

#RESTORENATURE

ICONIC PLACES

ON A PATH TO RECOVERY



A photo journey through Europe's iconic nature restoration stories

Nature is our life support, providing food, water, shelter, and climate stability for us and countless other species. Yet, across Europe, nature is under immense pressure. Species are disappearing, while climate change is placing even greater pressure on ecosystems and the communities that depend on them – with headline after headline underlining what is at stake.

This photo series tells a different side to the story: one of hope and action.

Photographers across Europe capture some of the continent's most-cherished nature sites, and how local communities, conservationists, scientists, and businesses are working at the heart of efforts to bring them back to health.

Their work spans glorious habitats across different parts of Europe – from Austria's floodplain forests grazed by horses, to freshwater stewardship in Ireland's Lough Guitane, to children rebuilding lost relationships with vultures in Bulgarian borderlands, to fishers, divers, and scientists working with other community members to restore habitats for seahorses on the Portuguese coastline.

And it talks too, about how people work together, sometimes in unexpected ways, to give nature the space to rebloom: NGOs working with private landowners to rehabilitate wetlands; schoolchildren working with conservationists to protect rare birds; fishers supporting marine conservation research. Together, they show that nature recovery is driven by collaboration and the people working every day to help nature thrive again.

The series shows restoration in action, and how ecological recovery and human well-being are deeply connected.

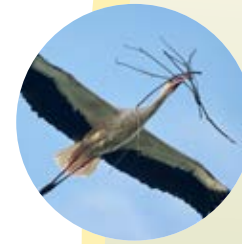
These stories come at a pivotal moment. Following the adoption of the hard-won EU Nature Restoration Law in 2024, countries across the EU are now preparing National Nature Restoration Plans that will guide how ecosystems are restored in the years ahead.

Many of the projects featured here began years before the new law was adopted. They now offer valuable lessons for putting it into practice. They show what can become possible when people have the support and resources to work for and together with nature.

Draft National Restoration Plans are due by 1 September 2026 – with final drafts due by 2027. This will set the direction for bloc-wide nature restoration for the benefit of nature and people.

Nature restoration requires commitment, time, knowledge, cooperation, resources, trust, imagination and a willingness to work across differences.

The people in these photographs are bringing all these elements together and their stories offer us more than hope. They show that joining forces to give nature the space to rebound brings its rewards in health, resilience, livelihoods, and safety.



AUSTRIA

RESTORING THE MORAVA FLOODPLAIN



BULGARIA

RESTORING THE BORDERLANDS



IRELAND

LIFE AT THE SOURCE



PORTUGAL

WHERE SEAHORSES LIVE AMONGST WASTE



SPAIN

WHERE THE MARSH MEETS THE SEA

AUSTRIA

RESTORING THE MORAVA FLOODPLAIN

Nestled along the Morava River on the Austrian–Slovak border, the Untere Marchauen Nature Reserve is a remarkable floodplain landscape jointly owned and managed by WWF Austria and a private landowner.

LOCATION: Marchauen Nature Reserve, Austria

PICTURES BY: Johannes Zinner

WRITTEN BY: Jurrien Westerhof

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Cattle farmers Julia and Vinzenz Harbich specialise in conservation grazing, managing both smaller and larger areas. Depending on the size of the area, they select the right number of animals, choosing breeds that are well adapted to thrive on the resources the landscape naturally provides.

Covering more than 1,100 hectares, the reserve is one of Austria's most valuable conservation areas. Ancient floodplain forests of willow, poplar, oak, elm, and ash cover two-thirds of the site, while a third is made up of wetlands, swamps, and species-rich meadows. Subtle variations in elevation, soils, and flooding patterns create a rich mosaic of habitats that support exceptional biodiversity.

More than a decade ago, WWF Austria reintroduced semi-wild horses and grazing cattle to restore the natural processes that once shaped this landscape. As ecosystem engineers, these animals graze, trample, and fertilise the land, creating a diverse patchwork of habitats for plants, fungi, insects, birds, and other wildlife. Unlike conventional livestock, the horses remain in the reserve year-round and forage naturally throughout the winter, feeding not only on grasses but also on shrubs, branches, and tree bark. Their presence has triggered a cascade of natural changes across the landscape.

The results have been remarkable. After an absence of nearly a century from the area, large grazers have helped restore ecological dynamics that were once lost. Monitoring shows a significant increase in biodiversity in the reserve. That includes the return and recovery of rare and specialised species such as dung beetles, which have become increasingly scarce elsewhere in Austria.

Today, the horses and cattle are an integral part of WWF's restoration strategy, helping to maintain a landscape driven by natural processes. The Untere Marchauen Nature Reserve stands as a powerful example of how people can work with nature to bring back biodiversity and safeguard Europe's natural heritage for future generations.

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Julia Harbich and her husband Vinzenz are in the area at least once a week to look after their cattle.

"Our cattle don't just graze. They help keep the floodplain meadow open and alive. Without them, the land would slowly turn into scrub."

— VINZENZ HARBICH

One of Julia's and Vinzenz's cows, foraging in a patch of natural forest.



Christoph Roland is an ornithologist by profession and works at the Untere Marchauen Nature Reserve. One of his responsibilities is to look after the herd of semi-wild horses that graze in the reserve.



"The horses don't just maintain the land, they transform it. Their grazing creates space for wildflowers, insects, and birds to return, bringing real diversity back to the floodplain meadow."

— CHRISTOPH ROLAND





Marion Schindlauer is biologist and ornithologist by profession. One of her tasks is to monitor the breeding places of rare bird species, like the Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*) or White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*).



In the nature reserve, Christoph Rolan also finds time to pursue his hobby: nature photography.

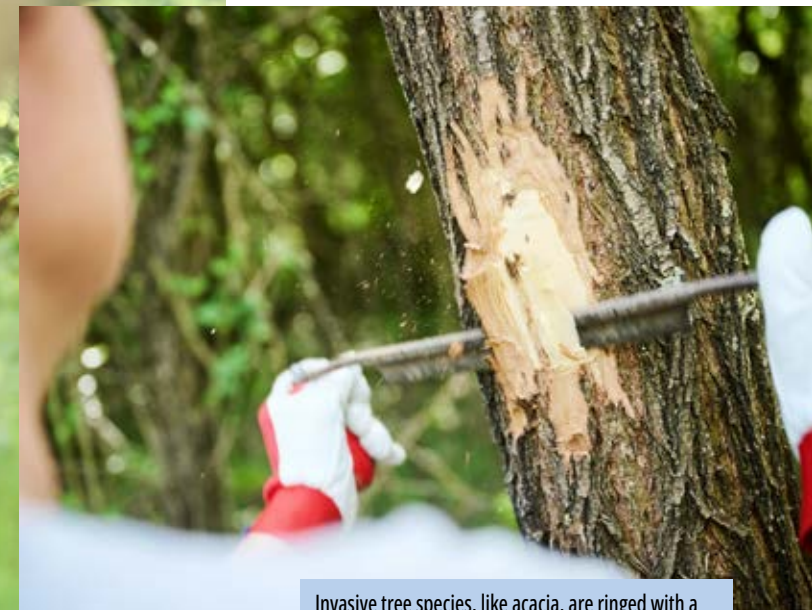
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Parts of the forest and meadows are grazed for a short period to protect the valuable vegetation. Here, Marion and Christoph install a temporary fence. It will be removed again a few weeks later so that it doesn't hinder wildlife like red deer.



