

## **Transcript**

*00:00:08:05 - 00:00:35:06*

*James Shooter*

I'm overlooking a series of ponds and pools in the north of Portugal in the upper reaches of the Côa Valley. A choir of Iberian waterfrogs are singing up from beneath me in appreciation. The colourful reflections in the waters have transitioned from the pinks of a Portuguese sunset into the deep blues of dusk. There's something quite beautiful about sitting back and allowing yourself to be enveloped by the sounds of nature. Just like the frogs, the surrounding landscape is crying out for more space to be made for water. Parched by the sun and singed by fire, the Greater Côa Valley is a 120,000 hectare watershed, where rewilding efforts are creating a healthy natural corridor, not just for amphibians but for lynx, wolves, vultures, dung beetles and people, too. I'm James Shooter, host of The Rewild Podcast and this is The Greater Côa Valley.

*00:01:24:04 - 00:01:56:02*

*James Shooter*

During my journey from the South to the North of Portugal, one thing probably stood out more than anything else, the abundance and diversity of wildflowers. A kaleidoscope of colour, supporting a cacophony of insects, humming and buzzing all over the place. Rock roses in pink, white and yellow lift the arid landscapes and meadows of daisies and purple vipers bugloss lay the carpet for extensive areas of Montado, a traditional Portuguese wood pasture.

Further into the north, in the Serra de Estrela Natural Park charred tree trunks bear the scars of a huge fire that swept through the landscape last year for kilometre after kilometre after kilometre. I've talked with others about the risks of fires, but to drive through a scene so freshly blackened was pretty heart wrenching. As I close in on the Greater Côa Valley, the landscape is peppered with olive and almond trees, two of the main crops for this part of Portugal.

Farmers are riding classic tractors, probably a wee bit past their best, along narrow roads to their morning chores and my first cuckoos of the year are heard echoing through the terraced hillsides around me. I'm meeting the team from Rewilding Portugal, at their bespoke rewilding centre in the village of Pinhel.

"Bom dia, hi, I'm James."

*00:02:45:11 - 00:02:45:23*

*Marta Calix*

I'm Marta.

*00:02:45:24 - 00:02:48:15*

*James Shooter*

Marta, nice to meet you.

*00:02:48:17 - 00:02:49:13*

**The Rewild Podcast**  
**By James Shooter**  
**Episode 5**  
**Greater Côa Valley**



*Sara Aliacar*  
I'm Sara.

00:02:49:14 - 00:02:49:24

*James Shooter*

Sara, nice to meet you. How are you?

00:02:50:01 - 00:02:55:16

*Marta Calix*

Did you find your way here ok?

00:02:55:16 - 00:03:05:02

*James Shooter*

Okay. Yeah. Yeah. I walked up from the river this morning, so I got nice and hot. I say, everyone wears coats in Portugal.

00:03:05:04 - 00:03:08:10

*Marta Calix*

We don't have Scotland weather!

00:03:08:12 - 00:03:32:08

*James Shooter*

"This is warmer than our summer, I think, already."

*(Narrating)*

I jump in a van with Pedro and Sara to explore Ermo das Aguias, a recently acquired property where, after years of attempted agriculture on unproductive land, nature restoration now leads the way.

Pedro sets up his scope, looking out over a gorge. Here, the power of the Côa river has carved a steep sided valley that winds through rock.

00:03:32:10 - 00:03:33:02

*James Shooter*

What do we have?

00:03:33:06 - 00:03:34:02

*Pedro Prata*

A griffon vulture.

00:03:34:02 - 00:03:36:13

*Sara Aliacar*

That's on the nest.

00:03:36:15 - 00:03:37:08

*James Shooter*

Oh brilliant!

00:03:37:10 - 00:03:46:02

*Sara Aliacar*

A period of incubation and all the chicks are just going to be born. Some of them are probably born already, and some of them are probably almost to go.

00:03:46:02 - 00:03:50:02

*James Shooter*

Oh, so they're really early nesters then if they're that far along already.

00:03:50:04 - 00:03:54:24

*Pedro Prata*

Yeah, they start early January. So right after winter.

00:03:55:01 - 00:04:12:22

*James Shooter*

It may seem like a risk for these vultures to bring new life into the world when the conditions are still at the mercy of winter. But these cliffside apartments are in high demand. And the earlier you lay out your towels, the better positions you get. Later, nesting golden eagles and eagle owls sometimes lose out to colonies of these opportunistic scavengers.

