

Transcript

00:00:10:11 - 00:00:35:08

James Shooter

It's mid-May and my absolute favourite time of year. Hawthorn blossom has erupted en masse, wildflowers of every colour, carpet the floor and the freshly unfurled leaves of spring adorn the trees with the most vibrant greens of the year. This is the season to set your alarms annoyingly early and drag yourself outside to enjoy the symphony or the dawn chorus at its most spectacular crescendo.

00:00:35:10 - 00:00:44:02

James Shooter

Just listen to it. A 5am reward.

00:00:44:04 - 00:01:13:05

James Shooter

So where am I? Well, while she might have pictured me in a lavish woodland wilderness far from humans, I'm actually in a strip of trees just 30 metres wide with highways to the north and west of me and Brussels Charlerois airport 5 minutes to the south. This is life, singing out defiantly from one tiny fragment of habitat. It's both sad and inspiring because for all its losses, nature is resilient.

00:01:13:07 - 00:01:45:22

James Shooter

It clings on, it fights back. I'm in one of the continent's most densely populated nations to see if rewilding still works at a smaller scale, alongside all the challenges humans bring to the equation. Today I head north to the swamp forests of Flanders, where thousands of hectares of fragmented land are being restored, revitalised and reconnected. Although after that rather early start, I first need to find a coffee, pronto.

00:01:45:24 - 00:02:30:15

James Shooter

I'm James Shooter, host of the Rewild podcast. And this is Grote Netewoud. So is it Ascension Day today or tomorrow? Yesterday? Ah, so neither of what I suggested!

00:02:30:15 - 00:02:36:03

Manu Büscher

People have a holiday and they also take Friday.

00:02:36:05 - 00:02:36:17

James Shooter

Right, I see.

00:02:36:23 - 00:02:39:21

James Shooter

So a lot of people are coming for the day here after?

00:02:40:01 - 00:02:44:07

Marc Verachert

Yeah, here you go.

00:02:44:10 - 00:03:07:15

James Shooter

Thank you so much. You get a waffle with it as well? Yes, it's okay. I'm in a renovated 17th century watermill now acting as the Visitor Centre for Grote Netewoud. I found a coffee courtesy of my guide for the day, Manu Büscher, and the pain of the early alarm begins to fade. Manu's lending me a pair of wellies.

00:03:07:17 - 00:03:18:16

James Shooter

And we're heading out with two of his colleagues to explore the squelchy, squishy ecosystem surrounding us.

00:03:18:18 - 00:03:23:00

Manu Büscher

And the goal here is alluvial forests, and as you can see.

00:03:23:02 - 00:03:23:10

James Shooter

Full of.

00:03:23:11 - 00:03:23:24

Manu Büscher

Full of willows.

00:03:23:24 - 00:03:24:22

James Shooter

Alder coming.

00:03:24:22 - 00:03:25:21

Manu Büscher

Alder coming.

00:03:25:24 - 00:03:28:08

Marc Verachert

This one, this and then, you know.

00:03:28:10 - 00:03:30:24

James Shooter

And this is all just naturally coming up? This is just from the seed bank?

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Manu Büscher

Yeah and flying in.

00:03:32:17 - 00:03:34:08

Marc Verachert

Yeah flying.

00:03:34:08 - 00:03:35:21

Manu Büscher

Seeds are just coming in.

00:03:35:23 - 00:03:36:20

Marc Verachert

And so its...

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Manu Büscher

The willows that are there and the alders.

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James Shooter

Yeah.

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Manu Büscher

But we have a lot of alders there.

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James Shooter

Everywhere we look, young, alder and willow are tentatively poking above the grasses and reeds. A future forest of water loving trees destined to be knee deep in H2O for much of the year. Beautiful and banded demoiselles dance beneath larger oak trees and orange-tip butterflies hurry along above the wet meadows attracted to the cuckoo flowers that grow here, on which they lay their eggs.

