

PERSPECTIVE

Agricultural rewilding with livestock: Lessons for implementation in Europe

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Abstract

1. Agricultural rewilding is a novel concept positioned on a gradient between agroecology and rewilding, combining the restoration of ecological processes with agricultural production. While the strengths of, and opportunities associated with, this concept have been well laid out, weaknesses and potential issues have been less well explored.
2. Here, we address this gap by complementing the outcomes of a scoping literature review, which included 20 sources, with 23 expert interviews to outline key considerations for broader adoption of agricultural rewilding with livestock. We also provide a map of relevant case studies in Europe and a SWOT overview.
3. Our work suggests that agricultural rewilding with livestock may present a valuable and integrated approach for bridging the traditional divide between rewilding and farming. However, it faces challenges and barriers to implementation related to a lack of standards, associated monitoring frameworks and conducive policy environment.
4. *Solution.* For agricultural rewilding to play a role in nature recovery in Europe, there is a need to develop clear guidelines, quantify outcomes and showcase success and create a supportive legislative context.

KEYWORDS

agricultural rewilding, agriculture, case studies, conservation, Europe, livestock, rewilding, SWOT

1 | INTRODUCTION

Agriculture takes up to 44%–45% of Europe's and 38.4% of the EU's land area (Eurostat, 2022), playing a pivotal role in shaping the continent's landscapes and making it essential to include in nature recovery discussions, including rewilding (Ceausu et al., 2015). A relatively novel approach, agricultural rewilding, was first introduced by Corson and colleagues in 2022. They define it as 'an emerging form of land use that we conceptually position on a

gradient between agroecology and rewilding', where rewilding is understood as approaches to increase the ability of ecological processes to act with little or no human intervention and agroecology as the application of ecological concepts and principles to agri-food systems. The authors suggest that agricultural rewilding could enhance biodiversity, sequester carbon, produce sustainable products and support rural livelihood, arguing that such an approach could be particularly well suited to livestock systems (Corson et al., 2022).

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While Corson and colleagues highlighted the strengths and nature recovery opportunities associated with the concept of agricultural rewilding, the weaknesses and risks associated with this new concept, particularly when it comes to its implementation, have been less discussed. This perspective, which focuses on agricultural rewilding with livestock, addresses this gap and reports on the findings from a scoping literature review and 23 semi-structured interviews involving academics and practitioners from a variety of countries in Europe. The piece first explores the status of agricultural rewilding with livestock on the continent, and then outlines key lessons for the future.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Scoping review

We performed a scoping literature review to assess the benefits and challenges of agricultural rewilding with livestock in Europe, deeming a scoping review most appropriate given the limited body of literature (Munn et al., 2018). Web of Science, ProQuest and Scopus were searched using a string that combined the terms rewilding, agriculture, livestock and Europe. Covidence—a platform for screening and organizing literature for evidence synthesis—was used for article screening, including papers discussing agricultural rewilding with livestock in Europe written in English, and excluding those not using the term ‘rewilding’, describing rewilding without agricultural production or describing crops rather than livestock. We focused on papers explicitly using the term ‘rewilding’, rather than on related concepts like extensive grazing or agroecology, to narrow the scope to academic literature that directly engages with the concept of agricultural rewilding. The scoping review resulted in 13 articles, with interview participants (see below) recommending seven additional articles, bringing the total to 20 (three of which are non-academic sources, including one WWF report, one TABLE Explainer and one case study’s land use model report).

We acknowledge that only including papers using the term ‘rewilding’ and written in English poses a significant limitation, potentially excluding valuable insights and perspectives from articles using other terminology or written in local languages. We also acknowledge that the focus on academic databases meant excluding potentially relevant reports and documents, although some were recommended by interviewees.

