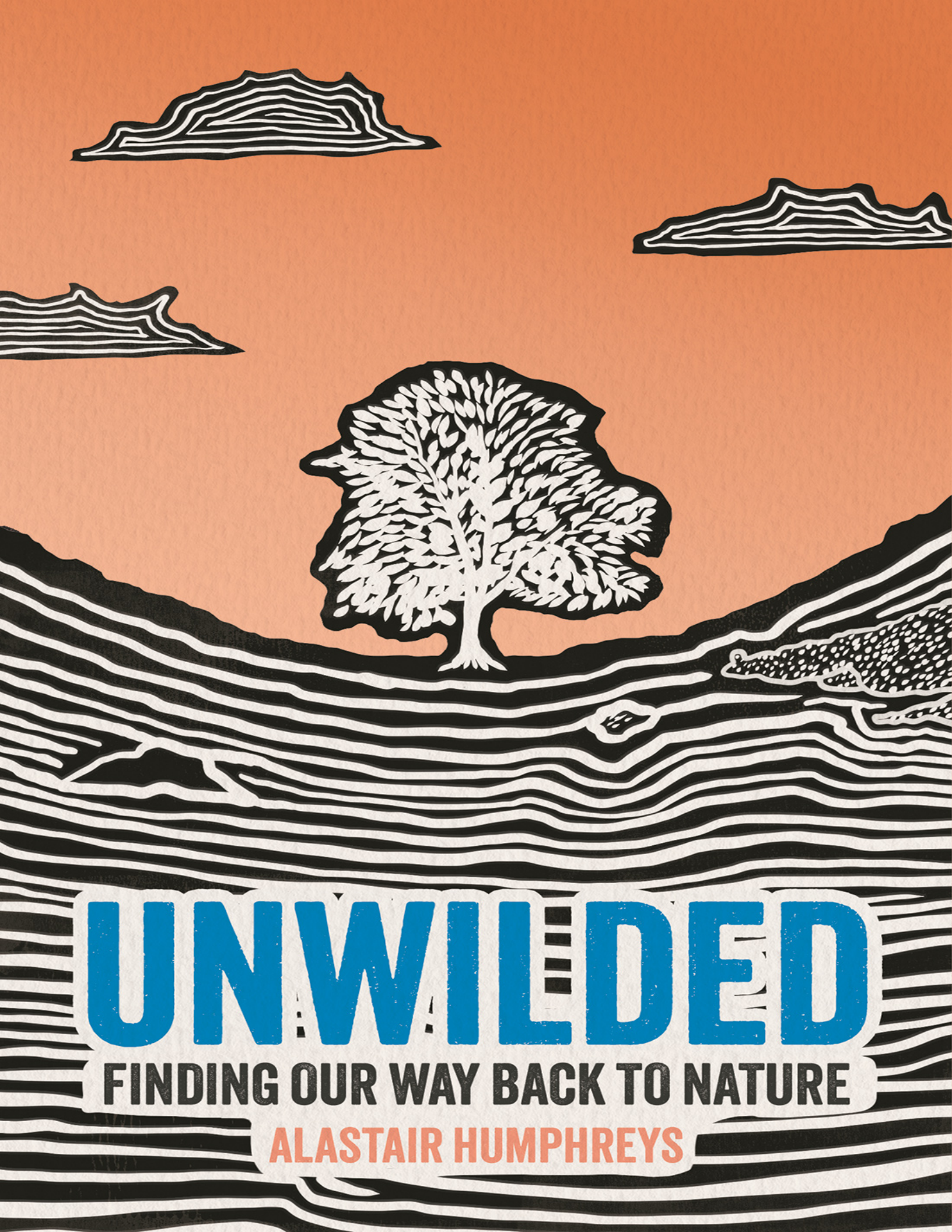




# UNWILDED

FINDING OUR WAY BACK TO NATURE

ALASTAIR HUMPHREYS

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# **UNWILDED**

**FINDING OUR WAY BACK TO NATURE**

**ALASTAIR HUMPHREYS**



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*'This is an interesting planet. It deserves  
all the attention you can give it.'*  
— Gilead, Marilynne Robinson

*'Look, I want to love this world  
as though it's the last chance I'm ever going to get  
to be alive  
and know it.'*  
— 'October', Mary Oliver

*'I had the best life offered up by this blue marble  
Or any alien world  
And no, I shan't complain  
If the lasting memory of me is the sign of a new life budding  
In the leaves of the elm trees  
No, I shan't complain  
I had the best time.'*  
— 'Blue Marbled Elm Trees', King Creosote

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# INTRODUCTION

In September 2023, as Storm Agnes hurled wind and rain across northern England, two men set out on a stealthy night mission. Daniel Graham and Adam Carruthers had decided it would be a bit of a laugh to chop down the iconic Sycamore Gap tree on Hadrian's Wall. The friends parked their Range Rover and approached the tree on foot under the cover of darkness. It was past midnight when one of them wielded a chainsaw while the other filmed the stunt.

Three minutes of skilful work undid a century and a half of tree. All those gales endured, all that rainwater drawn up through those deep roots in the landscape, all those spring blooms of tens of thousands of fresh leaves, all those yearly rings of fresh wood as life went on and on, as it always had. The wind roared, the saw screamed, the tree groaned, and with a sharp crack the sycamore crashed to the ground.

The pals cheered, took a wedge from the trunk as a trophy and then drove away in delight, congratulating each other on having 'launched an operation' like that. During the journey home, Carruthers' partner sent him a video of their five-day-old baby feeding, but he trumped her message with 'I've got a better video than that.'

At daybreak, the two fellows woke to infamy as news of the tree's demise began to spread. Who were the fellers, and why had they done it? Graham and Carruthers pinged gleeful messages back and forth as the story unfolded – at first locally, but soon as far afield as the *New York Times*.

'I think it's going to go wild!'

'It's gone viral, it's worldwide!'

When I was about twelve years old, I had hiked along Hadrian's Wall on a school trip. I remember how exciting it felt to walk alongside an actual Roman fortification, as it marched along the edge of a rocky outcrop, cutting across the windswept moorland.

The most memorable spot was where the clifftop wall dipped through a neat nook in the landscape, and there in the gap was a big tree. The sycamore stood out because it was the only tree around. From here you could see across miles of empty countryside, which I imagined had not changed much since Roman soldiers stood shivering as the wet wind blew over the heather. It was an ideal place for a gaggle of schoolchildren to mess about while we ate our packed lunches.

I describe this scene knowing it might actually be a fudgedtogether memory stitched from the 1991 Robin Hood movie (which I loved), with its accompanying Bryan Adams song (also a big fan) which hung around at number one in the charts for almost as long as the tree had been there. This Hollywood appearance had made the Sycamore Gap tree famous worldwide, not just to hikers and kids on school trips. Indeed, it even reached the dizzying heights of being crowned England's Tree of the Year in 2016.

And so I was bewildered when I heard it had been chopped down. Why would anyone do that? I felt anger, as I do when any beautiful tree is destroyed. But I was also surprised at how much news coverage the story generated, reaching far beyond the realm of tree huggers like me. Why was there such an outpouring of public grief? Perhaps it was simply sadness at the loss of a 150-year-old Tree of the Year.

But the 250-year-old Cubbington Pear, another Tree of the Year winner, was felled in 2020 to make way for the HS2 railway line, yet that wasn't covered in the media with anywhere near as much gusto. The Happy Man plane tree in London (named after a pub and marked on an 1870 Ordnance Survey map – both fine credentials) is another fallen Tree of the Year, axed to little outcry beyond the immediate community. It seems we do not love all trees equally.

The outrage about the Sycamore Gap tree was not only about the loss of a big tree. It was unusually beloved because it was both famous and familiar. It was photogenic enough to become a global icon, yet close enough to a car park for many people to have stood beneath, touched, and known the tree. Consequently, it occupied a sweet spot in our collective imagination.

There was nothing particularly remarkable about the individual tree itself, beyond the spectacular location and its rarity in an open landscape. I should not speak ill of the fallen, but if I was the sort of geek who ranked trees (and I very much am), then sycamores wouldn't make my top ten. It wasn't even native, ancient or wild, having been planted by a landowner to create a distinctive landscape feature. This is nature as anthropomorphic object, moulded by mankind for our own benefit and valued on the basis of our personal connections and interests. We knew this tree, and that is why we cared for it more than the largely unmourned Happy Man plane tree or the Cubbington Pear.

Appearing in court charged with criminal damage, Graham and Carruthers couldn't understand the fuss over the sycamore. They described it as 'just a tree'. They were right, in a way. Millions of trees are cut down every day. But we hadn't lost just a tree. The Sycamore Gap tree was a lightning rod for our connection to that landscape, and we grieved for the loss of all the stories sewn into our hearts there – the picnics and marriage proposals and scattering of ashes. And now Carruthers' baby daughter will grow up in a world ever so slightly diminished by its loss.

When I saw how upset everyone was, I didn't want to be 'that guy'. The one you come up against every time you settle in for a satisfyingly heated but pointless argument on social media, the person deflecting your laser-focused tirades with his indignation about a completely different topic. 'Yeah, but what about...?'

I did not want my whataboutery to detract from a rare moment of united public support for nature. Yes, I was angry too. Indeed I was oddly thrilled by the furore, and by how much people cared about the vandalism. But something about the story also felt off-kilter. Why were we suddenly so sad when we already axe 10 million hectares of forest each year – the equivalent of twenty-seven football pitches every minute – and nobody seems to object much? We struggle to grasp scale. This inbuilt bias, which makes it surprisingly hard for us to care more about bigger problems, is called 'scope neglect'.

Our empathy works well for the nearby and the visible, such as a single felled tree we felt a connection with. But it falters when faced with abstract magnitude beyond our immediate experience. Our brains can't handle the arithmetic difference between one fallen tree and the destruction of a rainforest. A concise encapsulation comes from Joseph Stalin, who apocryphally said that 'a single death is a tragedy, but a million deaths is a statistic.'

When I walked Hadrian's Wall as a child, I assumed Northumberland's desolate rolling hills had always looked this way. But those sweeping views are actually very different from the scenery the Roman legionaries stood guard over. Back then, it was a land of oak and birch forest (although zero sycamores), scattered with bogs, small farms and rough grazing.

Yet even by the time the Romans strode north, the countryside had already been transformed by Neolithic agriculture from the dense wildwood that developed after the Ice Age, teeming for millennia with wolves, bears and beavers. Travel deeper still into the past and dinosaurs might have wandered past.

What I thought of as eternal countryside was just the latest snapshot in time. Our modern landscapes of sheep-mown hills, burned moorlands and monoculture crops look 'right' to our eyes because they are what we've always known. Even the important conservation work of our beautiful national parks is only an attempt to preserve a moment – arbitrarily chosen, more or less, and already very different to earlier, wilder times. The natural world is perpetually in flux, and so there is no 'correct' baseline for how a place 'should' be.

Pausing to imagine how Hadrian's Wall used to look lays bare all the clearance and intensive grazing that have stripped the land of much of its biodiversity. Yet none of us who mourned the Sycamore Gap tree were crying for all the trees that had gone before, because we had never known the land when it was a forest alive with lynx and auroch. We love what we know and we only mourn what we personally have lost.

It is but a blink of ecological time from the abundance of the wildwood to the felling of the Sycamore Gap tree. But with our short lives and shorter memories, we are illequipped to register environmental decline. And

therefore what we consider to be healthy countryside becomes a little less wild and a little quieter every year. We inadvertently lull ourselves not only into thinking that things are not so bad, but also cheering for feeble restoration efforts.

Whenever we touch a tree, we ought to imagine how the environment has changed within *its* lifetime, not merely our own, to help us broaden our perspective. A mature tree has stood through many human generations – the great span of living memory – and witnessed a landscape far richer than the ones we accept as normal today.

Over time, the landscape at Hadrian's Wall has changed as dramatically as the thousands of acres of Amazon rainforest cleared to build a new road to the COP30 Climate Change Conference. But because it happened slowly, each tiny diminishment was unquestioned and unchecked until Graham and Carruthers finished the job. Only after the last tree had been cut down were we roused to care.

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My day began with a Zoom call. Some online meetings are efficient, and can occasionally even be fun. This was not one of those. I nodded and smiled weakly as the minutes of my life ticked away. When the call ended, I felt simultaneously drained and irritated. With a spare hour until my next call, I decided to stop banging my head on the desk and instead try to revive myself with a walk in a nearby wood.

As I wandered among the trees, my mind still churning crossly, I gradually began to notice the sunlight strobing between the branches and the dancing shadows on the forest floor. It had passed me by that the year's first leaves were already starting to bud green. Maybe winter was almost over, I thought, hopefully, as I rubbed my hands on a hawthorn's coarse bark and a robin sang. I took several very deep breaths and smiled. The simple act of stepping away from the thin, restless stress of digital life and into my nearest patch of green had quietly rewired my day.

This place was nothing special, just a small area of young woodland in an old quarry near the motorway, with paths for dog walkers and a CCTV camera watching for flytippers. An ordinary, everyday scrap of green on the edge of town. But as I leaned against a silver birch beneath the clear blue sky, I had a sudden epiphany. 'I like it out here. I should come more often.'

I realised that, despite spending my life rabbiting on about the great outdoors, I had stopped listening to my own advice. I had fallen out of the habit of going outside, little by little, without even realising, until I'd become too busy writing about nature to actually spend any time in it. What a buffoon!

The next day, I made a point of going for a lunchtime run up a small hill near my house. I stopped at the top to look around, partly as an excuse for a rest, but also because I like the view. It is a high point in a low-lying landscape, so I could see a relatively long distance over the sort of view you might find on the edge of any town in southern England. If I ignored the pylons, the dual carriageway and the towns, the gentle valley of green fields fading towards a hazy horizon felt like proper nature.

I ran home feeling reassured that some things are still like the good old days, before Zoom meetings that could have been emails which themselves

didn't really need sending. Modern life rushes on, but at least the wild countryside is unchanged and lovely.

After a shower, I returned to my computer with a coffee and far more calories' worth of toast than I'd burned on my jog. I pulled up the National Library of Scotland's website, which shows you different versions of maps, side by side.<sup>1</sup> I zoomed in to my little hill on a map from the 1830s and compared it to the modern map. I was astonished by what I saw.

I printed out the old map, and the next day I ran back up my little hill to take another look. The differences were probably predictable, if I had ever paused to consider them. But they shifted the way I look at the world, not least of all because I was surprised by how surprised I was. Nothing had changed since yesterday, except that I now saw how much had changed. And that changed everything.

Two centuries ago, according to the map, this grassy knoll had been blanketed beneath a two-mile stretch of woodland, while orchards filled the valley below. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it. The forest a haven of life, with red squirrels and pine martens darting through the branches, glades of bluebells in the spring and the songs of birds I have never known here: maybe the red-backed shrike, wryneck or hen harrier. I pictured apple trees in the orchards humming with bees and butterflies, and hares lolloping for cover as families harvested the fruit for local markets. It was a timeless vision of an English pastoral paradise. Well, timeless until all the trees got chopped down, I suppose.

I opened my eyes and looked around. Just a single tree remained of the woodland in an open ocean of grass. And, if I'm honest, it was more of a bush than a tree. Atop it sat a single pigeon, the only bird I could see or hear. The orchards had been grubbed up to make way for fields of ryegrass – green as astroturf and efficient for feeding cattle, but a poor substitute for nature. I didn't even see a cow, for this is a zero-grazing landscape where the grass is cut and carried away somewhere to feed livestock housed indoors. I had never truly seen this view before, and I understood now what a depleted landscape I lived in. If my great grandparents had walked this way, they would have expected more than fertiliser-soaked grass, one bush

and a pigeon. I had become so blinded by the familiarity of the places I see every day that I hadn't considered how much has been lost.

Comparing my view to the old map showed me that the landscapes we know are but one moment in a long continuum, rather than something static and permanent. A man may run (slowly) up the same hill twice, but if he is paying attention he will realise that it is never quite the same – not as it was in the past, and not as it could be in the future.

Our busy indoor lives, the moth-like lure of bright screens and shopping centres, and restricted access to much of our remaining green space all combine to make us more disconnected from the natural world than any previous generation.

A study led by Miles Richardson, Professor of Human Factors and Nature Connectedness at the University of Derby, suggests that our connection to nature has declined by more than 60 per cent since 1800. The causes include urbanisation, the loss of wildlife, and the failure of each generation to pass on a simple, everyday relationship with nature. This 'extinction of experience' leaves us either unaware of, or unconcerned about, all we are destroying – forgetting that our health, happiness and future all depend on the wild world we have pushed to the margins.

There's an old story about two young fish on their way to school. An old trout drifts past and says, 'Morning, little tiddlers. How's the water?'

The pair keep swimming for a bit, then one of them turns and asks, 'What's water?'

The Inuit language has no word for nature. Nor do the indigenous Amazonian Achuar people. Their immersion is as complete as those little fish in the water.

But across much of wealthy, industrialised society, our relationship with the living world has broken. We are no longer part of nature, but apart from it. No longer of the earth, but regarding ourselves as overlords of an infinite resource to be used as we choose, without consequence.

We burn through an Olympic-sized swimming pool of fossil fuel every fifteen seconds. Every twenty minutes, another species becomes extinct.

And 90 per cent of the oceans' coral reefs are projected to disappear before I do.

But we have all heard a million statistics like this and they never jolt us into action. So instead let me tell you a story about a pigeon.

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<sup>1</sup> The website is a treasure trove for nerdy cartophiles: [www.tinyurl.com/sidebysidemaps](http://www.tinyurl.com/sidebysidemaps)

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Four hundred years ago, Samuel de Champlain set sail across the Atlantic Ocean on an exploratory voyage to North America. He had a three-masted sailing ship, a moustache that curled smartly at the ends and the flowing locks essential for any self-respecting explorer of the day.

One warm evening in July 1605, de Champlain and his crew hunted a ‘goodly quantity’ of pigeons in Goosefare Bay, off the coast of southern Maine. They looked a little different to the pigeons back home – the males had an iridescent orange throat and chest, black spots on the wings and a blue-grey head and back, while the females were duller and browner. The feast of delicious, plump-breasted pigeon was a welcome change from endless salted beef and ship’s biscuits, and de Champlain might have enjoyed it even more had he known he was the first European ever to bag a passenger pigeon.

But the birds were not exactly rare trophies. There were as many as 5 billion passenger pigeons in North America at the time, making them the most abundant bird on the continent, if not the planet. The largest flock anyone attempted an accurate estimate for contained more than 3.5 billion birds. Another measured with seriousness amounted to 2.25 billion birds, give or take a few. The flapping of wings when a flock flew overhead was so loud that you had to shout to be heard, children fled in fear and horses bolted.

In the years ahead, labourers in Ontario would add meat to their dinners by chucking potatoes at passing pigeon flocks and bringing birds down. When a Captain Davy travelled back to Ireland from Philadelphia, his friends laughed at these tales, called him a ‘whopping liar’ and bestowed on him the nickname of Captain Pigeon. It is always hard to imagine sights beyond our personal experience.<sup>2</sup>

Native Americans, of course, had eaten passenger pigeons for millennia before the Europeans arrived with their guns. The Seneca people used poles to dislodge the birds from their nests, then drank their oil and feasted on the plump chicks, which they called *jah’gowa*, or ‘big bread’. Such small-scale hunting had no impact on the vast pigeon populations.

Even after they acquired guns, the Sioux, Potawatomi and Iroquois still refrained from shooting nesting birds. They understood that protecting the

breeding adults was essential if their way of life was to remain sustainable.

In contrast, it didn't take the European settlers long to realise there was cash to be made from what grew into a huge industry supplying markets across the growing United States. The birds' abundance and docile nesting habits made them so easy to hunt. It was also a bonanza for local communities when pigeon hunters turned up in droves, along with the accompanying industries of pluckers, packers, clerks and even 'trollops'.

The hardest part was finding a flock, as passenger pigeons did not return predictably to the same nesting grounds each year. They bred wherever mast crops of acorns, beechnuts and chestnuts were plentiful, then moved south in winter.

The largest recorded nesting was in Wisconsin in 1871, when 136 million breeding birds descended upon 850 square miles of forest. Imagine, if you can, the entirety of London inside the M25 covered with nesting pigeons. Trees bent or snapped under the weight, and hunters felled trees to harvest even more of the flightless baby pigeons. Sometimes they set fire to the woodland so that the smoke suffocated the chicks, sending them tumbling down in heaps two feet deep. Any surplus was just fed to pigs or ploughed into fields as fertiliser.

Another hunting technique was to launch spring-loaded nets over flocks enticed to land by sacks of corn, or lured by a live bird tied to a stool – the original stool pigeon. Hunters rarely bothered springing their traps for flocks smaller than five or six hundred at a time, and a single netting in Michigan in the 1840s ensnared 3,600 birds.

By the nineteenth century, people began hunting for enjoyment as well as for food. Blasting passenger pigeons became a popular sport, with 'shooting matches in every little town and a champion at every crossroads'. The birds were captured alive in the wild, then released to be shot. One tournament in Dallas proudly advertised that '5000 pigeons are to be slaughtered during the tournament', and a contest in Missouri ordered 60,000 birds, although 40,000 of them died in transit.

As cities expanded and firearms, railways and the telegraph advanced, the way society procured food changed forever. What had once been a local concern of gardeners, farmers and hunters became a national commercial

system founded on efficiency, scale and logistics. Countless barrels of pigeons were shipped to urban markets far from the nesting sites. Housewives roasted them with butter and gravy or baked pigeon pies. Taverns offered ‘all-you-can-eat’ passenger pigeon buffets, and in 1862 the Secretary of State hoped to impress a visiting Russian rear admiral with *côtelette de pigeons à la macédoine*.

People were now not only physically separated from the origins of their food, but also morally distanced from it – a shift that deepened their disconnection from nature. Once consumers were detached from the living systems that sustained them, it became easy to assume such abundance could never run out, or not even to think about it at all.

These were boom years in America. Food was abundant and cheap, and meat consumption rose sharply. Independent hunters were outcompeted by large companies who maximised yields and drove down prices. Business was good, so nobody worried too much about the trees felled, the billion birds eaten each year, and at least as many again spoiled and wasted. For everyone enjoying affordable food, making cash or having fun blasting buckshot into low clouds of birds, both the living world and the good times seemed limitless. It would have seemed absurd to imagine that your lunch, your hobby or your business could ever dent such plenty.

Yet the legendary flocks that Samuel de Champlain had known were beginning to shrink, almost imperceptibly, year by year. Nesting colonies became smaller and scarcer. Quiet voices here and there began to warn of the decline. I imagine most people ignored or mocked them. ‘Look up – there are millions of birds. How can you say things are going wrong?’

Hunters were the obvious culprits, along with all the customers enjoying cheap, convenient food with little thought for where it came from. But while these forces certainly accelerated the decline, the deepest pressure on the passenger pigeon was habitat loss.

A flock of 2 billion birds consumed up to 400,000 tonnes of acorns, beechnuts and other seeds in a single day. As forests were cleared, field by field, to make way for new farmland, the supply of natural forage dwindled until there was not enough wild land to sustain the birds. Flocks then

descended on fields of newly sown crops, with disastrous consequences for the despairing farmers.

As farmland expanded remorselessly into the continent's wilderness, friction between agriculture and passenger pigeons intensified. In Texas, a newspaper editor fretted about the prospect of 'millions of them sweeping through the forest, eating all the acorns and causing a wail of despair to ascend from the throats of our beautiful razorbacks [pigs].'

The twin pressures of agricultural expansion and overconsumption were taking their toll on the passenger pigeon population. But with heartbreaking inevitability, as numbers fell, the exploitation intensified. The scramble to seize what remained was driven by the fear that if one person did not cash in, someone else surely would. It was a true tragedy of the commons scenario. And so 1878 became the final year when the breeding population of passenger pigeons was still large enough to be sustainable.

Only then did campaigners' alarm grow into concerted action to save the passenger pigeon. By that point, however, their efforts were risibly small and far too late. They were also hampered by people clutching at self-serving explanations that were more palatable than the truth. Even as the skies fell silent, doubters clung to comforting stories – storms, secret migrations, birds drifting north to Canada, west to the Rockies, even to South America or Australia – anything but face the truth that human hands had emptied the heavens, and that reckless hunting and agriculture had destroyed what once seemed inexhaustible.

By the close of the nineteenth century, only a tiny number of passenger pigeons clung on in the wild. Conservationists placed adverts in newspapers to help readers know what this rare species looked like – a once ubiquitous bird whose flocks used to take days to pass over their grandparents' homes. Readers were urged to keep their eyes open, with rewards of \$100 offered for any bird found and, inexplicably, shot – perhaps not the smartest tactic. As sightings became rarer still, only live birds qualified for a reward. The passenger pigeon's fascination now lay not in its plenitude, but in its scarcity.

Zoos tried to purchase pigeons from scatterings of collectors, but numbers were so low that most of the birds were now beyond breeding age.

By 1910, there were only two passenger pigeons left alive: George and Martha, who were caged together at Cincinnati Zoo.

In his free-flying youth, George had a fine blue-grey head and a rosy-red breast. But now his feathers moulted, he weakened, had trouble walking, then died of old age and was tossed into a bin. Which left Martha, the loneliest bird on earth.

Chief Simon Pokagon of the Potawatomi Nation wrote this in *The Chautauquan* magazine in 1895: 'I have stood by the grandest waterfall of America and regarded the descending torrents in wonder and astonishment, yet never have my astonishment, wonder and admiration been so stirred as when I have witnessed these birds drop from their course like meteors from heaven.'

