

From darkness back into the light: Humanity's rewilding imperative

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Joe is production editor and Eileen is an associate editor of the journal. Along with Ian Whyte, who is also an associate editor, they commissioned the selection of pieces in this issue that relate to rewilding.

Keywords: biodiversity; conservation; ecological restoration; protected areas; rewilding

Citation: Gray J and Crist E (2023) From darkness back into the light: Humanity's rewilding imperative. *The Ecological Citizen* 6(1): 3–8.

Domestication, extirpation and simplification: These are the drivers of wilderness loss. Through them modern civilization has thrown an asphyxiating cloak over a world where ecological vibrancy, diversity and complexity were once ubiquitous. The magnitude of this many-layered wreckage resists description and perhaps even defies comprehension. What can be stated with a clarion certainty, however, is that accepting the wild's suffocation as an irreversible reality only intensifies the tragedy.

Mercifully, a powerful challenge to such an acceptance comes from a burgeoning fellowship of Earth citizens who are calling for the cloak to be peeled back, so that non-human life has a chance to rebound and the brilliant light of nature's diversity can shine again. These people, us among them, are proponents of rewilding, which is a uniting theme for many of the pieces in the present issue. These contributions add to a body of content on rewilding that we have brought to readers in recent years, including through our role as co-publisher, in 2020, of the *Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth* (<https://is.gd/rewildingcharter>).

Rewilding as reparation

Running through every rewilding initiative is the intent of reparation. This offers a counterpoint to the constant aggressive taking that characterizes civilization's nature colonialism. Rewilding is *giving back* to the natural world without tallying what we humans might “get” in return. Considered at a planetary level, it is a wholehearted affirmation to set the Earth free, allowing her full expression of her ecological and evolutionary arts. The battle cries are: *Return lost species! Give wildlife safe passage! Free large-scale ecologies! Maximize evolutionary potential!*¹

This contemporary response to wilderness loss and defaunation may yet demonstrate that we have the sight and will to free ourselves from the bind of human supremacy that is devastating all complex life on Earth. Such a release might begin with the recognition of our love for the planet that birthed us, and grow to encompass a grieving of losses, a rejoicing for what yet survives and the performance of small and big acts of reparation for the natural world.

The beginnings of a movement

Rewilding has undergone a mushrooming of popular and academic interest in recent years, but its origins as a concept date back at least three decades.² The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites a February 1990 article in *Newsweek* as the earliest use of the term “rewild” in print, within a report on the radical environmentalists of Earth First! (Foote, 1990: 32):³

Their forebears are the earnest hippies who, 20 years ago, emerged from the first celebration of Earth Day with plans to do some recycling, switch to nonphosphate detergent and donate \$25 a year to the Sierra Club. Today they are eco-guerrillas, radical environmentalists who have turned to outrageous—and sometimes illegal—tactics in their war against “greedheads” and “eco-thugs.” Militants vow not just to end pollution but to take back and “rewild” one third of the United States.

A small group of these radicals launched the magazine *Wild Earth* soon after, and the word “rewilding” first appeared in an article by John Davis in the winter 1991–92 issue. Davis, who today is the executive director of The Rewilding Institute, credits Dave Foreman as crafter of the term and notes that its original meaning focused on wilderness recovery. The crafter is no longer with us, as he died while the present issue was being prepared. In an article starting on page 77, Davis shares his tribute to Foreman, a man who “changed and expanded the way we do conservation in North America and inspired conservation activists and biologists to think big, wild and connected throughout the world.”

Since the seeding of the term, rewilding has indeed germinated into a broad movement, with diverse manifestations, a range of scales, local nuances and a global reach. These developments are all the more impressive given the numerous barriers that can potentially hinder positive action. “The greatest impediment to rewilding,” wrote conservation biologists Michael Soulé and Reed Noss in their classic 1998 *Wild Earth* essay, “is an unwillingness to imagine it.” Several articles in this issue illustrate both the breadth of rewilding and that willingness to envision it, as the movement has gathered momentum around the world.