00:04:06:03 - 00:04:10:15

James Shooter

We pause in a woodland glade so I can learn more about the work being done here.

00:04:10:17 - 00:04:54:00

Manu Büscher

Natuurpunt is a nature conservation organisation, the biggest one in Belgium. And we preserve nature, we restore nature, and it's basically a volunteer organisation. So the basis of the organization are our local volunteers. They take the initiative and have been doing that for decades already, first in buying parcels that were really valuable for, or had valuable nature, trying to save them from damage and trying to make them bigger by buying more and more parcels.

00:04:54:00 - 00:05:13:16

Manu Büscher

Even though Flanders is very fragmented and we can only dream of vast nature areas, it's still a very important task that we have to preserve nature here and be a step stone in the entire European nature context.

00:05:13:18 - 00:05:35:23

James Shooter

Grote Netewoud is a river valley in the eastern part of the Antwerp province. Now, when I say valley, I don't think V-shaped or even a U-shaped landscape for that matter. The land here is so flat you'd be forgiven for thinking there was no gradient at all. The very wet ground gives rise to a special kind of woodland where water tolerance is high.

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James Shooter

The willows are often first on the scene, a pioneer species whose seed blows in from surrounding areas. The alders that will soon dominate play an important role in the ecosystem, as their symbiotic relationship with nitrogen fixing bacteria builds fertility in the soil. Where long standing fragments remain, the ground vegetation is rich. Yellow iris, water trileaf and marsh marigold all splash colour on the forest floor.

00:06:02:20 - 00:06:24:01

James Shooter

The leaves, which fall to the waterlogged ground, aren't able to break down due to the lack of oxygen in the standing water. These are perfect conditions for the formation of peat, meaning an intact ecosystem has the potential to be a huge carbon sink both in the trees and the soils. But there's very little mature alluvial forests left here.

00:06:24:03 - 00:06:50:11

Manu Büscher

People have been doing a lot of things to get rid of the water to make it suitable for agriculture. So for a very, very long time, the main idea was to get rid of water as soon as possible, draining stuff and a lot of engineers have been working on that. And that's also the reason why agriculture was possible even in the valleys.

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Manu Büscher

But of course in a very extensive way and after World War Two, with the intensification of agriculture, it moved upwards also and valleys were partly abandoned.

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James Shooter

Historic engineering of these lands has had some success for agriculture. Drains have been cut, rivers have been dredged, all with the aim of moving water away faster. But the natural environment has suffered, as has its ability to mitigate the effects of climate change. In heavy rainfall, the water is no longer stored, it's just moved downstream, causing issues elsewhere.

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James Shooter

In the past five years, three of those have suffered periods of drought in this part of Belgium, where the lack of stored water then becomes a serious issue for farming. And if the peat dries out too, it loses its ability to store carbon. Over the last ten years, the local government and National Environment Agency have started to realise the management of the past is no longer tenable.

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James Shooter

They've started to rewiggle previously straightened river channels, halted dredging to allow sediment to build once more, and added decaying wood to the tributaries. This increases space for water storage, adds complex structure to the river system and allows a variety of niches to form improving habitats for fish, plants and invertebrates.

00:08:12:00 - 00:08:52:05

Manu Büscher

Then also the weekend ponds. It was fashionable in the 60s, 70s of last century to buy wet meadows in the river valleys. They became too wet for intensive agriculture, they were sold to mostly citizens who were digging in a pond there, putting the soil in a sort of a dike around the pond, so it was drier and then put a chalet or a caravan there to stay during the weekend and plant some trees and make it their own paradise.

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Manu Büscher

But of course, this there are hundreds of them throughout the valley and also are they have a huge impact on the ongoing hydrological situation as rivers cannot flood anymore. So the main problem was that the connection between the watercourse is in the valley itself. The land habitats was lost.

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Marc Verachert

And it's not only the sand, I mean they used everything to, to build these things and it's...

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James Shooter

Okay so rubble?

