the North Face and Esprit brands, has carried out one of the largest rewilding projects on hundreds of thousands of acres bought from mostly absentee landowners, promoting the return of species like the giant river macaw and the jaguar.

Although rewilding has become mainstream, even banal—a recent *Guardian* article encouraged homeowners to rewild their backyards—the Oostvaardersplassen is a controversial model. It was only after Vera’s project began that conservation biologists formalized the principles of rewilding around the three Cs: cores, corridors, and carnivores. Core reserves are the protected habitats. However, carnivores (the natural predators meant to regulate the ecosystem) and corridors (safe pathways between protected areas that allow migration) are missing in the OVP. And even though Vera paved the way for many successful experiments, from Croatia to the Rhodope Mountains, there are some who view his project in the OVP, 40 years after it began, as an unmitigated disaster.



Running free? The konik horses that roam the OVP reserve are left to their own devices—for better and for worse. (*Kathrin Mundwiler*)

Eddy Nagel, an animal rights activist, is among these outspoken critics. “I call it an experiment to make the strongest live and the weakest die,” he says. Most winter weekends, Nagel, 62, illegally tosses 150 bales of hay over the fence surrounding the OVP, then trespasses in the middle of the night to feed animals he says are starving. Under a cold rain in January, he and his frequent coconspirator, Bas Metzemaekers, also in his 60s, guided me through the part accessible to visitors—who are prohibited from leaving its trails—toward trees with gnawed bark: proof, for them, of the horses’ famished condition.

The pair’s investment in the project is astonishing. During the winter, they go three or four times a week to the reserve to observe the animals, sometimes feeding them. They’re not wild but domesticated

animals, the men insist. From the road that bisects the Oostvaardersplassen, we looked upon the expanse of grass and mud from which dark clouds of birds regularly take flight, with herds of cattle or horses here and there. There are electric towers, wind turbines, and a yellow train from Amsterdam that passes by every five minutes with a bang. The animals—wild or not—don't seem to mind.



The dissidents: Bas Metzemaekers (left) and Eddy Nagel are devoted to putting a stop to the OVP project. (*Kathrin Mundwiler*)

Metzemaekers has been in police custody several times for his trespassing and has sat through multiple trials, most notably on charges of having made death threats

against a forest ranger. (“Lies, lies, lies!” he swears.) But he remains undeterred. A blacksmith and hunter who grew up among farm animals, he was heartbroken by the sights he encountered at the OVP: a deer drowning amid ice, a wounded mare dying while giving birth, a toothless stallion. “And I’m not sentimental, not at all,” he insists. “Let them take them to the butcher shop. All of them. I have the mentality of a farmer. For me, it’s normal to raise animals to eat them. I don’t have a problem with that. My problem is the animals that are starving.” Everything he sees gets cataloged and photographed as irrefutable evidence of the debacle happening at the OVP.

Nagel and Metzemaekers were radicalized against the OVP in the winter of 2017–18, or the “winter of horror,” as they remember it. In this supposed paradise of biodiversity, thousands of skeletal animals roamed like zombies, hordes of mud-stained ghosts in search of any blade of grass, under the horrified gaze of the train passengers crossing the reserve. That particularly harsh winter, 3,200 animals died, nearly 90 percent of them killed because they were deemed unfit to survive the winter. The Dutch public, after years of eyeing the situation warily, turned decisively against the Oostvaardersplassen.

For a while, the reserve—nicknamed the Dutch Serengeti—had been a source of national pride. While the OVP’s fauna is admittedly less exotic to Europeans than Tanzania’s or Kenya’s, an impressive array of species returned over the years, as Vera predicted, including foxes, buzzards, goshawks, gray herons, kingfishers, kestrels, and even the white-tailed eagle, a variety not seen in the region since the Middle Ages. Ecologists from all over the world looked with admiration at this exceptional wildlife reserve. The handful of large herbivores introduced by Vera multiplied and grew. But their freedom of movement is constrained by fences, and although he says wolves—a key species in preagricultural Europe—are welcome there, the area is too small to accommodate them.

And that’s the rub: Predators are an essential component of any ecosystem, where a stable population presupposes a balance between births and deaths. In the absence of predators, deer, horses, and cows reproduced at an untenable rate, turning the Oostvaardersplassen into a monotonous grassland—a decline of biodiversity that drove away its impressive array of birds and small herbivores.

