NEW QUOTE

INTRO

I'm knee deep in mud. The kind of sticky, squelchy mud that tries to rob you of your shoes with every step. I'm trying to launch a kayak into a lagoon — without leaving my phone, the expensive device that makes these podcast recordings, or my dignity in the gloopy depths. I suddenly remember that there are piranhas in the water.

I have a partner in this muddy pushing. Her name is Marisi Lopez and she's the parks and communities coordinator with a conservation organization called Rewilding Argentina. And even with the two of us it's hard going—but eventually we get the kayak waterborne. We hop in and paddle through calm water the color of English breakfast tea, heading toward a trio of tapirs drinking at the further edges of the lake. They look kind of like pigs, but with long snouts and domed heads. They tend to be rather elusive, but have revealed themselves at this popular watering hole. Marisi and I float in our kayak and watch the magnificent beasts enjoy their sundowners, a moment completely worth the muddy struggle.

I've been trying to see wild animals up close, without much success, for several days. But the moment doesn't last long. The tapirs spot us, and one of them slips into the water. I trace a line of bubbles heading directly towards the kayak. Cue much frantic paddling away, before the tapir emerges behind the boat, facing the other direction, nonchalantly—and quite rightly—ignoring us.

WHY I'M HERE

I'm in an incredibly remote part of northern Argentina, in the aptly named El Impenetrable National Park. And I'm here because I want to see rewilding up close.

I've become increasingly conservation minded as I've gotten older.

Maybe it was having kids — three young boys who recentered my world and made the future a bigger part of my present. Or maybe it was that steady drum beat of doom about the escalating climate crisis that's kind of turned into a blast beat lately. I used to work in hard news and ran live blogs during hurricanes and other dramatic weather events. I knew about most wildfires as soon as they happened — and got minute–by-minute updates through Twitter and other news apps.

It all made me acutely aware of the climate crisis. But these days I think I'm at the acceptance stage of climate grief. Or really, the doing-something-about-it stage. Because I'm obsessed with solutions. What can we do — big or small — to take action?

One of the most promising new global trends is the concept of rewilding: the idea of protecting land and sea, restoring natural ecosystems with minimal intervention, and reintroducing keystone species. Back in my home nation, the UK, Scotland has made a lot of progress -— it's on its way to becoming the first rewilding nation. And there's a lovely book on the topic in England by Isabella Tree, called *Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm*. She, along with husband Charlie Burrell, turned a family farm in West Sussex into a shining example of rewilding.

In the Americas, though, it's all about the Tompkins. Kris, and the late Doug Tompkins, have spent decades preserving land in both Chile and Argentina. You'll know their story if you watched last year's documentary, *Wild Life*. Doug Tompkins founded North Face and Kris Tompkins was a CEO at Patagonia. And the film tells the story of how they left corporate life and joined forces to become an unstoppable force in conservation. The couple spent years buying land in both countries and turning it into national parks, before donating it all to the Chilean and Argentine governments.

In Argentina today, the work is done by Rewilding Argentina—a nonprofit offshoot of Tompkins Conservation. And their numbers are impressive. Rewilding Argentina has donated more than 400,000 hectares of land to create and expand seven national and provincial parks. Those seven parks sequester more than 938 million metric tons of carbon. That's over 600 million return flights from Los Angeles to London. They've even created two national marine parks and reintroduced 14 missing species. Underpinning it all is a focus on tourism to show both Argentinians and those from abroad the value, and fragility, of the natural world.

But what does all that look like on the ground? Can it really make a difference? Could it be a reason for hope amid all the doom and gloom? I'm here on a custom tour with Journeys With Purpose, a tour guide that arranges trips with conservation leaders across the globe. And I'm hoping to find out.

MUSIC BREAK

Arriving at El Impenetrable

ZOOM0078_TrLR Truck noises on road in

El Impenetrable National Park is part of the Gran Chaco, what Rewilding Argentina calls "one of the world's last remaining great wildernessess". And it really does feel impenetrable.

