

## Rewilding Charter Working Group

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The Rewilding Charter Working Group comprises experts within the global conservation community who convened to prepare this document for the occasion of the 11th World Wilderness Congress.

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# Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth

Advancing nature-based solutions to the extinction and climate crises

11<sup>TH</sup> WORLD WILDERNESS CONGRESS (WILD11) | JAIPUR, INDIA, 2020



**WILDERNESS**  
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*This Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth was developed by experts within the global conservation community preparing for the 11th World Wilderness Congress. WILD11 was scheduled to convene in Jaipur, India, 19–26 March 2020, but was indefinitely postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic. The Charter was subsequently approved by the WILD11 Resolutions Committee on behalf of the delegates.*

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## PREAMBLE

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### *Whereas*

- ▶ the beauty, richness, and diversity of life on Earth form the foundation of all we know and love,
- ▶ the diversity of life has intrinsic value, and is also central to human well-being,
- ▶ Indigenous knowledge stresses the interrelatedness of all life, a fact affirmed by modern science,
- ▶ Planet Earth has produced the conditions for human consciousness to emerge, and our collective conscience now calls us to defend and repair the natural systems upon which all life depends,
- ▶ cultural diversity around the globe is linked to nature’s diversity,
- ▶ human activity has modified more than three-quarters of the land (excluding Antarctica) and an even greater extent of the oceans,<sup>1</sup>
- ▶ the emerging Sixth Mass Extinction crisis and escalating climate crisis require bold action from all sectors of society,
- ▶ young people are demanding a different future, where people coexist with nature, allowing human and natural communities to prosper,
- ▶ humanity has failed to make sufficient progress addressing freshwater availability, marine life depletion, ocean dead zones, forest destruction and degradation, biodiversity loss, climate change, and continued human population and consumption growth,<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ people can make positive change when we act decisively, as illustrated by the decline of ozone-depleting chemicals; reduction of extreme poverty and hunger;<sup>3</sup> expanded economic opportunity, family planning, and health through investments in educating girls and women;<sup>4</sup> and the rapid growth in the renewable-energy sector,<sup>5</sup> and

*Whereas*

- ▶ pristine or largely unmodified habitat—“primary ecosystems”—sequester and protect large amounts of carbon, regulate local climate regimes including hydrological cycles, and provide a direct defense against climate-related hazards such as floods, sea-level rise, and cyclones,<sup>6</sup>
- ▶ conserving wilderness areas is vital for biodiversity conservation<sup>7</sup> and as seedbeds of recovery for regional rewilding on land and in the oceans,
- ▶ large-scale ecosystem restoration, especially of forested landscapes, and “rewilding regions with native species, especially apex predators, to restore ecological processes and dynamics” are seen as two of thirteen “diverse and effective steps humanity can take to transition to sustainability,”<sup>8</sup>
- ▶ the Rewilding Task Force of the IUCN’s Commission on Ecosystem Management<sup>9</sup> is drafting a set of rewilding principles with the intention of developing detailed guidelines for rewilding that will be useful to practitioners around the globe,
- ▶ ecological restoration enhances ecological integrity, a foundational principle of international environmental law and policy, starting with the Rio Principle 7, and continuing through the CBD (Aichi Target 10), the UNFCCC (the Paris Agreement) and other national and international policies,<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ the U.N. General Assembly has declared 2021–2030 the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration,<sup>11</sup> which aims at uniting “the world behind a common goal of preventing, halting, and reversing the degradation of ecosystems worldwide” to “achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, the Convention of Biological Diversity, the U.N. Convention to Combat Desertification, and other global frameworks,” and

*Whereas*

- ▶ the 2019 U.N. Climate Action Summit recognized the transformative power of “Nature-based Solutions for Climate” including sustainable agriculture and the “conservation and restoration of forests and other terrestrial ecosystems, freshwater resources, and marine and ocean ecosystems,”<sup>12</sup>
- ▶ an emerging consensus<sup>13</sup> among scientists, policymakers, and conservationists asserts that nature-based solutions, by protecting and restoring the living world, are key mechanisms for slowing and ultimately helping reverse greenhouse gas emissions that are causing a climate emergency,<sup>14</sup>

