

## Article

# For a Different Kind of Wildlife Management: Actions in Favour of the Wilderness as a Space for Experience and a Means of Diffusing Practices in Europe

Alexandra Locquet <sup>1,\*</sup> and Laurent Simon <sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup> Department of Geography, CNRS—Laboratory Ladyss UMR 7533, 75000 Paris, France<sup>2</sup> Department of Geography, Laboratory Ladyss UMR 7533, University of Paris 1 Panthéon Sorbonne, 75000 Paris, France

\* Correspondence: alexandra.locquet@univ-paris1.fr

**Abstract:** In response to the present ecological crisis, new approaches to environmental conservation and management are being developed in Europe. One of the axes considered by nature protection stakeholders since the 2000s is to encourage the return of the wilderness. This has led to the deployment of a variety of initiatives, mainly led by civil and non-profit organisations. The objective here, through the analysis of the discourses of stakeholders—from semi-directive interviews—and the initiatives developed in Western Europe, is to understand how the multitude of projects carried out throughout Europe constitutes a proposal for new environmental management practices. Indeed, the studied initiatives introduce a paradigm shift by reflecting a will to go beyond the mere preservation of nature in order to contribute to a global territorial transition. To this end, the studied projects propose to create both a social and interspecies link around their sites, but also to ensure the development of virtuous economic forms in the territories.

**Keywords:** wilderness; rewilding; wild land; free evolution; wildlife management; nature/society



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## 1. Introduction

As a result of the current ecological crisis (climate change and biodiversity erosion, which refers to habitat and species loss or degradation [1]) and the urgent need to find ways of reducing these effects, new thinking in terms of environmental conservation and management is being developed in the European context. As Jepson and Blythe [2] (p.1) point out “this century is witnessing a fundamental reassessment of the science and practice of nature conservation”. One of the axes considered by nature protection actors since the 2000s is wilderness [3–5], and its role in regulating the environmental crisis (combating climate change and hazards, conserving biodiversity, revitalising territories, etc.) [6–12]. This notion of the wilderness, stemming from North American culture, although internationally recognised, was only relatively mobilised by environmental managers in Europe in a territorial context remarkably modified by human activities [13,14]. The renewed interest in this concept has led to the deployment of various initiatives across Europe, mainly led by NGOs [15], and to the adoption of a resolution on the subject by the European Parliament in 2009 [16]. Although it has no regulatory scope, the introduction in a resolution [4] of the concept of wilderness reflects a new way of looking at environmental management and encourages Member States to develop and protect “wilderness areas”.

However, in Europe, socio-ecosystems are marked by a long history of anthropisation [5]. Initiatives to promote the wilderness and its return can therefore only be considered in environments that have been transformed and altered. To stop the degradation of these areas, wilderness projects intend to encourage the return of complete and spontaneous natural processes in environments that are currently semi-natural and in direct proximity to human societies. The objective of these initiatives is to find more wilderness and to reduce

human control on cultural landscapes (environments and spaces created or transformed by human activities) [17]. According to some authors, this can result in the appearance of “new ecosystems”, i.e., degraded environments that are no longer subject to active management [18]. They may present compositional changes compared with the past ecosystem [19] and are characterised by a good state of functioning in terms of structures and species.

