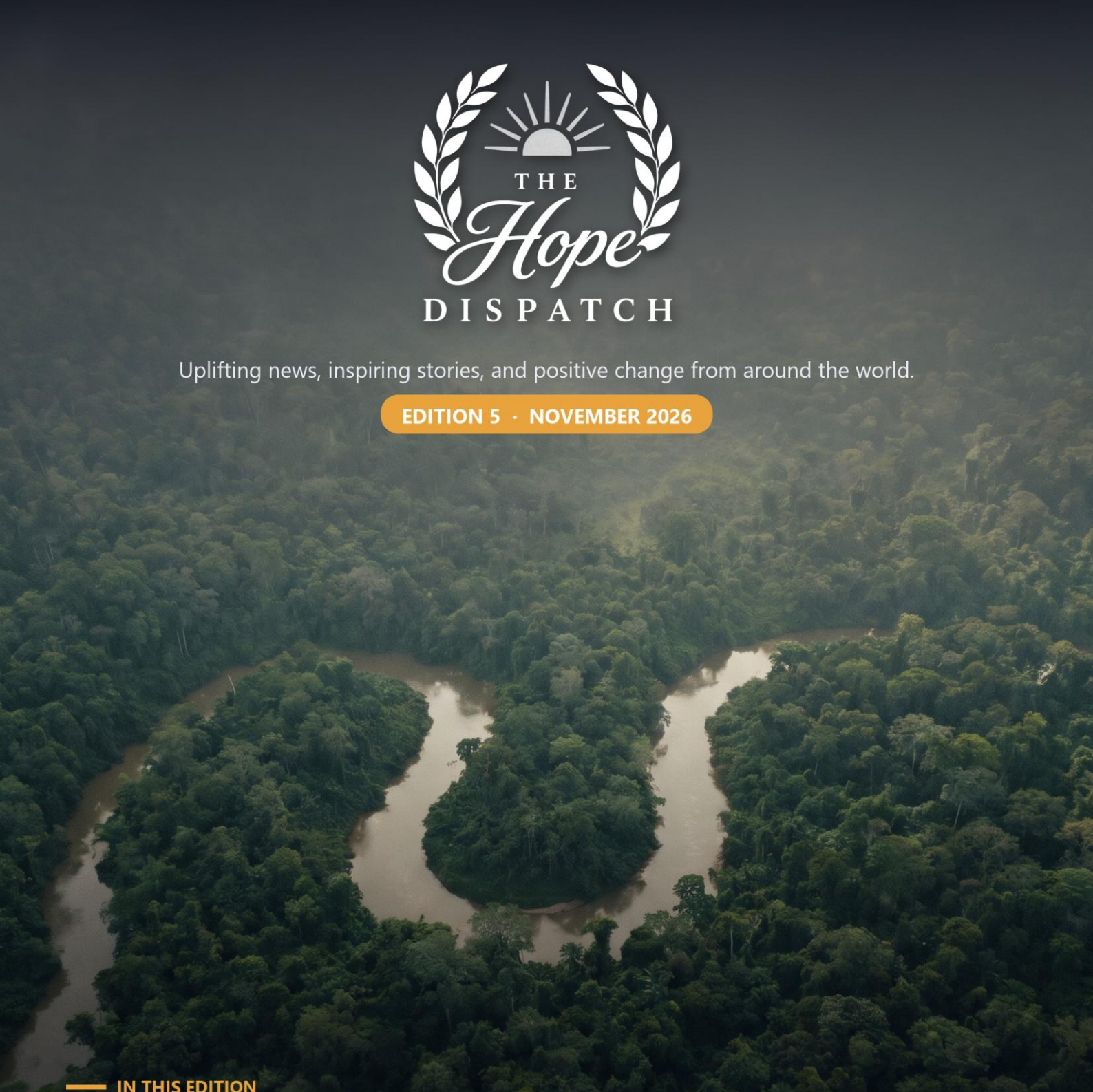
THE Hope DISPATCH

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

EDITION 5 · NOVEMBER 2026



IN THIS EDITION

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INTRODUCTION

The Hope Dispatch: November 2026

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition 5 of The Hope Dispatch: 5 pieces for November 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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Thank you to every reader who subscribes, shares and responds.

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

THE HOPE DISPATCH

The Year the Chainsaws Slowed: Brazil's Amazon Records Its Lowest Deforestation Since 1988

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In October 2026 Brazil's space research agency reported that forest clearing in the Brazilian Amazon had fallen to its lowest level since satellite records began almost four decades ago. It is one of the most significant pieces of environmental good news of the year, and it carries a lesson that reaches far beyond Brazil: when governments choose to enforce the law, forests can be saved.

A number worth stopping for

On Friday 16 October 2026, Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, known by its Portuguese initials INPE, released its preliminary annual estimate of deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon. The figure was 3,335 square kilometres of forest cleared in the twelve months to 31 July 2026.

That is about 42 per cent less than the year before. It is the lowest figure in a series that began in 1988, beating the previous record low of 4,571 square kilometres set in 2011 to 2012. According to Al Jazeera's report of the announcement, it also continues a streak in which clearing has fallen every year since 2022, adding up to a fall of 71.2 per cent over four years.

Numbers about forests can feel abstract, so it helps to put this one on a map. Mongabay, the conservation news service, noted that the area cleared in the latest year is smaller than the Spanish island of Mallorca. For Australian readers, it is roughly one and a half times the size of the Australian Capital Territory.

Now compare that with the worst years. In the mid-1990s, Al Jazeera reported, annual losses reached nearly 30,000 square kilometres. That is close to the size of Belgium, cleared in a single year. In 2004, another peak year, the figure was again well above 25,000 square kilometres. The latest figure is roughly one ninth of those peaks.

Brazil's environment minister, João Paulo Capobianco, did not hide his delight at the press conference in Brasília. He described it as "an absolutely stratospheric drop", adding that "it's like a dream."

He was not alone. Marcio Astrini, who leads the Observatório do Clima network of Brazilian environmental groups, called the figures "a historic achievement" and said the result showed that "with political will, it is possible to curb deforestation and greenhouse gas emissions."

The savanna next door

The good news did not stop at the edge of the rainforest. INPE also reported that clearing in the Cerrado, the vast wooded savanna that borders the Amazon to the south and east, fell by about 24 per cent to roughly 5,517 square kilometres. That is the lowest figure in the Cerrado series, which began in 2001.

This matters because the Cerrado is often overlooked. It is one of the most species-rich savannas on Earth and a crucial source of water for much of Brazil, yet it has been converted to cattle pasture and soy fields at a pace that has, in most recent years, exceeded the clearing in the Amazon itself. In several recent years more Cerrado than Amazon has been cleared.

One fear among conservationists has always been that protecting the Amazon would simply push the bulldozers south into the savanna. The data scientist Hannah Ritchie, who writes about environmental statistics and examined the new figures on 22 October, said she could see no sign that clearing had simply shifted from one biome to the other. Both fell together.

How the forest is measured

To understand why this figure carries so much weight, it helps to know where it comes from.

INPE runs two satellite systems that watch the Amazon. The first, called DETER, began in 2004 and works as an early warning system. It spots new clearing in close to real time and sends alerts to IBAMA, Brazil's federal environment agency, so that inspectors can respond. Its weakness is that it cannot see through cloud, and the Amazon is a cloudy place.

The second, called PRODES, is the official annual measurement. It uses higher resolution imagery, counts clearings larger than 6.25 hectares, and runs from August to July each year, because those are the months when cloud cover is lowest. PRODES is the figure that Brazil reports to the world and the one that researchers rely on when they talk about long-term trends. Gilberto Câmara, a former head of INPE, has compared it to a body count in a cemetery, because it reports losses well after they happen.

The October figure is a preliminary estimate, based on 271 of 516 priority satellite images. The final, consolidated figure usually arrives early the following year and can move a little. Last year's first estimate was later revised down slightly when the full set of images was processed. So the 3,335 square kilometre figure may change, but nobody expects it to change enough to alter the headline.

What changed

Forests do not stop falling on their own. Behind the numbers sit decisions made in Brasília, in regional offices and in the field.

A pattern that has happened before

Brazil has done this once already. In 2004, during President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's first government, Brazil launched an action plan for preventing and controlling deforestation in the Legal Amazon, known as PPCDAm. Over the following years clearing fell from about 27,000 square kilometres a year to around 7,000 by the end of the decade, and it kept falling until the record low of 2012.

Part of that success came from a measure introduced in 2008. The municipalities with the most clearing were placed on a public blacklist, and rural credit began to require proof that a property was following environmental rules. Economists at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and the Climate Policy Initiative later found that the blacklist reduced deforestation, largely by focusing monitoring and enforcement on the places that needed it most.

Researchers also found a clever way to test whether satellite-guided enforcement actually works. Because cloud cover blocks DETER alerts, they used cloudiness as a natural experiment. When clouds hid clearing from the satellites, inspectors were present less often, and more forest was lost. The conclusion was simple and powerful: watching the forest, and acting on what you see, protects it.

