

RecTalk Blog: Rewilding ... It's a Thing!

As if it isn't hard enough for us to have a conversation about our work, given the differing and sometimes concurrent jurisdictional uses of reclamation / restoration / rehabilitation (the 3Rs), we now have to contend with a new term – rewilding. To complicate matters further, rewilding has been further subdivided into specialities (e.g., guerilla rewilding, urban rewilding and even Pleistocene rewilding; see Cortlett (2016) and Pettorelli et al. (2018) for further subdivisions). So, what are these all about, do they differ from our beloved 3Rs, and why does it matter?

Let's answer the last one first – “Continued use of unclear terminology impedes practitioners or researchers from using the literature efficiently to find precedents that could assist their current efforts” (Gerwing et al., 2023). Nowhere is this more important than in the regulatory world where terms are defined in legislation and used with specific intent in policies, authorizations, criteria, standards, etc. For example, in Alberta the regulatory term used to describe actions taken to return disturbed land covered by the *Environmental Protection and Enhancement Act* is reclamation. Restoration should be reserved for activities not covered under the legislation such as seismic lines. They are not interchangeable!

Definitions

There are a variety of rewilding definitions, often reflecting the focus of the author or organization (e.g., wildlife, wetlands). Lorimer et al. (2015) summarized the key concepts embodied in the definitions: “A common aim is to maintain, or increase, biodiversity, while reducing the impact of present and past human interventions through the restoration of species and ecological processes”.

Rewilding Definitions

Bringing back qualities that have been lost, restoring an area of land to its natural state and possibly reintroducing species that had been driven out or exterminated (Bradford, 2019).

The large-scale restoration of nature until it can take care of itself – and us – again. It's about restoring nature's remarkable web of life, including habitats, natural processes and, where appropriate, missing species (Rewilding Britain, 2025).

Reversion to a pure and natural state before human intervention (Rewild Vancouver, n.d.).

Restoring natural ecosystems following major human disturbance to promote resilient, self-regulating and self-sustaining ecosystems (Rosenkrantz. 2023).



Figure 1. Sign at De La Republique Provincial Park, New Brunswick.

An ecological restoration concept that promotes the natural recovery of ecosystems, through (initial) active or passive removal of human influences (Rideout et al., 2021).

Activities aimed at restoring and protecting natural processes and ecosystems (Ducks Unlimited Canada, 2021).

Restoring wildlife and natural processes to ecosystems where they've been lost, often due to land clearing, agriculture or other human activities (Finnerty et al., 2025).

A comprehensive, often large-scale, conservation effort focused on restoring sustainable biodiversity and ecosystem health by protecting core wild/wilderness areas, providing connectivity between such areas, and protecting or reintroducing apex predators and highly interactive species (keystone species) (Rewilding Institute, n.d.).

The reorganisation of biota and ecosystem processes to set an identified social-ecological system on a preferred trajectory, leading to the self-sustaining provision of ecosystem services with minimal ongoing management (Pettorelli et al., 2018).

Managing landscapes and the land in a way that is welcoming and more suitable for “the wild” to return (Anonymous, 2022).

Reconnecting the critical base functions of river ecosystems as a long-term solution to sustain healthy watersheds for future Canadians (Government of Canada, 2022).

Guerilla Rewilding Definitions

Rewilding without approval, and often without due consideration of the potential for unintended impacts (Finnerty et al., 2025).

The unsanctioned release of species into the wild (Glentworth et al., 2025).

Urban Rewilding Definition

Urban rewilding (also sometimes referred to as micro-rewilding) is a specific style of rewilding which focuses on adapting and applying rewilding principles to projects in urban or suburban areas (Rosenkrantz. 2023).

Trophic Rewilding Definition

An ecological restoration strategy that uses species introductions (often apex predators; Rewilding Institute, n.d.) to restore top-down trophic interactions and associated trophic cascades to promote self-regulating ecosystems (Pearce, 2020).

Similarities and Differences

As can be seen from the definitions above, there are some similarities to the 3Rs – a focus on human disturbances and an emphasis on ecological function – and a common goal of the recovery of ecosystems following anthropogenic degradation (Mutillod et al., 2024). The primary difference is that the 3Rs as we use them tend to focus on active intervention on industrial disturbances (mining, quarries, energy, etc.) by regulated parties, whereas rewilding often involves less active intervention done voluntarily on land disturbed by non-industrial human actions (agriculture, urban development). Gerwing et al. (2023) proposed two decision trees to help distinguish the 3Rs from rewilding (among other terms).

Some authors (Bradford, 2019; Ducks Unlimited Canada, 2021) distinguish rewilding (restoring degraded habitat) from conservation (saving the intact places; protecting and restoring current habitats and wildlife populations). Other authors relate the two; for example, “Rewilding is a progressive approach to conservation” (Rewilding Europe, n.d.).

Often the term rewilding is used in conjunction with restoration (Ducks Unlimited Canada, 2021; Project Forest, 2025; Rideout et al., 2021); for example, Hayward et al. (2019) note that “All existing ‘rewilding’ definitions fit within existing definitions of the long-established field of restoration.” Cortlett (2016) provides an overview of the differences between restoration and rewilding. du Toit and Pettorelli (2019) state that “Rewilding and restoring both influence biodiversity, and common management actions such as species reintroductions (e.g., beavers or wolves) can be integral to a rewilding project. However, in contrast with restoration, rewilding has lower fidelity to taxonomic precedent and promotes taxonomic substitutions for extinct native species that once underpinned the delivery of key ecological functions.”

Guerilla rewilding is often criticised (Glentworth et al., 2025) as presenting “risks … to species, conservation, dialogue and democracy” (Timmins, 2023), though there is acknowledgement that there may be some potential benefits, including the publicity it generates for rewilding in the media (Timmins, 2023).

Canadian Rewilding Programs and Examples

Urban rewilding projects include Rewild Vancouver’s wilderness recovery strategy that aims to help the built environment work more closely with the natural world (Rewild Vancouver, n.d.);

Parc Jean-Drapeau in Montreal and Corktown Common in Toronto are other urban examples (Rosenkrantz. 2023).

Project Forest is restoring degraded land in regions impacted by agricultural expansion to increase forest cover, enhance biodiversity, and promote the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems (Project Forest, 2025).

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