



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Digital nature in the AI era: How human and AI-generated representations shape future visions of rewilding

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**Handling Editor:** Joe Glentworth**Abstract**

1. Rewilding has gained significant influence in nature conservation, offering hopeful narratives that address the interconnected challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss while enabling people to reconnect with 'wildness' in the Anthropocene. Rewilding powerfully shapes imaginaries of possible futures and is being implemented through numerous projects across the UK. These projects fundamentally transform landscape aesthetics and determine which human and non-human species are rendered visible, desirable and legitimate in rewilded futures.
2. In this study, we interrogate the aesthetics of rewilding through a qualitative approach that examines visual and textual materials from advocacy organisation websites, their social media accounts on Instagram and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated representations of rewilding produced by AI chatbots. Our analysis focuses on the framing and content of visual materials, such as what is represented and what is absent, as well as how these materials construct visions of desirable future natures.
3. We find that representations of rewilding focus on conventional nature aesthetics, predominantly excluding aesthetically challenging ecosystem processes, non-charismatic species and a diversity of people.
4. We argue that visual and textual materials reveal not only how nature is represented in rewilding discourses but also embody normative assumptions about what recovered or rewilded nature should look like. These visual representations act politically by normalising the presence or absence of particular people and activities in landscapes, thereby perpetuating narrow conceptualisations of environmental futures.
5. We discuss how our findings may inform the development of more socially just environmental imaginaries, contributing to more inclusive future land management both in policy and practice.

**KEYWORDS**

critical AI visual analysis, digital humanities, environmental aesthetics, environmental communication of nature conservation, rewilding

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Climate change and biodiversity loss have catalysed growing international and national support for rewilding initiatives. The United Nations has declared the current decade the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration (UNEP, 2023), while organisations such as Rewilding Britain advocate for Scotland to become the world's first 'Rewilding Nation', despite governments in Britain only tentatively engaging with rewilding terminology in official policy discourse (Cary & Wartmann, 2024). This momentum has mobilised diverse stakeholders from government agencies to conservation organisations, to fund, promote and implement rewilding projects across multiple scales (Harrington & Russo, 2024; Waylen & Marshall, 2023), and rewilding has become highly influential in nature conservation more generally (Jørgensen, 2015).

The concept of rewilding itself remains contested, with definitions varying significantly across academic and practitioner communities (Deary & Warren, 2017; Jørgensen, 2015; Schulte to Bühne et al., 2022; Waylen & Marshall, 2023). However, most interpretations emphasise dynamic ecological processes, species reintroduction or recovery, and intervention at landscape scales. Increasingly, the social sciences are taking part in the debate and question the power dynamics and societal aspects of rewilding (Cary et al., 2025; Gammon, 2019; Glentworth et al., 2024; Mikołajczak et al., 2022; O'Mahony, 2020; Thomas, 2022; Ward, 2019; Wynne-Jones, 2022), including drawing attention to the aesthetics of rewilding (Prior & Brady, 2017) and how such aesthetics can become politicised (Wartmann & Lorimer, 2024). However, at the intersection between social science studies of rewilding and environmental communication, there is still a lack research on how organisations employ aesthetic framings in their digital communications about rewilding, specifically through digital content, and how this may shape discourse and policy about rewilding.

In this study, we examine how these visual and rhetorical strategies function normatively, that is how they shape public perception, establish standards of value and potentially influence policy development (Rojas-Padilla et al., 2022; van Beek et al., 2020). Our analysis proceeds through several stages: We first contextualise our work within literature on environmental aesthetics and communication theory, then present our methodological approach and empirical findings across data we analysed from different digital platforms.

We analyse the content and framing of visual materials drawing out two common themes from our visual analysis to understand:

1. who and what is rendered visible or invisible through the framing and use of visual materials and
2. how future visions of emerging new natures are visually constructed, and to what effect.

We conclude by discussing the implications of aesthetic framings for rewilding and wider nature conservation practice and proposing alternative approaches that address the challenges we identify in current communication strategies.

## 2 | BACKGROUND

### 2.1 | Environmental aesthetics

Environmental aesthetics emerged in the 1960s as philosophers began applying aesthetic theory that had previously focused primarily on art to the natural world (Carlson, 2005). This field recognises that judging nature's aesthetics requires different frameworks than judging art, since natural environments offer multi-sensory, immersive experiences (Carlson, 2010). Aesthetic values function as a distinct type of environmental value alongside ecological and historical values, defined as normative positions that assign relative worth to landscapes, species and ecosystem components (Brady & Prior, 2020). These values have been demonstrated to exert influence on environmental policy and conservation action: What is deemed beautiful receives protection and care (such as the Yellowstone National Park or landscapes designated as 'National Landscapes' in England), while landscapes considered 'ugly' or 'unscenic', such as wetlands or plains, are often neglected (Kempton et al., 1996; Saito, 1998) and consequently have been built over or 'improved' for agriculture.

Critically, aesthetic and ecological values frequently diverge. Ecologically rich habitats like wetlands or dense forests may be perceived as visually unappealing, while ecologically degraded landscapes such as the overgrazed Scottish Highlands or neatly trimmed, manicured lawns and artificial plastic lawns are often valued for their aesthetic appeal (Macdonald & Macdonald, 2009; Robbins, 2012). Educational interventions can shift these perceptions (Lintott, 2006). For example, while many people associate negative aesthetic values with dead wood in forests, public acceptance increases when people understand its ecological importance for fungi and invertebrates (Gundersen et al., 2017). Dead wood (Figure 1) can even acquire positive aesthetic value among rewilding advocates and practitioners,



**FIGURE 1** Dead wood in the Alps. Though often deemed 'unaesthetic', dead wood becomes acceptable when recognised as habitat for fungi and invertebrates, and can even gain positive aesthetic value when seen as an expression of self-willed nature (Image credit: C. Wartmann).

who interpret it as a sign of self-willed nature free from human intervention, as documented at Scotland's Carrifran Wildwood project (Prior & Brady, 2017).

Despite growing recognition of the diversity of aesthetic values, environmental aesthetics research has inadequately addressed questions of power and representation, or who determines what constitutes an attractive environment, what appears 'normal' and who belongs in valued landscapes (Wartmann & Lorimer, 2024). These gaps are relevant across nature conservation initiatives, where visual communications could shape public support and policy development.