But with more large trees in the landscape, the displaced birds would have options. This is something the team here are hoping to improve in years to come. The vulture excitement picks up when we get a glimpse of something a little bit rarer. So there's two, I think, right?

00:04:28:01 - 00:04:33:12

*Pedro Prata*

Do you see the other one? I thought so too. Yeah, the other one is coming. I saw where it came out.

00:04:33:14 - 00:04:35:01

*James Shooter*

They're incredible birds aren't they!

00:04:35:03 - 00:04:37:23

*Pedro Prata*

They're beautiful. They're beautiful.

00:04:38:00 - 00:04:39:20

*Pedro Prata*

It's like a fairy of the winds.

00:04:39:22 - 00:04:59:06

*James Shooter*

This fairy we're watching is an Egyptian vulture. Confusingly, not quite Egyptian because it's from Egypt, although it can be found in Egypt. It's a whole Greek mythology drama where Zeus turn some guy called Aegyptius into a vulture after a love affair with someone's mother. You know, the standard way to name a species.

*00:04:59:08 - 00:05:28:19*

*Pedro Prata*

The different type of scavenger for their smaller in size. Um they have this mandatory migratory behaviour. They scavenge on the leftovers of scavengers, which is funny, but they also sometimes hunt as they complement their feeding strategy with hunting. And then they hunt on a very particular way by walking on the ground and kind of ambush small prey, such as lizards or things like that.

So, it's a really complex bird, in Africa they're known to break eggs, and eat other species eggs on the ground with stones. So, they have all these particularities.

*00:05:44:24 - 00:05:46:21*

*James Shooter*

So, they use tools?

*00:05:46:21 - 00:06:17:10*

*Pedro Prata*

They use a tool, yeah, that's documented for a long time. And so, you have all of this kind of interesting behaviours, interesting lifecycle. And not so interesting is their population decline. And that's where we would like to find ways to help to improve, especially here in the Côa. And sites like this where you have a pair, that was not recorded in this area before, maybe a pair that moved here and might be a new pair, that's amazing because this is the news we're looking for.

*00:06:20:04 - 00:06:25:12*

*James Shooter*

Pedro is team leader at Rewilding Portugal and they have a big vision for this landscape.

*00:06:25:14 - 00:06:50:24*

*Pedro Prata*

The vision for the Greater Coa Valley is to create the conditions to strengthen this corridor, this wildlife corridor, it connects multiple, uh, protected areas, wilder areas, uh, classified areas that already have a great potential if they are connected and the Côa is right in the sweet spot to actually connect with the conditions at the moment that allow it to get wilder.

So, we want to see more wildlife coming back and using this corridor and moving through it in abundances that are visible and that can grow to sustain the processes that will shape the landscape into the future.

*00:07:05:24 - 00:07:32:08*

*James Shooter*

The catchment of the Coa River, which makes up this rewilding landscape, is about 150 kilometres long and 50 to 60 kilometres wide. It runs parallel with the Spanish border between the Douro River to the north and the Malcata Mountain Range to the south. It's a landscape of river gorges, grassland, scrub and scattered oaks. It's a corridor of connected habitat vital to some of Portugal's most iconic species.

*00:07:32:10 - 00:07:56:22*

*Pedro Prata*

So, if you look at corridors in the peninsula and you can think of all the corridors there are possible, there's always one strand that goes through here. It has been used for species as the lynx. So, some of the lynx that were reintroduced in the South, moving, dispersing naturally have used this corridor. So, it does exist and it is where it is working as a corridor.

There are still some barriers, some threats, some constrains for it to be more strengthened. And that's where I think rewilding has something of an approach that can give that strength back to this corridor.

*00:08:10:18 - 00:08:44:07*

*James Shooter*

For too long we've made do with the protection of landscapes, fencing off our wildish bits and keeping them in the status quo. Where these landscapes are already impoverished, protection is no longer enough. This is where rewilding is different. It's proactive in its approach, recognises missing elements in an ecosystem and looks to restore natural processes. If you hear governments talking about protecting landscapes, question whether that should really be restoring. At a time of global biodiversity loss, we need to make sure we're getting the latter.

*00:08:44:09 - 00:09:07:11*

*Pedro Prata*

Showcasing and demonstrating is super important, but that is a long run and we are in a sprint run, because we're running out of time to reverse that trend. We're in the decade of nature restoration. We don't have to have a decade to demonstrate that nature can restore itself. We need to have a decade to spread the possibility of nature to recover.

We need to be as proactive, as fast, as effective as we can be.

