

APRIL 2023

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# WHY FUTURISTS MUST CONSIDER REWILDING

By Dr. Dana Klisanin, Ph.D.

The future of our planet depends on our ability to restore balance and harmony to nature. One solution that has gained traction in recent years is rewilding. Rewilding has its origins in conservation but also can be understood as a *narrative* with application across human systems, the human psyche, and planetary futures.

Image Source: Canva

The term *rewilding* was coined by conservationist biologists, Michael Soulé and Reed Noss, and later developed by Dan Foreman as a conservation strategy involving the restoration of natural ecosystems to their original state by reintroducing native species, removing invasive species, and allowing natural processes to take place.

As a narrative applied to human systems, rewilding involves looking at the ways we can learn from natural systems. For example, in:

- **Economics** -- rewilding involves moving away from a focus on infinite growth and towards a circular economy;
- **Education** -- rewilding involves ecological literacy that serves as a trintab guiding and informing curriculum design;
- **Healthcare** -- rewilding involves holistic approaches to wellbeing that include environmental factors; and
- **Business** -- the rewilding narrative involves ESG, green business practices, zero-waste, and sustainability.

As a futurist with a background in psychology, I have a special interest in applying rewilding to the human psyche and exploring its applications to futures. To better communicate what I mean by rewilding the human psyche, let's briefly return to conservation rewilding.

Conservation rewilding or wilderness restoration assumes that each generation perceives the current state of nature as the norm. This gradual loss of exposure to the natural world happens as neighborhoods expand and consume nearby forests and farmland. As a result, each generation has less exposure to nature than their predecessors, leading to differences in experiences and perceptions of the natural world. Grandfather's memories of "playing outside," differ from our own, and so forth, ad infinitum.

Let's put a number behind this perception of loss from one generation to the next: Each year, the world loses about 10 million hectares (24.7 million acres) of forest area, equal to 27 soccer fields per minute.

But the loss of land represents only one aspect of loss. It also comes with the loss of biodiversity, too:

- Since 1970, the world has lost 68% of its vertebrate wildlife population.
- More than 70% of the world's fish species are fully exploited, over-exploited, or depleted.
- Up to 1 million species are threatened with extinction, many within decades.

Holding these thoughts in mind, posit, if you will, the same gradual loss taking place within us – as an interior process. Imagine for every acre or hectare of wilderness lost, we've lost a concomitant interior space.

***What does such loss look like inside us?  
Inside the human psyche?***

One descriptor comes readily to mind: emptiness. Another, isolation, follows closely behind.

- Depression is a leading cause of disability worldwide and is a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease.
- Every year, more people die as a result of suicide than HIV, malaria or breast cancer -- or war and homicide.

A growing body of evidence strongly suggests that our external and interior landscapes are inextricably entwined. We know that the loss of natural habitats can lead to increased levels of psychological

distress, as well as cognitive decline. Conversely, exposure to natural environments can improve mental health by reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress. The richness of plant and bird species in a landscape improves mental health. And childhood exposure to green spaces, including parks and forests, can reduce the risk of developing psychiatric disorders later in life.

The loss of natural habitats can contribute to a sense of disconnection from the natural world, leading to what has been called "nature deficit disorder." This disconnection can lead to feelings of loneliness, isolation, and a lack of meaning and purpose in life. In contrast, spending time in natural environments has been shown to promote feelings of connectedness and belonging, leading to a greater sense of well-being.



Image Source: Canva

***We are continuing to learn about the powerful impact our exterior landscape has on our interior landscape, but there's no doubt the impact is real.***

Rewilding futures begins with taking this recognition to heart within ourselves and reflecting it in our work. As futurists, some of the key reasons for considering rewilding include:

- Restoring biodiversity through rewilding is essential for maintaining ecosystem stability and promoting ecosystem resilience. By reintroducing species and restoring habitats, rewilding can play a crucial role in sustaining the natural systems that support life on Earth.
- Rewilding has the potential to mitigate climate change by increasing carbon sequestration and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The restoration of forests, wetlands, and other natural habitats can help to sequester carbon and reduce the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. This makes rewilding a valuable tool in the fight against climate change.
- Rewilding can create economic opportunities through ecotourism and the restoration of ecosystem services like water purification and pollination. By generating revenue for local communities and creating jobs, rewilding can contribute to sustainable economic growth and development.
- Rewilding can support psychological wellbeing, reduce rates of depression, suicide, and increase feelings of connectedness and belonging.

- As a scalable solution, rewilding can be implemented at various levels, from small-scale restoration projects to large-scale conservation initiatives. This makes it adaptable to different contexts and applicable in both urban and rural areas.

One of our many roles as futurists is helping people see possibilities. Through rewilding, we can help others recognize the intimate relationship that exists between the exterior landscape and the human psyche. By doing so, we can impact thoughts and feelings, and with them, attitudes and behaviors. Consumptive behaviors and the destructive ecological practices arising from them can change – and must change. A recent Synthesis Report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, drives home the point:

***Global greenhouse gas emissions have continued to increase, with unequal historical and ongoing contributions arising from unsustainable energy use, land use and land-use change, lifestyles and patterns of consumption and production across regions, between and within countries, and among individuals. (IPCC, 2023)***

Rewilding is not just about restoring ecosystems -- it is a narrative. Rewilding tells us that through restoring our relationship with nature, we can create healthy futures for ourselves and for the planet. It's a daunting challenge, but one that is essential if we are to address the pressing issue of climate change and simultaneously protect both the exterior and interior landscapes of future generations.

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***Dana Klisanin, Ph.D., co-founder of Rewilding: Lab and one of Forbes' "50 Leading Female Futurists," is a visionary psychologist using storytelling, the arts, and design to inspire creativity and rejuvenate the minds of today's leaders and workforce. Her work fosters well-being, corporate social responsibility, sustainability, and regenerative possibilities for our world. Currently, Dr. Klisanin is conducting research on the existential risk posed by ignoring the impacts of climate change on the human psyche. Her innovative work has earned recognition from the World Futures Studies Federation and the American Psychological Association, and her insights have been featured in prominent media outlets such as BBC, TIME, and Fast Company. In addition to her professional work, Dr. Klisanin has written, Future Hack, a sci-fi novel for middle-grade students. The novel introduces anticipatory thinking and aims to inspire environmental action. The book is set to release in October 2023.***