## 2.2 | Environmental communication

As an extensive body of work demonstrates, images powerfully influence public discourses, opinions and worldviews. Several scholars delve into the cultural and political significance of how environments and nature conservation are portrayed in the media, and by environmental NGOs seeking to construct narratives and meanings around nature conservation (Damien et al., 2023; DeLuca, 2005; Gabrielson, 2019; Podeschi, 2007). Images are an important means of communicating scientific information beyond advocacy or academia and into the policy arena. Visualisations can influence policy and policy debates through various mechanisms, by conveying social norms, or as framing devices, which are deployed in strategic ways (Rojas-Padilla et al., 2022). There is also a growing body of work on critical visual studies on imagery and media representations of climate change (Milkoreit, 2017; O'Neill, 2013; Smith & Joffe, 2009; Yusoff, 2010). However, despite increasing media coverage associated with rewilding and nature recovery there has been much less scholarly attention given to mediated representations incorporating both visual aspects and text-based discourse analysis. Instead, existing research has focused solely on text-based discourse analysis on rewilding, for example in Scotland (Martin et al., 2021) and the UK and Republic of Ireland (Joyce, 2024).

Furthermore, the advent of the web 2.0 and user-generated content heavily focused around image-sharing magnifies the significance of digital media. These platforms play a crucial role in shaping beliefs about nature by raising awareness and cultivating pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours (Arts et al., 2021, 2022; Leighton & Serieys, 2025), in what has been referred to as 'nature 2.0' (Büscher, 2016), and can play a role in normalising aesthetics of 'messy recovered natures' that challenge the conventional aesthetic of the manicured lawn (Wartmann & Lorimer, 2024).

In this paper, we direct our attention to the way aesthetics are represented in visual and textual materials from advocacy organisation websites and artificial intelligence (AI)-generated representations of rewilding produced by AI chatbots. Conservation bureaucracies and NGOs are powerful players in the generation of influence, ideas, money and research about nature conservation (da Fonseca, 2003; Holmes, 2011). With NGOs playing an increasing role in accountability processes to persuade states to fulfil their

biodiversity commitments (Ulloa, 2023), our analysis provides a timely reflection on how these institutions reinforce their messaging about conserved nature. As part of this research was conducted for a Leverhulme Centre for Nature Recovery research project on the politics of aesthetics of nature recovery in the UK (<https://naturerecovery.ox.ac.uk/>), we decided to focus on the public-facing websites of nine UK-based rewilding organisations. These case studies are internationally relevant as influential projects that are socially networked and both shape and are shaped by wider international conservation practices.

## 3 | METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

We employ critical visual analysis to examine how environmental aesthetics construct visions of nature recovery, focusing on rewilding representations by UK organisations as our 'site of production' (Rose, 2022). Following a critical visual studies framework (Doboš, 2023), we analyse both *visuality* (image composition and scene construction) and *visibility* (who or what is rendered visible or invisible within these compositions).

### 3.1 | Imagery on websites and Instagram accounts of rewilding organisations

We examined rewilding representations on public-facing websites and social media presence on Instagram (<https://www.instagram.com/>) of environmental NGOs, partnerships and initiatives active across England, Wales and Scotland, including pan-British organisations such as Rewilding Britain. Rewilding in Britain provides case studies of international relevance due to its high level of biodiversity loss, its history of land-use change and the need to align rewilding with diverse cultural landscapes, land management practices and community interests. Organisations were selected based on top search engine results for 'rewilding' combined with country-specific terms, resulting in 4667 images examined for a total of nine organisations (Table 1). Table 1 shows that those organisations differ in the themes that they focus on, ranging from advocacy, tourism, to habitat and species management. The focus on these different themes may relate to the type of visual content that is shown on the respective websites.

We conducted a critical visual online analysis of these organisational websites, focusing on the *visuality* of the images—how the images were presented in the context of the websites, together with text and audio, where applicable, as well as on the content and framing in the images themselves. For the image content analysis, we first conducted open coding, where we reviewed the visual content and iteratively identified emergent themes in the visual materials to define the codes for our structured analysis (Figure 2). For each of the 4667 images from the nine websites (main and sub-pages) and Instagram, the first author first inductively produced a coding scheme shown in Figure 2 and then systematically assessed

TABLE 1 List of activities for different rewilding organisations sampled (activities listed represent results from best-effort search online by authors, and some activities may have been missed).

Theme	Activity	Alladale Wilderness Reserve	Rewilding Britain	Cairngorms Connect	Cambrian Wildwood	Highlands Rewilding	Knepp Estate Rewilding	Scotland the Big Picture	Trees for Life	Wild Ennerdale
Advocacy and networking	Advocacy	✓	✓					✓		
	Networking		✓					✓	✓	
	Funding provision		✓					✓		
	Partnerships		✓	✓				✓		✓
Tourism and community engagement	Ecotourism	✓				✓	✓			
	Nature and well-being days				✓			✓		✓
	Community events	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	
	Gaelic culture awareness			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Volunteering			✓		✓		✓	✓	
	Community Joint Ventures (CJVs)				✓	✓		✓	✓	
Research and commercial	Education	✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	
	Research		✓			✓	✓		✓	✓
	Natural capital services					✓	✓			
	Butchery			✓			✓			
	Regenerative farming						✓			
Habitat management and restoration	Reforestation and tree planting	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
	Forest restoration		✓			✓				
	Peatland restoration	✓	✓		✓	✓				
	Removal of ditches and fences				✓	✓				
	Non-native species removal						✓		✓	✓
	River and floodplain restoration			✓		✓				✓
	Marine rewilding					✓				
	Soil science (incl. mycorrhizal fungi)					✓	✓			
	Archaeology management									✓
Species management and reintroduction	Herbivore management (incl. deer)		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
	Wild boar monitoring					✓				
	Wildcat captive breeding	✓								
	Species reintroduction					✓	✓		✓	✓
Geographic focus	Scotland	Britain	Scotland	Wales	Scotland	England	Scotland	Scotland	England	England

