

# REVOLVE

QUARTERLY INSIGHTS INTO A CHANGING WORLD

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## Ecosystem Restoration

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# Ecosystem Restoration Camps: The Global Grassroots Movement

INTERVIEW WITH ASHLEIGH BROWN

Ashleigh Brown, Camp Coordinator and Co-founder of Ecosystem Restoration Camps, spoke to REVOLVE about the origins of what is today an international community working with the common mission to restore degraded landscapes and to educate as many people as possible about the value of ecosystem restoration.



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## Take us back to the beginning of Ecosystem Restoration Camps – how did it all start?

The concept was created by John D. Liu, who was working as a filmmaker in China documenting major political events. As he spent more time thinking about the arch of human history and evolution, he realized political events are just a small blip in human history, and what really matters is what happens geologically and ecologically.

He had this realization while working as a cameraman for a film about a large eco-restoration project at the Loess Plateau to revive a large area of land highly degraded by human activities such as cutting down trees and the uncontrolled movement of grazing animals. The loss of vegetation from the land had reduced its ability to hold water, creating huge floods that washed silt into the Yellow River.

The Chinese government, in partnership with the World Bank, created a program where people were paid to remove their animals and plant trees instead, rebuilding the soil structure.

After he saw how effective this project was, John changed his life’s trajectory and studied ecology and soil science around the world and continued film-making, seeing repeatedly how ecosystem restoration could solve a multitude of problems such as desertification, food insecurity, climate change and can even help quell the flames of conflict in places where desertification has caused desperation.

John was sure this was something that everyone needed to do – but the projects he was involved in were high-level and inaccessible to everyday people.

## How did the concept grow into the camps you have globally?

John had published an article in a permaculture magazine about the idea and started getting contacted by people on the Internet – myself included – which led to conversations on how we could make Ecosystem Restoration Camps happen.

The initial goal was to get 1,000 people to pledge 10 EUR/month – which we got to.

In April 2017, we secured our first camp partner, a landowner in Spain with 3,000 hectares of mixed natural and agricultural land between Almería and Granada. He leased us a five-hectare plot for us to establish our first camp – Camp Altiplano.

## How did it replicate – can anybody with a plot of land apply to become a camp and how does that work?

We learned a lot of lessons from Camp Altiplano, the main one being that it is not necessary to start projects from scratch. It is not a cheap process and entails the building of structures and digging ponds for water, which isn’t ideal if you want to rapidly scale up.

We had to think of a different model that would allow us to work and scale up quicker. That’s when we started working with a company called Regeneration International, that works globally campaigning for regenerative land use. They have a site in Mexico called Via Organica, which was a perfect camp partner because they already had the infrastructure to house and feed and

teach people and were already doing ecosystem rehabilitation. So we organized 10-day practical learning experiences multiple times a year, where people can go and take part and learn more about ecosystem restoration.

Our main goal was to focus on restoring the land rather than building new infrastructure. From there, we were able to reach out to a number of different organizations and had applications from various existing sites which opened up the idea of what a restoration camp is and could be.

Up until the beginning of 2019, we had one camp, and now in 2021 we have 37. That flexibility and openness is the reason why. We want our projects to be locally initiated and locally run. Anyone can become a camp as long as they are a group or site that are increasing the ecological function and vitality of the land around them.

1. The SEKEM-Wahat camp, located in the Bahariya oasis of the Egyptian Western-Desert, focuses on reclaiming desert soil and creating functional land. Photo: Ecosystem Restoration Camps

2. Camp Chocaya, located in the Bolivian Andes, focuses in designing and implementing an agroforestry based restoration project. The agroforestry system provides a model for how a balance between ecological values and economic gain can be achieved. Photo: Ecosystem Restoration Camps



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**You are a partner of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration. Has it been helpful for you to gain additional visibility?**

We have been added to a number of working groups with other UN partners and we were contacted by a researcher looking at different angles and stories for a Netflix series, so we are definitely already experiencing the benefits.

**With respect to cities, is ERC going into urban areas?**

While the majority of our camps are in rural areas, we are keen to develop further our influence in urban areas. We have just signed our first agreement in Los Angeles, working to restore and develop different parcels of land in the city. We are in talks with the local municipality and private landowners, even for the land beneath the iconic 'HOLLYWOOD' sign. We also have a module on urban restoration as part of our online course, with one of the most popular lessons focused on tiny forests. As a result, we have seen a number of tiny forests that have been developed due to the course.

**How can people access your course?**

The 9-month course is £800, all of the materials are pre-recorded, but every 25 students are given a facilitator to help guide them through the course. We also have a scholarship scheme and are trying to make it as accessible as possible. The next course starts in September 2021. ●

To read the full interview, visit: **[revolve.media](#)**

**Ecosystem restoration is very grassroots; it's something that every single person on Earth should know about and know how to do.**

# VIEWS

## The Team Effort to Restore the Earth

What started as a grassroots initiative has grown into a global effort to educate the masses on ecosystem restoration. With 37 active camps around the world, Ecosystem Restoration Camps has set its ambitions to bring together one million people by 2030 to restore degraded ecosystems in 100 camps around the world.

