



Europe's new nature law can be a game changer for rewilding

Immediate action at scale is needed to restore nature across Europe. Spearheaded by the Nature Restoration Law, the enabling environment for rewilding has never been stronger, although meaningful implementation by EU Member States is now critical.

Ramping up restoration

Wild nature is fundamental to the way societies and economies function. It provides the food we eat, filters the water we drink, cleans the air we breathe, and is critical for our mental and physical well-being. Yet in Europe, most habitats and species are in poor condition, with only a fraction showing any improvement over recent years. To turn the tide of European biodiversity decline, and meet pressing challenges such as climate change, protecting the nature we have left isn't enough. The restoration of European landscapes, seascapes, and wildlife populations is essential – not only for the inherent value of nature itself – but because such restoration is key if we want to move towards a more liveable, resilient, and prosperous future.

In this regard, the Nature Restoration Law – which was adopted in June 2024 – is a groundbreaking piece of legislation. While concessions were made during its passage, it still represents a significant step forward for wild nature in Europe. As the first continent-wide, comprehensive law of its kind, it sets binding targets for EU Member States to restore



A griffon vulture flies over dehesa landscape in Spain.

degraded ecosystems. Restoration measures must cover at least 20% of the EU's degraded land and sea areas by 2030, and ultimately all ecosystems in need of restoration by 2050. Moving forwards, Member States now need to draw up and implement national restoration plans, in which they identify concrete restoration needs and the measures needed to meet these targets.

As a cornerstone of the European Green Deal, the adoption of the Nature Restoration Law is indicative of a growing commitment to ecological restoration in Europe and across the world, based on a heightened awareness of the critical importance of revitalising our ailing natural ecosystems. According to Arie Trouwborst, a professor of nature conservation law at Tilburg Law School in the Netherlands, the overall enabling

environment for restoration and rewilding in Europe has never been stronger.

"We're now halfway through the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the Global Biodiversity Framework has ambitious restoration targets, while the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030 and beyond also has a strong focus on ecological restoration. Following the adoption of the new law, we now have to wait and see how EU Member States pick up the baton."

The pivotal role of rewilding

The benefits of restoring wild nature in Europe are clear and compelling and the legal requirement to recover nature at scale is now in place. The next question is: how should EU Member States go about carrying out that restoration? The answer, in short, is by rewilding.

"The Nature Restoration Law offers a huge opportunity for amplifying and accelerating rewilding across the EU," says Rewilding Europe's Head of Upscaling, Amy Duthie. "For the first time, Member States are required to make detailed plans about how and where they will restore nature. We must ensure these plans, the first of which are being drawn up right now, are ambitious and bring back nature at scale. Rewilding has a huge role to play."

Diving into the terminology of the Nature Restoration Law, which has a distinctly 'wilder' and more holistic character than the Birds and Habitats Directives that preceded it, there is plenty of implicit and even some explicit support for rewilding as a means of enabling nature recovery. For instance, the law's recommended restoration measures include "allowing ecosystems to develop their own natural dynamics" and "promoting naturalness and wilderness".

"The law may not mention 'rewilding' specifically, but it contains a strong focus on ecosystem restoration and ecological dynamics," explains Arie Trouwborst. "Its overarching objective is the long-term, sustained recovery of

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biodiverse, functional, well-connected, and resilient ecosystems. This is precisely what rewilding aims for.

"It is also really important to note that the targets established by the law will mean making more space for nature in Europe, moving beyond current protected areas. On agricultural land that has been abandoned, for example, it makes sense to undertake restoration through a rewilding approach."

Working with nature is smarter and more cost-effective

The obligation to implement the Nature Restoration Law now lies with EU Member States. But all 27 countries have the flexibility to achieve the law's targets in their own way, as architects of their own restoration journeys. Each country now gets to design its own national restoration plan, encompassing measures that are based on their own assessments, scientific inputs, and consultations. These plans are flexible and tailored to match the needs and capacities of each country.

While restoration efforts will require initial investment and resources, the Nature Restoration Law emphasises a cooperative and adaptive approach. It encourages collaboration between Member States, stakeholders, and local communities to identify smart, cost-effective solutions.

As a progressive approach to nature recovery, rewilding is not only proven and available right now – it is also highly cost-effective. While traditional



Konik horses in the Rhodope Mountains.

conservation often relies on intensive, expensive, and ongoing management, rewilding leverages nature's own resilience, making large-scale recovery both feasible and sustainable. Restoring the natural processes that shape landscapes and allowing species to perform their functional role in nature saves financial resources, human resources, and time. Simply put, giving nature the space and freedom to restore itself, and then manage itself, is not only an economic no-brainer, but a smart solution based on the fact that natural processes that have shaped our lands and seas for millions of years.