*00:09:13:19 - 00:09:26:06*

*James Shooter*

Amen to that.

*(Narrating)*

So, the time to act is now, and it is truly inspiring to visit these rewilding initiatives. They're not just talking the talk, but each face their own challenges.

*00:09:26:08 - 00:09:55:23*

*Pedro Prata*

The main threat to nature recovery has been the frequency of fire. Frequency plus intensity. Fire is, of course, a natural phenomenon. We've seen species that co-evolved with fire, it has always been present in these ecosystems and species evolved with it. What they never faced is the frequency and intensity of the recurrent fires as we have seen in the past 30 or 40 years.

And the result of that has been, to me, the major constraint to nature recovery. So, stopping or decreasing that frequency for a time period that will allow for the nature to recover is key.

*00:10:12:14 - 00:10:36:24*

*James Shooter*

Part of the issue here is choice of land use, coupled with a warming climate. Across vast swathes of Portugal, you find a tree more closely associated with koala bears in Australia, Eucalyptus. It stands in monotonous rows for as far as the eye can see. It's replaced much of Portugal's natural forests, which are a mix of oak and pine in dry regions and rich temperate rainforests in the wetter north.

*00:10:38:14 - 00:11:04:13*

*Pedro Prata*

So, to me is a really bad trade off. If you think that those forests are rainforest, temperate rainforests in the Atlantic Front with an impressive biodiversity that we don't know yet because we lost that reference years ago when the decision was to replant the whole thing with the bloody eucalyptus. It's mostly for bad quality paper, not even for high quality. Actually, Portugal is in a net importer of high quality pulp for the production of high quality paper. So we are, we are champions of the world to export napkins and toilet paper and we trade that for the most impressive biodiversity in the coast in the coastal front.

*00:11:23:08 - 00:11:50:01*

*James Shooter*

It would be funny if it wasn't so sad. Despite the more natural landscape in the Côa Valley, fires are still a looming threat. Although there are none of the flammable eucalyptus forests here, the absence of large herbivores has allowed combustible biomass to build up. These areas are integral to restoring functionality to this important natural corridor, and with the right approach, they offer the opportunity to drastically reduce the impact of wildfires.

*00:11:50:03 - 00:11:57:06*

*James Shooter*

To do this, the team are working to join up these core areas through land purchases and stewardship agreements.

*00:11:57:08 - 00:12:30:02*

*Pedro Prata*

We start with relatively big ones because to start we need it. But the idea is that we can grow out of it without the need to buy every single little block around. We need to agree

by example with a neighbour that this is beneficial for them. They are benefiting from having more surveillance, less flammable matter, more biodiversity and whatsoever, and if that can be traded in market for carbon and for biodiversity to pay to them directly, which they wouldn't be able to do on their own.

*00:12:30:04 - 00:13:02:05*

*Pedro Prata*

So, this is the strategy for the Côa. So, that's why it's so important to have this island along the Côa, the steppingstones, where we can start multiple of these practices, influence surroundings that they can touch each other, so at some point this will be connected through a mesh of ownership, cooperation, management, incentive. And if we can do so, then the animals who started in these fences can start moving back and forth, such as the ones depicted in the engravings.

*00:13:02:07 - 00:13:31:06*

*James Shooter*

When Rewilding Portugal first came to the area, it's fair to say there was some suspicion in the local community. Failed promises from previous NGOs and rumours of secret wolf releases led to some initial animosity. As a quick tip for any aspiring rewilding practitioners out there, secret releases of wolves is probably not the best method for getting locals on board, but by actively engaging with the community, demonstrating they were committed to the area and showcasing positive results. The rewilding team now have a good working relationship with local people.

*00:13:34:20 - 00:14:13:09*

*Pedro Prata*

Different groups have different challenges and also I think they will they will cooperate towards different benefits. I would say for cattle grazers, I think the management that they're doing now is expensive. They can't make ends meet. Honestly, they are super heavily dependent on subsidies. Without it, it would be gone as a business, and we want to demonstrate or find ways to cooperate together where we can lower their costs and increase their gains without being so dependent on subsidies as possible.

*00:14:13:11 - 00:14:43:13*

*James Shooter*

Subsidy funding in the EU comes from the Common Agricultural Policy CAP for short. The policy has largely been focused on paying out to increase agricultural productivity across the continent. This approach often leads to farming practices that are the polar opposite of the low intensity grazing systems Pedro is trying to encourage here. Positively, though, from January this year, a greener, fairer CAP came into play, which should start paying out more towards environmental and climate objectives.