2.2 | Expert interviews

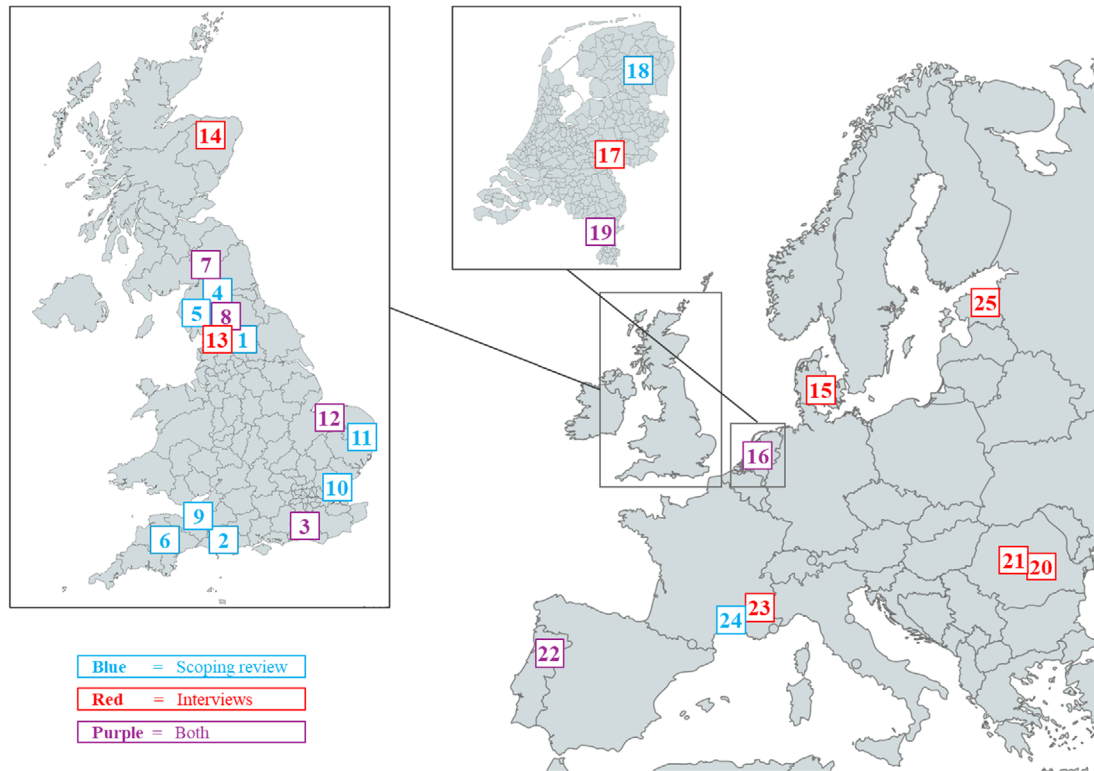
We conducted expert interviews to complement the information derived from our scoping review, which enabled us to ensure that practitioners’ perspectives were well accounted for. Twenty-three participants from 14 European countries were interviewed online via Microsoft Teams between 12 July and

30 July 2024, with a mean time of 44 min (standard deviation 6 min). We used purposive sampling to select participants representing diverse perspectives and experiences (Robinson, 2014). Participants were identified through literature scans, professional networks and online presence, followed by snowball sampling to expand participant inclusion, and were invited via email. Snowball sampling was undertaken by asking invitees/interviewees who else we should speak to at two stages: first, in the invitation email, and second at the end of every interview. Although we acknowledge that some level of sampling bias is inevitable (Wang et al., 2023), we endeavoured to speak to practitioners as well as academics from various countries in Europe, with assorted views on the topic, and a balanced gender distribution. We followed up with non-responders and extended additional invitations to underrepresented groups. Of the 39 invitees, 23 (59%) participated, with a women:men ratio of 10:13. Academics comprised 35% and had backgrounds in conservation and restoration biology (3), environmental geography and social sciences (2), agricultural and environmental sciences (2), sustainability sciences (1) and transdisciplinary studies (1). Practitioners (65%) included those in NGOs (9), farming (3), advisory roles (1), journalism and activism (1) and funding (1). Participants were located in the United Kingdom (6), the Netherlands (2), France (2), Spain (2), Portugal (1), Denmark (1), Sweden (1), Finland (1), Estonia (1), Slovakia (1), Hungary (1), Albania (1), Romania (1) and lastly Bulgaria (2).

At the beginning of every interview, participants were provided with definitions of key concepts like agricultural rewilding and livestock to ensure consistent understandings across interviews. Subsequent questions addressed the role of livestock in rewilding, the benefits and risks/pitfalls of agricultural rewilding with livestock, when it could be considered successful, where it could be best implemented and what role it should have in future conservation efforts. All interviews were recorded and transcribed for further inductive iterative thematic analysis in NVivo Release 14.23.3 (61). All participants were assigned codes in the form of A1 (academic 1) and P1 (practitioner 1) for de-identification. Ethics approval and written informed consent were obtained prior to interviewing.

