

# Restoring lands and reclaiming rights: the interaction between Rewilding and the Environmentalism of the poor in the European High North

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*Abstract:* To address the collapse of biodiversity and mitigate climate change, nature-based solutions such as rewilding are becoming more popular. Rewilding involves a dramatic shift in the uses of the landscape, yet its social impacts are little discussed in the literature. Rewilding projects are usually top-down initiatives, involving international activists collaborating with locals. However, in the Arctic, especially the European High North, local population are active agents in redefining what rewilding can be. This article aims to understand bottom-up, community-based Rewilding projects through the lens of the Environmentalism of the poor. It does so by arguing that the definition of “rewilding” has changed since the 1990’s and now focuses on the role of people within rewilding. This change of definition made it compatible with the Environmentalism of the poor, creating a new strand of rewilding, a “rewilding of the poor and the indigenous”, or “decolonial rewilding”. This movement challenges land-use regimes and is a tool for indigenous Sami people to reclaim their land while repairing the damages done by extractive industries, thus ensuring a sustainable future in a warming world.

*Keywords:* rewilding   Environmentalism of the poor   decolonial   Sami   Rewilding Europe.

*“Opportunities, like tomatoes, do not ripen simultaneously.”*  
Michael E. Soulé

## (A) INTRODUCTION

The concept of Rewilding has been much discussed in the last decade, both in the scientific field and amongst activists. An explosion of use of the term, associated with a plurality of different practices, has given the Rewilding movements an increased visibility, albeit at the cost of some bad press.<sup>2</sup> Most publications regarding Rewilding discuss the various methods and ecosystem interactions needed to achieve its goal. Fewer publications have targeted the social impact of Rewilding, and its potential to empower rural marginalized communities. Rewilding projects in the European High North feature a more substantial activist discourse and a greater emphasis on protecting indigenous livelihood and rights, alongside the more common elements regarding environmental protection and restoration. This resonates with a concept traditionally used to analyze environmental struggle by marginalized people in the Global South: the

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<sup>1</sup> M. Soulé, ‘An Unflinching Vision: Networks of People for Networks of Wildland’, 9(4) Wild Earth (1999) 39-46, at 44.

<sup>2</sup> N. Pettorelli, et al., *Rewilding*. (1st éd., Cambridge University Press, London, 2019)

Environmentalism of the poor. In this article, I argue that Rewilding has the potential to become a specific manifestation of the Environmentalism of the poor, and a tool to empower marginalized and indigenous communities. The intersection between these two types of Environmentalism has given birth to a new type of Rewilding, a “Rewilding of the poor and the indigenous”, which I refer to as “Decolonial Rewilding”. Decolonial Rewilding combines ecosystem restoration with social struggle in a social and environmental justice movement that aims to restore the land and to reclaim rights.

This paper is a conceptual and theoretical journey investigating two forms of Environmentalism: Rewilding, and the Environmentalism of the poor, to better understand community-based rewilding projects in the Arctic. What made Rewilding compatible with marginalized people’s struggle? And why rewilding project in the Arctic constitute a new type of “Decolonial Rewilding”? The data for this study comes from secondary literature and information gathered from documents published by Rewilding Europe and Snowchange Cooperative, as well as media interventions from people involved with these organizations. Ecological restoration is deemed crucial in the latest IPCC reports to mitigate climate change and improve ecosystem resilience in a warming world. By raising awareness about this development of the Rewilding concept, this article aims to create a conversation about the importance of giving rural and indigenous people in the High North more agency on restoration projects, thus moving towards a greater environmental justice.

This article is divided in two sections. The first section addresses the most common criticisms against the rewilding movement and how its definition evolved from its North American inception in the 1990’s, to its current use in the European Rewilding Network, which influenced rewilding projects in Sweden and Finland. The second part investigates the relevance of “Decolonial Rewilding” for the European High North with two examples from Sweden and Finland, focusing on Rewilding Lapland and Snowchange Cooperative.

## (B) REWILDING, A FUGITIVE CONCEPT

It can be surprising to think of Rewilding as a tool for the rural and marginalized, considering that one of its recurrent criticisms is its potential for severing the link between local inhabitants and their environment by creating a wilderness without people. D. Jørgensen summarized this in these terms: “Rewilders want to re-create a wild without people and are oblivious to the problematic nature of the wilderness construct”.<sup>3</sup> If this was true, Rewilding would be an adversary more than an ally for marginalized and indigenous people, akin to the Wilderness preservation movements described by W.Cronon and creating a “place for the white man to enjoy, where the indigenous are displaced”.<sup>4</sup> However, I would argue that fortunately, since the late 2010’s, the rewilding movement has distanced itself from the discourse of “wilderness”

<sup>3</sup> D. Jørgensen, ‘Rethinking Rewilding’, 65 *Geoforum* (2015) 482–88. [<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.11.016>]

<sup>4</sup> W. Cronon, ‘The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature’, 1 *Environmental History* (1996): 7–28. [<https://doi.org/10.2307/3985059>]

and increasingly emphasized the role of Rewilding as an agent to create both human and natural prosperity, which made it compatible with indigenous struggle and the “Environmentalism of the poor”.<sup>5</sup> This was tentatively formulated in the first rewilding texts from the 1990’s in North America<sup>6</sup>, and then the concept was adapted to various contexts through scientific and activist endeavors in the following decades, giving rise to the flexible definition of the term that is promoted by the European Rewilding Network.