Restoration work also involves cutting back encroaching shrubs that gradually spread into open land. In recent years, however, more areas have been maintained through grazing, helping to keep the landscape open in a more natural way.



Invasive tree species, like acacia, are ringed with a special tool. When the bark is removed, trees usually die without strong reproduction via their roots.

"We don't 'fix' this landscape, we support it. The real progress is seeing biodiversity return to a place where it had quietly disappeared."

— MARION SCHINDLAUER



Magdalena von der Thannen (right) and **Anna Lindenberger** (left) from BOKU University in Vienna study how restored floodplain meadows can support climate protection. Their research shows that extensively grazed wetlands can act as net carbon sinks, even in areas affected by regular flooding. Here, they are collecting and analysing soil samples, while a herd of horses rests in the shade of a tree and a floodplain pond slowly recedes under the spring sun.

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“Even after strong floods, this landscape keeps working for the climate, showing how powerful intact ecosystems truly are.”

— ANNA LINDENBERGER



Anna inspecting part of the carbon flux measurement platform.



"Restoring nature means working with it, not against it. Healthy wetlands sustain both the environment and the people connected to it."

— MAGDALENA VON DER THANNEN



The White Stork is one of the most iconic inhabitants of the Untere Marchauen Nature Reserve. Home to one of Central Europe's largest white stork colonies, the reserve provides ideal breeding, resting, and feeding habitats. Their presence is a strong indicator of the health and biodiversity of this unique floodplain ecosystem.



A stork bringing branches for the spring renovation of its nest.



The dung of cows and horses plays a vital role in the ecosystem. It provides habitat for dozens of insect species, which in turn serve as food for more than 100 bird species. Dung also contributes to the natural carbon cycle, as dung beetles transport organic matter into the soil. Their activity also creates healthier conditions for plants to grow. What seems insignificant at first is actually a small but vital part of nature's cycle.





Iris sibirica is a typical eastern european meadow species, that is endangered in Austria, and can be found in the meadows of the nature reserve. © Michael Stelzhammer



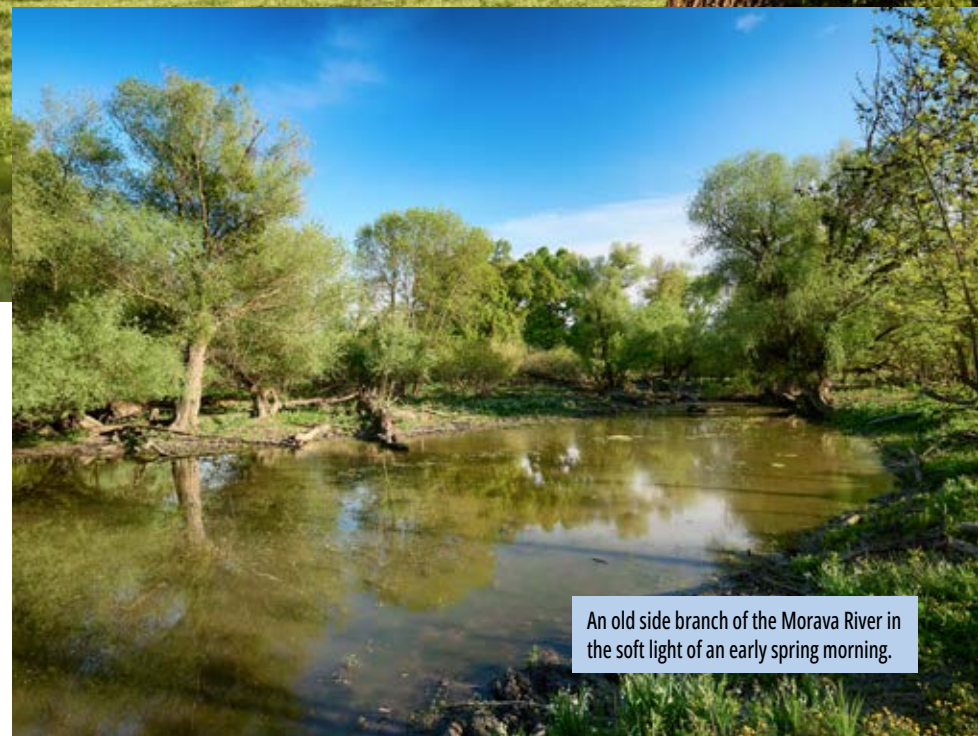
Dianthus collinus is a very rare plant species that, in Austria, can only be found in a few meadows within Untere Marchauen. © WWF Stelzhammer



Floodplain meadows and age-old oak trees are typical for Untere Marchauen Nature Reserve.

The WWF Auenreservat Marchegg is home to a rich variety of flora and fauna shaped by its unique floodplain landscape. Wet meadows, forests, and seasonal wetlands provide habitats for numerous bird species, amphibians, insects, and mammals. Rare plants thrive in the nutrient-rich soils, while old trees and open grasslands support species such as white storks, deer, frogs, and countless pollinators. The dynamic interaction between water, vegetation, and grazing animals creates a diverse ecosystem that changes throughout the seasons and supports high biodiversity.

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An old side branch of the Morava River in the soft light of an early spring morning.



The meadows and forests of the nature reserve 'Untere Marchauen' are part of the larger Morava floodplains. During floodings, large parts of the floodplain are inundated, and they play a very important role in flood risk reduction for downstream cities like Bratislava. These floodings also play a crucial role for the ecosystem. But due to climate change and river regulation, such floods occur less and less often.



BULGARIA

RESTORING THE BORDERLANDS

Stories from the Eastern Rhodopes

LOCATION: Eastern Rhodopes, Bulgaria

PICTURES BY: Dobromir Ivanov

WRITTEN BY: Marina Evgenieva

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Aerial view of the Arda River meanders in the Eastern Rhodopes, Bulgaria. The river winds through a lush green valley, surrounded by steep, rocky slopes. In the background, a large reservoir is visible, nestled between rolling hills. The foreground shows rugged, rocky terrain with patches of green vegetation.

Ancient volcanic ridges rise above the meanders of the Arda River near Madzharovo. The scars of mining activity are still visible on their slopes, bearing witness to an industry that left a deep mark on both the landscape and the lives of local people. Today, this land tells a different story: one where the recovery of ecosystems and wildlife is helping revitalise local communities and shaping the future of Bulgaria's Eastern Rhodopes together.

Straddling Bulgaria's borders with Greece and Turkey lies one of Europe's least-known biodiversity hotspots. Once part of the Iron Curtain and today the Green Belt of Europe, the Eastern Rhodopes are a place of dramatic change and rich wildlife. At the heart of the region lies the town of Madzharovo.

Set among the remains of an ancient volcanic complex, Madzharovo developed from a network of small settlements into an industrial mining centre during the second half of the twentieth century. After mining activities ceased at the end of the century, people began to leave and the industrial rhythm gradually gave way to nature's recovery.

Today, the Eastern Rhodopes and the Madzharovo region are among Bulgaria's most important conservation areas. For more than three decades, the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) has been working to bring back this unique landscape. Together with local partners, BSPB restores habitats, reduces threats to wildlife, and strengthens the relationship between people and nature.

Among the main activities are the conservation of threatened species such as the Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*), the restoration of key ecological relationships, the reduction of poaching and the use of poisoned bait, and the improvement of coexistence between people and wildlife.

One of the initiatives is the Vulture School where vultures born in captivity are prepared for life in the wild. Before their release, the birds are fitted with satellite transmitters, while children from local schools choose their names and symbolically become their guardians.