3 | AGRICULTURAL REWILDING—WHERE DO WE STAND NOW?

We found 25 case studies of agricultural rewilding with livestock throughout Europe (Figure 1). Eighteen of these are concentrated in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, where livestock-based approaches are generally preferred in densely populated areas over full-scale rewilding with wild herbivores. Examples from Eastern Europe were less documented in the literature, possibly due to underreporting or the use of differing terminology. It is important to note that the map of projects provides a visual overview but is likely non-exhaustive. Different methodologies,



- Ingleborough, England** – 400 ha: Rewilding a National Nature Reserve using Blue Grey cattle and Belted Galloway cattle for natural grazing, combining restoration of (limestone) habitats with animal production (Corson et al., 2022)
- Purbeck Heaths, England** - 3332 ha: Re-establishing natural processes in a National Nature Reserve, using Long-horn cattle, North Devon cattle, horses, and Mangalica pigs, focusing on extensive grazing for habitat restoration in heathland and coastal ecosystems and producing high-quality meat (Corson et al., 2022)
- Knepp Wildland, England** – 962 ha: Former farmland turned rewilding site with free-roaming grazers, including Long-horn cattle, Tamworth pigs, Exmoor ponies, and deer, to restore natural processes, promote biodiversity, and produce high-quality meat (Corson et al., 2022; Dempsey, 2023; Fraanje & Gamett, 2022; Gordon, Manning, et al., 2021; Mondière et al., 2023, 2024; Mondière et al., 2022; Thomas et al., 2022)
- RSPB Gteldale, England** – 2157 ha: Upland rewilding in a corner of the North Pennines, using free-ranging Galloway cattle, Shorthorn Cross cattle, and Exmoor ponies to support habitat restoration and bird conservation in combination with animal production (Corson et al., 2022)
- Wild Ennerdale, England** – 4402 ha: Rewilding in the Lake District National Park using Galloway cattle and deer for extensive grazing, to enhance natural regeneration and biodiversity, and for animal production (Corson et al., 2022; Dempsey, 2023; Mondière et al., 2022; Thomas, 2022b, 2022a)
- Upcott Grange, England** – 121 ha: Farm-based rewilding with extensive Heck cattle, Exmoor ponies, Iron Age pigs, European mouflon, and water buffalo, to boost biodiversity, and breed animals for restoration projects (Corson et al., 2022)
- Gteldale Farm, England** – 2575 ha: Rewilding an upland commercial hill farm within a nature reserve, using Luing cattle for extensive grazing, balancing habitat restoration with high-quality beef production (Corson et al., 2022)
- RSPB Haweswater, England** – 2264 ha: Rewilding upland habitats in the Lake District National Park with free-ranging Belted Galloway cattle, Cheviot sheep, and Fell ponies, combining ecosystem restoration with sustainable livestock farming (Corson et al., 2022)
- Stearth Marshes, England** – 468 ha: Coastal wetland rewilding with extensive grazing of Long-horn, Dexter, and Friesian cattle, as well as Rutland sheep, restoring habitats while supporting flood defenses and high-quality meat production (Corson et al., 2022)
- RSPB Wallasea Island, England** – 853 ha: Managed realignment project turning farmland into intertidal coastal marshland, incorporating extensive mixed cattle grazing for production and habitat restoration (Corson et al., 2022)
- Wild Somerleyton, England** – 830 ha: Rewilding lowland habitats with Exmoor ponies, Welsh black cattle, Large black pigs, European mouflon, and water buffalo, using extensive grazing to boost biodiversity while producing high-quality meat (Corson et al., 2022)
- Wild Ken Hill, England** – 416 ha: Combining rewilding and regenerative agriculture for nature recovery, using free-ranging Red Poll cattle, Tamworth pigs, and Exmoor ponies to boost biodiversity and produce high-quality meat (Dempsey, 2023; Lyons, 2020)
- Kingsdale Head Farm, England** – 602 ha: Rewilding an upland working farm using extensive cattle grazing to regenerate ecosystems, supporting both biodiversity and high-quality beef production
- Beldorney Estate, Scotland** – 349 ha: Highland estate rewilding project using extensive cattle grazing to promote natural habitats and support biodiversity while maintaining sustainable agricultural activities
- Skovsgaard Estate, Denmark** – 245 ha: Farm rewilding where free-ranging cattle, horses, and pigs help restore ecosystems, balancing biodiversity conservation with sustainable animal and meat production
- FREE Nature / GrazeLands Rewilding, Netherlands**: Organizations managing herds of free-ranging herbivores like Konik horses, Scottish Highland cattle, and Galloway cattle for natural grazing as part of rewilding projects, which in the Netherlands often involve population management and high-quality beef production (Wiersum, 2017)
- Gelderse Poort, Netherlands** – 435 ha: Rewilding of riverine areas with FREE Nature's free-ranging Konik horses and Galloway cattle, combining ecological restoration with production of animals and high-quality beef
- Hart van Drenthe, Netherlands** – 500 ha: Rewilding forest area with free-ranging Galloway cattle grazing, supporting habitat restoration and high-quality beef production (Smit and Kuijper, 2024)
- Border Meuse, Netherlands/Belgium** – 400 ha: Rewilding a cross-border riverine landscape, where FREE Nature's free-ranging Konik horses and Galloway cattle restore habitats and provide high-quality beef (Rouet-Leduc et al., 2024)
- Cobor Biodiversity Farm, Romania** – 500 ha: Re-establishing natural processes on degraded farmland with rotational grazing of Transylvanian Grey cattle, balancing high-quality beef production with the conservation of high nature value grasslands
- Angofa Valley Demonstration Farm, Romania** – 200 ha: Re-establishing natural processes on degraded farmland with rotational grazing of Aberdeen Angus cattle, balancing high-quality beef production with the conservation of high nature value grasslands
- Faia Brava, Portugal** – 850 ha: Rewilding former agricultural land within the Greater Cõa Valley rewilding area, using free-ranging herds of Garrano horses and cattle to manage habitats, support biodiversity, and produce animals and high-quality beef (Gordon, Manning et al., 2021)
- Farm, Alpes Dauphiné, France** – 400 ha: Alpine rewilding project using free-ranging Galloway cattle grazing to restore and sustain mountain ecosystems and produce high-quality beef
- The Camargue, France** – 2600 ha: Wetland rewilding project using low-intensity grazing of Camargue horses and Camargue cattle to enhance biodiversity, with the production of animals and high-quality meat (Gordon, Pérez-Barberia, et al., 2021)
- Puutsa Farm, Estonia** – 300 ha: Re-establishing natural processes on a traditional agricultural landscape using rotational grazing with native cattle breeds, restoring natural grasslands and producing high-quality beef