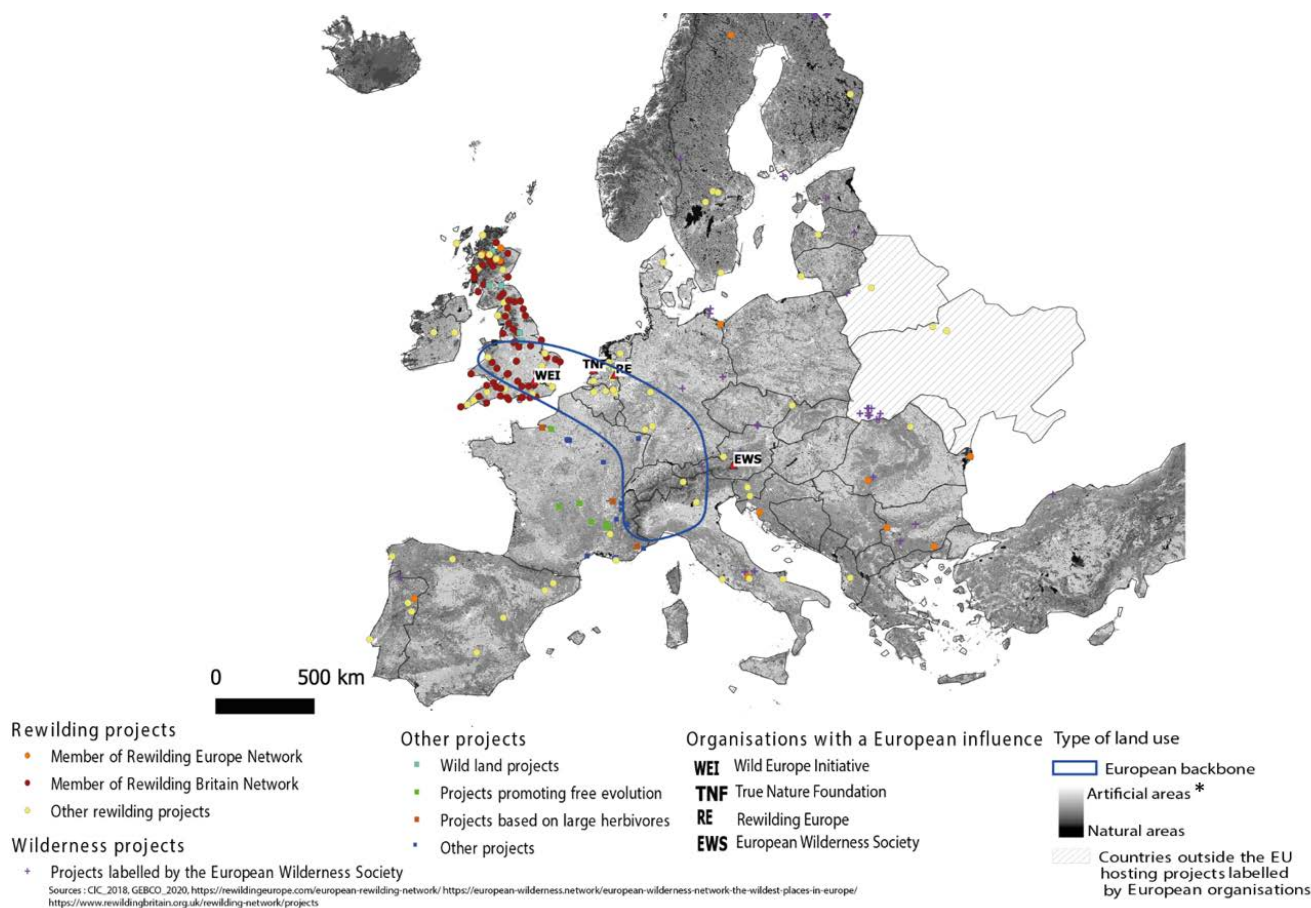
Regarding the strategies in favour of the wilderness in Europe—mainly developed by NGOs—they are poorly supported by public authorities and are carried out without a common operational model or a structured movement of stakeholders [5]. This is particularly expressed by the emergence of a diversity of concepts conditioned by the socio-ecosystem in which they are embedded. In the United Kingdom, and more specifically in Scotland, the wild land notion is used to designate semi-natural areas that are difficult to access and marked by anthropisation [20], in which it is possible to encourage the return of natural processes, mainly through restoration practises. In France, the free evolution principle is preferred to characterise allowing natural environments to develop without any human intervention and without specific time references [5]. Finally, on a European scale, the rewilding concept is widely used and presented by some authors as an alternative approach to conservation [21–23]. It aims to restore natural processes through the return of keystone species, and more specifically herbivores in the case of projects developed in Europe [24]. Rewilding differs from free evolution, in that it may include some interventionist practises to encourage the return of natural dynamics and it differs from restoration practises because it does not aim to return to a predefined state of nature [5,25,26]. The different concepts mentioned here are translated and adapted nationally and locally into a diversity of strategies that, little by little, contribute to the growth of concerns and mobilisations around a return to greater naturalness. The objective here, through the analysis of the discourses of stakeholders and initiatives developed in Western Europe, is to understand how the multitude of experiences carried out throughout Europe constitute a proposal for new environmental management practices. This paper also looks at how these actions question the interventionist approaches—management applied to maintain a semi-natural environment [27]—and modes of governance currently deployed in the context of environmental protection.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In order to understand the conditions regarding development and the variety of strategies deployed in Europe, we used a multi-scalar approach. The study here focuses on Western Europe, and more particularly the United Kingdom, the Netherlands—for the diversity of projects and their European influence [5]—and France, which presents rich ecological initiatives and contexts with the four biogeographical domains existing in Europe [28]. The aim was to consider a variety of socio-ecological contexts in order to analyse a wider range of approaches to the wilderness in Europe. Furthermore, Europe appears to be a particularly interesting site because of the contrast between wilderness projects, the age of anthropisation, and the high population density (with 108 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup> in 2018 [29]). Western Europe is marked by the presence of the European “backbone” (Figure 1), which runs from Liverpool to Milan and is characterised by a high concentration of human activities and density, the intensity of which decreases as one moves away from this area [30].

