



A river runs through it

On the banks of Portugal's Côa River, a thriving connection between people, nature and business offers new hope for the future.

A new chapter

From high up on granite cliffs, the metallic blue ribbon of the Côa River snakes its way through an immense landscape. Overhead, groups of vultures navigate thermals on outstretched wings, while the sounds of restless Sor-

raia horses carry faintly on the warm breeze. While this sweeping panorama may be reminiscent of Arizona or Utah, this is, in fact, northeast Portugal – a place where the recovery of wild nature is now working to revitalise culture, communities and local commerce.

Stretching for around 140 kilometres from south to north, the Greater Côa Valley is a uniquely captivating place. The hilly landscape surrounding the Côa, which rises in the Malcata Mountains and eventually discharges into the Douro (one of the few Portuguese rivers to flow south-north), is painted from an amazing palette: glossy citrus groves, silvery olive trees, and neat rows of vines streaming like tresses of green hair, all bisected by the river's cleaving gorge. This dramatic environment is home to such iconic species as the griffon vulture and Iberian wolf, with long-term population support provided by the Rewilding Portugal team.

Yet the Côa River is as much about man as it is about fauna and flora. Rocks beside the river are decorated with engravings dating back thousands of

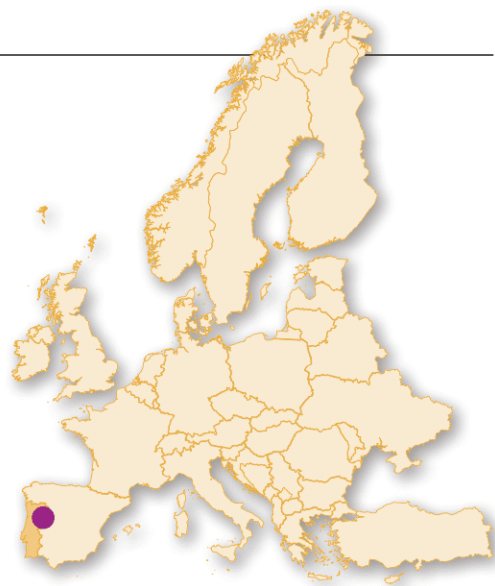


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years, highlighting the importance of this waterway and its wildlife to people and livelihoods of old. And in more recent times, the silent waters of the Côa have witnessed many decades of rural depopulation and associated land abandonment, which have negatively impacted both the ecology and communities of the area.

“For thousands of years, the Côa River and its environs have been a place where nature and people coexisted – where history ebbed and flowed, just like the seasonal water levels in the river itself,” says Rewilding Portugal team leader Pedro Prata. “With rewilding now taking off and having a growing impact in the Greater Côa Valley, we might be on the verge of a new chapter in the never-ending story of the Côa River.”

- **Country**
 Portugal
- **Focal landscape**
 Greater Côa Valley
- **Size of landscape**
 120,000 ha
- **Work started in**
 2011
- **Larger landscape**
 Rugged landscape between Sierra de Gata in the south and Douro Valley in the north, northeast Portugal.
- **Main habitats**
 Oak forests, shrublands, montado, serra, rivers and canyons with cliffs.
- **Focal species**
 Griffon, cinereous and Egyptian vulture, Spanish imperial and Bonelli’s eagle, Iberian wolf, Iberian lynx, rabbit, red deer, roe deer, Spanish ibex, wild horse, and Tauros.
- **Team leader**
 Pedro Prata



The network effect

The fact that land has been widely abandoned in the Greater Côa Valley has allowed some wildlife species to make a comeback and opens up exciting possibilities for rewilding. Yet as in other rewilding landscapes, it is critical that people living in the area benefit from the recovery of wild nature. In places such as the Greater Côa Valley, access to new jobs and livelihoods can breathe new life into local communities and prevent further social and cultural erosion.

Established in 2020 by the Rewilding Portugal team, the Wild Côa Network is an association of like-minded, Côa Valley-based enterprises (from guesthouses to handmade natural product sellers) who share a vision for a wilder and more sustainable future. The overall goal of the network – whose current membership now totals nearly 40 businesses – is to help develop a thriving nature-based economy in the area. In March 2022, the first face-to-face meeting between network members was held in the villages of Vilar Maior and Vale de Madeira.

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- ◀ Rewilding Portugal team leader Pedro Prata.
- ▶ Artwork by French artist Michèle Trotta was produced as part of the Festival CÕA – Corridor of Arts.
- ▼ Casa Villar Mayor.
- ▼ Ecological artist Antony Lyons.

an indoor garden of native Portuguese plants, and a courtyard with a barbecue. Rooms here are now bookable as private accommodation, allowing the Rewilding Portugal team to monetise the space and promote nature positive tourism in the region.

