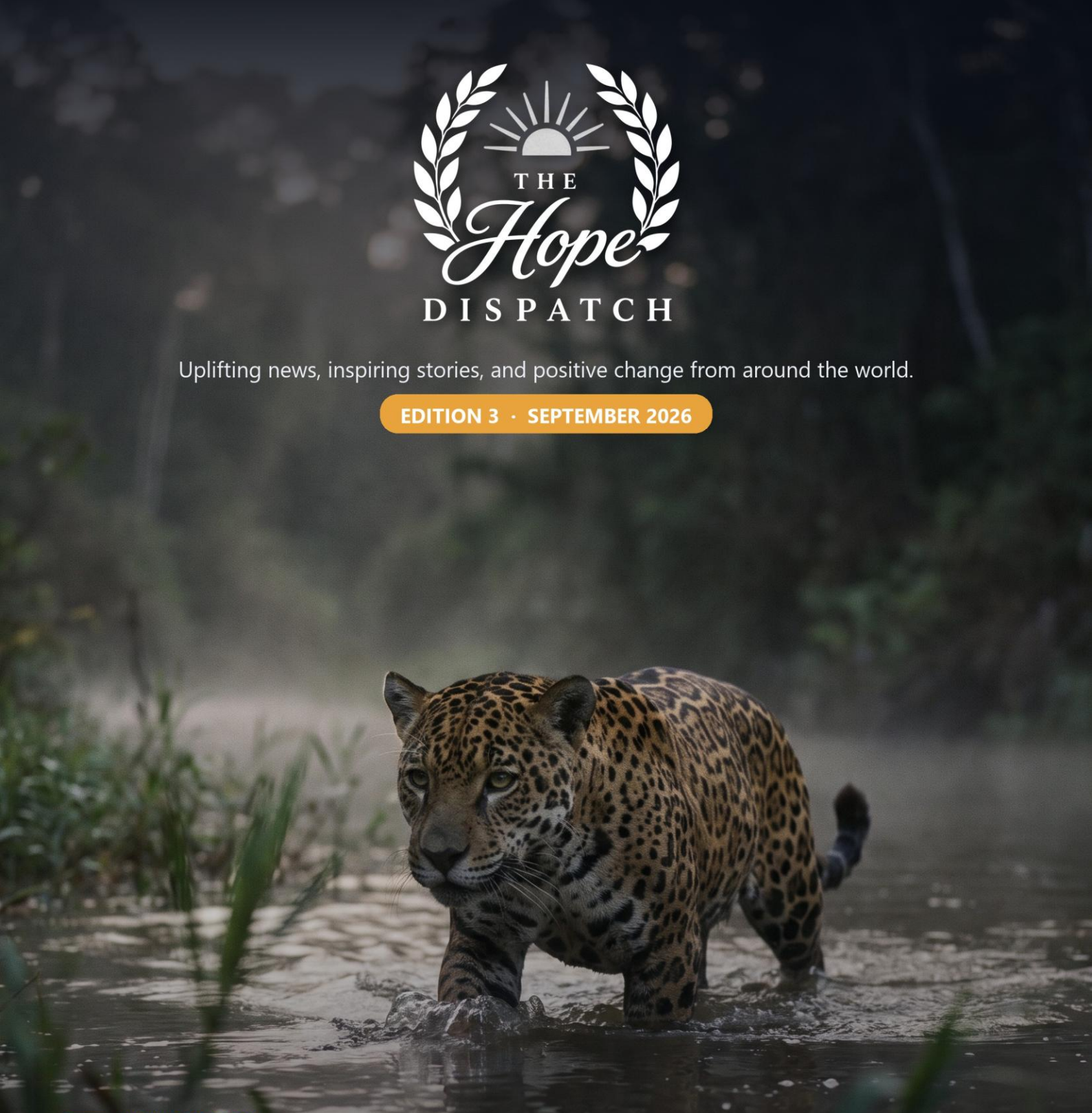
THE Hope DISPATCH

Uplifting news, inspiring stories, and positive change from around the world.

EDITION 3 · SEPTEMBER 2026



IN THIS EDITION

The Job Is Done

How HALO Finished Clearing Kosovo's Landmines After 27 Years

A Gift to Babies Not Yet Born

Thailand Eliminates Rubella

Coming Home

Giraffes, Rhinos and the Slow Return of Africa's Wild Places

One Hundred Nations for the Open Ocean

A September of Good News for the Sea

The Roar Comes Back

How a Gift of Land Brought Jaguars Home to Argentina

Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Subscribe free on LinkedIn

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INTRODUCTION

The Hope Dispatch: September 2026

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition 3 of The Hope Dispatch: 5 pieces for September 2026.

Uplifting news, inspiring stories, and positive change from around the world.

This edition brings together 5 new features written for this edition. New features are marked "Written for this edition".

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- The Job Is Done: How HALO Finished Clearing Kosovo's Landmines After 27 Years
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Thank you to every reader who subscribes, shares and responds.

Warm regards,
Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu
Author, The Hope Dispatch

THE HOPE DISPATCH

The Job Is Done: How HALO Finished Clearing Kosovo's Landmines After 27 Years

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In September 2026 The HALO Trust closed its humanitarian mine clearance program in Kosovo, 27 years after its teams drove in at the front of the first aid convoy. It is a rare thing in humanitarian work: a mission that actually ended, because the job was finished.

Most humanitarian stories have no ending. A famine eases and returns. A refugee crisis is managed rather than solved. Aid agencies arrive in an emergency and, decades later, are still there, because the conditions that brought them never quite go away. That is not a criticism of the people doing the work. It is simply the shape of most problems in a hard world.

Which is why one announcement in September 2026 deserves more attention than it received. The HALO Trust, the British-founded charity that clears landmines and other explosive remnants of war in more than two dozen countries, said that its humanitarian clearance work in Kosovo was complete. After 27 years, it was closing the program and handing responsibility for any residual hazards to Kosovo's national mine action authorities.

HALO's own closing line put it with a plain confidence that is almost startling in a sector used to open-ended commitments: "The job is done. Now it stays done."

This is the story of how a small territory in the Balkans, scarred by a short and brutal war, was made safe again, field by field and garden by garden, and what that quiet achievement made possible.

A war that lasted months, and a cleanup that took decades

The conflict in Kosovo ran through 1998 and 1999, between Serbian and Yugoslav forces and the separatist Kosovo Liberation Army. It ended after a NATO air campaign of 78 days, after which Belgrade withdrew its forces. Roughly 15 months of open conflict left behind nearly three decades of land clearance.

The human cost of the war was enormous. According to HALO, more than 800,000 ethnic Albanian Kosovars were displaced. In the summer of 1999, the old town of Gjakova was largely burned, and its main mosque and minaret had been deliberately destroyed that May. When families began to return, many found their homes damaged or gone. They also found something worse waiting in the fields, the roadsides and the gardens: minefields laid during the fighting, and unexploded cluster bomblets left from the air campaign.

The NATO road convoy entered Kosovo on 12 June 1999. The humanitarian convoy followed the next day, 13 June, with HALO's mine clearance teams at the front. Tom Dibb, a HALO project manager, later recalled the welcome in Pristina: "Arriving in Pristina we were pelted with flowers."

The flowers were a sign of relief. The danger was very real. Positive News, citing HALO, reported that 150 people were killed or injured by mines in the first month after refugees returned. HALO says that of all the landmine casualties recorded in Kosovo between 1999 and 2024, a total of 585, three quarters occurred in 1999 and 2000, before comprehensive risk education, survey and clearance were in place.

That statistic tells the whole story in miniature. The deadliest period was the very beginning, when people were returning to land nobody had yet checked. Once the work of mapping, warning and clearing got under way, the toll fell sharply. Every year after that, the clearance teams were not only removing weapons, they were removing the conditions in which ordinary people die doing ordinary things: walking to school, ploughing a field, gathering firewood.

Starting with the places people live

HALO's first task in 1999 was triage. Its teams concentrated first on the most urgent danger zones where people lived. Working alongside other organisations, they cleared most of the priority danger zones in populated areas within the first few post-war years.

Doing that required people, and HALO found them among Kosovars themselves. HALO says many thousands of Kosovars worked for the organisation over nearly three decades.

There is something deeply hopeful in that. People who had lost homes in the war spent years of their working lives making their country safe for everyone else. Multiply that across thousands of local deminers and support staff, and you begin to see that Kosovo was not simply cleared by outsiders. It was, to a large extent, cleared by Kosovars.

That expertise did not stay at home. Positive News reported that Kosovan HALO workers now lead the charity's operations in Syria and Ukraine, two of the most heavily contaminated places on earth. Skills learned in the fields around Pristina and Peja are now protecting families in other countries emerging from war.

What 27 years of patient work adds up to

HALO's closing statements give a sense of the scale through individual tasks: a minefield that had to be cleared before Pristina Airport could be redeveloped, hundreds of cluster bombs removed along the route of a motorway, 36 cluster munitions found on a single farmer's grazing land.

Numbers like these can feel abstract, so it helps to remember what clearance actually involves. Deminers work in narrow lanes, often on their knees, checking the ground a small section at a time. Metal detectors signal fragments, nails and bottle caps as well as weapons, and every signal has to be investigated. Cluster bomblets can lie in undergrowth, in streams or just beneath the soil. Progress is measured in square metres per day. Over 27 years, those square metres became a country's worth of usable land.