### (1) What is Rewilding?

Rewilding, in its simplest acceptance, is a form of ecosystem restoration that promotes the autonomy of natural spaces (“non-human autonomy”) and believes that they can thrive with minimal human management.<sup>7</sup> It fosters the safeguarding or reintroduction of keystone animal and vegetal species to improve ecosystem resilience, biodiversity, habitat connectivity, carbon capture and ecosystem services. The term was popularized in a remarked paper by Soulé and Noss in 1998, following a broader intellectual movement regarding ecosystem management and restoration in the 1980’s in North America.<sup>8</sup> This earlier form of Rewilding emphasized heavily, and polemically, the positive impact of carnivores on ecosystems and the need to help spreading them to more areas. In the absence of surviving megafauna in North America, other species such as wolves, lynx and other predators would serve as a replacement to control all other animal species, and by extension, the distribution of vegetal life and fungi.<sup>9</sup> To accommodate these predators, core conservation areas (like national parks) are preserved from human influence, turned into “wilderness” at the mercy of the local fauna and reintroduced wild-doers.<sup>10</sup> Soulé and Noss also emphasize the importance of connectivity, as a way to achieve the restoration of the population dynamics, interchange, and migrations in the natural, pre-agricultural, and pre-industrial landscape. To allow this planned wilderness to navigate between core areas, they advocate for “corridors” to link areas of high biodiversity together. This type of Rewilding was then summarized with the three “C” : Core, Corridor, and Carnivores.

In the decades following Soulé and Noss’ article, a plurality of ecological restoration movements has claimed the legacy of “Rewilding”, considerably enriching the scope of what a rewilding project can be. Johns counted four main strands, while Jorgensen lists six movements.<sup>11</sup> These movements generally distanced themselves from the “three C” “and instead took different approaches towards creating wild nature, whether by

<sup>5</sup> J. Martinez-Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (1st ed., Northampton, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002.)

<sup>6</sup> For example: *An Unflinching Vision: Networks of People for Networks of Wildlands*, published in 1999 by Michael. E. Soulé, puts in perspective the loss of human connection and wellbeing with the loss of biodiversity.

<sup>7</sup> Pettorelli, *supra* n.2; J. Prior, K.J. Ward. ‘Rethinking Rewilding: A Response to Jorgensen’, 69 *Geoforum* (2016) 13235 [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2015.12.003].

<sup>8</sup> D. Johns, ‘History of Rewilding: Ideas and Practice’, in N. Pettorelli, et al., *Rewilding*. (1re éd., Cambridge University Press, London, 2019) 12-33.

<sup>9</sup> M. Soulé, R. Noss, ‘Rewilding and Biodiversity: Complementary Goals for Continental Conservation’, 8(3) *Wild Earth* (1998) 18-8.

<sup>10</sup> Johns, *supra* n.8

<sup>11</sup> Johns, *supra* n.8; Jorgensen, *supra* n.3.

introducing lions and elephants to North America (supported by some proponents of Pleistocene Rewilding), or through the conversion of abandoned agricultural land.<sup>12</sup> However, it can be argued that despite this diversity of definition and application, rewilding remains consistent by promoting the “Autonomy of nature”.<sup>13</sup>

Rewilding gained increased visibility in Europe with the creation of Rewilding Europe in 2011. This organization adapted the Northern American concept of Rewilding to the European context and shifted its focus away from the polemical reintroduction of carnivores towards the importance of large herbivores.<sup>14</sup> Accounting for the specificities of European geography and history, Rewilding in Europe is also marked by generally smaller rewilding zones, emphasizing natural and cultural heritage.<sup>15</sup> The practice gained in popularity, but its experimental nature as well as problematic links to the concept of “Wilderness” triggered a backlash from environmentalists and researchers alike.<sup>16</sup> Following this, Rewilding Europe has slowly phased out “Wilderness” and now emphasizes more than ever that Rewilding is not about sacrificing a zone to the wild but creating a connection between people and their environment. This is reflected in statements such as this: “[Rewilding] helps us reconnect with the wonders of Europe’s spectacular wild nature. It is our best hope for a future where people and nature not only co-exist, but flourish” or “Rewilding also offers a wide range of new prospects, stronger social coherence and an enhanced sense of identity and pride”<sup>17</sup>.

