



SPECIAL SECTION

Rewilding, gender and the transformation of the Côa Valley

Nadia Bartolini¹  | Bárbara Carvalho² | Sarah May³

¹Institute of Archaeology, UCL, London, UK

²Independent Researcher, Vila Nova de Foz Côa, Portugal

³Independent Researcher, Cardiff, UK

Correspondence

Nadia Bartolini, Institute of Archaeology, UCL, London, UK.
 Email: n.bartolini@ucl.ac.uk

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Abstract

This paper focuses on women's agency through their responses to a rewilding initiative. To do this, we draw on ethnographic research conducted in a rewilding landscape in the Côa Valley in Portugal. Our initial encounters in the rewilding field were all with male workers. This led us to actively seek out women's experiences, who were mainly located on the margins of rewilding. We believe these experiences cast rewilding—and its effects on rural communities—in a new light. We discuss three women's differing relationships with a rewilding initiative: Beatriz who sold land to rewilding and purchased other productive land for her son; Diana and Matilda who are running businesses alongside raising young families and envisioning futures. Their experiences highlight not only how they have developed alternative means to ensure the reproduction of the family, but also how rewilding is more than nature. We conclude that listening to voices less heard enables a better understanding of how rewilding affects people's lives and their differential access to resources.

KEYWORDS

Côa Valley, ethnography, gender, rewilding, rural, women

1 | INTRODUCTION: REWILDING AND ITS SOCIAL IMPACTS

Rewilding is a landscape initiative that has been applied to restore ecological function depending on the local, national and regional circumstances in which it operates (Carey, 2016; DeSilvey & Bartolini, 2019; Foreman, 2004; Gammon, 2018; Jepson et al., 2018; Lorimer et al., 2015; Pettorelli et al., 2019; Root-Bernstein et al., 2018). Scholarly work on rewilding initially focused on biological diversity and conservation management, but it has recently started to investigate the effects of rewilding on communities (for example, Bulkens et al., 2016; Drenthen, 2018; Holmes et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021; Wynne-Jones et al., 2018). That said, the investigation relating to people's relationship with rewilding has, up until now, predominantly considered interested parties involved in rewilding, and in particular the ongoing tensions between rewilding advocates and farmers. The core concern of this paper is therefore less on rewilding itself than on how it impacts the social contexts within which such initiatives take place.

To do this we focus on a site in Northeastern Portugal where Rewilding Europe, a public benefit organisation, is involved in a partnership to rewild the Greater Côa Valley. European rewilding initiatives are considered a unique context because of the longstanding human influence over the landscape (Jepson et al., 2018; Massenberget al., 2023). Although scholarly work homing in on rewilding acknowledges the presence of humans, it places the benefits for the natural

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environment at the centre of the investigation. While we agree with Massenberget al. (2023) that rewilding in European landscapes should implement more holistic approaches, these approaches are often based on flattening the nature–human relationality insofar as they become singularities. We wish to draw attention to people whose voices in the landscape are less heard (Finney, 2014). We start looking from the margins (Hooks, 1984; Sultana, 2021) to reconsider the nuances of ‘the human’ impacted by rewilding projects. Our research intersects with work on gender and the environment (Cruz-Torres & McElwee, 2017; Johnson & Zalik, 2021) as well as feminism and rural geographies (Bennett, 2004; Fernández-Giménez et al., 2022; Little & Panelli, 2003; Pini et al., 2020; Whatmore, 1991) to tease out how the arrival of rewilding has affected their lives.

The paper starts by briefly introducing the context of rewilding in the C oa Valley before outlining how our first ethnographic encounters with rewilding practices in the field led us to specifically seek out women's voices at the margins of designated rewilding plots. We then narrate two case studies from our fieldwork to demonstrate women's agency as they engage in an ‘alternative feminine approach to rurality’ (Fern andez-Gim enez et al., 2022, p. 12), which in our context means that women adopt different strategies including the purchase of land and the creation of new businesses to secure a future for the reproduction of the family. We conclude that listening to voices less heard in rewilding landscapes helps us better understand the ways that rewilding impacts their lives and their differential access to resources.

