

ARTICLE IN THE SUMMER 2023

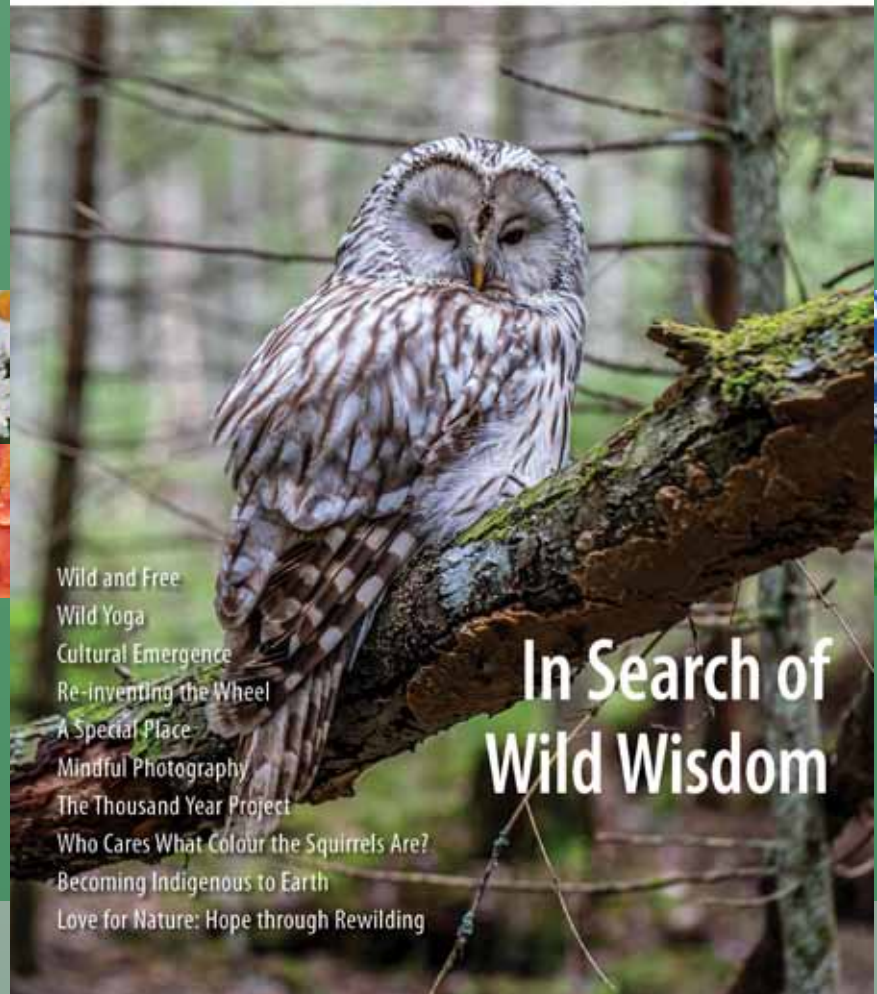
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Love for Nature: Hope through Rewilding

JAN STANNARD



What's your earliest childhood memory of being captivated by Nature? I was about six or seven and I was playing in the garden of my parents' house in Enfield, right at the edge of north London. I was sitting by a tin bath, relegated from real use in wartime to a handy container for gardening.

It had been raining and the bath was about six inches full, and I noticed a woodlouse trundling down one of the sloping sides. It walked straight into the water, across the bottom and then back up the other side. I can pinpoint my fascination for the natural world to that moment and it has never left me.

Life then happened to me, school, university, work, marriage, children, and my interest in Nature carried on from the sidelines, mostly countryside walks and reading about it. Then as the second decade of the new century progressed, with our two daughters now into their 20s, the interest I'd always had came up from the depths and broke the surface. I'd long been heeding warnings about the existential long term threats of climate breakdown and Nature loss across the planet, and the publication of one book had a completely galvanising effect on me. George Monbiot's 2013 work *Feral* introduced me to two fundamental concepts: shifting baseline syndrome and rewilding. There are moments in life when you learn something so mind-shifting that the world tilts on its axis. This was one of those. Suddenly, I understood there was an alternative approach to fighting back against Nature loss,

this thing called rewilding, which complemented decades of extraordinary conservation work, helping us as a country to cling on to our last fragments of Nature. What Monbiot helped me to see was that Nature needed new, connected space, at scale, to recover. More than anything, rewilding offered hope, the vital fuel for sparking action.

In the meantime, the government published its 25-year Environment Plan in 2018, targeting half a million hectares of land for Nature by 2030, and the 2019 State of Nature report confirmed just how bad Nature declines were becoming. In a global ranking of 'biological intactness' of countries and territories, England ranked 234th, amongst the worst in the world for the state of its Nature. Most of England was, and is, severely ecologically depleted and species extinctions were continuing unabated.

