



Next generation

ENGAGING AND EMPOWERING YOUNG PEOPLE IS VITAL TO THE GROWTH OF REWILDING.

The United Nations climate summit in New York in September 2019 will not be remembered for generating any hugely transformative action on global warming. What it will be remembered for is the electrifying address by Swedish teen activist Greta Thunberg, who took world leaders to task for their fecklessness.

Inspired by Thunberg and her simple yet powerful messages on the environment (which included a video on rewilding co-produced with British author and activist George Monbiot), young people rose up in their hundreds of thousands in 2019. In an unprecedented show of unity, they demanded greater action on biodiversity and climate change, proving that many amongst the younger generation do care about the fate of the planet and its people.

There will be nearly 1.9 billion people aged between 10 and 24 by 2050.

Bringing innovation, intelligence, drive and a fresh perspective, the younger generation has enormous potential to influence policy, business and science across the world. A challenge to the status quo is vital for any system that is seeking change and improvement. And when it comes to wild nature and the environment, this is sorely needed.

"The younger generation is increasingly demanding a different future, where people co-exist with nature and natural systems allow communities to prosper," says Aleksandrina Mitseva, who joined Rewilding Europe's Supervisory Board in 2019. "At Rewilding Europe we want to inspire this generation to help restore the natural world."



DAN DINIU / REWILDING EUROPE

“THE YOUNGER GENERATION HAS ENORMOUS POTENTIAL TO INFLUENCE POLICY, BUSINESS AND SCIENCE ACROSS THE WORLD.”

Early career expansion

Europeans, even ones living in big cities, rarely have to travel far to experience wild nature. Today, with its positive message and emphasis on practical conservation, rewilding is playing an increasingly important role connecting younger generations with that nature, inspiring the next generation of conservationists in the process.

With a view to building on and enhancing that connection, Rewilding Europe began advertising for an additional "early career" supervisory board member in early 2019.

"The idea was to find a dynamic and visionary rewilding enthusiast who could help to shape the rewilding movement in Europe, while simultaneously gaining experience in a board position," explains Rewilding Europe Managing Director Frans Schepers.

After a number of interviews, 22-year-old Bulgarian Aleksandrina Mitseva was appointed to the board in May.

"It's a really rewarding give-and-take process," she explains. "I contribute my insight, energy and understanding of young people's perspectives to the governance and strategic development of Rewilding Europe. And I also work to engage more young Europeans in rewilding, and support them in their efforts."

Community outreach

Working together with Laurien Holtjer, Rewilding Europe's Head of Communications, one of Aleksandrina's first ideas was to create a Young Rewilders Community.

"The ubiquity of social media is allowing a new generation to reach out and connect with others who share their interests in the environment and wild nature," explains Mitseva. "A core objective of the community is to provide younger people with an online platform for exchange, which is why we've set up user groups on Slack and Facebook."

"A lot of young Europeans applied for the early career supervisory board member position," she continues. "So we already had a ready-made group of people interested in and passionate about rewilding. The next job was to reach out to them, hear their thoughts, and co-design a network."

Still in its early days, the Young Rewilders Community now numbers around 30 people, all aged between 20 and 30, from right across Europe. Of these, five are core team members, involved in community organisation, grants and media production, while the remainder act as ambassadors, spreading the message about rewilding and contributing to discussions.

BY THE NUMBERS



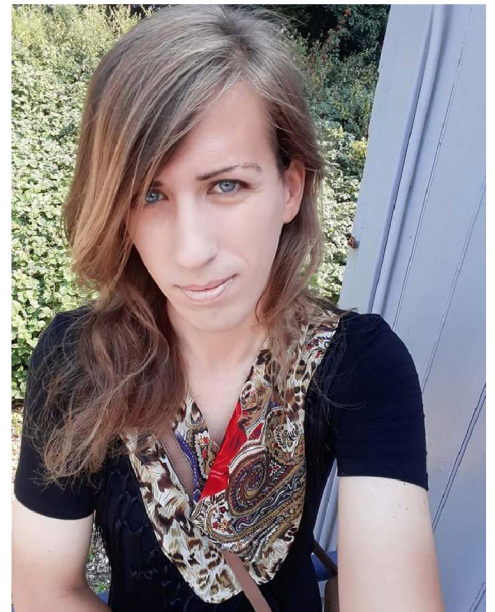
There will be nearly **1.9** billion people aged between **10** and **24** by 2050. **1.4** million children took part in climate strikes across the world in May 2019.



Aleksandrina Mitseva, Rewilding Europe's young Supervisory Board member.



Florian Wieser.



Kristen Bristow.