- ▶ the evidence is accumulating<sup>15</sup> of the critical role of wildlife in shaping ecosystems and “animating the carbon cycle” through carbon uptake and storage, suggesting that carbon sequestration could be substantially enhanced through wildlife recovery,
- ▶ the most logical path to address the dual climate and biodiversity crises, as articulated in “A Global Deal for Nature,” is “maintaining and restoring at least 50 percent of the Earth’s land area as intact natural ecosystems, in combination with energy transition measures,”<sup>16</sup>
- ▶ a growing body of “research has shown that various types of nature experience are associated with mental health benefits,”<sup>17</sup> adding to long-understood physical and spiritual values of outdoor recreation,
- ▶ the significant alignment of biodiversity-rich habitats and Indigenous territories<sup>18</sup> presents the opportunity to simultaneously support traditional land tenure, gain wisdom from the knowledge and practices of Indigenous communities, respond to climate change,<sup>19</sup> and sustain biodiversity beyond protected areas,

Now, therefore, by resolution, the World Wilderness Congress affirms this Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth, which embraces the universal right of all beings to sovereignty, livelihood, and well-being, builds upon more than a century of conservation policy and practice, and champions efforts to expand health and wildness around the globe.

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## VISION

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We believe that the world can be more beautiful, more diverse, more equitable, more *wild*. We believe that nature’s innate resilience, bolstered by human care, can initiate an era of planetary healing. In that future time when the world is whole and healthy, undammed rivers will run to the sea, their estuaries teeming with life. Following ancient patterns, whales and warblers will migrate unmolested through sea and sky. From tiny phytoplankton to tallest redwoods, all Earth’s creatures will be free to pursue lives of quality, and humanity will thrive amidst nature’s abundance.

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## OBJECTIVE

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We must keep wild that which is still wild and accelerate rewilding efforts in areas that have been diminished. By creating an interconnected system of wild habitats capable of supporting life's full variety and richness—implemented through voluntary, participatory actions of individuals, nongovernmental organizations, businesses, and governments—degraded lands and waters will be restored. Such a system would support human welfare by contributing to climate stability, clean air and water, pollination services, beauty, physical and mental health, moral satisfaction, and other life-supporting services that undergird flourishing human communities.

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## REWILDING DEFINITION AND APPLICATION

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Rewilding means *helping nature heal*. Rewilding means giving space back to wildlife and returning wildlife back to the land, as well as to the seas. Rewilding means the mass recovery of ecosystems and the life-supporting functions they provide. Rewilding means restoring and protecting specific places—on land and in the ocean—where nature is free to direct the ebb and flow of life. Rewilding is about allowing natural processes to shape whole ecosystems so that they work in all their colorful complexity to give life to the land and the seas. Such wild lands and waters are critical to sustain ecological vitality by supporting intact food webs and natural processes.

Rewilding is also about the way we think. It is about understanding that we are one species among many, bound together in an intricate web of life that ties us to the atmosphere, the weather, the tide, the soils, the freshwater, the oceans, and all living creatures on the planet.<sup>20</sup>

Tools for rewilding include well-established conservation tactics such as designating national parks, wilderness areas, wildlife sanctuaries, and marine protected areas; securing habitat connectivity (“wildlife corridors”) between protected areas; promoting human/wildlife coexistence; making infrastructure, especially highways, more permeable to wildlife movement; restoring degraded forests, grasslands, mangroves, coral reefs, and other natural communities; removing unnecessary dams and roads; reestablishing populations of “keystone” species including apex predators such as gray wolves, big cats, and sharks;<sup>21</sup> but it is particularly about eliminating or mitigating ecological wounds so that natural processes can rebound. Opportunities abound to apply these and other

conservation tools to help sustain and restore wildness in places that reflect the variety of conditions covering the globe, from highly manipulated landscapes such as cities and farmlands to remaining large wild areas.<sup>22</sup>

To adequately address the climate emergency and extinction crisis, humanity must implement nature-based solutions with unprecedented urgency. Wild forests, grasslands, peatlands, mangroves, salt marshes, seagrasses, and sea shelf sediments already pull vast amounts of carbon from the atmosphere and store it naturally in vegetation and soil, and restoration will greatly amplify this ability. Intact habitats are similarly crucial to maintaining biological diversity, the array of lifeforms with which we share the Earth.