*00:14:43:15 - 00:14:56:16*

*James Shooter*

Another stakeholder group that has been important to get on board has been the hunting community. Now, rewilders and hunters might seem unlikely collaborators, but both parties benefit from a more biodiverse and abundant natural world.

*00:14:56:18 - 00:15:21:05*

*Pedro Prata*

Things are changing and I see that for them to have areas of non-hunting where centuries where wildlife and hunting species can thrive will be beneficial for the hunting grounds as well because they will spill over. And that's reasonable to understand that none of the hunting associations will do that. They could do the habitat, the water point and the reinforcement but none of the association would stop hunting.

*00:15:21:07 - 00:15:41:23*

*James Shooter*

I'm excited to find out more about the wildlife here and how different species contribute to the overall functionality of the Coa Valley. I'm heading out for a walk with Sara Aliacar now, the Head of Conservation for Rewilding Portugal, and she's keen to show me the area where grazing animals are returning. Large Cork Oaks stand proudly on the hillside, they're the only tree that has been allowed to age here as a result of their economic value through cork harvesting. We use this amazing material to create so many products, including wine bottle stoppers, home insulation and even fabric. For the tree itself, the cork bark provides a natural protection from fire, assuming it hasn't already been removed, of course.

*00:16:05:01 - 00:16:26:14*

*Sara Aliacar*

If we look at the landscape in the fifties, this was all cultivated with barley. There were no wild boars, there was no roe deer. And now we are seeing also a comeback from the roe deer from the south of the Greater Coa Valley to the north. But what we want, what we are focused on is on bringing back natural processes and keystone species.

One of the things we've done here is to bring a herd of Sorraia horses to boost natural grazing in the area, because we know, I mean landscapes need grazers of different sizes. Here a very important grazer is the rabbit, its tiny, but it is a keystone species and is a food for a big variety of species in this ecosystem, in this landscape.

*00:16:52:17 - 00:17:00:24*

*James Shooter*

I can honestly say I've never heard of rabbits described as a keystone species, but when you think about it, it makes perfect sense.

*00:17:01:01 - 00:17:27:09*

*Sara Aliacar*

All the different nucleus of rabbits together in the landscape, they do have a big impact. They have impact on the rate of water infiltration in the ground. They have impact maintaining grasslands, and they are the prey base of many, many Iberian species, some endangered ones like the Iberian Lynx or the Imperial Eagle. For example we were talking about the golden eagle. Rabbits are very, very important for the golden eagle. The carcasses of rabbits also for the cinerous vulture, who is a specialised more in like smaller carcasses than happens with a griffon vulture. So here we also focus on, where



we are now, we have stopped hunting last year to try to recover rabbit and partridge as an important food base for the food chain.

And we are going to continue doing work with rabbits trying to increase abundance because we saw an important reduction of the of the species in the area. And also the grazers are very important, one of the things we are doing in the monitoring is to monitor the effect of the horses on the abundance of rabbit and partridge, because the horses are opening and maintaining grasslands, which is also food for the rabbit and the partridge.

In some areas they create patches of bare soil because they do like sand baths and because there's the trampling and rabbits, for example, like that very much for marking the territories and digging and things like that. So now we are monitoring that over time to see the effect.

*00:18:53:02 - 00:19:16:20*

*James Shooter*

I hereby vow to look at rabbits in a new light. I love the idea that the horses brought here are helping create rabbit friendly conditions too. I suppose the good thing is that rabbits breed like, well, rabbits. They can quickly recover given half a chance. The Sorraia horses are an old breed native to Portugal. The herds that have been released into the greater Côa Valley, are semi wild.

They roam huge areas, doing what they do best with little intervention or ongoing management from the team. Their wild ancestry helps them to mimic natural behaviours and fill the ecological niche of the lost wild horse. Sorraia is said to be descendants of the zebro. That's zebro, not zebra. Zebro were apparently the wild horse of the Iberian Peninsula and could have been the ones depicted in the rock engravings from thousands of years ago.

The Sorraias are mousey grey, short in stature and blend seamlessly into their surroundings. They have faint striping on the lower half of their legs, a nod to their zebro ancestry, perhaps. Again, that's zebro, not zebra. Although zebra does come from the old Portuguese word zevra, meaning 'wild ass'. So it is quite confusing. All you need to know is that they're all stripey and they're doing good work.

*00:20:11:09 - 00:20:13:08*

*James Shooter*

Okay, so what do we have?