But no more. Pigeon pies and fairground shows and expanding farmland had seen to that. Martha, the very last passenger pigeon, lived alone at the zoo until 1 September 1914. As the guns of the First World War rumbled across Europe, launching the reckless slaughter of millions, Martha died of palsy.

The passenger pigeon was now extinct, just a dozen or so generations since Samuel de Champlain enjoyed his roast dinner with the waves lapping on the beach. This was a culinary extinction. We had eaten the species to death.

But the hardworking housewife in the city was only feeding her family. So long as the birds were still sold in the market, the assumption was that the system must be sustainable and that nothing fundamental had changed.

And the hunter and the farmer had bills to pay. They were merely doing their job. Besides, if they did not hunt and farm and trade, someone else would do it. It was only what they had always done, and just the way things were. The young lad at the carnival shoot felt only excitement as he entered the tournament.

No one person was at fault for the slaughter of billions of birds, not even a man named Mr Atterberry, who mounted his trophy with a sign proclaiming, 'This was the last Passenger Pigeon killed in Illinois that there is any record of'. Nobody did it alone. Nobody worried until it was too late.

After all, things didn't seem so different today from last year, and this was true year after year after year. Until suddenly it wasn't. A girl who watched a million birds grew up to have a daughter who regarded a thousand as normal, and a granddaughter who thought none at all was just the way the world had always been.

Upon her death, Martha was packed in ice: suddenly we were concerned to preserve her. She was dispatched urgently to the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., to be stuffed. Because, in the well-meaning words on her museum display today, 'experiencing these objects in person creates moments of wonder and curiosity that can't be found elsewhere.'

Today, we have pictures of passenger pigeons and a few museum exhibits. But 'book-pigeons cannot dive out of a cloud to make the deer run for cover, or clap their wings in thunderous applause of mast-laden woods,' raged the environmentalist and writer Aldo Leopold in his 1949 book, *Sand County Almanac*. There are no moments of wonder and curiosity in such a world where 'they feel no kiss of sun, no lash of wind and weather. They live forever by not living at all.' Billions of birds became a memory, then a myth, a dusty museum specimen, and finally a forgotten footnote in history.

Martha's death marked the end of millions of years of those magnificent flocks streaming like feathered rivers across the sky, and of thousands of years of sustainable hunting by Native Americans. It also marked the end of the shockingly brief period that followed the arrival of Europeans, and our plundering of the continent through deliberate hunting and the inadvertent land squeeze of agriculture.

The passenger pigeon is gone, and the awe and beauty of our world is diminished forever.

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<sup>2</sup> Pretty much everything I know about passenger pigeons, and all the quotes, comes from three excellent books: *A Feathered River Across the Sky* by Joel Greenberg, *A Message from Martha* by Mark Avery, and *Hope Is the Thing With Feathers* by Christopher Cokinos.

On a recent train journey to Scotland, I had a conversation with an American passenger about the premise of the book I was working on, only to discover she actually lived in Martha's hometown – Cincinnati – and yet had never heard of passenger pigeons. This is an extreme example of what is known as 'shifting baseline syndrome'.

Shifting baseline syndrome is a vitally important concept with an unfortunately boring name. I believe it lies at the very heart of the climate and nature crises. Once I became aware of it, I began to notice shifting baselines everywhere. They help explain why we pay little heed to the decline in bugs splattering on our windcreens and why our fishing trip photos look pitiful next to grandpa's whoppers from back in the day.

We each regard the world we grew up in as being entirely normal, and we use that as our reference point. 'It wasn't like that in my day,' we all eventually begin to chunter, harking back to 'the good old days', without realising how altered those days themselves were from what had come before. Every generation believes its own baselines are correct, which steadily leads to less wildlife, dirtier rivers, fewer trees and less freedom to roam.

As perceptions of the living world shift over time, we lose our collective sense of how much nature once filled a landscape. I remember standing awestruck one winter dusk beneath a murmuration of 50,000 starlings on the Somerset Levels. It was my favourite ever British wildlife encounter. Yet that breathtaking spectacle was but a puff of dust compared to the passenger pigeons' glory days. My mind cannot compute a flock of birds tens of thousands of times bigger than what I saw. Our imagination for what is possible has also shrunk as the living world disappears around us.

I consider myself an adventurous traveller and a lover of wild places. My own lifespan overlaps with members of Shackleton's heroic Antarctic expeditions. He was alive at the same time as the globe-trotting naturalist Charles Darwin, whose life in turn overlapped with Lewis and Clark, who led the first overland expedition across North America to the Pacific Ocean. And they, on their canoe journey, saw spectacular flocks of passenger

pigeons. From awe and abundance to empty extinction, handed down swiftly along the chain of living memory.

Most of the catastrophes engulfing the living world – and our failure to respond to them – stem from our disconnection from nature. They also reflect our ignorance of, or indifference to, the cumulative impact of our individual lives and the systems that sustain them.

We care only for the nature we know, so this disconnection is disastrous for the living world. Shifting baseline syndrome is the dastardly sidekick to these perils, skulking along behind and making things worse. If nature disconnection is the batteries in our fire alarm for planet Earth running out, shifting baseline syndrome is a silent carbon monoxide leak making doubly sure we do not wake from our fatal sleep.

Learning to recognise shifting baselines has been one of my greatest awakenings. I wrote this book so that the next time you gaze over rolling hills, you notice not only their beauty but also that they have become green deserts, virtually devoid of life. And when you look out of your office window at the swifts scything over the chimney tops, your delight will also mingle with the knowledge that their numbers have fallen by two thirds in just three decades.

I apologise in advance. This awakening does not make for a happy shift in worldview. As Aldo Leopold wrote, ‘one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen.’

However, once we are aware of what has gone, we can also see what’s worth fighting for. I want everyone who was upset by the Sycamore Gap tree to be proportionally more outraged about all the trees we have felled before, all the nature we’ve destroyed, and to realise how much wilder the landscape could become again.

When I imagine how the little grassy hill near my home used to look, I feel saddened by its current diminished state, with its solitary pigeon sitting on a bush. But I am also optimistic for a future of nature-friendly farming that makes space for wildlife to return to these fields. It wouldn’t be hard to do. Change a few things on our plates. Tweak a few subsidies. And we’re

up and away. Unlike poor Martha, stuffed glumly in a dusty museum for all eternity.

Somewhere along the way, we have become unwilded. This book is about waking up to our disconnection from nature and the perils of shifting baseline syndrome. I want to show that our separation from the living world is not only catastrophic for the environment, but also damaging to us as individuals and as a society. Yet reconnection can be simple, fun and rewarding. The antidote I explore is simple: spend time in nearby green spaces, pay attention, and let that change the way we look at the world.

I am neither a scientist nor an expert. I am simply someone who became alarmed by my – and our – disconnection from nature, who has found joy and purpose through learning to become more observant. I will share my own unexceptional attempts at reconnecting and rewilding myself in the hope that you also might be inspired to explore your neighbourhood, think about what has changed over time, and turn what you discover there into the inspiration to identify your own challenges to address.

Observing the past helps us understand the present and reminds us that we can still choose to return nature to the heart of our society. Doing so can foster a sense of love and responsibility in those who might otherwise feel driven to lash out at the world with a chainsaw, or to unthinkingly shoot, sell, or eat a passenger pigeon without considering the cost.

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## **PART 1**

# **THE GREAT DISCONNECTION**

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I woke up to find the country astonished. One of the strongest geomagnetic storms in years had unleashed a spectacular heavenly display overnight. Now half the population was crowing triumphantly about the incredible Northern Lights while the losing half – which included me – was heartbroken about sleeping through it all.

WhatsApp groups were buzzing with excited chatter from the lucky onlookers, or wails of despair from those of us who had been tucked up in bed through one of nature's finest shows.

‘It was a dream come true.’

‘A once-in-a-lifetime experience!’

I gnashed my teeth and tried to be happy for my friends.

Social media was a flood of mysterious purple light framing mountains and artfully lit tents. It had been the ultimate night for showing off our curated online lives. But what really made me smile, once I got over my disappointment, were all the crappy phone photos of green skies over terraced rooftops or supermarket car parks. They demonstrated that people everywhere are awed by nature, not just the outdoor types up mountains. The public had been thrilled in every town lucky enough to experience the Northern Lights. And that felt important.

Nobody ever discusses nature on the community

WhatsApp groups where I live. At least not until last night, when so many folk had been inspired to step outside and look up at a night sky usually smeared with streetlights. We've forgotten that star-filled skies and daily encounters with nature were once normal.

The Northern Lights were a precious connection to something bigger, more beautiful and more mysterious than the daily trudge of to-do lists. Last night the wild world was not a distant place for adventurous souls, or something to watch on TV. It was right here, and that realisation brought happiness to everyone, everywhere, and drew communities together – except for those of us snoring under our duvets.

But busy WhatsApp groups and gushing chats in the corner shop about the wild world do not happen often enough. ‘Did you see the Northern Lights? Didn't the sky look magical?’ we asked this morning. But it will

soon pass, and tomorrow nobody will be asking, ‘Did you hear that lark singing? Have you smelled the wild garlic in the woods?’

What was once ordinary – dark skies, daily encounters with birdsong and seasons, a life threaded through with nature – has become so rare as to feel extraordinary. In accepting this diminished world as normal we have lost not only wildlife and wonder, but something essential to our own wellbeing.

Seeing as I missed the party, let me briefly trash talk the Northern Lights like a sore loser. They are a thrill to behold, no doubt. But are they unique? Hardly. Venus, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune all have their own auroras, so they are nothing special to any passing alien in their UFO. If you want to see something truly unique in the universe, you do not have to wait for the next appearance of the Northern Lights. Just get down on your knees, right here on planet Earth, and take a proper look at the daisies in the park. They suck in starlight and turn it into life itself, opening and closing their tiny petals every day as they pivot to follow the sun’s arc across the heavens.

Elon Musk and his pals won’t find anything nearly as miraculous in their Mars mansions – the ultimate example of disconnecting from nature. ‘Put them all on that spaceship and send them off,’ cried the naturalist Jane Goodall, who knew a thing or two about observation and awe. And yet we take our daisies and our passenger pigeons for granted, right up until it is too late.

It is sad how rare the feeling of wonder has become in our daily lives, how little we marvel at the wildness all around us. It is not that the world is short of wonder, but that we waste a lot of it. The budding leaves of the elm tree, a tiny ladybird, the opening drumbeat on ‘Born to Run’: there is infinite scope for everyday awe. But we have lost much of our capacity for that precious emotion amid the eternal infernal scrolling through funny clips on our phones.

We are deep inside the Screenocene era, living insulated lives through gadgets and windows, always one step removed from the wild universe on the other side of the front door. Our ancestors did not live this way, but we now consider it normal to spend only a few minutes outside as we shuttle

between home, work, gym, supermarket, couch and bed. A 2025 study found that people in Sheffield spent on average just four minutes and 36 seconds in natural spaces each day.

After the Northern Lights lit up the skies and our social media feeds, the collective sense of awe was but a fleeting moment before the algorithms returned to showing us cakes or cars or boys or girls. Our miraculous spacewalk was over, and we sealed ourselves tightly back into our sterile capsules once again.

I find it comforting that the Northern Lights are beyond our polluting, rapacious ways. They are blissfully and mightily out of reach. Those colours will keep on blasting away beautifully for billions of years to come, long after we've burned ourselves out down here. But what worries me is that the rest of nature *isn't* so imperiously immune to us.

The question I found myself wrestling with, in my blearyeyed disappointment at having missed the show, was that if so many of us felt delight at that brief interaction with the natural world, then how can we help people feel that more often? Not just at grandstand events like the Northern Lights, but every day, everywhere. How can we make this nature-noticing commonplace, so that it doesn't end with a social media photo and a few likes, but instead leads to a deeper relationship with our nearby nature and a firm resolution to protect the wild world?

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Most of us spend a lot of time indoors, staring at screens.

I'm doing that now, writing these words. I'll do it in the future when I log on to my bank account and watch the millions in royalties rolling in for this book... or when I scroll through the latest #notveryglowingbookreviews I've been slammed with on Instagram. (Have a look at them; they are quite entertaining.)

Childhoods today also revolve around screens. They can provide a lot of creativity and I love an occasional blast of *Mario Kart*. But outdoor activities like tree climbing and getting muddy have been replaced by expensive, supervised clubs and there is a damning statistic that some kids spend less time outdoors than prisoners pacing the exercise yard. We have grown so accustomed to lower activity levels being the norm, with children driven everywhere and adults rarely walking, that this loss of daily outside movement no longer registers as a loss.

Many children grow up without gardens, on streets without trees, in neighbourhoods where birdsong and changing seasons are barely commented on. This cuts them off from the small encounters that traditionally rooted childhood in the natural world. When the charity Trees for Cities delivers green interventions in schools, such as creating shaded areas and planting edible gardens, they often find that children worry about getting told off for being dirty and are scared of worms.

If you grow up thinking mud and worms are bad, it's likely to shape your adult attitudes. On the other hand, nature habits picked up in childhood linger into later life. I remain unable to walk past a horse chestnut tree in autumn without pocketing a few shiny conkers. It amazes and appalls me to see so many champion specimens ignored by everyone.

Increased traffic and increasingly nervous parenting accounts for children's 'radius of activity' – the area they are allowed to roam unsupervised – declining by 90 per cent in my lifetime. Our youngsters are now guarded under a well-meaning house arrest. There is a legal obligation that every book quoting this statistic has to launch into mistyeyed nostalgia about the good old days when we 'stayed out playing marbles till it were dark'.

I joke slightly, but this is shifting baseline syndrome in action. I used to wander the fields for miles – no cell phone, not many brain cells – so my childhood memories from the 1980s and 1990s will differ from those of someone young today, or someone who grew up in the 1960s. But each felt ordinary to those of us who lived them.

There is less scope today for young people to explore the natural world on their own terms, to dawdle, to mooch, to goof around, beyond family outings or structured school trips. That isn't just something to feel wistful about: splashing in streams or wandering off the path teaches attentiveness and how to weigh up risk, as well as sowing an instinctive love for nature. Digby Jones, a politician and former chairman of the Confederation of British Industry once said, 'If we never took a risk our children would not learn to walk, climb stairs, ride a bicycle or swim; businesses would not develop innovative new products, move into new markets and create wealth for all; scientists would not experiment and discover.'

Most children spend more time outside on school days than they do during the holidays, yet many state schools are losing their outdoor spaces, and playtimes are becoming shorter in order to squeeze in more schoolwork. Year after year, children have less green space available and spend less time in it. But shifting baseline syndrome blurs our view of this decline, and so the stage is set for the disconnection that inevitably follows.

Yet while one in eight schools in England have no access to any green space, the top 250 private schools have more than ten times as much outdoor land as state schools – rising to 140 times more for Eton's schoolboys.

For many urban children, school trips are their only contact with wild landscapes. But rising costs, paperwork and safety concerns mean schools now run fewer outings. Residential trips develop resilience, confidence, communication and compassion. But many pupils receive just five hours of outdoor learning a year, and a single 'nature day' might be regarded as a special event, rather than children routinely studying outside to spark their curiosity.

Paradoxically, the drive to keep children indoors to focus on learning is counterproductive. We assume that short attention spans are just part of life,

rather than at least partially symptomatic of a degraded environment. But spending time in green spaces helps reduce hyperactivity and leads to positive behavioural changes. Outside play and green space improves development, engagement and overall academic performance.

What is sometimes framed as a shaming lifestyle choice – too much screen time, not enough outdoor play – is often driven by inequality. The poorest families, who would benefit most from free, calming, energising play in green spaces, are often those with the least access to it, and who pay the greatest price for society's nature disconnection. The choices we make about where children play say a lot about who we are, what we prioritise and what we don't.

A simple measure of how well a place works is whether children can move about safely, play freely, and encounter nature close to home. Design a place where a child can walk, explore and spend time outdoors, and you tend to end up with a place that works better for everyone.

These problems will be solved only when we, and therefore our leaders, decide to treat them as important. Yet that becomes ever less likely as more people grow up without noticing nature's absence, while those who grew up surrounded by an abundance of it are prone to take it for granted, and to overlook the barriers others face in accessing it. We need to recognise that nature is not an optional extravagance, but a necessity for our childhoods and our communities.

There was a small uproar in 2007 when the Oxford Junior Dictionary cut words related to nature, such as acorn, kingfisher and buttercup, and replaced them with the likes of broadband and bullet point. But it was not the dictionary's fault; it merely reflected a change that had already happened, showing in black and white that the natural world was no longer at the heart of our culture. The language had simply faded away.

Adder. Bramble. Conker. Willow. Wren... A missing word here, a forgotten bird there. A quiet extinction. Author Robert Macfarlane and artist Jackie Morris began something of a fightback, and the popularity of their *Lost Words* book showed that many people did care.

The dictionary was not the cause of the problem. But by removing the words, it could not be part of the solution either. We grieve only for what we know. And once we lose the word for something, our connection with it inevitably frays.

If a young reader doesn't encounter a lark or a minnow in a book, and they've never met one in the wild, then another opportunity passes to light a spark. As botanist and author Robin Wall Kimmerer wrote in *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 'Names are the way we humans build relationships, not only with each other but with the living world.'

If we don't even have words for the wildness we are losing, how will we notice its passing? And if we don't notice, how can we care? If we don't care, then who will protect it? It is a cycle of accelerating disconnection.

Nature vocabulary might not seem particularly important today, but imagine a century from now a dystopia in which children no longer know what an earthworm is, and adults stand puzzled before an archive museum recording of a nightingale.

We do still have plenty of nature-based words in our lives: Apple. Amazon. Jaguar. Patagonia... Ten-year-olds recognise more than four hundred brands, but ask them to name four garden birds and many struggle. Unfortunately, adults don't fare much better unless we were once taught or something has sparked us to learn. And we are the ones responsible for passing on that knowledge and passion.

It is nobody specific's fault that nature has faded from our world. Brands are simply cooler and more central to our days. A wren is only a bird and a sycamore 'just a tree' (to quote the men who felled the Sycamore Gap tree). But if we accept this narrowing, we will raise children who are less curious and less inclined to care for the living world.

To try to counter this unintentional disappearance through not seeing and not naming, I began gathering words on my local map, harvesting everything around me to build my own natural dictionary – acorn, bluebell, chaffinch...

It was a technique, or perhaps a magic spell, to help me muster more attention. Every outing, every street, every path became equally as

interesting and valid once I had a quest to put together my own A to Z of all the nature mingled among the suburban streets – moss, nuthatch, oak...

I did a similar project when I first moved to London and wanted to get to know my new home better, but was also missing globetrotting. I ate my way around an A to Z of London's world restaurants – Afghanistan, Bolivia, Cambodia... Turkey, USA, Vietnam...

Look around where you are right now. What do you see? The more you look, the more you see – robin, swift, thistle... Say their names. Naming requires noticing, which is the first step to caring and the gateway to engaging with nature and taking action.

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When did we start considering it normal to see litter everywhere? Every time my parents venture south to visit me from Yorkshire, they're shocked by a mess that I no longer really notice. My own baseline has shifted. Litter might seem a petty quibble, but it's a sign of a community that doesn't feel responsible for its place. It is like a coal mine canary warning us we have stopped caring.

When our land does not feel like it belongs to us, and we don't feel part of nature, we are more likely to behave as though the world is a hotel buffet. Take as much as we like and don't worry about the clearing up. Too many of us pass across landscapes like skaters gliding over ice, as if they are nothing more than a backdrop to our lives, rather than being fish immersed in water. When you love something, you look after it. But that's not how we treat the planet anymore – or our local park.

Litter-strewn communities are not the way it has always been, nor how they have to be in the future. They are not the norm everywhere. Craig Mod, an American long-distance hiker living in Japan, wrote this in his Ridgeline newsletter:

Starbucks has big signs instructing non-Japanese customers to please not leave their takeaway cups in random locations. There are no garbage cans in Kamakura and if you are buying a coffee to go, you will be responsible for that receptacle for, potentially, a very long time. This is your grandé-sized hair shirt to bear. Garbage responsibility is something [other countries have] long since abdicated not only to faceless cans on street corners (or just all over the street), but also faceless developing countries around the world. Our oceans teem with the waste from averted eyes. And I believe the two – local pathologies and attendant global pathologies – are not *not* connected.

The issues around why someone drops or picks up litter are interesting, but it is even more important to consider why we produce so much of it in the first place, via commercial systems built on overproduction and disposability.

Litter reflects how we buy, use, discard and repeat, but it is also caused by business interests' glee at the freedom to make stuff cheap, flog it to us, and ignore the negative externalities and wider costs. We have trapped ourselves in a cycle where disconnection breeds neglect, a neglected

environment becomes normal, and that normalisation deepens our disconnection.

Breaking this cycle begins with noticing the mess and choosing to act, however modestly. I now notice litter and pick it up. But a friend of mine, who is currently living in a war zone, teases me that this is a very privileged thing to worry about, given the state of the world. He does have a point. Grumbling about litter rather than curing heart disease sounds insignificant, and even picking up a crisp packet makes negligible impact on the world. It may even just get shipped from my wood to someone else's neighbourhood in a poorer country. But the small deed does more than tidy a footpath: it helps me begin to take responsibility.

And that crisp packet is a symptom of the lifestyles we have slipped into that underpin the climate crisis, the biodiversity crash, the pollution choking our rivers and oceans, and the health calamities swamping our hospitals. Therefore what began with moaning about a mere crisp packet now starts to feel like engaging with issues that my friend *would* agree are worth spending my days banging on about.

Picking up litter doesn't even have to be a chore, if we adopt the approach of artist David Hockney: 'Most people don't look much. Looking is hard work. You're always seeing more. That excites me. There's beauty in everything, even a bag of rubbish. But you really have to look.'

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We all like nature. Nobody watches a wildlife documentary and thinks, 'Yuck! Let's get rid of all that.' Even Donald Trump once said, 'I'm an environmentalist. I want clean air and clean water. Really clean water. Really clean air.' We even like nature enough to bring it into our homes. Dogs and cats and houseplants, yes, but also kids' pyjamas covered in animals, plates and wallpaper decorated with flowers, and a fire blazing in the hearth like ancient cavemen.

Property developers name new streets after nature to entice buyers and make the neighbourhood sound more charming than somewhere like 'E Street'. Yet in my town there aren't even any bushes on Nine Elms Grove, let alone nine lovely trees. Until I started to think about it, it hadn't really struck me as odd that we like nature but live increasingly removed from it.

Britain has fewer street trees than the European average, and some urban areas have up to fifteen times less tree cover than others. This prompted me to take a masochistic bike ride around town on a deliberate mission to mildly depress myself.

I took in the absence of trees on Poplar Avenue, the lack of gardens on Hollybush Road, and a lone tree on Ash Road that highlighted not only how bare the street was, but also how much better it would look and feel with a few more leafy companions. The developers on Cedar Avenue had realised it was cheaper and quicker to chuck up a fence than to lay a hedge, or even dot a few token cedar saplings here and there. And the Lapwings cul-de-sac had made no effort to incorporate the living world into its construction. No bird would choose to live there, let alone the crested lapwing with its haunting 'peewit' cry.

Logging onto an estate agent's website, I snooped round a property that was for sale on one of these streets, a 'stunning modern retreat offering a haven for growing families. Enjoy alfresco dining, creating cherished memories with loved ones amidst the tranquility of nature.' The garden photos boasted a large concrete patio, a smaller square of grass and a single bush, all bordered by bare fencing. The estate agent knew that the 'tranquility of nature' sells, yet this seemed to me a very diminished definition of the word.

A slightly geeky thing I like to do is scan the amount of tree cover on a street as a rough gauge of how welcome nature is. Like litter, it is an easy clue to understand intuitively. While litter may signal short-term disconnection, a lack of tree cover indicates neighbourhoods that have missed out on long-term investment.

Trees support public health and climate resilience, as well as being beneficial for nature. They cool streets, reduce flooding, filter particulates, and provide shade, habitat and beauty. Trees improve children's ability to learn at school, as well as reducing asthma, calming traffic, lowering stress, encouraging walking and even helping crime prevention.

Street trees make life better for everybody and everything. Yet they are often scarce in the very neighbourhoods that would benefit most from them. This is not only a failure of urban planning but a sign of how easily we come to accept diminished versions of the places we live. By contrast, affluent areas with leafy streets are the result of decades of planning decisions, housing policy and sustained investment.

Whether you live on a street with lots of trees or none at all, you are likely to consider it normal and therefore underplay its impact. This is why tree equity calculators matter. They measure how fairly trees are distributed across neighbourhoods, estimating how many are needed to reach a local target and how urgently they are needed, based on economic, cultural and environmental factors.

Tree equity scores turn my gut feeling from scanning a street into measurable numbers, highlighting the areas most in need of investment. Alongside this, the 3–30–300 rule is an urban greening guideline that sets out what fair, everyday access to nature should look like: everyone should be able to see three trees from their home, live in a neighbourhood with 30% canopy cover, and be within 300 metres of quality green space.

A neighbourhood's tree cover is a slow story that we inherit, but it is also one we can consciously rewrite through our choices about what to leave the next generation. Each year's decisions or non-decisions might be insignificant, but compounded over the years the discrepancies become startling. Tree cover is therefore a clue to the fairness of a society. Planting a tree today is an act of belief in the future.

Within my lifetime, more than 70 per cent of the world will live and work in cities. The climate crisis means that investing in cooling green infrastructure – trees, parks, community gardens – must now be seen as essential to urban life as roads and plumbing.