Reintroducing populations of large, free-roaming herbivores such

as horses and Tauros, for example, is proven to be more cost-effective than year-round grazing, making it a more viable solution than mowing grasslands in places where extensive farming is disappearing. Beavers restore and protect wetlands for free: in Czechia, they recently built a dam that now protects a population of critically endangered crayfish, saving authorities – who were planning to build a concrete structure, rather than one of branches and mud – 1.2 million USD in the process.

"Natural regeneration of forests is cheaper than tree planting, saving the investment of money that will never be earned back," says Amy Duthie. "Natural predation is cheaper than culling. Scavenging is cheaper than carcass removal and disposal. And restoring floodplains is far smarter than building greater numbers of increasingly higher dykes. These examples illustrate how rewilding is about harnessing the power of nature and working with it in a smart way. The Nature Restoration Law encourages Member States to identify cost-effective solutions – rewilding can deliver them."

Carrots vs sticks

The passing of the Nature Restoration Law in June 2024 was a momentous day for nature. Yet the law faced an unprecedented disinformation campaign aimed at preventing it from passing into legislation, led by conservative and right-wing politicians and agriculture and fisheries lobbies. To reach a compromise, Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) sacrificed many of its critical obligations and targets, resulting in a final law substantially weaker than the original Commission proposal.

This pushback against laws to protect and restore European nature has become a battleground in EU parliamentary elections. The so-called "greenlash" against Europe's environmental focus is being fuelled by populist, far-right, and centre-right parties, who see it as fertile vote-winning territory.

There are many examples of this playing out. The return of the wolf in European landscapes has been accompanied by electoral gains for right-wing, conservation-sceptic parties, who have

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE LAW UNDERScores ITS RESONANCE AMONG EUROPEAN CITIZENS

positioned themselves as defenders of farmers' interests, while ignoring scientific evidence showing how non-lethal alternatives to wolf culling are both viable and preferable. Conservative MEPs have also framed nature and food security as being in opposition, despite the fact soil erosion currently costs EU farmers 1.25 billion euros each year in lost productivity, and that nature restoration can improve crop yields, enhance access to water, and reduce land degradation.

"I think this pushback against the Nature Restoration Law and nature in general in Europe has a lot to do with the general tendency of societies to polarise on everything, with debates driven by digitalisation and social media," says Arie Trouwborst. "Truths and science are continually disputed and everything is pushed into extremes."

In terms of the Nature Restoration Law, there will always be a discussion about whether "carrots" or "sticks" work best for realising nature recovery.

"It's clear that the big added value of the law is that it involves concrete deadlines and percentages, although anything that involves obligations will naturally generate pushback," says Arie Trouwborst. "In the past, countries have always been able to say they're complying with 'open-ended' legal instruments on conservation issues, when in reality on the ground, nothing much is happening. But nature conservation law does work in the EU. For example, I'm convinced many EU member states such as France, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Sweden would not have wolves today if it hadn't been for protection offered by the Bern Convention, and particularly the Habitats Directive."

Towards a better, wilder Europe

The Nature Restoration Law marks a significant step towards a greener and more nature-friendly future for Europe. It sets a precedent for international policies, laws, and regulations for nature conservation, restoration, and more responsible fishing, forestry, and agriculture.

Public support for the Nature Restoration Law underscores its resonance among European citizens. High levels of support in countries such as Italy, Hungary, and Poland reflect a broad endorsement of the law's objectives and reinforce the principle that public sentiment should guide policy decisions, rather than populist narratives.

Moving forwards, the EU and national governments now need to ensure that the Nature Restoration Law, climate and nature-friendly farming and forestry, and the sustainability of the European agricultural sector go hand in hand. This delicate task will be challenging and could require structural reforms in the EU's Common Agricultural Policy.

To help EU Member States integrate rewilding into their national restoration plans, Rewilding Europe, together with other members of the European Rewilding Coalition, has drawn up and published a set of practical guidelines.

"Rewilding organisations have decades of experience in supporting the recovery of nature across Europe," says Amy Duthie. "Now is the time to share our expertise and experience with policymakers, and apply practical rewilding at scale across the continent. When you think about the time, money, and effort it would take for people to restore nature themselves across the whole of Europe, it's clear that stepping back and letting nature lead is the only practical approach to achieving the Nature Restoration Law's goals."

The adoption of the Nature Restoration Law is not only a political and legislative triumph, but also pays testament to the EU's burgeoning commitment to environmental stewardship and nature recovery. Member States must now realise the law's ambition through decisive action, with rewilding offering the best pathway to meeting its targets.



A Tauros in Portugal's Greater Côa Valley.



Griffon vultures feed in Bulgaria's Rhodope Mountains.



A Eurasian beaver in the Scottish Highlands.



Non-lethal alternatives to wolf culling in Europe are both viable and preferable.