Then in January 2019, my goddaughter Sophie Jonathan, an editor at Picador at the time, sent me a proof copy of a book being readied for publishing, with a note saying that I would absolutely love it. That book was Isabella Tree's *Wilding* about Knepp, the famous pioneering rewilding site in Sussex, and that second life-changing read was the next waypoint on the road which led directly to Heal.

I'd already begun mulling over a way that I could help make a difference based on doing something practical with rewilding involved. Three threads were coming together – the practice of rewilding become established in the UK, an emerging community giving it credibility, and recognition by government that land use had to change to give Nature more space – which gave rewilding a strategic power which I believed meant it was not a trend but a profound shift which would change everything.

After more reading and research, I attended a major rewilding conference where I met some of the key figures in the fast-growing rewilding community and saw my first presentation about Knepp, and became absolutely determined to find a way of using the third phase of my life to become involved in rewilding in some direct way.

Inspired by the notion of 'everyone, together', I began to formulate an idea for a new charity which would be the

first dedicated to being a rewilding landowner. I could see that bringing about rewilding on the ground would mean owning the land, because ownership brings with it control and the certainty of supporting Nature in perpetuity.

By the summer of 2019, I'd developed the idea considerably and began to have detailed discussions with those already involved in projects. I began the registration of a charity. I didn't have its final name, that that came about in another extraordinary moment of happenstance. I had got to know a young woman who had set up a wildlife group near me and who was interested in rewilding, and I invited her to use a spare ticket for a talk by George Monbiot. As we waited for him to come on, I talked about the charity and expressed my frustration at the lack of a name for it. "How about Heal?" said Hannah Needham, now part of the senior management team at the charity.

With a name and charity registration underway, we shaped Heal's mission. It would have a plan to acquire a 200ha site for rewilding in every English county by 2050 or sooner, to make a substantial contribution to the need for new space for Nature. I found five people to become trustees and the launch was set for 30 March 2020. Then came total lockdown.

Would we delay the launch? Absolutely not. Nature loss and climate change are emergencies that need the sort of emphasis the nation managed to find when threatened by Covid-19. We launched with a single article in the Guardian and it opened the floodgates. We were working virtually and were absolutely swamped by hundreds of messages, donations and people wanting to volunteer. That's when we knew that the concept of a charity totally focused on practical rewilding looked likely to gain a foothold.

An early, critical decision was to recognise that a new charity would not be able to raise, in its first couple of years, the £5m-£7m needed to acquire land at that scale with buildings for its foundation rewilding site. We had to focus on other ways to supplement traditional sources like public donations and grants from trusts and foundations. Many trusts and foundations require charities to have operated for one or two years before they will consider giving grants for example. We completely understood this, because like any start up, a new entity has to prove that its existence can be sustained. It would also be too soon to anticipate legacy giving for the same reason.

We concluded that impact lending would help us meet our strategic goal of making rapid headway in terms of land acquisition, which we felt was essential given the urgent need to fight climate breakdown and address Nature's decline. A few months after we launched, we quickly concluded discussions with Direct Line Group for the provision of a commercial loan on advantageous terms of £3 million as funding towards our first two sites. This gave

us the cornerstone lending we needed to put down deposit on a foundation site in the South of England, which we had not found at that stage. We were then introduced to Triodos Bank UK, who were interested in providing their first ever impact lending to a rewilding project. An impact loan is a type of loan where the return to the lender is not purely financial and is often offered at lower interest rates.

We need to be able to pay down this lending as fast as possible. Quite early on, we had hit upon a novel and appealing land sponsorship scheme, using the what3words global addressing system, where every 3 metre by 3 metre square on the planet has its own unique three-word address. We realised that we could make the connection between this addressing system and a way of attracting donations to help us pay for the land on our sites. We launched Heal 3x3, where supporters sponsor a square for £20 and we use those donations to pay down the lending.

We looked for a suitable place to be our foundation site for over two years, searching in eight southern counties, and finally acquired Heal Somerset near Bruton on 29th December 2022. The 460 acres of land here are already beginning the journey of recovery and the site is being readied to welcome people who will come and explore Nature here and spend time together sharing their knowledge and experience.

In more than 40 years of work, I have never worked harder, nor experienced such meaning and purpose. I only wish I was 26 and not 66, as I would dearly love to see Nature return in abundance across many Heal's sites, while also knowing that the changes to the land, particularly healing the soil, will help fight climate change. Many people's wellbeing will be helped by giving them the chance to connect with Nature in their own way. But I also know that I would not have had the skills, experience, confidence and connections at that tender age to bring Heal into being. My beloved mother is 92 and relatively hale and hearty, and so with luck I have a couple more decades yet.



Jan Stannard is a founder, trustee and acting CEO of the national rewilding charity Heal, which is raising money to buy land in England for Nature recovery, climate change action and wellbeing. She moved into the charity sector after 40 years' experience in business, having served on company boards in the strategic communications and digital marketing sectors. She is a qualified coach and resilience specialist. www.healrewilding.org.uk