## (2) Tailored natural autonomy, the benefits of a flexible definition

The changing definition of Rewilding and the relative “fuzziness” regarding its practice has been discussed by Jørgensen, and by Prior and Ward in a response to Jørgensen’s article.<sup>18</sup> Jørgensen remarks that “Rewilding” is used by scientists and activists alike, covering a wide variety of projects, and is thus “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing”. Ward does not believe that Rewilding lost its meaning, instead arguing that it is the core of Rewilding, the “non-human autonomy”, which lends itself to a variety of practice. Rewilding has thus a set of core values that can be applied in diverse ways to different environments. This can be an obstacle when proponents of Rewilding discuss with policymakers, but it is also instrumental in the success of community-based Rewilding projects. The flexibility and experimental nature of Rewilding allows local non-state actors to start Rewilding projects at their scale independently, and then connect through

<sup>12</sup> C. Josh Donlan, et al. ‘Pleistocene rewilding: an optimistic agenda for twenty-first century conservation.’ 168(5) *The American naturalist* (2006) 660-81 [doi:10.1086/508027]; L. Wang, P.B.M. Pedersen. & J.C. Svenning. ‘Rewilding abandoned farmland has greater sustainability benefits than afforestation’, 2(5) *npj biodiversity* (2023) [https://doi.org/10.1038/s44185-022-00009-9].

<sup>13</sup> Prior & Ward, *supra* n.7.

<sup>14</sup> S. Carver et al, ‘Guiding Principles for Rewilding », 35(6) *Conservation Biology* (2021) [doi: 188293.https://doi.org/10.1111/cobi.13730].

<sup>15</sup> S. Carver, ‘Rewilding through land abandonment’, in N. Pettorelli, et al., *Rewilding*. (1re éd., Cambridge University Press, London, 2019) 99-122.

<sup>16</sup> D. Nogués-Bravo et al, ‘Rewilding is the new Pandora’s box in conservation’, 26(3) *Current biology* (2016) 87-91 [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2015.12.044].

<sup>17</sup> See the website of Rewilding Europe : Nature For People, accessed the 16th of November 2023. https://rewilding-europe.com/rewilding-in-action/

<sup>18</sup> Jørgensen, *supra* n.3; Prior & Ward, *supra* n.7.

the European Rewilding Network. By sharing a common structure, values and discourse, local actors can dialogue over what “non-human autonomy” means in their context. Through this diversification, Rewilding has emerged as a people-driven movement of ecological restoration. The “fuzziness” thus holds the potential for creating connections, something that Jørgensen also recognizes.<sup>19</sup>

The definition of Rewilding is thus flexible, and it is through decades of trial and error that the term has changed from a Northern American method for ecological restoration to a movement for reconciling people with nature. By escaping the milieu of conservation ecologists, the term Rewilding has been redefined by activists through practice and experimentation.<sup>20</sup> The importance of people and their cultural heritage in Rewilding is a step towards what Kim Ward describes as a move from “Wilderness” to “Wilding”, in a process of decolonization of the Rewilding movement.<sup>21</sup> Reed Noss himself has acknowledged this shift from “Wilderness” to “Wilding” and towards a greater justice for both people and nature. However, rather than deploring this change to his initial idea, Noss celebrates it as a natural and necessary evolution.<sup>22</sup> The definition and practice of Rewilding have thus evolved to include people, both by emphasizing the role of local communities in large NGO’s like Rewilding Europe, and by creating a term flexible enough that independent actors can adapt it to their local context while keeping to the movement’s core values.

### (3) Towards Decolonial Rewilding?

The flexibility of rewilding has made it compatible with the concerns of rural people regarding the healthiness of their environment. In the European High North, organizations like Snowchange Cooperative create rewilding projects to ensure a less polluted and more biodiverse environment, with healthier land and water, and to repair the damage created by the forestry and mining industry. In the case of the restoration of the Linnunsuo peatland, two acidic discharge emanating from the peat extraction site killed large numbers of fish in the adjacent rivers, endangering the wellbeing and means of subsistence of the inhabitants of the village of Selkie. It is after repeated complaint, mediatization campaigns and sampling of the water by the inhabitants that the company VAPO discontinued its operation and financed the restoration of the wetland as compensation.<sup>23</sup> This example illustrates the compatibility between rewilding and marginalized communities, as it intersects with the concept of the “Environmentalism of the poor”. This concept allows us to dive into the role of ecosystem restoration as a practice of resistance against state and market pressure on rural and traditional livelihood.

<sup>19</sup> Jørgensen, *supra* n.3, at 486.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; Johns, *supra* n.8.