Local communities and traditional livestock farming play an important role in supporting these conservation efforts. Today, the Eastern Rhodopes are also attracting a new generation of residents and entrepreneurs who choose to build their lives closer to nature.

Work is underway to include this unique region in Bulgaria's Nature Restoration Plan in line with the EU Nature Restoration Law, a step that would ensure its long-term management and conservation. The story of the region, however, goes beyond the scope of a single conservation project. It is a story of resilience, coexistence, and hope. It is a story whose significance reaches far beyond the borders of a single country.

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In the town park, a Eurasian Scops Owl (*Otus scops*) rests quietly among the branches. Across many parts of Europe, populations of this protected species are declining due to intensive agriculture, pesticide use, and habitat loss.



The Madzharovo Museum: The flag of the communist-era mining enterprise, ore samples, and old tools are among the few material traces that remain from a bygone era.



A Giant Peacock Moth (*Saturnia pyri*) rests on the wall of a house in Madzharovo during the day. Europe's largest moth is an indicator of well-preserved traditional landscapes. The species depends on old fruit trees and diverse habitats that are becoming increasingly rare.

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Known locally as the Orpheus Flower, *Haberlea rhodopensis* is one of the few "resurrection plants" in the world. After prolonged drought, it can dry out completely and then recover on its first contact with water. Today, scientists study the mechanisms behind this remarkable resilience, which may help agriculture adapt to climate change.

A Black Kite (Milvus migrans) is perched on a gnarled, moss-covered tree branch. The bird has dark brown plumage, a yellowish-brown head, and a sharp, hooked beak. It is looking towards the left. The background is a blurred green forest.

One of BSPB's vulture feeding sites in the Eastern Rhodopes. Three vulture species, a Hooded Crow (*Corvus cornix*) and Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) feed undisturbed on food provided by conservationists.



Marin Kurtev first arrived in Madzharovo in 1995 as a volunteer on vulture conservation projects. From 2005 to 2011, he worked at the BSPB Eastern Rhodopes Nature Conservation Centre, including serving as its manager. Today, he and his family run Nature Madzharovo, a company specialising in nature-based tourism, including kayaking, rafting, wildlife watching, and photography.



“At first, conservationists and people who wanted to develop tourism were not viewed very positively. But gradually the local community realised that this was the future.”

— MARIN KURTEV

The 2026 class of the Vulture School includes eleven birds. They hatched in zoos and wildlife rescue centres in Bulgaria, England, and the Czech Republic before being brought to the Eastern Rhodopes to prepare for life in the wild.



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A team of veterinarians from the Green Balkans Wildlife Rescue Center, BSPB's partner in the Vulture School programme, carries out health checks and records the birds' weight.



Schoolchildren from three villages in the Eastern Rhodopes became symbolic guardians of the young birds. They learned about the species and watched the Egyptian Vultures being tagged.



Satellite transmitters help conservationists follow the lives of released Egyptian Vulture and respond quickly when assistance is needed.



“Older people remember these birds because they were a common sight in their youth. That is why it is so important to work in places where the species is beginning to return, so that people know it and value it.”

— DR. ARKUMAREV



Dr. Volen Arkumarev and **Dr. Vladimir Dobrev** have been connected with BSPB since childhood and have worked on Egyptian Vulture conservation for nearly 20 years.

According to Dr Dobrev, awareness of the Egyptian Vulture is far greater today than it was 20 years ago. “Many more people now understand the challenges vultures face, thanks to the efforts of many organisations and the work that has been carried out for decades.”

"Our children did not know much about birds before. Now they do, and they are becoming more interested in nature. That means they will help protect it."

— GYULZADE ISMAIL



Gyulzade Ismail hosts the educational part of the Vulture School event.



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Veli Veli has been raising livestock since 2005, keeping traditional local breeds. Every day from spring until autumn, he walks dozens of kilometres with his cattle. He is pleased that he can contribute to feeding the vultures in the region.



**"Nature leaves no empty spaces;
it knows what it is doing."**

— VELI VELI

The Dunya traditional folklore group
from the village of Chernichevo

"We value our nature here. Nothing
is wasted. We have ancient forests,
lush meadows, and birds."

— THE DUNYA GROUP SAY PROUDLY



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Zlatka Karaslavova owns The Old Nest, one of the region's most beloved guesthouses. Her mother was born in Madzharovo, and as a child Zlatka could visit her grandparents only once a year because access to the border zone required a special permit. In 2024, she moved permanently to the town.

"I'm in paradise. A lifetime in Sofia and then to live here – do you know how wonderful that is?"

— ZLATKA KARASLAVOVA





From Sofia, through the Netherlands, to the Eastern Rhodopes – that has been **Petar Hristov's** journey so far. He first came to Madzharovo in 2017 to watch birds. The following year, he became a volunteer guarding Egyptian Vulture nests. Today, his life is closely connected to BSPB and the Eastern Rhodopes. He has bought five decares of land with a spectacular view and two ruined stone houses, which he plans to restore. He is developing a small campsite with guest rooms and space for tents and camper vans, to be called Bird Inn.

“Coming here fulfilled a dream I didn’t even know I had. I found a way to be close to nature, meet wonderful people, and earn a living at the same time. It’s perfect”

— PETAR HRISTOV



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IRELAND

LIFE AT THE SOURCE

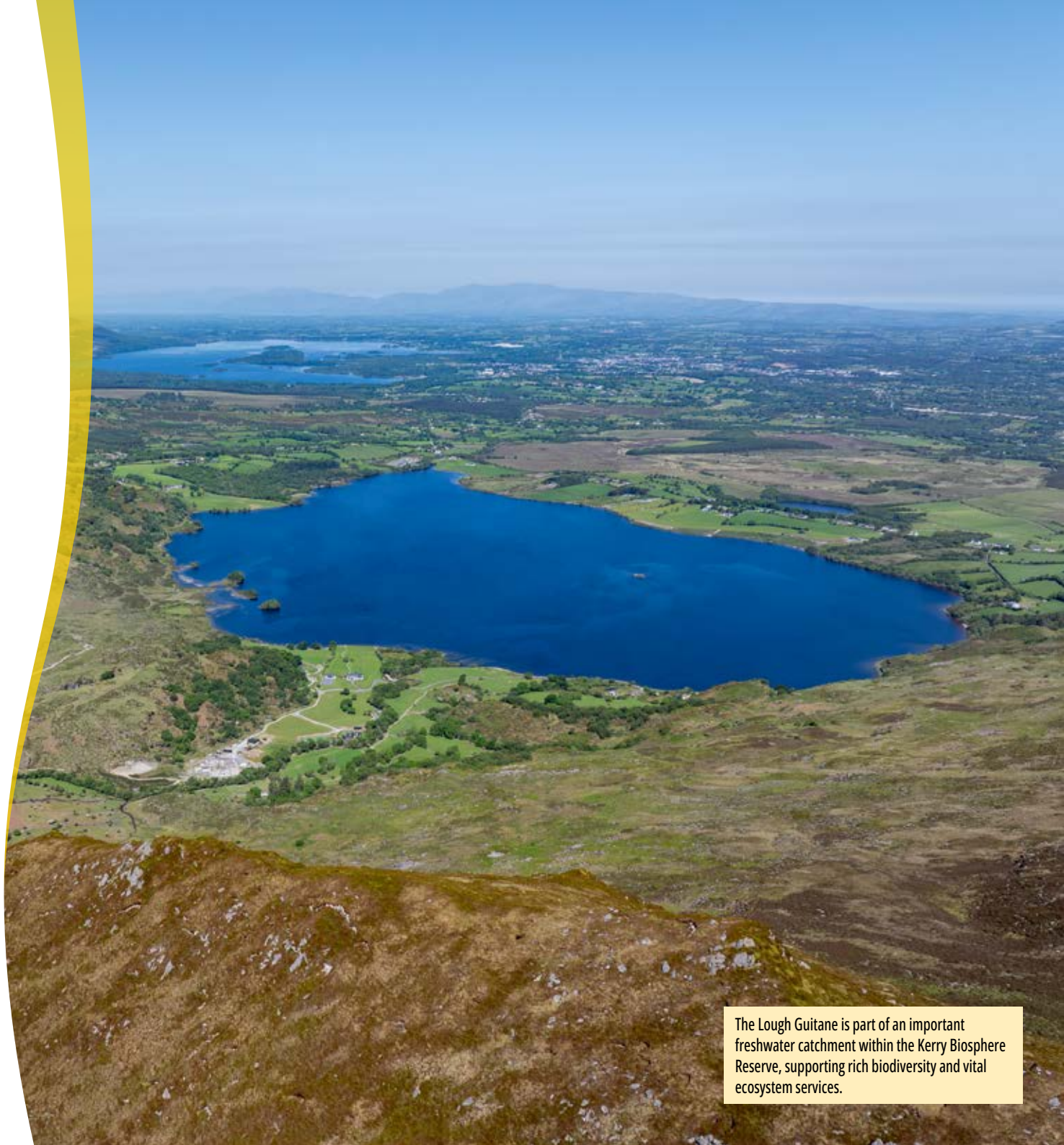
Protecting Lough Guitane in County Kerry