PHOTOS: ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION CAMPS

### ↑ Colombia

Campers remove elephant grass from the hillsides at Campo Mundo Nuevo to prepare the landscape for more sustainable agroforestry practices which will provide better protection against soil erosion.

Established Camp

A project that has substantial experience and capacity with restoring land, hosting campers and sharing their knowledge and expertise with the rest of the movement.

- 1. ★ Altiplano - Spain
- 2. Via Organica - Mexico
- 3. Reforest Now - Australia
- 4. Sinal Do Vale - Brazil
- 5. Sekem - Egypt
- 6. Habiba - Egypt
- 7. Mundo Nuevo - Colombia
- 8. Greenpop - South Africa
- 9. Mainsprings - Tanzania
- 10. Birdhouse - USA
- 11. Belipola - Sri Lanka
- 12. Mombasa Mangroves - Kenya
- 13. Paradise - USA
- 14. Chocaya - Bolivia
- 15. Contour Lines - Guatemala
- 16. Reforest Now - Australia
- 17. Embercombe - UK

Seedling Camp

A project that is in its startup phase, with some staff capacity, infrastructure, expertise and land, but one that still needs support to fulfil its vision and goals. As a seedling, all parties involved will jointly build this project together and develop the restoration work underway.

- 18. People's Coast - Gambia
- 19. Hotlum - USA
- 20. Jaguar Siembra - Colombia
- 21. Dryland Solutions - Somalia
- 22. Pachakuti - Peru
- 23. Pachaland - Belgium
- 24. Siolta Chroi - Ireland
- 25. Virsoleil - France
- 26. Mama Adama - Portugal
- 27. Functional Forests - Turkey
- 28. Khetee - India
- 29. Desperto - Brazil
- 30. Farm of the Future - Brazil
- 31. Watershed Forest Farm - USA
- 32. Uthai - Thailand

Seed Camp

A project that is still in the concept phase, awaiting a fixed site and team, with the intention and dedication needed for the creation of a camp.

- 33. Regenerate WA - Australia





↑ Spain

One of the very first campers at Altiplano in April 2017 preparing the first ever vegetable bed for campers to grow their own food. Here he is using a low impact hand tiller to prepare the ground for seed planting.

Lauren Bond, co-steward of Hotlum Eco-Regeneration Camp, makes biochar on the slopes of Mount Shasta. Heavy fuel loads, soil depletion, and drought in California have led to a growing interest in biochar.

↓ USA



↑ Kenya

Local community members demonstrate their commitment to an ambitious project to plant a forest of almost 30,000 mangroves at Mombasa's degraded Tudor Cree.

↓ Brazil

Setting up native tree seedlings in a dome nursery. Sinal do Vale directly regenerates the ecosystem and acts as an educational center for sustainability.



↓ Portugal

Volunteers from the Mama-Adama Awareness Centre restore the land in the Alentejo region of Portugal where old European cork oak trees have become infected with a fungus. Each volunteer plants a tree to help form a lifelong connection with the land and restoration project.



↓ Morocco

Marking out contour lines for planting trees as part of an agroforestry system Camp Khalifah hopes to develop. Planting trees on contours slows down runoff water, reducing soil loss and surface erosion.





↓ South Africa

Three volunteers exude joy after a day of planting hundreds of indigenous trees to restore a degraded landscape as part of Greenpop's Eden Festival of Action. The festival brings people together in South Africa's Garden Route area to plant trees, paint uplifting and educational wall murals, learn through practical sustainability workshops and reconnect with nature and each other. It's a key event in Greenpop's 'treevolution'.

Photo: Juliette Bisset

↓ Brazil

Volunteers armed with tools make their way back to a site at Camp Desperto where they will restore the area around a natural water spring to improve its flow.



↑ Guatemala

Trees being unloaded at La Guaria Cocoli, one of the villages in Guatemala where Camp Contour Lines Corp. Agro-reforestation is empowering locals to create new agroforests, replacing the old practice of slash and burn. These fruit trees will be planted on contours that blend into the surrounding tropical rainforest.





↑ Australia

Volunteers at Camp Arcoora. The foundations of an intensive syntropic food and timber forest, creating mycelium networks to connect resources and advance growth. Photo: Paul Daley, A Lush Forest

Volunteers plant along the slopes of Sierra Nevada mountain range of Colombia while a member of one of the four local indigenous communities watches on..

↓ Colombia



↑ Thailand

Campers plant vetiver grass at the banks of a newly-dug pond at Uthai Forest. Vetiver grass is commonly grown in Thailand for erosion control, bioremediation, and a source of living mulch. Photo: Aleithia Low

Volunteers at Camp Via Organica in Mexico plant agave plants, nopal (prickly pears) and ocotillos (large, semi-succulent desert shrubs) in the Jalpa Valley near San Miguel de Allende.

↓ Mexico





↓ USA

Participants gathered from all over the world to join Camp Fire Restoration Project (Camp Paradise) in restoring Paradise, California, USA, after the devastating wildfire of 2018, which nearly destroyed the whole town. In this picture, the group is working at a local elementary school, revitalizing the space and planting trees. You can see the stumps of trees that were lost in the fire, are getting replaced by new life.



↑ India

Since 2018, local villagers on the agroforestry training program ran by Camp Khetee for marginalized women and youth have been implementing this way of farming in the Durdih village in Bihar, India.

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