In her paper beginning on page 45, Sophi Veltrop (outreach manager at Northeast Wilderness Trust) explores the different manifestations, including active rewilding, passive rewilding and the rewilding of ourselves as humans. “Together,” she writes “rewilding the land and rewilding ourselves work hand-in-hand to offer a hopeful, realistic path forward in the face of climate

change and biodiversity loss.” A key observation in Veltrop’s article is that one need not “work for a conservation organization to be part of the rewilding movement.” Rather, it is something that can be encouraged and practised by individuals or small groups, operating on a more intimate scale.

Exemplifying local nuances, the conservationist Chris Gibson, in a Reflection starting on page 16, considers how the vision of a charity in the UK to create a network of insect-friendly pathways across this crowded island can be seen as rewilding the skeleton. “Nurture the skeleton,” he writes, “and as and when times and conditions allow, a new flesh will weave itself around those old bones.” Gibson also notes – reinforcing the above-mentioned observation from Veltrop’s piece – that “anyone anywhere can contribute: whether along a road verge or in a field or even across a whole estate, the more connected the better.”

Finally, in an article beginning on page 29, which evidences the spread of rewilding, Lise-Marie Greef-Villet (communications manager for the Peace Parks Foundation) reports on a suite of positive developments aimed at bringing wildest Africa back to life. “Just a decade ago,” she begins, “Zinave National Park in central southern Mozambique stood eerily silent – a once-abundant wilderness decimated by decades of relentless human impacts. Today, however, the park abounds with more than 6,500 animals from thirteen reintroduced species.”

Rewilding as a cornerstone in Earth’s recovery

Rewilding reflects the ecological and ethical sensibility to return large portions of the natural world to self-governance. Inspired by respect for the intrinsic value of the more-than-human world, it aims to set free terrestrial, marine and freshwater ecologies to their non-human dwellers and their inherent processes. In achieving this aim, we must enable places that have been impoverished by human encroachment, especially that of an industrial kind, to regain their wildness. In this way, they can become ecologically richer and more complex in processes, food webs, species compositions and evolutionary becomings. In the words of conservation biologist John Terborgh, “rewilding is the best hope for restoring something resembling primordial nature on this overstressed planet.”

Rewilding requires that we look toward the past for the ecological and evolutionary knowledge that is critical in restoring wildness to landscapes and waterways. It is not, however, about fixing ecosystems in some historic state. Rather, by reinstating extirpated species and processes, and removing anthropogenic structures and obstacles, nature is set loose to find new creative and regenerative patterns, ones which we should neither specify in advance nor aggressively manage. As Soulé and Noss have noted, “rewilding is critical in restoring self-regulating communities.” In other words, it establishes conditions for nature’s aboriginal dynamism, creativity and exuberance.

Of course, rewilding is not the only arm of conservation biology working to restore the richness and complexity of the Earth’s living systems. A closely allied branch is ecological restoration. In this issue, Usha Rajagopalan (a

conservationist in India) writes on the rehabilitation of a lake in Bengaluru while Richard Manning (an environmental journalist in the USA) describes the restoration of life-promoting fires in the Gold Creek watershed in Montana. These contributions start on pages 32 and 20, respectively.

Serving to reinforce both rewilding and ecological restoration are projects targeting a substantial increase in the amount of land and sea that is given protected status. Beginning on page 81, we include a tribute by Tony Hiss to EO Wilson, who recently passed away. Among Wilson's numerous major contributions to conservation, his last few years saw him championing Half-Earth – the proposal to set aside half of the planet in reserve. EO Wilson envisioned this aspiration as “the conservation of eternity,” while urging humanity that “doing something big is our only hope” (quoted in Hiss [2014]).

In these times, we cannot ignore the fact that increasing levels of consumption, a growing human population and sprawling industrial infrastructure will stymie the efforts of conservation biology. In the face of this, rewilding, ecological restoration and legislation for generous nature protection can be cornerstones for Earth's ecological rehabilitation. Their uniting theme is a recognition that there must be places where non-human needs are at the fore. Equally important, though, is that societies transform themselves to achieve harmony with the wider living world in those landscapes that we shape to meet our own wants (Crist *et al.*, 2021).