The healing powers of nature are extraordinary but not unlimited. The innate resilience of ecosystems, bolstered by active interventions of an engaged citizenry, offers a practical, hopeful path toward solving the foremost challenges of our time, with benefits for humans and all our relatives in the community of life.

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## GLOBAL CONTEXT FOR REWILDING

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In the 150 years since the emergence of the conservation movement and the array of land/sea/wildlife-protecting activities it has advocated, approximately 15 percent of the Earth's land surface and 10 percent of the oceans have been conserved to some degree, although far less is strictly protected from exploitation.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, many protected areas were not created specifically to maximize biodiversity conservation, are isolated from other conserved lands or waters, and are inadequately safeguarded.

While global investments in protected areas and adoption of wildlife conservation policies have produced many ecological and social benefits<sup>24</sup> and slowed the pace of biodiversity loss,<sup>25,26</sup> they are not nearly enough. Current ecological trends are negative—plummeting wildlife populations,<sup>27</sup> ocean acidification and dying coral reefs,<sup>28</sup> dramatically higher greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere than at the onset of the Industrial Revolution,<sup>29</sup> and a million species at risk of extinction.<sup>30</sup> We are on the trajectory towards global tipping points, which may reshape the entire web of life by the end of this century or earlier.<sup>31</sup> A rewilding approach to conservation, boldly implemented at a global scale, can help reverse such trends.

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## REWILDING IS REAL

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Rewilding is already happening, incrementally, around the planet, sometimes driven by new protected area designations on land and in the oceans, and often by the abandonment of marginal farmland, especially in the Northern Hemisphere but also in tropical countries.<sup>32</sup> To recreate functional ecosystems, however, there is almost always a need to enable the return of missing wildlife, especially strongly interactive species,<sup>33</sup> either through natural recolonization or active reintroductions. Inspiring rewilding initiatives include efforts to reintroduce wolves to Yellowstone and jaguars to the Iberá marshlands of Argentina; replenish the great Caledonian forest of Scotland; recreate living rivers across Europe by removing dams and dikes; restore free-roaming bison herds on the Great Plains of North America and from the coastal lowlands to the mountains of Europe; stimulate local economic vitality linked to parklands protection and wildlife recovery in Chile, Mozambique, and Spain; bring back missing megafauna to wildlife conservancies in southern Africa; reassemble degraded natural communities and restore tigers to the forests of India; rebuild ecological function across Australia's Yorke Peninsula; and designate new marine national parks in the South Atlantic Ocean. These and hundreds of other rewilding projects are demonstrating the power of place-based, bottom-up efforts to restore and protect nature's diversity.

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## PRINCIPLES FOR REWILDING<sup>34</sup>

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### ***The ecosphere is based on relationships***

Rewilding our hearts and minds is fundamental. Thus, a crucial first step toward widespread societal embrace of rewilding is to accept, celebrate, and activate the principle of "relationship," the essential function and ethic that sustains life on Earth.

### ***Making hopeful stories come to life***

Rewilding is about telling the story of a richer, more vital future but also about executing successful projects—empowering others to support and join this movement by demonstrating positive results.

### ***Embracing natural solutions and thinking creatively***

Rewilding can help solve environmental, social, and economic problems. Conservationists should design and implement rewilding projects in ways that are ambitious, innovative, proactive, strategic, opportunistic, and entrepreneurial.

