

Reconnecting with the Planet



What you can do for nature – what nature can do for you

“If we take care of the planet, the planet will take care of us.”

The Sacred Nature Initiative aims to inspire people to reconnect with the natural world, to rediscover our fundamental essence as a part of nature, and to join a movement to stop the destruction and restore what we've lost.

A particular focus is the incredible Mara-Serengeti ecosystem, the wildlife wonderland where vast herds of wild animals still roam free – and where humankind first emerged. But we're reaching out across Africa to the rest of the world. This is a call to action to everyone who cares – including the communities of East Africa – and you, too, wherever you are.

You will learn here why it's imperative that we reconnect and regain our ancient bonds with the natural world. We've set out too a long list of the things everyone can do to get involved and help. It's an urgent mission and we really hope you will join in.

It's not just about Africa. Clearly we love the amazing wildlife you can still find here. But this is a global movement. Nature exists all around you, everywhere. Look for it in your home and your neighbourhood, take a safari in your own countryside.

Let's all reconnect with nature, and rediscover what makes it so special, why it's sacred.

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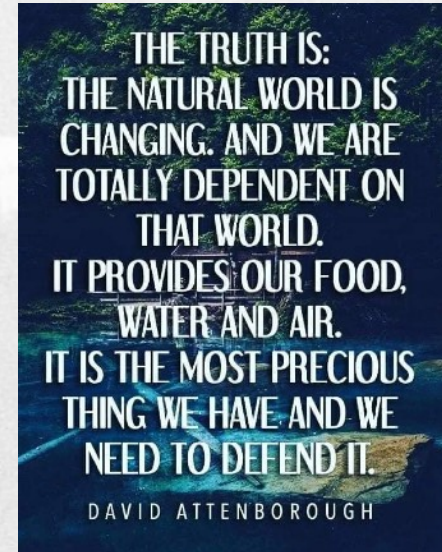


What nature does for us

The complex global ecosystem we call nature links every living thing together in a network of mutual dependency.

We depend totally on nature for our existence, our health and our well-being. Nature nurtures us and nourishes us. Nature inspires us and delights us. Nature created us. Without nature we are nothing. It is literally our life support system. Without colonies of fungus in the soil, nothing would grow. Without bacteria in our guts, we would be unable to digest our food. Without bees and other insects, there would be no crops. Without plankton in the ocean, there would be no marine life. The loss of any one part of the ecosystem risks the collapse of the rest.

We are a part of this ecosystem, not apart from it. Because we evolved in the natural world, our bodies and minds are totally integrated with it. Breaking the bond with nature directly affects our physical and mental health. Being 'in nature' is not just good for the soul, it's essential for our well-being. 'Nature experiences' are used as therapies against anxiety, depression and stress. It's no accident that holistic health practices are also called 'naturopathic medicine'.



Many of us know from experience how encounters with wildlife can uplift the spirit, whether it's a blaze of colour in a flowering meadow, the chattering of birds at your feeding table, the majesty of dolphins soaring across the ocean, the migration of millions of wildebeest over the plains, or the elemental excitement of sitting with a family of gorillas in the forest.



And yet . . .

We seem hell bent on destroying it – at an unprecedented and still increasing rate. As ecologist E. O. Wilson points out, it took 3.8 billion years for life on Earth to emerge and a mere 50 years for us to destroy most of it. Recent surveys report:

- 70% of the world's population of mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish has been lost in the past 40 years
- a 94% decline in the tropical subregions of the Americas is the largest fall observed in any part of the world
- 75% of the world's land area has been significantly altered by human activity
- the area of land devoted to agriculture has tripled since 1970
- timber harvesting has increased by 45%
- land degradation has reduced productivity over nearly a quarter of the planet's area
- two thirds of our oceans are experiencing increasing impacts from pollution and over-exploitation
- marine plastic pollution has increased tenfold since 1980, affecting more than 250 species, 86% of turtles, 44% of seabirds, 43% of marine animals
- marine species are rapidly dwindling, with only 3% of some species of large fish remaining
- 85% of wetlands have been lost
- 50% of live coral has been lost
- at least 25% of species – more than a million – face extinction.

In the past 50 years, human population has doubled, the global economy has quadrupled and global trade has grown tenfold. Humans are now overusing the Earth's capacity by more than 50%.