What went wrong in between

The record low of 2012 did not last. After Brazil revised its Forest Code in 2012, clearing began to creep upwards. Then, under President Jair Bolsonaro from 2019 to 2022, it rose sharply. Al Jazeera reported that the Amazon lost an average of about 11,600 square kilometres a year during that term, nearly 60 per cent more than in the previous four years. Environmental fines fell, enforcement weakened, and the head of INPE was dismissed in 2019 after a public dispute over the agency's deforestation data.

That history is worth remembering, because it shows two things at once. Deforestation can be cut dramatically. And progress can be reversed quickly if the will to enforce the law disappears.

The return of enforcement

When Lula returned to office in January 2023, his government revived PPCDAm, restored environmental enforcement and resumed creating protected areas and recognising Indigenous territories, Mongabay reported. AFP, the French news agency, attributed the latest drop to greater monitoring and stiffer penalties for illegal logging.

One of the most important tools has been the remote embargo. When satellites show that land has been cleared illegally, IBAMA can embargo that property without first sending a team on a long journey into the forest. An embargo means that meatpackers should not buy cattle from that land and banks should not lend to it. The punishment travels through the market rather than through roadblocks. Jair Schmitt, then IBAMA's environmental protection director and now its president, said in March 2026 that remote embargoes had reversed a rise in clearing, although no study has yet measured how much of the recent fall they explain.

This approach matters because the forest is enormous and the number of enforcement officers is small. Reporting by the analysis site Eikleaf noted that in March 2026 IBAMA

had 752 enforcement agents facing more than 100,000 DETER alerts over two years. No agency could inspect every clearing on foot. Satellites, data and economic consequences make the job possible.

Why this is good news for everyone

It is tempting to see Amazon deforestation as a Brazilian issue. It is not.

The climate

When forests are cut and burned, the carbon stored in their trunks, roots and soils is released into the atmosphere. In Brazil, land use change is one of the largest sources of greenhouse gas emissions. A year in which far less forest is cleared is a year in which a great deal less carbon goes into the air. For the global effort to limit warming, this is one of the cheapest and fastest wins available anywhere on the planet.

The rain

The Amazon is not only a store of carbon. It is a weather machine. Trees pull water from the soil and release it into the air through their leaves. That moisture forms clouds that drift south and west, bringing rain to farms and cities far from the forest, including the agricultural heartland of southern South America.

Scientists have warned for years that this system could break down. Mongabay summarised the concern: if deforestation reaches 20 to 25 per cent of the biome, the cycle that recycles rainfall could fail, leading to drier conditions, more fire and the possible loss of many tropical species. Amazon Conservation estimates that deforestation now covers about 15 per cent of the biome. Hannah Ritchie cites research suggesting that around one fifth of the Brazilian Amazon has been lost overall since records began.

Every square kilometre that is not cleared keeps the forest a little further from that edge.

The people of the forest

The Amazon is home to hundreds of Indigenous peoples and many traditional communities who depend on it for food, medicine, culture and identity. For them, illegal clearing is not a statistic. It often arrives with land grabbers, miners and violence. The recognition of Indigenous territories, which Mongabay notes the Lula government resumed, is one of the most effective forms of forest protection known. Study after study across the tropics has found that forests held by Indigenous communities tend to suffer less clearing than surrounding land.

The honest caveats

Good news deserves to be told honestly, and this story has some important limits.

1. **Degradation is not counted.** PRODES measures land where the forest has been cleared. It does not capture forest that is still standing but has been damaged by fire, selective logging or drought. Ritchie notes that the true loss of intact forest is therefore higher than the headline figure.
2. **Fire is a growing threat.** In 2024, burned forest across the Amazon basin released more carbon dioxide than deforestation itself, according to figures cited by Eikleaf.

Fires also broke out around Manaus in October 2026, and Ane Alencar of the Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) has warned that degrading land with fire is easier to get away with than paying people to clear it.

3. **The weather is turning.** A strong El Niño has been developing in the Pacific. El Niño is linked to drought in the southern Amazon, and fires tend to rise in the year after a strong event. Mongabay flagged this as a major risk for the coming season.
4. **Early warning signs.** DETER alerts for the first weeks of the new monitoring year, from 1 August to mid October 2026, were slightly higher than in the same period of 2025. These are early numbers, not an annual rate, but they are a reminder that the trend is not guaranteed.
5. **Politics.** The Amazon's future has always been tied to who governs Brazil. The INPE announcement came just days before a closely fought presidential runoff on 25 October between Lula and Senator Flávio Bolsonaro. Brazil's electoral court declared Lula the winner, giving him a fourth term from January 2027, a result his opponent has said he will challenge. Lula's stated goal is "to achieve zero illegal deforestation by 2030." His opponent had also promised to end illegal deforestation, while campaigning against what he called excessive environmental restrictions. Whatever one's view of Brazilian politics, the history of the past twenty years shows that enforcement depends on sustained commitment.

None of these caveats undo the achievement. They simply mean the work is not finished. The consolidated PRODES figure, expected in the first half of 2027, and the trend in fire and degradation over the next two seasons, will show whether 2026 marks a lasting turning point or a high-water mark.

What the rest of us can learn

For readers far from South America, it is fair to ask what any of this has to do with us. Here is the view of this newsletter: quite a lot.

Laws only work when they are enforced

Brazil had strong forest laws on paper throughout the years when deforestation rose. What changed was whether anyone was watching, and whether there were consequences. That lesson applies to almost every area of public life, from workplace safety to consumer protection to environmental rules here in Australia. A rule that is never enforced is a suggestion.

Data can be a force for good

The Brazilian Amazon alone is larger than Western Australia and the Northern Territory combined. Nobody could protect it by walking through it. Satellites made the forest visible, and public data made the problem impossible to hide. INPE's decision to publish its figures openly, year after year, gave journalists, scientists and citizens the tools to hold governments to account. Transparency did not save the forest by itself, but it made saving it possible.

Markets can carry the message

Remote embargoes work because they connect the forest to the people who buy beef and lend money. When a slaughterhouse cannot legally buy cattle from illegally cleared land, the incentive to clear it shrinks. Every supply chain that reaches back into a forest, whether for beef, soy, timber or gold, is also a chain that can carry responsibility forward.

Reversal is possible, in both directions

Perhaps the most hopeful lesson is that a trend many people thought was unstoppable has been reversed twice in twenty years. The less comfortable lesson is that it was also undone once in between. Progress is not a single victory. It is a habit that has to be kept.

The people behind the number

A single statistic can hide the human effort that produced it, so it is worth naming the groups whose work sits inside that 3,335.

The counters

INPE's scientists have published Amazon deforestation figures every year since 1988, through governments of every political colour. Their work is painstaking: analysing hundreds of satellite images, separating natural changes from human clearing, and checking results before they are released. In 2019, when the government of the day publicly questioned the agency's figures, the data held up. The credibility of the record that has just been broken rests on that long tradition of independent measurement.

The inspectors

IBAMA's field teams travel by plane, boat, truck and on foot into some of the most remote places on Earth, often into areas controlled by people who profit from illegal logging and mining. The work is genuinely dangerous. The wider risks of defending the forest were brought home to the world in June 2022, when the Brazilian Indigenous affairs specialist Bruno Pereira and the British journalist Dom Phillips were murdered in the Javari Valley in the western Amazon. The people who carry out enforcement do so knowing those risks.

The guardians

Across the Amazon, Indigenous communities patrol their own territories, report invasions and, in many places, physically stand between the forest and those who would clear it. Their protection is not a new idea brought in by outsiders. It is a relationship with the land that is thousands of years older than any satellite.

The voters and the buyers

Finally, there are the millions of ordinary people, in Brazil and beyond, whose choices shape the forest's fate: citizens who make the environment an election issue, companies that check where their beef and soy come from, and banks that refuse to lend against illegally cleared land. None of them will appear in an INPE table, but all of them are part of the result.

A forest that is still standing

It is easy to become numb to environmental news. So much of it is about loss: species declining, ice melting, records broken in the wrong direction. That is why a story like this deserves to be read slowly.

In the twelve months to July 2026, many thousands of hectares of rainforest that would have been cut down under the trends of just four years ago are still standing. The birds that nest in them are still singing. The trees are still pulling water from the ground and sending it skywards as rain. The carbon in their wood is still locked away.

That did not happen by accident. It happened because satellite scientists kept counting, because inspectors kept working in difficult and sometimes dangerous conditions, because Indigenous communities kept defending their land, and because a government chose to treat the law as something that matters.

The Amazon is not saved. But in 2026 it was given something precious: time. And in the long work of protecting the living world, time is the thing we need most.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Twenty-Two New Names on the Mountain: Rwanda's Gorilla Comeback Keeps Growing

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

On 4 September 2026, in the shadow of the Virunga volcanoes, Rwanda gave names to 22 baby mountain gorillas born over the previous year. Behind the music and celebration sits one of the most remarkable conservation recoveries of our time, built not on fences but on the idea that people and wildlife can prosper together.