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Manu Büscher

Yeah full of rubble.

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James Shooter

And you said asbestos was....

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Manu Büscher

Yeah also it was used a lot to prevent leakage of the ponds. They put asbestos walls around and.

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James Shooter

Starting to understand why it's an issue!

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Manu Büscher

Yeah.

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James Shooter

The main restoration effort here is reversing the changes people have forced upon the land. Filling up the ponds and removing the embankments to restore the topography of the valley. In a landscape where the valley sides can be just four metres higher than the valley bottom, every centimetre matters for the natural flow of water. It's an intensive process, but once completed, there's a good opportunity for succession back to alluvial forest.

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James Shooter

And how fast you seeing it? I mean, I can see saplings popping up everywhere. Is it a quickly returning habitat?

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Manu Büscher

Yeah, definitely. Yes. Even after well, we we've done works last year, the end of last year and if you come to the spots sometimes it's already full of alder and willow saplings and other plants that immediately colonised the spots. So the first pioneering stage of is very promising.

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James Shooter

As we walk along the raised boardwalks, the orange waters of the Grote Nete river stained by the iron rich substrate, slices its way through woodland. In damp pasture, the delicate pink flowers of ragged robin sway in the breeze, and the drumming of great and middle spotted woodpeckers ring out from decaying poles of standing deadwood. We pause in front of a particularly impressive section of marshy woodland to admire the view.

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James Shooter

One man who's seen a lot of change in this landscape is Michel van Buggenhout, a long term volunteer for Natuurpunt who previously worked on neighbouring land for 40 years.

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Michel van Buggenhout

I saw a lot of changing in nature, I saw a lot of going worse mostly, but also saw a lot of going better. In this area we have a little river here, the Molse Nete and since 30 years, its going better. And this is exceptional. But yes, it's okay. You like you can see you're stand here, you see marshes and the river with mixed turns and a lot of trees growing everywhere.

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Michel van Buggenhout

But before it was farmland and it wasn't even the best farmland because I'm talking now a hundred year back. We live here in a part of Belgium where the soil is fairly poor. There's no hummus in it. It's very sandy. And it is hard for a farmers to grow some crops on it. But here where the river is streaming for hundreds of thousands of years in the winter flood.

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Michel van Buggenhout

It leaves some little layer of better sediment. Yeah, sediment, Yes. Right. So for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years it's growing up. The sediment makes it much more hummus in the soil. Only problem was its wet. But before there were no tractors. No, that's no problem. Everything was handwork. But then after the 1900s and even more, after the Second World War tractors were growing bigger and bigger.

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Michel van Buggenhout

And it does. And it's not going difficult for the farmers to get the land to manage the land here, because the very big tractors, you know, they get stuck. Its just too wet. I said, okay, we have an opportunity here we go buying land there, so they bought a lot of land here and now it is in. The result is a very nice nature area whereby nature is increasing.

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Michel van Buggenhout

A lot of birds and animals came here. We never saw here. It's going a good way. Every acre I've bought makes me happy.

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James Shooter

I like it. A big part of Michel's voluntary job is acquiring land on behalf of Natuurpunt, to grow Grote Netewoud's impact. He once did this in his professional career and he now just does it for free. Land ownership in this area is on a small scale, which makes this a relentless task. The best analogy I can come up with for this is if you think of the Grote Netewoud's rewilding area as a thousand piece jigsaw, when you have all the pieces, it's great.

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James Shooter

You can create one large picture, but here the individual pieces are all owned by someone different, sometimes by two or three people, who can never agree on whether to give you that piece or not. Each small segment takes negotiation, time, effort and money. It's excruciating. And when you finally acquire some of those pieces, many have dilapidated buildings on them, lots of invasive plants to remove and asbestos leaking into the water.

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James Shooter

These tiny plots of land require attention before they can be added back into the bigger picture, more time, effort and money. It's a piecemeal approach, but needs must. The jigsaw will be spectacular once created. A return to a naturally functioning ecosystem in all its swampy, gloriousness. And what do you get out of volunteering here? Why? Why do you keep on coming back?