<sup>21</sup> K. Ward, ‘For wilderness or wildness? Decolonising rewilding’, in N. Pettorelli, et al., *Rewilding*. (ire éd., Cambridge University Press, London, 2019) 34–54 [DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108560962.003>]

<sup>22</sup> R. Noss, ‘The Spectrum of Wildness and Rewilding: Justice for All’, in H. Kopnina, H. Washington (eds) *Conservation : Integrating Social and Ecological Justice* (Springer International Publishing, 2020) 167–182 [[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13905-6\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-13905-6_12)]

<sup>23</sup> T. Mustonen, ‘Power Discourses of Fish Death: Case of Linnunsuo Peat Production’, 43(2) *Ambio* (2014) 234–43. [<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-013-0425-3>].

“Environmentalism of the poor” is a concept synthesized by Joan Martinez Alier in his 2002 book *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation*.<sup>24</sup> It is a specific type of Environmentalism that distinguishes itself from traditional environmental conservation movements (or “Cult of the wilderness”) and movements that combine economic development and sustainability, such as by “internalizing the externalities” (or “Gospel of Eco-efficiency”). The Environmentalism of the poor is a bottom-up movement, usually led by farming or indigenous communities in the Global South against projects of deforestation, monoculture plantations, mines, or any types of activity that would endanger their livelihood by damaging their environment. By showing that marginalized “poor” that were historically perceived as “too poor to care for the environment” do care when their health and livelihood are on the line, the “environmentalism of the poor” gives a theoretical framework to analyze grassroot environmental movements emanating from historically poor or marginalized communities (whether on a social, class or racial basis).<sup>25</sup>

A healthy ecosystem is central for the livelihood of many marginalized, rural and indigenous people. Ecosystem restoration has been central to land reform movements in Brazil such as the Landless Worker’s Movement. In Scotland, the Rewilding movements is initiated by wealthy, middle class and impoverished communities, creating a debate around land ownership and who benefits from wild nature. Whereas in the Arctic, projects piloted by Rewilding Lapland or Snowchange Cooperative demonstrate that indigenous welfare and rewilding are compatible, in opposition to the landscape management envisioned by the forestry and mining industry. Rewilding is a political endeavor in all these cases, challenging the unequal land-use regimes produced by colonial, capitalistic and industrial expansion. While these projects differ and show a different understanding of “wildness”, the flexible definition of Rewilding allow marginalized communities to engage with ecosystem restoration and dialogue with policy-makers over what kind of environment they want to inhabit.

This type of Rewilding, by addressing the needs of the local communities or being initiated by themselves, is a different and new type of Rewilding that aligns with the Environmentalism of the poor. A Rewilding that addresses both environmental and social degradation by promoting a more resilient environment to sustain local livelihood. This type of Rewilding could be qualified as “Rewilding of the poor”. However, since its inception in 2002, the relevance of a term as negatively connoted as “poor” has been reconsidered, leading some scholars to use the term “Environmentalism of the poor and the Indigenous”, to highlight the specific struggles of indigenous peoples. No matter what term is used (“marginalized” or “subaltern”), the core definition of a population at the periphery of economic and political power remains. Researchers familiar with this type of environmentalism have proposed to emphasize the proximity between the Environmentalism of the poor and the indigenous, and environmental justice movements, using instead the term “decolonial environmental justice movement”<sup>26</sup>,

<sup>24</sup> J. Martinez Alier, *The Environmentalism of the Poor: A Study of Ecological Conflicts and Valuation* (1st ed., Northampton, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002)

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> B. Roy & K. Hanaček, ‘From the Environmentalism of the Poor and the Indigenous Toward Decolonial Environmental Justice’, in S. Villamayor-Tomas, R. Muradian (eds), *The Barcelona School of Ecological Eco-*

which is also the term favored in this article. While calling the emerging movement of rewilding by marginalized populations a “Rewilding of the poor and the indigenous” has the advantage of conceptual clarity by simply juxtaposing the two terms, I reckon that “Decolonial rewilding” has a better potential to connect with other scholars and indigenous people themselves. Moreover, people like rural and indigenous farmers in Brazil, highland communities in Scotland or Ainu people in Hokkaido have been framed at the receiving end of coloniality, which also qualifies them as “the poor” for Joan Martinez Alliez. It is also the case of the Sami people in the High North, as discussed in the following part.

To put it simply, “Decolonial Rewilding” is a community-based movement of ecosystem restoration that seeks to establish spaces of non-human autonomy in order to provide enhanced ecosystem services to the local population. It is an experimental and context-dependent attempt to protect rural livelihood, prevent environmental damage and create sustainable development, and it is initiated by marginalized populations to remedy the degradation of their environment.