The work narrowed as it neared completion. Kosovo's national Mine Action Strategy for 2025 to 2030 treats the risk as tolerable once all high and medium priority tasks are complete, and HALO was working towards that objective. Mine Action Review, an independent monitor, noted that Switzerland was funding HALO's battle area clearance team in Kosovo until the end of September 2026, which matches the month the program closed. The same monitor had reported for some time that HALO's Kosovo program faced funding pressure, and national authorities, the Kosovo Security Force and Norwegian People's Aid remain active on the residual task, which the national strategy aims to finish by 2030.

It is worth being precise about what "complete" means. HALO has not claimed that no explosive item will ever again be found anywhere in Kosovo. Old wars leave stray objects that turn up for generations; farmers in France and Belgium still unearth shells from the First World War. What HALO has said is that its humanitarian clearance task is finished and that what remains is a residual risk that Kosovo's own institutions can manage. That is the realistic definition of success in mine action, and it is a significant one.

The life that cleared land makes possible

Atholl Stewart, HALO's recent program manager in Kosovo, has offered the clearest description of why this matters. In HALO's words, he argued that the real impact of removing landmines and cluster bombs "is not measured in hectares cleared". It is measured in what the land makes possible over time.

He went further: "Mine clearance was not the outcome of Kosovo's recovery. It was one of the prerequisites that made recovery possible."

That is a profound point, and the evidence supports it.

Roads, runways and trails

HALO says Pristina Airport, which now handles almost five million passengers a year, could only be redeveloped after a nearby minefield was cleared. The E851 motorway passes through areas such as Arllat, where hundreds of cluster bombs had to be removed before construction could proceed. The mountain trails above Peja were cleared before tourists began to visit; HALO's figures put that tourism economy at about 150,000 visitors a year.

HALO sums up the legacy simply: land that was once dangerous can now support homes, farms, families, roads and businesses.

A recovering economy and longer lives

HALO reports that Kosovo's economy has grown to more than US$14 billion, and that life expectancy has risen from 58 during the war to nearly 78. The World Bank, as Positive News noted, puts average life expectancy at 78, one year less than in the United States. Diaspora investment, particularly from Kosovars living in Germany and Switzerland, helped finance housing reconstruction.

Mine clearance alone did not produce those gains. Peace, reconstruction, investment, public health and the efforts of millions of people all played their part. But none of it could

have happened on land that people were afraid to walk on. A factory cannot be built on a minefield. A family will not invest in a farm where a cluster bomb may be buried under the vegetable patch. Safety is the foundation on which everything else is laid.

Farming without fear

HALO notes that farmers in Kosovo can now mechanise their operations and rebuild irrigation systems, which has improved food security and reduced reliance on imported food aid. This is one of the least visible benefits of clearance, and one of the most important. Mechanised farming requires tractors to cross every part of a field. If even one corner might hide an explosive item, the whole field remains a hand-worked plot, or is abandoned altogether.

HALO has shared the experiences of individual landholders. In the village of Moronice, a farmer whose grazing land lay close to cluster munitions saw HALO release more than 35 acres in September 2025, after its teams found 36 cluster munitions there. He now grazes his cows on the cleared land and told HALO: "I can now use my land without fear." In Arllat, a family who rely on beekeeping for much of their income had a large submunition removed from their garden; clearance in that village was completed in September 2024.

These are small stories, and that is exactly the point. The success of mine clearance shows up not in grand ceremonies but in cows on a hillside and honey sold at market.

More than digging: the three parts of making land safe

It is easy to imagine mine clearance as nothing more than people with detectors, but the Kosovo experience shows a more complete picture. HALO itself identified three things that were missing in 1999 and 2000, when most casualties occurred: risk education, survey and clearance. Each plays a distinct role.

Risk education teaches people, especially children, what explosive items look like, where they are likely to be found and what to do if they see one. In the first months after a war, when families are returning faster than any team can clear, this is often the single most effective way to save lives. A child who knows not to pick up a strange metal object is protected long before the field she plays in is cleared.

Survey answers the question of where the danger actually is. Teams speak with villagers, former soldiers and local officials, study records and examine the ground to separate truly hazardous areas from land that is merely suspected. Good survey means that clearance effort is not wasted on safe land, and that safe land can be handed back to its owners sooner.

Clearance is the slow, physical work of finding and destroying every item in a confirmed hazardous area. In Kosovo it included both minefields and what the sector calls battle area clearance, the removal of unexploded bombs, shells and cluster submunitions scattered across the landscape.

Together these three elements turned an emergency into a manageable task, and a manageable task into a finished one.

Why finishing matters

HALO's closing statement on Kosovo included a sentence that deserves to be read slowly: "Most humanitarian interventions do not end. HALO's do."

There is an important principle hidden in that claim. Landmine contamination, unlike poverty or disease, is a finite problem. There is a limited number of explosive items in the ground. Each one removed is gone for good. That means mine action is one of the few humanitarian fields where finishing is genuinely possible, and where a clear end point can be planned and reached.

Kosovo is not the first place where this has happened. HALO began work in Mozambique in 1993, and in 2015 the country was declared free of known minefields. HALO began in Angola in 1994, and that work is still continuing. The difference between the two shows how much depends on the scale of contamination, the length of the conflict and the funding available.

Kosovo's completion offers lessons that reach well beyond the Balkans.

1. **Speed in the early phase saves the most lives.** Three quarters of Kosovo's casualties came in the first two years. Getting survey, risk education and clearance teams in quickly, right behind the peacekeepers, made a decisive difference.
2. **Local people are the backbone of the work.** Many thousands of Kosovars worked for HALO over the decades. That built skills, jobs and trust, and it created a workforce that now leads clearance elsewhere.
3. **Priorities should follow people.** Clearing populated areas first meant that the land most needed for daily life was made safe soonest.
4. **Clearance unlocks development.** Airports, motorways, tourism and mechanised farming all depended on land being declared safe. Investors and families need certainty before they build.
5. **A responsible handover is part of success.** Passing residual risk to national authorities, rather than staying indefinitely, treats a country as capable of looking after itself.

The wider picture: hope in a hard decade for mine action

It would be wrong to present Kosovo's success without acknowledging the wider context. In recent years, mine contamination has grown dramatically in places such as Ukraine, Syria, Myanmar and parts of Africa. Some states have debated or announced withdrawals from the treaty that bans anti-personnel mines. Funding for clearance competes with many urgent demands.

In that environment, a story of completion matters more, not less. It shows donors and governments that money spent on clearance is not poured into a bottomless pit. It has a result, and the result lasts. It shows communities living with contamination today that their situation is not permanent. And it shows the deminers themselves, many working in dangerous conditions far from home, that the end of the task is a real place that people have reached.

Kosovo also demonstrates the value of patience. HALO stayed for 27 years. The early years brought headlines and flowers; the later years brought little attention at all. Yet the later years were when the last pockets of contamination were found and removed, when submunitions were cleared from gardens and grazing land, and when the job was finally finished properly rather than abandoned at "mostly done".

A reflection on quiet heroism

In my view, there is a particular kind of courage in work like this. It is not the courage of a single dramatic moment. It is the courage of turning up, day after day, to kneel in a lane of earth and check it inch by inch, knowing that the job is dangerous and that success will look like nothing happening at all.

When a deminer does the job well, nobody notices. A child plays in a school yard and never knows that the ground beneath her was once deadly. A tractor ploughs a field and nothing explodes. A plane lands safely at Pristina Airport. The achievement is invisible precisely because it worked.

The people of Kosovo, and those who stood beside them for 27 years, have given the world a rare example of a humanitarian promise kept to its end. Their story reminds us that some of the world's problems are solvable, that persistence pays off, and that peace is built not only by treaties and leaders but by thousands of ordinary people willing to make the ground safe again.

> *"Mine clearance was not the outcome of Kosovo's recovery. It was one of the prerequisites that made recovery possible." Atholl Stewart, The HALO Trust*

The fields are quiet now. That quiet is the sound of a job well done.

What we can take from Kosovo

For readers far from the Balkans, the Kosovo story still carries lessons worth keeping.

- **Finite problems deserve finishing.** When a problem can genuinely be solved, it is worth staying the course until it is, rather than moving on when attention fades.
- **Hope is often unglamorous.** The most important work is frequently slow, repetitive and unseen.
- **Rebuilding begins with safety.** Whether in a country, an organisation or a family, people cannot grow until they feel safe to take the next step.
- **Invest in local capability.** The most durable outcomes come when the people most affected become the experts.

In September 2026, Kosovo's long walk out of the shadow of war reached a milestone that deserves to be celebrated. The priority land is safe. The farmers are farming. The tourists are walking the trails above Peja. And somewhere in Syria and Ukraine, Kosovars who learned their craft at home are helping other families take their land back too.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

A Gift to Babies Not Yet Born: Thailand Eliminates Rubella

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

On 5 September 2026 the World Health Organization confirmed that Thailand has eliminated rubella as a public health problem. It took four decades of vaccination, careful surveillance and steady public health work, and the main beneficiaries are children who will never know what they were spared.

Some of the best news in the world is news about things that do not happen. A mother catches no virus in the early weeks of pregnancy. A baby is born with clear eyes, healthy hearing and a strong heart. Nobody writes a headline about it, because nothing went wrong.

That is what makes the announcement from the World Health Organization on 5 September 2026 so quietly remarkable. WHO said Thailand had been verified as having eliminated rubella as a public health problem, becoming the seventh country in the WHO South-East Asia Region to do so. In practical terms, this means that endemic transmission of the rubella virus, the ongoing circulation of the virus within the country, has been interrupted.