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Michel van Buggenhout

For me personally, because again, given several scientific reasons why I would support nature, because climate change and all the things you know, but I was also a nature lover from as I was a child. So for me, it's a feeling I think. Nature for me, is very important and I'm very sad to see destroying nature and things like that.

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Michel van Buggenhout

So I think is important. You can do your role and you do something for it.

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James Shooter

So you feel a personal responsibility to get involved?

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Michel van Buggenhout

Yeah. Too much. Yeah. I will not live long enough, but I'm very curious what you would see here 50 years and when nature's has gone its way all this time. It would be very interesting.

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James Shooter

What would you hope to see in 50 years time if you could look into the future?

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Michel van Buggenhout

We were surprised by some nice evolutions like the beaver for example. I think three miles from here there are wolves. All ready for the second or third year pups. Sometimes they come here hunting at night. Sometimes we, ten years ago we would never have believed this.

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James Shooter

We continue on our walking tour as Michel and Manu want to show me the area where beaver have taken residence.

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Michel van Buggenhout

I like with the camera, I like it. You can see the family history, you can see the first young come out and lots of fightings and things like that.

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James Shooter

Yeah.

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Michel van Buggenhout

You can see the young first come out and if they are some months older, they want to help with taking some branch to the river, but they don't tell help, they are swimming in the way and things like that.

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James Shooter

They're such great insights, aren't they, camera traps?

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Manu Büscher

Yeah they were introduced earlier in the in the Campine region that's quite far from here. And since then they have been spreading automatically throughout the Campine region and they reached Grote Netewoud about about five or six years ago and they've been doing very well here and they're spreading within the area as well. What they can do much more easy than we, well we tried to do it manually earlier, to stop drainage ditches to fill them or to dam them.

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Manu Büscher

But they do it in a much more efficient way.

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James Shooter

Hold onto your hats, because I'm about to go into a 90 second beaver fanboy monologue. Their ecosystem engineering is life-giving, carbon-storing, wetland-creating, water-filtering, flood-preventing, drought-alleviating, pure unadulterated beaver brilliance. And I can't think of a species we need to bring back thicker and faster to their former ranges. As a keystone species, they engineer their immediate surroundings into a series of rich wetlands.

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James Shooter

Now this is no act of heroism. They are completely selfish animals with only themselves to look out for. They dam small streams in order to raise the water table around them. They can then swim safely between foraging sites or into their lodge, cutting down the period of vulnerability whilst on land. These dams are made from sticks, stones, plant matter and mud which trap sediment and pollutants from traveling further downstream.

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James Shooter

The same structures store carbon and even become a mini ecosystem of their own as they often become vegetated with age. Camera traps in Canada have captured deer, wolves, lynx and even bears using beaver dams to cross watercourses. The mini wetlands creates habitat for a wealth of life, and the extra water storage holds back flows in times of high rainfall, reducing the effects of flooding downstream.

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James Shooter

In times of drought, the stored water becomes an oasis for the struggling surrounding land, and it's even been shown to stop wildfire in its tracks. For trees that have co-evolved alongside beavers, they coppice when felled, bringing new structure to the forest. For the trees that don't make it, a ready supply of deadwood is created. Those which fall into the watercourse provide shade and cover for small fish, and those that stay standing provide nest cavities for all manner of birds.

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James Shooter

I am a beaver believer and you should be too. Now, this is not to say there aren't challenges to face up to. For those living alongside these industrious rodents, flooded farmers fields, the burrowing of riverbanks and the felling of prized trees can all put them into conflict with people. But for me, many of the negative effects can usually be mitigated and the wider benefits massively outweigh localised issues. As Grote Netewoud gets wilder,

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James Shooter

beavers aren't the only interesting species making a comeback.

