





ENDANGERED LANDSCAPES PROGRAMME

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The Endangered Landscapes Programme offers an exciting and inspirational vision for the future in which European landscapes are enriched with biodiversity, establishing resilient, more self-sustaining ecosystems that benefit both nature and people.

The programme is funded by Arcadia, a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin, and is managed by the Cambridge Conservation Initiative.



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PROJECT OVERVIEW

CREATING A WILDER FUTURE FOR THE GREATER CÔA VALLEY, WESTERN IBERIA



The Côa Valley of Northern Portugal is an important region for birds of prey and apex predators, but overhunting and persecution have diminished populations of these species, disrupted food chains and damaged local ecology. This project will create a crucial wildlife corridor in the Greater Côa Valley and transform a region with currently high levels of rural depopulation and species loss into one with new opportunities for people and wildlife. Species reintroduction and the recovery of biodiversity-rich Mediterranean forest will create the conditions for wildlife comeback, and underpin the development of a modern, nature-based economy that serves as a regional role model.

THE GREATER CÔA VALLEY

The project area encompasses the Greater Côa Valley in the Beira Alta Raiana Region of Portugal, connecting the Malcata Mountain range in the south with the larger Douro Valley in the north. Made up of typical Portuguese "montados", the area is characterised by pastureland dotted with trees. This habitat dates back to the Middle Ages, when large grazers (especially cattle) formed its savannah-like appearance. The area has a strong continental influence, with well-conserved forests of sweet acorn and cork oak.

The Côa Valley is also of critical importance for large birds of prey and other soaring birds, which nest on the rocky cliffs of the Douro, Águeda and Côa rivers. Populations of Egyptian and black vulture and Bonelli's eagle are particularly reliant on these habitats. Wild boar, the Iberian wolf and roe deer are examples of keystone species that help shape the ecology of the Greater Côa Valley. Overhunting and persecution of these species, however, has degraded food chains in the area, with prey species overharvested and apex predators on the verge of elimination.



PROJECT CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITY

Many environmentally-damaging human activities are now in decline in the valley as a result of a rural exodus, land abandonment and an ageing resident population. These factors have led to the encroachment of bushes onto abandoned farmland and a spread of monoculture pine plantations. This has made the landscape extremely vulnerable to large-scale forest fires, endangering people's lives and properties, as well as wildlife.

Fortunately, land abandonment now offers an opportunity for large-scale landscape restoration, with the recent comeback of key species such as the Iberian wolf indicating the significant potential for recovery. The Côa Valley has the potential to become one of the main migration routes for wildlife on this part of the Iberian Peninsula, and its north-south orientation allows it to function as a corridor for species that need to adapt to climate change.

There is also growing support in the region for the development of alternative land-use models based on natural grazing, thereby creating landscape mosaics that function as natural firebreaks. This mosaic landscape will have a rich diversity of wildlife species and abundant prey such as rabbit, hare and red-legged partridge, creating a prey-base for species like Bonelli's eagle and Spanish imperial eagle. This should also encourage the return of the Iberian lynx, a species that is now recovering its former range through active reintroductions and improved prey availability.

WHAT THE PROJECT WILL DO

This project will restore wildlife and natural processes in the montado landscapes of the Côa Valley in Northern Portugal, reconnecting the valley with existing protected areas and thereby creating a 120,000 ha wildlife corridor. This revitalised, natural landscape will deliver important ecosystem services such as fire prevention, food, local products and enterprise opportunities such as wildlife tourism.

To achieve its aims, the project will:

- Increase the natural functioning and biodiversity of the Côa Valley by connecting strategically purchased core areas (total 1,000 ha) through land-use agreements and hunting associations to act as refuge and dispersion nodes, and revive ecological processes such as herbivory, carnivory and scavenging
- Restore populations of key wildlife species by reintroducing and restocking roe deer, facilitating carcass availability for the area's growing vulture population, and creating conditions for the spontaneous return of species such as the Iberian lynx and wolf, as well as endangered raptor species
- Reduce the main threats to habitats and species, poaching, poisoning and fire, in addition to pre-empting and mitigating human-wildlife conflicts between wolves and livestock owners
- Establish a new regional economy by investing in education programmes and training courses for wildlife guides and supporting local, nature-based enterprises
- Celebrate local natural and cultural identity and encourage different types of economic activity through events and festivals based around the 220 km Grand Route of the Côa Valley trail



PROJECT LEAD:

Rewilding Europe

PROJECT PARTNERS:

- Rewilding Portugal
- Associação Transumância e Natureza (ATN)
- University of Aveiro (UAVR)
- Zoo Logical

"Rewilding the Côa Valley will change people's perceptions of wild nature and create a new sense of pride and identity in local communities"

Pedro Prata, Team Leader
Rewilding Portugal