LOCATION: Lough Guitane, County Kerry, Ireland

PICTURES BY: Michael McGolgan

WRITTEN BY: StreamScapes

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The Lough Guitane is part of an important freshwater catchment within the Kerry Biosphere Reserve, supporting rich biodiversity and vital ecosystem services.

Lough Guitane is one of Ireland's most important freshwater ecosystems, supplying drinking water to around 62,000 people across County Kerry. Nestled within a catchment of peatlands, rivers, wetlands and upland habitats, the lake is renowned for its clear waters and exceptional natural beauty. For generations, its waters have sustained wildlife and the communities that depend on it.

Yet, like many freshwater ecosystems across Europe, this remarkable lake is facing growing pressures. Climate change, habitat degradation, invasive species, erosion and extreme rainfall events are threatening the natural systems that help maintain water quality and ecological health.

The health of Lough Guitane is closely linked to the health of the surrounding landscape. Peatlands store carbon, regulate water flows and reduce erosion, while riverside habitats and native woodlands help filter pollutants and provide refuge for wildlife. But scientific research shows that extreme weather events can disrupt these natural processes for months – underscoring the importance of nature restoration in a changing climate.

Across the catchment, scientists, conservationists, educators, landowners and local communities are working together to protect this extraordinary lake. They are combining their knowledge to better understand the challenges facing Lough Guitane and develop practical solutions. At the same time, their work is inspiring a new generation to value and care for the environment.

As an iconic place to restore, Lough Guitane is more than a beautiful landscape. It is a powerful example of how restoring nature can secure clean water, thriving biodiversity, healthy ecosystems and resilience to a changing climate for generations to come.

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For treatment facility operator Noel Rahilly, protecting water quality begins long before water reaches the treatment plant. Restoration efforts are helping to secure Kerry's main drinking water source for the future.

Lough Guitane water treatment facility provides drinking water to around 62,000 people across County Kerry. Catchment restoration measures, including peatland rewetting and riparian habitat restoration, help strengthen ecological networks and improve water quality.

Regular monitoring of Lough Guitane provides the scientific evidence needed to protect the lake and its surrounding catchment. Water quality testing, depth profiling and algae monitoring help identify emerging pressures and guide actions.

Restoring Lough Guitane is an investment in both nature and people – securing clean water and healthy ecosystems while supporting the wellbeing and prosperity of communities across County Kerry, including the nearby town of Killarney.



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For Kerry County Council scientist Iona McGloin, monitoring Lough Guitane reveals how the lake responds to environmental change and guides restoration efforts. This evidence is needed to protect its drinking water supply for future generations.

The restoration of places like Lough Guitane reminds us that clean water does not simply appear at the tap. It depends on healthy catchments, functioning ecosystems and careful stewardship. Pressures on freshwater ecosystems require us to rethink how we value, use, and conserve this vital resource.



At Killarney train station, Karen Yoder refills her water bottle as water from the Lough Guitane catchment reaches the tap.

Agriculture is central to Ireland's landscape and rural communities. But without careful management, nutrients from cattle farming, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, can enter rivers and lakes and impact water quality.

Nature restoration often begins with small changes in how we manage the landscape. Measures like fencing sensitive shoreline areas help reduce erosion, prevent sediment and nutrient runoff, and protect both water quality and valuable riparian habitats.

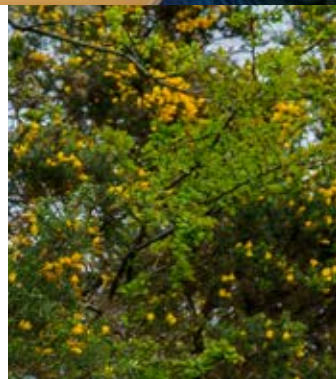


The invasive *Rhododendron ponticum* plant is a significant threat within the catchment because it grows so densely that it chokes out all other vegetation. Jess Burkitt of the National Parks and Wildlife Service works to clear it and restore native habitats.

Successful restoration relies on collaboration across organisations, sectors and disciplines. Working together, stakeholders help balance environmental, social and economic priorities.



Initiatives such as the Woodlands for Water programme are already helping to improve the health of the Lough Guitane catchment. Native woodlands help to filter pollutants, stabilise soils, and support biodiversity.



#RESTORENATURE IRELAND

Using drone technology and field surveys, Caolan Harrington of VESI Environmental identifies the pressures, opportunities and nature-based solutions to guide the protection of Lough Guitane.



Effective catchment restoration requires the right measures in the right places. As John O'Connor of Kerry County Council and Forest Service representative Darragh Fadden assess this native woodland scheme planted next to Lough Guitane, they're also considering wider restoration opportunities across a catchment where around 69% of the landscape is peatland.

Karen Griffin of Inland Fisheries Ireland and Maggie McColgan of StreamScapes discuss the ecological health of Lough Guitane. As an oligotrophic lake with naturally low nutrient levels and high water quality, its clear waters support a rich and productive aquatic food web.





Many opportunities to protect and restore the Lough Guitane catchment lie on private land and commonage, making engagement with landowners essential. John O'Connor of Kerry County Council, Darragh Fadden of the Forest Service, and landowner Roger O'Donoghue discuss nature-based solutions for water quality, biodiversity, and farm resilience.

For farmers like **Roger O'Donoghue**, caring for the land means balancing productive farming with environmental stewardship. Landowner participation is essential to protecting the natural systems that support clean water, healthy ecosystems and resilient rural communities.



StreamScapes Field Educator **Stephanie O'Toole** introduces students from Loughguittane National School to the fascinating world of freshwater ecosystems. Through hands-on learning and outdoor exploration, students discover how healthy rivers, lakes and wetlands support both people and wildlife.

A sense of wonder can inspire a lifetime of environmental awareness. Through interactive learning, students are encouraged to explore and connect with the natural world around them.



