

## Our Christmas 2023 Letter

### Looking back on 2023

This was the second full year for Consano Earth having been formalised in 2021. Our objective for this year, and every year going forward, is to add momentum to the fantastic work being done by our charity partners through rising financial and other support. Our efforts focus on smaller organisations where we believe our unrestricted funding can make a real difference and where we hope to be able to add value either ourselves or through our personal and professional contacts. Our two core charities remain [Heal Rewilding](#) and [Project Seagrass](#) but in 2023 we added [Somerset Wildlands](#), [Wildwood Trust](#) and [Youngwilders](#) to the organisations we support. This [page](#) provides details of all our charities as well as links to their websites for those wanting to learn more. All have done fantastic work in 2023, which we will not elaborate on here, and we look forward to even more progress next year.

In March we were so excited to travel to Somerset to visit [Heal Rewilding](#)'s first site. We started supporting Heal only months after they were founded in March 2020 and to go from an idea to acquiring a £5m+ site in only three years is testament to the passion and determination of Jan, Hannah and all the team. In January Heal became the owner of a 460-acre former dairy farm in Somerset, just outside Witham Friary, a village halfway between Frome and Bruton near the border with Wiltshire. "[Heal Somerset](#)", as it known, has huge potential for nature recovery and it has already begun. Heal Somerset is pastureland, mostly on heavy clay, with three small tributaries of the River Frome crossing it, and a spring.



The site includes miles of hedgerows, with mature oaks and numerous other trees scattered across the undulating landscape. The Heal team have been conducting baseline surveys of the site to properly evaluate the state of its soils and extent of biodiversity. It will be fascinating to see how Heal Somerset evolves over the years. Pigs are likely to be reintroduced in 2024, ecosystem engineers who through their rooting disturb the soil and encourage nutrient recycling, seed dispersal, habitat creation for insects and small mammals and generally increase biodiversity.

Whilst we were in Somerset we visited our friend Ben Goldsmith to see how his rewilding project is developing on his estate. We spent an afternoon with Alasdair Cameron, founder of [Somerset Wildlands](#), wandering around Wild Athelney, one of their rewilding sites. Somerset Wildlands aims at restoring some of the lost wildlife and wildness to The Somerset Levels through a process of distributed rewilding they call "wild stepping stones". Following our visit, we have started to support Alasdair and his work. A key reason why Somerset Wildlands has been able to purchase land is because of philanthropic loans provided by Julia Davies of [We Have The Power](#). We subsequently spoke with Julia to learn more about her work, and this conversation sowed the seed for an exciting development for us later in the year. We hope to have more news on that in 2024.

In May we travelled down to the West Country to visit Derek Gow and the Keep It Wild team to take our first look at the site where we have funded the construction of four new wildcat enclosures that will be critical to ensuring there will be a sufficiently sized population ahead of hopefully a full reintroduction in 2024. The pictures below illustrate how the site developed over the summer months before being completed recently.



Nick with Derek on the designated land in May prior to building work starting. Behind us is a small pond that features in one of the enclosures.



In early July the diggers go in.



In late July the enclosures are taking shape.



All finished



Home Sweet Home!

Whilst we were in Devon we visited [Wildwood Devon](#) owned by the [Wildwood Trust](#). CEO Paul Whitfield kindly showed us round the park with its beautiful gardens and great selection of native British animal species, all housed in natural enclosures, including bears, wolves, arctic foxes and wildcats. Paul and Wildwood are also closely involved with wildcat research and the national captive breeding programme.

A few months later we got to spend some more time with Paul to learn more about Wildwood's work. Wildwood manage many conservation projects but probably the most exciting is their joint effort with Kent Wildlife Trust (who we also support). The [Wilder Blean Project](#) has brought bison back to Kent, the first to freely roam in the UK in thousands of years. We are delighted to have now added Wildwood to the charities we support.

Subsequently in September we visited [Wildwood Kent](#) spending a very enjoyable afternoon with Paul and his team (pictured below). We learned some more about the Wilder Blean bison project and the huge amount of important conservation work the team are doing on many vital species including Wildcats, Pine Martens, and Red Billed Choughs.



