

Letting the Land Go Wild

A reserve built to run itself, and the winter that split the scientists.

6 min read

Before you read

- **baseline** — the reference state a change is measured against
- **intervention** — a deliberate action taken to alter an outcome
- **ecologist** — a scientist who studies how organisms interact with their environment
- **die-off** — a large loss of animals in a population over a short period
- **mandate** — the authority and instruction under which a body acts



Open grassland with grazing horses and cattle beside reed beds, Oostvaardersplassen, the Netherlands

¹ The Oostvaardersplassen lies below sea level on reclaimed land in the Netherlands, on a site that was once destined for industry. Left alone while the plans stalled, it filled with reeds and birds. From the 1980s it became the testing ground for an idea that has shaped European conservation ever since: that large grazing animals, released and then left largely unmanaged, could maintain an open landscape by themselves, as their wild ancestors once did.

² Cattle, horses and red deer were introduced. The herds grew. The reserve drew international attention, and the approach acquired a name — rewilding — and a following well beyond the Netherlands.

³ Then came the hard winters. With no large predators, no hunting and no supplementary feeding, the herbivore population grew to the limit of what the grass could support and then, in bad years, fell sharply. Animals starved in sight of a public road. Photographs circulated. Managers were accused of cruelty; some

received threats. People climbed the fences to throw hay over them. The policy was repeatedly revised under pressure, and culling and feeding were eventually introduced.

⁴ What makes the case genuinely difficult is that the scientific dispute underneath the public one was not resolved by the outcry, and is not resolved now.

⁵ One side argues the die-offs were the system working. Populations in unmanaged systems fluctuate; starvation in late winter is the ordinary mechanism by which numbers meet resources, and carcasses feed scavengers and soil. On this view the objection is aesthetic rather than ecological — a reluctance to watch a process that is neither new nor avoidable, occurring in a place where it happens to be visible.

⁶ The other side makes a structural objection. The reserve is roughly sixty square kilometres and fenced. In a genuinely open system, herbivores move: they disperse to other grazing when a range is exhausted, and predators remove animals before starvation does. Neither escape nor predation is available here. What is being observed, on this argument, is not nature running its course but a population confined in an enclosure, and an enclosure makes the manager responsible for what happens inside it.

⁷ Notice that these positions do not disagree much about the facts. Both accept the counts, the deaths, the absence of predators and the size of the site. They disagree about the baseline — about what the reserve was ever supposed to be compared to. Measured against a self-regulating wild system, the deaths are normal. Measured against a fenced holding of domesticated-descended animals under a public mandate, they are a management failure. The data cannot choose between those baselines, because the choice is not an empirical one.

⁸ There is a second disagreement, about what the project is for. If the aim is an experiment in minimal intervention, then intervening on welfare grounds destroys the result you were trying to obtain. If the aim is a nature reserve serving the public, then an experiment that the public finds intolerable has already failed on its own terms, whatever it demonstrates. Both are coherent aims. They were never clearly separated, which is how a reserve can be simultaneously judged a success and a scandal.

⁹ The influence of the site has outlasted the argument. Rewilding projects across Europe have borrowed its central insight — that grazing animals can do work that machinery and management otherwise do — while quietly declining to copy its refusal to intervene. Most now manage numbers, provide winter feed, or site themselves where animals can actually disperse.

¹⁰ That compromise is easy to read as a defeat for the original idea. It may be better read as a correction to a specific claim: not that letting go is wrong, but that letting go inside a fence is still a decision, taken by someone, with consequences they own. A reserve cannot be unmanaged by declaring it so.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the answer you think is best.

1. The Oostvaardersplassen became available for this project because:
 - A It was bought specifically as a nature reserve
 - B Industrial development plans for the reclaimed land stalled
 - C Farmers abandoned the land after flooding
 - D It was donated by a conservation charity

2. According to paragraph 5, defenders of non-intervention regard the objection to the die-offs as:
 - A Scientifically mistaken about the population counts
 - B Largely aesthetic rather than ecological
 - C Motivated by commercial interests
 - D A misunderstanding of the animals' species

3. The structural objection in paragraph 6 rests mainly on:
 - A The animals being descended from domesticated stock
 - B The reserve being fenced, so dispersal and predation are unavailable
 - C The soil quality of reclaimed land
 - D Insufficient funding for winter feed

4. The writer's central claim in paragraph 7 is that the dispute turns on:
 - A Disagreement about the number of animals that died
 - B Which baseline the reserve should be measured against
 - C Whether the public should be allowed access
 - D The reliability of the monitoring data

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences. Refer to the text where you can.

5. Explain in your own words why the writer says the data "cannot choose between those baselines".

6. Paragraph 8 identifies a second disagreement, about purpose. Why does the writer say both aims are coherent, and what follows from their never having been separated?

7. What is the significance of the detail that people climbed the fences to throw hay over them?

8. The writer says other projects borrowed the central insight while "quietly declining" to copy the refusal to intervene. What does the word "quietly" imply?

9. "A reserve cannot be unmanaged by declaring it so." Explain what this closing sentence claims, and how paragraph 6 supports it.

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Make a claim, then support it.

10. Choose one of the two baselines described in paragraph 7 and argue that it is the appropriate one for a site like this. Deal with the strongest objection to your choice.

11. Should an experiment in minimal intervention ever be run where the public can watch it? Argue a position, considering what visibility does to both the science and the politics.

12. The writer presents public outrage as a force that changed policy without resolving the science. Is that a failure of public reasoning, a legitimate exercise of it, or both?

13. Rewilding elsewhere has adopted the insight and dropped the purity. Is the compromise a correction or a defeat? Make a case using evidence from the passage.

14. Who should hold responsibility for animal welfare inside a reserve of this kind — scientists, the state, or the public? Justify your answer.

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — industrial plans stalled | 2. B — largely aesthetic rather than ecological | 3. B — the fence removes dispersal and predation | 4. B — which baseline applies

Part B

5. Both sides accept the same facts, so no further measurement separates them. The disagreement is about which standard of comparison is appropriate — a value and definitional question — and evidence cannot settle what it should be compared to.

6. Each aim is internally consistent: a minimal-intervention experiment is ruined by intervening, while a public reserve fails if the public will not accept what it sees. Because the two aims were never distinguished, the same outcome can be scored as success under one and failure under the other.

7. It shows the strength and direct form of public reaction, and that people were willing to override the policy physically. Accept answers noting it illustrates the collision between a scientific design and ordinary moral response to visible suffering.

8. That the shift was made without openly repudiating the original principle — the insight was credited while the uncomfortable part was dropped. Credit answers reading this as borrowing the prestige while avoiding the cost.

9. That declaring a site unmanaged does not remove human responsibility, because the fence, the species present and the absence of predators are all prior management decisions. Paragraph 6 supplies the mechanism: the enclosure removes the animals' own options.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the conclusion.

10. Require a baseline named, defended, and an objection genuinely addressed — not merely acknowledged in a clause.

11. Either answer is markable. Strong ones separate the effect of visibility on scientific validity from its effect on political survivability.

12. Look for a position that avoids both easy contempt for public reaction and uncritical deference to it. 'Both' is fully creditable if the two sides are distinguished.

13. Mark whether evidence from paragraphs 9 and 10 is actually used, rather than a general preference for pragmatism.

14. Any allocation is acceptable with reasoning. Strong answers link responsibility to who holds the decision-making power described in paragraph 10.

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