2 | THE C OA VALLEY, PORTUGAL

In Europe, it is estimated that over 11%, or 20 million hectares, of land are at risk of being abandoned between 2015 and 2030 (Perpi a Castillo et al., 2018). During Portugal's ‘Hungry Years’, low-income households in the C oa Valley had the poorest agricultural land in terms of productivity: in the 1940s and 1950s, people were still farming the rocky, uneven lands, with rye and cereal as the main crops (interview 10 October 2017). By the mid-1960s, ‘the oldest generations stayed around the villages while all the kids left’ (interview 10 October 2017). Census data reveal that, on average, population in the area was at its peak in the 1950s; a sharp decrease occurred in the 1960s and 1970s where many fled abroad, mainly to France, due to socio-political hardship (Statistics Portugal, n.d.; informal interviews 14–15 October 2017). By 2011, most of the population in the towns and villages in the C oa Valley decreased by over 50% (Statistics Portugal, n.d.).

In 2000, two biologists founded a small nature conservation organisation in the C oa Valley which mainly focused on increasing biodiversity by restoring habitats for cliff-breeding birds of prey (ATN, n.d.; Interview 5 September 2016). A turning point for the organisation was in 2003 when a wildfire spread and destroyed a significant part of the area (informal interview 11 October 2017). The nature conservation organisation employed people to do fire surveys and realised that it was not financially sustainable in the long run. This is when they started to re-introduce horses into the environment so that the animals could graze and contribute to clear the areas and reduce the spread of wildfires (informal interview 11 October 2017). In 2011, the nature conservation organisation partnered with Rewilding Europe to manage land for rewilding and spur rural economic development. Since then, some younger generations of people have either returned or moved to the C oa Valley to work in nature conservation or tourism.

Today, the C oa Valley is located between national parks, and features a patchwork of custodial land tenure that includes a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site and privately owned plots of land, including lands set aside for rewilding—the biggest of which is the Faia Brava nature reserve at over 1000 hectares. It is at this site and satellite rewilding sites in the area that rewilding principles have been put in place since 2011.

3 | METHODOLOGY: WOMEN IN THE FIELD

The research for this paper was based in the context of a wider publicly funded programme (AH/M004376/1, 2015–19), which examined heritage processes and future-making practices at various field sites in Europe. Two of these field sites involved rewilding initiatives: the C oa Valley (Portugal) and the Lake District (UK). This paper centres on the first site where Author 1 conducted fieldwork with Author 2, an archaeologist (and Portuguese interpreter) with intimate knowledge of the rural landscape and ties to the local rural communities. Our fieldwork methods involved participant observation, interviewing in the form of mobile methods (go-along in the landscape), and visual methods through film and photography. Fieldwork took place over four periods between 2015 and 2017, each lasting several weeks. After our first fieldwork period, all three authors started to engage in conversations around our experiences in our respective rewilding site. These ongoing conversations became part of our reflexive methodology (Ramzan et al., 2009) and were fundamental to the ideas that formed this paper.

Research in the C oa Valley initially consisted of investigating rewilding practices, which involved us travelling to areas at the centre of the designated rewilding plots. For us to view the day-to-day activities in the rewilding area, the rewilding manager advised us to follow field workers. We followed up to three men who we met regularly as they were able to provide us with valuable information to answer key research questions, such as the management of the animals, the maintenance of the territory and the tending of the vegetation. Initially, there was a joke made by the men about having two women following them around and taking pictures of them in the ‘wild’. Publicly, we laughed it off, though we discussed it privately. In a way, this confirmed for us our feelings about the situation: we knew they knew that this was both curious and alluring. For us, this played with conceptions of heteronormativity and rural male labour in the outdoors which are aspects that have been discussed in scholarly literature outside of rewilding, specifically in looking at the politics and gendering of farming practices as well as the gendering of ‘nature’ work (Brandt & Haugen, 2005; Ekers, 2013; Little & Jones, 2000; Whatmore, 1991).