These cold statistics tell us that the prolific abundance of nature is crashing around us, in what is being called a 'great extinction'.

The loss of natural landscapes and their biodiversity is intimately tied up with climate change as well as with human well-being. Climate change is amplified by the loss of wild spaces such as forests and wetlands, but a changing climate in turn accelerates these losses. Forests and oceans absorb carbon dioxide, keeping the atmosphere and the climate in balance. But once that balance is upset, it's hard to restore it. While it may be too late now to halt global warming, the good news is that we possess the knowledge and the power to stop the destruction of the natural world. And this can help slow the worst effects of a shifting climate.



Nature and health

Our disconnection from the land and from nature correlates with an explosion in lifestyle syndromes such as obesity, diabetes, anxiety and depression, allergies and weakened immune systems.

Greater exposure to, or contact with, natural environments such as parks, woodlands and beaches is associated with better health and well-being, especially in higher income, urbanised societies. Living in greener areas is associated with lower probabilities of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, asthma, mental distress, and mortality among adults, and lower risks of obesity and myopia in children. People who live close to natural wilderness like the beach, mountains, or parks, tend to have better mental health and report sick less often than those living in congested urban settings.

A predominantly indoor lifestyle correlates too with a rise in allergies. It has long been known that people exposed to farm environments while young have a lower incidence of asthma, for example, than the general population.

Polluted air that we breathe in because of traffic, industrial fumes and indoor pollutants is potent enough to inflame our respiratory tract and trigger breathing troubles, bronchitis and asthma.

Many of these so-called lifestyle diseases stem from inflammatory conditions resulting from the depletion from our environment of the microorganisms with which humans co-evolved.

The human intestine hosts 100 trillion bacteria, 10–100 times more bacteria than cells in the human body. These bacteria come from the soil, water, spores in the air, and in our food and drink. This gut microbiota is important to central nervous system function. However, the increased time spent indoors and the sanitisation of our living conditions has meant that we are exposed to fewer of these microorganisms than before.

A balanced diet rich in natural foods keeps us healthy by maintaining bodily functions including our immune system. Conversely, the modern 'epidemic' of obesity, diabetes, heart disease and some cancers coincides with the prevalence of processed foodstuffs which are manufactured instead of grown. Our dependence – in the developed world – on the convenience of extended distribution chains and retail supermarkets is yet another example of our disconnection with nature. Quite literally, it makes us ill.

Our reliance on pharmaceutical health solutions is a further symptom of our disconnect from nature. Natural remedies, including a diet rich in natural foods, are an available option for many so-called disorders.

Time spent in nature is also an antidote for stress. It can lower blood pressure and stress hormone levels, reduce nervous system arousal, enhance immune system function, increase self-esteem, reduce anxiety and improve mood.

We need nature, nature needs us

It's clear that we need nature as much as nature needs us. It's essential that we slow and reverse the loss of the world's wild places and wild species that make up the global ecosystem.

It may seem distant and too far out of reach for each of us alone to directly tackle the loss of our planet's rain forests, savannas and wetlands. But there is a great deal that we can all do closer to home. Reconnecting with nature, valuing nature for its own sake, respecting, revering and enjoying nature – in your own locality and on your own terms – is absolutely vital if we're going to save the planet from its headlong rush to destruction.

We face three choices.

1 - Do nothing, and carry on as before.

A majority of people most likely wish they could continue the trajectory of their lives unchanged. But this is not an option that solves anything and it risks prolonging the causes of our problems.

Mary Robinson, former Irish president and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, says:

"Take it personally: this is your world that's being destroyed, your children's future that's being compromised. Get angry and get active."

This is something we can all do now.

2 - Wait for governments to act.

Already, governments around the world have failed to live up to their earlier commitments. And while some significant changes are taking place – notably in the use of renewable energy – it may prove to be too little, too late. A greater issue is that we lack global governance systems to enforce rogue states to comply. Chinese fishing fleets (for example) and Brazilian loggers have no incentive to stop their looting of the planet's natural resources.

3 - Take action yourself.

It may seem daunting to be tasked with saving the planet. But the reality is that the damage we're doing is the sum of many individual decisions and actions. If we fail to act as individuals, we are sealing our doom. But if we each choose to act, in whatever small way, we can collectively achieve a massive impact.