For a nation of more than 65 million people, this is a public health achievement of the first order. To understand why, we need to go back more than 80 years, to an eye doctor in Sydney who noticed something no one else had.

An Australian discovery that changed medicine

Rubella, also called German measles, is usually a mild illness. Many children and adults who catch it have a light rash, a low fever and swollen glands, and recover within days. For a long time it was regarded as one of the least worrying of childhood infections.

That changed in 1941, thanks to Dr Norman Gregg, an ophthalmologist in Sydney. Following a rubella epidemic in 1940, Gregg began seeing an unusual number of infants with congenital cataracts of a distinctive kind. Many of these babies were also undersized and had heart problems and other impairments.

Gregg did what good doctors do. He asked questions and looked for a pattern. He identified 78 infants with congenital cataracts, and found that 68 of their mothers reported having had rubella early in pregnancy or just before they knew they were pregnant. Many of the children also had hearing loss and congenital heart disease. In October 1941 he presented his findings to the Ophthalmological Society of Australia in a paper titled "Congenital Cataract following German Measles in the Mother".

It was a landmark. Gregg had shown, about 20 years before the virus itself was identified, that a seemingly mild infection could cause devastating harm to a developing baby. The condition he described is now known as congenital rubella syndrome, or CRS. A 2002 follow-up of his original patients, published in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, confirmed that he had correctly identified the link.

It is worth pausing on that for a moment. One of the great public health victories of 2026, in Thailand, traces part of its scientific lineage to careful observation by an Australian clinician during the Second World War.

Why rubella in pregnancy is so serious

The danger of rubella lies almost entirely in its effect on pregnancy. As WHO explains, infection during pregnancy can cause miscarriage or stillbirth, or lead to congenital rubella syndrome, which is associated with lifelong birth defects. These can include deafness, eye problems such as cataracts, heart defects and developmental disability.

The scale of harm that rubella can cause became painfully clear in the United States in 1964 and 1965, before a vaccine was available. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, that epidemic involved an estimated 12.5 million rubella cases, about 20,000 cases of congenital rubella syndrome and 2,100 neonatal deaths. A 2005 CDC announcement gave further detail: more than 11,600 babies born deaf, 3,580 born blind and 11,250 fetal deaths. Different CDC documents break the figures down slightly differently, but the overall picture is consistent and sobering.

Behind every one of those numbers was a family. Many of the children born during that epidemic grew up with profound disabilities, and some are still living with them today.

The arrival of rubella vaccines at the end of the 1960s transformed the outlook. The CDC reports that endemic rubella transmission was eliminated in the United States by 2004, and that the WHO Region of the Americas was verified as having eliminated rubella in 2015. The last confirmed case of endemic transmission in the Americas was reported in Argentina in 2009.

The 1964 to 1965 epidemic also left a legacy beyond medicine. It showed governments and the public that a mild infection could have catastrophic consequences when it reached pregnant women, and it built strong support for the vaccine research that followed. Scientists worked to develop weakened forms of the virus that could train the immune system without causing harm, and within a few years the first rubella vaccines were in use. Today rubella protection is usually delivered as part of a combined vaccine alongside measles, and often mumps, given in early childhood.

What was once a regular and terrible cause of birth defects became, in many parts of the world, a disease that doctors in training may never see.

Thailand's long road

Thailand's success did not happen quickly or by accident. WHO's announcement sets out a timeline stretching back almost half a century.

- **1977:** Thailand launched its Expanded Programme on Immunization, the national framework for routine childhood vaccination.
- **1986:** A rubella-containing vaccine was introduced for girls aged six in primary school.
- **1993:** The vaccine was expanded to all children at one year of age.

The 1986 decision to start with schoolgirls reflects a strategy many countries used at the time. Because the gravest danger of rubella is to unborn babies, the first priority was to protect girls before they reached childbearing age. Once that foundation was in place, extending vaccination to all one-year-olds in 1993 allowed Thailand to reduce circulation of the virus across the whole population, protecting pregnant women indirectly by making it far less likely they would ever be exposed.

According to WHO, Thailand's program paid special attention to underserved and mobile populations, rapid investigation of suspected measles and rubella cases through fever and rash surveillance, and laboratory-supported surveillance. Each of these elements matters.

Reaching everyone

Vaccination programs tend to succeed easily in well-served urban communities and struggle at the margins. Children in remote areas, families who move frequently for work and communities with limited access to health services are the most likely to be missed. A virus only needs a pocket of unprotected people to keep circulating. Thailand's emphasis on underserved and mobile groups is exactly the kind of unglamorous detail that separates near success from genuine elimination.

Finding every case

Surveillance is the other half of the story. You cannot claim to have stopped a virus unless you are actively looking for it. Thailand's system investigated suspected cases presenting with fever and rash, and confirmed them through laboratory testing. Molecular epidemiology, which examines the genetic makeup of virus samples, helps to show whether a case is part of ongoing local transmission or has been imported from elsewhere. That distinction is central to verifying elimination.

Part of a global movement

Thailand's 1977 program did not appear in isolation. The World Health Organization had launched its global Expanded Programme on Immunization in 1974, with the aim of making basic vaccines available to every child in the world. At the time, only a small share of children in low and middle income countries were receiving routine vaccines. Over the following decades, national programs built on that framework became some of the most effective public health systems ever created, preventing millions of deaths from diseases such as measles, diphtheria, tetanus, whooping cough and polio.

Thailand's rubella story is, in that sense, one chapter in a much larger account of how countries learned to protect children at scale. The same cold chains, clinic schedules, record systems and trained health workers that deliver one vaccine can deliver others. Investment in the basic machinery of immunisation pays dividends across many diseases at once.

The value of trust

No vaccination program works without public confidence. Parents have to bring their children to clinics, schools have to support vaccination days, and communities have to believe that health workers are acting in their interest. Thailand's ability to sustain coverage over four decades reflects not only good planning but a relationship of trust between health services and the public.

That trust is not something any country can take for granted. Around the world, vaccine hesitancy, misinformation and disruption to routine services during the COVID-19 pandemic have caused coverage to fall in many places, and preventable diseases have returned as a result. Thailand's verification is a timely reminder of what becomes possible when trust is maintained over the long term.

How elimination is verified

Declaring elimination is not a matter of a health ministry announcing good news. It is a formal process, overseen by an independent expert body.

In Thailand's case, WHO says the South-East Asia Regional Verification Commission for Measles and Rubella Elimination held its annual meeting on 22 and 23 June 2026. It reviewed evidence from Thailand's National Verification Committee covering surveillance, molecular epidemiology, immunisation coverage, outbreak response and program performance. A verification field visit followed in July 2026. The Commission then recommended that Thailand be verified for the elimination of endemic rubella, and WHO announced the result on 5 September.

According to WHO, verification confirms that Thailand "has met the requisite criteria for interruption of endemic rubella virus transmission."

This rigour is important. It means the result is not a hopeful estimate but a judgement made by independent experts who examined the data and checked it on the ground.

Thailand joins a growing regional group

Thailand is the seventh country in the WHO South-East Asia Region to eliminate rubella. The others, according to WHO, are Bhutan, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, the Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste. Four of these, Bhutan, the DPR Korea, the Maldives and Timor-Leste, have eliminated both measles and rubella.

Worldwide, a CDC report published in July 2026 counted 117 of 194 countries as verified for eliminating endemic rubella as of 2024. Each country that eliminates rubella also reduces the risk to its neighbours, because there are fewer places from which the virus can be imported.

The voices from the announcement captured the mood.

> *"Thailand has shown that rubella elimination is achievable when strong political commitment, resilient immunization services," high quality surveillance and community trust come together. Dr Nilesh Buddha, Officer-in-Charge, WHO South-East Asia Region*

Thailand's Minister of Public Health, Pattana Promphat, framed the achievement around the people who benefit most: "By eliminating rubella, Thailand has protected newborns from preventable lifelong disabilities," he said. He added: "We will sustain this gain and intensify efforts towards measles elimination."

Dr Ailan Li, WHO Representative to Thailand, described the achievement as "an important milestone".

What elimination does and does not mean

It is important to be clear about the limits of this achievement, because public health successes are sometimes misunderstood.

Elimination is not eradication. Eradication means a disease has been wiped out everywhere, as smallpox was. Elimination means that sustained transmission has been stopped within a particular country or region. Rubella still circulates in other parts of the world.

Imported cases can still occur. A traveller can bring the virus into Thailand. What elimination means is that, because so many people are protected, such introductions should not lead to the virus re-establishing itself. Rapid detection and response remain essential.

The gain must be maintained. Elimination is a status that can be lost. If vaccination coverage falls, or surveillance weakens, the virus can return. Several countries around the world have lost measles elimination status in recent years after coverage slipped. The Thai minister's commitment to "sustain this gain" is not a formality; it is the heart of the task ahead.

Measles is the next challenge. Measles and rubella vaccines are typically given together, and the two diseases are tracked by the same verification commission. Measles is far more contagious than rubella and requires even higher coverage to eliminate. Thailand has said it will intensify its efforts towards measles elimination.

None of this diminishes what Thailand has done. It simply places it in context. Elimination is a summit reached after a long climb, and like all summits, it has to be held.

Why this is a story about hope

There are several reasons this announcement deserves a place in a newsletter about hope and positive change.