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Manu Büscher

Burbot is a freshwater fish from the Cod family. And it's a top predator and it's become extinct in Flanders in the seventies because of pollution of the rivers, but also loss of their spawning grounds. They rely on shallow places and also flooded haylands for spawning. So these all disappeared by the draining infrastructure. And in 2000, no in 1999, Flemish government decided to start up a reintroduction program.

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Manu Büscher

And the Research Institute for Nature and Forestry in the Agency of Nature and Forestry they tried and they succeeded in breeding these species in captivity. And from 2005, they released young burbot into the Grote Nete river in several places and they did this, well years and years, and meanwhile they were monitoring by re catching fish if they were able to grow up in the system and also after a couple of years if they found really adult fish, if the bred in the river system again and they found natural reproduction.

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Manu Büscher

So which is a success story here.

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James Shooter

Bluethroat, an attractive robin like bird, not surprisingly with a bright blue throat, is a target species here. They already nest in small numbers amongst the willows, and the increase in mosaics of wetland forest and marshy glades will continue to benefit them. But the bird Manu and the team really want to see breeding here is the black stork. Small numbers already call in on migration, but have yet to breed here in recent history.

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James Shooter

It would be a fantastic indicator that extensive alluvial forests have returned and are in good health. These impressive birds are much warier than the closely related white storks that you might see nesting on chimney tops in rural towns and villages. They need extensive areas of wet woodland free from human disturbance. If Grote Netewoud truly gets its natural ecosystems back at scale, the tangle of willow and blocks of alder growing in swampy ground acts as a natural barrier for all but the most adventurous human. Perfect conditions for the black stork to take up residence once again.

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James Shooter

So it's an exciting time to be working at Natuurpunt, with a real sense of change in the air for the fate of Belgium's natural wildlife. With so many volunteers giving up their free time here, I'm intrigued as to why Michel thinks they might get so much support.

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Michel van Buggenhout

Well there are other nature organisations that are okay, but Natuurpunt is the biggest one. They spend a lot of their time and money for buying land to make nature area. They try to have some influence on the government to make their lives better, to follow better European rules. As in Belgium, being in the European community is a very good thing for nature protection.

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Michel van Buggenhout

And because Belgium was not the best country in Europe for nature protection. So they are forced now by the European Community, very glad to that.

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James Shooter

EU legislation has played an integral part in bringing Member States up to speed on biodiversity objectives. This has been especially important when national governments might not have prioritised environmental issues, but the EU strategy so far has been focused on protection rather than restoration. In just this past week, on the 20th of June, the Council of the EU have reached agreement on a general approach for the nature restoration law.

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James Shooter

It's certainly not a done deal yet, but this proposal would set legally binding targets with the aim of recovery measures covering at least 20% of the EU's land and 20% of marine areas by 2030, and all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. Of course, more could always be done, but the change from protection to restoration will be a welcome transition in EU legislation.

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Michel van Buggenhout

Every year more and more people are member of nature organisations. But in Belgium, nature protection is generally not very popular. Most people are not interested because we have a very bad spatial organisation. So a lot of people in Belgium lives in the countryside and they have some garden and outhouses and some green fields, can be farmland, but its green fields in the neighbourhoods.

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Michel van Buggenhout

So they're not really interested in nature. There are other countries who would do it better in that way. So it means also for us hard work to get the bigger rivers. But is going better because more people are walking out here and saying, Oh well, that's nice. We will come back.

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James Shooter

So that's it, right? That's the key challenge is getting people into this landscape so they can see what's possible.

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Michel van Buggenhout

A big challenge and a very important challenge. Yes.

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James Shooter

Yeah. I think for me it's always so different experiencing it for yourself. You know, you can look at pictures, you can read about it, but coming and seeing the butterflies flitting about and seeing the wind through the trees, that's different. It's hitting people emotionally, maybe.

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Michel van Buggenhout

Yeah, yeah.

