



when dreams come true

In just six years Ecosystem Restoration Camps have grown from one man's dream to a global movement.

John D. Liu tells of many inspiring projects from Hollywood to Somalia that are literally changing lives and restoring whole ecosystems.

As I write these words, I'm looking out at the Red Sea in the small town of Nuweiba in the South Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. I'm at the Habiba Community of organic and regenerative farms that emerged from a beach resort following the global economic disruptions of 2008. The community is immediately practical in feeding people while also creating living laboratories to experiment and measure what can be done to restore degraded ecosystems and reverse desertification.

Beyond serving the community's need for nutritious organic food, the Habiba Community serves nearly 100 Bedouin farms that are learning to feed themselves while helping restore the desert to ecologically functional land. The Habiba Community is one of two ecosystem restoration communities in Egypt and part of a growing global movement of camps and communities. But I'm jumping forward a bit. Let's go back a few years to another point in the story.

Ecosystems Restoration at China's Loess Plateau

I first began to study the restoration of China's Loess Plateau in the early 1990s and learned that it is possible to restore large-scale damaged ecosystems including those that had been degraded over long historic time and vast areas. Since then I have been advocating for restoration in films, writing and public speaking for almost 30 years. While I so wanted people to know what I knew, I had a nagging feeling that no matter how hard I tried to communicate, few were really listening. I was becoming cynical.

In 2016, I began to have a recurrent dream. Imagine waking up with visions of smiling people living in simple shelters, working and playing together as they restored degraded lands. The dream people were acting with joy and passion as if their lives and the lives of their children depended on it. I would wake up with these visions of radiant people coming out from quite lovely tipis and yurts and skipping off smiling to restore degraded lands, but alas, I had little faith that this could be real.



LEFT

Mixing compost in preparation for tree planting at Altiplano, Spain

RIGHT

Restoring the mud flats back to mangroves at Mombasa Mangroves, Kenya

OPENING PAGE

Regenerative agroforestry is being used in the drylands at Khetee, India

The vision of free joyous people restoring the Earth was not compatible with the frustration I felt that people didn't seem to be hearing the message. Many mornings I shook my head dismissing the dream as utopian wishful thinking. Yet the dream persisted. It began to feel like I was becoming stuck in the sort of scenario featured in the movie *Groundhog Day* where I was living the same day, over and over again. To escape this trap, I wrote an essay for *PM* that was titled 'Earth Restoration Peace Camps'.¹

It is now six years since 'Earth Restoration Peace Camps' and to my astonishment there are now camps throughout the world. The first, Camp Altiplano, began in 2017 in the Spanish province of Murcia at the border with Andalusia. A lot has been learned in the creation of the camp in a degraded and largely deserted area of Spain. The second camp, Via Organica, was set up in the charming town of San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. By the third year there were 21 camps. The fourth year there were 37. By the end of 2020 there were nearly 50 camps and now there are at least 55 camps in six continents with many more wanting to manifest.

From the very beginning of the Ecosystem Restoration Camps movement it was clear that many people were eager to work together to repair the damage that has been done over human history to the Earth's natural systems. The main question was how can we do it? The rapid and continuous growth shows that the idea of restoring ecological function to degraded lands is not culturally specific. Healing is a universal need and a common aspiration for people of all races, religions and cultures throughout the world.

Humanity is currently facing multiple problems. We have physical disruptions of the hydrological cycle. The once fertile soils are being massively depleted. We are experiencing tremendous losses of biodiversity. Disruptions to ecological systems cause logical impacts to other systems. Climate

change, disastrous storms, droughts, floods, wildfires, mudslides, famine, pandemics are all predictable outcomes. These problems are not theoretical. We can't solve them by talking about them or clicking 'like' on the internet. We won't solve them by throwing money at them.

To solve the acute problems we now face, we will have to address what is causing them. We will have to change.

From California to Africa

The first camp in the United States formed in Paradise California in response to the horrific fire that destroyed the town and claimed the lives of 85 people in November 2018. The fact that the town's people chose to create an Ecosystem Restoration Camp shows the potential of the camps movement to address disasters and to bring support and hope to people who are dealing with massive ecological impacts. Since the first camp formed in the U.S., several other camps have formed in North America.

The Bird House became the first urban Ecosystem Restoration Camp when it formed in Hollywood, California. It was great fun to go with volunteers from the Hollywood Orchard which helped to give rise to the The Bird House as they gleaned fruit from heavily laden fruit trees in the back yards of the rich and famous and then took them to the Downtown Women's Shelter. I've visited the dynamic camp near Boulder Colorado, formed at Elk Run Farm and started by the Drylands Agroecology Research foundation that is pioneering direct action to restore the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. I have seen how the local community embraces and supports these efforts.

GreenPop in South Africa is showing just how much fun can be had while restoring degraded lands. For more than 12 years the GreenPop movement has been planting trees in several African countries while holding entertaining and educational



festivals that spread the good feelings, the ecological health of the land and the physical health of the people.

