



Laguna Grande: Steve Backshall and other celebrities join multi-campaign push to save tropical wilderness in the year of COP26

- ❖ WLT Patron Backshall is fronting a new initiative for children to measure their school and fund the protection of the same size area of tropical forest in Guatemala's Laguna Grande.
- ❖ The Laguna, home to 700+ species from manatees to jaguars, will also be saved with help from Rewriting Extinction, an initiative backed by Cara Delevingne and other celebrities.
- ❖ In addition to a new £1.2m WLT appeal, these initiatives will help WLT partner FUNDAECO triple the size of an existing reserve, saving habitats from a likely sale for logging.
- ❖ The alliance, featuring [composer Sarah Class's music](#) as its soundtrack, will help save a 'carbon powerhouse' of forest, mangroves and seagrass at a time of climate crisis.

WEDNESDAY 6 OCTOBER 2021 | Steve Backshall and other high-profile backers have thrown their weight behind a World Land Trust (WLT) campaign to save Guatemalan tropical rainforests from logging, with help from a global initiative supported by Cara Delevingne and other celebrities.

In the year of the make-or-break COP26 climate summit in Glasgow, naturalist and WLT patron Backshall will use his new Operation Ocelot mission to fund the protection of Laguna Grande, a major carbon sink of tropical forests, mangroves, wetlands and seagrass meadows. The mission will have children, teachers, parents and others measure school playgrounds and other areas, then raise funds to save the same size area of habitats around this Caribbean Guatemalan lagoon.

Speaking as he launched his mission to save this near-pristine chain of ecosystems in an area where 80% of lowland forest has been destroyed, Backshall said: "If you're a teacher, parent or Scout leader, this is something relatable for your youngsters to engage with – to look at a place they can see every day like their school or their street and know that they are saving the same size area of rainforest full of jaguars, ocelots, toucans and more."

At Laguna Grande, the saving of land by Steve Backshall's Operation Ocelot joins WLT's own appeal Guardians of Nimla Ha', named after the *nimla ha'* or 'great waters' in the Mayan Q'eqchi' language of local communities. Launched today, the £1,200,000 campaign – the most ambitious in WLT's history – will support WLT's in-country partner FUNDAECO as they purchase and protect enough land to triple the size of an existing reserve around the lagoon, from 1,668 to nearly 5,000 acres.

The efforts will also be supported by Rewriting Extinction, an initiative where stories from 300 creators will fund seven environmental projects – FUNDAECO's saving of Laguna Grande included – with support from celebrities from Ricky Gervais to Taika Waititi and Peter Gabriel. Led by Paul Goodenough, Rewriting Extinction will raise funds for conservation through the anthology *The Most Important Comic Book on Earth*, set to be published in the final run-up to COP26.

"I created Rewriting Extinction to raise the money and awareness needed to protect and safeguard as many species from harm as humanly possible," says Goodenough, an award-winning producer and writer of *Have I Got News for You*, *DreamWorks Dragons* and others. "The Laguna Grande project, this utterly imperative project, is just amazing. It tackles both the biodiversity crisis and the climate crisis."

Local people to benefit from saving of climate powerhouse packed with biodiversity

If it succeeds, the global, multi-project alliance to save Laguna Grande will ensure the protection of a magnificent chain of habitats in an area where timber extraction, cattle ranching and monoculture plantations are all on the rise. Were there not someone like FUNDAECO with a plan to purchase and protect the three forest properties under consideration, the WLT partner believes an eventual sale to logging firms would be likely.

At stake is the habitat of 700+ species. Laguna Grande is Caribbean Guatemala's most crucial breeding and nursing location for West Indian Manatee, while its forested shores boast Ocelot, Jaguar, Endangered primates like the Yucatán Black Howler Monkey and many others. 357 of Guatemala's ~800 bird species have been sighted around the Laguna, including 100+ migratory birds and charismatic year-long residents such as the Ornate Hawk-eagle.

At a time of climate crisis, expanding the reserve will also yield considerable climate benefits. At Laguna Grande, the carbon sequestered within forests, soils and sediments sits alongside the blue carbon potential – [known by scientists](#) to exceed that of terrestrial forests – of the lagoon's mangroves and seagrass meadows, which in turn also help to protect and feed the manatees that migrate in from busy Caribbean waters to seek shelter in the lagoon.

Crucially, and as with all projects funded by WLT, local people will lead – and benefit from – Laguna Grande's protection. The expanded reserve will remain in the hands of FUNDAECO, a Guatemalan conservation body with over 30 years of history. For the people around the lagoon, some of Guatemala's poorest, the protection of habitat around the great waters will help mitigate severe impacts of storms and floods, preserve fishing stocks and purify waters through pollutant removal.

"Our communities need their landscape: it is the air we breathe and our sustainable source of food and shelter," says Marta Tiul Cabnal, a Maya Q'eqchi' community member who works with local people under FUNDAECO's ['Healthy and Empowered Women and Girls'](#) programme. "The life and resources of Laguna Grande are not something you find easily. If we don't act, there's a chance that someone might ruin and pollute this natural bounty in the future."

“In an area where 80% of lowland rainforests have been lost to cattle ranches and crops, achieving this reserve expansion could not be more vital,” adds Marco Cerezo, CEO of FUNDAECO. “We’ll make sure that conservation continues benefiting local people, by providing green jobs, health services, scholarships and training for women and girls. If we save this landscape, we can add a grain of hope in the global fight against global warming and biodiversity loss – the foundations of a better planet.”

NOTES TO EDITORS

World Land Trust (WLT) protects the world’s most biologically significant and threatened habitats acre by acre. Through a network of partner organisations around the world, WLT funds the creation of reserves and provides permanent protection for habitats and wildlife. Partnerships are developed with established and highly respected local organisations who engage support and commitment among the local community. WLT also works to raise awareness, in the UK and elsewhere, of the need for conservation, to improve understanding and generate support through information and fundraising. <https://www.worldlandtrust.org/who-we-are-2/>

Fundación para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO) was founded in 1990 with a mission to safeguard the biodiversity and the sustainable development of local people in Guatemala. The organisation, responsible for Latin America’s longest continuous bird-monitoring programme, has striven for over three decades to create protected areas that balance the needs of communities and wildlife in jointly agreed land-use plans. Through its eight programmes, FUNDAECO is helping with the legalisation of Indigenous lands, running health clinics for young women and girls, as well as schemes to create eco-tourism jobs and education projects with a focus on inner city areas. <https://fundaeco.org.gt/fe/nosotros/>

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Pictures and maps of Laguna Grande and the life that will be protected through FUNDAECO’s reserve expansion can be found [in this gallery](#) and used in coverage, provided that they are appropriately credited.

To find out more about the **species** that will be protected with help from WLT’s Guardians of Nimla Ha’ appeal and the Operation Ocelot and Rewriting Extinction projects, follow the links to WLT’s dedicated pages for [Jaguar](#), [Ocelot](#), [West Indian Manatee](#), [Ornate Hawk-eagle](#), [Red-eyed Tree Frog](#), [Cerulean Warbler](#) and [others](#).