### (C) DECOLONIAL REWILDING IN AN ARCTIC CONTEXT

#### (1) Do rural and indigenous people in the Nordic countries qualify as colonized?

The Nordic countries are often praised for their redistribution systems and environmental commitments, so can the indigenous people of Finland or Sweden be qualified as “poor” or “colonized”? Moreover, can a concept such as “the environmentalism of the poor”, generally used to describe environmental and class struggle in the Global South, be applied to Europe and specifically to the European High North? The definition of “the poor” in Joan Allier’s book addresses diverse categories. The “poor” is “context dependent”, it is often “indigenous” or “farmer” from the Global South, but ultimately is a member of a marginalized group that is affected by “distribution conflicts caused by economic growth and social inequalities”.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, the “poor” is a marginalized group that suffers negatively from state or international pressure, and who suffers disproportionately from industrial development compared to regions occupied by non-marginalized.<sup>28</sup> Due to historical factors and the economic development of the Arctic as a resource frontier, I would argue that the Sami fit the definition of colonized (or the “poor” for Martinez Alier) within the Nordic context.

The European High North is a region currently shared between Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. The Sami people live across the borders of these countries, as indigenous people whose land has been colonized for centuries between the Low

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<sup>27</sup> Martinez Alier, *supra* n.24, at 14.

<sup>28</sup> I. Anguelovski, J. Martínez Alier, ‘The ‘Environmentalism of the Poor’ revisited: Territory and place in disconnected global struggles’, 102 *Ecological Economics* (2014) 167–176 [<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2014.04.005>]

Middle Ages to present days.<sup>29</sup> Nowadays, the Sami parliaments allow the Sami to retain some kind of political control over their homeland and people, but, as proven by the recent history of contestations over dams or windfarms, national governments do not always prioritize Sami interests<sup>30</sup>. Centuries of oppression, including cultural genocide, evangelization and forced sterilization have fragilized this population and endangered its lifestyle.<sup>31</sup> Various Sami communities commonly practice fishing and hunting to provide a part of their subsistence, while an estimated 10 to 15% practice reindeer herding with a semi-nomadic lifestyle (numbers from a 2003 study).<sup>32</sup> This relation to the land is crucial as an increasing number of industrial projects related to mining, forestry, and renewable energy generation are fragmenting the ecosystems, grazing areas and migration pathways of reindeers, while polluting the land and rivers in which rural people fish and hunt. To protect their communities from this wave of projects, deemed “green Colonialism”, Sami people reach out to the media, block machines and construction, and stage protest in front of official buildings.<sup>33</sup>

This ongoing colonization process of Sami territories by Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia is reflected in their economic development. Whether it is pelts and antlers in the 15th century, or pulp and critical minerals in today’s time, their wealth of natural resources is extracted to feed larger urban centers or international markets. The status of the European High North as an extractive resource frontier effectively blurs its status between the “Global North” and the “Global South”: “The increased resource extraction in the Arctic region suggests rather the claim that commodity frontiers move globally, leading to the peripheralization and damaging of regions around the world. There are many pockets now in the Arctic and other parts of the assumed “Global North” that increasingly fulfil the role of supplier of raw materials at cheap prices but with a heavy socio-environmental cost.”<sup>34</sup> The Environmentalism of the poor generally applies to the Global South, but the specificities of the Arctic region make it a relevant concept to analyze and understand environmental struggle by the indigenous and rural population.

The consequence of the status of an extractive frontier, combined with historical marginalization and low population density, is that indigenous people and rural communities in the High North are disproportionally impacted by the “Green Transition”. To feed the green transition, Nordic countries and the broader economy need a range of minerals for batteries, wood, pulp, dams for electricity, nuclear waste disposal sites

<sup>29</sup> N. Kent, *The Sámi Peoples of the North: A Social and Cultural History* (1st ed, London: Hurst, 2014).

<sup>30</sup> F. Buhre, et B.Collin, ‘Braiding Time: Sami Temporalities for Indigenous Justice’, 51(3) *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* (2021) 227-36 [https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2021.1918515].

<sup>31</sup> S. Errico, B. Ann Hocking, ‘Reparations for Indigenous Peoples in Europe: The Case of the Sámi People’, in F. Lenzerini(ed.), *Reparations for Indigenous Peoples: International and Comparative Perspectives* (Oxford, Oxford Academic, 2012) 363–388 [https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199235605.003.0014]; Kent, *supra* n.29.

<sup>32</sup> S.M. Williams, ‘Tradition and Change in the Sub-Arctic: Sámi Reindeer Herding in the Modern Era’, 75(2) *Scandinavian Studies* (2003): 229-56.

<sup>33</sup> S. Normann, ‘Green Colonialism in the Nordic Context: Exploring Southern Saami Representations of Wind Energy Development.’ 49(1) *Journal of Community Psychology* (2021) 77–94 [https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22422].