FIGURE 1 Case studies of agricultural rewilding with livestock in Europe mentioned in interviews (red), scoping review (blue) or both (purple).

TABLE 1 SWOT of agricultural rewilding with livestock in Europe; *n* indicates mention frequency by interviewees (total is 23).

Strengths	Weaknesses
Biodiversity conservation and ecosystem restoration: Restores niches, improves nutrient cycles, reduces bush encroachment (<i>n</i> = 22)	<i>Reduced agricultural output</i> : Effects lower agricultural outputs than with more intensive practices (<i>n</i> = 10)
Climate mitigation: Contributes to carbon sequestration and climate-related benefits (<i>n</i> = 6)	<i>Human-wildlife conflicts</i> : Elicits risks of crop damage, traffic accidents and disease spread caused by free-roaming animals (<i>n</i> = 7)
Sustainable products: Allows for eco-friendly high-quality meat and animal products (<i>n</i> = 21)	<i>Risk of overgrazing</i> : May do harm to ecosystems from overpopulation and uncontrolled grazing from mismanagement (<i>n</i> = 6)
Fire prevention: Reduces bush encroachment and wildfire risks (<i>n</i> = 9)	<i>Animal welfare concerns</i> : Elicits risks of mismanagement, e.g. improper species selection resulting in non-hardy breeds in harsh conditions, or (vitamin) deficiencies (<i>n</i> = 3)
Reduced time and costs: Enables less veterinary care and supplementary feeding (<i>n</i> = 8)	<i>Food safety challenges</i> : May create risk of not meeting hygiene standards (e.g. TB) (<i>n</i> = 3)
Cultural preservation: Maintains traditional practices and emotional ties to the land (<i>n</i> = 8)	
Animal welfare: Fosters natural living conditions and increased animal agency (<i>n</i> = 5)	
Opportunities	Threats
Diversified business models: Creates opportunities in tourism, carbon credits, subsidies and premium-priced products (<i>n</i> = 13)	<i>Lack of supportive policies</i> : Legislative hurdles and delays in policy changes encumber implementation (<i>n</i> = 14)
Public acceptance: Educates the public to foster acceptance of sustainable and rewilding practices (<i>n</i> = 7)	<i>Limited availability of premium markets and tourism</i> : Diversified business models are not accessible everywhere (<i>n</i> = 3)
Local community engagement: Supports rural livelihoods, prevents depopulation and fosters investment (<i>n</i> = 13)	<i>Dependence on subsidies</i> : Long-term financial sustainability is uncertain (<i>n</i> = 8)
Broader applicability: Allows implementation where full-scale rewilding does not, e.g. smaller, less connected or more populated areas (<i>n</i> = 5)	<i>Erosion of rewilding concept</i> : Management of livestock may undermine rewilding principles (<i>n</i> = 11)
	<i>Increased antagonism</i> : Can cause resistance from farmers due to differing land-use objectives (<i>n</i> = 8)
	<i>Greenwashing</i> : Can create risk of misuse of narrative to perpetuate harmful livestock practices (<i>n</i> = 7)
	<i>Loss of local knowledge</i> : Rural depopulation can decrease local knowledge and skilled labour availability (<i>n</i> = 5)