***Protecting the best, rewilding the rest***

Conserving the most intact remaining habitats and key biodiversity areas<sup>35</sup> as well as working to recover lost interactions of nature at all levels and restore habitat connectivity in land- and seascapes at every scale, shows the complementarity of rewilding and traditional approaches to nature protection.

***Letting nature lead***

As in medicine, rewilding efforts should emphasize helping nature's inherent healing powers gain strength, with the goal that management interventions would decline or cease over time. Humility will allow us to cede control, enabling restored natural processes to shape dynamic land- and seascapes of the future.

***Working at nature's scale***

Natural systems operate at many scales continuously. Similarly, global rewilding efforts can work place by place, incrementally and at various scales to rebuild wildlife diversity and abundance and allow natural processes, such as disturbance and dispersal, to create resilience in natural and social systems.

***Taking the long view***

To ensure sustained positive effects on biodiversity and quality of ecosystem services (such as carbon storage), rewilding efforts must be planned and implemented with a long-term perspective.

***Building local economies***

Creating, expanding, and restoring natural areas with abundant wildlife can provide new opportunities to create economic vitality and generate livelihoods linked to nature's vitality.

***Recalling ecological history and acting in context***

Successful rewilding efforts are informed by deep knowledge of the environmental and cultural history of particular places. Working within the social, biological, and physical realities of a territory will foster successful rewilding outcomes.

***Evidence-based adaptive management***

Learning from others, using the best-available evidence, gathering and sharing data, and having the confidence to learn from failure will lead to success and grow the institutional capacity of the rewilding community.

***Public/private collaboration***

In the way that public/private collaboration has helped to expand protected areas, private initiative can catalyze public actions from governments at every scale, from local to national, so that economic and institutional frameworks provide increasing incentives for rewilding.

***Working together for the good of ourselves and nature***

Effective advocates for nature build coalitions and forge partnerships based on respect, trust, and common interest. Connecting different disciplines, working intergenerationally and honoring the perspectives of diverse stakeholders will produce successful rewilding results.

Nature also has her own needs. Terry Tempest Williams once wrote, “The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint, that we might leave room for the life that is destined to come.” In this present moment of profound decision for humanity, when our choices will affect every person on Earth, our descendants, and all our relations in the community of life, rewilding offers a wildly hopeful course of action.

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**CALL TO ACTION**

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In a spirit of hopefulness for the future of life, we call on individuals, communities, nongovernmental organizations, corporations, governments, and other institutions to advance efforts to protect remaining large wild areas and to support rewilding projects around the world (see Appendix A). A global rewilding movement—embraced by the broadest spectrum of constituencies and encouraged by governmental policy—can ultimately weave wondrous blue and green ribbons of wildness that wrap the Earth in beauty, offering the promise of a better future, with freedom and habitat for all.

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# Appendix A

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## CONSTITUENCIES AND ACTIONS FOR REWILDING

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In the 21st century, humanity faces a stark choice: continue on the current trajectory and witness the unraveling of Earth's life-providing systems, biodiversity, and beauty, or commence a new era of reciprocity and harmony between people and our relatives in the community of life. A global movement for nature recovery through rewilding presents myriad opportunities for individuals, organizations, governments, financial institutions, businesses, and stewards of wild lands and waters to bring diverse talents to the cause of helping nature heal. Crucially, developing an economy based on restorative practices could provide durable, life-affirming livelihoods for people around the globe, and reorient toward a new, positive future for all Earth's creatures.

No single document could list the full range of avenues for conservation policy and practice that may advance rewilding, but, building upon the work of rewilding organizations from 15 different European countries in the Call to Action for a Wilder Europe,<sup>1</sup> an initial listing of key constituencies and some preliminary actions follows.

### *Citizens*

- ▶ **Rural communities:** Embrace opportunities generated through rewilding to continue living from the land and sea in a new relationship, with enhanced economic prospects for young people to find reasons to stay and, hence, reduce rural exodus.
- ▶ **Indigenous peoples:** Support the aspiration of rewilding to help nature heal at scale by offering wisdom from traditional communities, especially knowledge, practices, and ideas anchored in the interrelatedness of all life. See rewilding as an opportunity to secure and restore land tenure and territories of life.

