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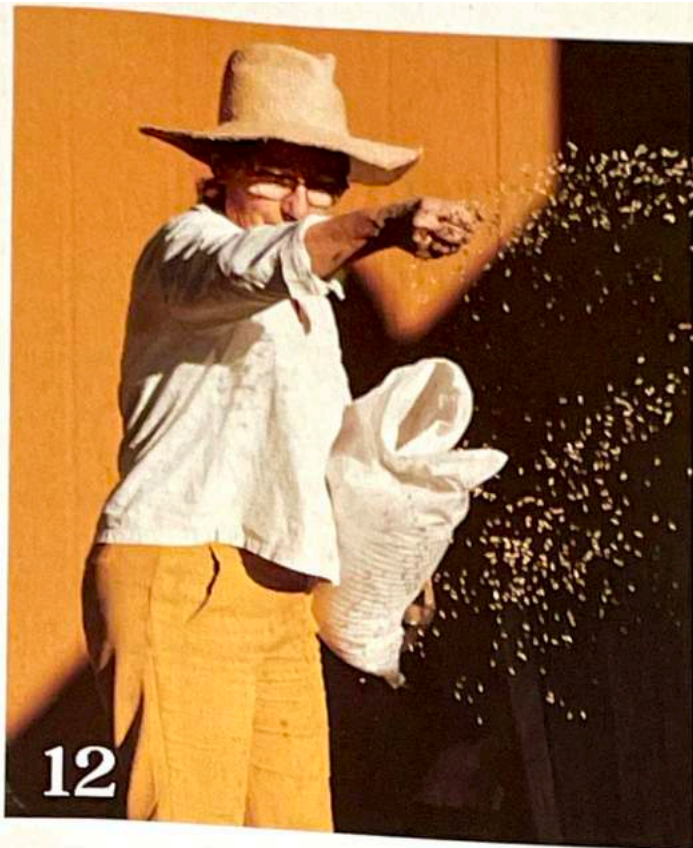
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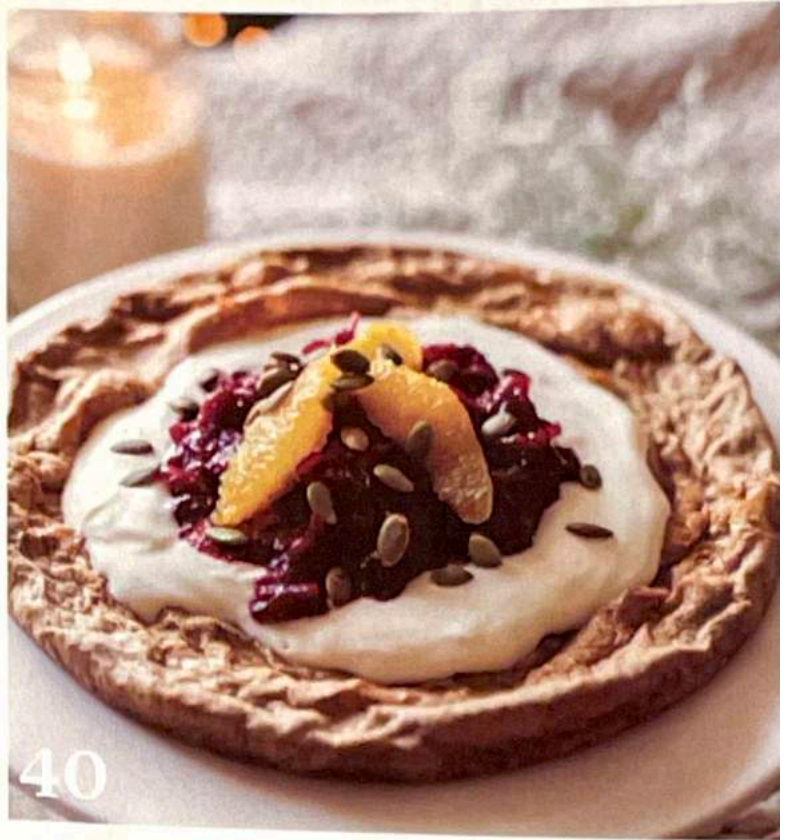
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FROM
SOUL
TO SOIL

Get involved in restoring hope
by restoring ecosystems

WORDS | Laura Bolt

Ecosystem restoration provides a powerful tool for global communities to connect, share knowledge, and make a difference from their backyards. From the rural farmlands of Spain to the glittering Hollywood Hills of the US, meet the changemakers restoring their surroundings and learn how you can be part of the solution.