What you can do - 1

STOP THE DESTRUCTION

The loss of wild places and wildlife mostly happens outside our immediate view. When you eat a burger, someone far away may have cut down a swathe of rain forest in order to rear cattle and bring it to you. The palm oil in your processed foods, or in your make-up, most likely came from a plantation that was once rain forest. Forests were cleared too to make space to grow Kenya's famous tea, coffee and flowers. Your pension fund may have invested in mining or other projects that damage the environment. You can help stop this.

- Learn about the big destroyers of nature: mining, deforestation, swamp drainage, extraction and production of fossil fuels, manufacture of chemicals, plastics, metals and cement, and large scale agribusiness; road networks, housing estates, towns, cities.
- Think about the foods you eat and where they come from: far too much is flown around the world for our 'convenience'. The harvesting of far too much meat and fish involves destruction of natural environments on land and at sea. Plantations of crops such as soy, avocado, pineapples, bananas, tea, cotton and oil palm entail the destruction of vast swathes of natural landscape, especially tropical forests. Even so-called 'sustainable' plantations entail massive destruction and biodiversity loss.
- Palm oil is an ingredient in a huge range of foods, cosmetics and toiletries, but manufacturers do not always label it as such. Be aware and avoid it if you can.
- Rearing animals for food – and growing crops to feed them – is one the greatest reasons for rain forest destruction. Agricultural emissions of methane and nitrous oxide are one of the greatest causes of global warming. And industrial scale animal agriculture is one of the world's greatest consumers – and polluters – of water. Try to avoid the products of intensive farming. Eat less meat, even if it's just for a few days a week.
- In a similar way, large scale commercial fishing is devastating the marine ecosystem. For every kilo of fish sent to market, as much again is wasted as so-called 'by-catch'.
- Buy local produce if you can. Transporting foods around the globe, especially by air, is a major source of greenhouse gas emissions. Avoid out-of-season 'goodies' that have been flown half way round the world.
- Would you eat termites, grasshoppers or caterpillars? Many people do. Most of our foods were once wild species. Much of our seafood still is extracted – unsustainably – from the wild.
- Read the labels on foods you buy: Where did they come from? What do they contain? What claims are made for them and how legitimate are they? Descriptions such as 'green', 'eco-friendly' or 'farm fresh' have no meaning in law, and even the words 'organic' or 'sustainable' don't guarantee much. Be alert to false claims on the packaging.
- 'Greenwashing' – exaggerated claims of environmental friendliness – is rife and getting more brazen, even from firms who should know better.

- Buy less 'stuff' – washing machines, microwave ovens, TVs, phones, tablets, etc – and get them fixed instead of replaced. Swap, sell, trade or give away unwanted stuff.
- Many clothes are made from artificial fibres, plastics by another name. But the plantations that produce cotton, and the amount of water used to transform it into fabric, also stack up badly on their environmental impacts. Try to stay aware and make rational choices.
- Household laundry is a major source of waterborne pollution. The effluent is laden with detergents, and billions of micro-plastic particles from our clothes are flushed into the drains every time you run the washing machine. They end up in the sea, a carcinogenic risk in our food chain. Watch your laundry habits and run your wash only when you need to, with full loads.
- Think about your pets and their impact. Around 20% of forest-destroying plantation crops, as well as beef and marine catch, goes to feed cats and dogs. Dogs scare away birds and small mammals. Cats kill them. It's inevitable: it's what they do.
- Much of the world's paper is produced by felling boreal forests in Scandinavia, Canada and Russia. Toilet tissue is a product you use once and throw away – what a waste of trees! Even if it's produced from so-called sustainable forest plantations, they've still destroyed the region's original biodiversity.
- Population and growth is the single greatest threat: consider the implications for your own family.
- Don't buy wildlife products.
- Work from home if you can rather than commuting every day.
- Invest ethically. Watch where your investments go, do they help or hinder the environment?
- If you're in business, consider the impact on the environment of your operations, your products and your supply chain. Business should not be defined solely by profit and growth but also by a duty of care to people and to the planet. Over time, this will become obligatory.
- Whenever a mine is blasted, a plantation planted, a farm fenced, timber cut, a fishing fleet deployed, a dam constructed, crops sprayed – or funds invested in such schemes – someone made a decision that profit is more important than the planet. Let it not be you.
- Learn about your own community's historic relationship with the natural world, even if it means delving back centuries. The culture of many original societies reflected a much greater balance and reverence for nature.
- When you travel, do it with purpose, with an awareness of your impact, and a sense of responsibility.