With each passing year, we become accustomed to living in environments that are further and further removed from the wild places where animals like us once roamed. Town names that evolved as a connection between a place and its nature are now merely syllables heard in announcements on the railway tannoy. ‘We are sorry to announce that the train to Ashford – the river’s ford near the ash trees – will no longer be stopping at Birkenhead – the headland of birch trees – or Harefield – the open land where hares are found.’

The names remain as words, but only echoes linger of their original meaning. We no longer include nature where we live, and we have forgotten it was ever there. In accepting that thinning we forfeit the benefits that nature brings to our communities. Instead we drift from *somewhereness*, rooted in a place that is recognisably and meaningfully our own, towards a bland homogenous *anywhereness*, weakening our sense of identity, pride and belonging.

In our pursuit of ‘a lifestyle of comfort, convenience and timeless charm’ – to conclude the estate agent’s pitch – we live on Nine Elms Grove without twigging that we haven’t seen nine elms<sup>3</sup> all year. It is a life in which nature is reduced to something printed on pyjamas or a memory preserved in the nostalgic name at the end of your street.

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<sup>3</sup> I am aware, incidentally, that I could not readily recognise an elm tree myself, as most died out before I was born, felled by a human-imported disease. This was unfortunate. Careless, then, that we have since made the same mistake again, and that dieback may mean that future generations will not recognise one of our most common trees.

Most chapters in this book began with me wondering about something while wandering around woods or running up little hills. Although where I live is somewhat built up, it is easy for me to get out into nature and find good spots to exercise, relax and think. I work for myself, so if the day is grinding me down, I can just go and climb a tree. I'm comfortable in the outdoors, not averse to a spot of gentle trespassing, and can easily navigate from built-up streets to peaceful trees.

I'm very aware of the privilege of not having to worry about uncomfortable encounters in the countryside as I'm sufficiently tall, white, male, straight and middle-class not to be harassed by anyone. And just in case, I'm also quite good at running away, which means I never feel anxious about my safety or welcome. All in all, I've got it good and easy.

But this untroubled connection with the outdoors is not so simple for everyone. Access to green spaces generally follows the familiar divides of inequality and disconnection: gender, race, wealth, disability, geography and so on. The words of Benny Rothman, a key organiser of the Kinder Scout mass trespass, remain true almost a century later: 'We ramblers, after a hard week's work in smoky towns and cities, go out rambling for relaxation and fresh air. And we find the finest rambling country is closed to us... Our request, or demand, for access to all peaks and uncultivated moorland is nothing unreasonable.'

Those in the poorest communities today are more likely to live far from green spaces and visit them less often. They suffer worse health outcomes as a result. Nearly half of England's most deprived communities are more than fifteen miles from a national park or protected landscape, and reaching them by public transport is slow or expensive. Even on our much-envied footpath network, approximately a fifth of people struggle with mobility issues due to gates and stiles.

Additionally, even if you feel lucky to have a few footpaths or bits of woodland to run through, you might not appreciate how much more open space there used to be, or could be, or actually is. For none of the myriad of problems exacerbated by nature disconnection are helped by 90 per cent of England's countryside and 97 per cent of our rivers theoretically being legally off-limits to the public.

‘Private’ and ‘Keep Out’ signs are so common that we forget the land has not always been like this, or that it could be different. When did it become normal or acceptable to be barred from strolling through a wood, or swimming in a river? How can anyone own a hill?

In the great song ‘This Land Is Your Land’, folk singer Woody Guthrie reflected on encountering a ‘No Trespassing’ sign, only to realise that the land beyond still felt as though it belonged to everyone – you and me – not just those who claimed ownership.

Farmers and landowners rightly worry about the practical challenges of expanding access to the countryside: litter, gates left open, crops trampled and livestock worried by dogs. On the other side of the fence – quite literally – are those who point out that half of England’s land is owned by under 1 per cent of the population, many of whom have proved themselves to be exceedingly poor custodians. We are not being excluded to preserve a paradise: behind all those ‘Keep Out’ signs, our countryside has been exploited into one of the most nature-depleted nations on earth.

Centuries of industrialisation, enclosure, intensive farming, urban sprawl and privatisation have scoured wildlife from the land and severed our connection to it. This happened earlier and more completely in Britain than almost anywhere else and it has dulled our expectations of what nature should look like.

Restoring access could help reverse that decline by rebuilding a sense of belonging and responsibility. It’s a clear example of shifting baseline syndrome that we grew up believing exclusion is inevitable, rather than a political choice. We cannot care for a landscape that we are not even trusted to walk upon.

A right to roam responsibly over moor and dale is important, but improving everyday access to green spaces in and near towns is even more urgent. These are the settings where most people connect with nature and they are critical for bringing daily doses of fresh air and open sky to everyone’s doorstep, especially for the one in eight households without access to a garden. Almost all our engagement with the wild world takes place in these

close-to-home green spaces, rather than on mountaineering expeditions or summer holidays.

The Victorians deliberately incorporated nature into the fabric of our cities as public health infrastructure: places such as Victoria Park in London, known as ‘the People’s Park’, Glasgow’s Queen’s Park, built as ‘lungs’ for the industrial city, or Leazes Park in Newcastle, created specifically to provide ‘healthful recreation’ for working people.

Thoughtfully designed green infrastructure improves air quality, absorbs carbon, eases urban heat and flooding, supports wildlife and provides green routes for walking and cycling. So it is not enough to only champion our traditional rural spaces, the green belt and national parks. City planners ought to make nature flow through every street. But we have lost that civic responsibility in today’s car-centric, cost-cutting approach to town planning.

Victorians didn’t spend their childhood in padded soft play centres. They played outside and walked in fields and therefore intuitively understood the value of street trees and green spaces. Meanwhile we are dismantling the Victorian legacy, as our parks are nibbled away by housing pressures and funding cuts.

The Fields in Trust charity works hard to defend our remaining green spaces, and their website shows matching aerial photos from 1945 and 2023 which you can slide back and forth to see how much has gone. It looks shocking when seen so swiftly, but the gradual loss over decades is a perfect example of shifting baseline syndrome, as we get used to each small decline in our towns and soon forget what we’ve lost. Parks are an important ‘third place’ – not home, not work – where we can stay active, meet friends, or enjoy a quiet moment. They are a haven for harried parents, weary shift workers and lower-income communities who can’t get away for a weekend in the hills.

In the United States, more than three hundred mayors (including the mayors of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston) have pledged that all people should live within a ten-minute walk of a green space. Even the lofty United Nations Sustainable Development Goals decree that everyone should have easy access to safe, welcoming green and public spaces.

In 2023, our government declared that we should all live within a fifteen-minute walk of a green or blue space (which a third of us currently do not). Sadly, by the end of that same year, ministers scrapped their plan to make the target legally binding, which all but guaranteed that deprived and built-up communities will once again be left behind. I began to think I could incorporate the idea into my own work. Could I try to help more people access the nature close to where they lived, even for just fifteen minutes a day?

On paper, at least, we all seem to agree that access to green spaces is not a luxury but a basic human necessity. Our relationship with nature inevitably suffers if we can't reach it, if we aren't allowed in, or if it isn't there. What was once normal – easy access to land, parks and open space – has become restricted and unequal, eroding our health, sense of belonging and responsibility for the natural world.

Every locked gate and lost park lowers our expectations of what our relationship with a natural environment should be. And consequently each generation accepts a greyer, more fenced-off world, until sitting beneath a tree or walking beside a river becomes a magnanimous treat bestowed on us occasionally by those who own the land, rather than a core part of being human.

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I recently treated myself to a cheap old film camera from eBay for a new creative challenge, plus some childhood nostalgia. I remember walking around at home as a child with my first ever camera, looking for things to photograph, torn between the urge to snap away (the dog, mostly) and a reluctance to waste the fifteen precious shots on my film. I even enjoyed the deferred anticipation of waiting for the film to be developed. The pictures were fine. The memories were lovely.

My hope now was that shooting with the clunky Olympus Trip 35, which was probably as old as me, would get me outdoors more regularly and help me slow down and chill out. I took it on a walk to test it out.

The woodland was fresh and cool and the light was softer than in town. The camera reminded me to look carefully at the world and disciplined me to try harder than usual to capture a good photo. Is this the moment I want to preserve? Or this one?

Now that each photo came at a cost, it forced me to pause. Did I really want to take this picture, or should I just enjoy the view? The photo wouldn't be perfect; I had to hit and hope, and accept that the outcome was not entirely in my control. It was a very different experience to the thousands of photographs I blast with my phone, titivate with filters, and yet rarely look at again. Here I am, in this moment, for better or for worse. Accept it. Above all, notice it and live it.

It was a relaxing way to spend an hour; looking for images, listening to the gentle sounds of morning in the wood, and then choosing a tree to sit beneath while I boiled water for coffee on my little camping stove. The bustle of town felt far away, though I knew it lay only a mile or so from here.

Colossal sweet chestnut trees peered down at me as I sipped my drink, their ancient trunks like corrugated columns. A jay chattered in the branches. But something was nagging me. Tens of thousands of people lived within a few miles of here. Why was I the only one lucky enough to be enjoying the headspace of these woods?

One obvious and important answer: most people have got a proper job, you professional wastrel. That is true, but I knew there would be people relaxing in cafes, brainstorming in offices, studying biology in schools and

pounding running machines in gyms. Did none of them want to do those things for free in the woods? Or does it no longer occur to us that we can?

I decided to follow the overhead power lines into town to investigate what everyone was doing. I jumped on my bike and rode down bridleways and tracks at top speed, simply for the fun of it. My heart rate was high, my cheeks glowed and I had a big smile on my face. Nature turns exercise from a chore into play.

I locked my bike in the town centre, then wandered the streets. Sure enough, people were out and about, strolling, running, chatting in cafes or on benches. The sky was hemmed in by buildings and there were golden arches but no goldfinches. There were more CCTV towers than towering trees and the few trees that remained had been harshly pollarded and entombed in tarmac. This was nature denatured to the max.

Many homes had converted their front gardens into paved parking spots or plastic lawns, for we now prioritise speed and convenience above much else. In one garden, a plastic hawk flew like a kite above a trellis of plastic flowers to deter any actual birds from landing.

I was only a short bike ride from those magnificent trees that had been perfect to climb or play among, but here in town impromptu play was frowned upon. 'No Cycling' and 'No Ball Games' signs abounded. We have normalised environments that don't help our mental wellbeing and have turned being active into a task to be scheduled, paid for and, above all, done somewhere else.

Compare the times when children played freely outside to today, where you have to book, pay and sign waivers to visit an indoor soft play centre for some ear-screeching, health-and-safety-approved fun and really bad coffee.

We like to think our habits of how much we move and how often we go outside are the result of personal choice, but much of this is shaped without any conscious decision. The places we live nudge us towards certain ways of behaving. If streets are unpleasant to walk, we drive. If there are no safe green spaces, we stay indoors. Our contact with nature is not simply a matter of willpower, but of design.

These hard streets gave no clue to the nearby winding paths and ancient trees, nor indeed that many of the residential streets had themselves been countryside less than a century ago. I knew how close the woods were, but I wondered how many other people knew that too. A walk in the woods or a few quiet minutes sitting under a tree would feel unusual, even indulgent, to many people in my town, I suspect, despite the fact that more of us than ever are mentally exhausted and physically unfit.

In our age of screens and convenience, it is easy to forget that we did not evolve for stationary indoor lives. We are wild animals – long-distance roamers who have domesticated and caged ourselves. We no longer live in forests or hunt for food, but our ancient core has not disappeared. We still need daylight and darkness, movement and rest, and sunshine on our faces. When those needs go unmet, we become restless, unfit and unwell.

Active time outdoors used to be built into everyday life: walking to work, playing outside with friends, or joining weekend hiking groups organised by trade unions, youth clubs and churches, with ‘Ramblers Special’ trains laid on for big outings.

We like to think of ourselves as the most advanced species on the planet, yet our bodies ache from sitting still and our minds buzz from never switching off. Instead of addressing the causes, we treat the symptoms with pills and accept these conditions as normal. If this is modern life working as intended, it might be worth questioning the design.

What if prescriptions came with a map of local green spaces and other nature therapy activities, as well as a packet of pills? Engagement with nature offers a proven, low-cost intervention to lifestyle-related health issues, and the prescribing of activities in nature to tackle mental ill health has already benefited thousands of people across England.

These activities can be as small as gardening with your bare hands to boost your gut microbiome, or listening to birdsong and smelling flowers. However we engage with it, nature helps our mind, body and soul, yet we still treat it as an optional extra rather than a basic human need.

Spending regular time in green spaces is one of the simplest and most effective ways to address many health problems. But if it is so good for us, why aren’t we all in the woods – and what would it take to change that? I

sometimes feel the urge to walk around shouting: ‘There’s some brilliant nature this way – and it’s free to visit!’

Part of me feels like a busybody for worrying. Shouldn’t everybody just decide for themselves what is good for them? But shifting baseline syndrome makes it hard to notice the absence of nature when you have never really engaged with it or have fallen out of the habit. And many people face real barriers accessing the outdoors. Somewhere between the woods and the town centre, we have misplaced a balanced way of living. And most of us did not even notice it slipping away.

My old film camera did not make the woods a better place – but it helped me be better at being in them. By encouraging me out there, then forcing me to pause, slow down, and accept imperfection, it reminded me what I was losing in modern life’s pursuit of speed and convenience.

Perhaps the most radical health intervention is not another app or pill, but the simplest, cheapest and most old-fashioned habit of all: moving through the trees, breathing fresh air, and letting the woods do their work on us, with or without an old camera in hand.

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Since I began paying closer attention to the world around me, the question that has most intrigued me is how we choose to divide the land between nature, farming, and where we live. Our wilder places have been squeezed, and we fear that our suburbs sprawl. But in fact only 8 per cent of Britain is built on, while 70 per cent is farmland, leaving very little truly wild land for nature. These proportions have consistently shifted, and we can easily choose to adjust them again.

I used to assume that the amount of land we took from nature to produce our food was simply the amount that was necessary, and that because fields are green they must be good for wildlife. I was very wrong on both counts. So I bought a supermarket lunch to eat on my little hill while I had a think about the connection between field and food. I strolled up the grassy footpath for a picnic.

First up: an ‘irresistible’ New York-style deli sandwich – beef brisket pastrami with Emmental – double-wrapped in plastic to keep it pristine. I looked out at the quiet farmland as I nibbled some ‘100 per cent chicken breast’ bites, cheese strings that were ‘rich in calcium and vitamins’ and a ‘100 per cent pork’ salami with a ‘protein kick’. I washed it down with a bottle of ‘fruit juice and blue spirulina’, which was ‘energising and sugar-free’, despite its unnerving hue.

Main course done, I savoured a pot of pineapple pieces and a mango protein yoghurt, then polished off a brownie. That cake might sound decadent for an athletic kinda guy like me, but it was vegan so it must be healthy. I took one last look across the green fields then waddled home, happy – and rather full.

Back in my shed, I settled down at the computer to digest my lunch, both literally and in terms of thinking about the impact it had on my health and the health of the living planet.

Time for a confession: I only bought this lunch to make a point about nature connection. It’s not what I would usually eat. The dissonance I felt when walking around the supermarket was interesting: the items I usually buy kept catching my eye, but today I was searching for the sorts of food I

typically ignore. They had become harder for me to see, which shows how powerful ingrained food habits become.

This was not a meal based on nutritional, ethical or environmental choices. It had a colossal carbon and land footprint. It was mostly cooked up in a chemistry lab, and it was all sheathed in single-use plastic that I tossed into a hedge (joke!), where it'll sit for the next 500 years – which is about as long, I suspect, as the meal will sit heavy in my belly. What began as one man's convenient lunch, multiplied by billions, becomes a planetary reckoning.

There is no longer a clear connection between the food we eat and where its circuitous journey began. We have come to consider it normal to live on unpronounceable additives and for the poorest among us to be the most overweight.

In Britain, we spend a smaller proportion of our income on food than almost any other country, although that share is roughly twice as high for low-income households. We eat more than ever, over half of us are overweight and our diet is the leading risk factor for death, which should outrage us, but no longer seems to. We also waste 30 per cent of our food.

As the good times rolled, and as our baselines and waistlines shifted, our disconnection from nature meant we never paused to consider the impact of the food we consume and the low prices we demand.

When we dash into a shop we rely on quick mental shortcuts rather than careful choices – known as bounded rationality – and supermarkets exploit these through clever placement and greenwashing labelling. Many brightly packaged foods are targeted at children, making them more likely to grow up thinking food comes from multipacks, not the natural world. My 'blended and shaped' chicken bites hinted only blandly at the industrial madness distancing the shrink-wrapped snack from an actual chicken. It was unlikely to have been a happy bird scratching around for bugs, frolicking contentedly in nature, which is the story we still tell children (and ourselves) about where our food comes from.

We are wild creatures from the savannah, and our sense organs are extraordinary at choosing suitable foods based on their smell, colour, taste

and texture. But cunning scientists have hacked these sensitive instruments and tricked us into stuffing our faces with chemicals we can't even pronounce, let alone resist.

Once upon a time, when we were hungry, we wandered the woods until we found a berry to eat. Later, lunch depended on how well we had sown, watered and tended our crops. Nowadays, more than half our calories come out of factories.

There are around three hundred thousand edible plant species, plus millions of animals we could eat. But three quarters of our global diet comes from just twelve plants, five animals and a science lab of grossness. Looking at the ingredients of my lunch, I was impressed to discover I'd just cheerfully scarfed down over a hundred different things. Even my virtue-signalling vegan brownie cost a hefty £2.80 and contained more than fifty ingredients.

Food writer Michael Pollan has a list of 64 pithy rules in his book *Food Rules: An Eater's Manual*, including 'Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants' and 'Don't eat anything your greatgrandmother wouldn't recognise as food.' Here is a rough A to Z of industrial-sounding ingredients in my lunch that definitely didn't grow in grandma's garden, and which I wouldn't have chosen to pop into my mouth had I paid closer attention to the small print rather than the enticing bold text promising 'irresistible' food, 'high in protein' and 'loved by families': Ammonium bicarbonate, biotin, calcium acetate, disodium guanylate, esters of mono and diglycerides of fatty acids, folic acid, gelling agent, humectant, isomalto-oligosaccharides, lecithin, maltitol, niacin, oligofructose, pentasodium triphosphate, ricinoleate, sodium tripolyphosphate, thiamine, vegetable mono- and diacetyl tartaric acid, yeast extract. No wonder I needed a nap – Zzzzz...

Up on my hill, I'd looked around at the farmland and reminded myself that food requires fields, and fields are land that was once wild. The trade-off should be obvious. But it isn't if our relationship with food never extends beyond shops or restaurants. Until we recognise the rupture between field and plate, we will keep feeding an appetite that is consuming the world itself, and shifting baseline syndrome deceives us that it has always been this way.

It takes a cognitive shift to realise that a green field isn't the idyllic landscape of our nursery rhymes. The modern food system is the single biggest cause of nature loss and river pollution. We have turned almost half the habitable surface of the planet into monoculture, replacing trees and wildlife with ploughed and sprayed fields. Family farms have been swallowed by corporations, and this industrial agriculture rapes the earth as it spews forth enough calories to feed 15 billion people.

Additionally, a quarter of all greenhouse emissions come from the food system, more than all the world's cars, planes, ships, trucks and trains combined. If we quit fossil fuels tomorrow, our diet choices alone would still push the planet past the 1.5 °C threshold of planetary heating.

What was once the most natural of things – food visibly rooted in local fields and seasons – has become a devastating industrial system of ultra-processed excess. As we've drifted from the land, we have forgotten what good food and good countryside look like.

It is naive to dream that the public will all start tucking into healthy food voluntarily, especially those struggling with the cost of living. Chocolate is delicious. Burgers are cheap.

People are busy. Under those conditions, we need to make it easier to choose fresh, affordable, sustainable food, and harder and more expensive for processed food companies to keep wrecking the environment and our wellbeing.

A shortage of money, time and skills has made processed food the default option for too many of us. It is even harder for the millions living in food deserts – areas with little access to fresh, healthy and affordable food – and for the many more of us who rely on help from food banks.

Comedian Kevin Bridges is typically forthright on the subject. 'As soon as I made a few quid, thanks to you people, I lost weight. Simple as that. Yet I hear politicians saying, "Is there a link between poverty and obesity? We're going to commission a think tank." Aye, there is a fucking link. You don't get avocados in a food bank. Try getting a fucking sixpack with the contents of a food bank: alphabet spaghetti and a bowl of Frosties. See if Joe Wicks can get you lean eating that shite.'

Lasting change rarely comes from lecturing society or relying on individual willpower. It comes from redesigning systems so that healthier, nature-friendly food becomes the affordable and convenient default. That requires action from government and the food industry. Our entrenched food culture will shift only through rules and nudges that change what is easy to buy and what future generations grow up seeing as normal to eat.

The Planetary Health Diet, a global interdisciplinary initiative, is one such attempt to rethink what we eat so that human health and the natural world can coexist – a balance we have not yet achieved. The introduction of a sugar tax in 2018 is a good example of a top-down policy that led manufacturers to change their recipes, thereby reducing the amount of sugar people consumed. Everyone was a winner.

Much of the food we buy in supermarkets – particularly along the central aisles – harms both our health and the planet. A fundamental shift in what is sold is long overdue. But supermarkets operate under such tight competition that they cannot change without stronger regulation; any move away from cheap, low-quality products risks being undercut by rivals.

Meanwhile, a small number of corporations dominate the production of ultra-processed foods, making billions while driving ill health and environmental damage. Our food system is distorted and unsustainable.

Spending a little time paying attention to the farmland nearest to where we live could help more of us prioritise eating food that is good for nature, or at least much less bad. Our diet extracts not only a tragic price in depleted soil, pollution and biodiversity loss, but also takes up insanely more land than necessary. Every time we choose from a menu, we also declare how much land we're willing to take away from nature. Beef typically requires around 50–100 times more land per calorie than crops such as maize, and tens of times more land per gram of protein.

If we were to imagine a hypothetical world where nobody consumed meat or dairy, global farmland could shrink by three quarters and still produce enough food to feed everyone. That's an area the size of the United States, China, the European Union *and* Australia combined. It is quite

extraordinary to picture what might return in its place – forests, wetlands, wildlife – all while producing the same amount of calories and protein.

A carefully managed number of livestock do play a role in our food system, of course, from the biodiversity benefits of mob grazing to the utilisation of harsh uplands. But if our diets shift towards using less land and causing less pollution, the result is not sacrifice but a win-win: lower emissions and water pollution, more space for nature and healthier lives.

When I sat there in the grass, belly full and head buzzing with all these thoughts, it struck me that my little hill had done its job far better than a supermarket ever could – it had reminded me where our food ultimately comes from.

I was unsure whether all this made me upset at what madness our lunch has wrought, or if it excited me as such an obvious, positive, achievable pathway for nature renewal, carbon capture and so much more. Because if loss of wildness, climate chaos and poor health are so connected to our food and our engagement with the countryside, then so are the solutions.

Every meal we eat is a powerful vote for the kind of world we want to live in, and an opportunity to make space at our tables for nature. But until our lunches once again feel linked to the fields beneath our feet, we will keep mistaking a full plate for a healthy countryside.

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One summer afternoon when I was young, my brother was playing in a cricket match. Mum drove him there with all his kit and I decided to cycle to the game. The village was a familiar name on the signposts I saw from the car window, but I'd never ridden there before. I spread a map across the kitchen table, traced an off-road route, filled a bottle with Ribena and pedalled off on my beloved mountain bike (a neon-pink Townsend Equaliser that I saved and saved to buy. It cost £130 and I adored it.)

I was hot and sweaty when I arrived at the match, but the adults were all impressed, and Mum bought me a fizzy drink. I still remember the surprise on that cross-country ride of discovering where that village actually was and how it nestled into the folds of a landscape that I knew as separate villages linked by roads. Hills and paths wove the land together in a way I hadn't appreciated before. This place I thought I knew well sat in a broader landscape that I was beginning to see in a different way.

That small ride showed me how the world opens up when you move through it under your own power. These days we often skip that part, leaping over the land in aeroplanes to our destinations, rather than feeling it take shape beneath us. But there is so much to discover when you move slowly. Years later this notion expanded into a larger plan, and I pedalled away from that same front door and cycled around the world. It was the adventure of a lifetime, and it got me hooked on exploring wild environments.

In the decade that followed, I flew off to deserts and ice caps, having many brilliant experiences for which I am extremely grateful. I grew accustomed to scrolling through flight deals whenever I wanted an adventure. The world is full of dazzling sights – more than we can ever experience – and I love flying somewhere new. Historically, and still for most of the world today, people have found their adventures in the landscapes around them. But why did I now assume I had to jet off to feel alive? What was the lure of the faraway?

Today, many of us in wealthier countries have far more options than holidaying at home, and some of us take to the skies several times a year. Absurdly cheap plane tickets have reshaped how we think about flying, helped by a cushy tax system. Roughly half of what drivers pay at the pump

is tax, while aviation fuel is untaxed. Applying the same principle to flying would add hundreds of pounds to a flight to Disney World. With us Brits taking 80 million overseas trips each year, that could raise substantial hypothecated revenue to help tackle climate breakdown.

This seismic shift in how much we fly not only harms the environment, it also risks weakening our connection to where we live. Travel can broaden horizons, and many people feel an attachment to more than one place. But escape is easier than repair. If home begins to feel broken or dispiriting, it is now so simple – at least for the privileged frequent flyer – to jump on a jet plane and leave, rather than stay and fix it. In doing so, we risk becoming temporary visitors everywhere, rather than citizens sufficiently rooted in one place to care for it.

