

# Rewilding Australia and the World

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Australia has a diverse ecosystem of flora and fauna, which is unique in the world. Nowhere else will you find keystone species which include potoroos, bettongs, bandicoots, koalas, platypus and Tasmanian devils. But Australia also has the unenviable title of the country with the highest mammal extinction rate in the world. Between 7-10% of all species on Earth occur in Australia, yet as high as 10% of globally recorded extinctions are here. To halt this alarming statistic, we need to not only prevent further extinction but also restore what we have lost. This is where the concept of Rewilding originates. Rewilding is a form of ecological restoration. The aim is to recreate an area's 'natural uncultivated state'. The World Wildlife Fund-Australia sits rewilding under three headings. Rebuild. Restore. Rebalance.

## Rewilding the world

Rewilding, an exotic name, conjures up images of savage beasts being introduced into our rural environment. Many will have read about the return of wolves to Yellowstone National Park. But this venture is a fraction of the purpose of rewilding. To quote the words of David Attenborough from, *The Global Alliance of Rewilding*, "To restore stability to our planet, we must restore its biodiversity, the very thing that we've removed. It's the only way out of this crisis we've created - we must rewild the world."

The Global Rewilding Alliance works in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, North America and Australia. They plan to rewild more than 100 million hectares of land and sea in more than 70 countries. This daunting task commenced in 2020 and already has had many successes.

For examples we first go to **Sweden**, where Rewilding Sweden is restoring and securing free flowing rivers to support the migration and breeding of salmon, trout and other species. They are creating 'blue-green' corridors to connect the mountains to the sea.

In **India** an ambitious project was commenced in 2016 to restore forests across Assam's 'Elephant Country' for reconciling human and biodiversity needs. Through 'Rural Features', communities act as the primary stewards of habitat restoration and management.

In north eastern **Zambia**, Tondwa Game Management Area is a vast rich ecosystem of 134,000 acres. It holds a pivotal place between National Parks and GMAs. Its protection and management will ensure a contiguous conservation landscape and wildlife corridor.

Heartland, Rewilding's mission in the **USA**, is to reconnect and rewild the Mississippi River Watershed. Once one of the wildest and most biologically diverse regions in North America, it is now almost entirely crops and human development. Their aim is to promote compassionate and respectful coexistence through advocacy and education.

Beijing was once considered home to the **North China** Leopard. The Taihang Mountains and the Yanshan Mountains are a continuous and complete habitat for the North China leopards. In the past that was their territory of 10,000 square kilometres. This area is gradually becoming islands due to highways, villages and farmland. The rewilding aim is to bring the leopard back to its home of Beijing by repairing corridors, awakening people's enthusiasm for the wilderness and bringing the mountains back to life.

In **Southern Scotland** the Borders Forest Trust planted trees in a 1,600 acre valley in the Moffat Hills. Their aim to 'Revive the Wild Heart of Southern Scotland' has seen the establishment of a rich, diverse, wooded landscape of native species. Returning the land to what would have existed there, thousands of years ago.

For the endangered orangutans, 172 bird species, 65 mammal species and 57 reptile, and amphibian species the Sebangau National Park is home. This is the largest, lowland rainforest remaining in **Borneo**. Borneo Nature Foundation is replanting vast areas of burnt and degraded forests with seedlings grown in community nurseries. This initiative provides income and also encourages leadership by local women.

### **Key Rewilding Themes**

The examples above illustrate the complexities and diversities of the Rewilding concept. At a rewilding forum held in Sydney in 2016, six key themes were identified from the audience of academics, government and non government agencies.

1. *Rewilding is a focus on ecosystem processes and function rather than a single species or suite of species*
2. *Rewilding should incorporate people, including consideration of economic gain for communities via rewilding projects*
3. *Rewilding is applicable at multiple scales and in both rural and urban settings*
4. *Rewilding in Australia requires a shared vision in order to progress and meet its potential*
5. *Rewilding efforts should include a research component in order to demonstrate proof of concept and positive ecological change*
6. *Rewilding efforts will require policy changes from government*

### **Rewilding Australia**

Here In our home Australia, the Rewilding initiative comes from several organisations working in rural, regional and city locations. **World Wildlife Fund-Australia** has Rewilding as their newest plan of action. **Aussie Ark**, believing biodiversity is the interconnecting web of life, they plan to reintroduce plant or animal species, especially a keystone species or apex predator, into a habitat where it has disappeared. **National Parks Association of NSW** aims to build on its citizen science programs with a project led by the University of Sydney called 'nature-based solutions for growing cities: rewilding policies and practice'. The project's focus is bandicoots in Sydney's inner west; powerful owl movements throughout Sydney and bringing native pollinators back to urban green space.

### **Success**

A lot of talk? Perhaps you're wondering if there's been any action and success, **WWF-Australia** with partners has reintroduced the rare bush-tailed bettong to mainland south Australia. This marsupial had been locally extinct for more than a century. With dedicated partners they are restoring platypus populations in Sydney's Royal National Park. Through a trial program, the eastern quoll was reintroduced to mainland Australia for the first time. The population will be bolstered by an eastern quoll insurance breeding program and population supplementation program in Tasmania.

Close to Gloucester **Aussie Ark** aims to establish a self-sustaining population of 7 native species back to roam in the Barrington Tops. They now boast the largest mainland population of Eastern Quolls. Many of those quolls have been relocated to Booderee National Park in Jervis Bay, south coast NSW.

### **Unique Australia**

Projects that are successful elsewhere in the world might not be as successful here. Australia is different. **Australian Wildlife Conservancy** and **Arid Recovery** have utilised fenced enclosures in remote areas to exclude foxes and cats from destroying the recovery of small native mammals. These programs should not comfortably fit within the rewilding tactics, because they don't create self-sustaining ecosystems, but they have successfully allowed native species to flourish. AWC deliver and influence effective conservation across more than 12.9 million hectares in regions including the Kimberley, Cape York, Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre and the Top End.

**Bush Heritage Australia** is another unique organisation which doesn't necessarily fit within rewilding but they successfully manage 11.3 million hectares across Australia. They follow five agreed values of,

conservation, collaboration, community, culture and safety. Like many of the organisations mentioned, they work closely with First Nation groups to ensure they maintain access and a connection to country. Aboriginal insight, cultural perspective and collaboration is so important to rewilding.

## **Gloucester**

In our Mid North Coast area, the Gloucester Environment Group is busy achieving its own rewilding program. We call it 'KoalaWays'. The revegetation of land in the Gloucester area doesn't fall under the heading of Rewilding but perhaps it should. For several years Gloucester Environment Group (GEG) has taken on the task of revegetating land on private properties in the local Gloucester area. The planting is to preserve and increase the number of trees, both large and small, for our endangered species, the koala. Being an umbrella species, the increase in koala habitat will advantage all species in that environment.

## **What you can do**

You can be forgiven for thinking that rewilding is too big a concept for you. However, this is not the case.

## **How to rewild your property (large or small)**

Plant native grasses, shrubs and trees

Reduce dependency on fertilisers and pesticides

Choose insect friendly plants

Compost where possible

Declare a section of your property 'wild' (you'll save all that mowing)

Introduce rockeries or hollow logs for lizards and frogs

If a large property, create a wildlife corridor

Go for it. Be part of the worldwide rewilding family.