*00:20:13:08 - 00:20:33:24*

*Sara Aliacar*

We have a dung beetle here, which is a very important species for the ecosystem and very linked to the large grazers. So, they are a sign of good quality of the habitat because they will go for the horse manure to make this ball of dung, which they put their eggs inside.

00:20:34:04 - 00:20:38:02

*James Shooter*

Oh, that's why they do it. So, they're essentially making a poo nest.

00:20:38:04 - 00:20:44:24

*Sara Aliacar*

Yeah, that's it. Because it's quite stable in terms of temperature. It is good material.

00:20:45:00 - 00:20:46:22

*James Shooter*

Everything is making a lot more sense.

00:20:46:24 - 00:20:53:13

*Sara Aliacar*

And so we say...oh goodbye!

00:20:53:14 - 00:20:54:19

*Pedro Prata*

It flies!

00:20:54:24 - 00:20:56:18

*James Shooter*

Oh, that was cool. I like that.

00:20:56:20 - 00:21:10:19

*Sara Aliacar*

So that's a big difference. Like when you have the worming or like antibiotics, like other negative substances for wildlife in the manure of animals. Then you lose the invertebrates.

00:21:10:19 - 00:21:20:08

*James Shooter*

Yeah, sure, sure, sure. So, if they're essentially organic animals here with no inputs then yeah, it's good poo!

00:21:20:10 - 00:21:20:20

*Sara Aliacar*

That's it.

00:21:20:20 - 00:21:23:19

*James Shooter*

Oh, they're such cool animals. Oh, I love them.

00:21:23:21 - 00:21:42:11

*Sara Aliacar*

What we've seen so far, and we keep monitoring this through the years, is that in the areas with horses, you have more diversity of plants, of forms so you have more flowers of different diversity, which can be very important for pollinators, maintaining their source of food and diversity.

*00:21:42:13 - 00:22:08:13*

*James Shooter*

Joining the Sorraias soon after my visit, were a herd of 15 Tauros. These are semi wild bovines, cattle to you and me, that have been selectively back bred from a number of ancient cattle breeds to emulate the aurochs, the truly wild species, unfortunately declared extinct in 1627. Some of you may legitimately question things around about now: "But James, I came here for rewilding and you're talking about horses and cows. I can see those from my bedroom window." Well, the fact is that Europe did have wild horses once upon a time, and it did have wild cows. And not just any wild cow that one said to be the ancestor of all domestic cattle today. We know these large grazers were present across the continent, evidenced by ancient engravings and historical records, as well as through the discovery of skeletons and bone fragments.

Now, both of those truly wild species are no longer around, so we need to use proxies of those animals to emulate their effects on the land. Humans have stepped in to create, or utilise, animals that are both as functionally and genetically similar to their wild ancestors as feasibly possible. And the really important aspect of natural grazing is the low intensity.

Farmed animals are usually managed in high numbers and limited to particular areas, which often leads to overgrazing. In contrast, the Sorraia horses and Tauros are introduced at a level where disturbance is created, they consume flammable biomass, they fertilise the ground through dunging and they move on. For context, the newly released herd of 15 Tauros will roam an expansive 600 hectares.

*00:23:21:05 - 00:23:34:17*

*Sara Aliacar*

And we are also doing quite a lot of work with coexistence, particularly with Iberian wolf. With the work we are doing, we are kind of promoting the prey base of lynx and wolf.

*00:23:34:19 - 00:23:59:05*

*James Shooter*

The Iberian wolf is a subspecies of grey wolf found only in Portugal and Spain. They're more slight in build and have a few distinct markings for the neighbours beyond the Pyrenees. The majority of the population is found in northwest Spain with just 300 or so estimated to be living in Portugal. The wolves here have become isolated with the Douro River acting as a physical barrier to the north.

*00:23:59:07 - 00:24:15:12*

*James Shooter*

Aside from the river's steep cliffs and gorges, it has been modified in many places for the cultivation of vineyards and is scattered with large areas of infrastructure. This small and fragmented population is at serious risk of inbreeding and needs some fresh genes in the mix.

*00:24:15:14 - 00:24:45:13*

*Sara Aliacar*

The wolves as a top predator, it feeds mainly on ungulates. So, more and more ecologists know that it creates an ecology of fear in the landscape, so it keeps herds of grazers moving. What we have here, south of the Douro in Portugal is a particular situation, it is the result of habitat loss and persecution. As I said before, wild prey almost disappeared.

But in the fifties the only thing they had available was livestock. So, what we are seeing now with the expansion of wild boar and on roe deer overlapping the distribution of wolf is that the packs are feeding more and more on wild boar and they are starting also to feed on roe deer. So that is very good news.