It shows patience works

Thailand's journey began with a national immunisation program in 1977 and a targeted rubella vaccine in 1986. Verification came in 2026. That is 40 years of sustained effort by successive governments, health workers and families. In a world that often demands instant results, it is a powerful reminder that some of the most important outcomes take a generation or more to achieve.

It protects the most vulnerable

The main beneficiaries of rubella elimination are babies who have not yet been born. They cannot advocate for themselves, vote or campaign. Protecting them is an act of care by one generation for the next.

It shows science and public health working together

The chain from Norman Gregg's careful observations in Sydney in 1941, to the identification of the virus, to the development of vaccines, to national programs, to the verification process in 2026, is a story of knowledge being built, shared and applied across decades and continents.

It proves goals can be reached

Global health targets are sometimes dismissed as aspirational. Thailand's verification shows that, with sustained commitment, they can be met. Every country that reaches elimination provides a working model and practical lessons for others still on the road.

Why it matters beyond Thailand's borders

Thailand is one of the most visited countries in Asia and a major hub for travel, trade and migration across the region. People move constantly between Thailand and its neighbours for work, study, family and tourism. That makes Thailand's rubella status important well beyond its own population.

When a country at the crossroads of a region stops the internal circulation of a virus, it removes one of the places from which that virus can spread to others. Each elimination makes the next one easier. The seven South-East Asia Region countries that have now eliminated rubella form a widening circle of protection, and every new member of that circle strengthens the rest.

For Australia, which has a large and long-standing connection with Thailand through tourism, education and family ties, the news is also welcome. The *Medical Journal of Australia* follow-up of Gregg's patients noted that congenital rubella is now rare in Australia, a result of decades of vaccination. Rubella's decline in nearby countries helps to keep it that way.

Lessons for health systems everywhere

Thailand's experience offers practical lessons that apply well beyond rubella.

1. **Start with those at greatest risk, then widen.** Vaccinating schoolgirls first, and then all one-year-olds, allowed Thailand to protect the most vulnerable early while building towards population-wide protection.
2. **Do not neglect the margins.** Paying special attention to underserved and mobile populations closes the gaps through which a virus can keep spreading.
3. **Measure what you are trying to change.** Fever and rash surveillance, backed by laboratories and molecular analysis, gave Thailand the evidence it needed to prove its case.

4. **Invite independent scrutiny.** Formal verification by a regional commission, with a field visit, gives the result credibility at home and abroad.
5. **Plan for after the milestone.** Sustaining coverage and moving towards measles elimination keeps the momentum going.

A reflection

In my view, there is a deep moral beauty in public health work of this kind. It asks people to act today for a benefit they may never see. The nurse who vaccinated a six-year-old girl in a Thai primary school in 1986 was protecting a baby who might be born in 2010 or 2020 or 2030. The laboratory technician who confirmed a rash was not rubella was contributing to a body of evidence that would be judged years later.

Most of the people who made this happen will never be individually thanked. Most of the children who benefit will never know there was anything to be spared from. And yet the outcome is real: fewer miscarriages, fewer stillbirths, fewer babies born deaf or blind or with damaged hearts.

When we look for hope in the world, we often look for dramatic rescues and sudden breakthroughs. Thailand's rubella story offers a different kind. It is the hope of steady, patient work that adds up, over decades, to something extraordinary.

> *"By eliminating rubella, Thailand has protected newborns from preventable lifelong disabilities." Pattana Promphat, Minister of Public Health, Thailand*

This article is general information about a public health milestone and is not medical advice. Anyone with questions about vaccination, particularly before or during pregnancy, should speak with a qualified health professional.

Three things to remember

- **Rubella is mild for most people but dangerous in pregnancy.** That is why protecting entire communities, not just individuals, matters so much.
- **Thailand's success took four decades.** It began with schoolgirls in 1986, expanded to all one-year-olds in 1993 and was verified in 2026.
- **Elimination must be defended.** High vaccination coverage and strong surveillance are what keep the virus from returning.

The next time you read a headline about a health system under strain, it is worth remembering stories like this one. Health systems are slow, imperfect and often criticised, yet they are also capable of extraordinary achievements when they are given time, resources and public trust. Thailand has given the world a fine example of exactly that.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Coming Home: Giraffes, Rhinos and the Slow Return of Africa's Wild Places

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In northern Uganda, a reserve emptied of wildlife by war and poaching four decades ago has welcomed back rhinos and giraffes. In South Africa, six rhinos orphaned by poachers have grown up, returned to the wild and had calves of their own. Together they tell a story of patient repair.

There is a particular kind of silence in a landscape that has lost its animals. The grass still grows and the rivers still run, but something is missing. For decades, that was the condition of the Ajai Wildlife Reserve, on the western bank of the Nile in north-western Uganda. In the early 1980s, rampant poaching and prolonged insecurity wiped out its once diverse wildlife.

In 2026, that silence began to break. In January, rhinos returned to Ajai for the first time in about four decades. In July, they were joined by Nubian giraffes, one of the most endangered giraffe subspecies in Africa. And in the same month, more than 3,000 kilometres to the south in KwaZulu-Natal, conservationists announced that six rhinos rescued as orphans after poachers killed their mothers had each given birth in the wild.

These stories are not about miracles. They are about years of rescue, rehabilitation, planning and community work. That is precisely why they are worth telling.

Part one: Ajai, a reserve reborn

A place with a proud past

Ajai was first declared a game sanctuary in 1937 and gazetted as a reserve in 1965. It lies in Uganda's Madi-Okollo district, east of the town of Arua. It was once one of the most important rhino areas in the country. By 1965, according to Ugandan reporting, Ajai supported around 60 of Uganda's remaining 80 or so rhinos, most of them northern white rhinos.

Uganda historically had two rhino species. The Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) explains that northern white rhinos lived west of the Albert Nile, with Ajai as their stronghold, while eastern black rhinos lived east of the Albert Nile and north of the Victoria Nile. Both were wiped out during a long period of insecurity through poaching and habitat loss. UWA records that the last rhino in Uganda was killed in the Narus Valley in Kidepo in 1983.

For almost two decades after that, Uganda had no rhinos at all.

The long road back for Uganda's rhinos

The recovery began in 1997, when Rhino Fund Uganda was established to start a systematic reintroduction program. According to UWA, two rhinos were imported from Kenya in 2001. In 2005 and 2006, breeding began at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary with four rhinos from Solio in Kenya and two from Disney's Animal Kingdom in Florida in the United States. From those six founders, the population at Ziwa grew to 49. In December 2025, eight more southern white rhinos were imported from South Africa to strengthen the Ziwa herd.

The rhinos at Ziwa are southern white rhinos, not the northern white rhinos that once lived at Ajai. The northern white rhino is now described by UWA as functionally extinct. UWA's case for introducing the southern subspecies is that the two were once regarded as a single species, making southern white rhinos a credible way to restore the role their northern cousins once played, even though they are not native to Uganda.

In January 2026, UWA carried out what it described as Uganda's first translocation of rhinos from one protected area to another within the country, moving four southern white rhinos from Ziwa to Ajai. This was the first phase of a national program to bring 20 rhinos to the reserve, with the remaining 16 to follow once the first group had settled. UWA's Executive Director, Dr James Musinguzi, called it "a proud and emotional moment for Uganda."

Giraffes return in July

Six months later, Ajai received its next returnees. On Tuesday 21 July 2026, Uganda Wildlife Authority rangers and veterinarians began moving Nubian giraffes from Murchison Falls National Park to Ajai, a journey of 106 kilometres (65 miles).

The Associated Press and Africanews reported the operation as the relocation of 12 giraffes. UWA's own news report, on 23 July, said six giraffes, four females and two males, had been introduced to Ajai so far, out of a total target of 12, with support from the Giraffe Conservation Foundation. In other words, 12 is the planned total and six is the number UWA confirmed as moved in that first batch.

The logistics of moving an animal that can grow up to six metres tall and weigh up to 2,000 kilograms are formidable. AP reported that officials first directed three giraffes into waiting trucks, with tree branches mounted inside so the animals could chew during the trip. Giraffes had been absent from the Ajai area for decades.

The translocation team was led by Dr Patrick Atimnedi, UWA's assistant commissioner for veterinary services. The project follows UWA's National Giraffe Conservation Strategy and Action Plan for 2020 to 2030, and international guidelines requiring scientific evidence for translocations.

Why move the giraffes at all?

There are two reasons, one hopeful and one sobering.

The hopeful reason is that Uganda's Nubian giraffes have recovered so well that they can now be used to restock other areas. Arthur Muneza, East Africa Coordinator for the Giraffe Conservation Foundation, told UWA that the global population of Nubian giraffes has

grown to over 2,500 individuals, with Uganda hosting nearly half of them. The Giraffe Conservation Foundation's own reports describe how, not long ago, only two populations remained in Uganda, in Murchison Falls and Kidepo Valley, both at precariously low numbers.

This is not Uganda's first giraffe translocation. Between 2015 and 2016, UWA and the Giraffe Conservation Foundation moved 15 Nubian giraffes, four males and 11 females, from Murchison Falls to Lake Mburo National Park. Later moves established or reinforced populations on the southern bank of Murchison Falls, at the Uganda Wildlife Conservation Education Centre, in Kidepo, at Pian Upe Wildlife Reserve and at Ziwa Rhino Sanctuary. Each new population reduces the risk that a single disaster could wipe out the subspecies.

