

Rewilding Europe

A new beginning. For wildlife. For us.



Rewilding Europe

Main Guiding Principles



Main guiding principles of Rewilding Europe

Providing direction

This document describes the way in which the three principles Planet, People and Prosperity will be applied in the Rewilding Europe programme. This is the “DNA” of how Rewilding Europe works, both at the programme and at the project (local) level. As the title Rewilding Europe suggests, this programme is primarily focused on launching a new vision, a new direction and a new, higher level of ambition, rather than achieving a fixed goal. Providing more space for natural processes is essential to create a base for a more sustainable society and economy. Rewilding Europe therefore places the Planet, People and Prosperity principles in the context of complete ecosystems.

The European challenge

With over 1 million hectares of agricultural land abandoned annually by farmers and shepherds, the European countryside is providing our generation with a historic challenge. Rewilding Europe takes hold of this situation by giving the ratio of men to nature a new dimension. We see opportunities to:

- Realize world-class wild natural areas and wilderness throughout Europe (comparable with Yellowstone and the Serengeti), where European nature in its full richness can develop;
- Enable large audiences to experience these areas, making them proud of the spectacular natural heritage of our continent;
- Build a new, more viable nature-based economy, competitive with current forms of land use.

Model sites

To realize the ambitions mentioned above, they have to be tested in practice. Rewilding Europe will do this in a minimum of ten project areas across Europe. To fully accommodate the natural processes, these model sites require sufficient space to show what could be done on a much larger scale. Based on nominations received by local organizations, the areas which were selected were those that have the potential to become a rewilded area of at least about 100,000 hectares over the next 10 years. This is the scale at which Planet, People and Prosperity can be connected in a sustainable manner according to the principles of Rewilding Europe.

Planet

“Planet” (Ecological sustainability):

Every area should host complete and naturally functioning ecosystems specific to the region

More room for natural processes

Rewilding gives direction to our attitude to natural processes, allowing more space for the wild - the power of the elements: natural (ground) water levels, floods, natural fires, seepage, salt intrusion, avalanches, storms, and other extreme weather conditions. Adjusting to these natural forces is the basic principle of Rewilding Europe and lays the foundation for the landscape in the model sites. Within these areas, the influence of these processes is therefore no longer defined in terms of damage, but rather as creative strength.

Life itself as fine-tuner

The rough contours of the landscape are created by geological processes and etched by the elements. Life itself provides the fine-tuning. The interaction of hundreds of thousands of European plant and animal species and individuals provides an unprecedented landscape variation, in which all these species each occupy their own space. Typical vegetation-forming processes, in which plants and animals have leading roles, include natural forest growth, peat formation, herbivorous, and carnivorous life forms, as well as disease, fire and soil processes under the influence of for example fungi and insects. The natural distribution and migratory movements of species and their natural population dynamics are of great importance in establishing the dynamic balance within naturally functioning ecosystems.

With regard to these processes Rewilding Europe also strives for the most natural development. Some of these processes are described in greater detail below, especially since a more natural approach to these processes sheds new light on human use around hunting, fishing, forestry and agriculture.

Complete and functioning ecosystems

The aim to reach ecosystems that are as complete as possible, requires a definition of reference in space and time. Rewilding Europe aims towards the sustainable occurrence of all existing indigenous species that have inhabited Europe since the last Ice Age. The principles of natural population dynamics, dispersal, migration and interaction with other species in their natural habitat applies to all these species. As a reference we do not choose any period that is firmly set in the past, instead we want ecosystems to organize themselves under the current prevailing physical conditions.

Forest growth and regrowth

The spontaneous growth of woody plants is a dominant vegetation-forming process in many parts of Europe. Land abandonment that is currently taking place in many areas across the continent is leading in most cases to an accelerated development towards bush and closed forests. This is normally in competition with other natural processes that instead open up the forests (fire, storm, snow pressure, avalanches, ice and insect or fungi outbreaks) or where the succession is slowed or hindered by

the grazing and browsing influence of herbivores of all sizes, but especially the large herbivores. These latter processes have been denied or blocked in most parts of Europe's forests. Hindering the large herbivores natural effect on forests is an almost sacred standard procedure in all European forestry. Much of the normal native flora and fauna, belonging to related species to the open and mosaic landscapes is therefore today excluded in these areas. Rewilding Europe aims to again allow forest ecosystems in which these natural processes of disaster and regeneration can occur in a natural way.

