Book review

Feral: Rewilding the Land, Sea and Human Life

George Monbiot, Penguin Books, 2014, ISBN 978-0-141-97558-0, £6.99 (paperback), £27.98 (hardback), 317 pp.

This book is a thought-provoking read for all engineers who aspire to a broader knowledge of ecology and ecosystems. George Monbiot, who studied zoology at Oxford University, UK, is best known for his *Guardian* columns. In this book he returns to his roots to make a passionate case for a more intelligent approach to land management or rather the absence of it, as this book largely extols the benefits of resisting our urge to control nature.

En route, there is a surprising amount of material not just of peripheral interest but of direct relevance to many civil engineering disciplines: for the marine engineer he provides a thorough account of the damage done to marine ecology by industrial fishing techniques; for the coastal engineer he covers the return of fields to saltmarsh; and there is a reflection on the achievements of the Highways Authority, which Monbiot contends has done more for biodiversity than the bodies charged with preserving our natural heritage. Most water engineers will be familiar with his account of the contribution made to flooding by dredging and river clearance upstream.

His basic premise is that what we call nature conservation in the western world is in fact an effort to preserve the farming systems of former centuries. 'Reserves are treated like botanic gardens: their habitats are herbaceous borders of favoured species, weeded and tended to prevent the wilds from encroaching.' In much of the UK's national parks the grazing of sheep has reduced the landscape to what he terms 'a scoured grassland'. Even in wooded areas the grazing of the understorey has led to the absence of the habitats that would harbour a greater diversity of beetles, spiders, fungi and birds.

Monbiot's vision of the way forward is not a return to an arbitrary baseline but rather to let nature redirect itself, albeit lending a little assistance with the reintroduction of keystone species such as beaver and wolf (if you have just raised an eyebrow, consider that there are already at least a dozen packs of wolves in Germany and 2500 in Spain, and that there are some 25 000 bears in eastern Europe and Scandinavia).

That the UK lags behind most of Europe in terms of rewilding Monbiot attributes not only to our myopic view of conservation but to the farming, fishing and hunting lobbies, who often act in opposition to their own long-term interests. For example, the fisheries surrounding marine reserves improve because within the reserve spawning fish are protected and allowed to reach maturity – yet in 2014, we had moved to protect a mere five of our 48 000 km². It is worth pointing out that Monbiot, in my reading at least, is not advocating that we put our fishermen and hill farmers out of business to a man, but that we overhaul our thinking around marine and land management: increasing the size of marine reserves, modifying our fishing methods, taking a new approach to abandoned hill farms, reviewing the proportion of the Highlands given over to deer and grouse.

The language of the book is never dull. There are beautiful descriptions of nature here: 'Ringed plovers pattered along the shore with strange throaty warblings, then glided ahead of me on sickle wings. I could smell rotting seaweed and hear the strange music of the mudflats: the fizz and snap of tiny creatures shifting in their burrows'.

Such passages are interspersed with well researched argument and data and with occasional bursts of the withering tone that characterise his newspaper columns – 'a mud bowl whose waters are now as murky as a hedge fund's tax returns'. This sardonic tone won't be to everyone's taste and neither will the lack of a clearly defined narrative structure: the book itself is untamed.

Feral includes an appeal for us to rewild our own lives: to seek out the wilder corners of our continent, to expose ourselves to the wind and tides, to experience more of the unpredictable and to know exhilaration and tranquillity. This is a call that will resonate with many of the engineers I know: we joined the profession in the first instance partly because we wanted to work in the great outdoors. So, give it a read. It may make you reconsider your own life as well as our dealings with the rest of the living community.

Chris Whitehead