“LET’S JUST SEE WHAT WE CAN DO. BIG THINGS COME FROM SMALL BEGINNINGS!”

Holding online meetings every week, the team are now planning their first real-world meet-up in the Netherlands in the autumn 2020.

“The community gives me the perfect opportunity to meet and learn from others interested in rewilding and conservation,” says 27-year-old British ethnobotany student Kristen Bristow, who is studying for her Master’s degree in ethnobotany while carrying out bird and habitat surveys. “I want to spread the rewilding message among my generation, because they seem the most responsive to new ideas, and because I have a real desire to see nature and people coexist.”

BY THE NUMBERS



Studies show that individuals who spend more than **120** minutes a week in nature have consistently higher levels of both health and wellbeing than those with little or no exposure. In the United Kingdom, less than one in **10** children now regularly play in wild spaces, compared to half of children a generation ago.

Contributing to the cause

From wildlife photography to academic research, members of the Young Rewilders Community are involved with wild nature in myriad ways. Florian Wieser, a 22-year-old engineering student from Innsbruck, is committed to protecting Austrian wild nature and reconnecting people with it, while Rhys Lemoine, a 24-year-old Canadian master’s student based in Dublin, regularly writes about new ideas in rewilding and how past ecosystems can inspire restoration efforts.

“It’s great to have so much variety, because we can feed off each other,” says Aleksandrina Mitseva. “The one thing that unites all of us is a passion and enthusiasm for nature, the fierceness of which surprised even me.”



Rhys Lemoine.

A core team member, Anna Luijten is a 29-year-old bushcraft instructor and ecologist based in the Netherlands.

“I guess the overall goal of the community is to gather people with the same kind of ambition together,” she says. “Let’s just see what we can do. Big things come from small beginnings!”

A natural deficit

It’s hard to overstate how much good connecting with wild nature does for our wellbeing: study after study documents the psychological and physical benefits. According to a study published in 2019, those who spend over two hours a week in nature are significantly healthier and happier than those who don’t. In fact, doctors have even prescribed walks in natural areas to overweight children and depressed teenagers.

For whatever reason, the fact that young people are spending less and less time in nature is a concern. In the United Kingdom, for example, fewer than one in 10 children now regularly play in wild spaces, compared to half of children a generation ago.

"You can't connect with what you don't see or what you don't understand," says Rhys Lemoine. Children are mostly born and raised in cities now and they aren't receiving an environmental education at school. The result is that the only ones to learn about natural history are those that seek it out."

The disconnection with nature so prevalent among today's young people is compounded by something called "shifting baseline syndrome", in which each new generation accepts the situation in which they are raised as being normal. This is increasingly recognised as one of the fundamental obstacles to addressing a wide range of environmental issues.

"I live in a very crowded country (the Netherlands) and it is striking just how many people – not only the younger generation – who think of green farmland as wild nature," says Anna Luijten. "In reality, that farmland is one species of vegetation and next to nothing else. Hardly anyone appreciates how much wilder things once were, or could be."

A journey of rediscovery

Despite the headlines about digital device addiction and a lack of time spent outside, the story of young people and wild nature is not all doom and gloom.

"I think the events of 2019 showed that many young people do value nature and its protection," says Florian Wieser. "We just have to introduce them to it. One of the regular activities of the Youth Wilderness Programme in Austria, which I co-founded, is to go into the wilderness with as many young people from cities as possible and just spend time there."

Anna Luijten agrees. "I feel wonder when I see a bumblebee landing on a flower, being clumsy and falling off," she says. "I feel alive when the breeze ruffles my hair as I walk through woodland. By keeping places that are wild and letting young people experience them, we can share that sense of wonder."



Anna Luijten.

“BY KEEPING PLACES THAT ARE WILD AND LETTING YOUNG PEOPLE EXPERIENCE THEM, WE CAN SHARE THAT SENSE OF WONDER.”

What unites the members of the Young Rewilders Community, apart from their youth, passion and enthusiasm, is the appeal of rewilding.

"Rewilding is new, it's optimistic, and it has the potential to work at scale," says Rhys Lemoine. "The opportunity to do something big and bold is very attractive to a generation that's grown up on environmental pessimism."

"Rewilding is incredibly inspirational," adds Kristen Bristow. "It fills me with hope that it's not too late to fix the damage that we, as humans, have caused. That we can recover wildlife populations and ecosystems, and create a world that's more in balance. By spreading the word, building support and taking practical action, this is what the Young Rewilders Community is working towards."

BY THE NUMBERS



30 young Europeans involved in the Young Rewilders Community. **5** core team members of the community.