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Through exploration, discovery, and hands-on learning, students develop a deeper connection with nature and a greater appreciation for the freshwater ecosystems that sustain their communities. By fostering curiosity, wonder and understanding, programmes like StreamScapes inspire the next generation of environmental stewards.



Fifth and sixth class students take part in science training by kick sampling for aquatic invertebrates. The thrill of discovery is written on their faces as they uncover how these fascinating creatures act as important bioindicators – helping us understand the health of our lakes, rivers and streams.



Students examine freshwater invertebrates collected during their stream survey, including flattened mayfly nymphs. These tiny creatures provide valuable clues about water quality and ecosystem health.



In every drop of clean water, every thriving habitat, and every young person inspired to care for nature, the value of restoration becomes clear. Lough Guitane shows us what is possible when we work with nature to create a healthier, more resilient future for all.

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Seen from above, the relationship between stream, lake and landscape comes into focus. The waterways that weave through the catchment connect habitats, communities and the natural systems that sustain them.

PORTUGAL

WHERE SEAHORSES LIVE AMONGST WASTE

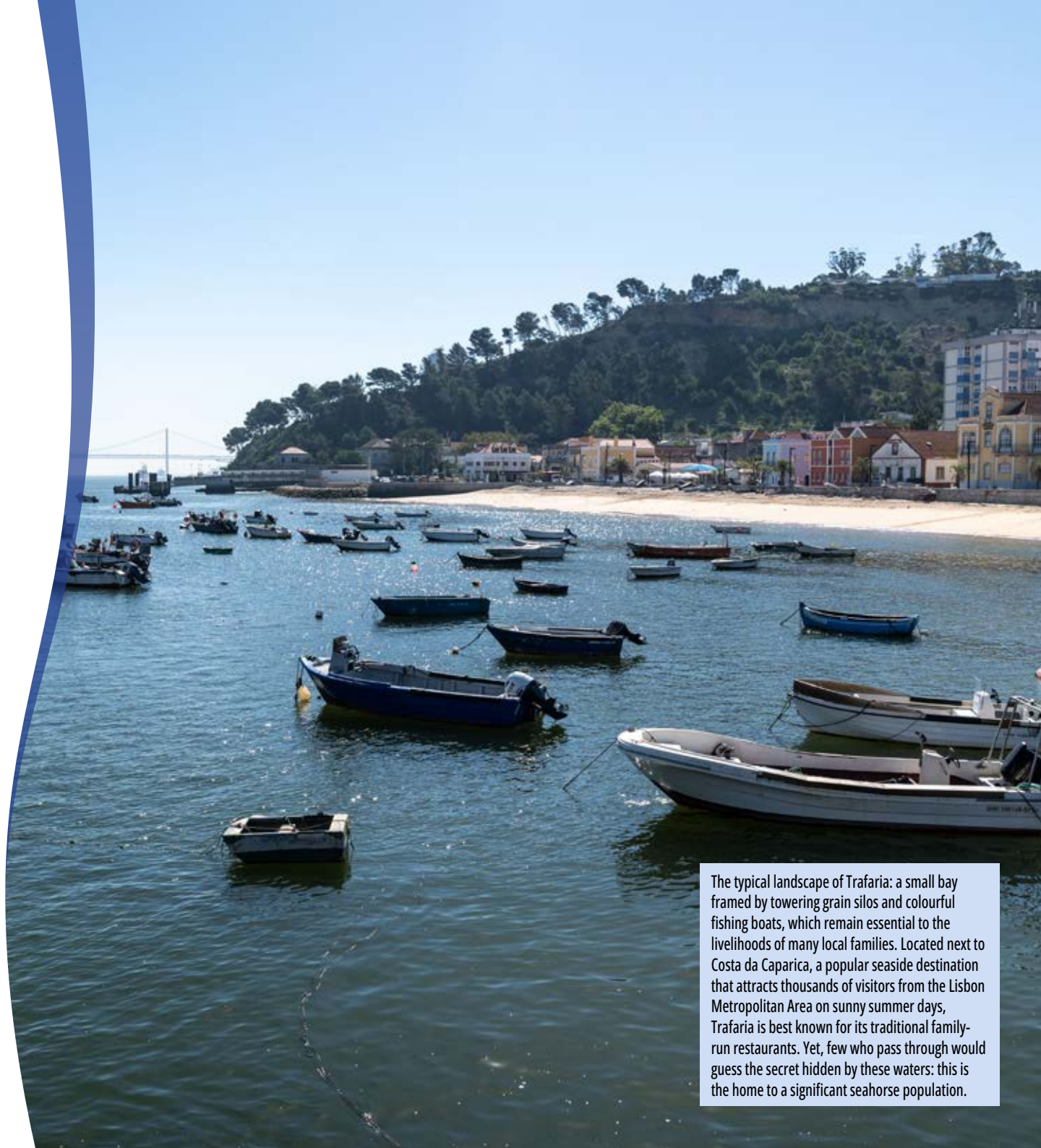
A new refuge for Trafaria's seahorses

LOCATION: Tagus Estuary, Portugal

PICTURES BY: Fábio Pinto / Underwater pictures by Mário Rolim

WRITTEN BY: Beatriz Dias Coelho

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The typical landscape of Trafaria: a small bay framed by towering grain silos and colourful fishing boats, which remain essential to the livelihoods of many local families. Located next to Costa da Caparica, a popular seaside destination that attracts thousands of visitors from the Lisbon Metropolitan Area on sunny summer days, Trafaria is best known for its traditional family-run restaurants. Yet, few who pass through would guess the secret hidden by these waters: this is the home to a significant seahorse population.

Just outside Lisbon, Portugal, lies the Tagus Estuary, one of Europe's most important coastal wetlands. The estuary supports rich seagrass meadows and a wide diversity of marine life, including dolphins and sharks. It provides essential ecosystem services for surrounding communities that depend on clean water, fisheries, and a healthy coastal environment. The area is also an important tourism destination.

The estuary is home to a very special inhabitant. Head resembling that of a horse, a body that looks like natural armour, and a curled tail that serves as an anchor. From this description, one might think of a mythical creature. Yet, it is a fish species: the seahorse. Two protected species are found in the estuary, *Hippocampus hippocampus*, the Short-snouted Seahorse, and *Hippocampus guttulatus*, the Long-snouted Seahorse. That makes the area one of the most important seahorse habitats in Europe.

Within this landscape lies Trafaria, a small fishing village, where generations have lived from the sea. Fishers have long known of the presence of seahorses in these waters and it is perhaps no surprise that the species has become a local symbol. Today, any individual accidentally caught in nets is carefully returned to the water.

But this incredible place is under pressure. Seagrass habitats have declined, pollution and marine litter affect water quality, and natural shelter areas are increasingly scarce.

To help restore the landscape, WWF Portugal is implementing restoration actions as part of the D-EVOLUÇÃO initiative. The first phase introduces artificial refuge structures on the seabed, designed by marine biologists and built with local community involvement. These structures will be monitored to understand how marine life responds and uses the restored habitat. A second phase will focus on removing marine litter with minimal disturbance to sensitive ecosystems and support the gradual recovery of natural conditions.

Together, these actions aim to make the estuary healthy again and reinforce the connection between local communities and the marine environment on which they depend.



A *Hippocampus guttulatus*, commonly known as the Long-snouted Seahorse, one of the two seahorse species found in Trafaria Bay (the other being *Hippocampus hippocampus*, the Short-snouted Seahorse). A species of bony fish, it is distinguished by its unique physical features, which make it, in the words of Rita Sá, Head of Oceans at WWF Portugal, "a species that people easily form a connection with".