“The main idea behind the rewilding centre has always been for it to connect people with a new narrative for wilder nature, to serve as an asset for the local community, and to host various training, cultural and recreational activities,” explains Rewilding Portugal’s enterprise officer Joaquim Canotilho. “Ultimately, its real value has been to give new impetus to a small Portuguese village. With the centre playing a key role, we have shown that it is possible to create new, nature-based business and give the area an economic shot in the arm, while simultaneously allowing the population to be proud of their natural heritage once again.”



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 “Its real value has been to give new impetus to a small Portuguese village where only 20 people live.”

For Bárbara Cardoso, owner of Casa Villar Mayor, a country house situated in Vilar Maior, being part of a sustainable, nature-based tourism network has proven incredibly useful.

“By taking advantage of the complementary skills of all the partners, the network allows everyone involved to provide a more complete and innovative offering to customers. It has strengthened the appeal of the Greater Cõa Valley as a destination, boosted sales, and broadened everyone’s commitment to wild nature. In personal terms, it has also allowed me to meet

a large number of people from various sectors and to deepen my knowledge of rewilding.”

Centre stage

The Wild Cõa Network meet-up also saw members come together at Rewilding Portugal’s rewilding centre in Vale de Madeira, which opened in late 2021. The centre, which extends across three floors, acts as a multi-functional space – in addition to areas for exhibitions, photo displays, meetings and information about local rewilding efforts, there are also rooms for sleeping and dining,

The art of nature

With their history of rural depopulation, the communities around the Cõa River have long suffered from a loss of cultural heritage and tradition. Designed as a celebration of the Greater Cõa Valley’s fertile crossover between culture and nature, and to build new pride in it, the Rewilding Portugal team are organising the “CÕA – Corridor of Arts” Festival, which is set to take place in the summer of 2023. The event will see a range of local and international artists connect with communities in the valley to co-create works of art, using natural materials, respecting natural decay, and referencing the valley’s time-honoured artistic history.

“Today, rewilding efforts mean the Greater Cõa Valley is becoming an increasingly important wildlife corridor,” says Pedro Prata. “But the valley is also a corridor through time. Generation



after generation have contributed to and shared in artistic expression here. The CÕA Festival will celebrate this, reinforcing the special connection between local communities, art and wild nature, and offering new hope for the future.”

UK-based ecological artist Antony Lyons, who first visited the Greater Cõa Valley seven years ago, is co-creating an impressionistic video-sonic poem called the “Wild Cõa Symphony”, which has been commissioned by the Endangered Landscapes Programme. Premiering at the festival, this will weave together imagery, soundscapes and voices, inviting audiences to contemplate the changing landscape as a place of healing and repair for people and ecologies. Together with Portuguese archaeologist Bárbara Carvalho, Lyons has stayed in the valley for extended periods of time to produce the poem, engaging local communities and schools through workshops and artist-led walks.

“In the Greater Cõa Valley you really get a sense of what I call the ‘deep time’ story – of that longstanding connection between culture and nature here that is reflected in the archaeological sites of the area,” says Lyons. “It has been a real pleasure working with and taking inspiration from local people, and I hope the festival will enhance local pride and a sense of identity.”

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Lyons is also producing a land-art sculpture for the festival entitled “Habitat – A Treasure House”. This will be located in the Faia Brava Reserve.

Future focus

Today, the Rewilding Portugal team are working hard to rewild the Greater Cõa Valley, with the aim of creating a healthy, fully functioning and resilient natural landscape that supports an array of wildlife species. This, in turn, is enabling the development of a thriving nature-based economy and helping to restore and reinforce cultural values.

The new narrative for this unique part of

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members currently in the Wild Cõa Network.

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Portugal is already becoming an inspirational example of what could happen at a larger scale across the country.

The efforts of the team and the diverse benefits of rewilding were widely discussed at Portugal’s first ever rewilding symposium, which took place in September, just outside Lisbon. With a range of thought leaders and rewilding experts present, it saw many productive discussions take place around the opportunities and challenges of rewilding in Portugal.

“Awareness of rewilding is now on the increase in Portugal,” says Rewilding Europe’s Head of Rewilding Raquel Filgueiras. “One of the biggest questions that came out of the symposium was: ‘why isn’t rewilding in Portugal carried out more widely?’. The rewilding experience in the Greater Cõa Valley, where restored nature, communities and businesses are working so well together, is definitely one that could and should be replicated elsewhere.”