Just to get here, I've taken a short flight from Buenos Aires to the northern city of Resistencia. And now I'm in a 4 x 4 truck, zooming northwest toward the town of Nueva Poblacion and the La Armonia gateway. Marisi [Lopez from Rewilding Argentina] is my guide and driver. In the back are Gabriel, who also works for the organization, and a photographer named Andrea.

As we get closer, the paved roads give way to dusty, dried mud tracks — and that's where our truck really starts to earn its muddy stripes. We're jolted left and right as Marisi deftly navigates the increasingly challenging terrain. Dry maté leaves fly into the air from a mug stuffed into the dashboard. Through a mud-splattered windscreen I watch the bumpy track turn to deep sand as spiky tree branches lean in close to form a tunnel. Some four hours after our drive began, we finally pull up in a cloud of dust.

We've arrived at the Los Palmares glamping site — part of the new tourism infrastructure Rewilding Argentina has been establishing in the region. We're just outside the park's northern boundary here and it really is remote. And wild. It's proper wilderness.

I'm shown the way to my glamping tent, and as I walk through the trees along a wooden boardwalk, I briefly feel that weird combination of loneliness and of being watched that I sometimes get in deserted forests.

Each of the tents have three cosy single beds, flush toilets, a shower, a fan, and side tables with coffee books. All the creature comforts you'd expect. But outside is where the wild things are. Peccaries, armadillos, wolves, and giant anteaters roam the dense semi-arid forest — all part of the biodiversity that makes this region so important to protect.

I don't see any of it, of course—at least not at first. The dense forest and skittishness of the animals conspire to make wildlife-spotting very tricky. The area is also less biologically diverse than in the past. Decades of hunting, deforestation, and ranching have caused mass defaunation across northern Argentina. Pampas deer, marsh deer, and guanaco are extinct.

But Rewilding Argentina has been reintroducing several species. Red-footed tortoises now meander peacefully among the carob and algarrobo trees—transplants from Paraguay. And at a research station deep in the forest, a giant river otter and a female jaguar are being monitored. We'll meet them later.

MUSIC BREAK

Marisi: Now we are in Los Palmares. It's the limit of the northwest of the national park. And we are taking a boat from the Bermejo River until camping La Fedildad and this is the entrance, the gate of the national park. But we … stop in the middle of the tour because we are sleeping on the edge of the river ... Tomorrow we'll continue three hours.

The following morning, Marisi, Andrea, and I huddle together on a small boat that's motoring down the Teuco River. We're heading off to camp halfway down the northeastern boundary of the park. At the helm is Helen Pargeter, who's actually English too but has worked for the foundation here for several years.

ZOOM0121_TrLR goodbye and hasta manana and boat noises

For hours we meander around river bends, surrounded by high brown mud banks and TK trees.. Every so often we spot the dark green scales of a crocodile-like caiman before it slips noiselessly into the water to keep an eye on us. It's all very green and brown.

Flashes of color do appear, though, mostly in the form of birds,: the red neck of an otherwise monochrome stork; the yellow beaks of great egrets.

We eventually arrive at our campsite — which is really just four tents at the tree line staked down onto hard, baked mud, a firepit, and a few plastic containers of supplies. Another guide, Dario Soraire, welcomes us with sandwiches and drinks. We sit around a folding table on the mud. Andrea speaks no English, and I speak embarrassingly little Spanish, so multilingual Marisi has to work hard engaging us both in conversation at the same time.

Helen and Dario cook an excellent asado, roasting beef steak next to an open fire and presenting it with a garnish of traffic light colored peppers, roasted sweet potato, and charred onions. I wash it down with a gin and tonic as the light fades.

I'm warned not to venture into the trees to use the toilet after dark. There are poisonous snakes there, and we're hours from anything resembling urgent care.