<sup>34</sup> K. Hanaček, ‘On thin ice – The Arctic commodity extraction frontier and environmental conflicts’, 191 *Ecological Economics* (2022), at 9, [https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107247]

and waste disposal in general.<sup>35</sup> These projects are overwhelmingly featured in the Arctic frontier, on indigenous land, rather than in the more populous south of the Nordic countries.<sup>36</sup> Most of these projects are damaging the environment on which indigenous livelihood is based. Mines, and especially mountaintop removal mining pollutes a large area, including rivers and water basins. Tree monoculture plantations are extended deep into old-growth forests, leading to the loss of biodiversity and essential carbon sinks.<sup>37</sup> Overall, the multiplication of these projects in Sami territories fractures the space and makes it unable to sustain reindeer herding, fishing and hunting. Heavily polluted areas are called “sacrificed zones”, sterile environmental areas which are exploited for the greater benefit of the industrial economy, and they are often placed closer to marginalized populations rather than where the dominant population lives.<sup>38</sup> While these are deemed necessary for the transition to a green society, most indigenous and rural communities perceive the unequal distribution of risks and benefits as unjust. They see it as “Green Colonialism” and as the ongoing colonialization of indigenous land.

## (2) Rewilding Lapland, alliance and compromise between indigenous communities and Rewilding Europe

Several rewilding projects have been implemented in the Nordic countries, including in the High North. In Sweden, Rewilding Lapland (later renamed Rewilding Sweden in 2018) has been established in 2015 as one of the largest areas covered by a Rewilding Europe initiative. This project is the first where Rewilding Europe worked with indigenous people, which significantly altered the nature of the project.

Research on this project shows that compromise is a key element in the co-construction of what a rewilded Lapland is.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the dialogue between activists from Rewilding Europe and the Sami communities shows that Rewilding in the High North takes a strong political dimension. Critics of rewilding fear that it could separate people from their environment and expel people from their land, but the case of the Lapland rewilding project shows a much more nuanced and intricate process. Overall, the Sami communities inhabiting the area support the Rewilding project, as long as it is co-managed with them and not imposed top-down.<sup>40</sup> The Sami in Sweden have struggled with the Swedish state to obtain the recognition that Lapland was co-managed

<sup>35</sup> B. Skorstad, ‘Sacrifice Zones: A Conceptual Framework for Arctic Justice Studies?’ in C. Wood-Donnelly, J. Ohlsson (eds), *Arctic Justice, Environment, Society and Governance* (Bristol University Press, 2023) 96-109 [https://doi.org/10.56687/9781529224832-012].

<sup>36</sup> E.M. Fjellheim, ‘You Can Kill Us with Dialogue: Critical Perspectives on Wind Energy Development in a Nordic-Saami Green Colonial Context,’ 24 *Hum Rights Rev* (2023) 25–51. [https://doi.org/10.1007/s12142-023-00678-4]; Normann, *supra* n.33.

<sup>37</sup> For general effects of monoculture, see M.E. Iezzi et al, ‘Tree monocultures in a biodiversity hotspot: Impact of pine plantations on mammal and bird assemblages in the Atlantic Forest’, 424 *Forest Ecology and Management* (2018) 216-227.

<sup>38</sup> S. Lerner, *Sacrifice Zones: The Front Lines of Toxic Chemical Exposure in the United States* (Cambridge London: The MIT Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> J. Rouet-Leduc and E. von Essen, ‘The Compromises of Rewilding in Swedish Lapland: Implications for Nature Reconciliation’ 17(1) *Journal of Transdisciplinary Environmental Studies* (2019) 38–54.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.; I. Gordon et al, ‘Domestic Livestock and Rewilding: Are They Mutually Exclusive?’ 5 *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* (2021) [DOI:10.3389/fsufs.2021.550410].

between them and the state, and the Rewilding project would not have gone through if it was only a top-down process. The fact that the project went on with the approval of the Sami shows that they also had an interest in it.

Managing the land, and who is legitimate to do what on the land is a central political issue. Through the dialogue with Rewilding Europe, the Sami communities seem to have identified several key aspects of Rewilding that could strengthen their legitimacy on the land while improving the ecosystem services that sustain their livelihood. For example, rewilded areas are generally conservation areas and thus exempt from clear cutting, while old-growth forest sees increased protection. These older forested areas are essential for Sami reindeer herders, since they can support the growth of lichen that feeds the reindeers during winter.<sup>41</sup> The management of these forests has been a central element of conflict with Swedish forestry companies (including state-owned companies) that prioritize clear cuts and plantations, which cannot sustain high biodiversity.<sup>42</sup> Allying with Rewilding Europe was thus identified as something that could benefit the Sami in their fight for the protection of their livelihood.

