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Engaged spirituality for a living Earth

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Wild and Free
Wild Yoga
Cultural Emergence
Re-inventing the Wheel
A Special Place
Mindful Photography
The Thousand Year Project
Who Cares What Colour the Squirrels Are?
Becoming Indigenous to Earth
Love for Nature: Hope through Rewilding

In Search of Wild Wisdom

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The Thousand Year Project

MERLIN HANBURY-TENISON



As a child growing up on an upland hill farm on Bodmin Moor you are frequently told that grass is your future. The rye grass that we associate with Britain's green and pleasant land is a dominant variety that tends not to support much ecosystem diversity and prevents other grasses, flowers or trees from flourishing. It does however provide a stable and reliable food source for the ruminants that humans have domesticated over the last few thousand years.

When my father first began farming our farm, Cabilla, in January 1960, he ran a completely diversified rotational system. We had a dairy herd of sixty five Jersey cows who were brought in every morning to the milking shed. A further forty Black Galloways roamed the hedgerows and scrub and were put out onto the neighbouring moor for their winter forage. These would be herded up every year and their offspring sold at market for beef. We had fifty Devon Longwool sheep who provided us and others with wool and lambs for the freezer and ten white pigs who produced sucklers which were also bound for the butchers. Nearer to the house were kept thirty laying hens who contributed their eggs to this mix and throughout it all my father grew oats, wheat, barley, flat-pole cabbages and turnips.

All of these animals and plants took from the land and gave back to it in their own particular way. The excrement of one species would return a different goodness to the soil

compared to another. At the same time some plants fixed nitrogen in the soil and some used it more voraciously. By rotating the various fauna and flora across our mid-sized farm my father was able to ensure that we could take food from the land without degrading the soil that was left behind.

Cabilla also employed eight people full time, at a time when most households were single earning homes. This meant that eight local families went to eight local shops, drank in eight local pubs and put their children into local schools. The beating heart of our upland communities was sustained by small and medium sized farms which produced food and provided employment.

Alas, throughout the sixties and seventies an obsession with agricultural efficiency and our ever closer shackling to the Common Agricultural Policy resulted in farmers being encouraged and incentivised to move towards mono-culture farming methods that were easier to audit and required less employment. From the sixties to the turn of the new millennium my father began a carousel of various activities as the markets and the regulators pushed farmers in different directions. He became purely a beef farmer before trying his hand variously at sheep farming, goat breeding, exporting red deer and, finally, wild boar farming for the fine meat industry. All of these businesses relied upon healthy amounts of thick rye grass growing across our valley and, if farmers could grow more by taking out hedges or cutting down sections of woodland then they should. The mixed manure and nitrogen fixing crops were gone and year on year the health of the soil decreased.

My wife Lizzie and I took over Cabilla a few years ago. By this stage we had gone from eight full time employees to the occasional bit of part time help and farms like ours had become increasingly dependent on subsidies from Brussels to survive. An NFU report published in 2017 stated that the average upland hill farm on Bodmin Moor and Dartmoor takes between 85-92% of its annual income from these subsidies. Added to this that the average age of an upland hill farmer is 62 and that farming has one of highest suicide rates in the UK and our future on the land looked decidedly uncertain.

I had spent my career before returning to the farm in the military where I served on three tours in Afghanistan as a reconnaissance officer. I was blown up by a roadside bomb

in Helmand Province and had struggled to fully reintegrate into civilian life after leaving the forces. I had then spent a number of years working in London and, during this time, developed complex PTSD.

Lizzie worked in an incredibly fast-paced industry where she helped some of the world's leading brands to develop and market their products. She had felt the effects of the toxic tempo of urban life and work and we had been trying and struggling to start a family for several years.

The farm is loosely split into 100 acres of woodland and 200 acres of grazing grassland. Throughout the years that we had lived in London, Lizzie and I had spent as much time as we could in this woodland, healing and recharging before returning to the cacophonous and difficult life that we were living in the city. The woodland had survived the centuries of farming because it was inaccessible and my father had always loved it more than he loved the idea of clearing more land for grazing animals.

So was our future destined to be grass?

Upon returning to the farm permanently we began to commission studies and research projects within the woodland. Initially we established, with the help of the Ancient Tree Forum, that the woods were at least 1,000 years old. The old Domesday records showed that they hadn't been interfered with and by tracing their history back through the records between then and now we could chart a millennium of uninterrupted growth. The Eden Project then launched a paleo-botanical study involving peat core sampling and were able to establish that the forest had been unchanged for at least 3,664 years (give or take 29 years – they apologised for not being more specific). This forest was an ancient, visceral and spiritual place. What Lizzie and I had always known was now being uncovered by a brilliant group of scientists and researchers.

Along this journey people began using the term 'Atlantic Temperate Rainforest' when they spoke about Cabilla. Like most people I had never known that the UK had rainforests but it became clear that a thousand years ago up to 20% of Britain might have been covered in this stunning habitat. Temperate rainforests are one of the best environments that we have in the UK for sequestering carbon, restoring ecosystems and also improving human mental health and wellbeing. Taking a walk through a rainforest is guaranteed to leave you feeling revitalised, more positive and full of vim and vigour. The forest in our valley was as pristine and large as these remaining vestiges tend to be. This gave us a new mission.

The Thousand Year Project is our pledge to the rainforest. Rather than try and increase the 200 acres of grazing land at Cabilla by cutting back the forest and claiming areas

for marginal hill farming we are converting these 200 acres back into the temperate rainforest that they would undoubtedly have originally been. This doesn't mean an end to farming in the valley. Healthy forests should have large herbivores pushing amongst them, coppicing native trees and fertilising the forest floor. By working with cutting edge technology such as NoFence collars for cattle and mobile solar powered trough systems we can simulate the tightly packed mob grazing patterns that the cattle, ponies and pigs would have demonstrated in a pre-historic landscape.

In the last month we have planted three and a half thousand trees, only the tip of the iceberg of the one hundred thousand we will plant over the next two years, but a start. These are predominantly Celtic oaks (*quercus petraea*) and this creature gives our project its name. The Celtic oak is a thousand year creature. It takes 300 years to grow, stands for 400 years and can take up to a further 300 years to die, fall and rot. This full lifecycle of the oak is needed for the full cycle of a truly healthy temperate rainforest with all of its chaotically layered diversity and vitality. We have a responsibility to plant trees today that will form part of a robust functioning rainforest in one thousand years.

Suddenly in 2023 temperate rainforests are being spoken about in the news and businesses are even pledging money towards their restoration. This has coincided with the launch of our charity, The Thousand Year Trust. It was never going to be enough for Lizzie and me to only restore the rainforest in the Cabilla valley. The need is so much greater. The charity's mission is to triple the amount of temperate rainforest growing across the whole of the United Kingdom. Guy Shrubsole, one of the UK's absolute experts on this habitat and author of *The Lost Rainforests of Britain*, has calculated that there are 330,000 acres of rainforest left in the UK. Join us on our mission to raise that number to a million acres. The adventure begins!



The website for the Thousand Year Trust is: www.thousandyeartrust.org. Also, Cabilla runs various activities for individuals and groups, such as retreats and tree-planting weekends. You can read more detail about those at: www.cabillacornwall.com