Popular culture and marketing reinforce all this, selling the idea that ‘proper travel’ means safaris and jungles. It begins to feel normal to assume that beautiful nature lies far away, and to forget what the wild on our own doorstep once looked like.

Travel is not new. It is an ancient, human and often wonderful experience. But we do not have an unlimited entitlement to travel however we want, whenever we want and as far as we want, regardless of the cost to everyone and everything else. Freedom is not the same as consequence-free indulgence. The question is not whether we should travel, but what it costs and whether we are willing to bear that cost.

To challenge some of my travel habits and reconnect with my roots, I packed my panniers and set off. I spent a month cycling only around Yorkshire, the county where I grew up, to try and have a proper adventure without leaving home. I’d realised that I had more adventure memories from the Yukon than from Yorkshire. I resolved to explore the place as if it was a foreign land, with my eyes open and optimistic as they tend to be when I travel abroad, rather than cynical or unseeing as they too often are when I’m in my own country.

From the first pedal strokes out of Middlesbrough railway station, I was surprised how little of my home county I had ever seen. I slept under the stars and swam in bays I never knew existed. The towpaths of the old

industrial canal network were green corridors alive with life. I rode them with my eyes peeled for kingfishers, as dragonflies skimmed the water. Every twenty or thirty miles the landscapes shifted, from the balancing boulders of millstone grit in Nidderdale to the vast cathedral chamber of Gaping Gill, a hundred metres beneath the limestone of the Dales.

The locations had not changed since I grew up here, but my notion of what counted as adventure had, for I'd spent years believing that wonder began beyond the boarding gate. All that shifted back on this ride was my attention, but with that came a richer connection. I felt part of the place, rather than just passing through, as the land moved slowly beneath my wheels. The new experiences I'd once flown so far to find had been right here in front of me all along, softer perhaps, but maybe deeper for being my home.

I had feared that even God's own county wouldn't be enough to hold my attention for a month. Instead, by the end of the journey, I wished I could keep going for three. It was a brilliant experience, and it reminded me of that first ride to the cricket match, when the world I thought I knew expanded simply because I moved through it slowly enough to notice it.

My love of adventure and travel did eventually become my gateway into loving the natural world. It took me long enough to get here. But today I feel more fired to appreciate the environment around me than to bag another foreign stamp in my passport.

The psychological and health benefits of spending time in nature don't even require distant wilderness or epic adventure. They arise just as readily from ordinary encounters close to home. And if we are to resist accepting a diminished world as normal, that resistance begins with something as small as learning to notice one ordinary piece of nature every day.

Both nature and adventure matter deeply to me for many reasons, ranging from the existential to the everyday. Not the least of these is the danger that each generation accepts a diminished world as normal and stops missing what has been lost. Aldo Leopold captured this in his essay 'Wisconsin', reminiscing about a youthful canoe adventure on the Flambeau River:

‘Perhaps our grandsons, having never seen a wild river, will never miss the chance to set a canoe in singing waters.’

Since I stopped flying entirely for adventures six or seven years ago (and as much as possible for all other reasons), I have learned that the richness of my journeys is not measured in miles, but by how deeply I connect with a place. The more I chased wildness ‘out there’, the less I noticed the wildness woven into places I thought I already knew.

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Somewhat reluctantly, dear reader, I decided to walk a lap of my neighbourhood shopping centre for some book research. The things I do for you!

It is a massive place, with hundreds of shops and thousands of parking spaces. Traffic jams stretch for miles during busy periods. You can buy anything you want, from flashy watches to fast fashion, and then celebrate your purchases at around sixty bars, restaurants or cafes. I try to avoid it at all times.

But I was curious to see how people were spending the afternoon. The lights were bright, the shops were full, and everything seemed good with the world. I hope most of the shoppers were enjoying themselves, or usefully ticking off to-do lists. But a place like this also reveals some of the less tangible facets of nature disconnection.

So many people buying stuff, eating burgers and milkshakes, relaxing, or maybe trying to impress others, is a perfect example of what Jon Alexander calls the 'Consumer Story' in his book *Citizens: Why the Key to Fixing Everything is All of Us*. The Consumer Story era began promisingly, with choice, agency, votes and change. But now, decades later, we find ourselves running frantically on a hamster wheel squeaking 'me, me, me' and 'more, more, more'. Our overconsumption has become so extreme that if everyone lived as we do in Britain, we would need 2.6 Earths to sustain us all.

Perhaps, if everybody was wildly happy, I might ignore the problems, stick two fingers up at my future grandchildren and dive into the shops. But our addiction to stuff also fuels our debt and stress and it doesn't even seem to make us particularly happy. There is a dissonance between the bright lights selling promises of prestige and the darker reality that we are taking resources from the future – all while feeling empty inside.

Many of the enticing window displays were a monument to our increasingly individualistic culture, urging us to think first about ourselves – our ambitions, choices and independence – rather than what we share with others. Our attitude has drifted from 'We're all in this together' towards 'What's in it for me?'

Despite all the smiling faces on the billboards around me, advertising's role is generally to make us unhappy with what we have and then hint that a new purchase will solve everything. In contrast, spending time in green spaces has a proven positive effect on wellbeing. Encounters with nature evoke deeper emotions than many modern distractions, fostering gratitude, moral uplift and a feeling of belonging within a wider living world.

So I prefer the adverts made by Purpose Disruptors, a group of young creatives who've formed an 'Agency for Nature' to channel their talents into supporting their most important client: the natural world. Their stylish campaigns work to repair our broken relationship with nature: a poster of a model amid blossom with the line 'Dropping this spring. Cherry blossom. Get the look. Go outside.' Or a goalkeeper distracted by a pigeon: 'Caught bird watching again' and a box explaining that 'Taking a moment to notice nature can boost your physical and mental health. Give nature some extra time.'

In addition to facilitating the accumulation of ever more stuff, this shopping centre has also become the default place to hang out and relax with friends, rather than, say, having a picnic in the park. Studies have found that people who feel less connected to nature tend to consume more and think less about sustainability. Throw in the thousands of adverts we see every day, and you've got a recipe for a Consumer Story downward spiral. The less we care, the more we shop. This is not a plea to stop shopping, but a suggestion that reconnecting with nature might be more meaningful than buying another outfit. One large survey found that a person's sense of connection to nature is four times more important than their socio-economic status in predicting whether they feel their life is worthwhile.

The shopping centre doesn't create apathy, but it is a visible representation of our separation from the natural world. It reflects a system that prizes what can be bought, displayed or measured, and rewards status and novelty. Little wonder, perhaps, that I was feeling a strange emotional flatness as I walked around, even in the midst of all this colour and noise.

As I dodged crowds clutching shopping bags and Frappuccinos, our environmental problems felt far away. Without something personal at stake,

protecting where we live begins to feel like someone else's job – something for governments, charities, or people who care more than we do. As outdoor leisure is replaced by individual consumption, we grow more isolated and distanced from the living world. And as that disconnection deepens, decline begins to feel normal, and we stop fighting to restore what we no longer realise has been lost.

This disengagement spreads into our political and our career choices. If the planet's fate does not feel bound to our own, or vice versa, we're less motivated to work for it or to hold governments and industries to account. In recent years, the environment has already slipped back down our list of priorities in the ballot box, even though it underpins most political issues.

The cost of living rises when droughts reduce global crop yields and our reliance on fossil fuels leaves us exposed to sudden price shocks. Heatwaves and polluted air add extra strain to the NHS. Housing markets are impacted as floodrisk homes become harder to insure. Migration escalates as water scarcity fuels political instability and people flee uninhabitable regions. And the likelihood of more pandemics rises as habitat destruction forces humans and wildlife into closer contact. Yet the share of the UK public in favour of reaching net zero before 2050 has nearly halved since 2021.

But in the shopping centre today it was easy to ignore all this. The problem is not the shopping centre itself, but rather how easy it is to forget that everything here depends on the living world beyond its walls. If we neglect that critical fact, we will keep searching for fulfilment under the bright lights while the natural systems that sustain us unravel.

Over the past few chapters I have laid out some of the consequences of society detaching from the living world. Nature disconnection and shifting baseline syndrome lie at the heart of our exploitation of wild places, the mass extinction we are causing, and our indifference to it. They also shape our psychology, emotions, health and culture, influencing how we build our towns and raise our children. This disconnection is both sad for us and catastrophic for the natural world.

In *Citizens*, Jon Alexander argues that we need to move beyond the fading Consumer Story towards a more creative, caring and community-driven world, which he calls the 'Citizen Story'. In this new era, we are no longer passive consumers but active participants. It's a call to shift from isolation to contribution, from consumption to care, and to become actively involved in a wider story of repair and renewal. Once we see ourselves this way, we stop being spectators and start shaping the future.

And so it is time now to get out of this shopping centre, to step blinking into the sunlight and go for a walk in the woods. Not only to cheer ourselves up, but also to begin the great reconnection, to surround our lives with nature once again, for the benefit of both people and planet. And the good news is that we can begin in our lunch hour.

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## **PART 2**

# **FIFTEEN MINUTES OF NATURE**

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Nature connectedness is more than a fuzzy, tree-hugging sentiment. It is a measurable and actionable concept describing how we think about, feel about and experience nature. Our relationship with nature can be as deep as that with close friends or family – full of attention, intimacy and shared fate – or as distant as a stranger we barely notice.

I felt it was important to develop a stronger sense of connection to nature in my own life. But I was busy today. There were trains to catch and bills to pay. This is the problem we all face. We're too busy for nature today. We've got work to do and kids to feed and an infinite algorithm to scroll through. But that is OK, as today is just one day and nature will still be there for us tomorrow. Until it isn't.

The nature we put into our days is, of course, the amount of nature in our lives. I needed to stand firm on the commitment I made after that boring Zoom call. In fact, the busier I got, the more important it was. So I resolved to quickly nip out to the woods.

But then – ugh – my boring busy-ness just got more boring and more busy when I discovered a boring puncture in my boring car. No time for the woods now. I limped along to a boring garage to get it fixed. Boring. The man told me it would take thirty boring minutes to repair and I could sit in the boring waiting room, scrolling through my boring phone, feeling uptight, waiting for the big boring bill to arrive.

Or...

I opened the map app on my phone, zoomed out to find a scrap of green and then left the garage on foot to go and explore. I walked to the edge of town and through a gloomy, graffitied underpass beneath the railway. I emerged into a wood, like passing through my own magical wardrobe. The wood shimmered with green light filtering through the leaves and the air smelled damp and clean. I now only had five minutes left before I needed to return for the car. But in that brief time it was so refreshing to just sit on a log, take some deep breaths and feel the sunshine on my face.

I opened the Merlin birdsong ID app on my phone, and together we listened to the wood's noisy peacefulness. There was the giant cacophony of a tiny wren, plus chattering robins and fluting blackbirds. A buzzard mewled high above the trees. I couldn't see it, but I heard it. Recognising

the bird's call and knowing its name meant I could picture it in my mind, circling wild and free up there, pleasingly unconcerned with boring punctures. This was exactly the microdose of nature I needed on a frustrating morning.

Despite starting to make time for little things like this and appreciating their benefits, I still felt a resistance to framing this book's solutions around something so small. I worried this was a pale imitation of the outdoors compared to, say, spending a month in a tent. After twenty years showing off about being adventurous, I was embarrassed to suggest the wood near the garage might be a cure for life's ills.

Then one day, in a brief interval between chores, I went for a quick run through a copse of trees near the motorway. The upswell of delight and relief it brought convinced me that my pathetic macho doubt that such small things don't count was precisely why I ought to put pen to paper.

Do not underestimate how spectacular it can feel to step outside for fifteen minutes and fill your lungs with fresh air. These tiny experiences do count. A brief jog won't get you as fit as crossing a continent, and you won't be able to bore people about it for long in the pub. But it does much more good than not getting out at all.

I knew the government had backed the idea that everyone should live within fifteen minutes of nature, but then done nothing about it. Rather than waiting for a good idea to become real, I decided to adopt it myself. I committed to something so simple it felt almost ridiculous: short, daily missions to somewhere green and wildish within fifteen minutes of where I happened to be, or simply spending fifteen minutes paying attention outdoors. Would I rather be breathing in salty Atlantic air than the motorway-scented hum of the home counties? Yes, I would. But the breeze here still feels good. Nature connectedness depends more on the frequency of encounters and the quality of attention than on the grandeur of the landscape.

Up to this point in the book, I have been writing about all that we have lost, what we no longer notice, and some of the consequences of that

disconnection. But now it is time to get outside and rewild ourselves through small, repeatable outings.

Fifteen minutes of nature is a rough guide rather than a stopwatch challenge. It is just a shortcut phrase to remind ourselves to seek out nearby nature and engage with whatever we find. It is important not to turn this into another optimisation task to be measured or ticked off in the endless gamification of life. As Miles Richardson, Professor of Human Factors and Nature Connectedness, reminds us, it's the moments not the minutes that ensure real connection. The quality of attention matters more than the clock. A head-down dog walk, phone scrolling with headphones, is likely to be less impactful than a mad minute or two face down in the grass, gazing at daisies and howling to the heavens in astonished awe.

As I slowly rebuilt my nature habit from the low point of my Zoom call disconnection epiphany, my sense of the world began to expand. I care more now about what we are losing – and that feels like grief – but I also feel hopeful for the future. Fifteen minutes outdoors will not transform your life on its own, but it can change the direction of travel. It also undermines the flawed idea that nature is reserved for special occasions rather than being part of everyday life. A little contact with nature is always better than none, which is where so many of us have ended up.

Once we start noticing what is close at hand it becomes harder to ignore, and harder to do nothing when it is threatened. Fifteen minutes of nature is therefore my opening bid for a revolution to change the world.

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Days are busy, diaries are full, and it is easy for the wild world to drift into the background. But it is always out there, waiting for me, while I sit through meetings and tick off errands (and while nature dwindles and my own days tick down). It is up to me to make the time to establish habits of stepping out regularly and remembering to be astonished.

The most vital piece of equipment I own these days is not a rain jacket or a rucksack, but my calendar. Without it, good intentions are often elbowed aside by something more pressing. If I do not deliberately block out time to go outside, it often doesn't happen. Work expands, emails multiply, and days slip past. But once it is written down, it becomes real. And once it becomes routine, it stops feeling indulgent and starts feeling essential.

I pencilled in a plan to do something on every full moon for a year, heading outside by the soft glow of moonlight. Going out after dark sidestepped the day's work commitments, and having the dates inked in the calendar in advance removed any excuse. The regularity and the scheduling is what made it happen. It is also handy that the full moon always rises around sunset.

Even the most familiar locations feel more wild after dark. Your hearing sharpens, your sense of smell seems keener, and the cold air on your face becomes part of the experience rather than an inconvenience. Crucially, the unfamiliarity also helps counter place blindness and the jaded belief that we already know everything about where we live. Darkness opens your eyes to how much you do not see.

My first outing came beneath January's Wolf Moon. Frost thickened the air as I strolled across a deserted golf course, reminding myself not to be scared of ghosts. The fairways lay in a small pool of darkness between streetlights and car headlights, yet it felt wild enough. Two owls called as the moon rose through bare branches. I set up my tripod then stood still through the camera's long exposure, listening to the cold night as I photographed the moon.

What was I doing out here? I didn't really know, but I liked it. I did not have a plan yet for this year of full moon outings, but experience has taught

me that it is better to just begin and figure things out along the way, rather than waiting for a perfect plan before starting.

A month later I sat beside a darkening lake as wind rattled the shore and rooks settled noisily into the trees. The moon was hidden by clouds but I realised that mattered less than the excuse to leave the sofa and step outside.

In March I went to the harbour at high tide, photographing a small boat as the cries of oystercatchers stirred dreams of slipping out to sea. April brought a moonlit run, while May promised eclipses and supermoons but delivered only dark cloud and hammering rain.

For June's Strawberry Moon I slid into a warm, slow river. The water felt like velvet as mist lay on the surface and bats flickered overhead. I had the river to myself as I floated on my back watching the first stars emerge in the midsummer gloaming.

On a hot July evening I cycled from humid streets into the dark countryside, where familiar woodland trails transformed into something wilder, stranger and more exhilarating. Racing down a bridleway in a pool of torchlight and spooky shadows felt recklessly fast. Hundreds of tiny footman moths fluttered wildly around my lights and face. Such abundance, I thought, with delight (while also flapping them irritably out of my eyes). So much unseen nature that I would have missed if I'd stayed home in front of the TV. I returned home dusty, sweaty and delighted.

In August, an enormous moon slid up into the sky as the sun dropped beyond the beach, and I swam through motionless, magma-red seawater gleaming like molten silver.

And September? In September I ignored my calendar's command, told myself that I would get out tomorrow instead, and then clean forgot and did nothing.

In October the moon rose alongside Jupiter and I watched from a theme park, high on sugar and hurtling through rollercoasters, stealing a brief glance skywards before plunging back into loop-the-loops and laughter. For November's full moon I fled a hunched evening of emails to walk a rainy lap of a field, glad simply to be out in the wind and fresh air.

And then, one bitter night in December, I stepped outside when the rest of the world was curled up indoors. My final full moon foray of the year

came with frost rising from the ground and stars sharp in the sky. Christmas lights glimmered up and down the street. Trees, moon, street: it was kind of palindromic.

Learning to become more observant is a bit like this. If you look in one way, you see the same human world of buildings and lampposts that you see every day. Shift your focus slightly, however, and you notice the moon floating a quarter of a million miles away in space, framed behind a tree that has evolved over millions of years to shed its leaves in response to subtle changes in daylight. Everything is different when you look differently. Everything is more astonishing than it first appears.

The Lunar Society were a brilliant, unruly dinner club of inventors and thinkers who gathered in the mid-eighteenth century to talk, argue and dream about science, industry and culture over roast beef and claret. Erasmus Darwin, James Watt, Joseph Priestley, Josiah Wedgwood and friends met on the night of the full moon so they could more easily find their way home afterwards, pleasantly oiled, and guided by moonlight.

Our life today feels so far removed from such natural rhythms. The moon determines the date of Easter, but little else. Yet in Sri Lanka every full moon remains a public holiday, a monthly pause grounded in religious tradition that reconnects daily life with something larger. Whether we notice it or not, the moon hangs above city and countryside alike, marking time, just waiting for the moment we step outside and look up.

Another year I collaborated with an artist, Anna Brones, on a combined art and writing project. We live thousands of miles apart, but were united by a shared fondness for coffee and the outdoors. We set ourselves a simple challenge: to drink coffee outdoors in a different way each month for a year. Afterwards I would write a short reflection, and Anna would create an intricate papercut artwork. The simplicity of the idea made it easy to fit around other commitments and gave plenty of flexibility for creativity.

For my first coffee of the year, instead of hunching over my phone in the kitchen, I simply carried my morning mug outside to feel the weather and fresh air. The hardest part of any adventure is what Norwegians call the *dørstokkmila* – the doorstep mile – stepping outside and making a start.

The following month I sat on a log in the nearest wood, drinking coffee as my restless mind slowly settled. Anna and I fell into a rhythm of coffees after swims, bike rides, sunrises, rainstorms, and even one shared outdoors with a friend selected for being more accustomed to Starbucks than stars. Over time, the coffees themselves became incidental. What stayed with me was the habit of paying attention. And with that, the places I visited began to open up.

My final example of monthly outings was a simple ritual that lasted for three years. On the first Wednesday of every month, my computer went 'Ding!' and off I went to climb a tree – low-slung and easy to ascend, with vast boughs and a comfortable spot to rest. I'd sit up in the giant oak and chill for a few minutes, looking out across a woodland view that was open and unobstructed in winter, but jungle-crowded green in midsummer. Dog walkers occasionally plodded beneath me, but none ever looked up and noticed me.

Sometimes I took a thermos of tea to enjoy up the tree. Other months I dashed up and down because I had other things to be getting on with. But no matter how busy I was, I made sure to never miss a month.

One winter, in the cold, colourless woods, my foot slipped as I climbed to my perch, jolting my senses awake with the sharp and wonderful reminder that I was balanced high in a tree that was hundreds of years old. In spring the woodland filled with new leaves, gaps stitching themselves closed as birds hurried through the branches and bluebells pooled across the ground, the whole place suddenly urgently alive. In summer the late sun lingered over the extravagant greenness, and it was bliss to sit barefoot and unhurried. In autumn, I lingered a little longer in my tree as leaves loosened and drifted down. The year turned quickly, and all those brief weekly climbs helped me notice it.

Each of these ventures was so small as to barely merit recording on their own: a coffee by a river, a moonlit walk, fifteen minutes up a tree before returning to my emails. None required anything more than a note in the calendar. Nothing dramatic happened. I simply went outside again and

again until it became normal. But like many habits, the cumulative reward outweighed the effort required. Repetition sharpened my attention and changed how I experienced both place and time, attuning me to the slow, seasonal shifts.

I was beginning to understand that nature connection does not arrive through grand gestures, but by small actions, repeated often.

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Noticing nature can be as simple as remembering to look up at a tree on your next walk to the shops. But good resolutions fade and I find habits get forgotten unless I build them into my routine. So this year I have been going to a wood with my old film camera every Thursday morning.

I decided to take one photograph of the same tree from the same place every week, a tall sweet chestnut near the footpath. Taking only one photo means there is no hassle, and no need for later editing or anything else liable to slow me down and put me off. I can manage it even on my busiest days or when it's pouring with rain. It guarantees I get out briefly to have a look at how my tree is faring (and perhaps, also, consider how I'm getting on, too). I soon began to look forward to each tiny outing as a little ritual stitched into my week.

Looking back through the photographs today, on an autumn morning when golden leaves are spinning in the breeze, I am surprised how bare everything was when I first visited the tree in winter. The wet trunk shone black, and scattered yellow leaves were the only colour. As I turn through my printed pictures – one partially blocked by a stray thumb over the lens – it is like watching the seasons in fast-forward: the first flush of spring growth, the wood filling with dense greenness, then shades of gold as the wood thins towards the closing of the year. And I was there to see it all, or at least a weekly sliver of it. If I had visited the tree only once, I might not have considered how it had looked earlier in the year or in all the seasons to come.

Early in the project, I craved obvious changes, but most visits the tree looked much the same as the week before, and only every month or so would I realise, 'Hang on, something is different!' It showed me that incremental change is hard to notice as it happens, and that our sense of 'normal' shifts with it until, only in hindsight, the change becomes undeniable.

Returning to the same tree every week also made me aware of how much my own internal weather coloured what I saw. Some weeks I arrived stressed, resentful that I had to take this photo before cracking on with whatever work awaited me. Other weeks, the outing felt spacious and restorative. I suspect the weeks I least wanted to be there were the times I

needed it most. Time in woodland lowers stress hormones and offers a rare pause from constant stimulation. Through nature's slow rhythms, it reminds you that change is natural and that you too can slow down.

My tree was nothing special, just convenient. But visiting it every week has made it special to me. You don't reconnect with nature by lecturing yourself into action or by waiting for a grand, life-altering moment. You reconnect by stepping outside for fifteen minutes, over and over again, and looking closely at a tree. You don't need a fancy camera to do this – a quick photo on your phone is enough. Or you might prefer to start a written note on your phone of the changes you notice each week (I use the Presently app). Recording small moments of everyday nature – two I noted this week are 'warm hat in a cold wind' and 'blackthorn blossom' – helps counter our tendency to dwell on the negatives and take what is good for granted. It trains us to savour what we experience, and deepens both our happiness and our sense of connection to place.

People fly thousands of miles to chase spring blossom or photograph autumn colours. But I have been enjoying this wild lap of the solar system every Thursday without having to go anywhere at all. If you're patient enough, then all the seasons come to you.

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My relationship with litter has evolved from not seeing it, to ignoring it, to making me irritated, to finding it satisfying to fill a bin bag and leave a positive trace on a place. But I have found a new twist which is even more rewarding: making cameras out of trash.

The low-tech alchemy of creating a photograph using an old can is magical. All you do is slice the top off a tall beer can and make a tiny pinhole halfway up. Curve a piece of photographic paper inside the can, tape the top back on and you're ready for action. It's as simple as that.<sup>4</sup>

I went for a walk, picked up some cans, made a batch of cameras, then headed out to set them up. A great pleasure of photography is slowing down and observing. Doing something out of the ordinary, like searching for spots to position beer-can cameras, helped me look even more carefully.

I was entranced the first time I saw that a pinprick of light burning slowly onto a piece of paper had produced a clear image of the tree I'd aimed the camera at. The photos are monochrome and speckled, rather like night vision goggles. Because the pinhole aperture is so tiny, it takes a long time for enough light to burn an image onto the photographic morseless tidal wave of new content and curated perfection, I found it refreshing to wait a week or more to create a rather blurry photo of an old tree.

Every year, Earth travels more than 500 million miles around the Sun, and my oak tree has stood still and watched these seasons come and go hundreds of times. The crowning glory of the pictures is that the passage of the sun's daily journey arches in a white, smooth streak across the sky. If you leave the camera out for a month, you get thirty thin stripes as the sun's path shifts slightly each day with the changing season. One photograph holds an entire month of light and life within it.

Over the past year, I have set up beer-can cameras to capture the sun's arc over a big old oak tree each season. In the weeks around the spring equinox, the photograph shows bare branches and the sun's path lifting visibly day by day. At the summer solstice, the tree's foliage is dense and bushy. It must have been a windy period, for the image is blurry, though the midsummer sun curves high above the tree. At the autumn equinox, the tree still holds its leaves, but the sun's stripes sit lower and are spaced further apart than in summer. The winter solstice image is dark and gloomy, the sun

barely creeping above the horizon, skulking in a low-slung curve across the bottom of the frame.