00:25:39:13 - 00:26:02:11

James Shooter

Rewilders like to talk about ecotourism a lot, and that's an important aspect of rewilding economics. But getting locals to discover what's on their doorstep is absolutely essential. Normalising nature as part of the everyday routine will only make it harder for others to take it away. It also makes communities think about their green spaces in a different way.

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James Shooter

Are they truly wild? Can there be more? How can I help? Marc Verachert is a chairman for a regional Natuurpunt group. He and an army of local volunteers work hard on encouraging people into the Grote Netewoud. It's an amazing place to discover, unwind, de-stress, exercise and play. Why do people visit here? Why do people come here from the surrounding urban areas?

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James Shooter

What's what's in it for them?

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Marc Verachert

So it's so nice, so green, so, so quiet. So yeah, that's what they want to see. They, they want to hear the birds singing and yeah, that is definitely attractive for them.

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James Shooter

I've seen lots and lots of families at the visitor centre as well. It's an important place for families to go?

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Marc Verachert

Yeah, yeah, definitely. So we invest in that and our visitor centre has as a walk for kids and, and it's an attractive walk, I mean where they can Yeah. Go through the wall there and, and so really feel the nature and that's very important to that we bring these kids in the nature again that they can feel the nature.

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Marc Verachert
Yeah.

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James Shooter

And do they seem to like it you know? It's hard to get kids outside these days?

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Marc Verachert

No they really like it. And, and as long as they can be very inventive in finding new walks and go through the nature where it in fact should not be done, but it's attractive for them, I mean, yeah, it's a challenge and that's what they look for.

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James Shooter

Kids being kids.

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Marc Verachert

Yes, of course.

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James Shooter

Down at the visitor centre where I began my day, there was a fantastic natural playground bordering a small section of a nature reserve. Kids were splashing and splashing, getting caked in mud. It may seem trivial, but this is a vitally important part of de-sanitizing society. When was the last time you poked a puffball, or said hello to a harvestman, plopped in a puddle or tumbled out of a tree?

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James Shooter

Look to our children. They're experts in it. My three year old burst out laughing in the garden recently, so I went out to see what all the commotion was about. He was lying flat to the floor, watching a large garden snail slide along the lawn. I got down with him and started to laugh as well. Have you ever looked closely at a snail?

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James Shooter

They are absolutely bonkers. There's an infinite amount of wonder to discover and rediscover. So let's all dig out our inner child and get looking. Natuurpunt has a course for kids where they learn a walk and some of the interesting facts about nature. And then they retrace their footsteps with their parents and act as the guide. I think this is such a lovely way to nurture those nature connections.

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Marc Verachert

The most attractive, attractive walk in the province of Antwerp last year was the one that we built from the visitor centre through the nature in the in the neighbourhood. So, yeah, this is this is important. And of course, sometimes they should during their walk should have a place for a drink or yeah, that's also attractive to them, but that's okay.

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Marc Verachert

We try to build that also in the walk so that they can also have a rest here and there and okay.

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James Shooter

So combining the world of comfort and nature.

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Marc Verachert

Yes, of course.

00:29:43:15 - 00:30:07:16

James Shooter

Of course. I had my coffee at the visitor centre this morning. That was vitally important to me. Natuurpunt nature reserves are generally free to access even for non-members. I always feel a little perplexed at charging people to visit nature. The fee turns it into an attraction. Something to do on a Sunday for those with disposable income rather than something that definitely should be integrated into all of our daily lives.

00:30:07:18 - 00:30:26:08

James Shooter

The visitor centre at Meerhout provides a great starting point for journeying into the Grote Netewoud. Perhaps it is the good coffee that draws people in. But once there its a springboard into Wild Flanders. Visitors might first jump in with armbands, a rubber ring and a swimming hat on. But if they're tempted to return and dip their

00:30:26:08 - 00:30:39:24

James Shooter

toe in once more. We'll soon see them take a dive and a deeper connection with the landscape will develop. And do you find people are surprised to see these rich habitats here when perhaps a lot of the surrounding land has been modified?