However, it is in this part of Europe that numerous initiatives in favour of the wilderness have been emerging since the 2000s [5]. In the European context, the increasing interest in the wilderness is correlated with the growth of environmental concerns [6,31]. In addition, the 2010s were marked by the assessment of the strategies to combat biodiversity erosion of the CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity) [32] and the European Union, leading to questions about the interest of the wilderness to achieve these objectives. The observation was made that, despite the progress achieved, the environment and biodiversity were still suffering damages [33]. As of 2005, organisations representing various interests (tourism, civil society, and governments) have been mobilising to have the European Par-

liament adopt a resolution in favour of the wilderness (adopted in 2009), then to try to establish criteria for its definition [3,4,34,35]. At the same time, and despite the absence of a precise theoretical and operational framework for dealing with the wilderness, initiatives are gradually emerging across Europe, mainly led by non-institutional stakeholders [5] (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Map of projects in favour of wild nature in Europe. \* Data from the Corine Land Cover database, which lists the different types of land use in Europe. Based on the different categories of the database, the data here were distributed along a gradient from the most artificial spaces to semi-natural to natural environments.

This paper is based on data from doctoral research conducted by A. Locquet [5]. Firstly, this study is an inventory of the main organisations involved in wilderness activities in the studied areas. These organisations were identified through bibliographic (grey and scientific literature) and sitographic research. The organisations selected are those that claimed to act in favour of one of the studied concepts—wilderness, rewilding, wild land, or free evolution. The inventory and documentary research made it possible to analyse the strategies implemented by these structures and to identify the key stakeholders who could be met during semi-structured interviews. The sampling was established according to a qualitative approach, the objective being to meet the “competent social agent” [36], i.e., an agent who has knowledge of the conditions and their field of action, over which they have reflexive control [37,38]. The interview was the preferred method, as it allows us to understand the strategies and decision-making processes, as well as the interplay between stakeholders [39]. It is an exchange during which questions are put [40] to a respondent who is free to answer by spontaneously developing his or her point of view and using his or her own language. The speeches collected through semi-structured interviews that were recorded were restructured in SONAL software designed for the creation of audio

data corpora [41]. This software aims to store, code, and analyse recordings by allowing thematic breakdowns [42]. Those categories have been determined using an inductive analysis of the collected discourses based on a set of systematic procedures, essentially guided by research objectives, which allow for quantitative data analysis [43]. This method relies mainly on in-depth reading of the data in order to reveal categories and themes from the researcher’s interpretation (Tables 1 and 2) [44]. This work is broken down into two major phases; the first is to observe the data and the second is to organise it.

**Table 1.** The coding process in the inductive analysis (based on Thomas [44], redrawn from Creswell [45]).

Analytical Actions	Structuring of Data	
Semi-directive interview	Raw data	Phase 1—observation of the data
Transcription through SONAL	Long text	
Initial read through data text	Many page of text	
Identify specific segments of information	Many segment of text	
Label the segments of information to create categories	30–40 categories	Phase 2—organisation of the data
Reduce overlap and redundancy among categories	15–20 categories	
Create a model incorporating most important categories	3–8 categories	

**Table 2.** Metadata and categories of the database “Interview” (adapted from Locquet [5]).

Main Category	Fields	Information Contained
Planification	Actions	History of the project and actions implemented by the studied structure
	Policy	Tools (regulatory and ecological engineering) and means (funds and access to land) used by the structure
	Territory	History and characteristics of the project area
	Wild aspect	Criteria of “wilderness” according to stakeholders, either in the ideal or to determine the area of action
Organisational aspect	Link	Links and types of stakeholders with whom the person met to conduct the project
	Conflict	Type of conflicts related to the project
	Answer to land abandonment	Interest in agricultural abandonment as an opportunity for the return of the wilderness
	Interest	Origin of interest in the theme of the wilderness in the country of the stakeholder and in Europe (according to him)
Environmental aspect	Environmental interest	Environmental interest of the actions implemented
	Species	Link between the project and the reintroduction or management of species
	Reference	Ecological reference states used
	Human and non-human	Place left to man in the context of the project
Concepts	Terms	Definitions of terms according to the stakeholder: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Wilderness</li> <li>- Wild land</li> <li>- Rewilding</li> <li>- Restoration</li> </ul>

In addition to the stakeholders' discourses, the structures studied and the actions they developed were also the subject of a double entry classification. The first categorisation consisted of dividing the studied organisations according to the concept (wild land, wilderness, rewilding, etc.) they used in their communications. The studied entities were then categorised according to the action strategies they adopted (environmental management, research, and mediation). The categories were determined here both through the analysis of the stakeholder speeches and the study of documents produced by the structures.