Part of noticing the men we were following was through the camera. Our ethnographic investigation involved the use of equipment, such as a mirrorless camera, microphones and a tripod. The lens, therefore, framed the workers’ labour. The most striking example is when we found ourselves video recording and interviewing the men who were fixing a barbed wire fence that had been damaged in the rewilding area (Figure 1).

We asked them to describe the work that they were undertaking and demonstrate their tasks. In some cases, this involved them slowing down so we could capture their work on film. This scenario reinforced a commonplace trope of masculinity where ‘men are framed as the protagonists of production’ in the outdoors (Ekers, 2013, p. 877). In our case, we witnessed how the day-to-day maintenance of rewilding plots, such as repairing fences and moving animals, speaks of the physical labour and strength required to perform those tasks in the field. The camera, however, as a tool of research acted as a framing device and contributed to enhance this performance through the embodied act of manual labour: ordering the steps being taken, showing the sweat on their bodies, focusing on their hands manipulating the wire, capturing the arm muscles pulling the wire to the posts, and zooming out to frame an entire body hammering to fix the pole into place. The camera became a prop behind which we could both hide and observe, retreat our bodies while promoting theirs. The paradox of using visual methods is that it privileges embodiment, yet, what it also does is reinforce the male body in this case. The lens felt like a voyeuristic tool in this circumstance, particularly as it worked to physically alert us to the presence of the men in conducting everyday practices in rewilding.

This scenario heightened our positionality as women in the field and led us to seek out people who were not *in* the rewilding plots. As we moved to the edges of the rewilding reserves, our experience with the male labourers instilled in us a particular desire to find women and bring out their voices to better understand how their lives had been affected by the rewilding initiative.

In the next two sections, we narrate the stories which we have assembled from the interviews, informal conversations and mobile methods that occurred during two fieldwork periods (2016–17). First, we will hear Beatriz’s story and then we will follow with the stories of Diana and Matilda.



FIGURE 1 Repairing a fence in the rewilding area. Photo by N. Bartolini, 13 October 2017.

4 | BUYING LAND TO SECURE THE FUTURE OF THE FAMILY

In our quest to speak to locals associated with rewilding, the rewilding manager mentioned an older resident as being key to forging a relationship between the nature conservation organisation and one of the nearby isolated villages. Francisco¹ is a business owner in a village next to the rewilding territory. Francisco becomes a key informant not only because his business is a central meeting point for villagers and gossip, but also because he indicated that he was one of the first to have sold lands for rewilding and has been an avid promoter of the rewilding initiative in the village. During our numerous visits to him, we had noticed his wife who was often helping him run the business, but she constantly cast her eyes away from ours and let us speak with Francisco. When we finally get Beatriz's attention, she is surprised that we want to talk with her. We explain that we want to hear from her, hear about her story and get some of her views. She waves her arms around in the air and insists that we should speak with her husband. But we persisted in trying to persuade her to speak with us. Finally, she agrees.

We find out that the land that was sold for rewilding was hers, not her husband's. She had inherited this land from her late father. She tells us how she recalls working that land, mainly to garden with her grandmother. She also mentions that her grandfather died on that piece of land in a tragic accident. But this was a long time ago. She says that once the nature conservation organisation came along and offered to buy that land, she thought they might as well take up the opportunity and sell it since she was not using it herself. We ask her if she has been back to see the land after it was sold? Beatriz tells us that she has never returned to see the land. We ask her why? She tells us she doesn't really care for the land now since she worked that land a long time ago. Intrigued, we inquire further: what about seeing the land as it is being transformed for rewilding? She tells us that she doesn't care about this; 'land needs to be productive to have value'. Beatriz then attempts to correct a misconception we have: she is the one 'on the land', not her husband. She then proceeds to show us her garden where she grows potatoes and an impressive range of vegetables. She also picks almonds, and one day, we see her toiling in the shade, skilfully breaking the shells and putting almonds in bags that she posts to relatives living in the cities.