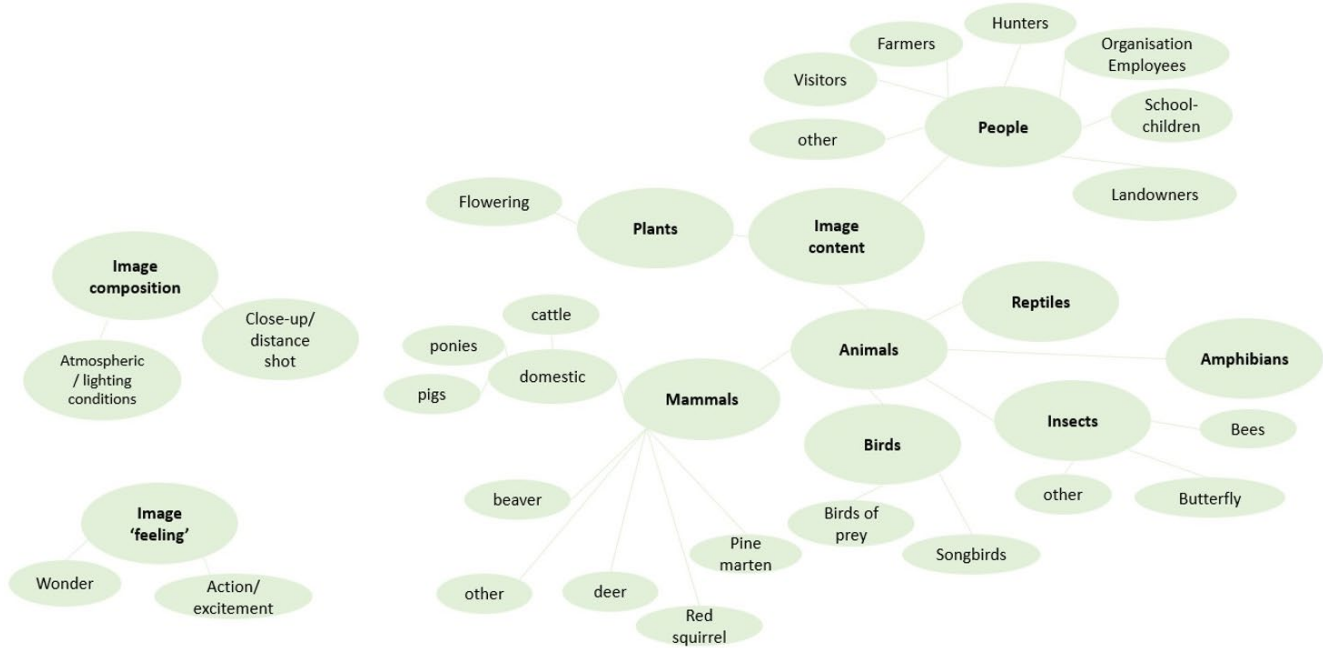


FIGURE 2 Coding scheme used for manual structured coding of images.



FIGURE 3 Example of structured manual coding applied to a sample image (image not part of the data set for this study). Image credit: F. Wartmann.

the presence or absence of codes, a process which is referred to as 'structured coding' (Crag & Cook, 2007; Rose, 2022).

For example, the image showing a butterfly on a flowering plant (Figure 3) would be manually coded with 'Plant: Flowering'; Insects: Butterfly; and 'Image composition: close-up'.

To comply with social media Terms of Service, all coding was conducted online without downloading or storing images, and only hyperlinks were stored locally. The list of the structured codes used and guidelines on how they were applied are available as Supporting Information S1. This research received ethics approval from the University of Oxford ethics board with grant approval number: SOGE C1A 23 68.

### 3.2 | AI representations of rewilding

In addition, we also critically analysed the representations produced by commonly used AI 'Chatbots' powered by large language models (LLMs), such as ChatGPT, Gemini, DeepAI and Copilot, and how they represented images of rewilded Scotland and England. AI and critical visual analysis is a developing field, which examines how AI systems interpret, generate and manipulate text and visual content, while critically evaluating the underlying biases, assumptions and power dynamics embedded within these technologies (Hayvon, 2025; Jääskeläinen & Åsberg, 2024; Putland et al., 2025).

LLMs primarily generate text, but they can also create images by combining language and vision systems (Figure 4). The process works as follows:

1. The text prompt (e.g. 'a cat sitting on a mat') is turned into a numerical format.
2. These numbers guide an image-making model, often called a diffusion model, which starts with random noise and gradually refines it into a picture.
3. The picture, like the text, can also be represented in a numerical format. In this shared space, the LLM can understand and

generate both text and image components, allowing it to create pictures directly from text descriptions (Myers et al., 2024).

We used different prompts to generate AI images (Table 2), which aligned with the national-level focus of our study. We recognise the limitations of these prompts and the potential for different results if we had used more landscape-specific terminology.

Using these prompts (Table 2), we then conducted critical visual analysis of the generated AI images focusing on visual elements, such as image construction, content and composition, and the impact on the viewer (Rose, 2022).

## 4 | RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Visual materials feature prominently across websites, particularly where economic incentives for donations or visitations exist, consistent with research demonstrating imagery's effectiveness for

fundraising (Burt & Strongman, 2005) and commercial marketing (Wedel & Pieters, 2007).

In the following, we discuss aspects from what is visually represented and not (people, infrastructure and different species), as well as the ways in which messages are framed.

### 4.1 | Visibilities and invisibilities in rewilding imagery

#### 4.1.1 | Representations of people and infrastructure

The visual material predominantly features rural landscapes with minimal human infrastructure. Where buildings or roads appear, they are positioned in the background at considerable distance from the viewer. Drone footage with aerial perspectives was commonly employed across multiple websites (see also examples in Table 7), reflecting broader trends in geographic representation that provide novel, previously inaccessible viewpoints (Garrett & Anderson, 2018).

This aerial framing creates both geographical and emotional distance between viewers and landscape content. While wide-angle, elevated perspectives facilitate scenic appreciation, they simultaneously remove viewers from immersive landscape experiences. The distant vantage point renders human infrastructure less visible and reinforces imagery of landscapes devoid of cultural inhabitation. When buildings do appear, they typically serve rural economies connected to rewilding activities, such as visitor cafés. Notably absent are depictions of residential life, such as images of people in their homes, which are scarce unless directly linked to ecotourism ventures.

This infrastructure absence suggests that while rewilded landscapes are valued for economic potential, the lived experiences of residents are excluded from landscape narratives and future visions.