In total, 54 organisations were studied and 63 respondents were interviewed (Table 3). Those working for the wilderness in the European context were mainly from the voluntary (36%), academic (16%), and private (11%) sectors, with only 27% of the stakeholders interviewed being from a public body.

**Table 3.** List of studied organisations.

Organisation Type	Organisation Name	Home Country	Interview Code
Charity	European Wilderness Society *	Austria	I-T-WEI
Public authority	European Commission	Belgium	I-PB-CE
Partnership	Wild Ennerdale	England	I-REN-WE
Private	Knepp Wild land	England	I-RE-KE
Charity	Rewilding Britain	England	I-RS-RB
Charity	Wilderness Foundation	England	I-WB-WF
Charity	Lake District National Park	England	I-LDNP
Public authority	Natural England	England	I-PB-NE
Charity	The National Trust (England)	England	I-WL-NTE
Public authority	Leeds University	England	I-R-LU
Academic	Wild Land Research Institute *	England	I-R-WLRI
Academic	The wildlife trust	England	I-ER-WT
Academic	Endangered landscape *	England	I-ER-EL
Program	Wild europe initiative *	England	I-T-WEI
Charity	The Scottish Natural Heritage	Scotland	I-WL-SHN
Public authority	Cairngorms National Park	Scotland	I-WL-CNP
Public authority	Scottish Wild Land	Scotland	I-WL-SWL
Charity	John Muir Trust (Scotland)	Scotland	I-WL-JMT
Charity	The National Trust for Scotland	Scotland	I-WL-NTS
Charity	Scotland Big Picture	Scotland	I-REN-SBP
Private	Coigach Assynt living landscape	Scotland	I-REN-CAL
Partnership	Tree for Life	Scotland	I-REN-TFL
Charity	Highland titles	Scotland	I-RS-HT
Private	Loch Lomond National Park	Scotland	I-LLNP
Public authority	SRUC	Scotland	I-R-SRUC
Academic	Center for mountain studies	Scotland	I-R-CMS
Academic	Assynt Foundation	Scotland	I-ER-AS
Partnership	Cambrian Wildwood	Scotland	I-ER-CB
Charity	Carrifran Wildwood	Scotland	I-ER-EL
Charity	Nature Ressources Wales	Wales	I-PB-NRW
Academic	Cardiff University	Wales	I-R-CU
Academic	ASPAS	France	I-LE-ASPAS
Charity	Rivières sauvages	France	I-ER-RS
Charity	CEN Normandie	France	I-LE-CEN
Charity	Forêts sauvages	France	I-LE-PNRV
Charity	Conservatoire d'Espaces Naturels d'Auvergne	France	I-LE-CENA
Charity	Association Francis Hallé pour les forêts primaires	France	I-LE-AFH
Public authority	Parc Naturel Régional des Vosges du Nord	France	I-LE-PNRV
Charity	WWF France	France	I-C-WWF
Charity	ARTHEN	France	I-R-ART
Charity	Réserve naturelle, marais du Vernier	France	I-R-RNCB
Public authority	Réserve biologique des Monts d'Azur	France	I-R-MA



Table 3. Cont.

Organisation Type	Organisation Name	Home Country	Interview Code
Charity	Mountain wilderness	France	I-ER-MW
Public authority	Réserve Naturelle Naitonale du Vercors	France	I-C-PNRVER
Public authority	Réserve Biologique Intégrale (Office National des Forêts) du Vercors	France	I-C-RBIONF
Public authority	PatriNat—AFB— MNHN	France	I-N-INPN
Public authority	National park ‘des Écrins’	France	I-LE-PNE
Charity	Alparc	France	I-I-ALP
Consultancy	Biotope	France	I-RE-B
Fondation	Rewilding Europe *	Netherlands	I-RE-RE
Charity	True Nature Foundation *	Netherlands	I-R-TNF
Public authority	Oostvaardersplassen	Netherlands	I-R-SO
<b>Number of organisations identified</b>			<b>54</b>
<b>Total number of people met</b>			<b>63</b>

\* An organisation that also has influence at a European level. NB: In the rest of this paper, quotes from the stakeholder’s mind will be referenced according to the column “Interview Code”.