A naming day in Kinigi

In Rwandan tradition, the arrival of a new baby is marked by a naming ceremony. Family and neighbours gather, suggestions are offered, and the child is welcomed into the community with a name that carries meaning, hope or a story. The ceremony is called *kwita izina*, which simply means "to give a name."

Since 2005, Rwanda has extended that tradition to its most famous residents. Every year, the babies born into the mountain gorilla families of Volcanoes National Park are formally named before crowds of local residents, rangers, dignitaries and visitors. The ceremony has become one of the country's best known national events.

The 21st Kwita Izina took place on 4 September 2026 in Kinigi, at the foothills of the park in Rwanda's Northern Province. Its theme was "Conservation is Life: Sustaining the Future." Prime Minister Justin Nsengiyumva attended as Guest of Honour, representing President Paul Kagame. Guests included the former President of Botswana, Mokgweetsi Masisi, the former Prime Minister of Ethiopia, Hailemariam Dessalegn, and the former Prime Minister of Tanzania, Mizengo Pinda.

According to the Rwanda Development Board (RDB), 22 baby gorillas were named in 2026, bringing the total named through Kwita Izina since 2005 to 460.

Who did the naming

The honour of naming a baby gorilla is given each year to a mix of people: conservationists, community members, international figures and people whose work touches Rwanda's story. The 2026 list, published by the RDB, was a striking blend of the global and the local.

Among the international namers were:

- **Shaikha Al Nowais**, Secretary-General of UN Tourism, who named a baby *Ishakwe*.

- **Dominic Barton**, chairman of the mining company Rio Tinto and a former Canadian ambassador to China, who chose *Mukondo*.
- **Alastair Fothergill**, the British wildlife filmmaker behind landmark natural history series, who chose *Mpinga*.
- **Mutaz Essa Barshim**, the Qatari Olympic high jump champion, who chose *Tarama*.
- **David Lappartient**, president of the international cycling federation, who chose *Muhuza*.
- Two former football captains, **Patrice Evra** and **Mamadou Sakho**, who chose *Muganura* and *Ntwarane*.

Just as important were the Rwandan namers. The filmmaker **Marie-Clémentine Dusabejambo** named a baby from the Humura family *Bukaka*, a name reported to mean majesty, strength and power. The Rwandan musician **Israel Mbonyi** chose *Impeta*. And **Jeannette Uwimbabazi**, a ranger at Nyungwe National Park, named a male from the Musilikale family *Ndahiro*, reported to mean "commitment."

Including a frontline ranger among the namers is a small detail with a big meaning. In a ceremony attended by former heads of government and Olympic champions, a ranger's choice of name stands alongside theirs.

Other names chosen in 2026 included *Ruhembe*, reported to mean "at the forefront", *Mucyo*, a word for light, and *Ngabonzima*, *Ndongozi*, *Kambere*, *Ngoga*, *Komezutsinde*, *Igeno*, *Shikama*, *Inkera*, *Rugamba* and *Nkwakuzi*.

Each name is more than ceremony. Naming is part of how researchers and rangers track individual gorillas, their families and their health over a lifetime. A gorilla with a name is a gorilla that someone is watching over.

From 250 to more than 1,000

To understand why the ceremony matters so much, you need to go back to the early 1980s.

At that time, mountain gorillas were widely expected to disappear. They live in only two places on Earth: the Virunga Massif, a chain of volcanoes shared by Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda, with a small adjoining area in the Congo. Poaching, habitat loss, snares set for other animals and civil conflict had driven their numbers down to alarming levels.

Speaking at the 2026 ceremony, Prime Minister Nsengiyumva recalled the low point: "In the early 1980s, there were only about 250 mountain gorillas left in the Virunga Massif."

Today, according to the RDB, there are more than 1,000 mountain gorillas in the wild, including more than 600 in the Virunga Massif. The most recent coordinated surveys, carried out across the Virungas in 2015 and 2016 and across Bwindi and the neighbouring Sarambwe reserve in 2018, together counted 1,063 individuals.

That recovery was strong enough that in 2018 the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) moved the mountain gorilla from its "Critically Endangered" category to "Endangered." It remains a species at risk. But it was one of the few great ape populations anywhere in the world whose numbers were rising.

A word about Dian Fossey

No story of the Virunga gorillas is complete without the American primatologist Dian Fossey. In 1967 she founded the Karisoke Research Center on the slopes between two of the Virunga volcanoes, beginning what has become one of the longest running studies of any wild animal. Her work, and her fierce campaigning against poachers, brought the gorillas to world attention. She was murdered at her camp in December 1985, a crime that has never been fully solved. Her book *Gorillas in the Mist* and the film made from it introduced millions of people to the animals she loved.

The research centre she founded continues today through the Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund. In a sense, every Kwita Izina is part of her legacy: individual gorillas, known by name, watched over every day.

How the recovery happened

There was no single solution. The mountain gorilla's comeback was built from many strands, woven together over decades.

Daily protection

Rangers and trackers patrol the forests every day, removing snares, monitoring each habituated gorilla family and reporting anything unusual. Snares are not usually set for gorillas. They are set for antelope and other animals, but a young gorilla caught in one can lose a hand or a foot, or die. Removing them, one by one, has saved many lives.

Veterinary care in the wild

Mountain gorillas are among the very few wild animals that receive hands-on veterinary care in their natural habitat. Since the 1980s, field veterinarians, now working through the organisation known as Gorilla Doctors, have treated gorillas for snare injuries and respiratory infections, which can spread from humans. Scientists who have studied the population believe that this kind of direct intervention has made a measurable difference to its growth.

Cooperation across borders

Gorillas do not recognise national boundaries. The Virunga Massif spans three countries with a difficult shared history. Conservation authorities in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo have cooperated through a transboundary collaboration, sharing data and coordinating protection. That cooperation has been tested by conflict, but it has helped keep the population connected.

Tourism that pays

The most distinctive part of Rwanda's model is what it has done with tourism. Rwanda chose a "high value, low volume" approach. Gorilla trekking permits are expensive, set at US$1,500 per person since 2017, and visitor numbers are tightly limited. Small groups spend a strictly limited time with a habituated gorilla family, keeping their distance and wearing masks to reduce the risk of passing on illnesses.

The money raised pays for protection, and, crucially, some of it goes directly to the people who live beside the park.

Sharing the benefits with neighbours

This is the heart of the story, and the reason Rwanda's approach has attracted so much international attention.

The communities around Volcanoes National Park are among the most densely populated rural areas in Africa. Families farm small plots on steep, fertile volcanic soils right up to the forest edge. In the past, the park could easily have been seen as land locked away from hungry people, and the gorillas as animals that sometimes raided crops.

Rwanda's answer was the Tourism Revenue Sharing Programme. Under the program, 10 per cent of national park tourism revenues are reinvested in surrounding communities. According to the RDB, more than RWF 23 billion has been distributed to date, supporting nearly 1,300 community projects, including schools, health centres, water infrastructure and livelihood initiatives.

The Prime Minister put the principle simply at the 2026 ceremony: "Protecting nature cannot be separated from improving people's lives."

The RDB's chief executive, Jean-Guy Afrika, framed the gorilla itself as a symbol of what that approach can achieve. He said the mountain gorilla "demonstrates what sustained commitment, strong institutions, community partnership" can deliver.

The Governor of the Northern Province, Maurice Mugabowagahunde, described the ceremony as "an opportunity to recognise the value of the natural heritage we have."

This is the view of this newsletter: the single most important idea in Rwanda's model is that conservation must make sense to the people who live closest to it. A family that sees a new classroom, a clean water point or a clinic paid for by gorilla tourism has a reason to care whether the gorillas survive. A former poacher who becomes a porter or a guide has a reason to protect the forest he once hunted in. Fences and laws matter, but goodwill matters more.

What a gorilla trek looks like

For readers who have never been, it helps to picture how this kind of tourism actually works, because the details explain why it protects rather than harms the animals.

Visitors gather early in the morning at the park headquarters in Kinigi. They are divided into small groups, each assigned to one habituated gorilla family. Habituation is a slow process, often taking a couple of years, in which researchers and trackers spend time near a gorilla group every day until the animals accept the presence of quiet, respectful humans.

Trackers head out ahead of the visitors to find where the family nested the night before. The trek itself can take anywhere from under an hour to most of a day, climbing through farmland, bamboo and dense mountain forest. When the group reaches the gorillas, the

visit is limited to about an hour. Visitors keep their distance, speak quietly and follow the guides' instructions.

Almost everyone involved in that hour is local: guides, trackers, porters who carry bags for a fee, drivers, lodge staff and the people who cook, clean and build. Gorilla tourism is not only a source of park revenue. It is an employer in a region where good jobs are precious.

A mirror held up to the wider world

The mountain gorilla's recovery is all the more striking when set against the fortunes of its close relatives.

The mountain gorilla is a subspecies of the eastern gorilla. Its cousin, the eastern lowland or Grauer's gorilla, lives in the forests of the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, where conflict, mining and hunting have taken a heavy toll. Researchers reported in 2016 that its numbers had fallen dramatically over the preceding two decades, and it is listed as Critically Endangered. Western gorillas, spread across Central Africa, also face serious threats from hunting, disease and habitat loss.