### How LLMs Create Images

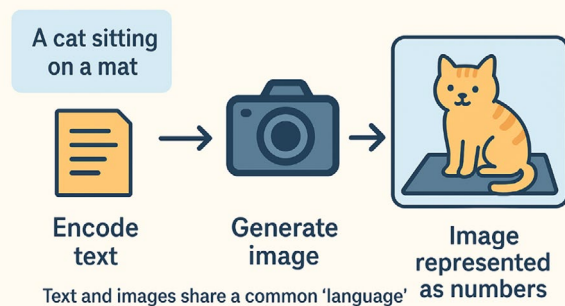


FIGURE 4 How large language models (LLMs) generate images, created by ChatGPT-5, accessed on 21 August 2025.

Large language model (version)	Prompt/image number	Date accessed
ChatGPT (GPT-5)	'Can you produce an image of what rewilding in Scotland looks like?' Image A	18 August 2025
ChatGPT (GPT-5)	'Can you produce an image of what rewilding in England looks like?' Image B	19 August 2025
Copilot	'Create an image of what rewilding in Scotland looks like'. Image C	19 August 2025
Copilot	'Create an image of what rewilding in England looks like'. Image D	19 August 2025
Gemini (2.5 Flash)	'Can you produce an image of what rewilding in Scotland looks like?' Image E	19 August 2025
Gemini (2.5 Flash)	'Can you produce an image of what rewilding in England looks like?' Image F	19 August 2025
DeepAI	'Can you produce an image of what rewilding in Scotland looks like?' Image G	19 August 2025
DeepAI	'Can you produce an image of what rewilding in England looks like?' Image H	19 August 2025

TABLE 2 Overview of prompts used for AI 'chatbots' or large language models to generate rewilding imagery.

People's dwelling practices appear peripheral to dominant rewilding stories. This observation affirms Jørgensen (2015, p. 487) that: 'the "wild" exists for advocates at a time when there are more animals and less people (or at least, much less intrusive people)'.

Human presence, while not entirely absent, clusters around four distinct categories: landowners or managers, volunteers and scientists engaged in restoration activities (tree planting and species releases), schoolchildren participating in outdoor education and recreationists in technical outdoor gear (Table 3). These representations reveal landscapes designed for visitation and resource extraction rather than habitation; they are rendered as spaces for recreation, scientific study and income generation that occurs elsewhere, not lived-in cultural landscapes and places.

#### 4.1.2 | Representation of species

Iconic and well-loved species (Tables 4 and 5) dominate visual materials, typically shown in close-up angles as a photographic technique that emphasises subject importance (Brown, 2016) and their function as flagship species for garnering support.

Beavers feature prominently across most websites, shown in daylight close-ups and nocturnal wildlife camera footage. Domesticated naturalistic grazers such as ponies and Longhorn cattle serve as proxies for extinct ancestors, valued both for grazing behaviour and acknowledged aesthetic appeal (Tree, 2023). When insects appear, they are typically well-known, aesthetically favoured species, such as domestic honeybees or butterflies (but not moths).

Less charismatic species are notably underrepresented. Our analysis found minimal reptile imagery (one snake, one slowworm image from Knepp, see Table 6), limited amphibian representation and taxonomic bias towards mammals and birds over insects, reptiles or amphibians to highlight biodiversity of recovering landscapes.

This is to some extent reflective of the focus of project activities with beaver reintroductions or enclosures (Knepp Estate, Wild Ennerdale) or wildcat breeding (Alladale). However, even when species reintroductions programmes include a focus on insects, as is the case with the Hairy wood ant (*Formica lugubris*) as a 'small and mighty ecosystem engineer' for Highlands Rewilding, there are few pictures of ants prominently displayed.

Similarly, mostly absent are challenging landscape aesthetics (Table 6): scrubby, thorny succession vegetation rarely appears except in isolated instances, such as thorny vegetation against the sunset on the Knepp Estate website. This pattern reveals a very limited engagement with aesthetic challenges inherent in nature recovery.




Aesthetic 'disvalues' such as vegetation succession, less relatable species, or death and decay are largely excluded from organisational narratives with some exceptions (Predator eating prey in image C; Table 6). Although deer management is a conservation activity across several organisations (Knepp Estate, Highlands Rewilding, Trees for Life; see Table 1), images of deer carcasses were mostly absent from their websites. One of the exceptions was Rewilding Britain's website, which showed carrion being examined by symposium attendees. Cairngorms Connect takes a more proactive approach through 'A Deer Stalker's Story', an educational video that follows a stalker and his dog through the process of stalking, killing and retrieving a deer. The video engages directly with the act of killing by showing the moment of the shot, focussing on the stalker taking aim and discussing the shot itself, and then retrieving the carcass. However, the gutting at the kill site is not shown. A subsequent section displays an already-gutted carcass in a clean, sanitised butchery environment. While Cairngorms Connect clearly aims to normalise deer harvesting for food without alienating audiences, omitting the 'bloodier' gutting process sanitises the reality of harvesting species for conservation and consumption. This curation of visibility prioritises positive public engagement over depicting the full visceral nature of the practice.

Overall, the focus on conventional nature aesthetics on the organisational websites suggests that supporting these institutions will yield aesthetically pleasing outcomes aligned with picturesque and beautiful ideals. Despite a 'wild' rhetoric in the textual materials, rewilding representations bear little resemblance to the challenging aesthetics that rewilding can bring, instead maintaining familiar, comfortable visual conventions.

#### 4.2 | The visual construction of wilderness

Scenic imagery often appears as animated video footage accompanied by classical music, creating cinematic aesthetics exemplified by sites like Alladale Wilderness Reserve (Table 7). The aesthetic approach emphasises scenic and picturesque landscape categories,

TABLE 3 Examples of people shown in visual materials.

Examples of people in landscapes			
Aspect	A. Outdoor recreationists	B. Volunteers	C. Schoolchildren
Website	Rewilding Britain	Cairngorms Connect	Scotland the Big Picture

frequently employing drone or aerial cinematography across projects from West Sussex's Knepp to the Scottish Highlands.