It feels like we're in the middle of nowhere, although at the same time it's the middle of somewhere. But I can't take credit for the thought, even as a quote. I heard it secondhand that Kris Tompkins made the remark when she passed by this way a week or so earlier. It's stuck with me though.

I bed down early.

Moving from boat trip to camping site

The next morning, I'm told there are some peccaries in the forest behind our tent. But by the time I clumsily tromp off to investigate, the furry, pig-like animals are long gone.

El Impenetrable's animals remain elusive. But so do other humans. As we move on to our next campsite, La Fidelidad, we see no one. It's a far cry from what I've heard about jaguar spotting

tours in Brazil's Pantanal region, where captains of boats full of people radio each other about sightings and race to provide that coveted glimpse of the cats.

And that's why I love it. Tourism is nascent here. Most visitors come from other parts of Argentina. The only other English name I see in the guestbook is Duncan Grossart, of Journeys With Purpose.

Marisi: The other one was charata. And this one … urraca.

While I don't see many animals, signs of life are everywhere. The birds provide a constant soundtrack. And on a walk near La Fidelidad campsite later that day, the forest's inhabitants have left plenty of evidence. We see peccary tracks. Holes made by armadillos and lizards. Deer footprints. And poop. Plenty of poop.

Hernan: ..And bones inside. This is maybe puma. You can see little hair and also little pieces of bone. So they eat everything.

That's Hernan Staziuk, who works with Rewilding Argentina in Impenetrable. He's explaining how you can tell from the bones inside the puma dung that it's been dining on a rabbit.

He also shows me some animal sightings — photo and video footage on a laptop from various camera traps to further prove that this place teems with life. A marsh deer. An oblivious giant anteater strolling around like it owns the place. Which, actually, it does. When the jaguar's not around.

Have you ever seen a giant anteater? They're majestic, hilarious creatures. Long pointed snouts. Fluffy legs like they're at some kind of 70s disco. An enormous, flamboyant, seemingly unnecessary — but I'm sure quite useful — tail.

Marisi shows me a video on her phone of a giant anteater from another trap. In it, the anteater is taunting a male jaguar several times, until finally he's pictured, in the jaguar's mouth, being led to his demise.

Anyway, Hernan also oversees the campsite at La Fidelidad. It's more rustic than the glampsite at Los Palmares — although it's significantly elevated from our adventurous tent by the river. It's basically a collection of small clearings in the forest, all with river views, that have wooden platforms to pitch a tent on. There are decent toilets, some trails, a dining tent, and a few other amenities.

But here's the thing: it's free for anyone who wants to stay. It doesn't cost a thing to come here and pitch a tent in the middle of this wild region. That's because the organization wants to make wilderness accessible to all, to show local people the value of their own backyard.

And actually, bringing local people along is a key part of the rewilding effort here. Several members of Rewilding Argentina have spent years here, building relationships with longstanding residents.

I meet many of those local people on the trip. People like Veda and Ruben, a husband and wife. Veda shows me the blankets she knits for visitors, with natural dyes made from local stuff like cactus mold and even mate leaves. I also meet Juan Tejada, who's known as Pirincho to his friends. (*Pirincho* means bird or a tuft of hair in northern Argentina). He takes us on a horse ride through the part of the forest he owns. He wears a large overcoat he's made from a cow hide. It's new, so it's stiff and uncomfy-looking, but apparently it's great for keeping off the sharp barbs from the trees. His horse has one too.

And I finally do get to meet two of the most famous residents of Impenetrable later that day: Isis the female jaguar and Iberá the giant river otter. Two keystone species whose presence is vital to rewilding efforts here.

Meeting the animals at the research center

giant otter squeaks

That's Iberá. She's looked after in a large pen near the research center in Impenetrable.