The sobering reason is oil. AP reported that an estimated 40 per cent of Uganda's oil deposits lie in the Murchison Falls area, within the park. TotalEnergies officially began drilling in the Tilenga project area inside the park in June 2023, and drilling activity and heavy machinery movements have increased, despite years of opposition from environmentalists. Dr Atimnedi told AP that drilling and other pressures are "shrinking the habitat of wildlife here, but especially giraffes." Establishing new populations elsewhere is a form of insurance if the damage becomes significant.

It would be dishonest to present this as a purely happy story. Conservationists would rather giraffes did not need to be moved away from industrial development at all. But faced with that reality, building a secure "seed population" in a restored reserve is a practical and hopeful response.

Early signs of success

The early reports from Ajai are encouraging. Wilson Katamigwa, the senior warden in charge of the reserve, told AP that the animals are doing well and multiplying, with many pregnant, and described them spreading both inside and outside the electric fence.

Ajai's restoration is broader than rhinos and giraffes. According to AP, southern white rhinos, buffalo, zebras and hundreds of Uganda kobs are being reintroduced. Part of the reserve is being fenced, and the ranger force has grown to counter poaching. Arthur Muneza noted to UWA that wire snares set by poachers for small antelopes can also injure giraffes, which shows why ranger patrols and community cooperation remain essential.

The community at the centre

Perhaps the most important element of Ajai's recovery is the people who live around it. AP reported that nearby communities receive a share of tourism revenue and have been educated about conservation. Moses Ayoti, a local resident, told AP he was excited to see the animals near his home and that he trusts the community to look after them because they belong to the locals too.

That sense of ownership is the strongest protection any reserve can have. Fences and rangers can only do so much. When neighbouring communities see wildlife as their own heritage and a source of income, poaching becomes harder and support for conservation grows. UWA has linked the giraffe project to Uganda's broader tourism ambitions, and the warden at Ajai hopes tourism will strengthen the local economy in Madi-Okollo district.

Why big animals matter to a landscape

It might be tempting to see rhinos and giraffes simply as attractions for visitors. They are much more than that. Large animals shape the places they live in, and a reserve without them is an ecosystem missing some of its most important workers.

White rhinos are grazers. By cropping grass close to the ground, they create and maintain short grass patches that other grazing species, from antelope to warthogs, depend on. Their movements open paths through vegetation, and their dung returns nutrients to the soil and supports a world of insects and the birds that feed on them. Conservationists sometimes describe large grazers as gardeners of the savanna, because their presence changes how the whole landscape grows.

Giraffes are browsers, feeding high in the trees where few other animals can reach. Their feeding shapes the growth of acacia and other woody plants, and they help to spread seeds across wide areas as they move. Their height also makes them watchful sentinels, and other animals often respond when giraffes become alert to danger.

When a reserve regains species like these, it is not just adding animals to a list. It is beginning to restore the relationships between plants, soil and wildlife that make an ecosystem function. That is why the reintroduction of rhinos, giraffes, buffalo, zebras and kobs at Ajai together is so significant. Each species plays a part, and the whole becomes more resilient as the parts return.

From a place of conflict to a place of visitors

The history of north-western Uganda adds another layer of meaning. Ajai's wildlife disappeared in the early 1980s amid prolonged insecurity, a time when people in the region also suffered greatly. A reserve that is now receiving rhinos and giraffes, with fencing, rangers and visitors, is a sign of how much the area has changed.

Tourism built on restored wildlife can bring jobs and income to communities that have historically had fewer economic opportunities than other parts of the country. Rangers, guides, drivers, lodge workers, cooks and craftspeople can all benefit. When those benefits are shared fairly, as the revenue sharing around Ajai is designed to do, conservation and local prosperity reinforce one another.

Part two: KwaZulu-Natal, the orphans who became mothers

Rescued from tragedy

On 25 July 2026, *The Witness*, a newspaper in Pietermaritzburg, reported a story that rhino conservationists in South Africa had been waiting years to tell. Six rhinos orphaned by poachers had each given birth to calves in the wild after being rehabilitated and released.

The six animals had been rescued from various reserves managed by Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the provincial conservation authority, around 2017. Their mothers had been killed by poachers. Good Good Good, reporting the story, identified all six as white rhinos.

For a young rhino, losing its mother is usually a death sentence. Rhino calves depend on their mothers for protection, guidance and milk for a long time. Orphans left alone in the

bush rarely survive. Those that are found in time face a long journey of veterinary care and rehabilitation.

Four to five years of patient care

Dumisani Zwane, Ezemvelo's Game Capture and Veterinary Manager, explained that orphaned rhinos typically remain in rehabilitation for about four to five years before release. Ezemvelo's Game Capture and Veterinary Unit oversees every stage: rescue, veterinary treatment, rehabilitation, release and post-release monitoring.

That is a long commitment. It means years of feeding, medical care, gradual reintroduction to wild foods and careful preparation for the moment when a young rhino must fend for itself. It also means sustained funding. Ezemvelo acknowledged that a group of partners helps to cover the high costs of caring for orphaned rhinos alongside government. *The Witness* listed African Wildlife Vets, Wild Wonderful World, Wildlife ACT, Wild Tomorrow, Ubuntu Trust, Zululand Rhino Orphanage, WWF South Africa and REX, the Rhino Conservation Trust.

What rehabilitation involves

Rehabilitation programs of this kind generally move through careful stages. A rescued calf first needs emergency treatment for wounds, dehydration and shock. Very young orphans need regular milk feeds, often around the clock, from carers who become, in effect, substitute mothers. As the calves grow, they are introduced to other orphans so that they can form social bonds, and they are gradually given more space and more natural food.

The aim throughout is to avoid creating animals that depend on people. A rhino that is too comfortable with humans is at risk once released, both from poachers and from conflict with communities. Carers therefore reduce contact over time, until the young rhinos are living in large, wild enclosures and finding their own food. Only then, after years of preparation, are they released into protected reserves, where monitoring teams continue to track them.

The fact that all six of these orphans went on to breed is a strong indication that the process prepared them well for life in the wild.

A symbol of hope

The births are proof that rehabilitation works not only for individual animals but for the species. A rescued orphan that survives is a welcome outcome. A rescued orphan that breeds in the wild means the rescue has fed back into the wild population, and the effect of the poachers' crime has, in part, been undone.

Zwane described the births as a symbol of hope for rhino conservation. "Rehabilitating rhinos has proven to be a true conservation success," he said, adding that "with the right intervention, orphaned rhinos can return to the wild after time spent in captivity" and breed naturally.

The threat has not gone away

Like the Ugandan story, this one carries an honest caveat. Poaching continues to threaten rhinos in South Africa and across Africa, and the very existence of rhino orphanages is a

reminder of how many mothers have been killed. *The Witness* itself noted that poaching remains a threat to the species.

What the births show is that the response to that threat is not only enforcement, important as that is. It is also care: the slow work of saving the survivors, raising them and giving them back to the wild.

What these stories have in common

Uganda's reserve restoration and South Africa's orphan program are different projects, run by different institutions in different countries. Yet they share several features that point to a broader lesson about how conservation succeeds.

1. **Recovery takes years, sometimes decades.** Uganda's rhinos took from 1997 to 2026 to return to Ajai. The KwaZulu-Natal orphans needed four to five years of rehabilitation and several more before calving.
2. **Partnerships make the difference.** Government agencies, private orphanages, international foundations, zoos and local communities all played a part. No single organisation could have done it alone.
3. **Security and science go together.** Fencing, rangers and anti-poaching work protect the animals, while veterinary care, monitoring and evidence-based planning make sure translocations and releases are done well.
4. **Communities must benefit.** Revenue sharing and education around Ajai give local people a stake in the animals' survival.
5. **Insurance populations matter.** Spreading giraffes and rhinos across several sites reduces the risk that one threat, whether drilling, disease or poaching, could undo decades of progress.

A reflection on repair

In my view, the most hopeful thing about these stories is that they are stories of repair. The damage was done by people: by poaching, by conflict, by the pressures of development. The repair is also being done by people: rangers, vets, carers, scientists, donors and villagers who have decided that the loss is not final.

There is something moving about the idea of a rhino calf born in KwaZulu-Natal to a mother who was herself found alone as a baby. There is something equally moving about giraffes stepping out of a truck into a reserve that had not seen their kind for decades, and rhinos grazing again in the place where Uganda's last great rhino population once lived.

These animals did not choose their history. But because many people chose to act, their story did not end in loss.

> *"With the right intervention, orphaned rhinos can return to the wild after time spent in captivity." Dumisani Zwane, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife*

The same might be said of wild places themselves. With the right intervention, and enough patience, they can come home.

Three things to remember

- **Ajai lost its wildlife in the early 1980s.** In 2026 it welcomed back rhinos in January and Nubian giraffes in July, alongside buffalo, zebras and kobs.
- **Uganda's giraffes have recovered enough to share.** Moving animals to new sites builds insurance against threats such as oil drilling.
- **South Africa's orphans have become mothers.** Six rhinos rescued around 2017 after poachers killed their mothers have each had calves in the wild.

None of these outcomes was guaranteed. Each depended on people who were willing to commit years of effort to animals that could not thank them. That is a kind of generosity worth celebrating.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

One Hundred Nations for the Open Ocean: A September of Good News for the Sea

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In September 2026 the High Seas Treaty reached 100 parties, Australia among them, and Norway created its largest marine protected area. A global review found the world is still well short of its ocean protection goal, but these milestones show the tide is beginning to turn.

