

Rewilding talk at Troutbeck examines wildlife restoration



Noted environmental strategist Ben Goldsmith, left, of Somerset, England, engages in conversation with Dr. Joshua Ginsberg, president of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, during a Troutbeck program on Saturday, Nov. 8.
Photo by Leila Hawken

By **Leila Hawken**

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AMENIA — The intriguing movement known as “rewilding” as an environmental strategy drew a large and diverse audience to Troutbeck on Saturday, Nov. 8, to hear a conversation between noted environmentalist Ben Goldsmith and Dr. Joshua R. Ginsberg, president of the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies.

“It’s exciting to do something together with the Cary Institute,” said Troutbeck co-owner Charlie Champalimaud as she introduced the program.

Definition of the term came first as Ginsberg noted that different meanings can apply.

“In Britain the landscape is managed, not the wildlife,” said Goldsmith who owns 12,000 acres in Somerset, England. Under his care, his land has become a natural home, attracting a variety of wildlife species, all a benefit to a larger ecosystem.

Due to a monocultural view of land use focused on farming alone, the English landscape had been drained of all nature, Goldsmith explained. To receive public funding, landowners have been required to be cultivating the land for farming.

Cropland is silent, however.

"I refused to accept the idea that there is no place for wildlife," Goldsmith said, adding "Our happiest moments stem from contact with nature." Profound grief over the accidental death of his daughter, Iris, was assuaged over time by literal immersion in the natural world.

Goldsmith sees nature as a source of spiritual renewal. His work is to envision landscapes and ways to help them recover their diverse wildness through natural process, rather than intervention.

"We have glowworms back in Somerset, England," Goldsmith proclaimed, describing "a riot of noise" emanating from rewilded land.

Growing up with Central Park nearby, Ginsberg noted that his father served as the NYC Commissioner of Parks, leading Ginsberg to spend many boyhood hours fascinated by the rat population in one section of the park.

Goldsmith is integral to initiatives such as "Nattergal," a British nature recovery company, and the "Conservation Collective," a network of local environmental foundations.

"The greatest challenge is to overcome the culture of opposition," Goldsmith said, adding that to achieve recovery one must encourage the doubters to participate.

Young farmers in Britain, for example, are willingly changing from sheep farming to cattle, the latter's grazing habits to be better for the natural landscape to thrive.

Moving to the topic of historical ecology, Ginsberg noted that members of indigenous communities in the U.S. are contributing historic insight into landscape management to provide food and habitat for wildlife.

"We've lost an abundance, but rewilding is igniting the enthusiasm," Goldsmith said.

"We can have it back if we want it," both concluded.

A conservation scientist, Ginsberg has formerly served as Senior Vice President of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Global Program.

Questions from the audience raised the issue of higher-density housing and its impact on the environment. Ginsberg suggested that expanding an area already given to smaller lots is likely to be less harmful to the environment than development spread out over large areas.

To learn more about rewilding, go to www.rewildingtheworld.com.