In the wild, many creatures die from disease, wounds, starvation, or predation much more frequently than from old age. Sometimes nature deals massive blows. In 2015, for example, a bacterium wiped out 200,000 saiga antelopes in Kazakhstan in a matter of weeks. “In sober truth,” wrote the philosopher John Stuart Mill, “nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature’s every-day performances.” But when we’ve orchestrated the wilderness, must we then let it carry out its cruelty unimpeded?

As gruesome images of the widespread animal deaths spread, opposition to the OVP started to take root. In 2005 the president of the Dutch Council on Animal Affairs compared the situation to a concentration camp, to a form of “animal experimentation” that must be abandoned. Some years later, organized resistance groups mobilized to save the animals that remained. Vera began receiving threats online.

That year, the Dutch government commissioned an international committee of experts to find out whether it was possible for the OVP “to maintain a resilient, self-sustaining ecosystem including large herbivores” that was acceptable in terms of animal welfare. To compensate for the reserve’s lack of carnivores, the committee determined that the weaker animals should be killed to avoid painful

natural deaths. It also recommended that shelters be created to protect the animals from the wind. Humankind was reasserting control over the laws of nature.

Five years later, a harsh winter meant a large number of animals had to be culled. Images of the starving animals appeared on national television, provoking outrage that brought conditions at the OVP to the attention of the Dutch parliament. After an emergency debate on the fate of the animals, the House of Representatives decided that rangers were mandated to feed large herbivores. A new committee of experts declared “a moral obligation for the managers [of the OVP] to take all necessary measures to minimize the extent of any unnecessary suffering” and recommended killing “the animals that are in visibly poor condition” before the winter could batter them, in “early reactive culling.” But the new committee deemed parliament’s supplementary feeding mandate a “political decision,” contrary to the experts’ advice. “In effect,” they wrote, the feeding “simply increases the winter carrying capacity of the ecosystem, allowing herbivore populations to increase and stabilize at a new, higher level.” As Vera told the journalist Isabella Tree, “Starvation is the determining factor. It is a fundamental process of nature.”



Another opponent: Equestrian Annemieke van Straaten lobbies against the OVP project from a far-right perspective. (Courtesy of Annemieke Van Straaten)

Scientists are divided on the objectives of rewilding. Should it—and can it—re-create a state of nature that existed before human influence, as in Siberia’s Pleistocene Park, where a Russian scientist

and his son have approximated a mammoth steppe ecosystem of the earth's last glacial period? Or should it repair specific ecological damage caused by humans? Does "wilderness" instead refer to the idea of a natural process, of letting go, without a specific objective, of any given habitat, garden, forest, or urban area? If humanity is to limit its empire, where does it set those limits?

The very concept of wilderness, seen as untouched nature, is a human invention. In a 1995 *New York Times* essay, "The Trouble With Wilderness," the environmental historian William Cronon wrote, "Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural.... If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall."

The paradox of rewilding, a wilderness designed and conceived by people, is nowhere more blatant than at the OVP, where animals roam an artificial land, like a stage where one expects the spectacle of wildness. But must we necessarily stand outside nature for nature to be authentic? What is more natural—a UNESCO reserve or a dandelion growing through the asphalt of a parking lot?

"The awareness that we are slowly growing into now is that the earthly wildness that we are so complexly dependent upon is at our mercy," wrote the activist Wendell Berry in the 1980s. "It has become, in a sense, our artifact because it can only survive by a human understanding and forbearance that we now must make. The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity."

In an article for the scientific journal *Nature, Ecology & Evolution*, scientists termed this period of Covid-induced containment "anthropause." Anthropause is, in part, a respite for nature, yet the cessation of human activities has exposed how much nature may need people in the Anthropocene. Closures of national parks and widespread travel bans have meant a drop in financial support for all kinds of environmental operations. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, tourism provides the money to maintain the parks that protect wildlife. Across Asia and Africa, reduced human presence and law enforcement in more remote areas have exposed endangered species

to increased poaching. The anthropause authors wrote, “What is clear is that humans and wildlife have become more interdependent than ever before.”

As Hans-Erik Kuypers, an OVP ranger, more bluntly puts it, “Without man, the Oostvaardersplassen would not exist.” Even the animals’ DNA bears traces of human interference. Take Heck’s aurochs, which now populate the dull plain of the Oostvaardersplassen in the hundreds. The original aurochs, a muscular and aggressive wild ox, has the sad honor of being one of the first species recorded as extinct, in 1627. But in interwar Germany, the Heck brothers, who directed the Berlin and Munich zoos, selectively bred cattle in an attempt to genetically reengineer the species; the project dovetailed with the Nazi quest to restore a racially pure Germanic past. Both projects, of course, were chasing a myth: The oxen that emerged had little to do—genetically or otherwise—with any purported state of unspoiled nature.