A dominant theme involves iconic 'wild' animals and naturalistic grazers creating images of wilderness that echo pastoral landscape aesthetics. Wild ponies replace sheep as focal points dotting the landscape, maintaining familiar visual compositions while signalling ecological transformation (Cary et al., 2025). The visual construction of wilderness is reinforced through accompanying text that forms idealised wilderness narratives. Alladale's website exemplifies this intertextuality, featuring 'untamed Highlands' beneath an image of a white male surveying distant vistas from a cliff edge (Figure 5), while describing the area as '23,000 acres of utopia' encompassing 'dramatic glens, colourful hills, glistening rivers' that reinforce scenic wilderness ideals.

### 4.3 | Positive messaging

Within the content of the visual materials, there is a strong focus on positive messaging showcasing nature-positive actions through

TABLE 4 Representations of species on websites.

Species type	Examples	Websites
Charismatic mammals	Red squirrels, beavers	Cairngorms Connect, Rewilding Britain
Naturalistic grazers	Ponies, Longhorn cattle	Knepp Wildland
Popular insects	Butterflies, bumblebees	Multiple sites

TABLE 5 Examples of iconic and relatable species.

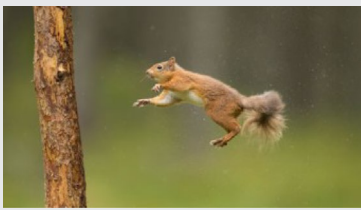


Examples of iconic and relatable species			
Aspect	A. Red squirrel	B. Ponies as naturalistic grazers	C. Beavers
Website	Cairngorms Connect	Knepp Wildland	Rewilding Britain

TABLE 6 Examples of engagement with more challenging aesthetics.

	Image A	Image B	Image C
Examples of challenging aesthetics (largely absent)			
Aspect	A. Reptiles (slowworms)	B. Scrubby vegetation	C. Predator-prey relation
Website	Knepp Wildland	Knepp Wildland	Scotland the Big Picture

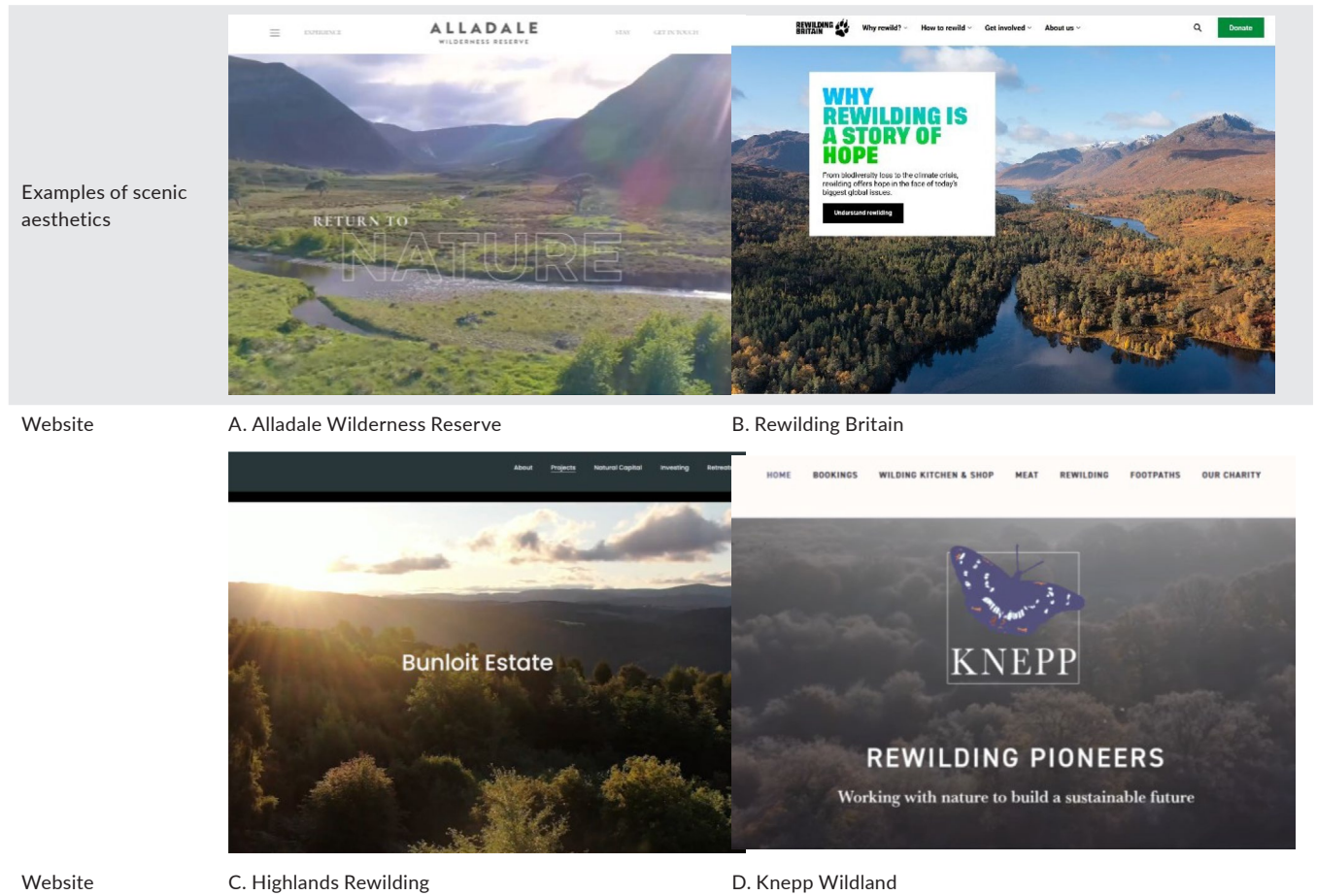
activities, such as tree planting, monitoring of success by measuring change, or release of iconic and relatable species that represent recovery, such as beavers or raptors (Table 8).

The positive messages are reiterated in the text, where there is mention of rewilding as 'a story of hope' on the Rewilding Britain website, as well as on the Knepp Wildland site, where Knepp's 'dynamic, rebounding ecosystem is a story of hope, showing how nature can bounce back if we let it'. We found no evidence of negative messaging in our sample of websites imagery, indicating the focus on a hopeful and future-positive narrative to galvanise hope and action for change. However, within this hopeful narrative of delivering rewilding at scale and at speed lurks the danger of using these positive images and messages to gloss over potential challenges and lingering or acerbating social inequalities.