The power of storytelling

For the Earth's course to be steered from one of mass extinction to a path of returning life, it will require, in the words of Amy Lewis, “the mobilization of leadership and public action on an unprecedented scale,” and perhaps a “partial reinvention of civilization.” Lewis is chief policy and communications officer at the WILD Foundation, which is an organization working to build a global movement to protect wilderness and attain the goal of protecting half the planet. In an article starting on page 66, Lewis writes about the potential role for storytelling in inspiring such a reinvention. Reading her uplifting prose is just one reason why we are excited to be launching, in parallel with the publication of this specially themed issue, a new dimension to *The Ecological Citizen* known as *Rewilding Successes*.



Rewilding Successes

Inspiring stories about nature's rebounding from all corners of the Earth

<https://rewilding.ecologicalcitizen.net/>

Published by *The Ecological Citizen*



Figure 1. A section of the Elwha River, after dam removal (photo by Richard Probst [CC BY 2.0; <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/>]).

Available at <https://rewilding.ecologicalcitizen.net/>, *Rewilding Successes* is a dedicated blog-style platform for authors to share inspiring stories about nature's rebounding from anywhere on the planet. There are already eight live stories, spanning four continents, and we will continue to publish further pieces as they come to us. The initial set of stories includes, among a wide diversity of pieces, the inspiring tale of the Elwha dam's removal (Figure 1).

Bearing WITNESS

Another relatively recent development for *The Ecological Citizen* is our launch of the WITNESS category (see <https://is.gd/WITNESS> for more information). The goal of this nascent series is to bear witness to the losses of lifeforms, lifeways and places that humanity's no-limitations growth is driving. The roots for this category were established in the journal, but now, with the publication of a partner piece to the present editorial on *Earth Tongues* (Gray, 2023), it has sent out suckers that have sprung up on our blog; we hope that it will now grow in both venues. If you would like to contribute to the series, please see Box 1.

The first WITNESS post on the *Earth Tongues* blog offers a personal perspective on the loss of wilderness and the promise of rewilding, and it includes the following passage with which we shall end (Gray, 2023):

Rewilding is not a magic wand that can quickly undo the deathly spells we have cast in our woefully misguided quest to exert an autocratic control over our fellow Earth-kin. Nevertheless, it can catalyse the process of recovery and it can make the otherwise-impossible a reality, not least through the reintroduction of extirpated species to places that are unreachable by natural recolonization. As such, it is—from a planetary perspective—one of the brightest lights that burn in the twenty-first century.

Box 1. Call for contributions to the WITNESS series.

So much environmental thought stays inside the abstract space of philosophy, policy recommendations or debates. With this category, we stay close to the ground: To bear witness to the losses of lifeforms, lifeways and places that humanity's no-limitations growth is driving. To remember the Earth realities we love and are fighting to preserve.

- We are seeking pieces for the journal of around 1000–1500 words, with up to ten references, that describe such a loss. Contributions might focus on a threatened species, a habitat on the wane or some other example of human-caused ecological decline, and they should offer suggestions, if possible, as to how the loss might be halted or even reversed.
- To enquire about submitting your work, please use the following link: <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/contact.html>. And for an example of the style of these articles, please see the first piece in the series here: <https://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/article.php?t=witness-order-sirenia>.
- Further information is available at: <https://is.gd/WITNESS>.

Notes

- 1 While battle cries do not generally come with endnotes, we will clarify what is meant by the pithy “Maximize evolutionary potential!” Evolution by natural selection works with the material of genetic variation. Thus, when populations of animals, for instance, are massively reduced, evolution has less genetic variation to work with toward the emergence of varieties, subspecies and new species.
- 2 Reed Noss has observed that the idea of rewilding can be traced much further back, to the work of ecologist Victor Shelford beginning in the early 1930s.
- 3 We cite the version of the article that appeared in the international edition of *Newsweek*, but the *Oxford English Dictionary* references a version published a week earlier in the US edition.

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