00:30:40:01 - 00:31:06:02

Marc Verachert

Yeah, yeah, yeah, definitely. They are always surprised when they come here. Sometimes people from cities like Brussels and Antwerp or Ghent, they come here and say, Whoa, here, there's still some nature in the Campine. So yes, there is still some nature and we fought for that over the last 40, 50 years. And and yes, we have again, nice places to walk.

00:31:06:02 - 00:31:15:08

Marc Verachert

And we lost it over some decades, but now the nature is back and people come over again.

00:31:15:10 - 00:31:48:22

James Shooter

Natuurpunt aren't an organisation to sit back and wait for people to stumble upon the natural environment. They put on a huge amount of events, walks and courses for the general public to immerse them in these intriguing pockets of wilderness. A number of volunteers were setting up for a diving beetle identification course when I arrived first thing this morning. Over the summer months, you can watch a film in the forest, join a butterfly and grasshopper walk, detect bats at night, litter pick a nature reserve and join a workshop on mammals to name but a few of their courses.

00:31:48:24 - 00:32:12:18

James Shooter

The mantra here is the more people learn, the more they respect, the more they discuss with others. It's unleashing a ripple effect and empowering people to spread the word. You won't protect what you don't care about and you won't restore what you didn't know was there. And the thing is, you never know who you might inspire into action.

00:32:12:18 - 00:32:42:18

Marc Verachert

I fact I started here in Meerhout about 40 years ago, a little bit more even. And just by following a course, I started to follow the course with a few friends, it was the end of my study period. And so I was looking for something different. And I had been a Boy Scout earlier. And, and during that period of Boy Scout I think I was 14 or so.

00:32:42:18 - 00:32:59:16

Marc Verachert

I also visited a nature reserve in Flanders here with a guide, and he was so impressive that I really felt nature in my heart.

00:32:59:18 - 00:33:11:10

James Shooter

Fantastic. It sounds like that one nature guide 40 years ago had an incredible connection for you and then that's led on to a 40 year career here. That's amazing. The power of people.

00:33:11:12 - 00:33:13:00

Marc Verachert

Yeah. Yeah.

00:33:13:02 - 00:33:18:10

James Shooter

So what kind of volunteering opportunities are there to get involved in? What can people do here?

00:33:18:12 - 00:33:54:04

Marc Verachert

Oh, they can, as I said, a lot of them are helping in working in the nature. I mean, keeping some roads open for people to walk, planting trees sometimes, not necessary here, but but yes, other places you have to do it. I do. They do a lot. I mean, this is definitely one of the most important tasks, but others are, let's say, working in the visitor centre.

00:33:54:04 - 00:34:18:21

Marc Verachert

So it's completely driven by volunteers. I mean, this is a success really. And, and but also while other things, monitoring, so the birds, the butterflies. We have specialists in and doing that. I mean, it's important to know what grows and what flies and what lives here.

00:34:18:21 - 00:34:48:12

James Shooter

Marc and the Natuurpunt team have been interested trying to get National Park status for this area. But the amount of human infrastructure crisscrossing the region makes it a difficult sell, so they now refer to it as a nature park instead. Roads, of course, have their own effects. The canals further restrict matters. The Albert Canal, a 20th century construction connecting industrial zones in the east with the harbour of Antwerp in the west, transports around 40 million tonnes of goods a year on huge container ships.

00:34:48:12 - 00:34:58:00

James Shooter

Not only does it draw huge amounts of water from a rain-fed river basin in France, it acts as an impassable barrier for some wildlife.

00:34:58:02 - 00:35:19:22

Marc Verachert

I mean, if we want to have otter back, we have to put somewhere an aqueduct. So now, now, a few weeks ago we got the support from the government. It will come there. I mean, if you push and keep pushing, it will change. I mean, now they see Yes, yes, we really have to do something.