### 4.4 | Conflating space and time to construct future landscape visualisations

Environmental NGO websites amalgamate different temporalities, with few representations of the past represented. This is likely due to younger organisations lacking before/after image archives, which only few organisations, such as Carrifran Wildwood possess (Figure 6). Where past imagery exists, it contrasts a bleak, empty landscape with the aesthetically pleasing, life-filled present. Figure 6 exemplifies this approach: the 2020 'present' features rosebay willowherb in the foreground and undulating forest edges, replacing the monotonous 'before' landscape.

TABLE 7 Examples of picturesque aesthetics and scenic landscapes.



Examples of scenic aesthetics

Website

A. Alladale Wilderness Reserve

B. Rewilding Britain

Website

C. Highlands Rewilding

D. Knepp Wildland

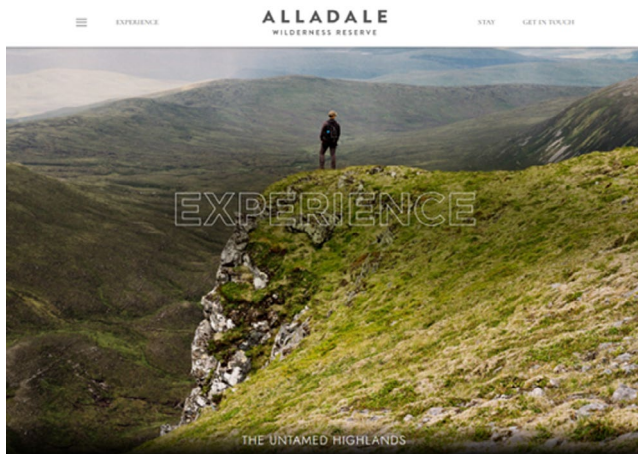


FIGURE 5 Screenshot of Alladale Wilderness 'The untamed Highlands' text below an image of a man standing on a cliff edge (<https://web.archive.org/web/20230410141056/https://alladale.com/>).

Other organisations such as Rewilding Britain employ professional graphical illustrations to visualise future landscapes. These hand-drawn illustrations represent a distinct sub-genre of nature recovery visualisations. It has been argued that this artistic choice potentially insulates visions from detailed criticism that photorealistic specificity

might invite, while powerfully normalising particular futures where ecological relationships dominate the foreground and human-nature relations retreat to distant towns (Wartmann & Lorimer, 2024).

Organisations also borrow imagery from locations where envisioned futures already exist, using contemporary lynx photographs from Europe and Scandinavia to illustrate Scotland's potential future, where currently no lynx live in the wild. These 'real' images carry different visual power than graphical illustrations, enacting prefigurative politics through documentary authenticity rather than artistic interpretation.

#### 4.5 | AI shows visions of future rewilded landscapes

Images of rewilding in England and Scotland were generated using four different AI chatbots (Table 9). The resulting images are all landscape-based and feature a mix of natural landscape features and non-human species. None of the images generated feature people or human infrastructure, such as fences, footpaths or buildings. Within the rewilding landscapes depicted, golden light (C, D) is used to create a romantic atmosphere and emphasise the soft, captivating nature of the rural scene. Aesthetically pleasing flowering plants are positioned in the foreground (B, C, D, F, H).

TABLE 8 Examples of positive messaging.

Examples of positive messaging			
	Aspect	A. Beaver relocation	B. Tree planting
Website	Scotland the Big Picture	Rewilding Britain	Cairngorms Connect



FIGURE 6 Repeat photography of the Carrifran wildwood project (<https://alastairhumphreys.com/where-one-tree-survives-a-million-trees-will-grow/>, last accessed on 25 July 2024).

Charismatic mammals graze peacefully or are depicted with large eyes (D) and staring directly at the image viewer (H). Where a mix of non-human species is depicted, they appear side by side in harmony (B).

All images generated for Scotland feature a combination of mountainous terrain in the background and a waterbody. One image (E) depicts an aerial view of a rewilded Scotland, with birds of prey soaring above a meandering river and a herd of deer grazing the river valley. The lighting conditions are atmospheric, with a hazy light over the hills in the background. Large and charismatic mammals feature prominently in the image composition, including a Highland cow (C), fox (A) and deer with large, impressive antlers (A, C). Images generated for England also feature charismatic mammals in the foreground, although apart from the fox (A, B), different species to Scotland, notably ponies (D, F). Where the image includes the wider landscape (D, F), this is gently rolling terrain, with trees, thickets and wildflower meadows interspersed with a meandering river.

The focus of AI-generated rewilding imagery is conventional nature aesthetics, echoing the findings of the website content analysis. Similar techniques are deployed as on organisational websites, such as drone-style imagery, to emphasise scenic and picturesque landscape categories (E). Less charismatic species are excluded and there is no depiction of aesthetically challenging ecosystem processes, such as predation, death or decay. Although some images hint at





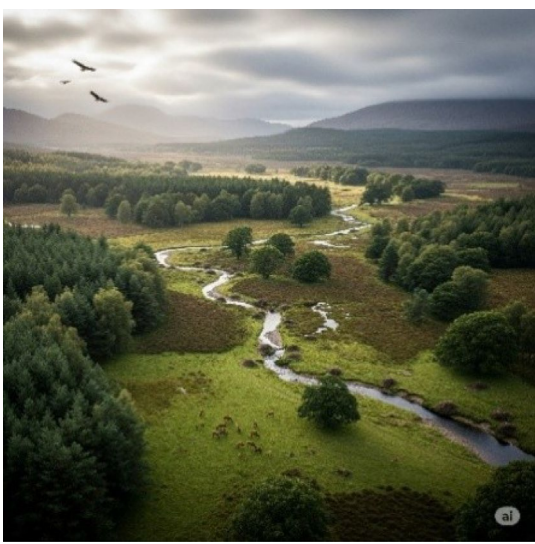

scrubby, succession vegetation (F, G), the dominant framing is one of an ordered and harmonious bucolic scene. Most notably, human presence is absent from any of the images, implying that people do not belong in rewilded landscapes.

After generating an image of rewilding in England (B), ChatGPT was further prompted with: why aren't there any people in the image of rewilding in England? It generated the following response: 'Good observation—that's because rewilding images usually focus on landscapes and wildlife to illustrate how ecosystems might look when nature is given more space to recover. The absence of people emphasizes the idea of nature taking the lead, with minimal human interference.'