The descendants of these herds were among the 3,200 casualties of the “winter of horror,” when protesters began to call the little Serengeti “Auschwitz for animals.”

“It is...time to conclude that this experiment is gone out of control,” read a petition launched in 2019 by the high-profile biologist Patrick Van Veen and signed by more than 200,000 people. “The State Forest Service claims to be a nature conservation organization, but what is different about this nature reserve from a zoo or a farm?” read the petition. Even the legendary field biologist Jane Goodall got involved. “When I heard [the OVP story], I could hardly believe that something like this would happen in a civilized country,” she wrote in an open letter. “There is no excuse for the continuation of a policy of non-intervention when this results in horrific suffering.” During demonstrations in front of the reserve, protesters held funeral processions and minutes of silence for the dead animals. The threats against Vera intensified. He received a letter targeting his grandchildren. “This letter had a huge impact on my family,” he told a Dutch newspaper in January 2020. He soon removed himself from the public eye, but that did little to stop the protests.

From this growing chorus of opposition to the OVP emerged Annemieke Van Straaten, the movement’s most vocal lobbyist. She has opted for PR tactics over direct action. Instead of bales of hay tossed over the fence in the middle of the night, she sends out six people to

document abuses on the reserve and relays the news on Twitter in furious posts accompanied by vomiting emojis. Overpopulation, she claims, leads to “mare rapes.” In the winter she posts a lot of photos of horses with their hair matted in clumps, with burdock fruit stuck like Velcro. Van Straaten comes from the horse world, and for her, a happy horse is a horse in a field “with people who take care of it every day,” she says, and, presumably, an untangled mane and tail. In January 2019 she offered to buy 90 horses from the forest service that manages the reserve, without success.

Politically, Van Straaten comes from the far right. Her foundation is supported by the Party for Freedom and the Forum for Democracy, two hard-line right-wing parties. She is critical of the ideology of the OVP’s founders, who are determined to continue their experiment. “They want to re-create an ancient nature,” she says indignantly. “And for that, they receive subsidies from Europe!”

Ultimately, Van Straaten would like to empty OVP of most of its animals, including all of its horses. Where to put them? “That’s not my problem,” she says. “But when you put animals behind fences, you have to take care of them.”



Winter of horror: The remains of thousands of deer and other grazing animals littered the OVP after the winter of 2017–18. (*Pierre Crom / Getty Images*)

The battle around the Oostvaardersplassen reflects a long-standing cultural and political tension between the two visions of nature. “Ever since the 19th century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks,” Cronon wrote, adding that rural people “generally know far too much about working the land to

regard unworked land as their ideal.” Sociological research has shown that in the Netherlands, appreciation for wilderness is greater in the city than in the countryside.

“That contradiction is reinforced in the current era, in which politicians are setting the elite and the people against each other,” says Martin Drenthen, a philosopher and Oostvaardersplassen expert, noting that the OVP is routinely accused of being an elite ecological plaything. This is reflected in the voting behavior of the province, which votes more conservatively than areas with big cities.

Conservative parties such as the Christian Democratic Appeal, the People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy, and the Reformed Political Party are in favor of more active human involvement in the management of the reserve; social democrats, the Green Party, and the Party for the Animals support a hands-off approach, although the Party for the Animals wrote that culling is the “most animal-friendly solution.”

At the mention of Van Straaten’s diatribes, Kuypers shrugs. “Does an animal have to eat all year round? I’m not sure,” he says quietly. He seems transported by the contact with nature, his face reddened forever by the north wind. “They tell us, ‘You don’t like animals.’ We respond, ‘We love them as much as you do but in a different way.’ We give them space and freedom. It’s a different perspective.”

For example, he explains, the burdock fruit clinging to the horses’ hair (and grating on Van Straaten’s nerves) need animals as vehicles to disperse. The seeds fall off on their own during the winter. To him, they’re just further proof of an ecosystem that is working. All the supporters of a wild OVP, free from human meddling, praise the quality of life of the animals and their freedom of movement and socialization. In an interview with the Dutch daily *De Volkskrant* in January, Vera castigated the farmers who raise dairy cows that they kill after six years, when they could live for 20, and horse lovers who “sit on them.”