The compromises have shaped a unique type of High North Rewilding that exemplifies how rewilding can constitute an Environmentalism of the poor when marginalized communities support it. The reintroduction of predators has been ruled out as to not damage the interests of the herders, and the project proceeded with an emphasis on forestry protection and herbivore management. This shows, as remarked by Carver et al., that rewilding can be a scale that is adapted to local contexts.<sup>43</sup> A second compromise is ecotourism. Ecotourism occupies an important place in the strategy of Rewilding Europe, but the terms and nature of this ecotourism have been a source of conflict between Rewilding Europe activists and Sami villages.<sup>44</sup> The rural inhabitants of the High North are seeking other ways to develop their regions than environmentally damaging activities such as mining and tree plantations. Through Rewilding they might be able to diversify their activities, moving from being an extraction frontier towards a less exploitative kind of economic development. Ecotourism can be a part of this, but this is to be decided on their terms.

Another aspect of Rewilding that is impacted by the High North context is the concept of “reconciliation”. Rewilding Europe presents their work as a way to reconcile people and nature. But, as Rouet-Leduc and von Essen highlight, the Sami do not need reconciliation with nature, but with the Swedish state.<sup>45</sup> By contributing to the co-management of Lapland by indigenous people, incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge to fine-tune the ideal rewilding project for the locals and the ecosystem, and improving the livelihood prospects of the reindeer herders, Rewilding becomes

<sup>41</sup> S. Roturier, M. Roué, ‘Of Forest, Snow and Lichen: Sámi Reindeer Herders’ Knowledge of Winter Pastures in Northern Sweden’, 258(9) *Forest Ecology and Management* (2009) 196067. [<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foreco.2009.07.045>]; S. Kivinen, J. Moen, A. Berg, A. Eriksson, ‘Effects of modern forest management on winter grazing resources for reindeer in Sweden’, 39(4) *Ambio* (2010) 269-78 [doi: 10.1007/s13280-010-0044-1].

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> S. Carver et al., *supra* n.14.

<sup>44</sup> F. Koninx, ‘Ecotourism and rewilding: the case of Swedish Lapland’, 18(4) *Journal of Ecotourism* (2019) 332-347 [DOI: 10.1080/14724049.2018.1538227].

<sup>45</sup> Rouet-Leduc and von Essen, *supra* n.39.

more than a movement of ecological conservation. It becomes a “decolonial rewilding”, a movement of ecological restoration that is also a movement for colonial reparation and the reclamation of lost lands.

### (3) Snowchange Cooperative, community-based rewilding for rural welfare

Snowchange Cooperative was created in the late 2000, and describes itself as a non-profit organization that “document climate and environmental change in the North and work with local and Indigenous communities of the Northern regions”.<sup>46</sup> While the environment had been an integral part of Snowchange’s work since its inception, the concept of Rewilding was only introduced in the late 2017 after contact with Rewilding Europe. At this time, Snowchange received a loan from Rewilding Europe that allowed it to rewild the Linnunsuo peatland by purchasing the land from the company VAPO.<sup>47</sup> Subsequently, Snowchange deepened its involvement with rewilding organizations. The history timeline on Snowchange website starts mentioning “Rewilding” in 2018, when four of its restoration projects joined the European Rewilding Network. In this case, indigenous and rural people are initiating these restoration projects. They are allying with Rewilding Europe, which brings part of the funding and general knowledge on Rewilding, while Snowchange brings the experience of its own rewilding projects and the integration of local Traditional Ecological Knowledge.

Snowchange originates from an initiative bringing together scientists, rural and indigenous people. It is a cooperative concerned with safeguarding the livelihood of its members, and creating a diverse environment capable of capturing carbon and delivering enhanced ecosystem services is an integral part of this. The fact that the Arctic is warming up four times faster than the rest of the world, putting pressures on northern ecosystems, increases the urgency of creating resilient and diverse ecosystems.<sup>48</sup> The cooperative has an activist outlook, highlighting the damage that industrial activities such as peat extraction have done to the environment that sustains their livelihood. Snowchange is a prime example of the intersection between Rewilding and the Environmentalism of the poor. It is a bottom-up movement that later allied with a large European NGO, while fostering its own network of indigenous-led organizations.

For its president and founder, Tero Mustonen, Snowchange embodies a specific type of Rewilding, the “northern Rewilding” : “We have been propagating and advancing the notion of Northern Rewilding [...], it is specific, it is always specific”.<sup>49</sup> This aligns with the notion of the compromise and what Rewilding becomes when it is adapted

<sup>46</sup> Snowchange Landscape Rewilding, accessed 16th of November 2023 <https://www.landscaperewilding.org/>

<sup>47</sup> Historical Timeline of Snowchange, accessed 16th of November 2023 <http://www.snowchange.org/historical-timeline-of-snowchange/>; Finland’s Snowchange purchases wetland with its first Rewilding Europe Capital loan , accessed 16th of November 2023 <https://rewildingeurope.com/news/finlands-snowchange-purchases-wetland-with-its-first-rewilding-europe-capital-loan/>

<sup>48</sup> M.Rantanen et al, ‘The Arctic has warmed nearly four times faster than the globe since 1979’, 3 *Commun Earth Environ* (2022) [<https://doi.org/10.1038/s43247-022-00498-3>].