I watch as Debora Abregu, a biologist who works on the program here, releases her for an afternoon snack.

sound of gate opening and otter diving into water

sounds of otter eating fish

Marisi (translating Debora): *Ibera eats a live [fish]. But she doesn't know that we put the fish in her pen. So the pen has two parts and when she's in one part we put the food in the other part. But she never sees that we provide the fish. She thinks that she is hunting natural fish.*

Iberá actually came from a zoo in Europe — and having her here is kind of a big deal. Giant river otters are endangered globally and weren't seen in Argentina for decades until a male named Teuco, was spotted in 2021.

The hope is that Iberá attract's Teuco's attention and a love affair begins. If they have a family, some of them could be released into the wild. Otters live in groups, so you can't just release one on its own. As with all things rewilding, you have to play the long game. The same thing goes with the jaguar.

Marisi: How you say, um, the mark of the jaguar in the tree, we can show you. The jaguars are very territorial. And they mark the places. You can see it's very big. All of this just one hand.

We're looking at the deep gouges in a tree, signs of claw scratching bark. It's a mark from when Qaramta the male, wild jaguar passed by on a conjugal visit to Isis, the captive female. Isis is from Brazil and we meet her in a network of large pens at the Jaguar Reintroduction Center. Even through a wire fence, Isis is beautiful. We spend a few minutes in her company and it's a privilege to see this important, emblematic creature up close. She's more interested in tearing into an enormous piece of flesh of course.

There are only ten confirmed jaguars in Argentina's part of the Gran Chaco ecosystem—all of them male. But a female named Keraná was released by the organization a few months after my visit.

The nerve center for all this activity is El Teuco Biological Station, a handful of semi–permanent tented structures by a lagoon, ensconced among the trees. This is where the passionate conservationists work and socialize, and today it's a hive of activity.

Marisi: *Everything is made by local people. This is the patilla, the place for making fire, with a live roof. Now it's dry but sometimes it's green, it depends of the weather and the rain, and has an oven and everything because they pass a long time here cooking and spending the night, talking, guitar, with the guests, everything. It's like the garden.*

New food supplies have arrived, and sacks full of vegetables join a space stuffed full of books, animal skulls, and radios. Debora Abreu shows me views from the pens and camera traps on a laptop. Outside, darkness gently envelopes the forest and the air starts to fill with campfire smoke and laughter.

Stefano: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Oh, no, it's incredible. The one that went to Buenos Aires, that was incredible.

That's Sebastián Di Martino. He's Rewilding Argentina's conservation director. We have a long chat in the twilight. He tells me the story of Teuco the traveling otter, and his epic journey.

It was, uh, From here, more than 2,000 kilometers that it had to travel by river, but then in the coast of the sea. Because, uh, to enter the channel in which, he was recorded, uh, he has to swim in the mix between La Plata River and in the ocean, but it's an estuary with salt water and crabs and it's, it's marine water. So it's the first time that a giant otter is recorded in the salt water. And also the southernmost record ever for a giant otter. It's not even in the, in the historic distribution that we suppose they have. It's even more south.

We're talking shortly after my tapir escapade I mentioned at the top of the episode. I'm sweaty and covered in mud. I haven't slept in a bed or showered for two days. But I'm feeling more energized than I have in a long while. The energy and excitement here is contagious. You can read impact reports and study numbers all you like back home, but seeing climate action up close and personal is something else. It gives me hope for the future.

Patagonia Azul

ZOOM0057_TrLR Penguin noises strong

That's an odd noise, right? The huffing and bleating, it's kind of part sea lion, part wookie. It sounds a bit like someone ironically blowing a party favor. It's actually the sound of hundreds of penguins. Magellanic penguins to be precise. Around a million of them hit up this part of the world to roost in the southern hemisphere's summer. And I'm standing on a long winding boardwalk above—and amid—them. A few small herds of guanacos—relatives of the llamas—are roaming around too. And just like with the tapirs I mentioned earlier, while I'm in awe of them, they're suitably indifferent to me.