On my first summer visit, I spotted an owl nesting high in the tree. In autumn, I gathered gigantic field mushrooms growing beneath it. At the winter solstice, I retired promptly to thaw out in a pub with a log fire. Finally, to round off the year, when I returned to collect my spring camera, I found I was nervous, as an entire year's project depended on a good result from this beer can taped to a fence post. I was relieved that the picture turned out to be the best of the lot.

I have a similar relationship with cameras as I do with bicycles: if only I had a better and more expensive one, then all my personal shortcomings would be redeemed and my brilliance would shine through. And then I would be happy. Beer-can cameras made from someone else's rubbish have exposed the folly of that thinking.

I suspect that what many of us are starving for is not a better camera, but experiences that change us and that create richer, deeper, thicker moments. These primitive cameras are the cheapest, worst and most enjoyable photography imaginable. They produce crappy but intriguing pictures. Awkward, slow and inefficient, they demand attention and care – which is precisely why they offer something scrolling never can.

Pinhole photography is not about snapping a perfect moment and moving on, but about letting time settle, like silt in slow water. The cameras sit in place while weather systems roll through, dog walkers come and go, and the sun rises and sets. They remind me that the richness of experience lies not in how many things we do, but in how deeply we commit to them. We chase more and more in these fast, disposable days, yet a single attentive moment outweighs a dozen rushed ones.

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<sup>4</sup> You can find detailed instructions for making a beer-can camera on my website:  
[www.alastairhumphreys.com/blog/can-camera](http://www.alastairhumphreys.com/blog/can-camera)

When I give talks at businesses about getting outdoors more, the biggest audience objection is invariably a lack of time. I agree that yes, we're all busy, but I also suggest that if you're too busy to enjoy even fifteen minutes of fresh air, then you probably need to get out for thirty... Sitting under a tree might not be urgent, but it is important.

Scheduling a little outdoor time into every working day, rather than waiting until I can set aside a whole day specifically for fun outdoors, has been a simple life hack and a useful shift in mindset.

As an experiment, I decided to try working outside for one hour every day for a week to combine both essential work and essential fresh air. I could manage that no matter how busy I was.

I began unambitiously by shifting my workspace just a couple of metres from the desk in my shed to a log outside the door. This tiny transition felt like a novelty, and gave me a refreshing jolt of fresh air and writing energy. Sunshine makes everything feel better.

The next day I took my laptop and a flask of coffee to a picnic bench beneath two tall chestnut trees. A quizzical dog walker asked what I was doing. When I explained she said, 'Ooh, I'd never thought of that. What a good idea.'

It was inconvenient not being able to do online research (or – truth be told – faff around checking BBC Sport endlessly). But the enforced constraint of knowing that the only useful thing I could do for the next hour was to write meant I became both efficient and creatively freed-up.

On day three, I confirmed that climbing a tree is an excellent addition to any hour of work.

Day four's spot was a bench by a duck pond. I had the choice of facing either a busy road or a hawthorn hedge full of litter. I opted for the hedge, as had the sparrows who twittered and fidgeted pleasingly in the undergrowth. My eager-to-be-distracted personality enjoyed watching them, or squinting at the sun and taking off my woolly hat, then putting it back on again. But those distractions were less jarring than my usual shed antics of relentlessly putting the kettle on, so I still got plenty done.

On Friday, day five, and purely in the name of professional thoroughness, I headed to a pub garden for an outdoor brainstorm. You

might think of pub gardens as places to sneak off for a cigarette or to escape screeching karaoke, rather than as nature. But if you're outside under an open sky, with a breeze and some sugar-seeking wasps, then it very much is nature – if you opt to notice it. While it would be a very bad idea for me to make a regular habit of working in the pub, I definitely enjoyed it. The relaxed mood and change of scene was also helpful in turning up new ideas. (Am I allowed to claim the Guinness and salt and vinegar crisps as a working tax expense, I wonder?)

We have grown so used to working indoors that sitting outside with a laptop felt faintly odd. But we could reset that baseline and spend more time outdoors while we work, learn, relax or exercise. Why, for example, do children have to do all their lessons inside? Research shows we learn better when we vary the locations of our studies.

Everyone I spoke to on Zoom that week had been envious that I was working outside. Perhaps that is a good starting point for change: to take more calls in the sunshine, and help new habits grow from there. Could we make more meetings a walk in the park?

How much of our working lives could take place outside? Not as another task to squeeze into already busy days, but as a shift in how our days unfold. That does not mean turning all time outdoors into work. There is still value in sitting, walking and looking around with nothing to achieve. The aim is not to blur the boundary completely, but to loosen it – and let a little more of life happen outside.

I don't always make time for nature, but I never feel too busy for food. They make a natural pair, and one is a good excuse for the other. Foraging is a great route back into paying attention.

Every autumn there is an eruption of mushrooms and toadstools in dewy fields and leafy woodland across the land. It is easy to understand their traditional connection with mystery and magic: the sudden appearance and disappearance, the strange shapes and colours and, of course, their potential lethality.

They do seem otherworldly, I thought, down on my knees in a damp field, nervously comparing pictures on my phone with the fungi before me.

Will it make a lovely lunch, or will it be my last supper? After all, every kind of mushroom is edible, but many only once.

We munch mushrooms all year round these days, jeopardy-free. But in olden times the brief period of abundance must have been much more exciting as people hurried out to harvest their share. Unfortunately, generations of common wisdom about what was safe to eat, what was trippy and what would kill you has now mostly been lost. Cue the pathetic sight of me scrabbling about trying to restore some of that accumulation of knowledge from a standing start, via various YouTube tutorials. Most of my friends were astonished that I intended to do something as outlandish as eat a wild mushroom. I wasn't entirely confident myself.

Later I sent them smug photos of my pan-fried field mushroom, almost as large as the plate and as fresh as food can be, though they still mocked me about my impending death – or at least a mad dash to the toilet. I enjoyed my lunch, although the hint of doubt did take a little edge off my appetite. But I will persevere with learning more, both because foraged food is delicious, and because it deepens my appreciation for the living world.

Fortunately there are less stressful ways to find food for free without dicing with death. The simplest is blackberry picking, which anyone of any age can enjoy, whether on the walk to school, or reaching through railings while you wait for your train to work.

Blackberrying is one of the annual events that binds us to the natural cycle of the seasons. As mornings freshen towards the first hint of autumn, I start to keep my eyes peeled for bramble bushes. Blackberries are a consolation for the end of summer. My technique is all pick, eat, pick, eat efficiency, like a robot arm on a factory production line. I eat my fill and then collect more to bake into a crumble, although in reality I normally eat all of those too before I get home.

Food does not begin life wrapped in plastic on a supermarket shelf. It is the most natural thing of all, born of sunshine and soft rain. Gathering blackberries is a way to reconnect people to a place and to introduce children to ideas of provenance. Inviting friends or family members blackberry picking is a perfect way to spend time in nature together.

Blackberries are the very essence of democratic abundance. Everyone, prince or pauper, can pick berries, scratch their arms and stain their faces with the juices, wherever they live in the country.

Foraging turns food from a commodity into a story – and stories are what teach us to care. Robin Wall Kimmerer put it well when she said, ‘How are we going to fall in love with the world if we don’t pick berries’?

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I'm fortunate that in almost any town I can step outside and find my way to somewhere green. I've done it so often that it now feels second nature. I know it is not always difficult, and experience has shown me, again and again, that it is always worth the effort.

Many people face barriers that I do not – moving through the world can feel less safe or less easy; time is tight, access is limited, and even getting out of the door with a buggy or wheelchair can be an effort. But we need to work towards a world where those barriers are reduced and it becomes second nature for people to picture, in their mind's eye, a big sign pointing them towards the woods.

In an earlier chapter I wandered around my town centre wanting to shout, 'There's some brilliant nature this way – and it's free!' So I decided now to give something like that a try.

I found cardboard and some fat felt pens, sat down at the kitchen table and put my limited art skills to the test. Feeling satisfied with my handiwork, I headed to the high street and stood outside one of the fried chicken shops holding the sign above my head. It read 'Fifteen Minutes to Nature' with a big arrow pointing towards the nearest park.

Crowds streamed past, going about their morning routines: shoppers with bags, couples with coffees, parents pushing prams. Everybody looked at me, which I suppose was the point, although I found it very embarrassing. Most avoided catching my eye as they read my sign, then quickly looked away before the weirdo accosted them. I just grinned gormlessly. Some folk smiled back, but only a few asked what I was doing.

'There's a nice bit of nature just down the road,' I replied.

'Have you ever visited the park with the pond?'

But nobody seemed inclined to deviate from their errands to visit my duck pond. It was time to try my second tactic.

I pulled on a high-vis vest, a handy strategy for ensuring you'll be left alone to get on with whatever you're doing. I was amused to notice how nervous I felt as I prepared for my first ever piece of graffiti. The new Banksy, I am not.

I got down on my knees, shook my can of green paint vigorously, and then sprayed the pavement through a cardboard stencil that read 'Fifteen

Minutes to Nature’ with a row of arrows. I stood up and admired my efforts. I don’t like to boast but it looked awesome. I glanced around anxiously, worried someone would tell me off, but nobody had spotted me. So I nervously repeated my motif around town: ‘Fifteen

Minutes to Nature... Fifteen Minutes to Nature...’

When I originally daydreamed about this idea, I’d imagined green lines running from everyone’s front door to their nearest green space. I now began drawing a very long line along the pavement with a big chunk of chalk, from my pavement graffiti towards the park. This made my back ache, so I stopped for a rest. Standing up to stretch gave me a chance to further my new bad-boy credentials by converting an officious ‘No Cycling’ sign into one that read ‘Go Cycling’. I was pleased with that.

I continued slowly drawing my line across town. Along the way, I highlighted wildflowers growing through the pavement – what we dismiss as ‘weeds’ – with a bold chalk square, like an artist’s frame, and added a label proclaiming ‘NEARBY NATURE’. You do not need to visit Kew Gardens to discover interesting new plants.

Unfortunately, my piece of chalk wore away long before I reached the park, so my green line fizzled out. But I enjoyed the concept and the outing later made for a fun short film on YouTube.

Editing that got me thinking about all the different communities we are part of. My sign-holding efforts had not had much effect. People were busy, the park wasn’t on their minds, or it wasn’t as straightforward for them to visit as I was making it sound. But I belong to other tribes too: people around the world who might watch the YouTube video, for example, and the community of readers who find their way to this book – a small but distinguished group, of which you are a valued member, one of literally dozens.

I wonder whether my street signs nudged even one person in my town to think about when they’d last engaged with the wilder world. But this chapter might. There are so many ways to reach the different groups our lives intersect with – and have fun while we are doing it. Though my green line never reached the park, perhaps it might still prompt you to point others towards the nature within fifteen minutes of your own street.

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It is easy to assume that real exploration requires gallivanting around the world, and I myself thought that for years. But there is as much to see in the square kilometre where you are right now as there is anywhere else on earth.

A few years ago, while writing *Local*, I set out each week to explore a different grid square on the Ordnance Survey map of my area. But you don't even need to travel across your map to get a fresh perspective. I decided to walk the perimeter of the one-kilometre square that I live in, to see what revealed itself if I traced the edge of home in an unusual manner.

I followed the map's boundary as closely as possible, skirting field edges but otherwise walking in straight, awkward lines that made familiar spots feel strangely unfamiliar. I know this square kilometre so well after years of living here, so I wondered whether tracing an invisible grid might shift how I saw it, or whether everything had already become too familiar.

Spring accompanied me as I set out. Frogspawn filled a drainage ditch aspiring to be a pond. Between the paving slabs and the tarmac on my road I noticed a strip of cobbles I had never seen before. There was nothing of interest in that, but it prompted the question of what else

I overlook. Outside the care home, a skip overflowed with the contents of a bedroom, and an overturned armchair tossed on top hinted at stories of a life unseen. I turned onto a farm track marked 'No Trespassing', and kept going in a straight line.

Hedgeless fields stretched away, one merging into the next, featureless except for a string of pylons where kestrels sometimes perch. One field lay ploughed and bare. Another was swaddled in netting to protect the kale from pigeons. The countryside felt stripped of natural habitat.

I joined a footpath and the litter returned – poo bags, drinks bottles and abandoned helium balloons all beginning their long afterlife as rubbish after a fleeting moment of use. A lark rose singing above the motorway's distant hum and linnets chattered in the bushes.

Back on a pavement again, tucked in beside a busy road, I stopped to look at a house I'd never seen before, its eaves carved like a gingerbread house. And then I discovered a footpath I'd never noticed before in all my

years living on this grid square. I wasn't sure whether to feel pleased or embarrassed.

I followed the footpath through a yard, cluttered with stacks of pallets, a skip, an old microwave, a rusting speedboat and thick coils of purple piping. Somewhere, someone was frying chicken. I realised I was hungry as I wandered through more brown fields back towards the houses and home. Time for lunch.

I had not travelled anywhere I did not think I already knew by heart, and yet the simple act of moving differently had tilted the world just enough for me to see it afresh.

Later, I tried a similar exercise on a slightly larger scale. I turned to an old friend for the outing – the Library of Scotland's side-by-side map viewer – and set off to cycle a lap of the town following the boundaries as shown on a map from the 1800s. Back then the town edges had been crisp and clear, with no suburbs or industrial parks leaching outwards like ink seeping across blotting paper. The town was the town and beyond that lay nature. Those frontier streets still exist today, though separated now from fields and trees by many generations of new roads and developments.

I hadn't visited this part of town for a while and was disappointed to find that the outdoor gym from the hopeful era of the 2012 Olympics had been ripped out. I had never actually seen anyone use it, but I liked the theory. Only the old sign remained: *No membership required. Just turn up and take part.* I considered repurposing it for the woods.

Plants were already pushing through the broken tarmac where the gym machines once stood. I opened the Seek app on my phone to identify them: bull thistle, chickweed, goat willow, wall barley... Such lovely vernacular names, now lost from our common vocabulary, along with the folk knowledge of their uses. It was heartening to see how swiftly they returned once the tarmac was removed and nature left to its own devices for a few months.

I rode along what had once been streets lined by fields along the town's edge, but were now subdivided terraces facing car parks and post-war flats. My 1830 map marked a country church here; in its place today was a

fenced-off corner of crumbling car park that was steadily being reclaimed by pioneering birch trees.

Crossing the old main road, I followed a graffiti-streaked alley that had once bordered an orchard. A school, a jiu-jitsu gym and rows of 1970s houses now filled the former fields, before opening onto a green where several old trees predated the map itself. A vandalised red phone box stood as yesterday's vision of the future.

I climbed a hill that formerly divided town from country. Orchards and fields had given way to takeaway shops and vape stores. Beyond them lay unremarkable residential streets where nothing suggested this had once been countryside, nor that they retained much connection with nature today.

I passed statues of both Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II – both unquestioned symbols of permanence and stability, until one day they weren't.

I weaved through a building site full of drilling and banging and beeping lorries. Looking up at the new developments of flats, I realised they already seemed familiar to me. And yet, when I first moved to this town, this had been a car park. Not countryside, granted, but still a reminder of how our baselines shift.

Coming into the home straight now, I popped into my favourite samosa shop for a snack, and the lady behind the counter upsold me a couple of fresh bhajis, as usual. Perhaps some things do never change.

Using an unfamiliar map to explore a familiar neighbourhood forced me to look with fresh eyes at places I thought I knew well. It reminded me that the closer you look, the more you discover, and the more interesting everything becomes.

The 200-year-old map revealed how much my town has changed, even though it feels normal and permanent to me. Change is not bad in itself, but it is always worth paying attention to how places evolve, thinking about the implications of how we live today, and imagining how things could change for the better over the next two hundred years.

The overlap between my enjoyment of microadventures and my ongoing attempts to keep rewilding myself means I am always looking for excuses to both get outside and to look at familiar countryside in unfamiliar ways. With this in mind, I decided to cycle across town from the area with the lowest tree equity score to the area with the highest.<sup>5</sup> It sounds a bit nerdy, but if nothing else, it was an excuse for a lunchtime bike ride.

My starting point was an area with a tree equity score of just 54, which was not only the lowest in the borough, but also far below national averages. That was what the data said, but what did it look like in real life?

I rode up terraces of houses with tiny front gardens of concrete or gravel. There were no street trees, no grass verges and barely a single plant, bush or window box. Wheelie bins lined the pavements, England flags fluttered from lampposts and the kerbs were scattered with takeaway litter. Without trees, the streets looked harsh and bare.

The same was true on a 1960s estate where the architect's priority had been maximising car parking space. It was the middle of the day and absolutely silent. There were no gardens and no street trees had been planted. Everything was straight lines and hard brick, concrete and tarmac.

The patches of grass outside a tower block of flats were fenced off with 'No Ball Games' signs. Only a handful of saplings had been planted within the last few years. A children's playground was enclosed with a metal fence and surfaced with black rubber matting. But there was also one lovely large cherry tree whose branches spread generously across the sky. Someone had rigged a tyre swing from one of its limbs. I took out a piece of chalk and wrote 'NOTICE THIS TREE' on the pavement in front of it. It was worth paying attention to and cherishing.

At the centre of a small parade of convenience stores, takeaways and a launderette and a launderette, the raised beds that had been intended for flowers were just bare earth with a few scruffy tufts of grass and dandelion leaves. But in the middle of the plaza was a magnificent sprawling firethorn bush with dark leaves and red berries. Once again, I chalked 'NOTICE THIS TREE'. A shopkeeper talking animatedly on his phone glanced briefly at my graffiti and then returned to his conversation.

I went into his convenience store, piled high with sliced white bread, crisps and noodles. I asked if they sold fruit, and he pointed me towards the back. The fresh food section was a single shelf covered in plastic grass, with a few apples wrapped in plastic and a row of toy rubber chickens.

The poorest areas of our towns have both the least nature and the worst food, and places with low tree equity are often food deserts too. In this part of my town, it's easy to find a kebab, but hard to find a tree. You can buy biscuits but not broccoli.

I left the shops and pedalled towards the part of town with the highest tree equity score: an impressive 93. Its tree cover was 18 per cent, below European averages, but it looked positively Amazonian compared to the other side of town. It was, in every sense, a healthier environment.

On a Victorian terrace with steep slate roofs, each house had a rustic revival porch supported by tree trunk uprights. I passed a communal square of grass bordered by compact but smart homes, their brightly painted doors opening onto small gardens filled with plants. Large trees and well-established saplings lined the green, and birds chirped back and forth.

Hedges and trees were so abundant that some of the streets felt like country lanes. There were none of the stark straight lines seen on the other side of town, but instead a natural softness as trees arched overhead and bushes filled with birdsong spilled over from gardens. Huge horse chestnut trees overlooked yet another park, and the children's playground stretched out as a big grassy area of swings and slides, lined with still more trees.

Paying attention to tree equity is a good hack for better understanding the locations you explore on your fifteenminute outings. Riding directly from one end of town to the other made the imbalance impossible to dismiss as coincidence. It added a new layer of understanding to the way I look at streets I thought I already knew, highlighting how questions of fairness and connection are built into the everyday fabric of where we live.

Here in the leafiest corner of town, I knelt down again and chalked 'NOTICE THIS TREE' on the pavement. It is one thing to live on a leafy street. It is another thing to realise it and not take it for granted. As I cycled away, I turned back to see a woman stop, read my words, and look up at the

tree for several seconds. She then smiled and continued on her way.  
Mission accomplished.

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[5](#) Check your community's tree equity score here: [www.uk.treeequityscore.org](http://www.uk.treeequityscore.org)

[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)

How clean is your local river or stream? Only a very small number of English rivers have good ecological status, and none have good chemical status. Consequently, drinking directly from your river probably sounds like a silly idea. We have forgotten what healthy water looks like and accepted poor conditions as standard.

For most of human history, people relied on streams for drinking water. But today, when we're thirsty we turn on a tap or go to a shop, with little thought for the rivers our water comes from. Do you know which river supplies your water? When did you last drink from a stream? We have shifted from treating this as normal to seeing it as strange, even dangerous. What was once natural and intuitive now requires disclaimers, test kits and an iron stomach.

This detachment reinforces the idea that nature is 'out there', different to us, even though more than half of our bodies are made up of water. It runs through our veins and fills every cell. We drink tens of thousands of litres in our lifetime, and every molecule of that water is billions of years old. It was once rain, once ocean, once river and now is – briefly – us. How foolish then to see ourselves as aloof from the natural world.

So I went along to my nearest river with a basic chemistry set, a mug and a thirst for a drink of water. I planned to walk upstream as far as necessary until it was clean enough to drink. I would look out for obvious signs of pollution – floating turds, slimy rocks, algal blooms – and then, once it looked visually acceptable, I'd use my testing kit to check for nitrates and phosphates. High concentrations of these indicate nutrient pollution from agriculture, sewage and urban runoff. (Legal disclaimer: this is probably not precisely how they do it in a laboratory.) I certainly needed to be vigilant: in 2025 sewage was dumped into English and Welsh rivers over 380,000 times.

The water was muddy and brackish at first, so I walked upstream beyond the natural silt until it looked more appetising. It was, if nothing else, a pleasant excuse for a stroll. I enjoyed following the wide river, pushing my way through tall marsh reeds.

After a while, I passed under a dual carriageway and could see my first town up ahead. I scooped up some water, unpacked my new chemistry kit,

read the instructions, and got testing. To the naked eye, the water didn't look too gross, though there was a lot of plastic rubbish. I've certainly drunk much worse. But the test results confirmed that there were moderately high levels of nutrient pollution.

I was a little thirsty but I needed to keep walking upstream towards cleaner water. I followed the river through the town and into a park where children were splashing through sprinklers in a purpose-built water playground. Nobody was playing in the adjacent river even though it was shallow and looked enticing, burbling gently through rocks and yellow marsh marigolds.

Beyond the park, a CCTV camera on the riverbank looked at me looking at the river as I weighed up whether to have a drink or not. My assumption was that because I was upstream of the town, the water must be cleaner. But why should towns mean dirty water? It doesn't have to be that way. We unquestioningly expect our settlements to degrade nature and don't pause to reflect whether there's another way.

In the 1960s, many of Switzerland's rivers were thick with algae, their surfaces clogged with scum and dead fish. Swimming was banned because people were falling ill. But public pressure led to action, and now Swiss rivers are some of the cleanest in the world, even those flowing through cities. The Swiss today are rightly proud of their 'blue gold'. Paris has cleaned up the Seine and enabled public swimming again after a century-long ban. Copenhagen harbour used to be polluted by industrial waste and sewage, but now is so clean that people swim in it. The Chicago River was once so toxic that it went up in flames, but after a polluted century people are swimming in the city again, proving it's never too late to rescue a river. So why not us, too?

I dipped, scooped, tested... and failed again. Although I was upstream of the town, the river was still polluted. The problem therefore was not the town. Farming is the biggest source of river pollution in Britain – particularly through fertiliser runoff and livestock waste – even more than the high-profile sewage spills that make the news. Nevertheless, the stretch ahead was one of my favourite parts of the river, bending and curving

through tranquil farmland, albeit with an accompanying roar of motorway traffic.

I enjoyed walking along the riverside footpath for a while, then filled another mug of water and tested again. But the nitrate levels still hadn't dropped, so I was forced to keep going through more cow fields. By the time I unpacked my kit to test again, I was getting quite thirsty.

Drumroll... And the stream finally passed the test and I could celebrate with a welcome drink of cold water. It tasted all the better for having been earned and anticipated. (Legal disclaimer, part two: there are multiple hazards associated with drinking directly from rivers, and nasty things like E. coli and norovirus don't show up on a GCSE level chemistry set.)

I was enjoying myself, so I decided to continue the mission and follow the river for a few more miles to its source. The stream grew narrower and shallower as it wound on, undisturbed, beneath another motorway. The water was clear and cold and it was time to swim – or rather to lie down – which was lovely even though I was well within earshot (and bare-bum sight) of the motorway.

Feeling refreshed, I continued up a wooded hillside. My stream was shrinking rapidly now and the final stretch was barely a trickle. When it dried up altogether I had to rely on my map app to guide me. I came upon patches of flattened grass where deer had been resting in the shade. My clumsy progress through the trees had alerted them and I spotted them bounding away gracefully.

I was standing now in a squidgy bog at the foot of an oak tree. This was the official source of the stream that would grow into the river I'd been following all day. It was a secluded and scenic end to an unusual and enjoyable walk, and the process had made me think differently about my river too.

Becoming emotionally invested in something we take for granted, like a drink of water, reminded me how important it is to keep campaigning to clean up our rivers. We must not assume that the way things are now is how they have always been. It is vital that we hold water companies, agricultural businesses and politicians to account, and demand solutions rather than

allowing them to continue extracting profits and paying large dividends. Rivers can heal very swiftly if we only choose to prioritise them.

The walk had also reminded me that any small, arbitrary microadventure can turn you into an explorer of the world and lead you somewhere new – like this woodland glade I had never visited before, or to the source of the water that flows from your tap the next time you drink with gratitude and appreciation.

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If I asked someone in my town where to go swimming, I would almost certainly be directed to the public pool. The notion that you prefer to swim outdoors might seem unusual in some communities, particularly those far from places where wild swimming is either part of everyday life or, more recently, a fashionable pursuit. My usual way of discovering spots to swim is therefore a combination of scanning Ordnance Survey maps, backed up by aerial reconnaissance on Google Maps' satellite view. This was how I discovered a promising pond on the edge of town, behind the railway station. It appeared to be big and blue – always a good start for a swim – but I couldn't tell how accessible, deep or clean it was.