In June we attended a gathering at [Wild Ken Hill](#) where owner Dom Buscall brought together an inspiring group involved in rewilding initiatives in the East Anglia area.



At the Wild Ken Hill event we heard fascinating presentations from Wendling Beck, WWF, Rewilding Britain and WildEast before spending the afternoon wandering around the amazing habitat that comes from Wild Ken's blend of wilding, traditional conservation, and regenerative agriculture.

One of many highlights was visiting the 55-acre beaver enclosure. Since our last visit to Wild Ken two years prior it was amazing to see the changes brought about by our favourite ecosystem engineers.



As part of our East Anglia trip, we also visited local projects [Westacre](#) and [Wendling Beck](#). Thanks to Alec and Alex respectively for showing us round!

In mid-July we attended an evening event with Beaver Trust at Ewhurst Park. We were hosted by owner Mandy Lieu who bought the estate in 2020 and is now two years into her rewilding project. In January a pair of beavers were released into an enclosure. This was the first release in Hampshire and it was wonderful to hear from Mandy about the level of excitement and engagement this has had with local school children. We continue to be big fans of Beaver Trust. This year we have funded the production of a short film for them that showcases the importance of river buffers supporting the work they are doing as part of the [Riverscapes partnership](#).

In late July we spent a weekend attending the wonderful “If not now, when?” species reintroduction and rewilding symposium hosted by [Keep It Wild](#) in Devon. Derek Gow, Nick Viney and all the team did a fantastic job with three days of fascinating and inspirational talks mixed in with seeing old friends and making some new ones. The event was book ended by Sir John Lister-Kaye, the celebrated conservationist, naturalist, and author who founded the [Aigas Field Centre](#) in the Highlands. John had so many wonderful and funny stories which we heard during the event and also over breakfast as we were very fortunately staying in the same place. Visiting Aigas is definitely on the to do list hopefully in 2024. There were too many excellent talks to call out everyone but special mention goes to Charlie Burrell ([Knepp](#)), Guy Shrubsole ([Lost Rainforests of Britain](#)), Harvey Tweats ([Celtic Reptile & Amphibian](#)) and David Waters ([Great Bustard Group](#)). Both Mary Colwell ([Curlew Action](#)) and Paul Whitfield ([Wildwood Trust](#)) delivered such emotionally charged stories that they brought the audience to tears. We came away from the weekend even more determined to do what we can as we all battle this climate emergency.

In early November we met the team at [Youngwilders](#) following an introduction from our friends at [Treebeard Trust](#). We had previously heard of Youngwilders’ work because of the Resurgence event they host with our partners Heal Rewilding and Knepp Wildland Foundation. Youngwilders focus on accelerating the rewilding of the UK and involving young people in the movement. Over 80% of UK young people are eager to take action to help the environment but only 1 in 5 believe they are being listened to on environmental issues. Youngwilders facilitate small-scale, youth-led nature recovery projects across the UK while also running an experimental mix of other engagement approaches including rewilding workshops, the yearly youth rewilding summit (Resurgence) and their magazine. Following our meeting we have committed to provide Youngwilders with ongoing monthly unrestricted funding.

In mid-November we were keeping our fingers crossed as the Big Syn International Film Festival, the world’s biggest sustainability film festival, revealed its winners from over 400 films and over 200 charity films received from over 120 countries. Since 2019, the festival has reached over 45 million in 120 countries to create public awareness about sustainability and the United Nations Global Goals or Sustainable Development Goals, using the power of meaningful cinema. Up for the UK short documentary award was “Kelp!” a film that we funded after a shout out on the So Hot Right Now! podcast from some Falmouth University students. We are delighted to say Caylon La Mantia and her team won! Not only that as a result the big screen at Piccadilly Circus, probably for the first time ever, was dominated by kelp. The film is available on our [YouTube channel](#) and more information available [here](#).



## Some specific projects we have supported this year

In April we visited Paradise Fields in Ealing, London to meet with Sean McCormack of [Ealing Wildlife Group](#) and Elliot Newton of [Citizen Zoo](#) who spearheaded the return of beavers to Ealing for the first time in 400 years.