"I don't know, they're very strange. They just stay there, minding their own business, holding on with their tails... quietly living their lives."

— QUINCHAS



Quinchas has lived in Trafaria and fished in these waters of Trafaria for 30 years. And although he has encountered seahorses many times over the years, they have never lost their sense of mystery.

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Local fishers have known about the presence of seahorses in these waters for generations: they have always appeared in their fishing nets and on the beach sand. While awareness of the importance of these animals may once have been more limited, those who fish here today play their part in conserving this population. Whenever seahorses are accidentally caught in their nets, they are immediately returned to the river.



“People travel to the Azores to see dolphins, yet they are right here on their doorstep,” notes Rita Sá. And after years studying the different species that inhabit the estuary, WWF Portugal reached a simple conclusion: “The true protagonist is the estuary.”

— RITA SÁ

Home to dolphins, seahorses, sharks and vast seagrass meadows, the Tagus Estuary is one of Europe’s richest ecosystems. Rita Sá, Head of Oceans at WWF Portugal, highlights how the true richness of this territory lies in the diversity of species and habitats that coexist within one of Europe’s most important estuaries.



Despite being surrounded by around 1.8 million people, much of the Tagus Estuary’s biodiversity remains largely unknown to the public.

In Trafaria Bay, home to this seahorse population, the riverbed is covered in waste: from discarded toilets and fishing gear such as nets to abandoned shopping trolleys, which these animals have adopted as shelter. As Rita Sá puts it, “at the moment, biodiversity is linked to waste.”



To ensure that biodiversity is not put at risk, the different stages of this habitat restoration project must be carefully followed. As Rita Sá explains, the process began with engaging the local community and assessing the ecosystem. The current phase focuses on creating alternative habitats for seahorses, with the removal of the waste on which much of the estuary's biodiversity currently depends only taking place later. Throughout the entire process, the community remains central: “We want the community to be part of the project and to feel proud of it,” says the marine biologist.

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Lining Trafaria Bay are the fishers' storage huts, which serve as both meeting places and vantage points over the life of the village. It is here that we meet Mr Fernando, who refuses to let age keep him away from these waters. Although he is not a fisher, he still works transporting fish. For the photograph, he proudly displays two Conger eels caught earlier that morning.



"The first thing the parish council or the municipality should do is clean the beach, because it's the only one around here that's always dirty. The other beaches are always clean. Trafaria has always been neglected."

— MR JORGE

At 67 years old, Mr Jorge has been fishing in the waters of Trafaria for 52 years. More often than not, seahorses end up in his nets. "They get caught in the net, and I throw them back into the river," he says. This care contrasts with what he sees as the neglect of Trafaria by the local authorities, particularly when it comes to cleaning the waste that eventually ends up in the estuary.



Born in Trafaria and the daughter of a fisher, **Marta Santos** grew up hearing stories about the seahorses that inhabit these waters. "Seahorses were used as lucky charms. Everyone carried one dried specimen in their wallet alongside a saint's image and a one-cent coin," she recalls. Today, she is enthusiastic about the seahorse habitat restoration project in the Tagus Estuary and believes it could become a source of local pride.

A volunteer with EDA Association for the past four years, Marta Santos maintains the family connection to the sea in a different way: through environmental, educational and community projects that promote awareness and engagement among local residents. She is part of the association's Plastic Lab project, where waste collected from beaches, festivals and other locations is transformed into artistic pieces, urban furniture, signage and educational tools for schools.

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PORTUGAL



"I think very few people realise the potential of the seahorse. Once they understand how unique it is, it will become a great source of pride for the community, and people will care even more about protecting it."

— MARTA SANTOS



"There are no seagrass meadows here anymore. It's just waste, nothing else. But there used to be seagrass beds, and they adapted remarkably well."

— MÁRIO ROLIM

Mário Rolim, a diver who has a deep knowledge of the fishing community, also knows the seabed of the bay better than most. He runs a warehouse for diving activities, often used by the scientific community, known locally as Armazém do Mário ("Mário's Warehouse"). "This is a fishing harbour. The visibility is poor, the water is brown, and sometimes you can only see about 30 centimetres ahead of you... You never know what you're going to find underwater," he says of the experience of diving in Trafaria.

Over the seven years since establishing Armazém do Mário in Trafaria, Mário Rolim recalls that the fishers were the first to alert him to the presence of seahorses in the bay. Since then, he has been photographing these animals and remains fascinated by their ability to adapt to their surroundings.



“Beyond the silos, there used to be a beautiful forest of seaweed. There were lots of sea urchins and lots of seahorses.”

— MIGUEL

Born and raised in Trafaria, **Miguel** (known locally by the nickname “Bina’s Cousin”) has been fishing and diving in these waters for more than 30 years. He belongs to a generation that remembers a very different estuary. Today, where extensive underwater vegetation once thrived, he finds mostly submerged waste – and seahorses clinging to abandoned shopping trolleys.

In summer, once school is out, Trafaria’s children head to the beach. The village retains a strong sense of community. “It takes a village to raise a child,” says EDA volunteer Marta Santos, recalling how neighbours helped care for her daughter Carolina when she was young. Yet the social challenges facing the community are impossible to ignore. “It’s still a poor area. Many boys start working at a very young age and end up leaving school,” she says. In a place where fishing remains an important source of income, economic hardship can sometimes lead people to seek other ways of making a living.

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Since then, Gonçalo Silva and the MARDIVE team have carried out more than 100 dives in Trafaria. “It had such an impact on me that I never stopped working with seahorses. That first moment, putting my head underwater in Trafaria and seeing seahorses on one side, shopping trolleys on the other, piles of oyster shells and waste everywhere... I think that was the moment that struck me the most,” he admits.



Trafaria's seahorse population stands out not only for its abundance, but also for its size. According to Gonçalo Silva, it is one of the densest known populations and includes some of the largest individuals recorded across the species' distribution range. It also possesses another unusual characteristic: “The environment they live in is a bit surreal because they inhabit marine litter,” explains the MARDIVE biologist.



**"By protecting seahorses, we
are protecting their habitats."**

— GONALO SILVA

In this photograph are some of the people involved in this project: Mrio Rolim, Gonalo Silva and Rita S. They are just three of the many individuals working to conserve Trafaria's seahorse population. The future of these animals will be shaped by many hands: fishers who return them safely to the water, divers and marine biologists who monitor and study them, and community members who believe this natural heritage is worth protecting. Together, they hope to restore some of the richness that the estuary has lost over decades.



Although seahorses are the flagship species of this restoration project, they represent only a small part of the biodiversity found in the Tagus Estuary. The same habitats support dozens of other species that depend on this ecosystem for food, shelter and reproduction.



The MARDIVE team's study of this population revealed an unusual adaptation from an early stage: seahorses use abandoned shopping trolleys on the estuary floor as habitat. This observation became the foundation of this WWF Portugal project. "What we want to do is use shopping trolleys as inspiration for structures that offer seahorses protection and places to anchor themselves," explains Gonalo Silva.



"If we remove everything at once, we will also be removing the places where they shelter and anchor themselves."