In that context, the mountain gorilla stands out as a population that has grown, not shrunk. It shows what is possible when protection is steady, local communities are partners, and the world is willing to pay for conservation. It also shows how much depends on peace and stability. Where those are missing, even the best intentions struggle.

Why a name changes everything

There is something about naming that changes how people feel. A statistic about a population is easy to forget. A baby called Ndahiro, meaning commitment, born to a family called Musilikale and named by a ranger who spends her days protecting Rwanda's forests, is not.

Kwita Izina has turned the gorillas from an abstract conservation cause into a set of known individuals with families and stories. Rwandan media follow the ceremony closely. International visitors and namers carry those stories home. Each year, the event refreshes the country's relationship with its gorillas and reminds the world that the recovery is still happening.

It is a lesson that organisations of every kind could learn from. People protect what they know, and they know what they can name.

A tradition that travels

Kwita Izina has also become a way for Rwanda to tell its own story to the world. Over the years the ceremony has drawn conservationists, diplomats, athletes, artists and business leaders to Kinigi, and each of them goes home with a personal connection to one particular gorilla. A namer who chose a name in 2026 will be able to follow that gorilla's life for years to come through the researchers and rangers who monitor its family.

That personal link is valuable. It turns visitors into ambassadors and reminds international partners that the recovery depends on continued support.

Room to grow

The recovery has created a new challenge. A growing gorilla population needs more space, and Volcanoes National Park is small.

The RDB says the long-term vision includes expanding Volcanoes National Park by about 3,740 hectares and establishing about 6,620 hectares of buffer zones. The broader program is expected to improve livelihoods for more than 17,000 people.

Expanding a park in one of Africa's most crowded rural landscapes is not simple. It means working closely with families whose land and homes may be affected, and making sure that they are better off as a result. Done well, it could give the gorillas room to keep growing for generations. Done badly, it could undermine the goodwill that has made the recovery possible. The world will be watching how Rwanda handles it.

The honest caveats

Conservation success stories deserve to be told with care, and this one has real limits.

1. **The population is still small.** Just over a thousand animals, living in two isolated populations, is a fragile base. A single disease outbreak could cause serious harm. Mountain gorillas are vulnerable to human respiratory illnesses, which is why tourists must keep their distance and wear masks.
2. **Conflict remains a threat.** Much of the Virunga Massif lies in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, where armed conflict has disrupted conservation work for many years. Many rangers in Congo's Virunga National Park have been killed in the line of duty. The Rio Times noted that the political dimensions of that conflict, including Rwanda's role, are disputed and highly sensitive.
3. **Tourism is vulnerable to shocks.** A model that depends on international visitors can be hit hard when travel stops, as the world learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. Diversifying how conservation is funded remains an important task.
4. **Counts take time.** The headline figures rest on surveys that are carried out only every several years, because counting gorillas in steep, dense forest is slow and painstaking work. Year to year births, such as the 22 named in 2026, show the population is reproducing, but they are not the same thing as a full census.

None of these caveats take away from the achievement. A population that was expected to vanish has more than doubled in the Virungas since the early 1980s, and the wild total now exceeds a thousand. But the work is ongoing.

What the gorillas teach us

There are lessons in Kinigi for people who will never see a mountain gorilla.

Hope can be built

In the early 1980s it would have been reasonable to write the mountain gorilla off. Many people did. The recovery since then shows that even when numbers are desperately low, careful, patient work over decades can turn a story of loss into a story of return.

Local people are the solution, not the problem

The most successful conservation programs around the world tend to share one feature: they treat the communities around protected areas as partners rather than threats. Rwanda's revenue sharing scheme is one of the clearest examples. When people benefit from wildlife, they protect it.

Celebration matters

It would be easy to see a naming ceremony as public relations. It is that, in part. But it is also something deeper. By borrowing one of the most intimate rituals of Rwandan family life, the country has made the gorillas part of its own story. Children grow up knowing that baby gorillas are welcomed with names, just as they were. That is a powerful way to build a culture of care.

Small acts add up

The recovery did not come from one grand gesture. It came from rangers removing snares day after day, vets climbing volcano slopes to treat an injured infant, researchers recording each family's movements, and community members choosing not to hunt. Hope, in the end, is often made of ordinary work done faithfully for a very long time.

Twenty-two reasons for optimism

Somewhere on the slopes of the Virunga volcanoes this morning, a baby gorilla named Ndahiro is clinging to his mother's fur. Not far away, perhaps, a youngster named Bukaka from the Humura family is learning which leaves are good to eat. Their families have names, their histories are recorded, and people they will never meet are working to keep them safe.

Forty years ago, their parents' generation was close to the edge. Today there are more than a thousand mountain gorillas in the wild, and each September another group of babies is welcomed to the world with names chosen in hope.

That is not the end of the story. But it is a very good chapter.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

The Tunnel Under the Thames: London's Super Sewer Cuts Overflows by 86 Per Cent in Its First Full Year

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In October 2026, the first annual report on London's new "super sewer" found that the amount of storm sewage spilling into the tidal River Thames had fallen by 86 per cent compared with the years before it opened. It is a story about engineering, about a river once declared biologically dead, and about what happens when a city decides that its waterways deserve better.

A river and its reputation

For most of the past two centuries, the River Thames has had a troubled relationship with the city it flows through.

In the hot summer of 1858, the smell from the river became so overpowering that it was remembered as the Great Stink. Raw sewage from a rapidly growing city flowed straight into the Thames, and the stench reached the Houses of Parliament on its banks. The crisis pushed Parliament to act, and the engineer Joseph Bazalgette was given the task of building a new sewer network for London.

Bazalgette's system, built between 1859 and 1875, was a marvel of the Victorian age. Great brick tunnels intercepted sewage before it reached the river and carried it east, away from the centre of the city. It transformed public health in London and is still in use today.

But Bazalgette designed his sewers for a London of a few million people. He also designed them to combine rainwater and sewage in the same pipes. When heavy rain falls, those pipes fill up, and to prevent sewage backing up into streets and homes, the system was built with overflow points that release the excess directly into the river. His network included 57 of these combined sewer overflows.

As London grew, more roofs, roads and pavements sent more rainwater into the sewers. What had once been a rare emergency release became a regular event. Before the new tunnel, an average of more than 20 million cubic metres of untreated sewage mixed with rainwater entered the tidal Thames each year.

By the late 1950s, the river was in such a poor state that it was declared biologically dead. It has recovered a great deal since then, thanks to better treatment works and tighter

controls. But the overflows remained a stubborn problem. Every heavy downpour risked sending raw sewage past Westminster, the South Bank and Greenwich.

Enter the super sewer

The solution was the Thames Tideway Tunnel, known to most Londoners as the super sewer.

It is a tunnel about 25 kilometres long, running beneath the river from Acton in the west to Abbey Mills in the east. It has an internal diameter of 7.2 metres, taller than a London double-decker bus, and it runs at depths of about 30 metres in the west to around 70 metres in the east. At Abbey Mills it joins the Lee Tunnel, which carries the flow on to the Beckton Sewage Treatment Works in east London, one of the largest in Europe.

The idea is simple. Instead of spilling into the river, the overflow from 34 of the most polluting combined sewer overflows now drops down into the tunnel, where it is stored and then sent for treatment.

Construction began in 2016. Work was slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The first sewage entered the system in the second half of 2024, it became fully operational in February 2025, and King Charles III officially opened it on 7 May 2025. The final cost was about £5 billion, making it the largest investment in London's sewers since Bazalgette.

Building it was an enormous undertaking. Tunnel boring machines worked their way beneath one of the busiest cities on Earth, under bridges, embankments, railway lines and historic buildings. Work sites along the river became temporary towns of engineers and labourers. The tunnel's managers often described it as a once in a lifetime project, and for many of the people who built it, it was.

What happens when it rains

It is worth walking through what the tunnel actually does on a wet London afternoon, because the simplicity of the idea is part of its beauty.

1. **Rain falls on the city.** Water runs off roofs, roads and pavements into drains. In most of central London, those drains feed the same pipes that carry sewage from homes and businesses.
2. **The old sewers fill.** Bazalgette's great intercepting sewers can carry a certain volume to the treatment works. In a heavy storm, the combined flow quickly exceeds that capacity.
3. **The overflow is diverted downwards.** In the past, the excess would pour out through overflow points straight into the river. Now, at the 34 most polluting points along the tidal Thames, it is captured by new connection structures and dropped down deep shafts into the tunnel.
4. **The tunnel stores it.** The super sewer acts as a giant underground reservoir, holding the flow until there is capacity to deal with it.
5. **It goes east for treatment.** The stored flow travels along the tunnel to Abbey Mills, then through the Lee Tunnel to Beckton, where it is treated before the cleaned water is returned to the environment.

Before the tunnel, step three ended in the river. Now it ends underground. That one change is what the 86 per cent figure is measuring.