Look at a globe and you will see that most of our planet is blue. Look more closely at a map of who governs that blue, and you will find something surprising. Beyond the coastal waters that nations control lies the high seas: vast stretches of open ocean that belong to no single country. According to the High Seas Alliance, these international waters cover nearly half of the planet's surface.

For most of human history, the high seas were governed by a patchwork of rules for shipping, fishing and seabed mining, but there was no comprehensive legal framework to protect the life within them. Positive News reported that less than 1 per cent of international waters is fully protected.

That is now changing. In the week of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2026, the treaty designed to protect high seas life reached 100 parties. In the same month, Norway created its largest ever marine protected area, and a major global assessment set out exactly how far the world still has to go. Taken together, these developments give us an honest but hopeful picture of the ocean's future.

The High Seas Treaty: from idea to law

Years of negotiation

The agreement widely known as the High Seas Treaty is formally concerned with the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Diplomats, scientists and campaigners spent many years negotiating it at the United Nations.

The text was formally adopted by negotiating states at the UN on 19 June 2023. It opened for signature on 20 September 2023. To enter into force, it needed 60 countries to ratify it, meaning they had to complete their own domestic processes for formally accepting it as binding.

That threshold was crossed in September 2025, when Morocco and Sierra Leone became the 60th and 61st parties. Under the treaty's rules, it entered into force 120 days later, on 17 January 2026.

One hundred parties in September 2026

The momentum did not stop there. On 23 September 2026, the High Seas Alliance, a coalition of ocean conservation organisations, announced that the treaty had reached 100 parties. Six countries deposited their instruments of ratification during the UN General Assembly week: Germany, Papua New Guinea, Zimbabwe, Canada, Australia and Brunei Darussalam.

The list is worth reading twice. It includes a major European economy, a Pacific island nation, a landlocked African country, a North American nation with one of the world's longest coastlines, a Southeast Asian state and Australia. The breadth of that group reflects how widely the idea has been accepted: the open ocean is a shared inheritance, and its protection is a shared responsibility.

For Australian readers, the inclusion of Australia is particularly welcome. Australia is surrounded by ocean, its economy and culture are deeply connected to the sea, and its waters border vast areas of the high seas in the Indian, Pacific and Southern Oceans. Elle Lawless, Senior Ocean Campaigner at Greenpeace Australia Pacific, said: "Vast, robust ocean sanctuaries offer a crucial solution."

The milestone came just over a year after the treaty passed the 60-ratification threshold.

What the treaty actually does

The High Seas Alliance describes the treaty as the world's first comprehensive legal framework for protecting ocean life on the high seas. It provides a framework for creating marine protected areas in international waters, something that was previously very difficult to do in any coordinated way.

The treaty also addresses environmental impact assessments for activities that could harm the high seas, the fair sharing of benefits from marine genetic resources, and support for developing countries to build their capacity in ocean science and technology. In other words, it is not only about drawing lines on maps. It is about how the open ocean is used, who benefits and how decisions are made.

According to the High Seas Alliance, priorities for the first Conference of the Parties, expected in January 2027, include agreeing on the treaty's institutional set-up and operating rules, establishing highly and fully protected marine protected areas, and setting rigorous standards for environmental impact assessments.

There is an important detail here. Only countries that have ratified the treaty can vote on its decisions. Those that have not ratified have no say. That gives every remaining country a strong reason to join, and it gives the 100 parties a real voice in shaping how the high seas will be protected.

Voices from around the world

Rebecca Hubbard, Director of the High Seas Alliance, urged more nations to act: "We need more countries to ratify in order to achieve equitable global ocean protection by 2030."

Dr Aristide Takoukam Kamla, President and Founder of the African Marine Conservation Organization, described Africa's growing role: "the continent intends to help shape ocean governance, not simply follow it."

That last point deserves emphasis. Ocean governance has often been dominated by wealthy nations with large fishing and shipping fleets. The participation of African, Pacific and other developing countries in the High Seas Treaty is a sign that the rules for the shared ocean may, at last, be written by a more representative group of nations.

Norway's largest marine protected area

Andfjorden, from coast to deep sea

While the world's diplomats were celebrating in New York, Norway was taking action in its own waters. On 18 September 2026, the Norwegian government established the Andfjorden marine protected area, its largest to date.

According to the County Governor of Nordland, the protected area covers 1,848.5 square kilometres, roughly the size of the Oslofjord. That is about 714 square miles. It spans the municipalities of Andøy, Harstad and Senja, mostly in the far north of Nordland and the south of Troms, well inside the Arctic Circle.

The area is made up of two parts: a large area around Andfjorden and the outer side of the island of Andøya, and a small area at Indre Selfjorden on Senja.

An extraordinary underwater world

What makes Andfjorden special is its range of habitats. The protected area stretches from the coast to the open ocean. It includes Bleiksdjupet, an undersea valley more than 1,000 metres deep, which carries nutrient-rich water up into the fjord with the coastal current.

In its deeper waters there are coral reefs, coral forests, sponge forests and sea pen communities. In the shallows there are kelp forests, shell-sand seabeds and beds of coralline algae. North of Steinavær lies a coral reef about six square kilometres in area and 40 metres high, built by stony corals. Many people are surprised to learn that coral reefs exist in the cold, dark waters of the Arctic, but Norway's deep-water reefs are among the most remarkable in the world.

These habitats serve as spawning, nursery and feeding grounds for many commercial fish species. That in turn supports fishers, whales and seabirds. Protecting the seafloor here is not only good for nature; it is good for the people whose livelihoods depend on a productive sea.

How the protection works

Activities that damage the area are prohibited, including placing new installations on the seabed, depositing material and dredging. The large area has three protection zones for especially vulnerable and valuable biodiversity, with stricter rules than the rest of the area, and two reference areas for research into the effects of bottom-fishing gear. Near Steinavær, fishing gear that touches the seabed is prohibited, and the armed forces and defence industry are banned from shooting and blasting.

The area will be managed locally, by a dedicated board with representatives from the municipalities, county authorities and the Sámi Parliament. Including the Sámi Parliament recognises the deep connection of Norway's Indigenous people to the northern coast and sea.

A step in a long plan

Andfjorden was one of 36 areas identified in Norway's marine protection plan of 2004. With this designation, 24 of those areas are now protected. The share of protected territorial waters around mainland Norway rises from about 4.8 per cent to 6 per cent.

Norway's Minister of Climate and Environment, Sigrun Aasland, said the protection "will help ensure that future generations can also enjoy the natural values of Andfjorden." She also noted that the area contributes "both to our food supply and to unique nature experiences."

A journey that began with a plan in 2004 reached this milestone in 2026. Like many of the most important conservation achievements, it required persistence over many years.

The honest picture: a global review of 30 by 30

Good news is most useful when it is set against the full picture. In September 2026, a major review provided exactly that.

In 2022, governments meeting under the Convention on Biological Diversity agreed on a target known as 30 by 30: to protect 30 per cent of the world's land and 30 per cent of its ocean by 2030. The 2026 30 by 30 Global Assessment, produced by Campaign for Nature with Together for the Ocean, looked at how the world is tracking.

On land, the news was encouraging. The assessment found that roughly 20 per cent of land and inland waters is currently protected, and that existing government commitments could lift this to about 27 per cent by 2030. That is short of 30 per cent, but much closer than many expected. Positive News summed up the findings by saying the global 30 by 30 goal is "within reach", but only if governments accelerate action.

At sea, the picture was very different. Only about 10 per cent of the ocean is designated for conservation, and existing national commitments would raise that to only about 12 per cent by 2030. The authors described the ocean as the critical gap in global progress. A companion report, the Ocean Protection Gap Report 2026, found that just 3.5 per cent of the ocean is effectively protected, meaning that damaging activities are excluded or reduced. Positive News noted the warning that bottom trawling and other damaging practices still occur in many designated conservation zones.

Brian O'Donnell, Director of Campaign for Nature, called on governments to accelerate action.

These figures matter because they remind us that celebrations must be followed by work. A protected area on paper is not the same as a protected area in practice. The High Seas Treaty's emphasis on highly and fully protected areas, and Norway's ban on seabed-touching fishing gear in sensitive zones, show what genuine protection looks like.

Why this gives us hope

It would be easy to read the 30 by 30 figures and despair. I think that would be a mistake, and here is why.

The legal foundation now exists

Until 2026, there was no comprehensive legal mechanism to create protected areas across the high seas. Now there is, and it has 100 parties. Laws do not protect the ocean by themselves, but without them, coordinated protection of international waters was close to impossible. The tool has been built; the task now is to use it.

Countries are acting in their own waters

Norway's Andfjorden shows that national governments can and do create meaningful protection close to home. Every coastal state has the power to do the same, and each new protected area adds to the global total.

The world is measuring honestly

The 30 by 30 assessment is a sign of maturity. Rather than declaring victory, conservationists are counting carefully, distinguishing paper protection from real protection and naming the gaps. Honest measurement is the first step to genuine progress.

Momentum is building

From adoption in 2023 to entry into force in January 2026, and from 60 parties to 100 in about a year, the High Seas Treaty has moved faster than many international agreements. That speed reflects a growing recognition, across very different countries, that the ocean's health is tied to our own.

Why the ocean deserves our attention

The ocean is not a distant concern. It produces a large share of the oxygen we breathe, absorbs a significant share of the carbon dioxide and heat that human activity produces, and feeds billions of people. Its health is bound up with the stability of the climate, the security of food supplies and the livelihoods of coastal communities from the Arctic to the Pacific.