00:35:19:24 - 00:36:18:21

Marc Verachert

And and the next step is here three kilometers further down, which you have another canal. And behind there is another reserve. So over there. So our next step will be we push the government also to put aqueduct there. I mean, if you want to have really connected nature, you have to do that. You got some subsidies from Europe and Flanders, of course, but but also a lot of of industry which sometimes can benefit directly from people visiting the nature of the area, but also because of some

compensation that they want to give, because maybe they have some impact on the nature and with their production or or transport or whatever.

00:36:18:23 - 00:36:47:04

Marc Verachert

And then okay, they want to compensate that in one way or the other by investing in that nature. So this is things that happened already here in our area and and we have a lot of big industry next to the canals, canals and, and most of these factories have already invested and subsidised us. Yes, that's good. So that's is.

00:36:47:06 - 00:36:51:24

James Shooter

Is that them recognising that they need to do that or is that something they're being pushed towards?

00:36:52:01 - 00:36:59:04

Marc Verachert

Originally they were asked and they did it, and now they are spontaneously coming to us. So this is a nice evolution.

00:36:59:09 - 00:36:59:20

James Shooter

Really good.

00:36:59:22 - 00:37:13:18

Marc Verachert

Because they see that, okay, climate problems and nature problems, we all have to work together to solve it. And okay, so they want to put some investments into the nature. So it's nice evolution.

00:37:13:20 - 00:37:23:06

James Shooter

For those relying on canals. You know, you need stable climate. Stable, Yes. For for water levels and everything. So that really do need to invest in nature.

00:37:23:07 - 00:37:27:19

Marc Verachert

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Over the last years they have seen it. It will be needed.

00:37:27:21 - 00:37:53:11

James Shooter

I think we're slowly starting to realise that we can't keep pitching economy over ecology. Big businesses the world over require a healthy, functioning planet to avoid huge disruption to global economics. It's promising that the industries alongside the Albert Canal are recognising that and paying their dues. But to address my question right at the start of the episode, can rewilding work at a smaller scale?

00:37:53:13 - 00:38:16:03

James Shooter

Well, there's certainly a lot of potential here. Areas that were once farmland a few decades ago have reverted back to rich woodlands full of life. It had always been a constant battle, trying to keep water at bay and a tough way to make a living. When water is allowed to return, it's amazing how quickly the native ecosystems recover.

00:38:16:05 - 00:38:39:10

James Shooter

The ongoing issue here will always be human infrastructure. It's one thing pulling down dilapidated cabins and filling in weekend ponds, but another to stop housing developments in their tracks or control the number of roads criss crossing the region. And it's these that squeeze the natural environment in the middle, restricting it from being able to dynamically move or spread beyond core areas.

00:38:39:12 - 00:39:02:08

James Shooter

With the amount of people living here, Belgium will never be 100% wilderness from border to border. But all countries need to play their part in the rewilding movement because what's the alternative? It's great to see how much is returning here and in a way it's possibly more inspiring to see it happening in such a densely populated country. What Natuurpunt are doing really well

00:39:02:08 - 00:39:42:05

James Shooter

here is finding the balance between encouraging people to visit and leaving space for wildlife to return. The infrastructure of boardwalks, cycle paths and play areas provide a freely accessible nature experience whilst leaving the majority undisturbed. People are reengaging with wild on their doorstep, and that's surely got to be one of the most important challenges to overcome. After all, if we're to rewild the world, we first must rewild ourselves.

(Outro)

Thanks as always for joining me for episode six of The Rewild Podcast. Hopefully a demonstration that all nations have a role to play in returning life to our landscapes. Next month we'll be taking a wee break and returning in August instead. I'm not going on holiday. Our van which we were traveling around the continent in broke down on a French highway and is slowly being towed back to the UK.

It's only the engine though, so I hear that's not an important part. But we shall return come rain or shine. And whilst I'm back on home turf, I'll be taking the opportunity to visit Knepp Estate in Sussex, a pioneering example of what much of the English lowlands could look like. Catch you next time, and wish us luck.