The Lee Tunnel: the first piece of the puzzle

The super sewer did not arrive alone. The Lee Tunnel, a storage tunnel almost seven kilometres long and around 75 metres deep, was built first to deal with the single largest overflow on the system at Abbey Mills, which had been discharging into the River Lee, a tributary of the Thames. It was forecast to capture about 16 million cubic metres of sewage a year.

Alongside the tunnels, a separate program of around £675 million upgraded five major sewage treatment works, including a large expansion at Beckton, so that the extra flow captured by the tunnels could actually be treated.

The lesson here is that big environmental fixes usually come as systems, not single objects. A tunnel that stored sewage but had nowhere to send it would have solved nothing.

Bazalgette's long shadow

It is fitting that the company created to build and own the super sewer is formally named Bazalgette Tunnel Limited, trading as Tideway.

Joseph Bazalgette's sewers were built in an age when many people still believed that diseases like cholera spread through bad air. In 1854, the physician John Snow had traced a cholera outbreak in Soho to a contaminated public water pump, offering powerful evidence that the disease was carried in water. The Great Stink four years later made the political case for action impossible to ignore.

Bazalgette's network did more than remove a smell. By carrying sewage away from the parts of the river from which Londoners drew water, it helped end the great cholera epidemics that had killed tens of thousands of people in the city. He also built the Victoria, Albert and Chelsea Embankments along the river, which carry his sewers beneath them and created some of London's most famous riverside walks. He was knighted in 1875.

A Victorian engineer who solved one of the great public health crises of his age left behind a system so well built that it still works today. The super sewer is, in a real sense, an extension of his vision: an upgrade for a city that has grown far beyond anything he could have imagined.

The first report card

In October 2026, Thames Water and Tideway, the company that built and owns the tunnel, published the first annual Tideway Benefits Report. It covers 2025, the tunnel's first full year of operation, during what the companies describe as its commissioning phase.

The report assessed four goals: reducing sewage discharges, improving water quality, cutting sewage-derived litter, and reducing the number of days when the river carries an elevated health risk for people who use it.

Here are its headline findings.

Overflows

Storm overflows to the tidal Thames fell by 86 per cent compared with the period before the tunnel. The annual volume spilled fell to just under 3 million cubic metres in 2025, compared with a pre-Tideway average of more than 21 million cubic metres.

To picture that, an Olympic swimming pool holds about 2,500 cubic metres. The reduction is the equivalent of many thousands of pools of sewage and stormwater that did not end up in the river.

Oxygen for fish

When raw sewage enters a river, bacteria break it down and use up the oxygen in the water. Sudden drops in oxygen can kill fish and other wildlife in large numbers. The report found only one dissolved oxygen depletion event in 2025 that was linked to overflow activity, which the companies say means better conditions for fish and other aquatic life.

Health risk

The report found that days when the river carried an elevated health risk linked to overflows fell from an average of 75.7 per cent of days to 10.4 per cent in 2025. For rowers, paddlers, sailors and others who use the tidal Thames, that is a significant change.

Litter

Sewage carries more than human waste. Wet wipes, sanitary products and plastics that people flush down toilets end up in overflows and then on the river's foreshore. The report estimates that about 84 tonnes of sewage-derived litter were kept out of the Thames in 2025, with around 130 tonnes intercepted across the wider London Tideway Tunnel system.

Independent monitoring by the river charity Thames21, which surveys litter on the foreshore, found that sewage-related items fell from 30 per cent of the litter recorded before the tunnel to 18 per cent in 2025.

The bigger picture

Tideway's own annual report, published in June 2026, said that since the first connection in 2024, the tunnel system had intercepted more than 20 million tonnes of storm sewage. That is sewage that would otherwise have flowed into the river through the heart of London.

What the people involved said

Tess Fayers, Director of Waste and Bioresources at Thames Water, said: "This report shows that the Thames Tideway Tunnel is already delivering real benefits for the River Thames."

Henrietta Gibb, Director of Impact and Engagement at Tideway, said the results showed "the profound difference the Thames Tideway Tunnel is already making to the river." She was also careful to add that the system "will fully prove itself over the longer term."

Alison Debney, who leads UK nature recovery conservation work at the Zoological Society of London (ZSL), welcomed the progress while stressing that "continued investment and innovation remain essential."

The honest caveats

Good news is more useful when it is told honestly, and the report itself is candid about its limits.

1. **The 86 per cent figure is modelled.** The reduction is based on modelled volumes rather than direct measurement of every discharge. Modelling is standard practice for systems of this kind, but it is an estimate.
2. **2025 was a dry year.** Less rain means fewer overflows, tunnel or no tunnel. The report acknowledges this and argues that the reduction is far greater than rainfall patterns alone would explain. The true test will come in wetter years.
3. **It is early days.** The figures cover the first year, during which the system was still being commissioned. Long-term performance will only become clear over several years of monitoring.
4. **The report comes from the operators.** The figures were published by Thames Water and Tideway, the organisations responsible for the tunnel. Independent monitoring, such as the Thames21 litter surveys and ZSL's work on river health, will be important in confirming the results over time.
5. **The tunnel does not fix everything.** The super sewer deals with the overflows along the tidal Thames in London. It does not solve pollution in the river's upstream tributaries, nor the wider problems with sewage spills that have caused public anger in many parts of England. Thames Water itself has faced serious financial difficulties and public criticism in recent years, and the broader debate about the state of England's water industry continues.

None of this undermines the achievement. It simply places it in context.

What the next reports should tell us

Thames Water and Tideway have said they will publish annual reports tracking the tunnel's benefits. That commitment is welcome, and it gives everyone who cares about the river a way to keep score. Here are the questions those future reports will need to answer.

1. **How does the tunnel perform in a wet year?** The real test of any storm sewer is a long, rainy season. A strong result in a wet year would be far more convincing than one in a dry year.
2. **Do measured results match the models?** As more monitoring data accumulates, it should be possible to compare modelled volumes against observed conditions in the river.

3. **Is oxygen holding up?** Fish kills caused by sudden oxygen crashes were one of the most visible signs of overflow damage. A run of years with few or no such events would be a strong sign of lasting change.
4. **Is the foreshore getting cleaner?** The Thames21 litter surveys offer an independent check. If the share of sewage-related litter keeps falling, that is something any visitor to the foreshore will eventually notice.
5. **Is wildlife responding?** ZSL's long-running monitoring of fish, seals and other species will show whether the river's ecology is benefiting over time.

Asking these questions is not cynicism. It is how good news becomes durable news.

A river coming back to life

The Thames of today is very different from the "dead" river of the 1950s.

ZSL, which has monitored the tidal Thames for many years, published its State of the Thames report in 2026. It found signs of recovery, while warning that pollution and climate change remain significant challenges. Over recent decades, scientists and volunteers have recorded seals in the estuary, seahorses, eels and well over a hundred species of fish in the tidal river. Porpoises and even the occasional whale have been sighted far up the estuary.

The super sewer will not bring that recovery on its own. But by removing the single largest remaining source of raw sewage in the tidal river, it gives the Thames's wildlife a much better chance.

Why this matters beyond London

Readers in Sydney, Melbourne, Auckland or anywhere else may wonder why a London sewer deserves space in a newsletter about hope. There are three reasons.

Old cities everywhere share this problem

Many of the world's older cities were built with combined sewers, carrying rainwater and sewage in the same pipes. When it rains heavily, they overflow. Climate change is bringing more intense downpours in many regions, which puts even more strain on old systems. London's solution is expensive, but it is a working example of what can be done.

Infrastructure is a form of care

We rarely think of sewers as inspiring. We should. Bazalgette's sewers saved countless lives from cholera in the nineteenth century. The super sewer is the modern equivalent: a quiet, invisible system that protects public health and the natural world every time it rains. The view of this newsletter is that investing in good infrastructure, even when nobody will ever see it, is one of the most generous things a society can do for its future.

Public pressure works

The super sewer did not happen by chance. It followed years of campaigning by environmental groups, scientists, river users and residents who refused to accept that raw sewage in the river was simply the price of living in a big city. The tunnel's first report card is, in part, a reward for that persistence.

What we can take from it

There are a few simple lessons in this story.

- **Problems that seem permanent can be solved.** For more than a century, sewage overflows into the Thames were treated as an unavoidable part of London life. They were not.
- **Measure what matters.** The tunnel's benefits are being tracked in the terms that matter to people and wildlife: volumes spilled, oxygen levels, health risk days and litter. Reporting those numbers every year makes the promise accountable.
- **Celebrate progress, and keep going.** An 86 per cent cut is a remarkable start. It is not the end. The most useful response to good news is not complacency but renewed effort.
- **Small habits still matter.** The litter figures are a reminder that some of what ends up in our rivers starts in our own bathrooms. Wet wipes and sanitary products belong in the bin, not the toilet.

A cleaner tide

More than 165 years after the Great Stink, the river that once embarrassed a nation's parliament is a little cleaner every time it rains.

Somewhere deep beneath the riverbed, in a tunnel most Londoners will never see, water that would once have poured into the Thames now flows quietly east to be treated. Above it, rowers train on the tide, mudlarks search the foreshore for history, and seals haul out on sandbanks in the estuary.