I set off to investigate along a footpath that was fenced in tightly on both sides. I tracked my position on the phone until I reached the nearest spot on the path to the pond. I continued just a little further to get beyond the CCTV cameras, then hauled myself up the tall metal fence, gingerly manoeuvred over the spikes and jumped down the other side into the bushes. This is not how I enjoy approaching a swim and it is unlikely to be a successful method for getting the nation outdoors and active.

On the other side of the fence, however, things seemed promising. It was clear I wasn't invading anyone's domestic privacy, there was no farmland or protected wildlife, and I wasn't interfering with any industry. The abandoned scrubland had a few paths running through the trees, showing I wasn't the first person to come here.

I followed the clearest paths through the undergrowth, bracing myself for the anticlimax of a slimy, polluted pond. But I was shocked when I pushed through the final bushes and saw the water. The pond lay in a steep, wooded hollow, spanning perhaps sixty metres by thirty. A faint breeze rippled the blue surface. It was a peaceful morning and the sun shone brightly. Had I somehow teleported to the Nordic countries? Trees ran down to the water's edge all around the pond, except for one open area of flat ground. There were natural rocky steps descending into the deep, clear water, making a safe entry and exit point. I had stumbled upon an absolute gem of a swimming hole. I grinned, then hurried down to the water. I leapt in and swam around happily, then dried off, climbed back over the vicious fence and headed home.

Later, I posted a pretty photo on Facebook, essentially to humblebrag about my swim. I thought everyone would be jealous. But to my surprise, a vocal minority of commenters were horrified by what I'd done. To me, it was a clean, warm pond with a safe exit point. To them it was deep and therefore dangerous. And it was in the wild and unsanctioned – and therefore extra dangerous.

I know there is no such thing as a 'safe' swim spot, only safe swimmers. But these concerned comments – about safety and permission, not water cleanliness – illustrated a significant shift from the days when everyone enjoyed summer dips in local ponds, to today's assumption that chlorinated swimming pools and vigilant lifeguards are essential for a plunge.

A comment from Dan, an Englishman abroad, pushed back against the Facebook criticisms:

I've lived in Finland since 2015 and it completely opened my eyes to how archaic attitudes to nature access are in the UK. I'd struggle to live in the UK again, having come to love and appreciate being able to swim wherever I please. In Finland, children learn to swim in lakes and the sea from a young age – access to water is a public right, not a risk to be fenced off. People are trusted to learn, assess and take personal responsibility. The culture actively encourages interaction with nature, not separation from it. People are therefore much more responsible when it comes to littering in nature too, and that creates a culture where people see nature as something to care for and enjoy, not something off-limits or dangerous by default.

Dan had captured, in an impromptu paragraph, the entire thesis of the book I had been writing for over a year! So in my reply to his comment I asked if I could quote him.

Hi Alastair,

Absolutely, you can!

Regarding some of the comments on your post, it's honestly hard for me to wrap my head around some of the reactions. I must sound like a broken record to my friends and family in the UK because I constantly compare everything to Finland. But it's just so encouraging to see how deeply nature is woven into everyday life here. And equally disheartening that the desire for greater access to natural spaces in the UK is still viewed by many as radical. I honestly don't know what I'd do without access to natural water now. Swimming outdoors has become such an essential part of my life here.

Something interesting that I discovered while living in Finland is that there's no real concept of 'wild swimming'. I have a photography project about swimming in Finland that

I've been working on for the last few summers.<sup>6</sup> When I first started, I used the phrase 'wild swimming', which was often met with confusion: 'What do you mean when you say wild swimming?' In Finland, swimming in nature is just 'swimming'. What feels more unnatural to many Finns is swimming indoors, though public swimming halls do exist and are common; they're viewed more like gyms, while swimming in lakes and the sea is just an ordinary activity and a part of the culture. I think it's a beautiful reflection of how nature is seen not as something separate or set apart, but as something that they live within and are surrounded by.

If you ever find yourself in Finland, I can show you to some nice swimming spots.

All the best,  
Dan

I would love to take Dan up on the invitation to visit Finland. The photographs on his website look great. But I also have my own pond right where I live, surrounded by trees and dragonflies, tucked behind the railway station. This watery oasis would not look out of place in the high latitudes of Finland. It is just a shame I had to dodge CCTV cameras and leap railings to access it. Most local families would not run such a gauntlet.

Imagine if this lovely pond, on unused land, became a hub where my built-up community could access nature and learn to value and respect it, especially those who can't afford regular visits to swimming pools. It would be such an opportunity to learn safe water skills and to care for a wild place.

Instead, it has been barricaded by giant spikes, and more and more of us now believe that this is the responsible thing to do with 'dangerous' water. We forget that the risks in life are not only hazards and things going wrong, but also the risk of missed opportunities and experiences. Responsible access to the countryside, with rights and responsibilities learned and understood, would allow conversations to focus on genuine dangers, not fevered imaginings, and help more of us build connections with beautiful places.

That cultural shift begins by noticing places like this, questioning why they are off-limits, and supporting local efforts to open them up. Back in 1996, Roger Deakin set out to swim through the British Isles in his brilliant book *Waterlog*, discovering how much of an outsider the wild swimmer had become. Thirty years on, we still treat something as ordinary as swimming outdoors as though it were something separate or set apart.

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6 [www.danieljamescourt.com/by-the-waters-edge](http://www.danieljamescourt.com/by-the-waters-edge)

*OceanofPDF.com*

There is something I didn't disclose when I was waxing lyrical about my pond in the previous chapter. Yes, it was one of the prettiest I've seen in England, and I was delighted to discover it. Yes, the swim was fabulous. But what I didn't mention was that the shoreline was strewn with an unbelievable amount of litter. I still enjoyed myself, but the state of the place saddened me.

In his 1939 novel *Coming Up for Air*, George Orwell writes angrily about just such a spoiled pond:

I wondered why it is that we're all such bloody fools. Why don't people, instead of the idiocies they do spend their time on, just walk round looking at things?

That pool, for instance – all the stuff that's in it. Newts, water-snails, water-beetles, caddis-flies, leeches and God knows how many other things that you can only see with a microscope. The mystery of their lives, down there under water. You could spend a lifetime watching them, ten lifetimes and still you wouldn't have got to the end even of that one pool. And all the while the sort of feeling of wonder, the peculiar flame inside you. It's the only thing worth having and we don't want it.

How could my hard-to-reach pond have become such an ugly mess? It seems, at first glance, a very strong argument against granting anyone access to the countryside. As the writer Wendell Berry observed, the world is not divided into sacred landscapes and ordinary ones, but rather into places we treat with care and those we allow to be degraded.

Irritated, I returned with some bin bags, clambering back over the spiked fence on another warm day. Swifts swirled overhead, orange-and-black comma butterflies battled the breeze, and coots, moorhens, water rails and a cormorant drifted on the water. I pulled on thick gloves and began clearing up cans, bottles, food wrappers, broken glass and tangled fishing line.

While I worked, I wondered what sort of person would make an effort to reach this tranquil place and then spoil it – how the pleasure of being here could sit alongside disregard for its care. Perhaps they dropped a single can, assuming someone else would clear it up, if they thought about it at all. Others might notice that litter and think: why should I be the one to start taking my junk home? Nature feels vast, able to absorb a little damage, and a few cigarette packets hardly seem to matter. Or perhaps they did take care

of their own rubbish and decide that was enough – here as consumers rather than custodians, passing through for the experience rather than forming any real relationship with the place. At some point in the process the mess slipped beyond the reach of any individual's effort or blame, and people just gave up and got on with their swims and picnics.

This small pond is not so different from the blue marble of Earth itself: something we value, yet allow to be wrecked.

Each of us assumes the problem belongs to someone else, that their damage is minor, or that the worst has already been done, and that the responsibility for now fixing it lies elsewhere. Everyone blames someone, and no-one does what anyone could.

Whatever others may or may not have been thinking when they messed up this place, I found it satisfying to fill my bin bags and begin tidying the pond. Even though I was only scratching the surface, it felt good to get involved and do something positive. And then came my real reward: a childish cannonball into the deep, clear water for a well-earned swim.

The council would likely say this peaceful place had been tightly fenced off for safety reasons. The litter, though unrelated, does little to inspire confidence that it would be treated well if opened up. But the fence has not succeeded in protecting the place or keeping people out. It only excludes those who are unwilling or unable to climb it and ignore the intimidating 'Keep Out' signs; swathes of people who would likely find contentment here and hopefully leave no litter. Fewer landowners would object to visits from those decent, well-behaved folk. But denying access to the countryside in order to deter the 'wrong type' of people clearly doesn't work. We just hop the fences and come in anyway. And some of us even clean the place up.

I have never met anyone who would prefer the countryside to be dirty than clean, or rivers polluted rather than clear. Arguments about access should not be battles of division, pitting landowners against swimmers, for example. We have far more in common than that. I believe this even of the people who left all the litter. Perhaps if they felt they had a stake in this

place and believed they were part of the solution rather than outsiders, they might act differently.

Change does not come from shouting angrily on social media, or across a fence. It emerges from recognising what we share, asking what we want the land to become, and focusing on our common ground rather than points of difference.

I suspect most of us love the living world, at least in some quiet, neglected way. The problem is not a lack of care, but a loss of connection. We have grown used to a diminished world and behave accordingly, our concern dulled by inattention, self-interest and the assumption that this is how things have always been. The question is not whether we care, but how we turn that buried affection into the slow, practical work of making things better.

Most guides about etiquette in the outdoors emphasise leaving no trace – the old code of taking nothing but photographs and leaving only footprints. But what if, instead of merely leaving no trace, we all made an effort to leave a positive trace? Not just taking our litter home but also picking up what others have left behind. A few footprints in the sand, and also a positive handprint of making the place cleaner or better; having a friendly conversation with a landowner; teaching someone the name of a bird. Rather than sneaking ghost-like across the land as though we don't belong, we might walk through it proudly as caretakers and custodians.

The writer Molière said, 'It is not only for what we do that we are held responsible, but also for what we do not do.' It is not enough anymore to do less harm or leave no trace. Those of us who run through woods at sunrise, paddle rivers, swim in ponds and camp on hills need to step up. Because who else is going to fix this mess – not just my small, scruffy pond, but the larger issues behind it – if not us? If we leave the land better than we found it, and lead by example, perhaps we can shift the conversation about access from exclusion towards stewardship.

I resolved to bring more bin bags every time I swim in this pond and to keep chipping away at the litter. I hope that, once it's cleaned up, future

visitors' baseline expectations will rise and they'll think twice before dropping that first piece of litter.

I doubt whoever erected the fences would give me access permission for this clean-up operation. So I will follow the advice of Paul Powlesland, self-appointed nature guardian of the River Roding in London, who began his years of brilliant work there by picking up litter.

'I tend to avoid asking,' says Paul. 'The projects where I've had to get permission are still bogged down. The ones I've just done are already making a difference.'

Paul founded the River Roding Trust to restore the river for public benefit. He mobilised community clean-ups and tree planting, reopened blocked public footpaths, and monitored pollution to hold the perpetrators to account. Through co-founding Lawyers for Nature and by living alongside the river itself, he has also helped push for legal rights for ecosystems and inspired a growing river-guardian culture.

He is not driven by rage or despair, but rather from the satisfaction of planting a tree and watching it grow, or from canoeing past riverbanks he has restored and seeing sand martins nest in burrows he helped create.

Paul's advice is refreshingly simple: spend time with your river, your wood, your bit of green. Get to know where it's thriving and where it's struggling. Replicate what works and remove what doesn't.

'You'll understand what your place needs,' he says, 'just through observation and time.'

Inspired by stories like Paul's, I looked around for other ways to get involved. I enjoy following the Surfers Against Sewage campaigns on social media. They share inspiring stories of cool people cleaning up cool places and enjoying the benefits of community spirit, being outdoors and making a difference. One day, I saw a notification about a clean-up event happening near me. It was not a beautiful Cornish beach, but rather a suburban duck pond in Bromley. Hardly the stuff of aspirational Instagram feeds, but I grabbed my paddleboard and set off to help.

When I arrived, I realised my uncharitable mental image of the Bromley duck pond had been wrong. It was even uglier and filthier than I had

imagined, overlooked by a 1970s concrete block, with litter everywhere. But as the ancient proverb reminds us, a bad day on the paddleboard still beats a good day in the office. I introduced myself to Steve, the organiser, who was one of those rare, valuable people who turn quiet outrage into tangible action. He had brought hand sanitiser, hi-vis vests and even actual health and safety forms.

As we inflated our paddleboards, three police officers approached. I assumed the mission was about to be shut down on some tedious technicality. But they were delighted we were going to clean the pond and thanked us for getting involved.

Steve and I pulled on wellies and rubber gloves, then paddled out onto the mankiest water I've ever had the pleasure of floating on, joking that this might be a worldfirst paddleboard expedition on the Bromley duck pond. We began scooping up debris, piling it onto our boards and then ferrying it to other volunteers on the shore.

Together we filled sack after sack with the usual suspects: fast food packaging and the obligatory traffic cones. Booze bottles too, broken tennis rackets, footballs and half a skateboard. I took particular delight in the more unusual items we found – a soggy stuffed unicorn, a giant Christmas bauble, Thomas the Tank Engine.

A French woman passing by stopped to chat. She praised our efforts but seemed baffled by the state of English parks. 'In France,' she said, 'we have more respect for nature.'

While we worked, I asked Steve and another volunteer what had prompted them to take action. Both had separately been galvanised by health crises. They'd reassessed their lives, found themselves drawn to mindfulness and, from there, to a connection with nature. Importantly, someone had invited each of them to an event. That gentle human nudge – come and join us – turned their passive interest into purposeful action and drew them into a community. Change often begins not with grand plans, but with a conversation, an invitation, and then a shared morning in the mud.

By lunchtime, we were all filthy and smelly, but we had made a noticeable difference. (Please feel free to send me a medal.) It felt as though we'd reclaimed the pond in a small way, for the town and for nature. And

the morning had been fun too, an enjoyable paddleboard session that was sociable and surprisingly satisfying. It was certainly more memorable than many of my outings on cleaner lakes where I have been in search of nothing more than an Instagram-worthy selfie.

I might never return to Bromley pond, but I'd enjoyed sharing a few hours with good people and making a small dent in a problem. Picking up litter won't fix the world. But it can make you care enough to start demanding the bigger changes that *are* needed to fix the world. It feels good to make a start, one little pond after another.

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The Netherlands is widely admired for its cycling culture and infrastructure, and it's easy to assume such a transformation would be unrealistic to replicate in Britain. It's just different here, we shrug, accepting that as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. But the Dutch did not historically prioritise active transport, and their embrace of cycling was far from inevitable. They were tilting towards becoming a car-centric country, like us, until as recently as the 1970s.

But a shocking rise in road deaths shifted something called the Overton window, which is the range of ideas that most people see as normal or acceptable at a given time. The public demanded change. Campaigns like *Stop de Kindermoord* ('Stop the Child Murder') captured the imagination and forced politicians to act. They chose to invest heavily in the nation's cycling infrastructure.

Today, the result is not only less traffic and cleaner air across the Netherlands, but a healthier population that takes cycling safely for granted as a more convenient option than driving. We could choose to do the same.

Early one Friday morning, commuters in north London hurried towards Tube stations, clutching coffee and checking their phones. The streets were full of buses and cars carrying workers and schoolchildren. I pedalled past the traffic jams, zipping along to join my first ever bike bus.

A bike bus is a group of children who cycle to school together along a fixed route, picking up others along the way, like a bus. Cities are perfect places for them as congestion often means they're no slower than driving. A bike bus turns an ordinary commute into a celebration of active travel, helping children start the school day active and alert while building a sense of community. Education scholar Margrit Stamm found that children who travelled to school under their own steam drew brighter, more vibrant pictures of the journey than those driven by car.

The bike bus I was joining had been organised by a family – Cat, Bruce and their son, Falcon – who already cycled to school and work. They wanted to make the ride more fun and help others do it too. Their weekly bike bus had now grown into something lots of children looked forward to every Friday.

Off we went, a cheerful collection of kids, parents, teachers and volunteers swooshing through the streets in a colourful, noisy convoy. We were chaperoned by competent outriders and marshals, with bells, whistles and cheerful tunes pumping from a speaker. It was great fun.

Cat and Bruce were both passionate cyclists and nature lovers. On their bike bus rides they'd spotted or heard chiffchaffs and blackcaps, foxes, sparrowhawks, swifts, parakeets and jays. Nature is all around us, even on a busy urban school run.

My favourite part of the experience was watching the reaction of stereotypically grumpy Londoners: the van drivers, workmen hoisting scaffolding and stressed commuters queuing in cars. As the kids waved and rang their bells, almost everybody smiled and waved back. People who lived and worked near one another, but would normally just mind their own business, as is the way in cities, were nudged into engaging and interacting. I had anticipated that the ride with a bike bus of smiling children would be heartwarming, but not the broader sense of community wellbeing it generated.

I saw other children looking enviously out of car windows as we cruised past their traffic jams. It was apparent that pedalling to school with your friends held appeal, if only it could be normalised. If bike buses became commonplace, it would likely inspire others to join in. With fewer people driving, the streets would become even safer for cycling. And bike buses could become a normal part of childhood for everyone.<sup>2</sup>

Cat and Bruce had identified a problem in their lives and responded with a solution that benefited their family and community, mobilised others and set in motion a positive feedback loop. Once you show that something is possible and good, it cajoles others into action.

My outing with the bike bus was only a short ride to school, but also a small step towards a different kind of normal – a glimpse of an ordinary life where this sort of thing no longer feels novel. If enough streets began their mornings like this, living differently might stop feeling radical and start feeling routine.

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[7](#) To find your nearest bike bus, or to start your own, visit [www.bikebus.world](http://www.bikebus.world) or [www.bikebus.org](http://www.bikebus.org)

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Each spring, a friend and I make a pilgrimage to Knepp, a rewilded farm in Sussex, to listen to the dawn chorus. We groan at the 3 a.m alarm, convene in the dark, and then love the rest of the morning. An English April sunrise is arguably my favourite of all possible sunrises.

Knepp used to be typical of many farms since the Second World War. The earth was worked hard, output was all that counted, and everything was propped up by subsidies. But the soil deteriorated and ever-higher doses of fertilisers failed to maintain the yields. Eventually the owners gave up, handed the land back to nature, and allowed it to rewild.

Twenty years later, the change is extraordinary. It is a spectacular experience to hear an intensity and variety of birdsong so different from the fields where I live, only fifty miles away.

Zanna knows far more than me about birdsong, but the dawn chorus at Knepp is such a competitive cacophony of tiny birds singing their hearts out that we both needed to clutch our phones, Merlin birdsong app open, to try and untangle what the heck was going on. We tiptoed around in the dim light, grinning and pointing at hedgerows – a cuckoo, a nightingale! Striking species – the turtle dove, the white stork, the purple emperor butterfly – are returning to a land that was once depleted, but now is recovering fast. This is the sort of place I want to live in and experience every day, not just visit on special outings.

Little makes me happier these days than the simple, cheap, carbon-guzzling benefits of rewilding land and rewiggling rivers, making our countryside more nature-friendly and more resilient to climate breakdown, while still growing food and providing jobs. Rewilding is not about replacing farming, but about rebalancing the environment. It invites us to see our place in the landscape differently, to recognise ourselves as part of the living framework rather than its exploitative overlord.

But rewilding feels controversial to some people. Farming is not only a job; it is an identity and heritage often passed down through generations. To suggest that land use might need to change can feel an affront to this way of life, but that is absolutely not the case.

Some critics assume the countryside has always looked as it does today and therefore should remain so. They dislike rewilding because it appears scruffier than tidy fields. We prefer landscapes that signal care and order, even when they are ecologically poor – a reflection of shifting baselines. Indeed, this was my reaction too on the first occasion I visited Knepp. It took me a while to learn to appreciate messy diversity rather than smooth green carpets of grass.

There are practical questions too. Will we produce enough food? How will farmers earn a living? Who pays for the transition? The costs of change are immediate and local, while many of the benefits of rewilding are slower and will be shared more widely. Farming depends on predictability and annual income, but nature unfolds over longer timescales and requires people to accept uncertainty in return for future gain. Without stable policy and long-term backing, that is not a fair exchange.

That unease is deepened by experience. Rural communities have too often seen policies imposed from afar that promised improvement but did not deliver, with shifting rules, unreliable payments and little long-term consistency. Without trust, rewilding risks being seen as something done to farmers and landowners rather than with them. Lasting change will come only when governments show that funding farmers and restoring habitats are not competing goals.

Concerns about food production and national self-sufficiency are reasonable. The idea of replacing sheep pasture with trees might sound alarming. But much of our fertile land is currently used so inefficiently, growing crops to feed animals rather than people, with significant losses of energy at each stage. As a result, we use far more land per meal than necessary. Shifting towards growing more food directly for people could deliver the same nutrition while freeing up space for ecosystems to recover and for new forms of rural income to develop.

But if a farmer is no longer raising sheep, how will they earn a living? Since the Second World War, many farms have depended on subsidies alongside the food they produce to remain viable. Land use is already shaped by public funding and political choices. It is not simply a question of land equalling food.

The question, then, is how that support is directed. It can reward environmental restoration, support sustainable food production and help create diversified income streams such as tourism. The aim is not to remove livelihoods, but to make them more resilient over time.

Seen in this light, rewilding is not a threat to rural communities, but a tool for securing their future. Knepp offers one example of how this can work. Just two decades after returning the farm to nature, it is more than a haven for wildlife. It also generates a good income from tourism, leisure, subsidies, as well as from regenerative agriculture techniques using Old English Longhorn cattle and Tamworth pigs. Knepp is not empty or wasted acreage, but an alternative kind of effective, healthy environment that sustains both people and the natural world.

Our countryside looked different a century ago, and different again a thousand years before that. The question then is not whether it will change again, but how. What kind of country do we want a century from now? And what happens if we continue as we are, with damaging processes that leave farms vulnerable to the very climate instability they are contributing to?

It is a useful thought experiment to imagine how we might design agriculture if we were inventing it today, rather than 12,000 years ago when there were only a few million people around. With eight billion people on the planet and an understanding of greenhouse gases, we would certainly opt to maximise yields while minimising harm.

The UK's Climate Change Committee has calculated that we must change the use of over 20 per cent of our agricultural land in order to achieve net zero by 2050, and to make good the government's commitment to protect and manage 30 per cent of our land and sea for nature by 2030.

Rewilding plus environmentally friendly food production categorically does not mean the end of either farming or rural heritage. At its best, rewilding creates mosaics of agriculture, wild spaces and livelihoods that exist alongside one another, while also restoring conditions for a sustainable future.

I hope my friend Zanna and I continue our tradition of dawn meet-ups for many years to come. But it would be better if they began to feel unnecessary, as rewilded areas and regenerative agriculture became

commonplace. One day, perhaps, people will find it baffling that we had to plan a special outing just to hear birdsong in spring.

As I sat on my local hill, looking out over fields of monoculture crops grown to feed livestock, I tried to imagine a different scene. If only a quarter of these fields were packed with crops for humans to eat directly, nutritionally comparable to our current approach, the remainder could be spared for a mixture of rewilding, low-impact income avenues and regenerative agriculture that replenished the soil and absorbed carbon, while still generating delicious produce.

A small number of cows rotate between the meadows, with chickens scratching through their dung. Arable fields are enriched by manure and cover crops, and dotted with saplings that will one day become mighty ancient standards. Hedgerows, ponds, copses and wildflower margins knit the intricate web together, encouraging pollinators and birds. This is a beautiful, economically viable future. It does not feel distant or unrealistic, but an appealing and achievable evolution of what we already have.

Unfortunately I don't own hundreds of acres, but outside my writing shed is my own miniature rewilding kingdom. It is a very small triangle of garden which I have encouraged to go nuts by doing almost nothing at all. The cow parsley is five foot high and rising. Self-seeded field maple trees have galloped above head height in just a few short years. There are oak and horse chestnut saplings courtesy of forgetful squirrels. And the willow twigs I cut last winter and shoved into the soggy soil are already beginning to take root and grow. It's a crowded, chaotic scrap of the planet, and I love it, as do the many birds that flitter and twitter through the sheltered undergrowth.

I derive a far richer satisfaction from looking out of my shed window these days than when it was a groomed lawn I never noticed. I was blind to the place where I spent most of my waking hours, and my unthinking baseline assumption was that an absence of birdsong was normal here. I was so accustomed to the idea that garden sheds sit on garden lawns that it took me years before I saw the potential for letting it run a little wilder, for

immersing myself more deeply in nearby nature, and for taking my tiny first step to a wilder world.

The glorious green mayhem outside my shed shows that if you do nothing for the living world but get out of its way and watch it flourish, then good things happen quickly, and that this makes us happier too.

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The best way to repair a damaged landscape is usually for humans to step back, like at Knepp. But sometimes a gentle nudge, like planting the right tree in the right place, helps not only the living world but also the person holding the spade.

For several years, I've participated in Trees for Cities' volunteer planting days, typically held in uninspiring corners of parkland around outer London. The last one I attended was helping restore a fragment of the Great North Wood that once stretched several miles south-east from central London. The forest had been felled over centuries, tree by tree, for ships and charcoal and grazing, with each woodsman making but a negligible mark on the landscape, until today the only reminder of the Great North Wood is a few lonely old oaks. And so there we were, shovels in hand, trying to begin growing something back.