One camp that I think has amazing potential is Appalachia Renewal near Lovely, Kentucky. With 7,000 acres, the camp aims to be a beacon of hope for people dealing with intense issues like mountaintop removal and the need to restore watersheds, forests, biodiversity, and frayed social systems from unemployment and long-term poverty. Camp Coyote is another fascinating camp in California I have visited that is working to recycle and upcycle the tragic waste of overconsumption. Camp Coyote is an exciting place where young people are experimenting with building a new sustainable society and economy through recycling and upcycling everything and planting out.

Several Camps and Communities in the movement I have visited include: SEKEM in Egypt, Camp Virsoleil in France, Hotlum Camp on Mount Shasta in California near the border with Oregon and The Land in Mendocino California.

There are many other Communities and Camps throughout the world in Europe, UK, Asia, South America, Central America, Canada, Australia and Scandinavia. All the camps are unique and the concept allows all of us to find places either near or far from where we are. You can even start new camps and communities where you are or where you want to be. Please check the Ecosystem Restoration Camps and Communities website to see all the camps.²

One reason that I came to Egypt was to participate in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Convening of the Parties (COP27) in Sharm El Sheikh. The Ecosystem Restoration Camps and Communities Movement is physically engaging ordinary people around the world in restoring the Earth. This is exactly what is needed to ensure the future of human civilization. It can also bring enormous satisfaction to the people choosing to restore Earth systems.

We need to realize that as satisfying as it is to know that thousands of people around the world have stepped up to help themselves and others by restoring soils, vegetation, freshwater systems and biodiversity, we have very serious problems that require us all to transform our destructive actions and convert them to healing activities.

The seriousness of the problem was brought home to me when a colleague working with the World Food Program (WFP) confided that even if 100% of the pledges countries have made to protect people from the predicted famine caused by the war between Russia and Ukraine were in fact donated (which rarely happens), he fears that this would only be sufficient to deal with 50% of the looming crisis.

This new potential catastrophe combined with climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, the refugee situation and collapsing economic conditions felt very demoralizing. I looked around and saw that I might not be alone in this sentiment.

I went to sleep and had some dreams that were in some ways more like nightmares ... but in the early morning I woke up with a new dream and a new resolve. Apparently, I had been processing my thoughts while sleeping and when I awoke, I saw quite clearly that in all the successful restoration projects I'd seen, there were large numbers of people working on them. The people doing the work were often the least educated, the most vulnerable and those who lived closest to the land.

What if it were possible to see that all our problems are inter-related? What if we could employ everyone who is at risk of starvation, at the edges of large-scale degraded ecosystems, and train them to restore degraded landscapes? Could the poorest people, those most at risk from famine, be the key to restoring Earth systems?



Chocaya, Bolivia is 2,800m above sea level in the Andes mountain range. The area is very eroded and there are water shortages in the dry season. Plants like cacti survive on minimal water while still providing food.

Continuous Transformational Change

At 70 years old I realize that throughout my life I've witnessed continuous transformational change. In 1979, when I went to China at the time of normalization of relations between China and the West, I found a poor and befuddled country. As a young television cameraman, I documented China's astonishing rise from poverty to become a world leading economy and a rising international power.

Then I was sent to Moscow where I documented the collapse of the Soviet Union which no one had imagined could fall apart so quickly. Then I was sent to China's Loess Plateau where I documented the restoration of the cradle of Chinese civilization as alluded to in the early part of this essay. It was there, in what was known then as the most eroded place on Earth, I saw that if ecological restoration was the central intention of human civilization, we could restore all degraded lands on the Earth. This is the Great Work of Our Time and would fundamentally change everything now and in the future.

What if all of the problems facing humanity share the same root cause and reveal the reason to train and engage the most vulnerable people in ecological restoration? We could end global hunger and they could feed themselves because they are in fact free people. What if engaging these people not only made them heroes of the restoration movement but also returned their basic human rights?

Dryland Solutions is a Sufi Intentional Community in Somalia. With the blessing of the local elders, the youth, the local, regional and national governments, a young Somali woman educated in Canada has begun an ecosystem restoration camp. Imagine what could happen if

we, who are reading this, were to help them to create some basic infrastructure like central kitchens, creator spaces and cultural stages and they are supported and trained to restore their lands. They could show the world how to heal the Earth and the Human Spirit.

Six years ago, I was dreaming of people choosing to go camping and restore the Earth. This dream has come true.

My dreams are growing. Now I'm dreaming that if we all worked together to care for one another at this urgent time in human history, we would stop the decline of our civilization and herald a new age of enlightenment.

When dreams come true ... we can live in peace. We just need to have faith and do what we know is right.

¹ www.permaculture.co.uk/articles/earth-restoration-peace-camps

² www.ecosystemrestorationcamps.org

More from John

'Earth Restoration' (PM106)

'Restoring an Ancient Paradise' (PM102)



John D. Liu made the documentaries *Green Gold*, Prix Italia award winner, and *Hope in a Changing Climate*, named the best ecosystem film at the International Wildlife Film Festival. Learn more about his work here: <https://knaw.academia.edu/johndliu>

For more on Ecosystem Restoration Camps visit: www.ecosystemrestorationcamps.org

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