While a job as ambitious as global ecosystem restoration may seem suited for only the most well-trained experts and scientists, you may be surprised to know that the driving factor of change is someone unexpected—you.

Ecosystems Restoration Communities (ERC) is a Netherlands-based organization that empowers everyday people around the globe to assist in ecosystem restoration through training, research, and hands-on opportunities, urging them to get involved in local projects. The group's first initiative was a camp in Spain, where a local farmer offered six hectares of a 200-hectare farm to volunteers, providing them with an opportunity to understand how to restore badly degraded agricultural land. From rebuilding coral reefs in Kenya to restoring soil in the forests damaged by wildfires in Paradise, California, the group currently oversees more than 50 initiatives worldwide.

For ERC Director Pieter van der Gaag, the group's role is to "focus on everyday people initiating projects, supporting them with knowledge and financial resources, and making them part of a community where a knowledge exchange can take place." Van der Gaag estimates that since the organization's inception, 25,000 people have participated in camps, internships, volunteer pop-ups, and trainings in their local areas. >

While enjoying the feeling of sand under our feet, running our fingers through a gurgling stream, or a quiet day may make us feel closer to nature, we often overlook the profound role our ecosystems play in our daily lives. And, as with many things in light of climate change, the future of these ecosystems is in jeopardy.

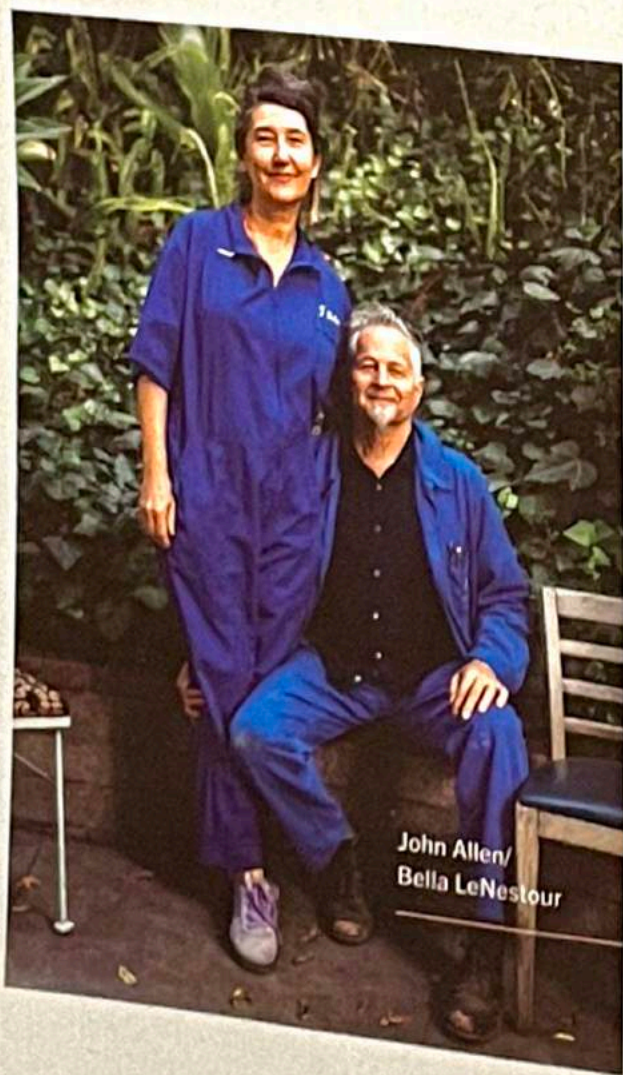
In June 2021, the United Nations (UN) announced the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, an initiative that aims to "assist in the recovery of ecosystems that have been degraded or destroyed, as well as conserve the ecosystems that are still intact." It's a timely goal—currently, almost three quarters of earth's land is degraded, and over 3 billion people are already feeling the effects of soil erosion. Unfortunately, 60 percent of the benefits that we acquire from Earth's ecosystems are used unsustainably.

From wetlands to deserts, restoring ecosystems across the globe has the potential to make a massive impact on climate change. In fact, the UN estimates that restoration could remove 13 to 26 gigatons of greenhouse gases from the atmosphere by 2030, as well as provide an economic upturn for millions of communities whose lives are impacted by the climate crisis.