Herbivores

In the absence of large herbivores, forests that are destroyed by fire or storm will be overgrown and covered with young bushes, shrubs and trees in just a few years. For much, maybe even the majority of Europe's native flora and fauna there would be no place without large herbivores. Millions of years of co-evolution has led to this intricate interaction. During the last thousands of years, this interaction continued in a modified form within the framework of extensive domestic livestock rearing and grazing.

At present, most wild herbivores have been exterminated or reduced greatly in numbers, and at the same time their domesticated successors are now rapidly leaving the countryside as agricultural land is abandoned. The combined result is that this million year old process is coming to an abrupt end and this now threatens a huge part of European biodiversity. Recovery of a natural herbivore communities is a crucially important part of Rewilding Europe. Because of the crucially important ecological function, near-natural, domesticated descendants of European aurochs, wild horse and reintroductions of other wild herbivores in areas where they occur naturally, are therefore also part of the Rewilding Europe programme.

Carnivores

Large predators like wolves, bears and lynx, as well as large birds of prey and scavengers are particularly vulnerable to persecution, partly because their ecological niche overlaps with that of humans. Through hunting, poaching, or, more effectively, poisoned bait, these species are relatively easy to wipe out or decimate their populations. However in recent decades large predators have made a spectacular comeback. Among others, successful nature conservation efforts, reduction of persistent chemicals and pesticides (DDT, PCB, mercury) in combination with rural depopulation and socio economic development are causing this positive development. The numbers are still only a tiny fraction of what their natural populations levels could have been and many species are still absent in large parts of Europe. Moreover, many predators are condemned to a nocturnal life after centuries of intense persecution and (severe) over hunting, whilst their presence during the day could contribute to the nature experience and to their economical value for tourism. Rewilding Europe is working on rehabilitation for this category of animals, so they can, at least in the model sites, obtain their natural population dynamics. Therefore, hunting in these areas should be minimal, or even (in the core areas) omitted entirely.

Migration and dispersion

When we want to have natural behavior of all the above mentioned species it is not just the size of the areas that is important, but also the connection of the various sub-habitats that herbivores and carnivores use. Think of the combination of flood plains

and floodfree refuges or an altitudinal migration route between elevated summer pastures and lowland river valleys which provide enough food in winter. With Rewilding Europe we seek an optimal connection of these sub-habitats within the pilot areas, if possible with a larger surrounding network of natural areas. Connectivity of habitats is key to facilitate migration and dispersion of these species.

People

“**People**” (Social sustainability):

Each area should be embedded within the social, cultural and historical fabric of it's respective region

Rewilding Europe works for enabling people to continue living on their land and welcomes visitors to enjoy the spectacular nature and wildlife that will be the result of this programme. This invitation applies to both local people as well as visitors from outside the area, who are encouraged to experience the joy of nature and to harvest from nature in a sustainable manner, as long as this does not adversely affect the natural processes as described above. By engaging the existing landowners, Rewilding Europe promotes a new land stewardship based on wild values.

Zonation of human uses

Rewilding Europe strives for an optimal balance of human use between the different areas that compose the overall rewilded landscape. A spatial zoning of the model sites will provide direction to where consumptive and non-consumptive uses could take place.

Three areas of human use can be distinguished:

1. *Core wilderness areas*: in these areas it is all about spontaneous nature and the experience of this wild nature, without major recreational infrastructure or harvest of natural products other than fruit, berries, nuts and mushrooms (all non-consumptive use).
2. *Transition areas*: rewilded areas with maximum room for natural processes and the possibility to experience it through an appropriate recreational infrastructure (trails, lodges etc.). Sustainable harvesting possible of timber, animals (hunting, fishing, domestic livestock and fruit) subordinated to natural development both nonconsumptive and consumptive use).
3. *Buffer zone*: effort to turn harvest of wildlife and agricultural products whenever possible into long-term sustainable use and natural carrying capacities. Adequate protection of crops against herbivores and domestic livestock against carnivores. Both non-consumptive and consumptive human use.