### 3. Results

The analysis of the discourses and actions developed within the framework of the various projects shows that there is a diversity of proposed strategies in Europe to encourage the return of greater naturalness within degraded ecosystems. The results of the interviews and the analysis of the implemented strategies have made it possible to emphasise actions relating to environmental management and others in connection with research and mediation (this category includes scientific research, communication, and labelling actions).

To study “management” actions, the statements of the stakeholders managing the sites (47 respondents) were isolated. An analysis of this data shows that, despite a desire to encourage the development of spontaneous natural processes, most stakeholders intervene in the environment (Table 4). The analyses show that, depending on the socio-ecosystems they originate from, the stakeholders do not use the same concepts to describe their strategies. It has also emerged that the actions implemented within the framework of the mobilisation of the same concept can vary according to the country considered. For example, rewilding strategies do not result in the development of the same types of practices in the Netherlands and in Great Britain. Nevertheless, the results highlight that the main objectives of the stakeholders are to reduce anthropic pressures, restructure the environments, and limit the factors that can degrade them (e.g., protection against wildlife, such as *deer* browsing, which limits the regeneration of forest environments). The type of strategy used is largely influenced by the socio-ecosystemic context in which the project is developed and by the concept to which it is attached [5]. In the British context, the main objectives are to encourage the return of woodland cover and to reduce the homogeneity of the environment due to the significant grazing pressures. Indeed, Great Britain is marked by very high grazing pressures affecting the regeneration of plant cover; in 2017, more than 15 million *sheep* were counted in England [46]. On the other hand, the popularity of trophy hunting encourages the maintenance of large *deer* populations [47,48]. The growth of these populations, which limits forest development, is notably favoured by the absence of predators [49]. As a result, the principal strategies implemented are changes in grazing distribution and pressures, tree planting, and protection against herbivores (via fencing). In France, the actions developed aim to encourage the return of natural processes through the principle of free evolution, by allowing environments to evolve spontaneously. This is a continuation of the movement of an increase in forest areas that the territory has known for 150 years, driven both by reforestation policies and by the spontaneous regeneration of forests [50]. The implemented practices are therefore intended to be very

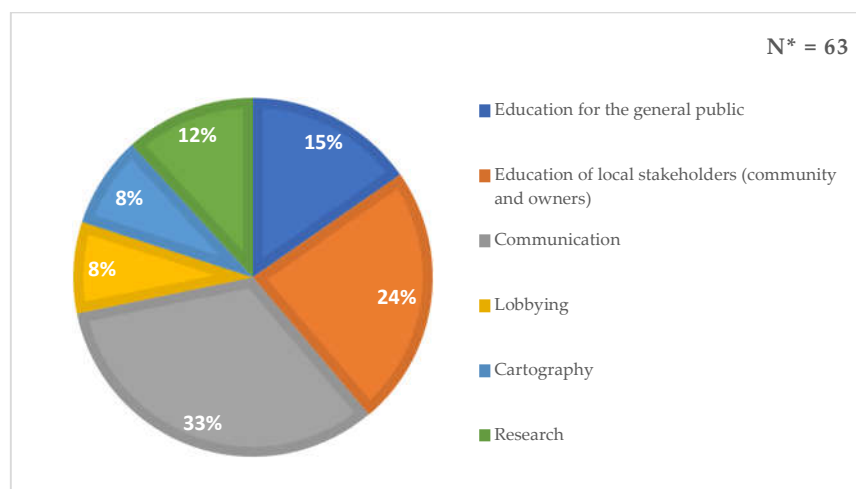
little interventionist. Furthermore, an analysis of the actions and discourses shows that in France, strategies are also being developed to reintroduce large herbivores (Arthen tarpan, Réserve des Monts d’Azur) [51,52], with a view to complete trophic chains and recover grazing dynamics in order to maintain a habitats mosaic. These practices are also favoured by Dutch organisations that are seeking to develop rewilding strategies at both a national and European level.

**Table 4.** Summary of concepts used according to the strategies mobilised and the country in which they are implemented [5].