And then there’s the question of fences. The OVP’s critics liken the reserve to a camp that prevents emaciated animals from grazing elsewhere. (Some activists once cut holes in the fences to let red deer escape; some ended up on the highway and had to be shot.) Ecologists, for their part, respond that all wild areas are bordered by some kind of natural barrier, like a river.

The larger debate on the role that humans should play in ending animal suffering most often concerns slaughterhouses, factory farming, and animal testing. But now animal rights organizations, following in the footsteps of the influential utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer, are campaigning to alleviate the suffering of wild animals as well. Why should our moral contract with domestic animals be any different with wild animals? Since humans already interfere extensively with nature for their benefit, why not direct this interference to the cessation of animal suffering?

Some even dispute the idea that an animal is happier in nature, where the dangers are great, the stress level is high, and its natural needs are not necessarily satisfied. “There is a conflict between animal rights activists and environmentalists,” says Drenthen. The former focus on the fate and welfare of individual animals, he says, while the latter have a holistic perspective, focused on the flourishing of entire ecosystems.

At the OVP, where this debate has been raging for decades, the answer has yet to be found. Animal ethicists call ecologists ecofascists on the grounds that willingly sacrificing an individual to preserve a system is tantamount to fascism; ecologists reply that their ideological rivals are ecologically illiterate.

The Dutch philosopher and animal ethicist Jozef Keulartz suggested that “wild” and “domestic,” rather than being fixed categories, exist on a continuum and that obligations of care should be calibrated according to an animal’s position on this spectrum. In a 2017 lawsuit over whether the reserve was violating welfare laws regarding the treatment of domesticated animals, a Dutch appeals court granted the large herbivores of the OVP a specific intermediate status of “wild kept animals”—whatever that might mean.



Inescapably intertwined: A high-speed train carrying passengers to Amsterdam cuts through the OVP. (*Kathrin Mundwiler*)

Today the rangers at the Oostvaardersplassen call a veterinarian if they see an animal in distress. But in practice, the rule seems unclear. Why didn't they call the vet for a fox that walked past us with a limp? "Good question," says Kuypers with a smile. Questions like these fit together like a chain of moral dilemmas. Should we replace slaughter with contraception? But can't procreation be considered an animal right? Yet isn't it better to deprive them of this right than to kill surplus animals?

"It's impossible to satisfy everyone," Kuypers concedes. "But one thing nature needs is continuity. No policy changes every two years. We need time to measure, to see what works, to adjust."

"Conservation is about managing people. It's not about managing wildlife," Caroline Fraser quoted conservationist Joseph Kirathe as saying.

Opponents of the OVP are not limited to equestrians mocked by scientists. There are also hunters and the farm lobbies, angry to see this fertile land slipping away from them, and those who want an airport next door to finally open to commercial flights, despite the thousands of wild geese. After minister Henk Bleker's decision to decentralize Dutch nature policy in 2011, the OVP's future is being decided at the Flevoland provincial level, where these pressure groups are most influential. As of 2018, total animals had to be reduced to no more than 1,100, regardless of their condition. A few horses were

slaughtered, and 180 were evacuated to reserves in Belarus and Spain. Deer were killed by the thousands; their meat is now sold to gourmet restaurants, and top chefs have judged it to be exceptionally marbled, thanks to the quality of life these animals lead.

“It’s no longer reactive culling. It’s hunting,” says Drenthen. Two guards who refused to kill healthy animals asked to be transferred.

The following year, the court barred further mass culling of red deer. The fate of the animals of the Oostvaardersplassen hangs on successive contradictory decisions. To this day, the various parties continue to appeal to human justice to decide whether and how many deer should be culled.

In this natural space, humans—their dreams, their battles, their shortsightedness, and above all, their financial motives—remain inescapable. Even the proponents of rewilding use the economic argument, adopting a lexicon borrowed from the market, of a nature-based economy or an economy of contemplation.

So it’s no surprise that in the Oostvaardersplassen, tourism looms on the agenda. It is about image, financing, compromise. “Sooner or later,” says Drenthen, “there will be holiday homes, cycle paths, and bird-watching huts.”

After all, what good would this wilderness be if it can’t be admired by humans?

Valentine Faure Valentine Faure is a French author and journalist. Her work has appeared in *Le Nouveau Magazine Littéraire*, *Libération*, *Society*, *The New York Times*, and elsewhere.

To submit a correction for our consideration, click [here](#).
For Reprints and Permissions, click [here](#).

COMMENTS (4)