

# The wilderness myth

At the heart of restoration there has to be reciprocity, writes **Kara Moses**

**T**he wolf shot out of the truck, putting as much distance between him and the humans as he could. The she-wolf emerged more slowly, sniffing the unfamiliar air. As if in recognition of something strangely familiar, she walked curiously but cautiously towards the humans, cocking her head as they sang the ancient song of the wolf from their culture. Pausing just a few metres away, she sat down, threw her head back and howled, joining the song of the people who once lived alongside her own. As the song sank into silence, she stood and quietly trotted off into her new home to make history. The people watched with tear-streaked faces and mixed feelings: the bittersweet joy of welcoming the wolf people back into Yellowstone Park after a 70-year exile in the absence of a similar welcome back for their own people, ejected from the park in its creation.

The displacement of Indigenous peoples is one of many dark legacies of European colonialism. By 1914, most nations had been colonised by Europeans at some point. The 'colonial package' imposed on invaded lands contained a suite of dominatory elements: western systems of rationalist, mechanistic thought; capitalism, along with its money, work ethic and aspirational consumerism; 'development' in the form of infrastructure and extractivist industry; patriarchal, monotheistic, 'sky religions' (usually Christianity); shaming of 'heathen' Indigenous, Nature-based culture and spirituality. Above all else, what the colonists imported and what these elements support is the conceptual separation of humans from Nature.

## Dewilding the colonies

The lands colonists 'discovered' were already inhabited, and often abundant and flourishing. Arrogantly assuming Native peoples didn't know how to exploit the abundant resources, colonists perceived 'untouched wilderness'. Colonisation had drastic impacts on ecosystems: forests cleared, game species over-hunted, predators exterminated, new species introduced, land claimed as private property for settled 'development' and widespread agriculture.

The impact on Indigenous people was devastating. Estimates of the number of Native Americans who died after Columbus's arrival vary, but range up to 95% of

the population in just two centuries. Many died from diseases that the colonisers brought with them. Seen as 'savage' sub-human creatures to be 'tamed' and exploited, others were brutally killed or died working as slaves. A report in 1867 by the Indian Peace Commission to the US president, Andrew Johnson, illustrates the religious moralistic attitude towards Indigenous people: "If the savage resists, civilization, with the ten commandments in one hand, and the sword in the other, demands his immediate extermination." Those who survived the genocide were subject to being 'civilized', often involving violent suppression of their culture.

Tragically, this story of subjugation and 'dewilding' of land, people and culture is global.

We cannot undo colonialism, but we can begin to make reparations, not just giving back what has been taken, but also restoring it: reintroducing what's been lost, removing what's been introduced, stepping back from imperialistic ways of domination and control. Decolonisation must involve a *rewilding* of land and culture, restoring ecosystems and Indigenous peoples' relationships with them. But does rewilding necessarily involve decolonisation? The paradox of rewilding is that it can itself become a form of colonialism.

## Eco-colonialism

Recently in mid-Wales, placards began appearing in fields: "Yes to conservation, NO to rewilding". Farmers became increasingly concerned as the early phases of a landscape-scale restoration project progressed despite many local people feeling that they weren't being communicated with. Though the restoration had never been described as a rewilding project, the involvement of rewilding charities was enough for suspicion and mistrust to build.

What began as conflicting views of land management escalated into accusations of 'eco-colonialism', with rewilding perceived as a romantic notion imposed on Welsh rural communities by a middle-class, Nature-deprived, English urban populace. As some farmers pointed out, rewilding promises to connect people to Nature, but which people, and which Nature? Greater value is seemingly placed on urban people and wild Nature than on rural communities already deeply connected to an agricultural landscape.