I really enjoy communal tree planting. There's gentle physical work in the fresh air, a tonic for body and mind. Add the hum of conversation and it becomes an act of hope, a reminder that you're not the only one who cares.

And yes, it also helped that there was delicious curry for lunch, plus a cheerful steel drum band playing as we worked. But the real nourishment came from the shared sense of turning our hope into something tangible. Over 70 per cent of attendees were novice tree planters, and the organisers' surveys – using tools like the Nature Relatedness Scale – showed that participants' sense of nature connectedness increased over the course of the day.

Planting trees sets off some of the positive feedback loops we need more of. The trees pull carbon from the air and filter pollution. Birds return and the place feels a little wilder and more alive. People notice and start spending more time outside here. The park becomes not just greener, but more valued. With that care comes a love for the wider wild world. That prompts more people to get involved with tree planting, and so on.

That day we planted 3,500 trees, and while our work was laughably small on a global scale, it felt worthwhile and good. The reward for action was the action itself. You dig a little hole, pop in a flimsy tree whip, and walk away knowing you'll never get to sit under that tree's shade. But maybe my grandchildren will, and that thought made me smile.

The old saying goes that the best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second-best time is today – and the best way to do it is together. There was something empowering in finding other people who felt the same way as me, knowing that my individual voice was adding to a chorus, and that we're not going away.

The world is in trouble, and the problems are vast, but we don't have to face them alone. There is community and kinship to be found in action and there is strength in numbers. Don't try to do it all by yourself – it grinds you down and doesn't work nearly so well. Find others and plant your trees together. Then share your stories and keep going, if for no other reason than because you enjoy it.

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It was Saturday morning, just before nine o'clock, and I was standing in a small crowd wearing skimpy shorts and feeling quite cold. Around me was a hum of low-level happy chatter. Friends catching up, parents comparing buggies and talk of sore knees as we waited for the starter to shout 'Go!' Then off we trotted, the sprinters and the shufflers, the young and the old, the chatty ones and those locked into their headphone world. I settled into my own pace, huffing and puffing but enjoying the fresh air and three steady laps of the muddy park – which required a tad more than fifteen minutes in nature, I admit.

Welcome to parkrun, a free, friendly five-kilometre event that happens every Saturday morning in thousands of parks around the world. I've participated in several different venues, and though the routes differ, the spirit is consistently the same. As people gather at the start line, bobbing on their toes and chatting, there's a definite feeling of belonging. On sunny mornings, the blue sky lifts people. On cold, wet ones, there's a shared wry masochism and the anticipation of tea and cake afterwards.

A volunteer gives the standard pre-run briefing: a reminder to be welcoming and courteous, to give a cheer for newcomers and those reaching milestones – 50, 100, even 500 parkruns. It's all done without fuss, which is fitting for an event that isn't about medals or rankings. Sure, there are always a few eager runners at the front, ready to chase personal bests. But further back, the pack trots or walks at its own pace.

Parkrun is built upon an army of volunteers who support the runners and make the event happen. They may be dedicated community members, parents and seniors, young people doing their Duke of Edinburgh's Award, or individuals looking to meet new people or gain new skills. It's a satisfying and rewarding way to connect, find purpose and contribute to the community.

Everyone is welcome at parkrun. Everyone is exercising. Everyone is outdoors. Nobody comes last: a volunteer tail walker ensures that. Whether you're battling a health condition, taking your first steps back to fitness, or training for a marathon, what matters is that you're here.

Every time I attend a parkrun, I wish more of the country was out running, walking or wheeling some Saturday morning miles with us. Our

health service is in crisis and we are the least active generation in human history. Life has become dominated by sitting, screens and car-based travel, all contributing to obesity, cardiovascular disease and chronic illnesses. If a scientist could invent a pill that slashed the risk of these, lengthened lives and boosted mental wellbeing, they'd win every prize going. But that 'pill' already exists. It's called parkrun, and it's happening every Saturday in a park near you.

This green pill is free, and it works wonders, saving the NHS millions each year. It is even prescribed by GPs, with more than 2,000 practices linking patients to their local parkrun, and 70 per cent of the public supporting the idea.

Around one in five people signing up for parkrun were previously inactive, and many come from lower-income backgrounds, showing that when opportunities are free, local and welcoming, they reach those least likely to engage with traditional sport, yet often those with most to gain.

Parkrun is about more than just running. It is also a demonstration of community and proof of the importance of local green spaces. Parkrun builds a habit of being outdoors for a broad spectrum of people and exposes them to the rhythms of the changing seasons, strengthening our connection to nature. For parkrun to thrive, people need easy access to local green spaces. As more people participate and appreciate the benefits, hopefully more parkruns will be established and more runners will demand the protection of the green spaces where they take place.

And even if none of the arguments above sways the government to support it, the blunt statistic that every £1 spent on parkrun returns over £16 in economic benefits surely should.

Parkrun offers a chance to increase what society regards as normal amounts of exercise, time outdoors, access to green space and community engagement. If a free weekly run can shift these baselines, then perhaps the broader problems we face are not as immovable as they seem. Big solutions often start small and local – perhaps even with a muddy lap around the park.

Every time I climb a tree, pick a blackberry or drink coffee by a river, the small, repeatable actions begin to add up. What once passed me by now fascinates me: the trail of ants or the smell of wet leaves. The world will not change because I spend a quarter of an hour outside. But if enough of us do, our priorities might.

As nature begins to feel close to home and joyful rather than distant and doom-filled, it becomes easier to care about and to champion. Once you care, you also notice what is missing: the empty hedgerow, the polluted stream, the locked gate. It becomes harder to look away, and easier to imagine what was once here and what could be again.

If nature is absent from your days, it is easy not to miss it at all. But once you begin to pay attention, its value becomes obvious. It does not matter what your doorway into nature is – climbing trees, taking photographs or eating lunch on a park bench. Do it often enough that it becomes routine, and learn to look more closely.

We are all connected to nature, just to different degrees and from different starting points, and that connection can always be strengthened. Research shows that simply paying attention to everyday nature improves wellbeing, and this connection deepens through five pathways: the senses, beauty, emotion, meaning and, ultimately, compassion – a shift from enjoyment to care. Improving human wellbeing and restoring the health of the natural world are not competing goals, but closely connected ones. In simple terms, regenerative positive psychology is the idea that we can improve our own wellbeing while helping the living world recover at the same time.

Our disconnection from nature crept in gradually as life moved indoors and grew busier. The instincts and habits we now deny our children in concrete schoolyards are ones we must relearn ourselves. But even if you don't buy all that, and aren't especially concerned about the fate of the living planet, there is a simpler reason to step outside. A run by the lake will improve your health and lift your mood. Do it for yourself, if for no other reason.

But rewilding our own relationship with nature must not remain a private activity, or it will never lead to wide scale transformation. The

challenge therefore is how to make nature connection commonplace. It should not be a luxury for the lucky few, but a daily human requirement, like clean water, that is built into schools, workplaces, streets and communities. It's nowhere near enough for me to write a book saying 'Go to the woods, they are great'. I assume that almost everyone who chooses to read this book will already know that and agree. (But just in case you need the reminder: go to the woods, they are great!)

How can we shape the places we live so that nature is not somewhere we visit, but something we are part of every day? What would it take to make nature part of everyday life for everyone, not just the motivated few? The question is no longer whether time in nature matters, but what we do with that knowledge to address broader issues. You cannot fix everything, so what will you choose to tackle?

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## **PART 3**

# **THE GREAT RECONNECTION**

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Two connected but opposite outlooks have occupied my thoughts in recent years. On the one hand, belatedly paying close attention to nearby nature has been very rewarding. Yet my eyes have also been opened to so many problems I'd never been aware of. Or, to be more honest, problems I'd quietly chosen to ignore as I feared the remedies would make my own life less fun.

Global emergencies that never personally touched me, and often felt conveniently beyond my responsibility, began to sharpen into vivid stories on my doorstep, like a magnifying glass focusing the sun's diffuse light into a small, ferocious beam. When I read about agriculture drying up the Aral Sea, I don't honestly feel much beyond a numb sigh. But it now really pisses me off when a stream near me is sucked dry for irrigation. The more I learned about my depleted neighbourhood and broken planet – and that these are one and the same thing – the less I was able to look the other way. I found it all distressing, depressing and enraging on a daily basis.

The combined effect has been like falling in love on a date, then learning they are dying (while people keep puffing smoke in their face). My anger was sharpened by the impression that hardly anyone seemed to care enough to do anything, not even through small personal changes. That included most of my friends, who are decent and informed people. I started to think the easiest thing would be to stop worrying too and just enjoy myself while Rome burns. If this is the end of days, I might as well book a beach holiday and enjoy the warmer climate.

There is an advert on YouTube for the United Nations Development Programme in which a dinosaur gives an excoriating speech to world leaders. 'Listen up, people,' it roars. 'I know a thing or two about extinction and let me tell you, going extinct is a bad thing. You'd think that would be obvious. Driving yourselves extinct in just 70 million years? That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. At least we had an asteroid. What's *your* excuse?'

The destruction of the living world on our generation's watch is morally unforgivable. Several shark lineages, 400 million years old – predating even the rings of Saturn – are now being wiped out by industrial fishing fleets. So too are horseshoe crabs, even older, and the ancient seed plants called

cycads which are critically threatened by habitat loss and illegal collection after 280 million peaceful years. But even if you don't care about wildlife, the impacts of climate chaos and biodiversity collapse will be astronomically expensive and catastrophic for millions, perhaps billions, of people.

What is my excuse? I am an educated, competent adult in a powerful country. I am at the heart of all the problems, but also the solutions. The temptation I feel to say 'little me can't do much', or to point the finger of blame elsewhere, is lazy and self-exonerating.

After all those fifteen-minute outings listening to birdsong, working outside or climbing trees, ignoring what is happening now feels unconscionable. I care for the tree I photograph every week and for the health of the people I know. They feel more real to me than abstract concepts or the sludge of doom-laden statistics. I am no longer apart from nature; I am part of the living world, and that makes all this personal. I can't just give up, can I?

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After writing that heroic and rousing Hollywood speech,

I did what any sensible world-saver would do: I put the kettle on, opened a packet of biscuits and started a to-do list. If I was going to fix the planet, I first needed an inventory of everything that was broken.

I poured a cup of tea and then pored over every issue that mattered to me, from the world's biggest problems to the small things that personally infuriate me – middle lane hoggers, poo bag hangers and vape droppers. Nothing was too large for my list, nothing too small for a moan.

You won't be surprised to learn that this rapidly became a very long and alarming roster of spewing toxins, shameless profiteering, ridiculous subsidies and all the unintended catastrophes of comfortable modern life, from air conditioning, blast furnaces and coal emissions to xenobiotics, youth disconnection and zoonotic pandemics.

My fixation with shifting baseline syndrome saw ghoulish examples everywhere – the collapse of fish and insect populations and how we regard it as normal that 76 billion chickens are slaughtered each year, while passenger pigeons are gone forever. There are certainly some big old crises out there. I looked down my list and wondered where to begin.

Let's tackle cement, I thought, somewhat optimistically. We use enough cement to build a city the size of Paris each week, and China currently slaps down more cement every two years than America did in the entire twentieth century. If the cement industry was a nation, it would be the third largest emitter of greenhouse gases.

Unfortunately, by the time I'd read cement's Wikipedia page, I realised that making it environmentally friendly required innovation and policy changes that were way, way, way out of my league. I had to concede that I have precisely zero useful skills for decarbonising the cement industry. I was just going to have to hope that some clever entrepreneurial folk figure it out on my behalf, and quickly.

To my surprise, however, I did not find this disheartening. In fact it actually lightened my spirit, as I now simply crossed it off my list. Cement is problematic, but it is beyond my control. I cannot weigh myself down with every bad thing that is happening, drowning myself in cement shoes. I resolved to save my energy for the things I could do something about.

One system for decision-making, known in the productivity-hacking corners of the internet as the 5/25 Rule, helps you focus on what matters most and eliminate distractions. The idea is to write down twenty-five important things – or, in my case, 250 – and rank them. Then you pick the top five – what I thought of as my Five Battles – and consciously ignore everything else so that you can commit all your efforts to those priorities.

I'd already scratched cement, so that was a good start. As I looked further down my list, it was embarrassing to acknowledge how many things were beyond me and the mediocre resources in my shed. I crossed off every item I was in no position to resolve.

I checked nobody was watching and then also deleted everything that sounded boring. We all have enough tedious commitments in our lives, and even if the world is at stake, I confess I won't persevere if I'm not engaged. In contrast, I highlighted issues I particularly cared about and any problems impacting where I live, reasoning I'd be more inclined to stick with them.

As I worked through my long list of environmental problems, another question emerged: how should I decide what to prioritise? I had some reasons for choosing one issue over another – personal experience, emotion, proximity, practicality – but I also needed to consider impact. My aim was not to dismiss smaller concerns or pretend I could solve the biggest crises on Earth. But I wanted to choose with my eyes open. If two battles felt equally meaningful, it made sense to focus on the one with greater impact, rather than the one currently fashionable on social media. This is a tricky balance. Small actions matter, chiefly because they help people engage, and beginning is often the hardest step. But they can also distract from the larger forces shaping the problems.

The environmental writer George Monbiot has warned of the danger of losing sight of this and becoming absorbed in what he calls 'micro-consumerist bollocks': tiny issues such as plastic straws and coffee cups. We can expend enormous energy on symbolic gestures that suck everyone's attention while neglecting the systemic changes in energy, food, transport and land use that will determine the future of the planet.

This does not mean that small actions are worthless. Your chosen cause might be making your street a greener place, and that is a fine thing to do.

But it did mean that, when choosing my Five Battles, I tried to keep scale in mind. And, as always, I had to remain alert to my own cognitive dissonance – that the battles I felt most drawn to might not actually be the ones that matter most.

Patterns were beginning to emerge now, and I noticed that many of the remaining issues on my list were interlinked. My lazy, shortcut-seeking character appreciated that tackling one would bring multiple benefits, so I scrubbed out all the challenges that weren't connected to any others.

My list was now far less overwhelming than the initial tsunami of catastrophes I'd written down. The exercise was making it clear that the issues I was best placed to lend my voice to – given my alarmingly small circle of competence, career, hobbies and connections – were also those closest to my heart and daily life. All I needed to do was choose the issues that send me into preaching worthy sermons at my friends or shouting at the TV.

Now came the final step: to pick five and cross everything else off the list. Everything. They weren't my concerns any more, and leaving them churning around my brain would only make me pointlessly unhappy. Some other good soul could take care of them – you, perhaps, if you know anything about cement. My Five Battles were enough for now.

This might seem an opportune moment to sound the fanfare trumpets, unroll the parchment and hire a town crier to declare my proclamations and nail them on the doors of the town hall.

'Oyez, oyez! Listen now, you poor unfortunate captive reader, to the Five Battles I have chosen. I intend to pontificate about them at great length until you all agree with me!'

Anyone unfortunate enough to spend much time with me will have been subjected to various rants about dilemmas close to my heart. My standard approach is to read lots of books, learn lots of facts, get very cross and then speak without stopping until everyone agrees with me (or leaves). I can bloviate about any number of topics until all the fun has drained from a room and I am left alone at the bar.

Traditional environmental messaging is like this: factpacked, shouty, guilt-laden and ineffective. So many troubles get hurled at us all the time

that the outcome is despair and apathy, but not a lot of change. Experts have been warning us about the environmental apocalypse for decades – and it hasn't worked. Perpetual alarm merely leaves people feeling powerless, and when that happens many of us tune out.

You probably already have your own opinions on my chosen battles and don't need me yelling at you. Therefore you will be relieved to hear that I'm not about to bang on about them. There are already a dozen good books on each topic if you're interested to learn more. (Incidentally, the Five Battles I settled on were nature disconnection, the destruction of wild places, industrial agriculture, exclusion from nature and consumerism. I could have picked any number of other important causes. But these spanned much of the personal, cultural, political, systemic and ecological despair that I felt. They matter on a global scale, but they also mirrored what was agitating me in my own life and neighbourhood.)

Unfortunately, even after I'd narrowed down the woes of the world to just five, I found that immersing myself in depressing problems was still quite depressing. I was learning and moaning lots, but I'd fallen into the trap of being a 'hobbyist', wallowing in the dramas in the same way masochistic sports fans are unable to tear ourselves away from the demise of our terrible team. I wasn't getting any happier or fixing anything.

What I needed was less of the despair that often accompanies conversations about the environmental crisis, and more positive action. I began thinking about the better world we could build, and that was far more motivating. The great reconnection we need with the living world demands positive action over pessimistic paralysis – getting on with pragmatic, hopeful solutions that also improve our lives and are rewarding to be part of.

It can be tempting to excuse ourselves from rolling up our sleeves and getting stuck in because we are not a billionaire, scientist, politician or extrovert. But each of us has different strengths, connections and passions, which means we can all contribute in our own way. And if enough of us do something, perhaps we can become the first generation in history to leave the earth in a better state than we found it.

I did not know all the answers to my Five Battles, so I just asked what can I do today, with what I have, where I am, to make these a little better? I wanted to turn concern into engagement rather than waiting for expertise, certainty or permission to strike before doing anything.

So I sat at a whiteboard with some coloured pens, a mug of tea and another packet of biscuits. I wrote my Five Battles as headings, then brainstormed remedies for each until the board was covered in scrawl. I then began narrowing them down to five using the same process as before.

I scrubbed what I couldn't realistically influence or sustain and highlighted the things I was best at. I grouped together everything that overlapped, connecting ideas across the whiteboard like a manic genius. I was struck by how positive and energising this quest for Five Actions felt compared to the earlier barrage of battles. I was trying to optimise for enthusiasm – to become a 'funvironmentalist', aiming for a life well lived on a planet well loved, to borrow a phrase from futurologist Mark Stevenson on the excellent (and swearsy) Futureonauts podcast.

I circled my final Five Actions and wiped the rest of the board clean. They were: Local Time Outdoors, Sustainable Healthy Food, Simplifying Life, Land Access, Rewilding. But the specific choices are irrelevant to anyone but me.

What is important is they offered me an optimistic vision of a better world I was eager to help build, rather than a gloomy indictment of everything that is wrong. Commit to addressing these good things and I would make inroads into my Five Battles without needing to get depressed by them.

I felt uneasy discarding so many important issues, but the 5/25 exercise helped me resist the urge to spread myself too thin. A few things done well would be a good start, and more effective than pursuing the unrealistic unicorn of the 'omnicause'. We can do anything in life, but we can't do everything – at least not all in one go.

The final step was to reflect on my Battles and Actions and consider whether a single idea lay at the heart of them all. If so, it could focus my energy and help me make more efficient and effective decisions. It became

clear that the keystone linking everything on my lists was nature disconnection.

So my first mission had to be to try to get more people outdoors, help them notice what has changed and then imagine how things could be better. And so my success now depends largely on whether you, dear reader, are willing to spend fifteen minutes in nature and then get involved...

But I am not trying to persuade you to adopt my personal Five Actions. Instead I want you to engage with the challenges that matter in *your* world by asking you to try the 5/25 exercise. We all want a cleaner, wilder and more beautiful future. But our specific priorities are inevitably different. Don't let me tell you what to care about. Let me simply ask you to care about *something*.

Thinking through my Battles and Actions was a helpful exercise and I hope you also find it worthwhile. It forced me to articulate and prioritise my concerns, rather than just feeling generally irate or helpless. The point is not to rank what matters most in the world, but to focus our attention. Caring deeply is not the same as caring about everything. Making choices replaces overwhelm, guilt and 'whataboutery' with calm prioritisation and action, like a medical triage.

One note of caution: it is easy to be lured into distracting tribal squabbles. I am in several well-meaning WhatsApp groups that resemble a tug-of-war in which everyone pulls in different directions, and nothing moves. Let's not waste precious energy arguing because I like solar panels and you prefer wind farms. What counts is that we both want clean air, and both technologies are better than the grotesque subsidies still flowing to fossil fuels. There are more than enough disasters to go round and many ways to tackle them. My solutions are not better or more important than yours. The only thing that matters is that we all keep pulling, however loosely, in the same general direction. Progress, not perfection, is the goal. The world doesn't need perfect people – it needs people who care enough to begin and to keep going.

The first step on the path to saving the world (or your allotment) is to brain-dump a big list of everything that concerns you. You might choose to

do this in a single, furious, caffeinated session, scribbling in a notebook at a cafe. Or it could be a slower process, adding an item to a list on your phone every time something irks or worries you. Either is fine, but don't take too long. We need you! Plans will evolve, knowledge grow and allies appear once you are underway.

Like setting off on a hike, the landscape only begins to reveal itself once you start walking.

Once you have your long list, ruthlessly cut any problems you cannot significantly influence. Scribble out anything that feels like a chore rather than a calling. Group overlapping ideas together, then remove any items that don't connect to any others. Is there a hefty keystone holding all your ideas together?

Think about what particularly affects your life and community, as well as where you have relevant skills, access, or experience. Finally, circle the five issues you feel most energised to pursue, and then cross out everything else without guilt.

Next it's time to turn to the solutions, brainstorming every idea imaginable. Think big. Think small. Think global. Think local. Think idealistic. Think pragmatic. Think billionaire. Think bootstrap. Fill the page. Restructure the COP summits, rewild half the planet, pick up litter at the park...

Consider what feels fun to you but would feel like work to others. What are you much better at than me? What lies in the overlap between what you love and what the world needs? Pick just five and scrap the rest.

Your Five Actions will depend on your circumstances, so start where you are, with what you have, and with what you care about. There is no such thing as a 'correct' selection. They might be five pillars of wisdom that change the world. Or they might be steps to make your garden wilder, your office menu more eco-friendly, or a new project for your class at school. I hope, like me, you feel a surge of enthusiasm to get started.

**Your Five Battles and Five Actions**

Choose them well. Write them down. Begin.

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The idea that links these together:

.....

My first action:

.....

If this book is to be of any lasting use, rather than a waste of my time and your money, it must lead to something beyond its pages. So let's consider where to begin.

We've chosen Five Actions to frame our priorities and guide our next steps, whether they involve neighbourhood tweaks or fixing systems. Yet when we think of the scale of the world's problems, it can be easy to assume that whatever we do will be irrelevant, a lonely and futile gesture in a society that seems determined to carry on regardless.

But it is this disillusionment that keeps us stuck. Small actions feel pointless when we imagine we're acting alone, but they become powerful when they spread. A significant share of global emissions are the collective result of individual actions, which is worth remembering whenever it's easier to grumble about 'the system' rather than doing anything. Individual behaviour will not fix everything, but governments and corporations rarely move unless people show they expect action.

Individual actions also contribute to positive feedback loops. The more time I spend in nature, the more I notice how it has been depleted by industrial agriculture. That pushes me to change my diet, a small step towards freeing up land that could be rewilded, making the landscape richer and more inviting, and drawing more people outdoors to experience it. Their connection deepens, and the cycle begins again.

Campaigning for a responsible Right to Roam can trigger similar loops. As more people experience the beauty close to home, the urge for high-impact travel begins to ease. Time outdoors fosters a stronger sense of care, so people start picking up litter and standing up for the places they love. Public support grows, access expands, and the baseline for both access and stewardship begins to rise.

The simplest first step we can take towards making changes is to look at the harm we cause in our everyday lives. We don't set out to damage the planet, yet we all do it every day. Ninety per cent of people on Earth do not need to reduce their carbon footprint significantly, but the top 10 per cent of emitters – a group that includes me (and probably you) – exceed our sustainable carbon budget by roughly ten times.

Which of our unexamined habits can we rethink? If you would like a steer, you might consider the impact of your diet, travel, energy, finances, consumption and voting choices. Be sure to resist the classic New Year's resolution mistake of launching into vastly ambitious but unrealistic changes. Begin small instead, and as each tweak begins to feel comfortable, add another. See what works for you and learn from what doesn't. If you really hate something, try another approach. The point is not to feel guilty or to make your life worse, but to experiment with changes that make life better – both for the planet and for you.

This is a good start, but causing less harm is not enough. 'Every little helps' is true, but it's also a cop out. We can demand more from ourselves and each other. If we just snuggle under a rock and do fewer harmful things, the world is still going to be in a terrible state. It needs actively repairing and healing. Those of us who can should go further and faster than people whose lives are harder. As well as changing personal behaviours, that means committing time and energy towards our Five Actions. What can you do this week, this month and this year to leave a positive trace?

Much of the environmental debate has focused on the individual damage caused by the way we travel, eat and live. This framing is not accidental. Large companies often shift attention and blame onto personal behaviour instead of their own systems, which drive most emissions. It is no coincidence that it was BP who popularised the idea of the household carbon footprint calculator.

It feels rather bleak if our goal becomes simply slowing the rate of environmental harm. A more hopeful approach is to ask how we might actively make the world better. This is sometimes described as the difference between your climate footprint and your climate handprint.

Your climate footprint is the negative impact of your lifestyle; your climate handprint is the positive impact you create beyond that. Reducing our footprint matters, but expanding our handprints can be much more powerful if we use our roles as citizens, professionals, investors, consumers and role models to shape systems and social norms. One person's footprint is small; one person's handprint can ripple out to influence so many others.

We need to turn individual efforts into shared momentum by bringing more people into the conversation about positive solutions and making change feel relevant and achievable. Meaningful change often begins with far fewer people than we imagine, then grows as others see it, trust it and decide to take part. It starts by connecting with those around us and showing, in small ways, what better could look like.