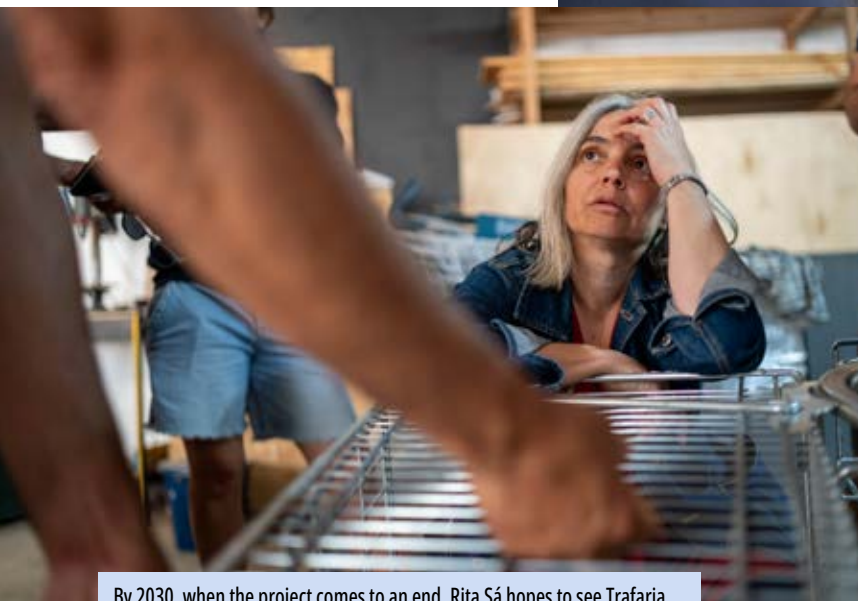
— GONÇALO SILVA

Beyond WWF Portugal, the team developing the new seahorse shelters includes members of the Trafaria community, such as local fisher Quinchas (left), who is helping to build the structures, as well as members of MARDIVE, including Gonçalo Silva (centre, seated), who will later be responsible for installing them on the floor of the bay.



The team is working to design new shelter structures for the seahorses, but the challenge is far from straightforward. Many seahorses currently rely on waste scattered across the estuary floor as habitat.

The project is pioneering in nature, as the approach it seeks to test has never before been implemented in Portugal. Inspired by restoration solutions successfully used in Australia, the team now faces a crucial question: will the seahorses adopt these new structures as an alternative to the waste they currently use as habitat? Only time will tell. If successful, the project will be able to move on to its next phase – the gradual removal of the waste accumulated across the estuary.



By 2030, when the project comes to an end, Rita Sá hopes to see Trafaria recognised for the uniqueness of its seahorse population. “I would like everyone to know that this is almost a seahorse sanctuary,” says the Head of Oceans at WWF Portugal. But she stresses that such recognition will only be meaningful if it happens in a sustainable way, ensuring that the local community continues to benefit from the process and remains at its heart.



“I would like everyone to know that this is almost a seahorse sanctuary.”

— HEAD OF OCEANS AT WWF PORTUGAL

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Restoring the habitat, gradually removing the waste that has accumulated across the estuary, and ensuring that the seahorse population continues to thrive: this is the future that marine biologist Gonalo Silva of MARDIVE hopes to help build through the project over the coming years. But he stresses that success will depend on the involvement of more people, organisations and companies in a cause that ultimately benefits the entire community.

SPAIN

WHERE THE MARSH MEETS THE SEA

Voices of restoration on
the Costa Brava

LOCATION: Costa Brava, Spain

PICTURES BY: Ana Tejedor

WRITTEN BY: Ecologistas en Acción

#RESTORENATURE



In Spain, only a small proportion of protected habitats are currently in good conservation status. Coastal wetlands have been systematically drained, developed and polluted, while marine ecosystems have been degraded by overfishing, pollution and habitat destruction. Yet, a growing number of ecological restoration initiatives are challenging the idea that environmental degradation is irreversible.

On the Costa Brava, in northeastern Spain, two projects funded through the European Union's LIFE programme offer a glimpse into this positive transformation. In the Pletera marshes, an unfinished coastal development has been dismantled and converted into a system of coastal lagoons, restoring ecological processes and a landscape that can once again be enjoyed and inhabited by both wildlife and local communities. Offshore, the LIFE Ecorest project is working to restore vulnerable Mediterranean marine habitats, including corals, gorgonians and sponge communities through collaboration between fishers, scientists, environmental organisations and public authorities.

Together, these initiatives show that restoration is more than an intervention on ecosystems. They demonstrate how degraded landscapes can become spaces of cooperation, where local communities, researchers, and institutions build new relationships with nature. They also raise questions that resonate across Europe: how can societies repair ecosystems damaged by decades of development? What role should public investment play in biodiversity recovery?

Through documentary photography, this project explores these questions by following the people and places involved in restoration efforts along the Costa Brava, documenting not only environmental recovery but also the social transformations that accompany it.

LIFE Pletera

Tourists walk past one of the residential complexes built during the boom years of sun-and-beach tourism. Just a few metres away, the restoration of Pletera symbolises a transition towards a model that places natural heritage at the centre of local development.



Pletera, Torroella de Montgrí (Girona). The urban development plan approved in 1986 envisaged six residential complexes on this coastal wetland. By the late 1980s, part of the area had been urbanised and 77 homes were built on just one of the six planned blocks (centre left of the image). Although the project was never completed, the infrastructure had already profoundly altered the marsh.

Archive photograph (2014) courtesy of Torroella de Montgrí Town Council.



Where streets were once planned, water has reclaimed its place. The Pletera lagoons, partly shaped along the footprint of the proposed development, have helped restore the natural dynamics of the marsh and strengthen its resilience to climate change.



Three LIFE-funded projects have contributed to the recovery of the Baix Ter wetlands since the late 1990s. The most recent, LIFE Pletera (2014-2018), enabled the removal of urban infrastructure and the restoration of lagoons and coastal habitats across the former marshland.

Archive photographs of the restoration process (2014–2018), courtesy of Torroella de Montgrí Town Council and Amics de la Fotografia de Torroella.

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The restoration of Pletera has enabled the recovery of habitats of European conservation importance, including coastal lagoons and glasswort communities. These ecosystems support threatened species such as the Spanish Toothcarp (*Aphanius iberus*), an endangered fish endemic to the Mediterranean coast of the Iberian Peninsula.



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Grandparents, parents and children look out over the lagoons. The restored landscape has become a meeting place across generations, where memories of the past coexist with possibilities for the future.



Desi walks with friends along the path that crosses Pletera towards the sea. For them, the wetland is part of everyday life: a place of movement, gathering, and leisure beside the beach.

Designated access routes guide visitors to the beach while reducing pressure on the lagoons and restored dune system. Conservation and public use can coexist when landscapes are managed in ways that respect their natural dynamics.

Fra Ramon Lagoon. In the background, an art installation reuses columns from the former roundabouts of the planned development built on this wetland. Conceived as a contemporary ruin, the work preserves the memory of a transformed landscape while engaging in dialogue with the restored ecosystem.