*00:25:11:10 - 00:25:41:11*

*James Shooter*

When wild prey's abundant there is much less pressure on livestock and less conflict between farmers and wolves. But this is a long-term goal, not a magic fix. If a farmer is losing animals, it's totally reasonable to want a resolution quickly. But these short-term solutions usually involve the wolves losing out, sometimes with the ultimate price. For wolves to be accepted by rural communities, it's vitally important to engage with local producers to help mitigate losses from the beginning.

Rewilding Portugal is coordinating the LIFE WolFlux initiative to reduce conflict, improve ecological conditions and increase tolerance within this part of northern Portugal.

*00:25:51:15 - 00:26:15:04*

*Sara Aliacar*

We are working alongside livestock breeders to see the different damage preventive measures that can work in each case. So, we have already supported with more than 70 livestock guarding dogs, 27 wolf proof fences and advice to many farmers already. And we are going to continue doing that, of course, in the next years.

We are working on reducing poaching and the impacts of fires that have created a lot of habitat loss in wolf territories and not only habitat loss, but also causing the prey to move from one place to the other, which has an impact also on the stability of the packs. So, we have a surveillance team doing fire surveillance and actively searching for, for example, for snares to try to avoid that.

*00:26:45:02 - 00:27:11:11*

*Sara Aliacar*

And I also do a lot of work in awareness and also trying to work with the government. Because when we detect these fragilities, for example, of the damage compensation system to try to work together with them to improve it because I mean, considering the situation of the wolves of population, what we need is urgent actions, not just increases that may happen in like 20 years.

*00:27:11:11 - 00:27:41:05*

*James Shooter*

A colleague of mine once said that rewilding is 10% ecology and 90% psychology. What he meant is that the physical act of returning natural processes is the easy bit, what's much harder, is the people bit. Getting stakeholders with different viewpoints to agree on a consensus or perhaps find common ground and work towards compromise; is difficult. This is most apparent and can often become quite heated when discussing apex predators.

Building trust is hugely important in these matters. Sara and her team work with farmers in areas where wolves already exist, but also where they're likely to recolonise in the near future. Wolves are one element towards better ecosystem health, but the whole approach of rewilding is still a relatively new concept. A lot of time and effort must go into working with a variety of stakeholder groups to involve everyone in building a brighter and wilder future.

I'm keen to hear from Marta Calix, Rewilding Portugal's Head of Operations on how she sees people fitting into a wilder Greater Côa Valley.

*00:28:16:23 - 00:28:38:10*

*Marta Calix*

Everything that we do, nature conservation, rewilding, however we call it, it's not possible if there isn't social acceptance of it. So, involving local communities and showing them that what we do can also benefit them is an incredibly important part of everything that we do here. So, this is a very rural area. A lot of people are still dedicated to agriculture, be it livestock breeders, be it subsistence farming. There is still some large farming in the region as well for wine in the Douro or almonds, some things like that.

*00:28:47:21 - 00:28:58:04*

*James Shooter*

Rural abandonment is an ongoing trend where lots of young people are heading towards the cities for better opportunities and people are giving up on marginal farmland where making a living is tough.

*00:28:58:06 - 00:29:23:19*

*Marta Calix*

Well, one of the things that sets rewilding apart from other nature conservation approaches is the strong focus on socioeconomic development of the regions through rewilding. So, a lot of our work is focused on also benefiting the economic fabric of the

region through nature tourism, through the promotion of local producers and just trying to promote this region as a destination for nature tourism.

*00:29:23:21 - 00:30:04:13*

*Marta Calix*

Let me tell you about the Wild Côa Network, which is a network that we created in the Greater Côa Valley and which aggregates tourism operators, local accommodations and local producers like Flor Alta or Matreira. And the goal of this network is basically to communicate better everything that is on offer in this region. So, Rewilding Portugal plays a bit of a catalyst role in terms of their marketing access, showcasing them to visitors. In general, our work is more focused on just spreading the word about what is here, trying to integrate everything that is on offer into a more coherent sort of visitation packages for people who come here and marketing the whole region.

*00:30:04:15 - 00:30:26:13*

*James Shooter*

Through the network you can use the directory to find sustainably built wooden cabins for a rustic, rural getaway; go looking for Egyptian vultures with local guides and even find olive oils or natural cosmetics produced locally in a nature friendly way. This is bringing the world of rewilding and people together, so that everyone benefits.

