



Research Report

Rewild Europe

Working Towards Sustainable Youth Work Communities

June 2026



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the European Union

Introduction

The project “Rewild Europe – Working Towards Sustainable Youth Work Communities” explores human-nature connection through storytelling and nature-based education. It is a small scale partnership between the organisations Symbiotic Roots (Spain) and Tiny Rewilding (The Netherlands), co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme of the European Union.

The research phase, carried out between February and April 2026, was the first core activity of the project. During this period, we explored folklore, myths, legends and contemporary narratives from different European cultures that reflect human-nature relationships. Further, the research investigated how storytelling can support nature connection, inclusion and youth work practice, while also collecting inspiration for rewilding activities and methods.

The **objectives** of the research were to:

- collect and document 10 “wild stories” from across Europe connected to nature, ecology and cultural heritage;
- gather inspiration and practical approaches for nature-based storytelling in youth work;
- provide groundwork for the development of future training methods and educational materials;
- strengthen cooperation and exchange between youth workers and partner organisations;
- connect with local stakeholders and initiatives related to rewilding and environmental education;
- contribute to the integration of rewilding and human-nature connection in European youth work.

Research process and methodology

The research was structured in three main phases, each using different methodologies: desk research, study visits, and an online focus group.

1. Desk research

During the desk research phase, we explored folktales, legends, myths, poems, and contemporary stories related to human-nature connection from different European contexts. We aimed to include particularly female, queer, and more-than-human perspectives, which are often underrepresented in narratives about human-nature relationships and cultural heritage.

As the four team members come from different cultural backgrounds, speak various languages, and were located in different European countries throughout the process, we were able to include stories from the following countries in our scope: Spain, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, Germany/Austria, Norway/Sweden, Moldova, and Ireland.

The main sources used during this phase included books, story collections, websites, magazines, podcasts, videos, and educational materials. We also consulted authors, publishers, storytellers, anthropologists, educators, and other experts who shared bibliographies, resources, and ideas for further research.



Map of origins of the collected stories

After a first phase of researching, reviewing, and sorting potential story material, we made a selection of ten stories that will be included in the final story collection as part of the Rewild Europe toolbox. In this process, we aimed to ensure diversity in different aspects: of voices represented (e.g. animals, females, marginalised groups, nature spirits), of natural elements present (e.g. forest, mountain, sea, lake), and of the places of cultural origin (different European regions).

For the final editing process, stories were translated to English. Some of them were slightly adapted to fit in length and style, and to make them more accessible for the context of educational youth work. The collection also includes two stories (re)written by one of our team members, bringing in a contemporary version of collected story material.

2. Study visits

We carried out six local study visits in Spain and the Netherlands connected to natural and cultural heritage. These visits aimed to gather local perspectives on human rewilding, ecological relationships, and nature-based practices, while also providing inspiration for educational activities and methods.

Through guided activities and informal conversations with local community members, educators, and experts, we learned about oral traditions, local stories, environmental education, nature conservation, accessibility in nature-based activities, and traditional ecological knowledge.

The study visits included:

- an **accessible nature conservation activity in Lauwersmeer National Park** and the activity centre **Lauwersnest** (NL);
- a visit to the **Wadden Sea cultural and natural heritage area** and the **Werelderfgoed Centrum (WEC) Lauwersoog** (NL), exploring relationships between humans, wildlife, and the local ecosystem;
- a **talk with a local forest ranger from Staatsbosbeheer** (NL), on the topic of rewilding natural areas and human-nature difficulties and conflicts that may arise, for example in Nationaal Park Drents-Friese Wold.
- a **guided walk with a local storyteller through the Montnegre i el Corredor Natural Park** (ES) focused on local myths, legends, and inclusive storytelling in nature;
- an **outdoor workshop on human-forest relationships in Collserola Natural Park** (ES);
- a **talk on the *trementinaires***, exploring traditional herbal knowledge and the cultural heritage of women healers from the Pyrenees (ES).