Stephen Hawking once said: *"We are in danger of destroying ourselves by our greed and stupidity. We cannot remain looking inwards at ourselves on a small and increasingly polluted and overcrowded planet."*

What you can do - 2

BRING MORE NATURE INTO YOUR LIFE.

We've separated ourselves from the natural world by retreating into our houses, our cars and our places of work or study. Find ways to break down the barriers and get out more. We are part of nature, nature should be a part of our daily lives.

- Be curious about the natural world, learn about it, take photos, enjoy and celebrate it..
- Know and understand 'your place': everywhere is different, everywhere matters. The way we relate to 'place' is important to who we are. Love where you live.
- Feed the birds in your garden, backyard or window sill.
- Take up nature based activities: hiking, camping, climbing, fishing, photography, painting, scuba diving . . . there's a long list.



- Walk more. Watch and observe the things around you. Practice mindfulness, be in the 'now'.
- Take yourself on a Two Hour Safari into the countryside once a week.
- Organise trips.
- Volunteer in a conservation group, get involved, get out in the thick of it.
- Take nature-based vacations.
- Keep a nature journal.
- If you're a parent or teacher, teach your children to get out instead of staying glued to their devices.



Senses and instincts

Bushcraft expert Ray Mears emphasises the value of using all of your senses when you're out in nature. It's obvious we're going to see things, but how often do we consciously listen, feel, smell and taste what's going on around us? In the Okavango, I remember counting 26 different bird songs before I even rose from my camp bed one morning. There's the smell of the rain in Africa. The furry feel of a paper bark acacia, or a mossy oak. The intensely fresh flavours of foraged foods such as wild garlic, blackberries, crab apples and elderflowers.

We can use our natural instincts too. Our instincts and natural ability to survive were honed from the time our ancestors emerged in the African savanna. They may have fallen out of use but we still possess them:

- we can tell what the weather is going to do
- we can find our way from clues in the sky and on the ground
- we can deduce the time of day, the passage of the month and the cycle of the seasons
- we know what's dangerous, and what's not
- we naturally gravitate towards water and, when we need it, the company of other people.

Try it when you're out!



What you can do - 3

CHANGE ATTITUDES

Fiona Reynolds, Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge and former Director-General of the National Trust, writes about the 'beauty' that nature offers:

"We've become entranced by growth and measures, we've lost beauty and locked ourselves into a consumptive world. You can use beauty to engage people to win hearts and minds, emotions rooted in the sense of how we value ourselves."

- Find beauty in nature.
- Slow down, make less noise.
- Think about your relationship with wealth. Should life be defined by income, bank balance and possessions, or by relationships, experiences and learning?
- If you have the opportunity, study nature-related subjects. Read about it, write about it.
- Watch nature programmes and wildlife documentaries.
- Think about how you view wild 'things': insects, birds, animals with teeth, snakes, spiders, sharks, dolphins, fungus, bacteria . . . why is this? We need all of them!
- Share your passion: make your own documentaries and put them out on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube or whatever channel you prefer.
- Give talks. Write, post, tweet, share your thoughts about nature.
- Recruit others to the cause: set up community groups and nature networks.
- Lead walks and wildlife experiences in your local area.
- Write to your government officials and ask that they support the restoration of nature. Make your requests for action or assistance specific to the places you care about.
- Get your council or municipality to let roadside verges and other spaces grow wild and link together as wildlife corridors.
- Write to your National Parks authorities and ask what they are doing to rewild or otherwise restore the lands they control.
- Change the narrative: stop using frivolous words like 'parks' and 'game'; celebrate words like 'weeds' and 'overgrown'; encourage people to leave land alone rather than continually micro-manage it; must 'development' always entail 'destruction'?
- If we're living amid an environmental emergency, we shouldn't be culling wild species like foxes and badgers, wolves and cougars. Support campaigns that put wildlife above domestic animals.
- The big decisions about nature and the environment are made by governments and corporations, politicians and business executives. Use whatever leverage you have with pension funds, investments, councillors, representatives, senators and law makers. Write and demand they avoid supporting destructive projects and promote preservation and restoration.
- Lobby your local planners and politicians to make nature as high a priority as the shift to renewable energy.
- Follow people with impact: look how teenage Greta Thunberg became a global voice.

