Rewilding is a subject that crosses many traditional subject boundaries. In order for rewilding to become widespread, George Monbiot in Feral argues that areas such as land ownership, notions of conservation, farming practices, and econonics need reform. There are many barriers to reforming these, and as such, Monbiot argues they will not change without major public demand (REF). These barriers often involve arguments of aesthetics, tradition, and culture, that masquerade as science (REF), and evidence in support of rewilding projects are dismissed with flimsy reasoning (REF). However, rather than arguing the need for science, Monbiot argues that culture has always created our relationship to nature, perhaps being inseperable. Therefore, for rewilding projects to succeed, they need to successfully change cultural relationships to nature.

This argument fits into cultural critiques that seek to understand the circulation of social ideas. In Zizek’s works, he argues using Lacanian theories that fantasy is an essential element of culture. Like Monbiot’s explaination, he says cultural fantasies sit between the subject and the “reality” of scientific facts, helping us to interpret and understand science in different ways (REF). For example, Monbiot argues that childhood books that depict the countryside as covered in sheep living in harmony with nature influence how we think the countryside should be (REF). The fantasy of a sheep-covered countryside could help understand rewilding projects. For example, countryside management has often demanded extreme grazing by animals, which can have a devastating effect on biodiversity (REF), and scientific evidence of the success of countryside health often involves measuring the health of specific species such as grouse, which are widespread and thrive on open moorland, rather than the health of endangered species, such as REF. The interpretation of this scientific evidence through the “sepia-toned” fantasy of the sheep-covered countryside creates knowledge and policy that becomes a barrier to changing the use of the countryside and encouraging a greater array of species. Therefore, in order to change the use of the countryside to encourage rewilding, we need to alter the cultural and social fantasies.

My proposal is to use Zizek’s understanding of cultural fantasies to study the relationship of people towards the countryside, nature, land use, and food during the project. During the lifetime of the project, locals, visitors, and other actors such as local politicians, farmers and environmental authorities will learn about how the countryside can be managed in a different way. Some actors will hold cultural fantasies that will become a barrier to rewilding, while some will likely hold fantasies that are more ameinbale to rewilding. Throughout the project, these fantasies may change. Monbiot talks about how specific encounters with nature have inspired or changed his view of nature (REF) – these appeared to function through a change in his fantasy about what nature is or can be. For example, his awe at salmon swimming upriver, a reconnection to an innate primeval uman perpose when catching fish (REF), or his visit to Slovenia, and astonishment and wonder when coming face-to-face with a wild forest that has regrown since it was devastaed and bare in WWII (REF). In Wilding by REF Tree, the author relates how their preconceptions are changed by their experiences of managing the land in a different way, appearing to change their fantasy of nature and how farmers can co-exist with biodiversity. These encounters may be shared in this rewilding project by actors, and by studying which social fantasies provide successful support for a more diverse and wild landscape, this can provide important results. Specifically, this research seek to answer the questions:

* What social fantasies emerge within local stakeholders and communities in this specific rewilding project? What social fantasies help or hinder it?
* How do social fantasies change during the project, and what creates these changes?
* How can these changes inform communication and policy around rewilding project to gain public support for rewilding?
* How does this rewilding project alter the social fantasies regarding other aspects of life, such as education, work, and community?

This information could be shared and supplied by rewilding projects, campaigners, charities, artists, government bodies and policy makers to inform what projects will inspire the public. It will help inform how communicate rewilding projects to generate support, and what messages create support for different groups and actors.

At heart, rewilding is a radical divergence from business-as-usual, challenging concepts of land ownership, resource extraction, and planning, but arguments about rewilding have often been used to justify the status quo. Japhy Wilson for example, describes how radical plans to create ecological universities in the Amazon became a mere facade, an illusion that covered up the Bolivian governments destruction of the Amazon. Here, the fantasy appeared to be a harmonious relationship between nature and extractive capitalism, which the public were asked to believe in an share. In Fashion Futuring in the Anthropocene, concludes similarly, that concepts of rewilding are used to justify further consumption. However, genuine rewilding challenges economics that see nature as a resource to be extracted (Death REF) and conservation as merely keep nature-as-is (Death, REF). It also inspires wider changes, which George Monbiot calls the rewilding of humans. The fantasy of wildness operating through society in politics and society is described in Monbiot’s book too, but where such fantasies were used for more sinister purposes (REF). The concept of reconnecting to human wildness was harnessed in Nazi propoganda to justify supremacy and domination: the Arayan race was cosidered genetically superior, but modern comfortable civilisation had weakened and truncated this natural superiority (REF). But such social fantasies do not need to be used for malign ends. Monbiot argues that contact with wild nature impacts children’s education, creativity, and emotional intelligence (REF), which appears to contrast with standardised state systems that oppose to such “wildness”. Mark Fisher, for example, describes how modern educational system have mechanisms of standardisation through operating anxiety of tests, self-surviellance and fear of failure. Allowing freedom for teachers to educate in their own way and for children to learn what subjects interest them are concepts opposed to mechanisms of control, self-regulation and anxiety. Rewilding in education, as enabling nature to take its own course, is perhaps opposed to such mechanisms of standardisation and control. The question that we can ask during this rewilding project is how does reconnection with wild nature influence people’s ideas of other aspects of life, such as education, community and creativity?

I am well qualified to take on this research project, having recently studied an MA in International Political Economy, focusing my dissertation on the way that cultural fantasies influence and reinforce the Silicon Valley economy of surveillance through a cybernetic fantasy of transforming the world for good through connection and communication. I have a long-held interest in nature and environmental politics, and one module in my MA course was Critical Environmental Politics, a module for which I gained a distinction. I was involved in Friends of the Earth Manchester for around five years, and was joint co-ordinator of the local group for almost three years. I have been a director of WWOOF UK for three years (check), a charity that focuses on organic farming, education, nature and community, and have volunteered for a few farming projects, such as farms in Cornwall, the Lake District, Thailand and Uganda. I run a website for a local park called Highfield Country Park, which is somewhat wild, and have been on several foraging courses. I have also worked as a freelancer for Friends of the Earth Europe and on a contract for Friends of the Earth EWNI (England Wales and Northern Ireland).