To link people around the world, ERC created a knowledge exchange platform dubbed the Restoration Project Finder, which connects locals to share knowledge and opportunities. They also use a WhatsApp chat, where van der Gaag has seen a hand-drawn farming model submitted by a farmer in Turkey be implemented by a group in Bolivia.

"I want participants who are able to say, 'I want to be a lighthouse for others,'" he says. "Someone in Somalia can help someone in California understand how to deal with dryland situations and vice versa, and that global connection can build a very powerful movement to restore our relationship with this planet as people."

Throughout its initiatives, ERC has sought to put power back in the hands of locals who understand their land (and its needs) best. This community-first approach also underscores the economic impact that ecosystem restoration has, especially for Indigenous communities that rely on healthy lands to work and survive.



Van der Gaag points to an initiative in Mombasa, where a lack of mangroves caused local fisheries to decline, resulting in a food shortage that affected local slums. "The young people that lived there that had access to the internet realized what the problem was," he says. "So many mangroves had been destroyed for wood to burn and cook on, that now needed to be restored. Now there are over a million mangrove trees planted by local slum-dwelling youth, and it all started from the recognition of a real need. Projects like this create a real sense of empowerment that people can do this for themselves."

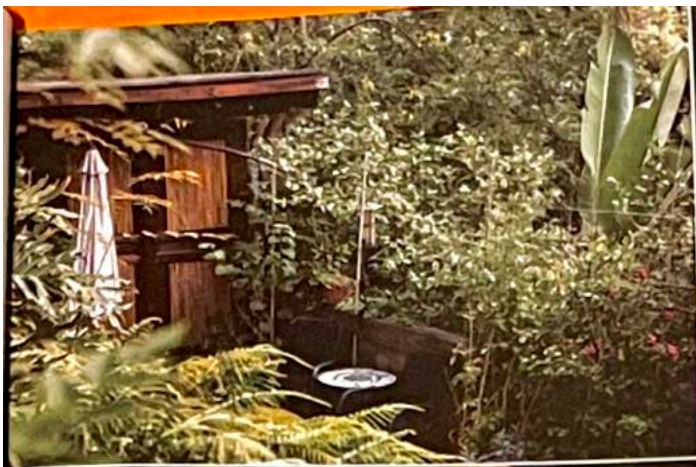
While it's vital to highlight the ecological and economic benefits of ERC's initiatives, it's also impossible to overlook the social and emotional benefits ecological restoration can have on urban communities, including those who struggle with climate anxiety and a lack of connection to nature.

In 2020, The Birdhouse became the first urban camp to join ERC. Co-founded by John Allen and his wife Bella LeNestour in 2016, the group describes itself as "part think tank and arts lab, part urban greening experiment and sustainable land use model."

Situated in the shadow of the iconic Hollywood sign, the Birdhouse sets itself apart with an arts-forward model that feels right at home in a city that capitalizes on change through creativity. "Our way of approaching climate change is through arts and ecology," says Allen. "I like to have a hand in both the spiritual world and the scientific one." In true Birdhouse fashion, Allen recently attended a flute making session conducted by the group's Tongva cultural advisor, retained in an effort to pay homage to the city's first inhabitants and to help "decolonize our minds so that we can decolonize the landscape."

The Birdhouse provides a slew of support for the community, including virtual events, in-person training, storytelling and singing sessions, farm to table cooking, and herbalism classes. Recently, the group has been engaging in local soil sampling, with results entered into ERC's database for analysis.

Allen notes that ecosystem restoration in urban areas is a unique process with real-life implications. For example, community gardens can have a significant effect on cooling their surrounding areas, which are often concrete and metal. "Rooftops across cityscapes are creating heat islands, pushing up hot air and creating precipitation in the atmosphere so that it doesn't fall as rain," he says. "That's a desert effect and creates an endless flood and drought cycle." The Birdhouse works to combat this by planting and maintaining trees to offset this heat. >