Beyond the direct support of coexistence tools for farmers, Marta has set up a deal to further improve the income of those willing to work with nature instead of against it.

*00:30:34:17 - 00:31:03:07*

*Marta Calix*

The work that we do with the farmers to protect the animals, it has a cost, right? So, we cover the upfront costs of the fences or of the dogs, but a dog lasts 8-10 years, so they will have running costs with these measures to improve the coexistence with wildlife. So, we do have a partnership with Wilding Shoes whereby they purchase the wool from sheep, from farmers that have these good coexistence practices and they buy it at a much better price than they could get elsewhere because wool is not currently a very valued product here.

*00:31:03:09 - 00:31:10:11*

*Marta Calix*

So that is actually a direct income direct benefit to a farmer because he is doing something that is wildlife friendly.

*00:31:10:13 - 00:31:33:13*

*James Shooter*

I really love this. If we think of our money as a vote, every pound or euro we spend on these types of products is a vote towards a less exploitative world. The financial rewards Marta has set up, reshapes some of the challenges farmers may face into tangible benefits. This builds a more positive relationship between the people that feed us and the wildlife we need to conserve.

00:31:33:15 - 00:31:52:12

*James Shooter*

This is all about being open and honest. It's about making sure advocates of rewilding like me aren't wearing rose tinted glasses and accept that for some nature restoration will bring some challenges. It's imperative we find solutions to, or better yet, actively prevent these issues rather than just ignore them.

00:31:52:14 - 00:32:17:17

*Marta Calix*

The Rewilding Centre has been absolutely instrumental here in this region because it was an area where there was a lot of that suspicion of 'what is nature conservation, what is rewilding'? And it provided sort of a base of operations to be in close proximity with the local community, to do all of these sorts of events, engagements, etc. And it has grown now to be a licensed local accommodation where visitors can also come and stay at.

00:32:17:19 - 00:32:33:05

*Marta Calix*

And everyone that we talk with from the local village, they're happy that we're here and that for us is important. They don't see us as a threat anymore. They don't see us as something bad, but they see us as actually bringing more life and activity to the village.

00:32:33:08 - 00:32:39:11

*James Shooter*

And it looks like it's had quite a bit of investment in it. So, you know, it's a real focal point in the village, right?

00:32:39:13 - 00:32:59:07

*Marta Calix*

Yes. Unfortunately, some of these villages, because of people leaving and the population getting older. For example, the only cafe in the village closed during the pandemic. So now we're going to open a small café at the Rewilding Centre. You lose these places where people can also be together and foster that sense of community. So, we're also trying to bring that back.

00:32:59:09 - 00:33:02:03

*James Shooter*

That's how you get people on board though, serving good coffee.

00:33:02:05 - 00:33:03:19

*Marta Calix*

Exactly.

00:33:03:21 - 00:33:26:17

*James Shooter*

In conservation communications of the past, a focus has largely been about hitting people over the head with science in the hope that some of it may penetrate. But that

doesn't really work, at least not with the general public. How many of you regularly read scientific papers front to back? I know I don't. I'm an abstract man at best.

We're an emotional species. We're all complex individuals shaped by history, culture, religion and our own personal circumstances within society, to name but a few. Our communications must reflect that and find new, accessible and inclusive ways to connect people to nature.

*00:33:42:24 - 00:33:59:03*

*Marta Calix*

The Côa Corridor of Arts is a land arts festival, and it's the first time that it's going to happen. It's going to be this year in July. It's basically over the whole month. So, each weekend it happens in a different village, all throughout the Greater Côa Valley.

*00:33:59:05 - 00:34:26:23*

*James Shooter*

Alongside connecting with the general public, we've got to get much smarter in reaching corporates. The level of finance required to restore nature on the scale needed won't be possible without the private sector sticking their hands in their pockets. I recently read an article which suggested financing to protect and restore the Earth's natural resources will need to jump to \$1 trillion a year by 2030.

*00:34:27:00 - 00:34:37:16*

*James Shooter*

That may sound shocking. The cost of inaction? \$2.7 trillion a year to global GDP. So, what better system to invest in than nature?

*00:34:37:18 - 00:34:59:13*

*Marta Calix*

That's actually the reason why I became interested in rewilding in the first place, because I was working at another NGO and I saw that there was this huge funding gap for what needed to happen, and I became interested in what the role of the private sector could be in addressing this, this lack of funding. And I think that the first steps are being taken by the private sector to get involved with this. It's still not enough, but I think the awareness is increasing that they need to be more involved and more proactive and more invested in improving things.

