

# Rewilding: The many-faceted movement that demands a resounding Yes

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As the word “rewilding” catches on in popular culture, the author revisits the concept’s original context, land conservation, and connects that to how we may embrace rewilding nature in our own lives and locales. First coined as a conservation approach in the late twentieth century, rewilding has grown into a global phenomenon that spans continents, habitats and cultures. It remains at its core a powerful recipe for healing the Earth. In addition to large-scale passive and active rewilding, individuals and communities have a role to play. The author invites readers to join the movement in whatever way is accessible and meaningful to them.

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I have identified as an environmentalist ever since I learned the meaning of the word. During the formative years of my life, my environmental activism largely took the form of *No*. *No* to oil, coal, fracking. *No* to plastics, toxic chemicals, pollution. *No* to factory farms, overfishing, deforestation. *No* to extraction, extinction, excess.

While I still stand by those values and try to live them out in the ways I am able, it is nonetheless exhausting to live a life where my personal principles manifest solely as protest and opposition. To be always saying *No* – as righteous as each *No* may be – is to orient one’s outlook from the negative. It is to frame a vision for the future in terms of what is *undesirable*, and that vision is simply not compelling enough to be realized, nor is it inspiring enough to give energy and life back to its supporters (Mercurieff, 2017). A future of health and wholeness needs more imaginative creativity of what we *do* want. Insofar as constant resistance is draining, constant creative re-imagining is generative, hopeful and life-giving.

I needed something to say *Yes* to. I found it in rewilding.

## What is rewilding?

The word ‘rewilding’ has been catching on like wildfire and, like fire, has a diversity of manifestations. The word has referred to everything from conserving landscape-scale wildlife corridors (Ripple *et al.*, 2022) to replenishing the microbiome of one’s skin or gut. Rewilding may be throwing wildflower seed to the wind, going ‘forest bathing’, or attempting to resurrect extinct megafauna using genomic technology (<https://reviverestore.org/>).

Given the radically different meanings this term can have, it behooves the user to provide a clear definition. I offer the following:

*Rewilding is the practice of offering ecosystems the time and space to heal, largely by removing impediments imposed upon them by humans and then relying on nature’s innate ability to regenerate itself.*

Rewilding may be practiced both in active, hands-on ways, and through passive, hands-off methods. It may occur at a small or large geographic scale. Regardless of how it is practiced, the underlying philosophy embraces nature’s resilience, agency and freedom. It honours the myriad, wondrous, complex life forms with whom we humans share this planet. The promise of rewilding doesn’t just apply to some far-off wilderness ‘out there’ – it invites people to reignite a deep and abiding love for the more-than-human world. It invites us to consider ourselves as one of many miraculous beings, and to re-orient towards being part of nature rather than dominant over it.

The term *rewilding* was originally coined by Dave Foreman in the *Wild Earth* journal, and has been embraced as a conservation tactic ever since. Three key ingredients to rewilding are now widely agreed upon: Cores, Corridors, and Carnivores (Noss and Soulé, 1998). Core habitat is wild habitat in the centre of a larger natural area – it has the least amount of disturbance or human presence, allowing species that require such conditions to still find a home. Corridors are the wild highways that connect large core areas of habitat to one another, so that species may move between them. We most often think of wide-ranging mammals using these corridors, but that’s not all. Plants and fungi may shift their ranges on a slower time scale than we may be able to notice, and amphibians and reptiles rely on micro-corridors for annual migrations between upland and wetland habitats. Corridors are important at many spatial and temporal scales. Finally, carnivores and keystone species shape ecosystems in pivotal and irreplicable ways. A forest without cougars or wolves, or a coral reef without hawksbill sea turtles or sharks, may look fine to the casual human passerby, but the family of characters is missing a crucial member. As a result, the relationships between the remaining family members, and the balance of the ecosystem at a macro level, are not the same in the shadow of that loss.

Rewilding is not, however, *rewinding*. Connecting ecosystems and giving them time and space to flourish on their own sets the stage for nature to continue forward. This movement rejects the false characterization of wild places as ‘pristine, untouched, grandiose’ and asserts that any place, even

those heavily impacted by people or without scenic views, may have an abundant, verdant and biodiverse future. Nor is rewilding about protecting the last remnant of a single species, as important as that may be. It's about holistic, systems-level recovery and healing. In sum, rewilding sets nature free, as it is, to adapt and evolve in response to whatever comes along.