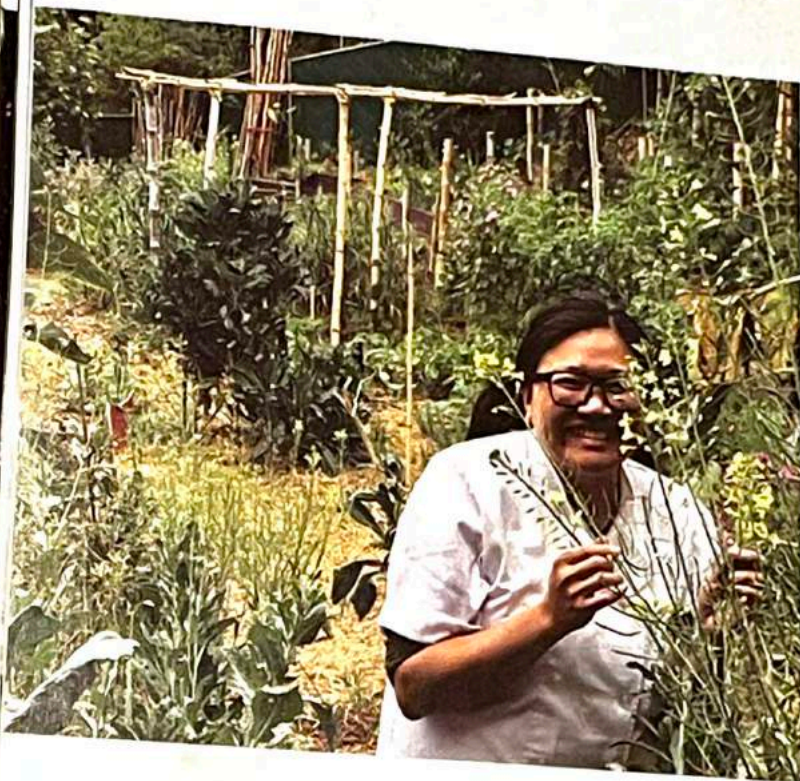


HOW TO VOLUNTEER WITH ERC

- **global opportunities:** long-term opportunities include camp building, communications, restoration, or testing a business idea
- **restoration activities:** shorter-term and skill-based opportunities at local sites
- **volunteer activities:** vary by location and duration; can include anything from photography to fundraising
- **learning opportunities:** include online courses like "Introduction to Ecosystem Restoration" and "Ecosystem Restoration Design"
- **other opportunities:** such as helping financially with a one-time or recurring donation

Ecosystem degradation

affects about 40 percent of the world's population. ERC is working to combat this with camps across 30 countries over six continents.



GET INVOLVED!

Volunteering isn't just good for the environment—it's also good for your health! Research has shown that volunteering has the following physical benefits:

- lower blood pressure
- less stress
- longer lifespan
- broader social connections
- reduced depression and anxiety

"Anywhere you have a green space in a city, it will be about a 10-degree difference from the street above into the garden below," he notes. "So, we don't just plant trees [and] protect them from urban enemies like rodents, deer, or traffic. We also use a special composting method that brings the right kind of microbial action back into the soil, making it more absorbent for any rainfall that does come."

For Allen and other members of the Birdhouse, these projects create a powerful connection with nature, which is often lost when living in a concrete jungle, as well as provide a sense of hope among bleak headlines and startling statistics. "We built this community because we don't want to be in isolation with this fear," he says. "We support each other in building our imagination. And when you have an imagination for something bright and possible, it does make you move from resignation to inspiration and action."

Whether you're interested in hydrology and rainfall or want to get your hands dirty in the soil, one of the great advantages of ERC is that almost anyone can get involved. In Los Angeles, the Birdhouse offers a revolving calendar of events and year-round workshops. Allen also encourages residents to plant trees at home, noting that "it only takes 280 acres of photosynthesis from grasses and trees to create and alter rainfall patterns. If people are willing to do it on their own land, we can help guide that."

For more far-flung opportunities, ERC offers both long- and short-term volunteer opportunities on its website. The organization also has volunteer positions for a variety of skills, from drone mapping and data capture to copywriting and photography.

Of course, there are also ways to get involved without going into the field. ERC offers online courses that provide a chance to get expert insight into the value of ecosystem restoration.

Whether you want to do your part to fight climate change, create real change for local farmers and families, or simply renew your connection with the earth and your community, taking action to restore ecosystems around the world can create a direct line from your soul to the earth. Turns out, change really does start at home. **A**

Laura Bolt is a Los Angeles-based journalist who has covered the environment, technology, and culture. Find her on Twitter/X: as @laura_bolt.