Photo 1 & 2: Study visit to the Wadden sea cultural and natural heritage area in the Netherlands. At the WEC Lauwersoog a seal release activity was attended. The visit revealed stories about local wildlife and the roles of humans in a complex ecological system. (Photos: Lia Hamminga)



Photo 3 & 4: Storytelling excursion through the Montnegre i el Corredor natural park, Catalonia, Spain. The region holds many local legends and myths connected to water and forest spirits, such as the “Dones d’aigua”; the “Women of the water”. The excursion was also a chance to observe archeological remains of local heritage, such as “Forns de peca”: traditional rural installations that were used to produce wood tar (pitch) from pine wood, which had many practical uses. (Photos: Silvia Bedmar)

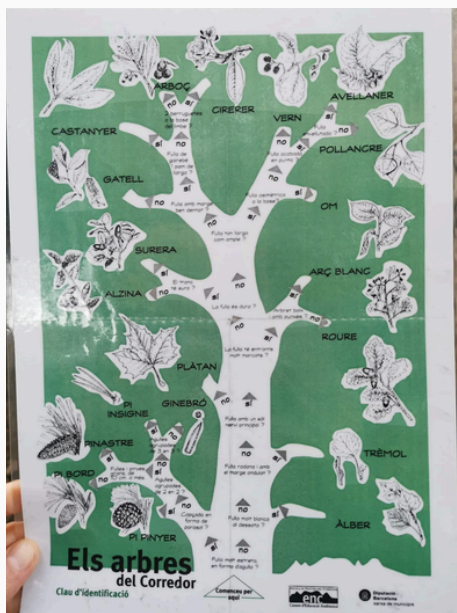


Photo 5: Easy-to-use activity sheet to classify trees, encountered during an educational workshop on human-forest relationships that was held in Collserola natural park, close to Barcelona. (Photo: Julia Stollenwerk)

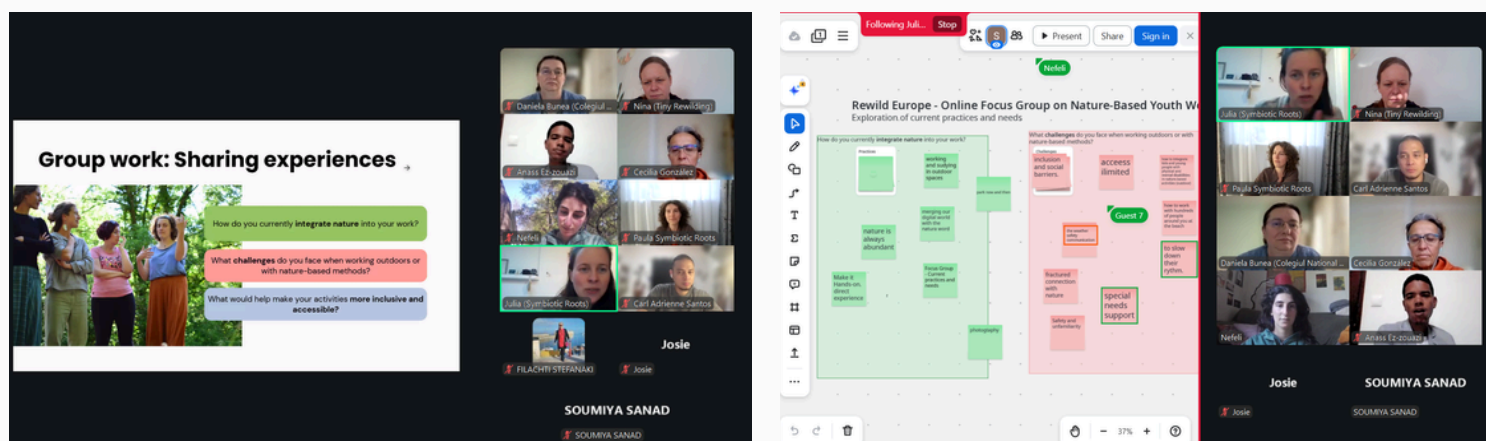
3. Online focus group with youth workers

As the final part of the research process, we organised a two-hour online focus group with ten youth workers from different countries across Europe and beyond, including participants from Portugal, Greece, Denmark, Romania, Slovenia, The Netherlands, Spain, and Morocco.

The focus group explored participants' experiences, needs, and challenges related to nature-based youth work, inclusion, and accessibility. It also served as a space to test storytelling methods in practice and to co-create first ideas for inclusive educational activities inspired by storytelling and human-nature connection. After the programme, there was additional time and space for networking between participants and representatives of our organisations.