The personal changes you adopt have value in their own right, but they also strengthen your credibility as a role model when you begin talking to others. We tend to copy what feels normal within our circles, and the visible choices of those around us reshape social norms. One person picking up litter gives permission for others to do the same. And once caring for nature begins to feel ordinary, a small act of care can shift the mood of an entire street.

Tackling your chosen solutions also becomes more effective and enjoyable when you're not acting alone. Cleaning a pond is a good thing to do, but if you can persuade friends to join you then you've created a small movement of local guardians.

I would love to plant a thousand trees, but my garden isn't big enough, plus it sounds quite tiring. But imagine if I planted ten trees, then persuaded ten of you to plant your own trees and also to sign up ten more friends to plant ten more trees. At the risk of turning this into a dastardly GCSE maths puzzle, we've now planted... a hefty number of trees between us.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most important first steps for your Five Actions is to start talking to people. Silence creates the false impression that no one else cares, which in turn keeps others quiet and slows collective momentum. Studies consistently show that most people in every country do support action on climate change and are even willing to make personal sacrifices, yet we underestimate that support – often by a wide margin.

Wherever you are – in the office, pub, WhatsApp chat or waiting at the school gates – you're already part of many networks where ideas can travel. Change tends to spread through concentric circles: you begin by preaching to the choir, and then gradually work to make your choir larger.

A good way in to these conversations is to focus on what the other person worries about, rather than what you care about. Try to step into their

life, ask questions and listen carefully to the answers. Which local concerns are microcosms of global problems and do they overlap in some way with your Five Actions? Think of them not as environmental issues for environmentalists, but conversations about a shared future.

The journey from *me* to *we* is not about proving people wrong, but about understanding their points of view and helping them take small steps. Hopeful conversations are far more persuasive (and enjoyable) than culture wars. The harder you criticise, the more people retreat into their existing views.

Begin instead with considering what's in it for them, and how your solutions might make their life better. We rarely respond when we're told what is good for the planet, but we act when something is good for ourselves; that switching to renewable energy means lower bills and that lentils are better for your heart than sausages.

I want more trees because they absorb carbon. You care about privacy from nosey neighbours and increasing property values on our street. That's fine: more trees suits us both. Frame your solutions around their priorities and the conversation will have a positive energy and a mutual direction of travel.

We all see the world through different lenses. On any issue, some of us are already engaged, some casually concerned, and the majority either doubtful or disengaged. About two thirds of the public fall into a group that researchers call the 'persuadables'. They are neither activists nor deniers, but are open to influence from either direction. Many feel overlooked by mainstream climate messaging, are preoccupied with everyday worries, don't follow the news or are wary of experts and elites. This is where all of us come in: chatting with the people who know and trust us, and showing how changes benefit their families and communities.

Climate scientists have created SHIFT – the Super High Impact Initiative for Fixing Tomorrow – a guide to the actions that make the biggest difference and drive wider change.<sup>9</sup> They highlight that if your income is over £28,000, you live in a liberal democracy and you have a university degree, then you are among the most powerful individuals who have ever lived – in the top 10% globally for potential impact. Recognising

this should give us the confidence to speak up and use that influence more effectively.

Regardless of who you are, we all have important roles to play in conversations about our Five Actions. Are you young or old? Rural or urban? A builder or a banker? Think about the people you spend time with and those who feel like ‘one of us’. These are the people you are best placed to reach. Start the conversation with them, and do not underestimate how much positive influence you can have.

Regardless of whether you’re a layabout typing in a shed, or a god (or a cog) in a giant corporation, your workplace may be where you can make the biggest impact. What you do with your career often matters vastly more than your personal emissions, which is a reminder to consider your overall influence – your ‘handprint’ – alongside your individual footprint. Even if your work is unpaid, domestic, or freelance, you still have reach. Every job is a climate job nowadays – or ought to be seen that way.

Workplaces operate at a scale individuals cannot match. They set defaults, shape decisions and influence supply chains that stretch far beyond any one person. A company can decide what materials it buys, how its products are made, how its staff travel and what it considers acceptable. These choices ripple outwards to suppliers, customers and competitors, steadily resetting the baseline of what we consider normal.

The problems we face are not isolated issues but the result of interconnected systems. This means piecemeal fixes will always fall short. Real progress comes from shifting those systems themselves: changing the incentives, habits and expectations that shape everyday decisions, and recognising how powerfully marketing helps define what we see as normal, desirable and acceptable.

You do not need to run an organisation to affect how it behaves. Workplaces rarely change because of a single sustainability officer issuing directives. They change when enough people begin to question decisions, raise expectations and suggest better ways of doing things. Culture shifts when ordinary employees stop accepting the status quo.

A practical place to start is to measure what you do. Track and report the impact of your organisation's activities, however imperfectly. It is a way of acknowledging responsibility rather than exporting the consequences elsewhere. From there, look at your work through the lens of your Five Actions. Where does your organisation cause the most harm? Which shortcomings are easiest to fix? Start there. Early changes build momentum and will make further change feel possible.

Progress at work is rarely dramatic. It comes through accumulated decisions: a different supplier, a new policy, a revised default. Over time, these small shifts can alter the direction of an entire organisation.

Some companies are doing brilliant, thoughtful work towards a greener future. Many are doing nothing. Most, I suspect, are achieving less than they claim, and certainly less than they could. The ambition for wherever we work should not be limited to doing less harm or reaching neutrality. It should be to leave things better than we found them, and to use the reach of our work to improve the wider world.

The final area of influence to consider, beyond your personal and workplace circles, is your proximity to power. It is a grand phrase, but all it really means is identifying where we have access to groups or individuals with a little more clout to make something happen than we can accomplish by ourselves.

You may feel that proximity to power sounds daunting, or not your kind of thing, or dependent on a privileged background, but influence is about much more than money and authority. Simple ideas could include speaking with a headteacher to reach a whole school community or a pastor with a large congregation. Influence shows up in many forms – not only in formal positions, but in your peers, community groups, tenants' associations, and the like. Make a list of who you know – and who your friends and family know – that might be able to add some extra heft to your Five Actions.

Your proximity to power extends to people you may not know personally but feel you could connect with: the writers you read, social media accounts you follow, and the organisations already involved in the issues you care about. It also includes formal power. Engage with your local

council and Member of Parliament.<sup>10</sup> Many politicians worry about climate change but hesitate to act, believing their constituents do not care enough. Show them that you do.

Contact the individuals you have identified and explain the situation in a way that feels relevant to them. Don't just send a generic message. Reaching out can feel awkward, but people do like to help and to make good things happen, especially if you can both show them the benefits and make it low hassle for them.

Demonstrate how your proposed solution improves their community, their workplace, or their daily life. Councils, for example, exist to support your local area. If you approach them with constructive ideas rather than complaints, they are more likely to become allies.

These actions may all feel modest, even insignificant in isolation. But this is how change accumulates – through many small efforts, repeated and shared. All these conversations, from your family at dinner and your friends in the cafe, up to your boss and Member of Parliament, are bricks in the persistent work of building a movement.

Archimedes once said: 'Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it and I shall move the world.' Your lever is your network. Your Five Actions are your fulcrum. Don't put off taking the first step from inertia to action until the time is perfect. Just do something small but visible today. Change one habit. Have one conversation. Send one email. Set up one meeting. Momentum follows action, not the other way round.

Change often looks impossible, until it happens. History is full of small campaigns like yours that grew into genuine transformation. Rosa Parks' quiet refusal to give up her seat changed America. Greta Thunberg was just a child when she began her school strike alone. Millions followed her example. Rebecca Hosking persuaded her small town to give up plastic bags, sparking a nationwide movement. She wasn't daunted by the implausibility of changing the country, but just began tackling a local area of concern. Like you, these heroes didn't wait for permission or perfection. They just started.

Research shows that when 25 per cent of a community adopts a new behaviour, it can become the social norm, triggering a cultural tipping point. Think of that as your target number. You don't need to recruit all your friends; a quarter could be all you need.

Similarly, when just 4 per cent of a population mobilise in sustained, non-violent activism, governments typically respond with structural changes. You, me, and a few of our friends can be more powerful than we realise, if we act together. What you start today will help build the momentum needed to bring wider attention to your Five Actions.

Politicians pay close attention to the Overton window, which is the range of ideas the public currently finds acceptable. They are wary of stepping beyond it for fear of losing votes. But the window shifts when enough people push together and the conversation grows louder.

Abolishing slavery or banning pub smoking were once way beyond the Overton window. But a handful of people acted and others followed. Suddenly what once seemed radical became inevitable, then accepted as conventional.

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<sup>8</sup> Please add a reminder to your calendar for 1 November to plant ten trees this winter.

<sup>9</sup> [www.jointheshift.earth](http://www.jointheshift.earth)

<sup>10</sup> It is easy to email your MP through [www.theyworkforyou.com](http://www.theyworkforyou.com) and I have always received a reply.

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This book has been about the impacts of our disconnection from nature – our unwilding – and the pernicious shifting baselines that mask a collapsing wild world. The wilder future I dream of sometimes feels a long way from the denatured landscapes I see from my little hill. I hope you’ve now joined me in spotting depressing shifting baselines hiding behind every fast-disappearing tree. Sorry about that. But we can rewild ourselves, and baselines can also rise towards a wilder future.

We already take many things for granted that are vastly better than they once were: child mortality and literacy rates, for example. Drink-driving and smoking have plummeted within a few decades. The textbook environmental drama of my school geography lessons was the hole in the ozone layer, and that is now healing well. Sometimes, as the poem suggests, things don’t go, after all, from bad to worse.

In Norway, nature is woven into everyday life and so is part of far more people’s routines than in Britain. Enjoying the outdoors isn’t just for self-proclaimed outdoorsy types or hippy tree huggers. You just go outside. It is not framed as exercise, therapy or adventure, but as a natural way to spend an hour. It means letting children play out unsupervised in all weathers, eating al fresco, and walking or cycling for daily transport as well as recreation.

Norwegians describe this approach as *friluftsliv* (pronounced ‘free-lofts-leave’), which translates as ‘open-air life’. *Friluftsliv* is normal people doing normal things, but in the fresh air. Nature is just where life happens, like fish in water. Why pound the treadmill when you could walk around the park? Why struggle to be heard in a cafe when you could sit with a thermos and a view?

Children learn how to behave outdoors simply by being there, as habits are passed down: do not disturb, do not destroy. They spend far more time outdoors than British kids, in a more extreme climate.

It’s easy to shrug all this aside by saying that things are different in Britain and Norway, and that this is the way it has always been. But *friluftsliv* was only popularised when Norway’s cities were growing larger and dirtier in the nineteenth century. People began to yearn for clean air, space and relief from industrial life. Playwright Henrik Ibsen helped give

this vague cultural instinct a name and a visible form through his 1859 poem *On the Heights*.

And so Norway made a shared cultural decision that a good life involves regular time in nature. *Friluftsliv* is now so engrained in society that political parties mention it in their election manifestos and politicians look for opportunities to be photographed in the countryside.

Over time, this mindset shaped laws and politics. Green space is valued, and outdoor recreation is promoted for health and wellbeing. A legal right to roam – *Allemannsretten* – ensures that every person has the freedom to enjoy nature, regardless of land ownership. Culture came first, policy followed, and both people and planet benefited.

I have tried to make the case for how nature disconnection and shifting baseline syndrome shape both our daily lives and the wider world. I've suggested scheduling fifteen minutes in nature every day to boost your wellbeing and to consider two questions: what has changed in this place, and what could the future be like?

Most people say they care about the climate and nature emergencies. But surface-level concern is very different to active commitment. People with the lowest levels of nature connectedness often do nothing for the environment. As their engagement increases, however, so do their actions. They might begin recycling or change what they eat. At even higher levels of connection, real momentum begins to build.

I would have told you I worried about the environment back in the days when I was scoffing cheeseburgers and flying business class to give speeches about the wild world. Concerned in my words, perhaps, but doing anything useful? Not at all. The gap between my beliefs and behaviours, known as the value-action gap, was appallingly vast.

What changed? A combination of reading lots of books and being gently held to account convinced me in theory that I ought to shift tack. But only when I began exploring my local green spaces did I actually engage enough to alter my lifestyle and my work.

Rachel Carson's 1962 book, *Silent Spring*, helped spark the global environmental movement. It begins with a vision of 'a town in the heart of

America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings'. Carson, who died of cancer in her fifties, would be horrified to see what further damage we have done to the living world since then. But it could still be different. The closing chapter of her book is titled 'The Other Road' and opens with these words:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been travelling is deceptively easy, a smooth super-highway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road – the one 'less travelled by' – offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of our earth. The choice, after all, is ours to make.

Here we are, well into the second half of what UN Secretary General António Guterres has called 'the critical decade for climate action'. Thousands of years of human history, and the future of the planet comes down to what a fraction of us, in a few developed countries, decide to do over the next few years. That's some responsibility. It's the very last minute of extra time and the ball has been tossed to us. What a privilege.

And so, what will we do? Will we strive valiantly with great enthusiasm? Will we charge forward with all our heart, or will we stand by, cold and timid, and hope someone else saves the game? The choice, after all, is ours to make.

Things are bad, and they are getting worse on our watch. But this could be the lowest baseline if we decide that from here on, we are going to repair and restore our wild world.

The upward journey could begin today, with us.

What matters now is not only how lightly we tread, but how far our actions reach. Reducing our footprint is necessary, but it is our handprint – the ideas we share, the norms we shape, the people we bring with us – that will tip systems in a better direction.

We must turn words into action and use them to build momentum, to agree ambitious goals and binding targets. We must act now – right now. We cannot afford dither and delay, because biodiversity loss is happening today, and it is happening at a frightening rate. Left unchecked, the

consequences will be catastrophic for us all. Extinction is forever – so our action must be immediate.

The above paragraph, however, stands as proof that *saying* you care about change, maybe even believing that you care about change, is not the same as getting stuff done. For it was lifted directly from a speech given by the then British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, in September 2020 – and it is safe to say that dither and delay and self-interest have so far triumphed over immediate action in every government's approach to the climate and nature catastrophes.

You do not have to fix everything. Just make something better. You don't have to be the best person for the job. Just be a person doing a job. You don't have to do it all alone. You don't have to agree on everything. You don't need to wait for the perfect moment. Begin today.

The country's response to the Northern Lights phenomenon (which I'm still bitter about missing) laid down a marker for our capacity for outpourings of everyday awe. We need to make that more common for more people.

The felling of the Sycamore Gap tree showed how deeply people care when the loss of the living world feels real. Yet that solitary tree on a bleak moor is also a reminder of how soon we forget what has already vanished. Think of the woman I met on the train from Martha's hometown: she had never heard of the passenger pigeon – once the most abundant bird on the continent, but now not even a memory.

The Sycamore Gap tree was beloved because it was accessible. People knew it. We care most for the people and places we know personally. If you walk in a beech wood every day, see the bluebells come and go, and then someone bulldozes it, you'll get upset. But if they raze a wood you've never visited – because it never occurred to you, or because it was surrounded by a high fence – you are less likely to be upset, or even know it has happened.

As the familiar environmental saying puts it: 'we cannot protect something we do not love, we cannot love what we do not know, and we cannot know what we do not see.'

The delight Daniel Graham and Adam Carruthers took in what prosecutors called their ‘moronic mission’ to cut down the Sycamore Gap tree had presumably faded by the time their notorious case came to court in May 2025. In his sentencing remarks, the judge described the act as ‘sheer bravado’ carried out for ‘some sort of thrill’, and both men were jailed for four years and three months.

I know nothing about the criminal justice system, but the sentence sounded harsh. I looked up what else might result in a similar time behind bars: aggravated burglary, grievous bodily harm without intent, dangerous driving resulting in serious injury, or possession of drugs with intent to supply. If damaging a single middle-aged tree was deemed comparable to GBH, what punishments should apply to companies causing vastly more harm while trashing the environment in pursuit of profit?

If their CEOs were judged and shamed as fiercely as these two ordinary men, rather than rewarded with bonuses, subsidies and rising share prices, we would instantly see far less destruction of the living world.

The strength of public outrage at the vandalism, and the accompanying sense of loss, undoubtedly shaped what the judge called the case’s ‘extraordinary social impact’ and, I suspect, the severity of the sentence. When a ruckus grows loud enough, officials respond. It is therefore up to us to rise as one when nature is harmed until we become impossible to ignore, and to hold those responsible to account while restoring what has been lost.

We must heed the tragic lesson of Martha the passenger pigeon, once one of billions in the skies of North America, and not let the wild world slip away from us unnoticed. Let her stand as a reminder of how abundance can disappear and shifting baseline syndrome blinds us to what we are losing.

And what of the sycamore itself? Its new haircut won’t look good on Instagram for a while, but it’s going to be fine. The tree has essentially been coppiced, so it will readily regrow and ultimately live for even longer.

New shoots have already sprouted from the stump and seedlings have been nurtured into forty-nine new saplings – one for each foot in height of the original tree. Hundreds of applications were received for these saplings, each with heartfelt stories of the importance of nature. They will all be

planted in publicly accessible spaces, encouraging future generations to form stronger connections with nature.

The Sycamore Gap tree demonstrates that we find vast issues hard to engage with, but small, local things still move us. Begin, then, with the place where you live. Get to know it, value it, live responsibly there, and leave it a little better than you found it.

Slow down. Pay attention. Encourage others to do the same. Start with one stretch of riverbank, one street tree, and let your care ripple outwards.

Somewhere along the way, we became unwilded. But that does not have to be forever. Damaged land heals and flourishes when we allow nature back in. I shut the laptop and step outside. The evening sun is low and golden. I feel the cool air on my face and hear a song thrush in full voice.

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# EPILOGUE

I am woken early by the chorus of birdsong outside my window, not that I'm complaining. It grows louder every spring. I slept well, even though the stars above the city seemed extra bright last night. Sparrows jostle in the wild patches of garden every household has since the ban on plastic grass, and willow tits chirp in the hedges where the front fences or second cars used to be.

Bees hum all around and turtle doves purr in the trees lining each street. They've grown tall in just twenty-five years. I remember the planting campaign – I even helped out myself. The pavements were a tangle of barriers and soil heaps, and everyone grumbled about the mess. But the groundwork also offered a good opportunity for the mass installation of electric vehicle charging points. It was only a brief disruption, and today nobody could imagine living without those trees.

Their shade was intended to protect us if the worst predictions of global temperature rises came true. Fortunately, the politicians got their act together just in time, and the world stopped bickering and began collaborating. It seems unbelievable to me now that I used to fret about whether we could reach net zero, and even crazier that some people back in the day were against it. This green street is the best place I've ever lived, although my neighbours find plenty of things to moan about. That's just the way of the world, I guess.

Anyway, birdsong is the only sound as I doze, though I know the roads will be filling with electric buses. Noisy congestion fell away once giant petrol cars became socially unacceptable and subsidies shifted from fossil fuels to clean energy. Owning a car used to be aspirational for the poor; now even the rich choose public transport. The old power station became a gleaming cluster of wind turbines and solar panels, so electricity is now cheap, and that settled the argument for good. Peer pressure, combined with being out of pocket, is a persuasive combination.

I climb out of bed and rub my hands ruefully over my thinning hair. I head downstairs to make coffee, and jot a reminder on the fridge to buy more the next time I walk to the high street. Then, like everyone, I head outside for my fifteen minutes of nature. It was never made compulsory, but once people appreciated the benefits, it became as commonplace as brushing your teeth.

All these changes that once seemed unimaginable simply make our lives better, and looking back it is hard to understand what all the fuss and resistance was about. Change seemed to happen quickly once it finally came.

Lots of folk will be in the park – to my old mind, still a word that makes me think of bare, mown grass – though really it is a green wilderness in the middle of the city. Some people run laps, others prefer jumping over rocks or doing pull-ups from tree branches. I used to take all that sort of fun for granted, but my knees no longer bend like they used to. People are so active nowadays, with most at least taking part in a Saturday morning parkrun in one way or another.

I still look after myself, of course – we all do. Kids in history lessons learn in astonishment about the health costs for a culture that once drifted towards less movement and more processed food in the name of convenience. Medical students read about type 2 diabetes in their textbooks but barely encounter it in their careers anymore.

I usually walk along the river through the city, watching trout in the clear depths, keeping my eye open for kingfishers flashing past and looking out for the beavers. Youngsters don't believe me when I tell them this very same river was once lined with concrete and full of rusty shopping trolleys. Not that there are many supermarket trolleys now most streets have their own greengrocer.

I smile indulgently at the younger me who used to walk up the little hill to eat a lunch of plastic-wrapped, factoryprocessed food. The old supermarket car park became allotments, designed using permaculture principles to mimic natural ecosystems. It's seen as common sense now that when nature is part of daily life rather than pushed aside, it underpins our

health, our food and our economy. I'll pop down to my allotment this afternoon to check on the asparagus.

Today it's my day to take the grandchildren to nursery, so I sit in the garden for fifteen minutes rather than heading out. I close my eyes and feel the sunshine on my face. One of my pleasures is noticing the days as they unfold, moment by moment, and this is a good one. The air smells fantastic as the wild garlic in all the rewilded corners of people's gardens is coming into season.

I used to find it so hard to sit still and resist scrolling on my phone, but it got much easier once the social media billionaires were banished to Mars (and the redistribution of their wealth to restore global biodiversity was a popular move too). That reminds me – I must look for my phone. I haven't seen it for a couple of days, though it hardly matters.

It occurs to me that it won't be long until the swifts return for the summer, their numbers swollen beyond imagination since I was young. I wonder which street's turn it is to organise the Welcome Home Swifts party? It's always a good excuse for a community barbecue – usually sticky glazed courgette, smoky portobello burgers and charred sweetcorn bright with chilli – to welcome back that feathered river across the sky. Hopefully, as a treat, there might even be a little steak from a regenerative upland farm – a by-product of conservation and recovery.

It's kind of them to invite oldies like me to the party, and I do my best not to waffle on too much about the bad old days. Everyone is so accustomed to the way things are now that they never believe me anyway.

I finish my coffee and hurry inside to get ready before the twins ring the doorbell, with their parents following behind in a hurried fluster of thanks. They've had a chaotic morning with the usual dramas of small children. One had spilled oat milk down their shirt; the other wouldn't stop playing outside when it was time to leave. Thankfully grubby shirts don't matter much at their nursery, where the garden is the main classroom. They come home muddy-kneed and full of breathless stories.

The little ones wave as their parents hurry to work on their electric bikes, joining the throngs of cycle commuters. They've got busy mornings of walking meetings in the park, I seem to remember. They and their friends

spend most weekends camping and swimming (they have dropped the word ‘wild’ these days – it’s just the norm), or helping with tree planting, bird ringing and wildlife work in exchange for good food and a bed. People are incredulous when I tell them we once littered the countryside with single use plastic, discouraged swimming in most rivers and didn’t have the open access path network that now runs alongside every river in the country.

The younger generation enjoy this way of life so much that they don’t waste time or money flying overseas just for leisure, especially now fuel taxes have made flights so expensive. They love ‘England’s green and wild land’, as the old song goes, and know that those flight taxes are helping restore it.

The countryside is certainly thriving since we changed our diets, growing food on far less land and creating more space for nature and public access. Because people can enjoy it freely, everybody looks after it now, not just farmers or so-called landowners. That shared responsibility transformed rural economies too, with farmers finally valued and properly paid for producing healthy food, richer soil and restoring wildlife.

I take the hands of my dear grandchildren, and we set off together. I’ll miss these nursery walks when they start pedalling to school by themselves. We greet neighbours on their way to work and children playing on streets free from ‘No Ball Games’ signs. Knowing the people around you, moving your body each day, and spending time outdoors has done more for loneliness and mental health than all the apps ever managed. It is hard to believe our streets were once shaped by traffic rather than people, and how that slowly eroded the friendships and connections that feel so natural now.

In the end, all this began with society realising that the living world deserved all the attention we could give it. We learned to love it as though it was the last chance we were ever going to get.

We pause to play on the rope swing hanging from the sycamore tree on the street corner. A group of teenagers are already there, as always. They are munching apples from the neighbourhood food forest, clowning around and making a racket. I smile: some things never change.

As the twins skip down the gravel pavement, one points out some flowers poking through.

‘Corncockle, Grandad.’

‘Very good,’ I say. ‘I’d have ignored that when I was your age.’

‘Blue pimpernel and pickly poppily,’ they continue.

‘Prickly poppy,’ I correct gently.

The pair begin competing to rattle off the name of every tree we pass. My back aches as I try to keep pace with these bundles of energy: I’m ready to grow young again. But I shan’t complain. I’ve had the best time. I squeeze their hands and smile.

‘Elm, ash... look how green the leaves are today, Grandad.’

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# AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you enjoyed this book, I'd really appreciate you spreading the word – posting a photo on social media, a quick mention to friends or your librarian, and a short review on Amazon all make a genuine difference to how visible a book becomes. Thank you. (And a reminder that if you hated it, the #notveryglowingbookreviews for @al\_humphreys on Instagram will make you chuckle.)

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alastair Humphreys is an English adventurer and author. He spent many years undertaking long journeys and writing about them for both adults and children. Over time, his focus shifted towards making adventure more accessible.

His idea of microadventures earned him recognition as a National Geographic Adventurer of the Year and the Royal Geographical Society's Ness Award for promoting wider engagement with the outdoors.

His growing interest in nature and conservation led to two books – *Unwilded* and *Local*, the latter shortlisted for the Wainwright Prize for nature writing.

He supports organisations including The Outdoor Swimming Society, The Right to Roam, The Rivers Trust and The Woodland Trust.

Visit his website to learn more about his adventures, books, newsletters, podcasts and films.

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