It is not a dramatic image. There is no single rescue, no viral video. But it is exactly the kind of progress that makes the world better in lasting ways: patient, practical and built to serve people who have not yet been born.

That is a kind of hope worth celebrating.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Six in One Frame: Wild Tigers and Leopards Make a Comeback in Northeast China

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

Chinese authorities report that wild Amur tigers and Amur leopards in a national park on the border with Russia have more than doubled in number in less than a decade. The figures come with caveats worth understanding, but the story behind them, of forests replanted, corridors reopened and neighbours across a border working together, is a genuinely hopeful one for two of the rarest big cats on Earth.

A photograph from the snow

Last winter, a camera trap fixed to a tree in the forests of northeast China captured an image that wildlife researchers in the region had waited a long time to see. A wild female Amur tiger walked into the frame with five cubs.

According to China's Science and Technology Daily, Duan Zhaogang, head of the Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park administration, said it was the first time in China that wild Amur tigers had been recorded "six in one frame."

To appreciate why that matters, you need to know how close these animals came to disappearing from China altogether.

Meet the cats

The Amur tiger

The Amur tiger, often called the Siberian tiger, is the largest of the world's tiger subspecies and one of the largest cats on the planet. It is built for cold: thick fur, a layer of fat and huge padded paws for walking on snow. Historically it ranged across the forests of the Russian Far East, northeast China and the Korean Peninsula.

Over the twentieth century, hunting, logging and the loss of its prey drove it to the edge. By the second half of the century, most of the surviving wild population lived on the Russian side of the border, in the forests of the Primorye and Khabarovsk regions. In China, the wild tiger had become little more than a memory in many of the forests where it once lived.

The Amur leopard

The Amur leopard is, if anything, even rarer. It is a subspecies of leopard adapted to the cold temperate forests of the same region, with a thick, pale coat marked with widely

spaced rosettes. It is often described as one of the rarest big cats in the world. By around the turn of the century, surveys in the Russian Far East suggested only a few dozen survived in the wild.

Both cats are apex predators. Where they thrive, it usually means the forest beneath them is healthy enough to support deer, wild boar and the many smaller animals and plants on which those prey species depend. Protecting them means protecting an entire ecosystem.

The numbers

On International Tiger Day, 29 July 2026, China's National Forestry and Grassland Administration released new figures for the Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park. According to the Global Times, which reported the release, the number of wild Amur tigers in the park had risen from 27 in 2017 to 72, and the number of wild Amur leopards from 42 to 115.

Those figures were repeated in October 2026 in a feature in Science and Technology Daily, the newspaper of China's science ministry, which described the park as the core area of wild Amur tigers and leopards in China and the country's only habitat supporting breeding family groups of these cats.

If accurate, those numbers mean both populations have more than doubled in roughly nine years. For animals that breed slowly and need vast areas of forest, that is a remarkable change.

The park

The Northeast China Tiger and Leopard National Park lies along China's border with Russia, in Jilin and Heilongjiang provinces, close to the point where China, Russia and North Korea meet. It covers about 14,100 square kilometres, an area somewhat larger than the Sydney metropolitan region, and its forest cover is reported at almost 98 per cent.

It was set up as a pilot national park in 2017. In October 2021, China formally announced its first five national parks, and the tiger and leopard park was among them, alongside the Giant Panda National Park, the Sanjiangyuan park on the Tibetan Plateau, the Hainan tropical rainforest park and Wuyishan in the southeast. A national law governing China's national parks took effect on 1 January 2026, according to Science and Technology Daily.

How the comeback happened

The reports describe several strands of work that came together.

Healing the forest

Over the park's first five years, according to Science and Technology Daily, about 40,000 hectares of forest undergrowth were replanted, and pilot projects for forest transformation and pest control covered around 12,600 hectares. The Global Times reported the same work in traditional Chinese units: more than 600,000 mu of forest restored or replanted.

Much of northeast China's forest was logged heavily in past decades. A healthy, varied forest supports more deer and wild boar, which in turn support more tigers and leopards. Restoring the forest is restoring the food chain.

Opening the corridors

Big cats need room. A single tiger may range over hundreds of square kilometres, and young animals must be able to disperse to find territories of their own. Roads, farms and settlements can cut a forest into islands that are too small to sustain a population.

The park has opened five wildlife migration corridors, according to the reports. Corridors allow animals to move between patches of habitat, find mates and avoid the genetic problems that come from isolated populations breeding among themselves.

Watching every step

The most striking part of the story is the monitoring.

When the park was first established, Science and Technology Daily reported, about 95 per cent of its area had no mobile network coverage. Researchers had to travel into the forest every one or two months to replace batteries in camera traps and copy data by hand.

Today, the park uses an integrated system that combines satellite remote sensing, high altitude aerial lookout stations and ground-based infrared cameras. The newspaper reported nearly 30,000 real-time wireless infrared cameras and 95 dedicated communication base stations. The system can identify more than 30 wildlife species, with an accuracy of more than 90 per cent for Amur tigers and leopards. The Global Times reported that it has recorded more than 30,000 tiger sightings and more than 40,000 leopard sightings.

Tigers and leopards can be told apart individually by their stripes and spots, which are as unique as fingerprints. With enough camera images, researchers can identify individual animals, follow their movements, record births and estimate population sizes. The same system also supports patrols, wildlife early warning and forest fire prevention.

Working with the neighbours

Big cats do not carry passports. Many of the tigers and leopards in the park move back and forth across the border with Russia.

The Chinese park has a long-term partnership with Russia's Land of the Leopard National Park, on the other side of the border. According to the Global Times, the two sides conduct joint population surveys, coordinate cross-border patrols and share information, and together they have created a transboundary protected area of nearly 17,000 square kilometres. Officials say 21 Amur tigers and 27 Amur leopards regularly cross between the two countries.

This cross-border cooperation is essential. The Russian Far East has long been the stronghold of both species. The recovery on the Chinese side depends heavily on animals moving in from Russian forests and on both countries protecting the same shared landscape.

How do you count a cat you cannot see?

Counting tigers and leopards is one of the hardest jobs in wildlife science, and it explains why the camera network matters so much.

Both species are solitary, mostly active at dawn, dusk and night, and spread thinly across rugged forest. A researcher could spend years in the park without seeing a wild tiger in person. Traditional methods relied on tracking footprints in snow, which can tell you that a tiger passed by but rarely which tiger, or how many.

Camera traps changed that. A motion-activated camera photographs any animal that walks past. Because each tiger's stripes and each leopard's rosettes form a unique pattern, specialists can match photographs to individual animals. Over months and years, a picture emerges of who lives where, which females have cubs, which young animals have moved away, and which individuals have disappeared.

With thousands of cameras, the coverage becomes dense enough to estimate populations with much more confidence. Real-time wireless transmission, described in Science and Technology Daily's reporting, adds speed. Instead of waiting weeks for a researcher to retrieve a memory card, images can reach the monitoring centre almost immediately. That allows rangers to respond quickly to a poaching risk, a wildfire, or a tiger wandering towards a village.

Part of a bigger national park story

The tiger and leopard park is one of China's first five national parks, and the others carry their own conservation stories.

The best known is the Giant Panda National Park, spanning mountains in Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu provinces. The giant panda became a global symbol of endangered wildlife, and decades of habitat protection, reserve creation and research have helped its wild population recover. In 2016 the IUCN moved the giant panda from "Endangered" to "Vulnerable", and in 2021 Chinese authorities announced a similar change in their own assessment.

The tiger and leopard park follows the same basic approach: protect large connected landscapes, restore damaged habitat, and monitor carefully. Big cats are harder to recover than pandas, because they need more space, eat large prey and can come into conflict with people. That makes any sustained increase in their numbers especially encouraging.

The honest caveats

This newsletter believes that good news is only worth sharing if it is shared honestly. There are real questions to keep in mind about these figures.

1. **The numbers come from official sources.** The headline figures were released by a Chinese government agency and reported by state-affiliated media. Independent verification is limited. That does not mean the figures are wrong, but readers should know where they come from.

2. **Different reports give different figures.** In early 2026, other Chinese state media reports described the populations as having risen to approximately 70 tigers and 80 leopards, and one placed the starting point in 2015 rather than 2017. The July 2026 release gives a much higher figure for leopards. Differences like this can arise from new survey data, different counting periods or different areas being counted, but they are a reminder to treat any single number with some caution.
3. **Some animals are counted on both sides.** Because tigers and leopards cross the border regularly, some individuals may appear in both Chinese and Russian monitoring. That makes national totals tricky to interpret, even though the shared population is what really matters for the species.
4. **Survival is hard for cubs.** A litter of five is cause for celebration, but not every cub will reach adulthood. Jiang Guangshun, a professor at Northeast Forestry University, told Science and Technology Daily that with large litters, "as many as half or a third of the cubs may not survive."
5. **Wild is not the same as captive.** Northeast China is also home to large captive tiger parks, which breed many cubs each year for tourism. Those animals are not part of the wild population. The recovery described here is about wild cats living free in the forest, which is a very different and much harder achievement.
6. **Conflict with people is a real issue.** As tigers return, they sometimes come close to villages, roads and farms. Managing that conflict fairly and safely, for both people and cats, is one of the most important tests any big cat recovery faces.

