When less is more: Rewilding as a strategy for nature recovery

By Wayne Visser

Can we bring nature back from the brink of collapse? That may sound melodramatic, but the evidence is sobering: the *Planetary Health Check 2026* shows that we have crossed 7 of the 9 science-based planetary boundaries;[1] the *Living Planet Report 2026* finds that wildlife populations have declined 73% on average since 1970;[2] and around 1 million animal and plant species are threatened with extinction, with 75% of the land surface having been significantly altered by human activity, according to the IPBES, the leading intergovernmental body for assessing the state of biodiversity.[3]

In fact, with vertebrate extinction rates up to 100 times the natural background rate, some scientists believe we are at the onset of a sixth mass extinction.[4] But perhaps we should not be surprised at this precipitous decline in the health of our living planet. After all, around $7.3 trillion is spent every year on activities that harm nature ($4.9 trillion by companies and $2.4 trillion in government subsidies), while only $220 billion goes towards protecting or restoring ecosystems (2023 figures).[5] In other words, for every $1 we spend on taking care of nature, $33 is spent on activities that degrade the environment.

The drivers of nature loss are many, including climate change, overexploitation of resources, pollution and invasive alien species, but the largest is land-use change, primarily for agriculture.[6] Research by UNEP and Chatham House goes so far as to identify agriculture as a threat to 86% of species at risk of extinction.[7] So, is regenerative agriculture the answer? That is certainly one approach that would help, as I explored in a previous CleanTechnica article. But there is another, more direct—and some would say more radical—solution that is gaining popularity: rewilding.

As with regenerative agriculture, rewilding is more a collection of ideas and practices than a well-defined science. Nevertheless, experts convened by the IUCN define rewilding as the process of rebuilding a natural ecosystem, following major human disturbance, by restoring natural processes and food webs.[8] The Global Rewilding Alliance puts it even more simply, as “helping nature heal”.[9] In practice, this can mean anything from leaving areas of nature undisturbed to actively introducing keystone species such as beavers, bison and wild boar.

Perhaps the most cited rewilding experiment is the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone National Park in 1995–96, after they had been eradicated there by 1926. This resulted in a so-called trophic cascade, whereby elk numbers fell, scavengers such as eagles, ravens and bears gained a year-round food supply, and willow and aspen began to recover in places.[10] The strength of that recovery, and the extent to which the wolves were the primary driver, has been contested,[11] but few dispute the overall positive effect on biodiversity and the ecosystem.

The Yellowstone case is rewilding on a large scale, but it is still dwarfed by the rewilding work of Tompkins Conservation, created by the late Doug Tompkins, co-founder of The North Face and Esprit, and his wife Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, former CEO of Patagonia. Working primarily in Chile and Argentina, they have helped create or expand 16 parks protecting over 45 million acres of land and sea, and reintroduced 14 species, including around 50 wild jaguars.[12] Besides the ecological benefits, ecotourism is boosting local economies.[13] In Chilean Patagonia, every dollar the state invested in the national parks along Chile's Route of Parks in 2024 returned US$6 to local communities,[14] while visitors to Argentina's Iberá Park, partly degraded by cattle ranching in the past, have doubled in a decade to 60,000 a year.[15]

At a more local scale, the Knepp Estate in the UK has become another well documented case of rewilding. In her book *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm*, Isabella Tree tells the story of how she and her husband, Charlie Burrell, converted their 1,400-hectare farm from intensive dairy and crop agriculture, which was losing money, into a thriving "wild farm," with free-roaming herbivores such as cattle, ponies, pigs, and deer.[16] A 20-year review shows an incredible rejuvenation of biodiversity, including a 916% increase in breeding bird abundance in the southern block, a 132% rise in bird species richness, a near-ninefold increase in dragonflies and damselflies, and a doubling of butterfly species in some areas.[17] There are climate benefits too, with 5.2 tCO2e/ha/yr sequestration, comparable to new native woodland.[18]

Critics of rewilding often frame it as a trade-off: more nature means less food; more wildlife means fewer jobs; more biodiversity means lower economic growth. These arguments can (and should) be tested, for in many (but not all) cases they will prove to be a false choice. My view is that it should be about balance. I saw this pragmatic approach at a rewilding site in Norfolk, England, called Wild Ken Hill, where they have designated separate areas for regenerative farming, coastal conservation, and rewilding —including 30 or so wild Exmoor ponies, 6 very inquisitive and vocal Tamworth pigs, and a small herd of Red Poll cattle.

My conclusion on rewilding is that it can certainly help us to reach the global goal of reversing biodiversity loss and becoming nature positive. It is by no means the only strategy, but it is one of the most direct and impactful. As I noted in the chapter on nature restoration in my book *Thriving*: "We know that nature is on the ropes, bruised and battered by dumb agriculture and dumber economics. But another thing we know is that, given half a chance, nature bounces back. Ecosystems are resilient and designed to flourish. The most powerful and effective action we can take is to step back and give nature space and time to recover."[19]

This article is adapted and updated from content in Wayne Visser's book Thriving: The Breakthrough Movement to Regenerate Nature, Society, and the Economy (New York: Fast Company Press).

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