Legal protection

Rewilding Europe supports the legal foundation of the above zonation. Most of the areas we work in are part of Natura 2000 or have another protection status, however, becoming part of local or national protection legislation will improve ecological, social en economical sustainability of these areas.

Social dimension

Creating local pride and sense of common ownership and responsibility for wild nature and the natural resources is a key concept for Rewilding Europe. This will be achieved through working with the local stakeholders – such as land owners, communities, and resource users – in developing new uses of land and sea with the values of wild as core basis. Individuals, groups of landowners and communities have joined based on common management principles. Wildlife and wild animals again become icons and draw cards for these regions. This should result in new jobs and sources of income, leading to a growing pride in the wild nature.

Cultural & historical dimension

The wilderness concept should be anchored in culture and history. In some areas relationships were already documented. The concept of “Wild as something normal for Europe” should also be referred to. The landscape in which we live today has a long history with man being an important factor for a very long time. However, it is not until relatively recently that the European landscape started to change very dramatically. Up to around 1700 there was still a lot of wild nature present in Europe, although it started to become a more crowded continent. Even in the densely populated countries, half of the land was still uncultivated and in a more or less wild condition. Due to the hunting interests of royals and nobles, large areas hosted wild animals – such as deer - to serve as game.

Prosperity

“**Prosperity**” (Economic sustainability):

The new land/sea use should be economically viable and competitive with other alternatives

A new rural economy

Small-scale farming and herding flocks of livestock has no real socio-economic future in many parts of Europe. In many areas such activities only exist because of massive subventions and subsidies, the future funding of which seems very unsecure. Rewilding Europe sees opportunities to help build sustainable regional economies through spectacular new nature and wildlife reserves. Unlike the subsidized small-scale agriculture, and to a lesser extent the subsidized forestry, this economy will be more independent of EU funding. For local businesses this will generally mean a shift in emphasis from primary production to a servicing economy and from unsustainable logging and farming to more sustainable harvesting techniques. *Rewilding Europe* can help with training and education of entrepreneurs and the commercialization of new products.

New ways of attracting commercial investment

Rewilding Europe will aim to create a commercial and legal framework which will facilitate nature-based investment in our target areas. Rewilding Europe will provide technical input in preparing contracts between land owners/land stewards/concession providers on the one side and tour operators/concession holders/investors to ensure that money earned from spectacular nature is also partly repaid to the manager or

officer of that nature area in order to sustain what will in essence be the primary resource of a nature-based business.

Nature as protection

Many events that are identified as 'natural' disasters are in fact the result of the opposite –of a human-influenced, disrupted natural system. For example the sponge effect by the restoration of natural vegetation in mountain areas, that decreases the risks of downstream flooding or drought. Or the fact that natural mosaic landscapes in the Mediterranean region are less prone to major fires than areas covered by dense bush and scrub. In this way in several areas of Europe rewilding will contribute directly to the protection of people. Large herbivores for example would keep bush away and thereby also keep fire risk low, which would lead to increased safety and huge economic cost cutting for society. This element of *Rewilding Europe* has particular relevance to the insurance industry sector.

Wildlife capital

Investing in land ownership in rewilded areas will become in time as attractive as the current value of abandoned farmland rises. A particular example will be when the wildlife populations increase and there is development of professional tourism products for visitors who are attracted by this wildlife. Wildlife as such will begin to be counted as a form of capital value for the land.

Investment Mechanisms

Rewilding Europe recognizes that changing an economy from a primarily agrarian basis to a nature-based economy will require a collective approach and significant support for commercial investment. Many of the existing and likely future business activities in the target areas will be of small and medium size. Rewilding Europe will provide technical support to the growth and establishment of nature-based businesses but will also form partnerships with financial institutions in order to establish one or more investment funds and other financing mechanisms which will invest in these businesses.