Methods used during the session included brainstorming, storytelling reflection, plenary discussions, and small-group work.

The focus group provided valuable insights for the next phase of the project: the development of educational methods and tools for youth workers.



Online focus group with European youth workers, held on 21 April 2026 on ZOOM

Key findings and insights

The research highlighted several key insights related to human-nature connection, the role of storytelling, and current needs in the fields of rewilding and nature-based youth work. The findings draw on the collected stories, local study visits, and the online focus group with youth workers.

Stories reveal different layers of human-nature connection

Across the collected stories, several recurring themes emerged. Many stories portray humans as part of a larger living web, emphasizing the interconnection and interdependence of all natural elements. In these cases, relationships between humans, animals, plants, and landscapes are often based on care, reciprocity, and mutual respect rather than domination.

Other themes include nature as a source of healing and wellbeing, the presence of feminine nature spirits as guardians or mediators between worlds, and the consequences of disconnection from nature. Ecological imbalance, greed, ignorance of natural cycles or the breaking of respectful relationships often lead to loss and failure, while care and attentiveness are rewarded.

These stories offer valuable perspectives and entry points for contemporary discussions on human-nature relationships and ecological responsibility.

Storytelling preserves ecological and cultural knowledge

The research highlighted the importance of collecting and documenting oral history and local traditions before they disappear. Stories often contain knowledge about landscapes, plants, animals, and sustainable ways of living that has been passed down through generations.

Examples encountered during the research include stories connected to medicinal plants, the rich oral traditions of the Irish traveller community, and the almost forgotten profession of the *trementinaries*, women from the Pyrenees who travelled and shared knowledge about herbal remedies.

We also found that many folktales exist in multiple local variations, reflecting the close relationship between storytelling, place and community.

Storytelling can therefore serve not only as a gateway to connect with cultural heritage but also as a means of transmitting ecological knowledge and local identity.

Rewilding requires reconnecting people with nature

The study visits provided insights into contemporary nature conservation and rewilding practices. Conversations with practitioners highlighted that many environmental challenges stem from a lack of awareness and connection to nature. Even basic issues such as littering often result from people not fully understanding the impact of their actions on ecosystems.

The research suggests that human rewilding may need to begin with simple, practical and emotionally engaging experiences in nature that foster awareness, responsibility, and care. Examples observed were inclusive clean-up activities, outdoor workshops with a game character that make environmental education fun and engaging, and an animal release activity that told the story of a wounded animal, harmed by human sea pollution, nurtured back to its full strength and set free – a touching and profound emotional experience calling for action. A main challenge remains to reach out to and include those who have no point of contact to nature connection activities.

In this sense, rewilding is not only about restoring ecosystems but also about rebuilding relationships between people and the more-than-human-world. Humans are both part of the problem and an essential part of the solution.

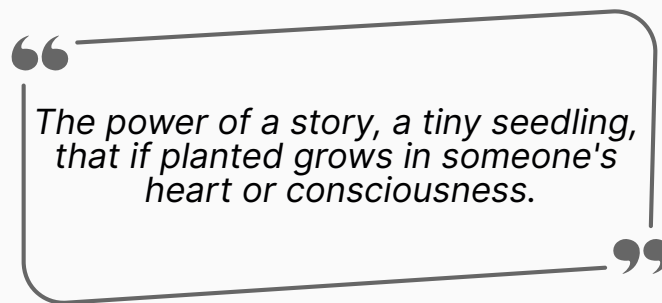


Storytelling has strong potential for nature-based youth work

The online focus group confirmed the value of storytelling as a nature-based educational tool. It was highlighted that stories can make environmental topics more accessible, create emotional engagement, spark imagination, invite a change of perspective, and provide a base for reflection on complex ecological issues in a safe and engaging way.

Storytelling may therefore offer new and diverse entry points to nature connection and sustainable action, helping young people engage with environmental topics in a personal and meaningful way.

As one participant reflected as a key take-away from the session:



Inclusive nature-based youth work needs adaptable approaches

Participants of the focus group identified several challenges related to outdoor learning, including accessibility, inclusion, weather conditions, safety considerations, and the growing disconnection from nature among many young people. As a result, youth workers expressed a need for practical, adaptable, and inclusive methods and materials that can support meaningful nature connection for diverse groups of young people.