Concept	Wild Land	Ecological Restoration	Free Evolution	Rewilding	Species Reintroduction	
Types of pratiques	Removal of infrastructure, recalibration of pastures, fencing	Forest planting, ecological restoration, set aside, nonmanagement	Absence of management and search for natural processes *	Forest planting, ecological restoration, set aside, nonmanagement	Species reintroduction	Research into natural processes, reintroduction of species
Great-Britain						
France						
Netherlands						

The shaded boxes correspond to the strategies mobilized by the stakeholders according to the country in which they work. This table was created based on the study of the stakeholders’ speeches. The practices listed here are those mentioned by the stakeholders we met. \* The search for natural processes refers to the desire of stakeholders to see natural functional ecological dynamics develop spontaneously in the environment.

Furthermore, the results of the discourse analysis and documentary research show that, in order to promote mobilised concepts and to develop knowledge of wilderness issues, stakeholders develop research and mediation strategies. Stakeholders thus have massive recourse to communication campaigns (33%) in favour of the wilderness (Figure 2). Some organisations have even dedicated themselves to this activity, especially around the concept of rewilding. This is the case, for instance, for the Wild Wonder for Europe or Scotland the Big Picture, whose mission is to bring about a change of perspective to allow for the development of rewilding practises [53,54]. As a respondent to the Big Picture said, their mission is to “advance the journey towards rewilding Scotland” (I-REN-SBP).



**Figure 2.** Mediation strategies used by stakeholders [5]. N\*: total number of responses.

Rewilding Europe is also very active in terms of communication and thus contributes to the dissemination of the concept in Europe. The organisation relies on a wide range of media (brochures and annual reviews) [55] to promote its activity. It has particularly

worked on the graphic charter it has developed, the aim of which is to ‘transmit a “joy of the wild” [56] that would encourage European populations to protect and innovate in relation to wildlife and, by extrapolation [...], the continent’s natural processes’ [57] (p. 40–41).

In order to demonstrate the interest in their actions, at local levels, stakeholders rely on educational approaches, generally aimed either at the general public (15%) (especially visitors when sites are open to the public) or at local practitioners (24%) (local communities or owners). Communication strategies are also important at national and European levels, where they are mainly related to lobbying or research activities (in this case in environmental science or cartography). These actions, implemented by only 8% of respondents, are directed at decision makers; they are mainly directed at institutions and project managers with a view to encourage support for wilderness issues, and are carried out by organisations such as the Wild Europe Initiative [58] and the European Wilderness Society.

These communications and lobbying actions contribute greatly to the dissemination of wilderness concepts both in the fields of nature conservation and among the general public. This phenomenon is also reinforced throughout Europe by the labelling processes of projects proposed by certain large European organisations—Rewilding Europe and the European Wilderness Society [59,60]—or national organisations (*Rivière Sauvage* in France). There are two methods of labelling. On the one hand, as explained by the stakeholders from within the European Wilderness Society and *Rivière Sauvage*, the labelling process is based on a certain number of criteria that projects hoping to benefit from the label must meet [61,62]. On the other hand, structures such as Rewilding Europe and True Nature Foundation use a strategy of building a network of pilot sites. These two organisations encourage, without initiating it, rural economic development of projects based on nature [63]. As one staff member of the True Nature Foundation highlighted, “we work with local conservation organisations, governments, and local communities” (I-R-TNF). Both organisations ensure that their projects are locally based on creating partnerships with local stakeholders. The Rewilding Europe organisation, for its part, reinforces this pan-European approach with the creation of its network of sites, the European Rewilding Network [59], which lists initiatives claiming to be or coming close to rewilding. As the stakeholders we met indicated, in order to join this network, the candidate structures must encourage the return of natural processes through their initiatives and propose a local economic development program. The labelling strategies developed by these pan-European structures contribute to the construction of a certain conception of wilderness and rewilding.