Why this matters

Tigers are a test of whether we can share the planet

Wild tigers have lost the vast majority of their historic range across Asia. They need large areas of intact habitat, plenty of prey and protection from poaching. Very few landscapes on Earth still offer all three. When tiger numbers rise anywhere, it is a sign that a society has made real space for nature.

In 2010, the countries where tigers still live agreed on a goal, often called TX2, of doubling the number of wild tigers by 2022, the Chinese Year of the Tiger. Several countries, including India and Nepal, have reported major increases since then. The figures from northeast China, if they hold up, add to a broader picture: after a century of decline, wild tigers in several parts of Asia are recovering.

Technology can serve conservation

The park's monitoring network shows how modern technology, used well, can make wildlife protection more effective. Cameras that once needed a researcher to hike in and swap a battery now send images in real time. Patrols can be directed to where they are needed. Villagers can be warned when a tiger is nearby. Every new photograph adds to a growing understanding of how these animals live.

Borders can be bridges

It is easy, in a time of geopolitical tension, to forget that countries still cooperate on the things that matter. The partnership between the Chinese and Russian parks is a reminder

that protecting shared wildlife can create space for practical cooperation, regardless of wider politics. Similar arrangements exist around the world, from the Virunga volcanoes in Central Africa to the great transfrontier parks of southern Africa.

What it feels like on the ground

Numbers can make a story like this feel distant. So imagine, for a moment, the view from one of those wireless cameras.

It is a cold winter night. Snow lies thick on the ground between birch and oak trees. A female tiger steps into view, her breath steaming in the frozen air. Behind her, one after another, come five cubs, clumsy and curious, tumbling through the drifts to keep up. A few seconds later, the image is on a screen in a monitoring centre many kilometres away, where researchers who have spent years in these forests finally see what they had hoped for.

Moments like that are why people do this work. They are also a reminder that conservation success is built from countless small actions: a corridor opened here, a stand of trees replanted there, a camera installed, a snare removed, a patrol completed, a conversation held with a village worried about livestock.

Why prey matters as much as predators

It is tempting to focus on the cats themselves, but the people who study them often say that the real story is about deer and wild boar.

A tiger needs to make a large kill regularly to survive, and a mother raising cubs needs even more. If the forest cannot support enough prey, no amount of anti-poaching work will produce a healthy tiger population. Restoring undergrowth, reducing logging pressure and controlling forest pests all help the plant life that deer and boar depend on. In turn, a well-fed prey population gives the cats a reason to stay, to breed and to avoid livestock near villages.

Seen this way, a litter of five tiger cubs is not only a sign that tigers are doing well. It is a sign that the whole forest is becoming richer.

Looking ahead

China says that during its 15th Five-Year Plan, from 2026 to 2030, it intends to expand its national park system and restore more corridors and habitats for tigers and leopards. According to the Global Times and Science and Technology Daily, emergency conservation and monitoring programs are also planned for 165 critically endangered nationally protected species.

The goals are ambitious, and the world will judge them by results that can be independently checked over time. That is how it should be. But the direction is encouraging.

What we can learn

There are lessons here for anyone who cares about the natural world.

- **Recovery takes time and patience.** Big cats breed slowly. A doubling in under a decade is fast for them, but it rests on years of quieter work before the numbers began to rise.
- **Habitat comes first.** No amount of protection helps a tiger with nowhere to live and nothing to eat. Restoring forests and reconnecting them is the foundation.
- **Watching closely helps.** Good data allows good decisions. Knowing where individual animals are, and how they are faring, makes it possible to protect them.
- **Neighbours matter.** Wildlife that crosses borders can only be saved by countries that work together.
- **Healthy scepticism is part of hope.** We can celebrate encouraging news while still asking good questions about how it was measured. The two go together.

A glimpse of what is possible

For much of the twentieth century, the story of tigers and leopards in northeast China was a story of loss. In 2026, the story being told is different: of family groups breeding again, of cameras catching mothers with cubs, of cats moving freely across a border through restored forest.

Whatever the exact numbers turn out to be, that is a change worth noticing. And somewhere in those snowy forests tonight, five young tigers are learning how to survive in the place where their species almost vanished.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Built in Hobart, Sailing on Batteries: The World's Largest Electric Ferry Enters Service

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In late October 2026, a ship built on the banks of the River Derwent in Tasmania began carrying passengers across the Río de la Plata between Argentina and Uruguay. The China Zorrilla is the largest battery-electric ship ever built, and its journey from a Hobart shipyard to South America is a story about engineering courage, a small island with big ideas, and a quieter, cleaner future for travel by sea.

A historic crossing

The Río de la Plata, or River Plate, is one of the widest estuaries in the world. On one side lies Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. On the other lies Uruguay, with the historic port town of Colonia del Sacramento facing the Argentine capital across about 55 kilometres of brown, tidal water. For generations, ferries have carried travellers, families, tourists and cars between the two countries.

On Wednesday 21 October 2026, an official launch ceremony was held in Buenos Aires for a ferry unlike any that had made that crossing before. Baird Maritime, the maritime trade publication, reported that the Uruguayan operator Buquebus had begun sailings of the *China Zorrilla*, the world's largest fully electric ferry, with its maiden commercial voyage running between Buenos Aires and Colonia.

Interesting Engineering reported that the managing director of its builder, Craig Clifford of Incat Tasmania, travelled aboard on that first commercial voyage. Describing the experience, he said: "On Hull 096, that familiar engine noise and vibration simply aren't there."

Incat's chairman, Robert Clifford, put the significance plainly: "This ship proves that large, high-capacity commercial vessels can operate on electric power."

What kind of ship is it?

The *China Zorrilla* is big by any measure, and enormous by the standards of electric shipping.

Feature	Detail
Builder	Incat Tasmania, Hobart
Operator	Buquebus
Length	130 metres
Hull	Aluminium catamaran

Feature	Detail
Passengers	Up to 2,100
Vehicles	Up to 225
Batteries	More than 250 tonnes
Energy storage	More than 40 MWh
Propulsion	Eight electrically driven waterjets
Onboard retail	Duty-free area of about 2,300 square metres
Route	Buenos Aires to Colonia del Sacramento, about 55 km

To put the energy figure in perspective, Interesting Engineering reported that the ship's storage of around 40 megawatt hours is about four times that of any maritime vessel built before it. Its batteries are charged at dedicated infrastructure at both ends of the route. According to Baird Maritime, a 40-minute charge allows a one-way crossing.

A household electric car might carry a battery of perhaps 60 to 80 kilowatt hours. The *China Zorrilla* carries the equivalent of hundreds of them, enough to move a ship carrying a small town's worth of people across an estuary in about an hour.

The ship that changed its mind

The vessel was not always meant to be electric.

Buquebus commissioned the ship from Incat in 2019. The original design called for conventional engines running on liquefied natural gas or diesel. Then the COVID-19 pandemic arrived, travel collapsed and production paused. During the long interruption, the owner and builder made a bold decision: they would make the ship fully battery-electric instead.

That is not a small change. Ships are designed around their propulsion systems. Switching from engines to batteries means rethinking weight, balance, power distribution, safety systems and how the vessel will be charged and operated. Incat has said that one benefit of the change was that the lighter electric configuration allowed smaller waterjets to be fitted.

The ship's working name throughout construction was Hull 096. In service, it carries the name of China Zorrilla, a beloved Uruguayan actress of stage and screen who died in 2014. Naming the vessel after her gave it a place in Uruguay's cultural life before it ever carried a passenger.

Paying for the future

A project like this needs serious financing. In July 2024, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the private sector arm of the World Bank Group, announced a partial credit guarantee of US$67 million to support Buquebus in building the ferry, alongside a US$107 million loan from Banco Santander Uruguay. Buquebus said it would separately invest a further US$14 million in two charging stations and the transmission infrastructure to supply them.

The IFC said the project was expected to cut about 37,545 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions each year. Alfonso García Mora, IFC Vice President for Europe, Latin

America and the Caribbean, said at the time that "investing in electric transportation is essential to reduce millions of tons of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions each year."

From the Derwent to the River Plate

Launch day in Hobart

The ship was launched into Tasmania's River Derwent in May 2025, followed by sea trials and commissioning. Tasmania's Premier, Jeremy Rockliff, called the vessel a "global showcase" of what the state could do. Incat's founder, Robert Clifford, said it "sets the benchmark" for electric shipping.

Across the Pacific on another ship's back

Getting a 130-metre ferry from Tasmania to South America is a challenge in itself. A battery-electric vessel designed for a one-hour crossing cannot sail itself across the Pacific Ocean. So in early August 2026, according to Interesting Engineering, Hull 096 was loaded onto the heavy-lift transport ship *Black Marlin* on the Derwent.

