THE ECOLOGICAL UPLIFT

Wild animals in sufficiently large numbers and intact food chains play important roles for functional and biodiverse rangelands ecosystems that provide proper livelihood for pastoralists as well as goods and services for human society. Rewilding can restitute the ecological processes that make rangeland ecosystems functional. This requires a harmonization of needs of people and nature.

The web of life of Planet Earth consists of an intricate network of processes operating at local, landscape, regional, continental, and global levels. A key example at the global level are the marine currents that interact with the climate and impact all ecosystems around the world, including rangelands. These processes connect biomes, ecosystems and habitats. They link animals and human society. Their functioning determines how ecosystems provide rural and urban communities with the goods and services needed for their survival, wellbeing, and prosperity. This includes products derived from rangelands as well as the provision of water, the capture and storage of carbon, climate resilience, flood protection, and much more.

Grasslands, savannas, and shrublands have experienced heavy conversion to agriculture, with 97% decline of the North American tallgrass prairies and 79% of the South American Cerrado the highest. Many of the world's grassy ecosystems are used by humans, i.e., extensive rainfed systems with native vegetation grazed by mammalian herbivores that sustain human livelihoods through diverse services, such as the production of meat and fibres or provisioning of diverse recreational activities. Emerging threats are afforestation of rangelands for carbon capture, mining, and infrastructure development, climate change and desertification. Degradation of these systems threatens to erode these natural goods and services, thereby jeopardizing livelihoods across all sectors of society.

In recognition of the dramatic decline in the ecosystem functions of Planet Earth during the last 100+ years, more and more conservation organizations around the world have adopted a rewilding perspective. "Rewilding is an ambitious, science-based approach to ecological restoration, seeking to re-establish lost species diversity, restore natural processes and ecosystem resilience at scales"[1]. Unlike traditional conservation approaches, which often focus on preservation and intensive management, rewilding promotes resilient and self-sustaining ecosystems where natural processes drive recovery and the need for human management is significantly reduced. "Rewilding should not be viewed as the absence of human influence but rather as acknowledgement of the agency of non-human elements within ecosystems", maximizing their ability to provide goods and services for human communities.

A United Nations University – Institute for Environment and Human Security (EHS) assessment[2] of how rewilding (among six other 'new' land and water management approaches) could enhance the work of the UNCCD, found that rewilding's biggest contribution is to the "ecosystem health pillar" of the Sustainable Land Management (SLM) concept through its goal to recover ecological processes and establish self-maintaining natural ecosystems. Rewilding is a direct response to meeting the global

[1] "IUCN Rewilding Guidelines: A Global Standard for Ecological Recovery", June 2025, final draft for submission and endorsement by the IUCN World Conservation Congress, Abu Dhabi, 9-15 October 2025

[2] Described in a policy report and a paper in Frontiers in Sustainable Resource Management

objective of creating "ecological integrity," which is one of the founding principles of the 1992 Rio Earth Summit declaration on environment and development to guide countries toward sustainable development. In addition, rewilding significantly contributes to global ecosystem services, such as water management, climate change mitigation & adaptation, reducing impacts of wildfires and invasive alien species, biodiversity, and others.

Science increasingly understands that wild animals are the key ecosystem managers and engineers we need. Decreasing their numbers reduces the quantity and quality of natural goods and services ecosystems provide. Strengthening populations and ensuring that the key 'engineering' species are present in sufficiently large population numbers will enhance the resilience and productivity of nature we need for our own well-being and survival.

Over the last century, grassland management has intensified across the world, with the number of domestic ruminants increasing dramatically from 1.4 billion head to 3.4 billion. However, this historical increase of domestic livestock was preceded in the late nineteenth century by a massive extirpation of wild grazers, which were hunted, killed by diseases, or confined by expanding agricultural lands. The biomass of wild mammals (terrestrial & marine) today is an order of magnitude lower than that of livestock: 0.007 compared to 0.1 billion tons of carbon. Intense human land use of natural grasslands often leads to rapid, large declines in wild grassland vertebrates, with particularly severe impacts when associated to the loss of keystone species, such as prairie dogs, with cascading effects on many other species.

The reasons behind the increasing rise of rewilding initiatives across the Earth lies in the underlying vision of a world with again functioning ecosystems, where people and nature can thrive together. It is a positive counterforce against the commodification and industrialization of life in general. This includes preserving and strengthening not only natural systems, but also social and cultural ones that are part and parcel of the diversity and resilience of earth and therefore critical for the wellbeing of human society as such. The Rewilding movement should be seen as a natural ally for sustainable pastoralism and the restoration of functionally intact rangeland ecosystems.

A GRA position paper "**The Ecological Uplift**" outlines in detail the "rewilding position", proving claims with concrete examples and case studies, focusing on three pillars:

- ◊ More Wildlife Needed!
- ◊ Wilder Working Landscapes
- ◊ Enhancing Ecosystem Services

Here is a brief overview of the three pillars.