We're now more than 1500 miles south in Patagonia Azul, where Rewilding Argentina's newest project is underway. There are two big penguin colonies here, which draw a few tourists to an otherwise empty land of estencias—or cattle ranches—and bracing ocean trails.

The organization hopes to attract more visitors to the area with new campsites, glamping, and other tourism infrastructure. It's part of a bigger effort to preserve the region, which is a biodiversity hotspot often likened to the Galapagos and also a UNESCO biosphere.

It's a wild and beautiful stretch of the country's east coast, where the Patagonian steppe meets the Argentine Sea. The region is a few hours south of Buenos Aires by plane but still some 1200 miles north of the more visited parts of Patagonia.

And while it doesn't have the guidebook-cover visuals of its famous neighbor, there's a quiet sort of beauty that sneaks up on you and casts a spell when you're not looking. Vast rocky plains peppered with tufts of grass stretch into the distance alongside wide blue-green bays. Like with many of my favorite places in the world, it's defined by what's *not* here: buildings, roads, shops, noise, other people.

Lucas: This is Leones Island. We are now in the French Bay. 100 years ago there's three different companies, two from France and one from England who explode sea lions to get oil, well they explode penguins too.

That's Rewilding Argentina's conservation coordinator Lucas Beltramino. He explains that the area has historically fallen victim to avaricious outsiders, with the British naturally at the forefront. We came over a hundred years ago and harvested the sea lions for oil. We brought over the sheep, which graze on the land and threaten desertification. They look really out of place, though. Their feeble, woolly white bodies just jar with the landscape somehow. The elegant, slender, light brown guanacos look much more at home.

Today, industrial fishing and sheep ranching are the biggest industries—and pose the biggest threats to this pristine place. Rewilding Argentina hopes to encourage locals and tourists alike to value the biodiversity of the place—and to encourage a move away from extractive economies in favor of small-scale, low impact tourism. It's also working to remove invasive species, like rabbits, armadillos, and domestic cats, recovering native algae prairies, and monitoring key species like the South American fur seal.

Over a few days I get to explore with another group of conservationists, in a well worn pickup truck driven by tourism development coordinator Maria Mendizabal. We spot sea lions, cormorants, and penguins by boat. We hike among grasslands and rocky outcrops. We visit new campsites and meet the local people who are getting involved.

There's a palpable sense of excitement and promise. Enthusiasm of the most infectious kind. I get excited. I kind of want to move here and join in the work. I take a lot of pictures and hope to remember these moments when the climate anxiety creeps in back home.

Maria: [0:50] So here it will be the area that it will have the interpretation center ... We will show the blue route, the four gateways so you will enter and it will be a mural … [5:09] This one's the living room … and we will put some sofas and books and time to relax if you have a tea here. This is the interpretation center; the idea is if you're in the camping you come walking or by car, you stay here, you understand where you are, what we want to do, be part of it.

Maria shows me around an empty building that used to be La Iberica sheep ranch, but is being prepared to open as a visitor center called Gateway Bahia Bustamente. It's a symbolic change of use—and since my visit it's opened up, with murals, installations and other immersive experiences showing locals and tourists alike the promise of rewilding.

At one point near the end of the trip, Maria swings the truck off the road and up to a deserted beach. Time for a swim, she says. Sorry? I say, It's time for what? It's late October and as I look out at the Argentine Sea, it looks freezing. Maria insists. You haven't visited Patagonia Azul if you haven't been in the water, she says. I relent, because you only live once. OK, I say. My fellow travelers, the conservationists, say in unison: We're good. So it's just me and Maria, stripping to our underwear and plunging into the icy shallows. The water is aggressively cold. It stings. It does that ice cold water thing of making your whole body tingle from head to toe. It's great.

As always, it makes me feel really alive. Just like this whole trip has. Alive to the promise of rewilding, to the beauty and fragility of the natural world, to the need to plunge into the frigid ocean once in a while and do the hard things to help protect it.