for example, a broader literature review or alternative sampling methods, might have produced a different map, with potentially many more projects. Semantic choices in the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to scope our research also played a role, as some agroecological farms could be ecologically very similar to those labelled as 'rewilded'.

The various reported strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) associated with agricultural rewilding with livestock are summarized in Table 1. In general, our interviewees mentioned positive aspects of agricultural rewilding twice as often as negative aspects. Although participants had divergent perspectives on the usefulness of the concept of agricultural rewilding with livestock, they acknowledged this approach has some potential role in future conservation efforts: more critical voices outlined it as a tool in the conservation toolbox that might only be appropriate in (very) specific situations, but others described it as more widely useful, taking up its own unique space on the gradient from intensive agriculture to full-scale rewilding. Biodiversity gains as well as sustainable animal products were strengths mentioned by nearly all interviewees

(100% of academics for both, and 93% and 87% of practitioners, respectively). One of the challenges most mentioned was that of decreased economic viability (63% of academics and 60% of practitioners), which was broken down into the weakness of reduced agricultural output, and the threats of limited access to premium markets and higher dependence on subsidies. Some broader themes were subdivided further into specific SWOT elements, for example, local acceptance and tensions can be found in the opportunity of 'public acceptance' and the threat of 'increased antagonism'.

4 | KEY LESSONS AND STEPS FOR FUTURE IMPLEMENTATION

Our work suggests that agricultural rewilding with livestock currently faces various obstacles hampering its effective implementation. We argue that, to support agricultural rewilding initiatives in Europe, it is vital that three key steps are taken to overcome the reported weaknesses and threats.

4.1 | Develop clear guidelines

The concept of agricultural rewilding with livestock needs specific guidelines. These should address factors like limiting the use of veterinary products (particularly no use of dewormers due to harmful ecological effects), setting animal density limits based on area size and characteristics (to avoid overgrazing), maintaining natural herd composition, year-round grazing, restricting supplementary feeding and selecting suitable breeds. Multiple interviewees stressed that these guidelines should be adaptable to different regions and contexts, allowing natural processes to take the lead rather than rigidly following a checklist of predefined objectives. Participant A7 noted that agricultural rewilding shares similarities with the semi-wild grazing systems outlined in the GrazeLIFE framework, balancing controlled livestock management with ecological restoration (Bezdicikova et al., 2021).

Guidelines allow for better measurability and monitoring of progress and can help prevent greenwashing, a major concern raised in interviews and the literature (Cusworth et al., 2022). The term 'rewilding' has sparked controversy and misunderstanding in farming communities (Wynne-Jones, 2022), which is an issue for the adoption of agricultural rewilding. Associating this new term with practical actions may reduce resistance; by focusing on implementation over contested terminology, it may assist with acceptance of agricultural rewilding as an approach. As one interviewee noted, 'We don't really care about definitions; we just try to implement things on the ground' (P10).