Beatriz mentions that there is another piece of land that she has purchased—for her son. We had assumed that she had released herself from land ownership, but instead, she purchased other land in the vicinity. We ask if she could bring us to see it; her joy is palpable. Beatriz directs us to the outskirts of the village, to a gated piece of land. She opens the gate and proudly walks us through the rows of olive trees and gives us a tour of the small house that her husband built (Figure 2).

Our initial interpretation of this situation is that Beatriz has a deep emotional attachment to this new piece of land. Our assumption was that this attachment was strongly linked to her family, since the land she sold to rewilding was inherited from her father—poignantly, for us at least, since her grandfather had died in a tragic accident on the land. We thought this family history would have made it hard for Beatriz to sell the land. However, Beatriz expressed no such concerns. Indeed, the sale indicates that her connection to land is not through an emotional tie that inevitably binds her family to a particular piece of land. Rather, we were struck by her insistence that she cut all ties to her inherited piece of land. It is possible selling the land might have enabled her to distance herself from the trauma. Hearing Beatriz, we favour an alternative explanation. This is to do with the function of land in the reproduction of the family.

For us, Beatriz's detachment from her family's land, and the significance of the newly purchased land that will be passed on to her son, is about the value of the land for the family: this, we believe, is about productivity. Here, to be clear,



FIGURE 2 Productive land on the margins of rewilding. Photo by N. Bartolini, 29 October 2017.

productivity is less about profit than it is about produce. This indicates that it is what grows on the land—the products of the land—that is being transmitted to her son rather than the specific piece of land linked to a familial heritage.

So how is the rewilding context different from a situation where Beatriz would sell her land to any other agricultural use? The proximity of rewilding has, in part, precipitated people like Beatriz to reflect on land and legacy, and to reconsider the livelihood strategies of those living on the land (Whatmore, 1991). Purchasing new land demonstrates Beatriz's agency and aligns with how rural women work within the patriarchy 'for the future of the farming family' (Bennett, 2004, p. 155). Yet, Beatriz's actions suggest that something more nuanced than 'land abandonment' is occurring in the margins of rewilding. The arrival of rewilding provides an option to divest of property that, as Beatriz told us, she herself is not using. While rewilding managers might view her land as being abandoned, she never mentioned to us that she had in effect abandoned it. Indeed, the C \hat{o} a Valley is rife with privately owned plots of land that individuals retain and inherit. Here, as the nature conservation organisation assumes control over her 'unused land' for the purposes of restoring ecological biodiversity, rewilding also functions to shut down the future possibility of the land's productive use. To cope with this loss, Beatriz scans the landscape targeting another plot of land as she works towards a future that involves productive land. The purchase of this new plot of land enables her to secure a reproductive future. But more than this, rewilding provokes Beatriz to act; something she might not have done had the land not attracted any attention from other investors during her lifetime, and the land would have reverted (passively) to her son after her death. Beatriz's agency is driven by the loss of an anticipated future that is absent from rewilding conceptions which emphasise future benefits for nature through ecological restoration. Another aspect of rewilding which is indicative of the C \hat{o} a Valley context is how it can stimulate rural economic development. In the next section, we will explore this through the actions of Diana and Matilda.

5 | CONVERTING REWILDING INTO A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

When Diana and her husband Fabio created the nature conservation organisation back in 2000, there was a funding programme in place to renovate buildings and promote historic villages in the area. They wanted to take advantage of the funding available to develop a sideline guest house business. Since then, Diana has taken over the guest house and looks after the family while her husband works full-time for a national park. Meanwhile, the nature conservation organisation partnered with Rewilding Europe and their guest house sought to attract tourists, including those through the rewilding network, to the area.

Initially, Diana and Fabio's guest house was a small project. Eventually, another property was purchased near the original building which extended the property into a B&B. They contacted travel magazines and other outlets that could promote their business. In the midst of this transition came the partnership with Rewilding Europe. This provided another dimension to their business. This concept of 'dimension' is important to Diana. We ask if this is because rewilding, particularly through the main Faia Brava reserve, provides a new dimension to the area? She says that more than the Faia Brava rewilding reserve, it is the projects around rewilding that give the area dimension and enable things to thrive. She explains that 'you have more with the sum of everything than just the parts', and that this involves more than just a combination of things; it is about considering the dimension of the whole. Here, the whole has a socialist vision: where people gather and work to create something bigger and better together.