1. More Wildlife Needed!

Wild animals are ecosystem engineers and rangeland policies should recognize this and plan for a co-existence between pastoralists, ranchers, and wild animals.

Key messages

(1) Rebuild the ecological foundation of rangelands through wildlife comeback and management,
(2) Explore opportunities of replacing lost megafauna with ecological proxies/analogues,
(3) Promote innovative, practical methods for human-wildlife coexistence (HWC),
(4) Maintain and restore large migratory systems of wildlife,
(5) Recognize the important role of wildlife in the water cycle (ecohydrology),
(6) Understand the ecological role of wildfires,
(7) Recognize how wildlife comeback can improve ecosystem resilience against alien invasive species and climate change.

2. Rewilding and rangelands: Wilder Working Landscapes.

With over 80% of global rangelands used for livestock production, plus additional land used for solar energy, wind energy, and infrastructure, it is essential to consider how working lands can benefit from rewilding. From livelihoods and economic development to landowners and utilizing traditional ecological knowledge, rewilding brings benefits to people.

Livestock can under certain conditions (defined carrying capacity; co-existence with other species relevance in the food chain) and to some degree replace the original grazers in their functional roles. There is no "either-or" if planned properly with the functionality of the ecosystem as key target.

Key messages

The Global Rewilding Alliance outlines in its position paper in detail measures to be included in rangeland restoration policies and decisions:

(1) Finding best ecological management options for pastoralism through holistic regenerative grazing,
(2) Wildlife ranching and sustainable hunting enterprises can co-exist with rewilding,
(3) Promote the concept of wildlife communal conservancies,
(4) Restoration should benefit local economic development,
(5) Learn from wildlife friendly solar & wind energy developments,
(6) Apply traditional fire knowledge & prescribed burning,
(7) "Learn the language": Listening and partnering with landowners & land managers,
(8) Protected rangelands need to be larger and better managed,
(9) Innovative economic and financial mechanisms can increase available funding.

3. Enhance ecosystem services.

Ecosystem services are the benefits that society receives from nature. They are broadly classified in four different categories: provisioning, regulating, cultural, and supporting (see below graph). Provisioning ecosystem services include the contribution of essential goods such as food, fiber, and medicinal. Regulating ecosystem services include carbon sequestration, prevention of soil erosion, and natural flood control. Cultural ecosystem services include intellectual, inspirational, and recreational activities. The fourth category is supporting ecosystem services serves as the ecological foundation for all the other three services. It includes services that are dependent on ecological processes such as primary production and nutrient cycling and that are intimately related to biological diversity.

Key messages

(1) **Supporting services:** Recognize the key role of wildlife in driving essential natural processes, such as food webs, nutrient cycling, ecosystem productivity, energy flows, seed dispersal, soil formation, habitat provision, biodiversity, and biodiversity,
(2) **Regulating services:** Consider the critical role of wilder landscapes with wildlife plays for climate regulation, carbon storage, water purification and distribution, pollination, and controlling invasive alien species,
(3) **Provisioning services:** Recognize that healthy rangelands providing food, drinking water and medicinal products is dependent on strong supporting services through the functional ecology,
(4) **Cultural services:** Rediscover the role of wildlife as part of the spiritual and religious values, knowledge systems, and document and promote how wildlife provide recreational opportunities and generate economic opportunities.

(5) **Conduct economic valuation** of rangeland ecosystem services, as a way of promoting their protection and restoration.

About the Global Rewilding Alliance

The aim of the global rewilding community is to maintain and restore the functionality of Planet Earth's ecosystems, on land, in freshwater, and across the oceans, showing how this benefits the well-being and prosperity of all sectors of society.

The Global Rewilding Alliance was set up with the objective of mainstreaming rewilding globally by creating a movement of partners across all continents to meet that aim. Most of the currently 260+ organizations that joined the network address rewilding in a local or national context. By coming together at the global level, we aim to make our voice heard and to contribute to the development of global policy and decision-making that can build the foundation of a world where nature and people can co-exist in harmony.

The Alliance is developing several mechanisms to this end. As a global movement we have a global narrative that frames our goals and aspirations, which serves as the overarching framework for our work. Related to his global narrative, we build "centres of gravity" around key rewilding themes, including issues like wildfires, invasive alien species, and climate, and, recently, biomes such as wetlands and rangelands.

A **GRA Rangelands Working Group** was formed in January 2025 currently consisting of representatives from the Biophilia Foundation (USA), American Prairie (USA), Rewilding America Now (USA), Rewilding Chile, Rewilding Argentina, Enonkishu Conservancy (Kenya), Southern Plains Land Trust (USA), Corbett Foundation (India), Altyn Dala (Kazakhstan), the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences, Nelson Mandela University (South Africa), Utrecht University (The Netherlands), the University of Cape Town (South Africa), and GRA Secretariat.