- ▶ **Urban dwellers:** Recognize the comeback of wild nature and wildlife for all of society, and see rewilding as an opportunity to experience wilder land- and seascapes and enjoy the abundance of wild animals roaming freely.
- ▶ **Scientists:** Conduct research on rewilding—such as on how to restore missing species and degraded habitats—and communicate the evidence about rewilding’s role in combating the biodiversity and climate emergencies.
- ▶ **Communications and marketing professionals:** Amplify the stories of ecological recovery, the benefits for addressing the climate and biodiversity emergency, and initiate dialogue about rewilding’s potential to benefit nature and people.

### *International institutions and governing bodies*

- ▶ **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD):** Incorporate the concept of rewilding as a key concept for ecosystem restoration as part of the Post-2020 Global Diversity Framework.
- ▶ **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC):** Recognize the significant contribution rewilding can provide to Nature-based Climate Solutions by enhancing carbon mitigation and storage as well as by increasing resilience of terrestrial and marine ecosystems.
- ▶ **United Nations Environment Program (UNEP):** Acknowledge the important contribution rewilding can make to meeting the objectives of the U.N. General Assembly for the “2021–2030 Decade on Ecosystem Restoration,” including carbon sequestration and storage, wildlife comeback, and repairing degraded lands and oceans.<sup>2</sup>
- ▶ **The Bonn Challenge:**<sup>3</sup> See rewilding as a key concept for restoring 350 million hectares of the world’s deforested and degraded land by 2030, with particular emphasis on forest landscape restoration.
- ▶ **Local, regional, and national governments:** Actively adopt rewilding as a tool for enhancing ecological services linked to water provision, drought reduction, defense against flooding, and carbon sequestration/storage, with the overall potential of reducing the biodiversity and climate change crises.
- ▶ **United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO):** Include the concept of rewilding as a new tool for maintaining the outstanding natural values of World Heritage Sites and for reconciling biodiversity conservation with sustainable use in Biosphere Reserves, with particular attention to how rewilding can enhance ecological services.

*Civil society organizations*

- ▶ **Society for Ecological Restoration:** To meet the aspiration to “secure a net gain in the extent and functioning of native ecosystems,”<sup>4</sup> the society and the IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management (CEM)<sup>5</sup> should review and consider adopting the vision, objective, definition, and principles of the Global Charter for Rewilding the Earth.
- ▶ **Environment Non-Governmental Organizations:** Actively support rewilding as part of the restoration efforts to safeguard biodiversity and combat the climate emergency.
- ▶ **Humanitarian Non-Governmental Organizations:** Recognize the opportunities that rewilding offers for enhancing the life-supporting systems linked to human well-being, with benefits for food production, outdoor recreation, local economies, and health outcomes.
- ▶ **Social justice and human rights groups:** Support compassionate and noncoercive measures to stabilize and peacefully lower human numbers, in terms of population and consumption—such as free access to family planning information and technology, and education and empowerment of girls and women.
- ▶ **Consumer organizations:** Because food production is a major driver of land-use change, greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, and water consumption,<sup>6</sup> support shifts in dietary patterns, such as from animal-based food production to a plant-based diet, that could produce very significant reductions in farmland, GHG emissions and water use<sup>7</sup> and allow for large-scale rewilding.
- ▶ **Birding, botanizing, and other wildlife-oriented NGOs:** Encourage members to support rewilding-focused policies and projects.