*00:35:07:11 - 00:35:32:05*

*James Shooter*

Here in Portugal, the rewilding team have fostered a relationship with Symington Family Estates, a large wine and port company based in the Douro Valley for the last 130 years. They have a real commitment towards sustainability, in lowering their effects on the production stage and have now produced a rewilding wine where a percentage of the sales reverts to Rewilding Portugal and the work they're doing.



Drink wine for rewilding. I'm sure that's something a lot of us can get on board with! I would have told you about this earlier in the podcast, but I imagine you'd have all switched me off to nip down the shops instead.

*00:35:41:08 - 00:36:04:16*

*Marta Calix*

Well, I think it's pioneers like Symington Family Estates that can really set the example for others to follow that what they are doing then also translates in clear benefits in terms of sales, because the rewilding edition has been a huge success. Even abroad, they're selling to a bunch of different countries and they're seeing an increase in the sales of that specific brand because there's also this interest on the consumer side, right, too. They see that bottle. Oh, this helps rewilding. All right, I'll buy this one. And so, we can set an example for other companies to then come and follow and copy the efforts.

*00:36:13:12 - 00:36:27:06*

*James Shooter*

Biodiversity loss is a global issue, meaning we need to work at scale. So, it's important for the teams behind rewilding landscapes like the Greater Côa Valley to encourage others to do the same, here in Portugal and beyond.

*00:36:27:08 - 00:36:50:13*

*Marta Calix*

If we can influence other organisations, other institutions that are already established elsewhere to adopt more rewilding-like practices and approaches, then that's a huge win. Last year we had the first rewilding symposium ever in Portugal, which brought together a lot of different stakeholders interested in this, and we are trying to bring rewilding mainstream and to make sort of like the standard nature conservation approach in Portugal.

*00:36:50:15 - 00:37:10:08*

*Marta Calix*

I think there's still so much that can be done and that can happen. There's so much potential for rewilding coexistence, corridors, ecological corridors, whatever you want to call them. There is enough space for that if you plan adequately and if you manage the land in a way that allows for it. And so hopefully in the future, that's what we will see. We will see much larger rewilding areas, which will include local communities coexisting peacefully with wildlife. The tool certainly exists for that, and it's more a matter of changing perception and understanding that we need to live with nature instead of just living off nature.

*00:37:28:03 - 00:37:54:16*

*James Shooter*

This is the key, though, isn't it? Not seeing nature as just a commodity in which to exploit, but working alongside the natural world so that nature and people thrive together. It requires a change in mindset, but that's from all of us. Because to make progress, we must find compromise with those of different viewpoints. Things are going

in the right direction, but are they going fast enough to avoid those tipping points coming our way?

Will the Greater Côa Valley in time to become resilient to fire before the next flames rip through? Will the fragmented populations of Iberian wolves find their way to their neighbouring kin? With Rewilding Portugal at the helm, the Greater Côa Valley can become a vibrant natural corridor for keystone species, such as boar, wolf and even rabbit too. It can become a landscape with more space for water, larger trees and improved biodiversity, all whilst being less prone to setting ablaze in the heat of a Portuguese summer.

Not only this, it can become a role model for rural economies too. Where producers and services willing to work alongside the rhythms of nature are rewarded. Where rural depopulation begins to reverse. Wouldn't it be great to see consumers vote with their wallets and reward these types of systems? Before I leave this fantastic part of Portugal, I'm off to do my bit for rewilding with a vote from my wallet too.

*00:38:54:18 - 00:38:56:06*

*Marta Calix*

James, tell me what you want and I'll go get it.

*00:38:56:10 - 00:39:26:14*

*James Shooter*

Oh yeah, I definitely want some of this wine. So, can I get two bottles of the red wine? For sure. One for drinking, one for keeping.

*(Narrating)*

Not all heroes wear capes.

*(Outro)*

Thanks for joining me for this month's episode of The Rewild Podcast. If you're enjoying the series, we'd really appreciate you leaving a rating or review wherever you're listening from. It really helps us reach more people with stories of positivity from the natural world.

As always, thank you to our fantastic contributors for giving up their time to show me around. The music was by Andrew O'Donnell of Beluga Lagoon, and the episode artwork was created by Gemma Shooter. The biggest thanks to Rewilding Europe for collaborating with me on this series.

You can find out more about their incredible work by visiting [rewildingeurope.com](http://rewildingeurope.com). Next month, join me in the swamp forests of Belgium. Catch you next time!