4.2 | Quantify outcomes and showcase success

Numerous interviewees emphasized the importance of showcasing success through pilot projects and measuring outcomes to provide scientific backing. As is true for rewilding in general, what constitutes success in rewilding can yet be challenging to define (Schulte to Bühne et al., 2022). However, one thing most interviewees did stress is the importance of engaging communities and stakeholders in project design to ensure successful alignment with local traditions and cultural contexts.

Quantification of outcomes for agricultural rewilding projects is particularly key due to ongoing debate in the academic literature regarding the true impacts of livestock grazing on climate mitigation and biodiversity. One participant noted, 'The climate piece, particularly around methane, is a thorny question' (A3). Some authors caution that carbon sequestration in livestock systems is both reversible and vulnerable to disturbance, climate change and biodiversity loss, while ruminants also contribute significantly to methane and nitrous oxide emissions (Soussana et al., 2010). However, other research points to the potential for herbivores to boost carbon sequestration, particularly in extensive grazing systems like adaptive multi-paddock grazing, possibly functioning as carbon sinks (Rizzuto et al., 2024; Stanley et al., 2018). Knepp-like agricultural rewilding projects could significantly contribute to carbon storage, but novel assessment

methods are required to quantify this impact. At the same time, such projects demonstrate clear biodiversity gains (Burrell et al., 2024). However, Filazzola et al. (2020) caution that livestock grazing has multi-trophic effects on biodiversity, particularly reducing herbivore and pollinator diversity—effects that depend heavily on grazing intensity and ecosystem context. Overall, the literature cautions that climate and ecological outcomes are highly context dependent, varying with ecosystems and grazing practices. It is essential that future research quantifies these impacts specifically for agricultural rewilding with different livestock species in various environments.

4.3 | Create a supportive legislative and systemic context

Legislative and policy alignment—including Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reforms, updated animal welfare laws for semi-wild livestock and integration with the Green Deal—is critical to creating a more supportive context for agricultural rewilding with livestock in Europe. Political will is vital to drive social change, ensure legislative support and secure sufficient funding for these initiatives.

Interviewees and literature alike emphasize the importance of better integrating environmental and sustainability goals into legislation, particularly the CAP (Pe'er et al., 2019; Simoncini et al., 2019). Reforms to the CAP are critical to better support rewilding over intensive agriculture, where a key issue is that of 'finding a policy identity for domestic, large herbivores, distinct from livestock' (P1). This reflects the major constraints of current animal welfare and food safety regulations in using livestock for natural grazing or rewilding purposes (Pérez-Barbería et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the transition to less intensive, pasture-based livestock farming in the Global North must avoid displacing intensive agriculture to the Global South, which risks tropical deforestation, biodiversity loss and greenhouse gas emissions (Cusworth et al., 2022). It is imperative that a sustainable livestock transition goes hand-in-hand with food system reform, including reduced meat consumption, particularly beef (Stoll-Kleemann & Schmidt, 2017).

5 | CONCLUSION

Agricultural rewilding with livestock may offer a promising and complementary approach to nature recovery in agricultural systems, with a wide range of benefits, but faces significant challenges in its implementation. To address the most pressing barriers, we have outlined three key recommendations: develop clear guidelines, quantify outcomes and showcase success and create a supportive legislative context. While these suggestions are broad and applicable across Europe, fostering supportive local conditions is crucial. This includes establishing markets for premium products, a concern particularly highlighted by interviewees from Eastern Europe. Additionally, the availability of skilled labour was identified as an emerging challenge, particularly in regions

affected by rural depopulation and the erosion of local and indigenous knowledge (Quaranta et al., 2020). Strengthening local education and awareness, as well as fostering economic opportunities, can play a key role in tackling these challenges and ensuring long-term success. Addressing these economic and social considerations alongside the broader structural challenges mentioned earlier can help unlock the full potential of agricultural rewilding across Europe.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Vivian van Dooren conducted this research as part of her MSc studies, under the supervision of Nathalie Pettorelli and Chloë Montes Strevens. Vivian van Dooren conducted the interviews, scoping review and data analysis and drafted the paper. Nathalie Pettorelli and Chloë Montes Strevens supported the conception, writing and editing of the paper.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data from this study are not publicly available due to confidentiality and the anonymization of interview responses.

ETHICS STATEMENT

All participants gave informed consent via a written consent form prior to participation. The research was approved by the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (reference code: SOGEC1B2409).

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