*Financing sector*

- ▶ **The UNFCCC Green Climate Fund:** In the “Areas of Work,”<sup>8</sup> radically increase the funding available for Nature Based Climate Solutions, recognizing the critical importance of restoring intact, functional ecosystems through rewilding for both mitigation and adaptation to climate change.
- ▶ **The Global Environmental Facility:** Adopt rewilding as a key principle in enhancing ecosystem services through large-scale restoration efforts, as outlined in the “New direction in the GEF Partnership to Protect and Restore the Global Environment.”<sup>9</sup>

- **Multilateral development banks (MDBs):** Following the example of the European Investment Bank, which in partnership with Rewilding Europe Capital set up a Natural Capital Financing Facility,<sup>10</sup> establish similar financing facilities across the world.
- **Private banking facilities:** Grasp the new financing opportunities generated through establishing rewilding investment facilities, providing loan opportunities for local entrepreneurs working together with rewilding initiatives.
- **Government agencies:** Provide private landowners strong financial and social incentives for wildlife-friendly stewardship. Various areas of public administration—from agriculture and public lands to economic and tax policy—should eliminate barriers to land and nature recovery.
- **Transportation sector:** Public works agencies, particularly highway departments, should design new infrastructure—if truly needed—and retrofit existing roads to be more permeable to wildlife movement, via use of strategic underpasses and overpasses that accommodate wildlife and improve public safety for motorists. They should also close and revegetate unneeded, habitat-fragmenting roads.
- **Philanthropists:** Individual and institutional funders can catalyze rewilding projects by direct funding of NGOs and help leverage public support via public/private collaboration.
- **Conservation & Biodiversity Banking:**<sup>11</sup> Make sure that rewilding becomes a key principle in biodiversity offsets, generating a net biodiversity gain through recovery plans and Habitat Conservation Plans as compensation for unavoidable impacts of development seen as crucial for the wider society.
- **Agricultural sector:** End ecologically harmful subsidies<sup>12</sup> and support expansion of natural areas in the agricultural landscape, such as ecological corridors designed to maintain keystone species and crucial natural processes such as pollination.

### *Land, water, and sea stewardship*

- **Forest ecologists and foresters:** Lead a transition toward wilder forest landscapes through the adoption of ecology-based forestry, setting aside no-cut areas and corridors in the landscape, protecting all remaining old-growth forests, and allowing the comeback of wildlife, particularly of those species playing a critical role in ecological function.

- ▶ **Hydrologists and river stewards:** Restore natural floodplains to provide wildlife habitat, reduce flood risk, and store water in upper catchments for periods of drought.
- ▶ **Water, energy, and navigation authorities:** Remove artificial barriers, particularly man-made dams, thereby enhancing wildlife habitat, natural flooding regimes, and ecological services that result from free-flowing waterways.
- ▶ **Coastal and marine officials:** Reduce obstacles to recovering coastal and marine life, such as coastal defense structures and industrial fishing practices, and establish no-take fishing zones and marine protected areas to cope with rising sea levels and temperatures.
- ▶ **Protected areas administrators:** Adopt the principle of rewilding in the planning and management of protected areas, to enhance biodiversity values and increase ecosystem resilience; expand wilderness areas, national parks, and other protected wildlands.
- ▶ **Wildlife biologists:** Help restore abundant and diverse wildlife populations through creating no-take zones/wildlife sanctuaries and by supporting population enhancement measures and reintroduction of lost species, especially ecological keystone species such as wolves, beavers, elephants, and salmon.
- ▶ **Land trusts:** Use and improve tools for private lands conservation including payment for ecosystem services, conservation easements, and coexistence funds for farmers who lose livestock to native predators.

### *Corporate sector*

- ▶ **Outdoor retailers and NGOs:** Create partnerships between businesses and specific rewilding projects that generate public interest and financial support.
- ▶ **Corporations with private land holdings:** See rewilding as a key tool for promoting stewardship on corporate landholdings, whether modest or large in scale, to foster biodiversity conservation.
- ▶ **Recreational sector:** Embrace the opportunities rewilding brings to local economies through wildlife-oriented tourism and related enterprises.
- ▶ **(Re)Insurance sector:** Acknowledge rewilding as an efficient tool to reduce risks, such as negative climate change impacts, and enhance ecological and societal resilience to natural disasters.

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