Marine protected areas, when they are well designed and enforced, give ecosystems space to recover. Fish populations can grow larger and spill over into surrounding waters, benefiting fishers. Habitats such as coral reefs, kelp forests and seagrass meadows can regenerate. Species that travel across entire ocean basins, from whales to turtles to seabirds, gain safe places along their routes.

That is why the developments of September 2026 matter far beyond the countries directly involved.

What comes next

The coming months will test whether the momentum of September 2026 can be turned into results on the water.

The first Conference of the Parties

The High Seas Alliance expects the treaty's first Conference of the Parties in January 2027. That meeting will be the moment when the treaty moves from principle to practice.

Parties will need to agree how the treaty's bodies will work, how proposals for marine protected areas will be submitted and assessed, and how environmental impact assessments for high seas activities will be carried out. Decisions made there will shape ocean governance for decades.

More ratifications

One hundred parties is a strong number, but it is not the whole world. Several major maritime nations have yet to ratify. Every additional party strengthens the treaty's legitimacy and broadens the group of countries with a vote. Campaigners such as the High Seas Alliance will continue to press governments that have signed but not yet ratified.

The first high seas protected areas

Scientists and conservation groups have for years identified areas of the high seas that are especially rich in life or especially vulnerable, from seamounts and underwater ridges to migration corridors used by whales, turtles and seabirds. Once the treaty's processes are agreed, the first proposals to protect such places can move forward. The first high seas marine protected areas established under the treaty will be a landmark moment.

Enforcement and monitoring

Finally, protection must be real. Satellite tracking of vessels, better data sharing and cooperation between coastal states and fishing nations will all be needed to ensure that the rules agreed in conference halls are respected far out at sea. The lesson from the 30 by 30 assessment, that designated areas are not always effectively protected, applies with special force to remote international waters.

What ordinary people can do

It is natural to feel that decisions about the high seas are made far away by diplomats. Yet citizens have more influence than they may think. Governments ratify treaties, create marine parks and fund enforcement partly because their people ask them to. Supporting well-managed marine parks, choosing seafood from responsibly managed fisheries, reducing plastic waste and simply paying attention to ocean policy all add up. The ocean's recovery will be built from many such contributions, large and small.

Lessons for leaders and citizens

Several lessons stand out from this month of ocean news.

1. **Shared resources need shared rules.** The high seas belong to everyone, which for too long meant they were protected by no one. The treaty shows that cooperation on a global commons is possible.
2. **Long plans pay off.** Norway's 2004 marine protection plan is still delivering results more than 20 years later.
3. **Include those closest to the sea.** Local management boards, including Indigenous representation, build legitimacy and long-term care.
4. **Quality matters as much as quantity.** Protection that excludes damaging activities is far more valuable than lines on a map.

5. **Participation brings influence.** Only parties to the High Seas Treaty can vote on its decisions. Joining is the way to help shape the outcome.

A reflection

In my view, there is something quietly profound in the idea that 100 nations, with very different interests and histories, have agreed that the open ocean deserves protection. It is a reminder that, even in a divided world, cooperation on the things that sustain all of us remains possible.

The ocean has given humanity a great deal: food, trade, climate stability and wonder. In September 2026, a growing share of humanity began to give something back. There is a long way still to go. But a coral reef 40 metres high in the Arctic is now protected, and the legal framework to protect the high seas is in force. That is a good place from which to continue.

> *"We need more countries to ratify in order to achieve equitable global ocean protection by 2030." Rebecca Hubbard, High Seas Alliance*

Three things to remember

- **The High Seas Treaty reached 100 parties on 23 September 2026.** Australia, Canada, Germany, Papua New Guinea, Zimbabwe and Brunei were among the latest to ratify.
- **Norway created its largest marine protected area on 18 September 2026.** Andfjorden covers 1,848.5 square kilometres of reefs, kelp forests and deep canyons.
- **The ocean is still the biggest gap.** About 10 per cent of the ocean is designated for conservation, and far less is effectively protected.

The good news and the sobering news belong together. One tells us what is possible; the other tells us how much is still to be done. Both are reasons to keep going.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

The Roar Comes Back: How a Gift of Land Brought Jaguars Home to Argentina

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

Seventy years after jaguars disappeared from the Iberá wetlands of north-eastern Argentina, they are hunting and breeding there again. Their return is the result of one of the largest private conservation efforts ever attempted, and of the people in Chile and Argentina who turned a bold gift into living parks.

Some stories of hope unfold in a single day. Others take a lifetime, and keep going after the person who started them is gone. This is one of the second kind.

It begins with two Americans who fell in love with Patagonia, spent their fortune buying land, and then gave it away. It continues with rangers, biologists, carers and villagers in Chile and Argentina who took that land and filled it with life again. And it reaches a remarkable point in the wetlands of Iberá, in Argentina's Corrientes Province, where jaguars, the largest cats in the Americas, are once again roaming free after an absence of about 70 years.

Two lives redirected

Douglas Tompkins was an American businessman with a gift for building brands. With his first wife, Susie Tompkins Buell, he co-founded the outdoor company The North Face in 1964 and later the clothing company Esprit. He was also a climber and adventurer. In 1968 he joined an expedition to Patagonia that produced the adventure film *Mountain of Storms*, an experience that left a lasting mark on him.

Around 1989, Tompkins left the business world. According to accounts of his life, he cited the ecological impact of the fashion industry. He set up what became the Foundation for Deep Ecology, endowing it in 1990, and in 1992 The Conservation Land Trust, which later became Tompkins Conservation.

His second wife, Kristine McDivitt Tompkins, had her own distinguished career: she spent about two decades leading the outdoor clothing company Patagonia as its chief executive, retiring in 1993. Together, the couple turned their attention to the wild landscapes of southern Chile and Argentina. Over the following decades they bought more than 2 million acres in the two countries.

It was an unusual thing to do, and it was not without controversy. In the 1990s, some people in Chile were suspicious of a wealthy foreigner acquiring large tracts of land in the south of their country. Over time, as the purpose of the purchases became clear, much of

that suspicion gave way to recognition. The purpose was never to own the land forever. It was to protect it, restore it and give it back to the public as national parks.

Pumalín, Corcovado and the start of a pattern

The first great project was Pumalín Park in southern Chile. It began in 1991 with the purchase of a run-down farm on the Reñihué fjord and grew to more than 700,000 acres. Pumalín was declared a Nature Sanctuary in 2005.

In 1994, the Conservation Land Trust, together with fellow conservationist Peter Buckley, acquired roughly 208,000 acres on the southern Chilean coast near Corcovado Volcano. In 2005 that land was donated to the Chilean state, forming the core of Corcovado National Park, which protects about 730,000 acres.

Meanwhile, in Argentina, Kristine Tompkins's Patagonia Land Trust funded the purchase of 165,000 acres in 2000, donated to Argentina's National Parks Administration to create Monte León National Park on the Atlantic coast. In 2004 her organisation, Conservacion Patagonica, bought Estancia Valle Chacabuco, a 175,000-acre sheep ranch in Chile's Aysén region, to begin creating what would become Patagonia National Park.

A pattern had formed: buy degraded or threatened land, restore it, and hand it to the nation as a public park.

A loss on the lake

On 8 December 2015, Douglas Tompkins died of hypothermia after his kayak capsized on General Carrera Lake in southern Chile. He was 72.

For many families and organisations, the death of a founder would mean the end of a vision. For Tompkins Conservation, it became a moment to accelerate. Kristine Tompkins continued the work, and the largest achievements were still to come.

The great gift to Chile

In 2017, Chile approved the Route of Parks of Patagonia, a scenic route of about 2,800 kilometres (1,700 miles) running from Puerto Montt to Cape Horn, linking 17 national parks.

Then came the defining moment. In March 2017 Chile's President, Michelle Bachelet, and Kris Tompkins signed a pledge under which Tompkins Conservation would give roughly 1 million acres and the Chilean government would contribute far more public land. In January 2018 the two signed decrees creating five new national parks and expanding three others, bringing more than 10 million acres of new parkland. One of the new parks was named Pumalín Douglas Tompkins National Park.

Yvon Chouinard, the founder of Patagonia and a close friend of the Tompkins family, put the scale of the achievement plainly: "No other human has ever created this many acres of protected wildlands."

In 2019, management of Pumalín and Patagonia National Parks was transferred to the Chilean government. Tompkins Conservation, the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Chilean

government also announced a fund called "Route of Parks: Protecting Patagonia Forever". In 2023, the government of Chile accepted another donation, of 230,000 acres at Cape Froward, at the southern tip of the South American mainland, for a future national park.

According to Tompkins Conservation, its offspring organisation Rewilding Chile has now helped to create seven new national parks and expand three others. The Route of Parks connects more than 60 gateway communities.

Rewilding in Chile too

The Chilean parks are not only about protecting scenery. They are also places where wildlife is being helped to recover. Patagonia National Park, created from the former Valle Chacabuco sheep ranch, is home to the huemul, an endangered deer that appears on Chile's coat of arms. According to Tompkins Conservation, fewer than 2,000 huemul remain worldwide, and about 10 per cent of them live in Patagonia National Park. The species needs intensive monitoring and protection, and the park gives it one of its most important strongholds.