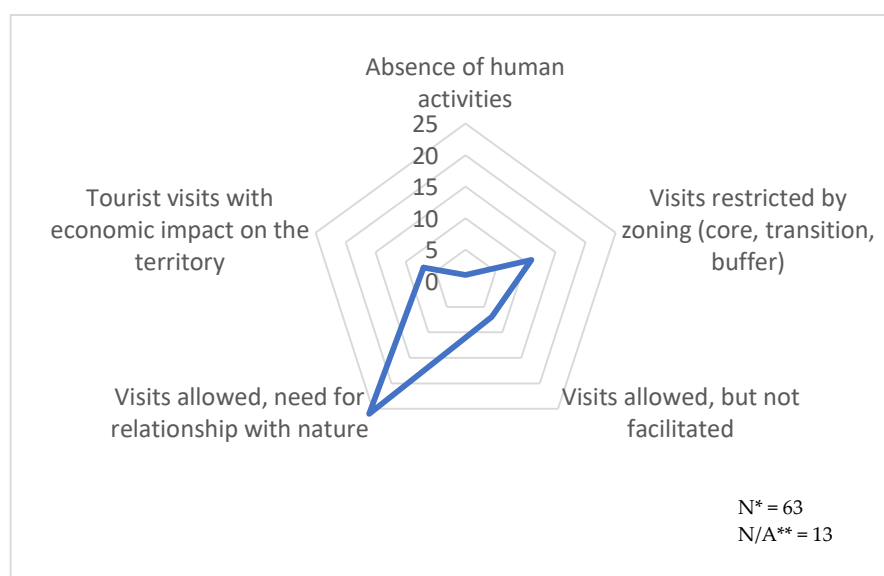
The particularity of the European wilderness projects induced by these “models” is to create a certain proximity between those areas and human societies. For the majority of stakeholders, it is essential to be able to access wilderness areas because there is a need for a relationship with nature. Most of the respondents mentioned the possibility of visiting those spaces without stipulating any special restrictions. However, 11 stakeholders indicated the possibility of using a gradient of human presence (Figure 3), which would correspond to a form of zoning - such as the one existing in some protected areas - according to which certain areas would be completely prohibited from all human activities, while other spaces could be open to human attendance. The idea of experiencing nature is important in the stakeholders’ discourse and for the desire to recreate closeness to wild nature. For 46% of the persons interviewed, it is essential to have access to these areas in order to rise awareness about the importance to protect those places, and to develop the willingness to act accordingly. This is why projects suggest economic models—especially ecotourism—based on human circulation and wildlife watching in wilderness areas. The idea of “putting nature under a bell”, which implies a ban on all use of the territory, is thus deconstructed [64].

The search for a relationship between wilderness areas and civil societies is also done by involving the latter in original land acquisition models. Indeed, projects developed by the studied organisations make it possible to be more imaginative and to propose alternative models such as the one of Highland Titles, in Scotland, which sells “lord’s titles and the right to visit a plot of land” [65], with the funds raised thus enabling the



organisation to purchase plots of land in order to let it regain its natural spontaneous dynamics. These innovative and alternative forms of environmental protection can also be found in projects such as those of ASPAS, which has launched a participatory financing scheme to find funds to buy plots in France [66].

Thus, through the diversity of the proposed projects, the role of environmental managers, as indicated by interviewed stakeholders, is being rethought in terms of support for landowners and the reinforcement of outreach activities—awareness-raising and education—in order to encourage the evolution and social acceptance of practices (I-RS-RB, I-LE-CEN, I-ER-RS, and I-ER-EL). The respondents' comments show that the objective is to "let nature take its course" (I-LE-ONF, I-C-WWF), this runs counter to the highly framed vision of nature based on past reference states and the control of ecosystems evolution. By extension, projects developed in favour of wilderness lead to a rethinking of the type of nature considered and the categories of values attached to it [5].



**Figure 3.** Distribution of responses concerning human traffic in wilderness areas according to the stakeholders interviewed (in absolute values). N\*: total number of responses. N/A\*\*: Not available (13 out of 63 stakeholders did not answer this question).

#### 4. Discussion

Despite the existence of interactions between stakeholders, the respondents hardly ever mentioned relations between the different initiatives during the interviews. In fact, the respondents made very little mention of exchanges between the different organisations and institutions, even though most of them knew about the other initiatives. Thus, it seems there is no clearly established movement towards the deployment of a skills exchange system. Initiatives developed are therefore carried out in a very individual way in relation to other actions set up at both a national and European level, although the motivations that drive the stakeholders are relatively similar. This phenomenon is reinforced by the fact that, depending on the socio-ecosystems from which they come, the actors do not necessarily have the same understanding of the concepts they use, as shown in Table 4. Furthermore, as a result of the absence of clearly defined technical procedures, projects developed in favour of wild nature in degraded environments thus appear to be experimental laboratory sites [5]. Therefore, the implemented strategies—not necessarily successful—leave a great deal of scope for adjusting actions to suit the territorial conditions in which they are implemented, while encouraging the return of more naturalness. These initiatives therefore contribute to the reflection process on the means and conditions for restoring natural dynamics in degraded ecosystems.

In addition, the communication and labelling strategies implemented by certain structures allow labelled projects to benefit from publicity, which may help to increase their attractiveness, especially in terms of ecotourism, but also to legitimise their action from an environmental and social point of view. This process also guarantees a certain ecological quality because of the standards that projects must meet. Finally, these approaches are mainly based on models that allow human circulation as mere visitors.