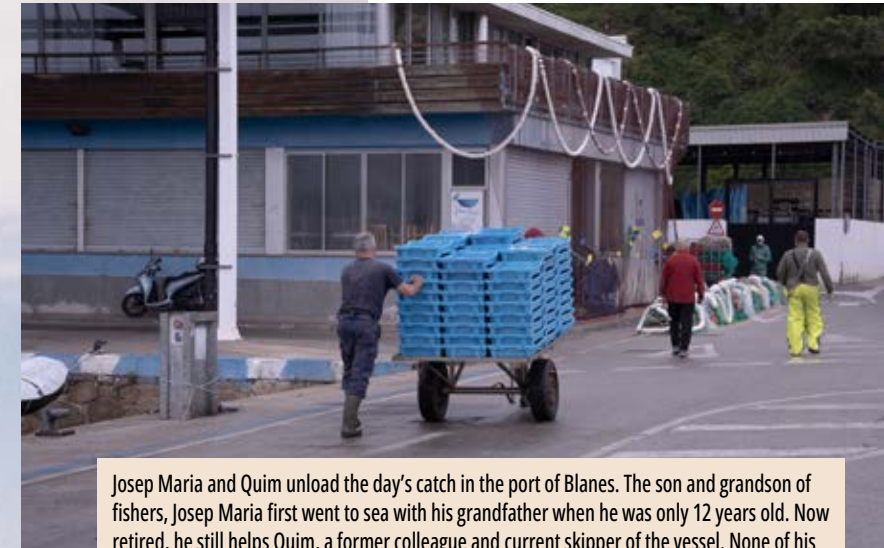
Just a short distance from Pletera, the River Ter reaches the Mediterranean after flowing more than 200 kilometres from the Pyrenees. Offshore, the LIFE Ecorest project is exploring new ways to restore degraded marine habitats and recover Mediterranean biodiversity.



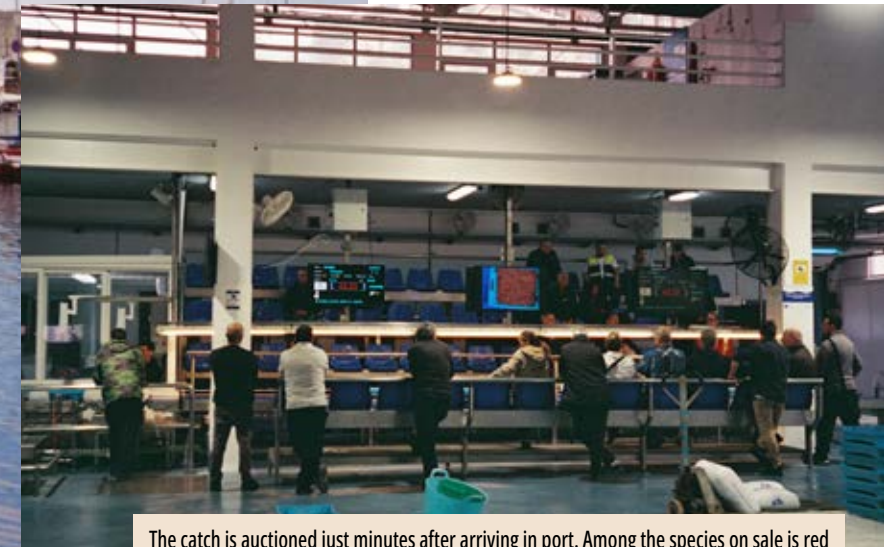
A young man runs alongside the Pletera lagoons. The restoration of the wetland has returned to the community a space where biodiversity conservation and everyday uses of the landscape coexist.

LIFE Ecoest

Port of Blanes (Girona). Fishers from this harbour participate in LIFE Ecoest, an initiative aiming to restore nearly 30,000 hectares of deep-sea habitats along the Catalan coast. The project turns the fishing sector into an ally in the recovery of vulnerable ecosystems dominated by corals, gorgonians and sponges.



Josep Maria and Quim unload the day's catch in the port of Blanes. The son and grandson of fishers, Josep Maria first went to sea with his grandfather when he was only 12 years old. Now retired, he still helps Quim, a former colleague and current skipper of the vessel. None of his children chose to continue the family tradition, reflecting a broader decline in generational renewal and a reduction in the number of fishing boats operating in the Mediterranean.



The catch is auctioned just minutes after arriving in port. Among the species on sale is red shrimp, one of the most emblematic and highly valued products of Costa Brava fisheries.

The smell of fish and salt fills the harbour. Activity at the fish market is relentless. Boxes move along the auction line while the constant sound of bidding buttons sets the pace of negotiations that last only seconds. Successful buyers quickly collect their purchase, cover it with ice and load it onto trucks. Within minutes, freshly landed fish begin their journey to fishmongers and restaurants.



María carefully cleans a sea pen recovered from a trawl net. Although she is not a fisher herself, she joins her husband Josep Maria every day to help with tasks on board. Thanks to LIFE Ecoreset, accidentally caught organisms like this one can be preserved, studied and later reintroduced to the seabed.



Marina and Sofia, researchers and technicians with LIFE Ecorest, examine and catalogue organisms recovered by fishers. Their work includes species identification, data collection and preparing corals, gorgonians and sponges for reimplantation on rocky supports. These tasks are carried out regularly across the project's nine participating ports.



Josep Maria places the organisms recovered during the day into the LIFE Ecorest quarantine tank. Located beneath the stands of the Blanes fish market, the aquaria keep corals, gorgonians, sponges and other invertebrates alive after their accidental capture in fishing gear.

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Sofía, a researcher and technician with LIFE EcoRest, attaches a sponge to a rocky support before its return to the sea. The weight of the rock allows the organism to descend through the water like a badminton shuttlecock, helping it settle upright on the seabed and re-establish itself on the marine substrate.



Corals, gorgonians and sponges are true architects of the seafloor. These species create structures that provide shelter and food for countless marine organisms. Decades of cumulative impacts have degraded many of these communities, whose natural recovery may take several decades.



Participants in an outreach event observe a sea pen accidentally recovered by the fishing fleet. Activities like this help reveal the biodiversity hidden beneath the Mediterranean's surface and the efforts being made to restore it.



Children gaze out across the Mediterranean during an excursion organised by LIFE EcoRest. On board, fishers and researchers explain how collaboration between science and the fishing sector contributes to restoring some of the sea's most vulnerable habitats.



Sofia, a researcher at ICM-CSIC, displays a sponge attached to a rocky support, ready for reimplantation at sea. The process allows organisms accidentally caught in fishing gear to be recovered and returned to habitats where they help sustain marine biodiversity.



Attached to rocky supports, organisms rescued by fishers and scientists regain their natural position on the seabed. Observations by the research team show how these structures once again provide shelter for fish and invertebrates, contributing to the recovery of marine biodiversity (*Photographs courtesy of ICM-CSIC*).



A sponge returns to the Mediterranean as part of LIFE Ecores's restoration work. Together with the recovery of *Pletera*, this initiative demonstrates that ecosystem degradation is not irreversible. When scientists, local communities and public authorities work together, restoration opens the possibility of new futures for nature and for the people who depend on it.

WITH THANKS

This is just a tiny glimpse of what's possible throughout Europe:
a vision of a safe and resilient future for all, living in harmony
with nature.

We are proud to present this series, brought together – like the restoration efforts themselves – in liaison with many artists, activists and conservationists. More than showcasing extraordinary landscapes, these stories celebrate the people restoring them, the communities reconnecting with the nature that sustains us.

These projects are living proof that nature restoration works – bringing back wildlife, strengthening resilience to climate change, ensuring we have clean water and strong food systems – and offering hope for the future.

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The Restore Nature campaign is coordinated by BirdLife Europe and Central Asia, ClientEarth, the European Environmental Bureau, and the WWF European Policy Office. The campaign brings together more than 200 NGOs and a wide range of stakeholders, including businesses, scientists, and activists. Together, they have advocated for the Nature Restoration Regulation. The campaign collected nearly 1.2 million signatures and messages from citizens urging decision-makers to adopt the law to restore nature. For more information, visit www.restorenature.eu

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