Other species have been brought back as well. Andean condors were released in Patagonia National Park in 2022 and again in 2024. In 2025, wild Darwin's rheas, large flightless birds of the Patagonian steppe, were moved from Argentina to the park in what Tompkins Conservation describes as the first international translocation of the species in the Southern Cone. That cross-border cooperation is a fitting symbol of a conservation story that has always spanned two countries.

The transformation of a sheep ranch into a national park where condors soar and huemul graze is itself a hopeful image. Land that was once fenced and overgrazed is now open to wildlife and to visitors from around the world.

Iberá: from ranches to rewilding

A great wetland

While the Chilean parks were taking shape, an equally ambitious project was unfolding in Argentina. Iberá, in Corrientes Province in the north-east of the country, is one of the largest wetlands in South America, a mosaic of marshes, lagoons, grasslands and forests.

In 1997, the Conservation Land Trust bought a cattle ranch in the middle of the Iberá wetlands, and its Argentine branch was founded the following year to acquire more former ranches. Doug Tompkins also bought an Argentine forestry company in 2002, with plantations and ranches totalling more than 272,000 acres. In 2017 Tompkins Conservation donated more than 103,000 acres for the future national park.

On 5 December 2018, the Argentine Congress passed the law creating Iberá National Park, which Argentina's National Parks Administration now lists at about 195,000 hectares. Together with the adjoining Iberá Provincial Park, the combined protected area totals about 1.76 million acres, the largest nature park in Argentina.

Empty of its largest animals

Protecting land is only the first step. Iberá had lost many of its most important animals through decades of hunting and habitat change. The jaguar, the apex predator of the

region, had been gone for about 70 years. Giant anteaters had disappeared from the area. Giant otters, macaws, peccaries and others were missing too.

Tompkins Conservation and its partners decided that it was not enough to protect what was left. They would try to bring back what had been lost. That is the essence of rewilding: restoring not only habitat but the full community of species, including the large animals that shape ecosystems.

The anteaters came first

The rewilding program at Iberá began in 2007, when biologists translocated giant anteaters to the marshlands, where they had been absent for decades. According to Tompkins Conservation, more than 100 orphaned anteaters have since been rescued and released, and three new local populations have been established.

Other species followed. Collared peccaries were translocated in 2015, and one self-sustaining population now exists, with three more in progress. Pampas deer, of which only about 2,000 remain in Argentina, now number an estimated 120 to 150 in Iberá, up from zero. The first giant otter translocations took place in 2019, and in 2021 the first giant otter cubs were born to captive-origin parents. Green-winged macaws were released too, 11 birds so far, in what Tompkins Conservation describes as the first reintroduction of a locally extinct bird in Argentina. Some of the macaws have flown more than 60 kilometres from the release area.

Each of these is a small story of return. Together they set the stage for the most ambitious step of all.

The jaguars

A species in trouble

Jaguars once ranged across much of Argentina. According to Tompkins Conservation, the country's jaguar population is now estimated at about 200 individuals, and the species has lost about 95 per cent of its original range there. Bringing jaguars back to an area where they had been absent for seven decades had never been attempted on this scale in Argentina.

Breeding for the wild

In 2015, the Conservation Land Trust's Argentine branch, now Rewilding Argentina, opened a captive breeding enclosure for jaguars at the San Alonso reserve in Iberá, the start of its jaguar reintroduction program. The approach was carefully designed. Large enclosures allowed cubs to grow up learning to hunt wild prey, so that they would be prepared for life outside.

In 2018, the program's first two cubs were born, the first jaguars born in Iberá in more than half a century.

Free at last

In 2021, the first jaguar, a female named Mariua, was released into the Iberá wetlands after a 70-year absence. Further releases followed that year, giving a founding population

of eight. In 2022, the first wild-born jaguar cubs were documented in Corrientes Province. By 2023, 14 jaguar cubs had been born in the reintroduction project.

The work has since extended beyond Iberá. In 2024, wild jaguars were translocated from Iberá to El Impenetrable National Park in Argentina's Chaco region, which Tompkins Conservation describes as the first translocation of wild jaguars for release anywhere in the world. In 2025, three wild female jaguars were released in El Impenetrable.

To understand the significance of this, imagine the night sounds of Iberá in 2015 and in 2025. Ten years apart, the same wetland, but in the second, somewhere out in the marsh, a wild-born jaguar is moving through the grass. A missing piece of the ecosystem has been restored.

Why a top predator matters

It might seem strange to celebrate the return of a large predator. Jaguars are powerful hunters, and in many places their decline was driven partly by conflict with ranchers. Yet ecologists increasingly recognise that top predators are essential to healthy ecosystems.

Predators regulate the numbers and behaviour of the animals they hunt. Without them, populations of large herbivores can grow unchecked, overgrazing vegetation and altering habitats for countless other species. The presence of a predator also changes how prey animals move and feed, spreading grazing pressure more evenly across a landscape. Scientists sometimes describe these ripple effects as a cascade, flowing from the top of the food chain down to plants, soils and waterways.

In Iberá, the return of jaguars completes a food web that had been missing its highest link for 70 years. With capybaras, deer, peccaries and caimans present in large numbers, the wetland has abundant prey. The jaguar's return is therefore not only a triumph for one species but a step towards restoring the balance of the whole system.

There is also a cultural dimension. The jaguar holds deep significance in the traditions of many peoples of South America. Its return to a landscape where it had become only a memory reconnects people with part of their heritage.

Setbacks along the way

The journey has not been smooth. In 2022, wildfires destroyed about 60 per cent of Iberá National Park, according to Tompkins Conservation. For a young rewilding program, it was a frightening blow. Yet the recovery continued, and the jaguar population kept growing in the years that followed. Wetland ecosystems have a remarkable capacity to regenerate, especially when they are protected and their animals are present to help shape regrowth.

People and parks together

One of the most important lessons from Iberá and the Chilean parks is that conservation succeeds best when it brings benefits to people. Tompkins Conservation says its work can be measured in "land and sea protected, wildlife populations recovered," and in neighbouring communities that prosper as a result.

At Iberá, the work focuses on gateway communities such as Carlos Pellegrini, San Miguel and Concepción del Yaguareté Corá, supporting jobs in nature-based tourism, local

entrepreneurs and public infrastructure. In El Impenetrable, the community of La Armonía serves as a gateway, with a youth training program. In Chile, the Route of Parks is designed to support more than 60 communities along its length.

The logic is simple. A region that once relied on cattle ranching, forestry plantations or sheep farming can build a new economy around wildlife watching, guiding, hospitality and crafts. If local people earn their living from living jaguars, macaws and otters, they become the strongest defenders of those animals.

Why this story gives hope

Private wealth, public good

The Tompkins story is a powerful example of private wealth being turned into permanent public benefit. The land was bought, restored and then given away, to be owned by the people of Chile and Argentina. That model has inspired others and shows what philanthropy can achieve when it is directed at the long term.

Losses can be reversed

For much of the twentieth century, the story of large animals was a story of decline. Iberá shows that, with enough care and patience, the decline can be reversed. Species that had vanished for decades can return and breed in the wild.

The work outlives its founders

Douglas Tompkins died in 2015, before many of the most important milestones. The great gift to Chile, the creation of Iberá National Park and the return of jaguars all came afterwards. The vision was carried forward by Kristine Tompkins, by the organisations they founded and by the governments, scientists and communities who took ownership of it.

Nations can rise to a gift

The governments of Chile and Argentina did not simply accept land; they added their own, passed laws, created parks and took over management. The success of these projects depended as much on public institutions as on private generosity.

Lessons worth keeping

1. **Think in decades.** From the first purchase at Pumalín in 1991 to wild jaguars breeding in Iberá, this has been a story measured in decades.
2. **Restore, do not only protect.** Protecting land saved habitats, but bringing back anteaters, otters, macaws and jaguars restored the ecosystem's full function.
3. **Plan for handover.** The aim was always to give the land to the public. Transferring management to national park services ensured permanence.
4. **Bring communities with you.** Gateway communities and nature-based jobs build lasting local support.
5. **Expect setbacks and keep going.** Wildfires, opposition and the loss of a founder did not end the work.

A reflection

In my view, there is something deeply hopeful in the idea that a person can spend their fortune not on accumulating more, but on giving back the wild. The Tompkins family could have kept their land, or their money. Instead, they gave both away, and in doing so they helped two nations protect some of the most beautiful landscapes on earth.

Yet the real heroes of this story are many. They include the carers who raised jaguar cubs to be wild, the biologists who tracked anteaters through the marsh, the rangers who patrol the parks, the officials who drafted the laws, and the villagers who chose to welcome visitors rather than cattle. A gift only becomes a legacy when others take it up.

> *"No other human has ever created this many acres of protected wildlands."*
> *Yvon Chouinard, on Douglas Tompkins*

Somewhere in the Iberá wetlands tonight, a jaguar is moving silently through the grass, in a place where its kind had been absent for 70 years. That is what hope looks like when it has been patiently built.

Three things to remember

- **A private gift became public parks.** Tompkins Conservation's land donations helped create new national parks in Chile and Argentina, including Iberá in 2018.
- **Rewilding restored what had been lost.** Anteaters, peccaries, pampas deer, otters, macaws and finally jaguars have returned to Iberá.
- **Jaguars are breeding in the wild again.** The first wild-born cubs were documented in 2022, after an absence of about 70 years.

Above all, this is a story about the power of a long view. Few of us will ever give away a million acres. But all of us can choose to invest in things that will outlast us, whether that is a garden, a community, a cause or the next generation.

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