Moreover, wilderness models, although partly based on interventionist approaches, help question current environmental management standards and encourage changes in practice. Indeed, current conservation practises, such as the objectives set by Natura 2000, aim to conserve semi-natural environments, known as heritage environments, attached to cultural landscapes, whereas wilderness areas intend to escape any human hold, by letting environments and thus landscapes evolve freely. As a result, wild spaces also lead to the need to consider the evolution of the landscape and the aesthetic view of nature.

The studied initiatives also contribute to questioning the very nature of environmental managers by relying on governance systems based on the mobilisation of associative or private stakeholders. As shown by Locquet [5], the European wilderness has been the subject of a two-fold process of a diffusion of ideas. On the one hand, the concepts and practices developed around the notion are conveyed in a bottom-up movement. They are initially derived from representations and initiatives carried out locally by stakeholders before being integrated by the major European organisations and institutions, which disseminate them more widely. On the other hand, strategies and notions around the wilderness are also subject to top-down logic. The top being the major organisations at the EU level, which carry the concerns and thoughts relating to the wilderness before they are integrated by local and national stakeholders. This is the case, for example, for the work developed by the Wild Europe Initiative [5]. These governance models invite the decentralisation of environmental management practices, but also the distribution of responsibility for nature protection issues, which is no longer solely a regulatory obligation, but also a matter of individual ethical responsibility. From an ethical point of view, wilderness initiatives put into perspective the human need to control what surrounds us and invite us to leave out the practices of “organising” land [64]. The issue here is to develop a certain humility and to reconsider the human’s position within the non-human, that is “the living among the living” [64].

Overall, wilderness projects in Europe allow for the opportunity to rethink the relationship between humans and non-humans. However, it is important to emphasise that the studied projects are still based on a dualistic vision of nature. Indeed, although wilderness initiatives seek to highlight the intrinsic value of nature, the main arguments for promoting wilderness actions underline the positive spin-offs of such projects from an economic and social point of view. Such an ambition contributes to the construction of a European wilderness that is distinct from the exclusionary wilderness associated with the American vision of the concept [5].

A shift is thus taking place towards more utilitarian and anthropocentric approaches, which seem to remain the main levers for promoting acceptance and mobilisation to ensure that wilderness is taken care of in Europe [5]. This phenomenon calls into question the trajectory of projects that aim to be innovative and break with traditional models. Indeed, utilitarian discourses reinforce the highly cultural dimension of the concept, even though projects wish to free themselves from it by refocusing their interest in natural dynamics free from all human pressures [5].

## 5. Conclusions

Faced with natural environment degradation and biodiversity erosion, initiatives in favour of the wilderness in Europe are positioned as innovative. The diversity of strategies developed in Europe contributes to questioning all facets of the complex notion of wilderness [5]. These projects, mainly developed in Western Europe, where there is, in principle, little room for wilderness due to high human density, appear to be essential for

discussing transition strategies in territories and reflecting on cohabitation modes between humans and non-humans. The initiatives emerging in Europe thus intend to propose alternative forms of management and interaction with non-humans while participating in the return of natural processes and the increase in naturalness. Although there is no structured movement or channel for disseminating these themes, the diversity of experiences and the communication and awareness-raising work carried out by the organisations are helping to increase interest in these issues. By going off the beaten track and proposing a different form of environmental governance, the studied organisations seem to be able to reach the wider public, ranging from local landowners and political decision makers to managers and the general public. This capacity contributes greatly to the emergence of interest in wilderness actions. Moreover, these approaches contribute to the construction of an “imaginary” wilderness around Europe. The projects developed here aim to put the wilderness back at the heart of the formerly anthropized territories, but also at the centre of relational dynamics between humans and non-humans by creating new proximities.

In so doing, the studied initiatives succeed in introducing a paradigm shift by showing a desire to go beyond the simple preservation of nature, by wishing to contribute to a global territorial transition. To do this, they propose both creating a social and interspecies link around their sites, and ensuring the development of virtuous economic forms in territories. The issue here is to socially reconsider abandoned or neglected spaces and to promote a certain letting go [5]. Projects aim—among other things—to respond to the need for nature by drawing on a strong emotional dimension attached to the wilderness. One of the strengths of these projects lies in the fact that they awaken the imagination [67,68]. In addition, these projects create positive stories, restoring the place of the wilderness. These aspects are consistent with historical conceptions of the wilderness that are largely concerned with issues of feeling.

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