### Rewilding the land through conservation: Active rewilding

Active rewilding looks many ways, all involving hands-on work to restore natural processes such as food webs, hydrologic systems, predator-prey interactions and wildlife movement patterns. A non-profit, government agency or citizen-led initiative might remove infrastructure that disrupts these processes: dams, dysfunctional culverts, rubbish dumps, toxic waste, barbed-wire fencing. They might install fish-ladders around dams that must stay in place to allow fish to carry on their natural spawning cycles. Or they might install wildlife crossing infrastructure under or above highways so that animals of all sizes – from toadlets to moose – can find safe passage. These actions have clear and measurable benefits to people too: stabilizing fish populations can lead to higher food security and enjoyment of activities like fishing and bird-watching, and functional wildlife crossings result in fewer dangerous collisions on the road.

Active rewilding also includes the re-introduction of native species to their home ranges – especially those who play an outsized role in the function and health of that ecosystem (*i.e.* keystone species, ecosystem engineers, grazers and carnivores).

Organizations are taking never-before-seen action on behalf of restoring ecosystems in an active way, and then letting nature take up the reins. For example, a brand-new proposal seeks to restore wolves and beavers to federal lands in the United States (Ripple *et al.*, 2022). In Chile and Argentina, jaguars, red-and-green macaws and giant otters are being rematriated to their ancestral homelands (<https://www.tompkinsconservation.org/>). In Mexico, the tiny axolotl's limited range is attracting the attention of rewilders (Cenisio, 2022). From China (Zhao *et al.*, 2020) to Scotland (<https://www.seawilding.org/>), Australia (Australian Institute of Marine Science, 2022) to Zimbabwe (<https://greatplainsfoundation.com/>), restoring lost species to their natural homes is gaining traction – and it is needed now more than ever before.

### Rewilding the land through conservation: Passive rewilding

The organization that I work for, which is called Northeast Wilderness Trust (<https://newildernesstrust.org/>), is one of the few practitioners of large-scale passive rewilding in the eastern United States. It operates in a region where less than four per cent of the land is protected in a wild state, and a mere fraction of one per cent is old-growth forest. In this context, passive rewilding holds immense promise to sow the seeds of tomorrow's ancient forests.

Passive rewilding means placing permanent, legally enforceable wilderness protections on a landscape, and then stepping back and letting nature heal herself. Passively rewilding places like those the Wilderness Trust protects are

often defined by what they are *not*. The forests are not logged, mined, plowed, developed or driven upon. This is all true and important, but the forests are so much more than that. Join me on a tour of a passively rewilding forest to see what it is ... what these lands are saying Yes to.

When Northeast Wilderness Trust acquires a Preserve or Sanctuary, or establishes a new forever-wild easement (legal protection) on land owned by another entity, we make a promise to the future. We promise that nature, rather than people, will get to direct what the forest looks like and how it behaves. And then time gets to work its magic.

Trees perform their photosynthetic alchemy, packing on new layers of carbon each summer. Wind, snow, rain and hail knock branches onto the ground, building up coarse woody debris that shelters important micro-habitats and gives richness back to the soil. Fungi feed on this richness, and mycorrhizal networks grow and complexify, amplifying communication and resource-sharing within the forest (Simard, 2021). Decade after decade, the soil builds and begins to look more like that of an old forest. With fallen trees and rich soil, mossy and leafy hummocks create variation in the forest floor. Dead trees live out second lives (Rankin, 2015). Standing hollow trees shelter bats, birds and small mammals, and the ones who have been able to live a long, full life are big enough even to house a family of bears, martens or bobcats. Downed ones sport thick coats of moss and house nurseries for new trees beginning their own journeys. Natural disturbances – storms, floods, droughts, insect outbreaks – create openings where younger forests regenerate naturally, adding diversity of age to the tree population. And unnatural ones, like anthropogenic climate change, will also shape the forests ‘naturally’ over time.

Passive rewilding may sound like an easier, *laissez-faire* version of rewilding, but that is not necessarily the case. An immense amount of time and work is required to legally protect wildlands. And once they’re protected, the work doesn’t stop there. True, the Wilderness Trust takes a backseat and lets nature run the show on each Preserve. But it requires boots-on-the-ground and positive relationships with neighbours and the local community to ensure nature is allowed to take her course and that encroachments – cutting trees, building trails, motor vehicle trespass – do not occur or are quickly rectified if they do.

### Rewilding the land through grassroots and community action

You do not need to work for a conservation organization to be part of the rewilding movement. Rewilding can be practiced in your neighbourhood, schoolyard, community park or local forest. This may look like seeding a pollinator meadow to replace a lawn, or establishing a rain garden to replace concrete. It may look like building bat boxes to hang outside, recognizing that bats who are in decline have few old, shaggy trees in which to roost. It may be adjusting outdoor lighting in your house or town so that nocturnal insects may make their way by moon and starlight as they have done for millions of years. It may be taking down the birdfeeder if bears live near you, it may be putting a

bird collar on your outdoor cat. All of these actions are rooted in an awareness of, and care for, the wild beings around us.