<sup>49</sup> Online interview of Tero Mustonen by Rewilding Europe, June 2023. Snowchange Cooperative and the Rewilding Network, accessed the 16th of November 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ggRimz-Nkk>

to the European High North, with its complex relations of state, indigenous and rural actors. This is not about creating a “wilderness” without people, but about creating diverse ecosystems that benefit the human and the non-human. The network of projects managed by Snowchange has a high biodiversity, they serve as haven for many bird species, and captures carbon with a network of wetlands and peatlands. Via the Rewilding Network, Snowchange can obtain loans, and exchange around biodiversity conservation with other organizations in Romania or Portugal. While the autonomy of nature is always central, there is not “one solution fits all” and each context has its own vision of Rewilding. While some scholars fear that the diversity of Rewilding can lessen its impact<sup>50</sup>, the practice hints that a flexible definition allows local movements to adopt it more easily, thus spreading the movement and creating dialogue around its core values.

To conduct its rewilding projects, Snowchange Cooperative can proceed in different ways, either by engaging with local villages, having landowners become part of the cooperative, or by directly buying lands. The fund can come from local people, from large NGOs such as Rewilding Europe, or from international donors. The discourse of Snowchange is that, by safeguarding carbon sinks, they fight climate change on a local and global scale. Locally, Snowchange Cooperative also brings a greater autonomy to rural communities by increasing their legitimacy to govern their lands. For Snowchange members, by buying the land, negotiating concessions, or joining the cooperative, rewilding projects improve the locals’ control on their lands and brings a greater confidence in the future because state companies are less likely to conduct extractive operations on rewilded lands. For Snowchange Cooperative, rewilding is very much social and political, the restoration of the ecosystem by locals and for locals have far-reaching social and political effects that contribute to sustainable development while bringing an increase of status to rural people who are often marginalized.<sup>51</sup>

#### (D) CONCLUSION

In this article, I have discussed the theoretical basis for the intersection between Rewilding and the Environmentalism of the poor, a type of “Decolonial Rewilding” that benefits local communities. This type of Rewilding has become possible via the diversification of the meanings and applications of “Rewilding” in Europe, which increased its emphasis on people rather than solely on the problematic concept of “Wilderness”. The flexibility of the term “Rewilding” allows local actors to adapt it to their local context while keeping to its core values regarding non-human autonomy. While some worry that this could water down this concept of Rewilding, the advantages of compromises and perceiving rewilding as a scale have been instrumental in its adoption by local communities. And by being adopted by rural, marginalized or indigenous people, Rewilding becomes a political concept that challenges land use regimes by companies and states, putting more importance on the defense of local livelihood, local sovereignty and climate change

<sup>50</sup> H. Schulte To Bühne, N. Pettorelli, et M. Hoffmann. ‘The Policy Consequences of Defining Rewilding’. 51-1) *Ambio* (2022) 93102 [<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13280-021-01560-8>].

<sup>51</sup> For reference, see the online interview of Tero Mustonen by Rewilding Europe, *supra* n.49.

mitigation. Joan Martinez Alier has remarked that environmental movements can be promoted by marginalized communities when the defense of the environment aligns with the defense of their livelihood, which is precisely the function of rewilding for organizations like Snowchange. This type of bottom-up, community-based rewilding is different from rewilding projects in the Carpathians or Portugal, and thus qualifies as a new strand, a “decolonial rewilding”.

Rewilding projects in the High North demonstrate what decolonial rewilding can be. Projects in Sweden and Finland show that local communities perceive the advantages of rewilding and its discourse. Compromises, ecotourism, traditional ecological knowledge and the creation of alliances with large NGOs are part of a larger movement in which restoring the land allows to reclaim rights, and the control over a land lost to colonization. Rewilding in this High North context is an Environmentalism of the poor, aiming to repair the damages of the forestry and extraction industry to create biodiversity hotspots that can sustain local people’s livelihood while mitigating climate change through the maintenance of carbon sinks. Through this evolution of the Rewilding movement, it seems that rewilders have avoided the creation of “a wilderness devoid of people” and instead created a wild for the people, and for marginalized people to seek environmental and social justice in a warming world. Such a sustainable development benefiting the human and the non-human alike, mitigating environmental damage on a local and global scale, and oriented towards a more equal and just society is undoubtedly key for Arctic sustainability.

