ReWild Mpumalanga

Project Description
The ReWild Mpumalanga Project seeks to restore ecological integrity in the Houtbosloop and Schoemanskloof Valleys of Mpumalanga, South Africa. This is a landscape deeply shaped by industrial development, where invasive species, biodiversity loss, habitat fragmentation, and degraded ecosystems threaten both nature and local livelihoods. Our work aims to rebuild ecological resilience, revive biodiversity, and create sustainable community benefits through rewilding and land restoration.

Location
The project is based in the Houtbosloop and Schoemanskloof Valleys, Mpumalanga Province, South Africa. These valleys form part of the transition between grassland and savanna ecosystems. They are crucial for water security, biodiversity corridors, and for the wellbeing of local communities who depend on healthy ecosystems.

Challenges
For decades, industrial mono-culture, agriculture, mining, and tourism practices — together with the spread of invasive alien trees — have transformed these landscapes, suppressing natural biodiversity, degrading soils, and drying water systems. Local grasslands have been lost, and their vital water-retention services compromised, leading to severe soil erosion and high turbidity in river systems. Without intervention, ecosystem collapse will intensify, and surviving species will be pushed closer to local extinction.

Exacerbating the situation, poaching with wire cable snares — driven by rising food and energy costs where nature becomes collateral damage — is taking an increasingly severe toll on remaining wildlife. From 2001–2015, we managed a local community organization called *HEAL* (Houtbosloop Environment Action Link). We employed two full-time rangers and removed over 12,000 wire cable snares from the Houtbosloop, Schoemanskloof, and Stadsriver Valleys.

Biodiversity Under Threat
Despite these pressures, the valleys still support an extraordinary diversity of smaller mammals and wildlife within remaining 'semi-wilderness' areas. These include:

- **Predators & carnivores:** brown hyena, jackal, caracal, serval, civet, honey badger, mongoose, leopard.
- **Primates:** baboons, vervet monkeys, bush-baby's and the rare samango monkey.
- **Ungulates & herbivores:** bushbuck, bush pig, red duiker, grey duiker, mountain reedbuck, klipspringer, and occasional kudu.
- **Other species:** porcupine, bats, and a range of small mammals.

Under current conditions, all of these species are increasingly threatened, struggling to survive as climate change, habitat fragmentation, invasive plants, water loss, and human pressures intensify. Their survival depends on immediate and innovative interventions to restore ecological balance.

Our Approach
The project focuses on:

- Clearing invasive alien plants and restoring natural vegetation.
- Producing biochar from invasive biomass to improve soils while reducing CO_2 emissions.
    - We use ancient flame-capped production methods in earth pits, producing up to 10 cubic meters per batch.
    - We experiment with applications such as inoculation with composts or compost tea for soil improvement, mixing biochar into G6 for dirt road stabilization, and using it in animal bedding to absorb moisture and reduce odours.
    - Our biochar is currently being trialed by Sappi as a potential replacement for perlite. If successful, this could support a circular economic model and drive invasive plant control.
    - We are in discussions with the forestry industry to utilize timber harvesting residue for in-field biochar production. This would prevent current harmful burning practice and turn 'waste' into value.
- Community-based rewilding, employing local people in land restoration and sustainable farming.

In collaboration with partners such as **Ratanang Collab, AvoVision, and Project Biome**, we benefit from access to Social Employment Fund (SEF) workers, and are awaiting confirmation of the program's fourth round. Some of our trained *restoration field workers* are also contracted by local businesses such as Joubert and Sons Citrus, with GeaSphere facilitating this part-time employment.

We aim to expand this approach by training and equipping dedicated restoration field teams, capable of addressing invasive plant control, anti-poaching, land regeneration, and rewilding.

Wildlife Recovery
Our long-term goal is to restore ecological processes and prepare the landscape for the gradual return of larger fauna. By reviving habitats and ensuring ecological functionality, we seek to make these valleys safe and resilient havens for wildlife.

Innovation & Global Relevance
This initiative is not only about local conservation — it is about building a **replicable model** for restoration and rewilding that can inspire similar efforts worldwide. In fragmented landscapes across the globe, people face the same challenge: how to live more harmoniously with nature, rebuild biodiversity, and regenerate life-supporting systems.

We have presented the project to the IUCN Rewilding Thematic Group, who have expressed interest in showcasing it as a case study of global relevance once implementation funding is secured. Such recognition would elevate the project to international visibility, inspiring and informing rewilding initiatives elsewhere.

Crucially, this work also creates opportunities for **research, monitoring, and measuring the ecological and social impacts of rewilding in a fragmented environment**. The valleys provide a unique natural laboratory to test, document, and refine restoration strategies that could be scaled globally.

The window for recovery is closing. With ecosystems degrading and wildlife under increasing threat, the time to act is now. By restoring natural habitats, supporting surviving species, and reintroducing ecological processes, this project seeks to create a living demonstration of hope — a model of restoration that communities and ecosystems worldwide can learn from.

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