The *Black Marlin* carried it past the northern tip of New Zealand, across the Pacific and around Cape Horn, the notoriously stormy southern tip of South America. The ship reached Uruguay on Friday 11 September 2026 and was welcomed at the port of Nueva Palmira. Over the following weekend it was floated off the transport ship.

"Touchdown in Uruguay," Incat wrote in a LinkedIn video post. Robert Clifford thanked the people involved, saying "Thousands of people have played a part in bringing this remarkable vessel to life."

After final commissioning and testing, the vessel entered passenger service in October.

Who was China Zorrilla?

It is worth pausing on the name painted on the hull, because it says something about what this ship means to the people it serves.

China Zorrilla was born in Montevideo in 1922 and became one of the most celebrated performers in the history of the River Plate region. Over a career that spanned the greater part of a century, she worked in theatre, film and television in both Uruguay and Argentina, and she was loved on both banks of the river. Many Argentines remember her as a star of the classic 1985 comedy *Esperando la carroza*. She died in 2014, aged 92.

A performer who belonged to both countries is a fitting namesake for a ship whose whole purpose is to connect them. Every crossing carries her name from one shore to the other and back again.

Not the first, but by far the biggest

Electric ferries are not new. What is new is the scale.

Norway has been a pioneer. In 2015, a car ferry called *Ampere* began operating on a short crossing of the Sognefjord, and it is widely regarded as the world's first battery-

electric car ferry. Since then, Norway has introduced many more electric and hybrid ferries on its fjord routes, helped by a power grid dominated by hydroelectricity.

Denmark followed with vessels such as the *Ellen*, an electric ferry serving the island of Ærø, which entered service in 2019 and was designed to cover a longer crossing than most electric ferries at the time.

Those vessels proved that electric ferries could work in daily service. But they were relatively small. The *China Zorrilla* is a different class of ship altogether: 130 metres long, able to carry more than two thousand people and hundreds of vehicles, on a crossing of around 55 kilometres. If electric power can handle a vessel of that size on a route of that length, the range of routes where it makes sense grows considerably.

That is why the shipping world has been watching this project so closely, and why the next ships on Incat's order book, for Molslinjen in Denmark, matter so much. Each successful vessel makes the next one easier to finance, build and operate.

How charging a ship works

Charging a car means plugging in at home or at a roadside station. Charging a ship carrying 40 megawatt hours of batteries is a much bigger task.

The *China Zorrilla* relies on dedicated charging infrastructure at each end of its route, which Buquebus said it would build at a cost of around US$14 million, including the transmission lines needed to bring enough power to the ports. During the time the ship is docked while passengers and vehicles disembark and board, it is connected to the grid and its batteries are topped up. According to Baird Maritime, a 40-minute charge is enough for a one-way crossing.

This rhythm, sail, dock, charge, sail again, is what makes short ferry routes ideal for batteries. The ship never needs to carry more energy than one or two crossings require, which keeps the battery size, weight and cost within practical limits.

A shipyard at the bottom of the world

There is something quietly wonderful about the fact that the world's largest electric ship was built in Hobart, a city of a little over a quarter of a million people at the southern edge of Australia.

Incat's story goes back decades. Robert Clifford began building and operating ferries in Tasmania in the 1970s. When a bulk carrier struck the Tasman Bridge in January 1975, bringing down part of the bridge and cutting Hobart's main road link across the Derwent, ferries became a lifeline for the divided city. Clifford's boats were among those that carried commuters across the river.

From those beginnings, Incat developed its distinctive wave-piercing catamaran designs: lightweight aluminium hulls built to slice through waves at speed. In 1990, an Incat-built catamaran named *Hoverspeed Great Britain* crossed the Atlantic and won the Hales Trophy for the fastest crossing by a passenger vessel. Incat ferries now sail on routes around the world, and the company has become one of the best known names in fast ferry construction.

Building the *China Zorrilla* took that tradition of innovation into new territory. Interesting Engineering reported that Robert Clifford credited the Tasmanian workforce with overcoming the engineering challenges. Craig Clifford described the vessel's entry into service in triumphant terms, saying: "This is a truly historic day for Incat, for Tasmania and for the global maritime industry."

What comes next for Hobart

The *China Zorrilla* is not a one-off. According to Interesting Engineering, Incat has three 129-metre battery-electric ferries under construction for the Danish operator Molslinjen, as well as two 78-metre hybrid electric vessels, at its Hobart yard.

For a regional manufacturing city, that is a significant pipeline of skilled work. It means jobs for welders, electricians, engineers, designers, apprentices and suppliers, many of them in a field that barely existed a decade ago.

Why this matters

Shipping's emissions problem

Shipping carries most of the world's trade and a great many of its passengers. It also produces a significant share of global greenhouse gas emissions, along with air pollution in ports and coastal cities. Large ships have long been considered one of the hardest parts of the transport system to decarbonise, because they need so much energy and travel such long distances.

Electric ships will not soon replace container vessels crossing oceans. But on short, busy routes like ferry crossings, where ships make the same journey several times a day and can charge at each end, batteries are increasingly practical. The *China Zorrilla* shows that this approach can work at a scale far larger than many people thought possible.

A better experience for passengers

Anyone who has travelled on a large ferry knows the throb of engines, the vibration in the deck and the smell of exhaust at the stern. An electric ship is far quieter. Craig Clifford's description of the first voyage, with that familiar engine noise and vibration absent, points to a change that passengers will feel directly.

There are benefits for the water too. Quieter vessels produce less underwater noise, which is a growing concern for marine animals that rely on sound to communicate and navigate.

Two countries, one cleaner link

The ferry connects two neighbours with deep ties of family, culture and trade. It also links into Uruguay's electricity system, which in recent years has drawn most of its power from renewable sources such as wind and hydroelectricity. When an electric vessel is charged from clean power, its environmental benefits multiply.

The honest caveats

Good news is best told honestly, and there are a few things worth keeping in mind.

1. **Electric is only as clean as its power source.** A battery ship charged from fossil fuel power still causes emissions, just in a different place. The full climate benefit depends on how the electricity at each end of the route is generated.
2. **Batteries have their own footprint.** Making large batteries requires mining and processing minerals such as lithium, nickel and cobalt, which has environmental and social costs. Recycling and responsible sourcing will matter as electric ships become more common.
3. **Short routes first.** This technology suits short, regular crossings with charging at each end. Long-distance shipping will need other solutions, such as new fuels, and that transition is much further away.
4. **Early days in service.** The ship has only just entered commercial operation. Its reliability, charging performance and real-world emissions savings will become clearer after months and years of regular sailings.

None of these caveats diminish what has been achieved. They simply place it in context.

What to watch for next

Over the coming months, a few questions will show how successful the *China Zorrilla* really is.

- **Reliability.** Can the ship keep to its timetable day after day, through summer crowds and winter weather on the estuary?
- **Charging.** Do the shore stations deliver power quickly and dependably enough to keep turnarounds short?
- **Emissions.** How do the real savings compare with the estimate of about 37,545 tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent a year given when the project was financed?
- **Imitation.** Will other operators on short, busy routes around the world order similar ships?

The answers will matter far beyond the River Plate.

Lessons from a ship

Big changes can start in small places

Tasmania is often thought of as a small, remote island. Yet a shipyard in Hobart has built a vessel that the global maritime industry is watching closely. Innovation does not need a giant city or a famous tech hub. It needs skill, persistence and a willingness to try something new.

A setback can become an opportunity

The pandemic halted work on the ship. Instead of simply waiting to resume the original plan, Incat and Buquebus used the pause to rethink the vessel entirely. It is a useful reminder for any organisation or person facing an interruption: sometimes the delay is the moment to ask whether there is a better way.

Courage in engineering is a kind of hope

Switching a 130-metre ship from engines to batteries mid-construction was a risk. If it had failed, it would have been an expensive and public failure. Choosing to do it anyway reflects a belief that the future can be built rather than simply waited for. The view of this newsletter is that every clean technology we now take for granted, from solar panels to electric cars, began with someone accepting that kind of risk.

Collaboration across oceans

A ship designed and built in Australia, financed with support from an international development institution and a bank in Uruguay, owned by a South American operator and named after a Uruguayan actress, now sails between Argentina and Uruguay. Behind it stand the welders of Hobart, the crew of a heavy-lift ship that rounded Cape Horn and the port workers of Nueva Palmira. Few things show more clearly how connected our world has become, or how much can be achieved when people work together across distance.

A quiet ship on a brown river

Picture the scene on a spring afternoon in Buenos Aires. Passengers stream aboard a vast white catamaran, families with children, couples on holiday, workers heading home to Uruguay. Cars roll into the vehicle deck. The ship slips away from the dock.

And then, something unfamiliar: quiet. No roar of diesel, no shudder through the floor. Just the hum of electric motors, the rush of water through the jets, and the low sound of conversation as the skyline of Buenos Aires falls away behind.

About an hour later, the ship glides into Colonia, plugs back into the grid and begins to recharge for the return journey.

It is not a revolution in a single day. But it is a glimpse of how travel by sea could feel in the years ahead: cleaner, quieter and gentler on the water. And it began in a shipyard on the Derwent, at the bottom of the world.

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