Finding the sacred in nature

Our collective disconnection from nature is a relatively recent phenomenon in historical terms. It can be traced to the 18th century Industrial Revolution, to which can be attributed the origins of global warming, to the post-war consumer boom of the 20th century, and to the more recent emergence of fast growing countries like Brazil, Indonesia and China into the modern global economy.

But possibly it goes back further, a lot further.

The old religions were nearly all nature based. We literally revered nature. But that stopped with the advent of mass religions which supplanted the ancient ways with the notion of the supremacy of humankind and of a life beyond Planet Earth.

The old religions revered the natural world because they knew how dependent we were on it. Whatever your beliefs, a reverence for nature is essential for the continuation of life on earth. We need to regain that fundamental respect for nature as something sacred.

Nature writer Eleanor o'Hanlon describes how her encounters with wild species deliver a deep spiritual transformation:

"Suddenly I was waking again to the burning, enchanted life of the world. I stepped out of my ordinary self into the space of light, and for a time that radiance lingered and shone out through the surface of visible things. They became transparent in the light. Even when I was home again, ringed with the noise and concrete of a busy London street, I stood before the ordinary blaze of a tree in autumn and watched in astonishment the leaping, rooted, dance of its flame."

Eden, she says, "is not simply a mythical place, or a metaphor for original innocence, or an outworn and divisive religious symbol."

It is a state of being, where we are "free to return to . . . in deep communion with the rest of life".



What you can do - 4

RESTORE AND REGENERATE

- Formal gardens can look lovely but they tend to be rather sterile from the point of view of the bees, butterflies and birds which should be buzzing around them if all were well. Reserve a portion of your garden to grow wild as a kind of 'cultivated wilderness'.
- Plant meadow grass, wild flowers and trees wherever you can find space.
- Grow your own herbs, fruit and vegetables, and encourage your family and friends to share the delight in doing so.
- Encourage people to grow things in otherwise wasted spaces and to sometimes just let it run wild. Think, for example, of roadside verges, hedgerows, car parks, graveyards, office premises, schools, colleges, churches and hospitals.
- Plant trees and shrubs.
- Stop using weedkillers and insecticides: their very purpose is to kill and disrupt the natural ecosystem.
- Plant things at work, inside and out, as well as at home.
- Grow your own Window Box Nature Reserve.
- Go foraging. Even in your backyard, you may find nettles, nuts, herbs, edible flowers and berries, depending on where you live and the time of year.
- When you travel, look for tour operators, destinations and packages that help protect and restore the environment rather than contributing to its erosion.



Small actions, big impact

IN SUMMARY

- 'First do no harm': measure and reduce your own environmental impact – at home, at school and at work.
- Reduce damage to the natural environment by becoming more aware of the choices you make.
- Get out more into the countryside wherever you are: take a Two Hour Safari once a week.
- Grow things: plant a nature reserve in your backyard or window box.
- Study, learn and share your passion for nature.
- Take up a nature-related activity.



THE BIG PICTURE

These tips are things we can all do. They'll make a difference for your own well-being, but will they truly make a big difference for the planet?

Collectively, we have to face up to the fact that big problems need big solutions. We need to think and act on a landscape scale, protect and restore entire ecosystems, and be ready to make radical shifts in the way we use land and the oceans. Only by protecting spaces and species will we turn the tide of destruction.

The big commercial organisations who have, for the most part, caused our problems are also those with the most influence, both on government policy and on remedial action. The key question is: Who are the real decision makers and how can we reach them?

If you're able to think big and use your influence, then let's please connect and work together.

Start your own Sacred Nature Initiative

Wildlife, nature, reconnecting with the planet, is not just about the iconic species we see on an African safari or an Alaskan whale watch. It all starts at home, with birds, bees, butterflies and all those myriad life forms that live around us. Take an interest in them, take care of them, and you're helping nature to take care of us.

You too can host your own Sacred Nature Initiative.

Are you involved in:

- a community group
- a local nature reserve
- a wildlife project
- a nature-based activity group?

Whatever it is, wherever it is, you can register as a Sacred Nature Initiative and become part of our global movement to promote greater respect for, and involvement with, the natural world.

The Sacred Nature [website is here >>>](#)



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