Staying at Diana's B&B, we have the luxury of being able to chat with her informally on numerous occasions. We are also able to appreciate the everyday activities that she undertakes. With her young family living on the premises, we see her care for her children, preparing meals and discussing homework. We also see her organise staff; discuss breakfast menus; cater to tourists' needs. But her management of the B&B while being a board member of the nature conservation organisation that she co-founded enables her to be an 'interlocutor' (Nast, 1994): someone who brokers relationships between tourism, local communities and rewilding. This is an important aspect of her enacting the dimension concept. Her knowledge of the area, both in terms of nature and culture, enables visitors to rely on her advice to get the most out of their visit. She has created numerous partnerships with local attractions, such as with the Museum and Archaeological Park of the UNESCO World Heritage Site where she offers nighttime guided tours at the Palaeolithic rock art sites. She has also arranged picnics and other special bespoke events to respond to visitor demands. Through the partnership between the nature conservation organisation and Rewilding Europe, we shared breakfasts with board members, foreign investors and collaborators of the European and British rewilding networks.

We discover that the architect and designer, Matilda, who worked on Diana's property, is also a B&B owner in another village. Intrigued to see if there were parallels with Diana's experiences, we decided to go and talk to her. Matilda has

relatives in the area, and, after having worked on Diana's house, she and her husband Luis (also an architect) decided to buy a property and establish themselves there. The property they renovated also houses their young family. What they liked most about the property was the integrity of the structure: while it required a lot of work, there were original features such as wooden beams that gave the property character.

Matilda tells us that, in part, the interest in the area is its potential: with nature conservation, rewilding and cultural heritage, the area seems ripe for opportunity and the freedom to try new things. As architects, they are always looking for new challenges with the built environment. She tells us they bought another property, one they hope to work on as an experiment, an eco-experiment, working with different local materials such as straw (thatch roof), iron and wood. They wish to evolve their practice from how they were taught at university and find new ways to address energy consumption. Getting to know the local area in which they now live, Matilda says they feel closer to the landscape and want to promote more sustainable lifestyles and eco-friendly travel. This is partly why they started the Star Camp. The Star Camp is a set of (at the time) three 20 m² rooms within the rewilding reserve, with a canvas material at the front that can be opened to the 'wild' (Figure 3).

Our encounters with Diana and Matilda show us a different aspect of women's agency in the rewilding landscape. Diana's concept of 'dimension' shows us that women are not simply taking advantage of economic opportunities, but that they are actively involved in a vision aimed at a new way of life. This recalls some of the studies on gender and the environment in the Global South that explore how changes in livelihoods not only occur because of pressures, but also because women innovate and diversify opportunities in relation to new circumstances (Cruz-Torres & McElwee, 2017, p. 138).

It could be argued that Diana and Matilda's responsibility for the house and home life reinforces gendered stereotypes of domestic work in rural environments (Bennett, 2004; Little & Panelli, 2003; Whatmore, 1991). Yet, rewilding has enabled them to ensure a stable and working home life for the family while creating a new 'dimension' for rural social futures in two ways. First, rewilding has allowed them to partially commercialise their domestic domain (Bouquet, 1982, p. 228), and second, to innovate in the public sphere (Fernández-Giménez et al., 2022). As they navigate their different commercial and public service roles (tour guide, biologist, nature conservation board member, designer, builder), they challenge traditional power relations in rural environments. They are central to linking locals, tourists and partners, demonstrating that rooted networks (Rocheleau, 2011), when linked with broader rewilding networks, stretch globally. While Diana and Matilda's stories might seem unique, we spoke to another woman in a different village next to a rewilding plot who started a B&B. We also heard about three other women with young children who developed their own business ventures as part of the wider opportunities afforded by rewilding. This suggests that women are responsible for the reproduction of the family at home as well as being responsible for economic and administrative functions, and creating links with the wider community. Women accumulating responsibilities in rural environments is not new (cf. Bouquet, 1982; Little & Panelli, 2003; Whatmore, 1991), however, we contend that these responsibilities are increasingly visible and significant in a rewilding framework that encourages rural economic development.