The site is incredible and is situated next to a retail park anchored by a McDonalds with multiple tower blocks as a backdrop. The yellow circle is a lake where Sean and Elliot hoped would be where the beavers would start their work.

You walk from the retail park through a short underpass and you are suddenly in an oasis and that is before the beavers arrive who will no doubt transform the landscape. That area of Ealing has had major flooding issues so it will be fascinating to see what impact the beavers have. As the first urban beaver reintroduction and given its proximity to Central London we think this project will be the inspiration and model for a lot more similar reintroduction projects bringing nature into urban communities.

We have supported Sean, Elliot and the team with funding for the signage required at the site as well as for a film to document the project. Thanks to [Matthew Billington](#) for allowing us to share this wonderful illustration.



In Autumn the dream of beavers returning to Ealing became a reality. We were delighted to attend the release event. The beavers weren't shy and put on a show. The site is now open to the public so if you are in the area drop by and see the magic of these wonderful ecosystem engineers for yourself.



In August we funded some technology development work for Foundation Conservation Carpathia. [FCC](#) was founded in 2009 by 12 philanthropists and conservationists with the goal to stop illegal logging of the woodlands around the Carpathian Mountains in Romania. FCC wish to protect a significant surface of Carpathian forests in form of a completely protected area for future generations. This is achieved by purchasing land and leasing hunting rights for full protection of all natural elements with private and public money. FCC have purchased over 27,000 hectares saved for full protection. There has been an increase in bears coming into local villages to the project and FCC identified several technical solutions that could help reverse this issue starting with using AI supported camera traps to identify oncoming bears. We have funded some development work for acoustic repellers that are triggered on identification which encourage the bears to change route. The AI models have now been tested in the field and are performing well, with very low false positive messages meaning very few false alarms when a dog or another animal is triggering the system. There will be more experimental testing in the Spring. Whilst the bears are now in hibernation development work is also ongoing on a more instant repeller, which has an “inflatable scarecrow” attached to the system.

In September we helped fund the initial startup costs of a European pond turtles reintroduction program that is being led by Keep It Wild, Celtic Reptile & Amphibian and a several other partners. The European pond turtle was once a part of Britain’s wild wetlands, especially in the expansive fens and broads of East Anglia. East Anglia was the last place the European pond turtles lived and has been chosen as the release location. The turtles were imported in late 2023 and will need 6 months in quarantine before a targeted release in the enclosure site in 2024.



Intensive research will follow over the next few years before ultimately a planned wild release. We wish Harvey Tweats and all the team well as they embark on this important work.

## Looking ahead to 2024

We expect 2024 will be another year of good progress for the charities and work we support. What follows are just a handful of what we hope to see over the coming year.

Our core rewilding charity for the land is [Heal Rewilding](#). As we discussed above the highlight for Heal in 2023 was the charity securing its first rewilding site. Jan Stannard, Heal founder and CEO, had the following to say as we move closer to 2024:

*“Heal Rewilding has so much to look forward to in 2024, especially seeing in a second Spring at our Heal Somerset site, when a year’s rest should see many more species benefiting from much less disturbance. Our plans at the site include smaller projects, such as installing owl boxes, increasing our use of wildlife cameras and doing a butterfly reintroduction feasibility study, to more ambitious ones such as creating a wildlife lake and four ponds, and building a wheelchair-accessible path. Our main priority is undertaking the next phase of our programme of species surveys, from small mammals and insects to reptiles and birds. We hope to have our first ecosystem engineers arrive – Tamworth pigs! We also want to start work on the acquisition of our second site in one of the Northern English counties towards the end of next year.”*

Our core rewilding charity for the sea is [Project Seagrass](#). Leanne Cullen-Unsworth, Project Seagrass CEO and Co-Founder provided this update for us:

