

Dismantling the Dams

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This coming spring, in Oslo, Norway, a group of forty researchers will make public a definitive verdict. The work they have conducted for the past six years will be used to answer a crucial question: has humanity entered the anthropocene era? Has it left the holocene period which has lasted for the past 10 000 years? In order to understand the complexity of the debate, we need to go back to the year 2000, when the Dutch chemist and Nobel prize laureate Paul Crutzen declared that humanity had entered a new era characterised by considerable changes induced by human activity. The human population and its industrial impact are now the main agents of geological transformations which have profoundly modified the planet. Researchers are still unsure when to date our entry into the anthropocene. For some, it occurred in the middle of the nineteenth century during the industrial revolution, as the first carbon emissions were released into the atmosphere. Other scientists go further back to the sixteenth century, at the time of the discovery of the Americas, when European explorers brought viral diseases that decimated local populations; this led to the abandonment of huge swathes of agricultural land which eventually returned to vast forested wildernesses. Some researchers point to the twentieth century when the first nuclear tests were conducted. At this time, radioactive particles returned to earth and can still be found in sediments all over the planet. Whatever the conclusions, the ongoing debate, as much as recent research, has underlined the continuous impact that humans have had on their environment.

It is within this context that the neologism rewilding was created. The word possesses many ambiguities in its significations and connotations. In etymological terms, rewilding engages with the idea of nature as opposed to culture, concepts which have continued to change through time. In French, the term is translated as renaturation, derived from the word nature, as opposed to wild in English. The concept has evolved in various ways due to language as much as to culture. In the current environmental debate, rewilding, when pushed to its extreme, enters the realm of Deep Ecology, an ecological movement that wishes to eradicate all forms of industrialisation and return human society to a primal natural world. But has primitive nature ever existed? The philosopher Timothy Morton, who coined the term Dark Ecology, insists in his books that nature is in a continuous state of chaos, and has for millennia included human activities. In this context, the idea of a primitive nature, of a lost Eden to which we could return, is an idealised concept, and such concepts make it even more complicated to address the environmental issues we are facing in relation to global warming.

In 2010 in Normandy, l'Agence de l'eau launched a programme that

aimed to restore the water quality of the Orne river. The project is part of a vast European programme to re-establish the ecological continuity of European rivers. During the nineteenth century dozens of dams of various sizes were built on the Orne, this modified the course of the river, which runs for 170 km before reaching Ouistreham where it joins the sea. Removing the dams allows the migrating fish such as salmon and eels to journey back to lay their eggs. Furthermore, the dams have created stagnant pools where the water is not properly oxygenated. Without the dams the current becomes stronger and allows the sediments that have accumulated to circulate. Removing the dams also entails other transformations such as redesigning artificial banks. Nevertheless, like any river, the Orne has constantly changed its course and its banks, either due to human activity or natural forces. While the dams were built for industrial purposes, the river was able to adjust to the complex modifications implied by them. Nature is constantly adapting and absorbing the changes that human activities impose upon it.

The project started with the l'Enferney dam, which has now been dismantled. Other dams are currently under work at different sites along the river. Since its instigation, the project has met with a lot of debate and opposition; various groups, such as the fishermen's lobby, environmentalists and local politicians have clashed over the programme and the costs involved. The rewilding of the Orne acts as a fascinating paradox: motivated by ecological principles, it further underlines the way in which humans impact on the landscape.