## 5 | DISCUSSION: THE POLITICS OF REWILDING AESTHETICS: VISUAL NARRATIVES AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

The above findings demonstrate the presence of certain aesthetic ways of framing rewilding in visual materials. We argue that visual and textual materials not only tell us about how nature is represented in rewilding discourses but also have a normative underpinning about what recovered or rewilded nature ought to look like. These visualities also act politically in normalising the presence or

TABLE 9 AI-generated images of rewilding produced by LLM powered chatbots.

Scotland		England	
			
LLM	A. ChatGPT	B. ChatGPT	
Aspect	Charismatic species	Meandering river	
			
LLM	C. Copilot	D. Copilot	
Aspect	Golden lighting	Flowering plants	
			
LLM	E. Gemini	F. Gemini	
Aspect	Aerial shot	Ponies as naturalistic grazers	

(Continues)

TABLE 9 (Continued)

	Scotland	England
		
LLM	G. DeepAI	H. DeepAI
Aspect	No people or human infrastructure	Atmospheric mist

absence of certain people and activities in certain landscapes. In the following, we discuss our main findings with respect to literature and suggest further avenues for research in engaging with more challenging aesthetics and engaging social justice aspects not only narratively, but also visually.

### 5.1 | The aestheticisation of hope through sanitised nature narratives

We found that the messaging of the sampled websites content was centred around a positive framing of hope and activism that can lead to visible and measurable positive change. This is in line with previous research on environmental communication about nature conservation, where the focus has shifted to positive messaging after calls to abandon the 'doom and gloom' communication approach (Swaigood & Sheppard, 2010). Although Kidd et al. (2019) highlighted the lack of evidence to support the broad consensus on focusing on positive conservation messaging, recent work drawing on the psychology of positive emotions emphasises the need to focus on communication that fosters engagement and supports sustained transformative action required to overcome the biodiversity crisis (de Lange et al., 2022).

In addition to the positive messaging in our sample, we also found a focus on charismatic species that further feeds into the positive messaging. For organisations, this is in line with previous research that shows how willingness to pay for species conservation is higher for more attractive photographs of species (Gunnthorsdottir, 2001), and guidelines for conservationists include drawing on existing positive associations (de Lange et al., 2022) and decreasing psychological distance (Kusmanoff et al., 2020). The prevalence of close-up shots of species aligns with previous research showing such close-ups

provide emotional framing and generate intimacy between the viewer and animal subject, encouraging caring ways of seeing and feeling about nature (McGrath, 2021).

Conversely, we found little engagement with potentially challenging aesthetics that can be produced through nature recovery, for example with thorny vegetation and 'messy' landscapes where new dynamics override the carefully curated aesthetics of pastoral landscapes or with scenes of death and decay. Instead, we suggest that the visual materials employed by nature recovery organisations create a new 'wilded pastoral aesthetic' where domestic livestock is replaced by naturalistic grazers. The portrayed imagery often evokes bucolic settings, rendering the wild acceptable and approachable for broader publics without risking fear or rejection (Wartmann & Lorimer, 2024). However, we argue that this form of aesthetic of a new wild nature is also problematic. The careful curation of appealing, hopeful imagery reveals a deeper tension within rewilding's visual discourse. While organisations strategically employ positive aesthetics to build a hopeful narrative and win public support to overcome resistance to landscape change, this same approach inadvertently reproduces a sanitised nature imagery that makes rewilding palatable to broad audiences. There is some engagement with the notion of death and decay visible for example with the approach of Cairngorms Connect depicting a deer hunt and a deer carcass prepared for consumption at a butcher's (without showing the process of the butchering itself). Rewilding Britain portrays a decomposing carcass that is studied by a group of people, or skeletal animal remains in the landscape on their website alongside a text explaining the ecological importance of decay. Such slightly less sanitised images of nature widen the field of aesthetic values associated with rewilding and do so through linking a negative aesthetic with positive ecological values. This aligns with the concept of 'unscenic nature'

in environmental aesthetics (Saito, 1998), which reframes seemingly unaesthetic nature, such as a decomposing carcass (Figure 7).

Rolston III (2025) for instance uses the example of an elk carcass that transforms into humus, nutrients cycle back into the ecosystem, and maggots mature into flies that nourish birds to change our aesthetic perception of death and decay. While not in our sample, Rewilding Europe produces educational graphics of carcasses that highlight their ecological value and, though somewhat sanitised, aim to change negative attitudes towards decay and death that have historically contributed to the removal of carcasses from the landscape.

## 5.2 | Constructing exclusion through the people-less landscape

Our analysis reveals that rewilding advocacy frequently employs carefully curated visual narratives and accompanying text that privilege pristine, uninhabited landscapes primarily accessed by predominantly white eco-tourists seeking wilderness experiences. While these aesthetic strategies effectively communicate hope and mobilise support for conservation efforts, they simultaneously reinforce exclusionary visions of nature that may marginalise diverse community perspectives and alternative relationships with landscape.

Where people are represented in visual material, we find representations of outdoor recreationists, landowners and managers, volunteers/scientists and schoolchildren. However, the absence of certain people (people of colour) is also notable. This finding is



**FIGURE 7** Reindeer carcass in Norway. A carcass decomposing can be aesthetically challenging, but a reframing focusing on ecological processes of nutrient cycling can change our understanding from seeing decay into recognising renewal (Image credit: B. Wartmann).

in line with previous studies of nature conservation organisations on who is visualised as present and naturalised as belonging in a landscape, for example in the Netherlands (Kloek et al., 2017) and Australia (Damiens et al., 2023). Previous work has challenged normative assumptions of belonging, for instance work by artist Ingrid Pollard in the series 'Pastoral Interlude' that explores issues of race, representation and the British landscape (Kinsman, 1995). Research has highlighted that some forms of rewilding, and the material 'wild' they produce, are associated with male authority and benevolence (Ward, 2025). Given the primacy afforded to certain demographics in rewilding imagery, our findings provide reflection on the intersections of patriarchy and conservation (Bossert et al., 2024). To meet aspirations to deliver more inclusive forms of nature recovery, we argue that the visual materials are an integral part of shaping ideas of belonging and would need to be aligned with this aspiration.