Diana and Matilda's affinities towards nature conservation and sustainable lifestyles could be associated with their age and education, suggesting that in their case, university-educated women return to the rural with ambitions



FIGURE 3 Side view of the Star Camp in the rewilding area. Photo by N. Bartolini, 7 November 2015.

that align with Rewilding Europe's nature-based economies and funding strategies ([Rewilding Europe website](#)). However, the opportunities offered by rewilding are not perceived as being open to everyone and this creates tension. A few informants located in different villages around the rewilding plots queried the funding allocation process. One (older male) informant in particular pondered whether funding went to certain individuals who had tighter connections with rewilding networks, those who were city-educated who knew how to write proposals, or if funding panels privileged certain villages over others in the C oa Valley. This suggests to us that gender alone does not explain the perceived inequalities that exist in rewilding landscapes. Age, education and class contribute to widening the gulf between older generations living on the land and newer generations who return or migrate to the area. Even so, we argue that women like Diana and Matilda are using rewilding to change the socio-economic model of rurality in the C oa Valley.

6 | CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper has been on how women have actively responded to rewilding in the C oa Valley. It is through women's active engagement with rewilding that we can better understand rewilding's socio-economic impacts in the region. We have highlighted that in both case studies, women ensure the reproduction of the family in rural environments (Bennett, 2004; Bouquet, 1982; Little & Panelli, 2003; Whatmore, 1991). However, it has also been important for us to recognise that women are not positioned in the same way by rewilding, and that they take different strategies in the opportunities afforded to them.

The rewilding manager's focus that we should speak with Francisco emphasises how male voices dominate rural environments (Little & Jones, 2000). Beatriz herself did not see the point of us insisting on speaking with her. The product of gender inequality is that women's stories are often hidden, undervalued and there is a tendency to not notice their agency (including by women themselves). But we discovered that Beatriz had in fact much to say and contribute to our understanding of how rewilding affects women's lives: she inherited land which she did not use (rather than abandoned), divested that land to rewilding, and bought new land with olive trees which will one day be inherited by her son. Importantly, in this case, the land she inherited is not without value: it is land without a product. What rewilding has done is shut down the future potential of its production for produce. Beatriz has another way of seeing land: the vitality of the land is the vitality (and future) of the family.

A generation younger than Beatriz, Diana and Matilda's conceptions of ensuring the future of the family are embedded towards an ethos that espouses ideas combining environmental and social sustainability. Their return to the C oa Valley as university-educated and environmentally conscious women enable them to take advantage of the opportunities offered through rewilding. Indeed, their social status and sustainability-driven business acumen aligns with Rewilding Europe's vision to establish rural economies alongside rewilding. This also has the effect of creating tensions as older populations grapple with the gradual churn of younger families transforming the C oa Valley's socio-economic model. Though rewilding enables Diana and Matilda to juggle multiple roles that make them more visible in the public sphere, their innovative business model is tethered to their traditional role as mothers and carers of the household and visitors.

These experiences evidence that rewilding is more than about nature conservation, animal reintroductions and dealing with conflict over land use. It is about how women use their knowledge, expertise and agency to create futures for their families (Fern andez-Gim enez et al., 2022; Whatmore, 1991). If we ignore these voices, we miss how rewilding is more than nature, its management and practices. As others have indicated, there is a human component in rewilding that links people and nature (Martin et al., 2021; Massenberg et al., 2023; Wynne-Jones et al., 2020). Yet, more research is needed to understand the nuances of that human component. Our paper outlines details that reveal how women are affected by and respond to rewilding. It is through these human experiences that we can appreciate how rewilding transforms people and shapes their futures.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Nadia Bartolini  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0375-9413>

ENDNOTE

¹Names of participants have been changed to preserve anonymity.

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