All of the examples above may be scaled up to make an impact at the level of a community, region or continent, as in the case of the Homegrown National Park (<https://homegrownnationalpark.org/>), Quiet Parks International (<https://www.quietparks.org/>), or the Dark Sky Project (<https://www.darksky.org/>). All of these actions not only heal nature, but also offer healing to people both physically and spiritually.

Passive rewilding is also accessible at a smaller scale. We might decide to leave that pile of brush in our yard or community garden, giving shelter to insects and other small creatures. We might join the planning body for a local park or forest and advocate for a section of it to be set aside to grow old and wild. We might get involved with urban forestry efforts to ensure all neighbourhoods equitably enjoy the benefits of city trees. We might advocate that pesticides not be used on public green spaces, or that our town or city adopt No-Mow May (<https://beecityusa.org/no-mow-may>). There are ways small and large that people from all identities and walks of life can get involved in the rewilding movement ... and it wouldn't be complete without a look inward.

## Rewilding ourselves

Rewilding the land is even more powerful when accompanied by an equivalent journey of human culture and values. How do we welcome the wild into our own lives? Can we learn lessons from rewilding the land and lean into messiness, curiosity, interdependence, freedom, letting go of control over others? Ultimately, rewilding ourselves means rekindling humanity's lost familial and reciprocal relationship with nature. It is essential to acknowledge here that access to nature is unequally and unjustly distributed – whether it is enjoyment of National Parks (Hamilton, 2020) or the number of trees on a city block (Cusick, 2021) – and this inequitable distribution is rooted in systemic oppression that continues to this day. An important ingredient to this work is ensuring everyone, regardless of identity, can experience nature and nurture a relationship with the other-than-human world if they so choose. Healing the Earth and healing human communities are intertwined efforts, yet oft not treated as such.

Redefining our relationship with nature does not require one to be surrounded by wilderness or constantly immersed in wild nature. Here are some prompts to spark your own imagination and curiosity in nurturing your personal relationship with nature, whether you're in an urban, suburban, rural or wild environment.

- **Go outside.** Try using all of your senses to experience the land. Do you notice something new or feel something different when you do this? Turn it into a game or a meditation. (Only use your sense of taste if you know what you are doing or are accompanied by a wild foods expert.) Take off your shoes, lie on the ground, walk in the rain, climb a tree, sit by the water. Experience or witness the parts of nature that may be uncomfortable or less

desirable (biting or stinging insects, inclement weather, thick and thorny brambles, carnivores). Even if they're unpleasant to you, recognize their sovereign right to exist.

- **Get to know your wild neighbours.** You don't have to be an expert – start with just one plant, bird, mushroom or insect at a time. Is there one you keep seeing whose name you don't know? Use an app like iNaturalist, Seek, or Merlin to find out, or consult a field guide or your local nature centre. Try out a wildlife tracking class or start a nature journal.
- **Learn new things, and share your curiosity and discoveries with others.** Check out, for example, Northeast Wilderness Trust's library of wilderness resources (<https://newildernesstrust.org/about/#library>) for recommended books, essays and research. Can you bring revelry and delight for nature's wonders, or something new you learned about the wild beings around you, into conversations with family and friends?
- **Mark the seasons.** For example, celebrate spring's arrival by picking up litter before plants obscure the sides of roads and streams, or helping amphibians cross the road on their way to vernal pools on the first rainy night of spring.
- **Become a citizen scientist.** There are plenty of free and low-commitment ways to help ecologists gather data about reptiles and amphibians, butterflies (<https://www.e-butterfly.org/>), birds (<https://ebird.org/home>), and more. For example, at Northeast Wilderness Trust's Ambassador Preserves, you can snap a picture at our Rewilding Photopoints (<https://www.chronolog.io/project/NWT>) to participate in long-term monitoring of a rewilding ecosystem. Far from a dull, regimented homework assignment, each of these initiatives are experiential, first-hand adventures and are great ways to get children and teenagers hooked on wild nature.
- **Get involved.** Find a rewilding organization or project near you and learn about their work, volunteer or become a member. Search the Global Rewilding Alliance (<https://explorer.land/p/organization/gra/>) or Restor (<https://restor.eco/>), or scroll through the Nature Needs Half network of allied organizations (<https://natureneedshalf.org/who-we-are/members/>).

## Dreaming a wilder world into existence

Together, 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. These pursuits are lifelong journeys, and the more people who join in, the more we can accomplish. The rewilding movement needs as many friends and allies as there are people.

I recognize that the work (and play) of rewilding myself will be a lifelong adventure. And that there are many ways for us all to participate. It is a calling I have only just begun to answer. Perhaps, fifty years from now, I will still be beginning, again and again. What I know for certain is that I'll still be saying Yes.

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