The visual materials we analysed contribute to the construction of an idealised, romantic wilderness largely devoid of people who permanently inhabit them. These materials thus feed into an imagination of nature-rich but people-less landscapes, despite the long cultural history of landscapes in Britain, where current absences of people are often the result of historical exclusion processes (Devine, 2018). Such a vision of future landscapes is more reminiscent of notions of wilderness defined by absence of visible signs of infrastructure and people (Carver & Fritz, 2016), and creates a friction between the textual development of the discourse to include people, following extensive critiques, for example through terminology, such as 'rewilding and repeopling', to highlight a form of rewilding more inclusive of people (Dolton-Thornton, 2021; Martin et al., 2021). These findings highlight a critical tension within environmental communication: the very imagery that successfully garners public support for rewilding may inadvertently perpetuate narrow conceptualisations of unjust environmental futures. The predominant aesthetic framings we identified risk normalising particular socioeconomic and cultural relationships with nature while obscuring other ways of understanding and inhabiting landscapes. They can also be critiqued for failing to align with the dynamism and complexity of ecosystems and ecological processes.

## 5.3 | Visual politics as prefigurative practice

As much of the work by nature recovery organisations is aspirational, and while some material changes can already be seen at certain sites, much of the work of these organisations is vision-driven to deliver a certain outcome for the future, which is informed, sometimes, by notions of an optimal baseline in the past, where contestations revolve around the setting of that baseline (Lorimer et al., 2015). Visual materials help to create and construct this vision. Where graphical illustrations are used, these are commissioned to represent certain idealised visions of a future. Photographs are seen as 'more real', but they act in a similar way to an illustration in that the framing and content hides as much as it shows. It has been argued that visual representations of rewilded futures act as prefigurative politics in that they perform a vision of a 'better world' to come (Jeffrey &

Dyson, 2021) and which serves as a blueprint for basing action on to deliver that future. This future-creating through visual material is inherently political as it constructs a desirable future, where certain species and people are present, while others are absent, which has implications for social and environmental justice of nature recovery (Wartmann & Lorimer, 2024).

The websites we analysed showed a high degree of professionalism, employing pictures that are both technically challenging to take (e.g. birds of prey in full flight and jumping squirrels), and require technical equipment (e.g. high-quality drone footage of landscapes). This speaks to the high professionalism and importance given to visual materials employed to 'tell the story' of nature recovery and rewilding in Britain. As Peter Cairns, founder of Scotland The Big Picture, and a professional nature photographer states: '[...] we produce compelling visual media that amplifies the case for a wilder Scotland'. The case for a 'wilder' Scotland, we argue, is made using carefully selected and framed images that highlight and thus amplify the story of an uninhabited Scotland, visited by mostly white 'eco-tourists' in search for wilder landscapes. Although this degree of professionalism ensures that the 'story of hope' for nature and rewilding finds audiences, it also continues to shape and normalise certain visions of nature for the future.

Critically, such visions are not restricted to the advocacy space but can influence policy and policy debates. By including cognitive, normative and emotional information in graphical form, visions portray the underlying values of importance in specific societal situations (Rojas-Padilla et al., 2022). Such framing of reality can shape actors' understanding of the policy problem, as well as perceived solutions (Wardekker & Lorenz, 2019), potentially influencing the direction in which policy develops.

## 5.4 | Moving beyond aesthetic exclusion in the AI era

Recognition of the political dimensions of aesthetics opens several pathways for more inclusive rewilding communication, particularly as AI increasingly shapes both textual and visual representations of nature. Our findings highlight two interconnected challenges: first, the immediate need to diversify imagery on organisational websites that currently reinforce exclusionary narratives, and second, the longer-term imperative to reshape textual descriptions of rewilding before they become further entrenched in AI training datasets.

This second challenge is particularly pertinent and highlights the biases and unintended consequences of conservation AI (Sandbrook, 2025). Current organisational communications, with an emphasis on people-less landscapes, are actively training LLMs to reproduce these same exclusionary visions when generating both text and images about rewilded futures. By proactively developing more inclusive descriptions of desirable environmental futures on their websites and digital communications materials, conservation organisations can influence how AI systems will represent rewilding to future audiences, potentially creating a feedback loop towards more socially just environmental imaginaries.

## 5.5 | Future research: Towards counter-visualisations and inclusive futures

We suggest that future research interrogates the rationale behind these visual materials in collaboration with professional photographers and communicators. This could identify avenues for hopeful storytelling that includes diverse people and non-humans, such as species that are not conventionally considered charismatic. And furthermore, where there are wider stakeholders involved, existing visualisations may also be challenged by using 'counter-visualisations'. Producing such counter-visualisations, where communities' visions take centre stage, can open dialogues and unsettle established narratives and imaginaries of what is normal, or a desirable look for future landscapes.

Moving forward, we recommend that researchers collaborate with photographers and communication experts to examine the assumptions and decision-making processes underlying current imagery practices. Such partnerships could identify pathways towards more inclusive storytelling that maintains the compelling 'narrative of hope' essential to environmental advocacy while broadening representation and participation.

Furthermore, we advocate for the strategic development of counter-visualisations that centre community voices and alternative landscape visions. These alternative framings could challenge dominant narratives by foregrounding diverse stakeholder perspectives, thereby expanding public discourse about what constitutes desirable and achievable socially just environmental futures. By unsettling established visual conventions, counter-visualisations offer opportunities to democratise conversations about rewilding and create space for more inclusive approaches to imagine and enact alternative visions for future land management in policy and practice.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Flurina M. Wartmann: conceptualisation; data collection; data analysis; visualisation; writing—original draft; writing—editing. Emma Cary: data analysis; visualisation; writing—original draft; writing—editing.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The social media data analysed in this study are not included in the manuscript or [Supporting Information](#) due to the Terms of Service of the social media platform from which they were sourced, which

prohibits downloading or redistribution of its content. All analyses were conducted directly on the platform. Images from rewilding organisation websites are publicly available at their source URLs. All large language model (AI)-generated figures analysed in this study are included within the manuscript.

## STATEMENT OF INCLUSION

Our study was conducted in and on the Scottish and English context by researchers who live and work in Scotland/England.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**Supporting Information S1.** Image coding guidelines.

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