*“Project Seagrass is a marine conservation charity which delivers action towards saving the worlds seagrass. All of our work is guided by the best available and current science. This year has been another year of growth for Project Seagrass. We moved to a new HQ and developed our seed processing facility which saw its first million seeds pass through, these seeds are now stored at our nursery in West Wales, or have already been planted at one of our UK restoration sites, ready for germination in the spring. The seagrass nursery has seen its first full cycle of seed planting, germination, growth, flowering, and seed production (from wild collected seeds) which has been a highlight for the whole team. We are now moving to the next phase of scaling up nursery operations. In July 2023, Project Seagrass also celebrated its 10th Birthday marking a decade of research, community and action for the team. But 2023 has also been a significant year for seagrass more broadly. On 1st March the world celebrated the first formal UN recognised ‘World Seagrass Day’. On the day, Project Seagrass hosted an international panel of experts discussing the global challenges for seagrass meadows*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLMnmNSe7qw> and ways to find optimism and solutions to these remaining challenges. 2023 also saw the inaugural UK Seagrass Symposium which brought together some of the growing community of seagrass researchers and practitioners in the UK. In exciting news, Project Seagrass will host the second UK Seagrass Symposium in November 2025 (hoping it will become a biannual event). The team at Project Seagrass are looking forward to a future in which seagrass thrives in harmony with people. But there is still a lot of work to do to secure this future. Momentum has to be maintained, Project Seagrass has started something and got peoples' attention, the world seems to be listening, and so now is the time to work even harder to share the importance of nature for humanity and why we need to do more to protect and repair our beautiful world. Seagrass is an ideal example of a habitat that demonstrates human-nature compatibility because we're not something separate from nature, we are a part of it. People are part of the ecosystem, and we have to acknowledge that and find solutions to the biodiversity and climate crises that support both planet and people."

We think 2024 could well be the "Year of the Wildcat". There is a lot of fantastic work happening all over the UK to bring this fantastic creature back to where it belongs. Much of this work is being led by Derek Gow. Here is what he thinks we can look forward to in the year ahead:

*"The new wildcat pens are fully up now with climbing furniture such as viewing platforms, springy poles that enable them to leap with ease from one landing area to another and fixed patrol shelves in place. Brush piles which encourage small mammals such as field voles into their living space are scattered throughout their floors to provide genuine hunting experiences and shortly we will start planting the surrounds of these features up with berry bearing native trees to further encourage mice. We bred 16 kittens in 2023 several of which have gone off to new holding facilities elsewhere until they too are required for breeding in 2024/25. The Devon Wildcat Reintroduction Project is progressing well to date. Further studies using bait lures and trail cameras in woodlands throughout Devon suggest that there are as the Europeans told us would be the case very few domestic cats in the forests and therefore any potential for hybridisation if many wildcats are released simultaneously are very low. The public consultation exercise is demonstrating significant support for the species return and all other issues which require resolution such as compliance with the Habitats Regulations are being addressed swiftly. In early November Dr Marianna Hartmann-Furter from the Cat Specialist Group of the International Union for Nature Conservation in Switzerland came to look around our facility and advise on the suitability of habitats in Devon for wildcats in general. She was impressed by both our breeding rate of kittens (2.3 on average per litter), the relaxed nature of the adult cats she viewed and the complexity of the older enclosures which are growing in well now to provide them with a high-quality living habitat."*

2024 takes the crown from 2023 as the most important year in the climate emergency just as 2023 took it from 2022. The time for action is now and everyone can make difference. For anyone looking for an inspiring stocking filler here are some great reads:

- God Is An Octopus – Ben Goldsmith
- The Book of Wilding – Isabella Tree and Charlie Burrell
- Footprints in the Woods – John Lister-Kaye
- Beaver Land – Leila Philip
- Three Against the Wilderness – Eric Collier (hard to find in print)
- Rooted: How regenerative farming can change the world – Sarah Langford
- The Seaweed Revolution – Vincent Doumeizel
- Big Bets – Rajiv Shah



We hope to be much more active on social media going forward so please follow us on [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#). We also plan to do some more regular updates in 2024. If you want to receive these please sign up on from our [homepage](#).

We wish you all the very best for 2024

**Nick & Elena Martin**  
**Consano Earth Co-Founders**  
**December 2023**