Initial ideas generated during the focus group included the use of simple and accessible language, barrier-free outdoor spaces where possible, flexible activities that can be adapted to different needs, and participatory approaches that give everyone an opportunity to contribute and share their perspectives.

Challenges and limitations

During the research process, we also encountered several challenges and limitations that at the same time provided valuable learning opportunities for the next phases of the project.

Limited scope and availability of suitable stories

As part of the research design, we deliberately focused on often underrepresented perspectives, including female, queer, and non-human voices. One challenge was finding stories that aligned with these criteria. Many (mainstream) folklore narratives we encountered were shaped by patriarchal social structures and male perspectives, domination over nature, or violent conflict.

While these stories remain important cultural heritage, it was sometimes difficult to identify narratives that offered alternative perspectives on human-nature relationships. This challenge also highlighted the relevance of the project itself. The fact that such stories are hardly visible, points to a need for new educational resources that focus on care, reciprocity, inclusion, and ecological awareness. The project therefore contributes not only to preserving existing stories but also to creating new pathways for nature-based storytelling in youth work.

Accessibility of stories and sources

Accessing suitable materials was sometimes challenging. Many stories were scattered across different books, websites, local archives, or oral traditions, making them difficult to locate. Alternative stories were not accessible in mainstream books or libraries; queer story publications were often only available at small local publishers and not accessible online, or not even printed copies were available.

In some cases, language barriers limited access to regional folklore sources, while oral stories were often undocumented or difficult to trace.

This reinforced the importance of local knowledge holders, researchers, storytellers, and community members as valuable sources of information and highlighted the need to document oral traditions before they are lost.

Limited time and resources

The research was carried out within a relatively short timeframe and with limited resources. As a result, the collection of stories and examples cannot be considered exhaustive. Many additional stories, traditions, and perspectives remain unexplored and could provide valuable material for future research.

The research should therefore be understood as an initial exploration that can be developed further in later project phases and future initiatives.

Multiple versions and interpretations of stories

Many of the stories encountered exist in numerous local variations and adaptations. In oral traditions, stories naturally evolve over time, reflecting the cultural context and experiences of different communities. This sometimes made it difficult to identify a single "original" version of a story.

On the other hand, the research highlighted storytelling as a living practice that continuously adapts to changing contexts and audiences. With the project we react to these changes by offering our own contemporary story versions.

Balancing authenticity and accessibility

For the purpose of the story collection, some stories had to be shortened, translated, or adapted to make them accessible to an international audience and suitable for educational use. This raised questions about how to preserve cultural context and authenticity while creating materials that are understandable and engaging for youth workers from different backgrounds.

Throughout the process, we aimed to maintain the core messages, themes, and cultural significance of each story while adapting them for the project's educational objectives.

Recommendations for youth work

Our research may inspire youth work practice in the following ways:



Use storytelling as an entry point to nature connection

Stories can provide an accessible and emotionally engaging gateway to nature-based learning, inviting curiosity, empathy, and personal reflection. They can help young people build emotional connections with landscapes, plants, animals, and ecological issues.



Explore complex environmental topics through stories

Folktales, myths, and contemporary stories can serve as starting points for discussions on themes such as interdependence, care, biodiversity loss, and human-nature relationships. Storytelling creates space for diverse perspectives and allows complex topics to be explored in a more accessible and relatable way.



Encourage co-creation based on storytelling

Youth workers can use storytelling as a starting point for creative activities such as role play, theatre, land art, nature writing, nature invitations, or other nature-based activities inspired by storytelling. This allows young people to connect environmental themes to their own experiences and cultural contexts.





Develop inclusive and adaptable nature-based methods

Nature-based activities should be designed with accessibility and inclusion in mind. This includes using simple and accessible language, offering different levels of participation, selecting accessible outdoor spaces whenever possible, encouraging nature exploration in different natural environments and throughout the natural seasons, and adapting activities and materials to diverse needs and abilities. Storytelling is particularly valuable because it can be adapted to different groups, learning styles, and settings.



Create new stories for human rewilding

Youth work can also create new stories that reflect important values such as care, ecological responsibility, and sustainability. Such narratives can offer positive visions of human-nature relationships, lower the threshold to the natural world, and inspire rewilding practices.



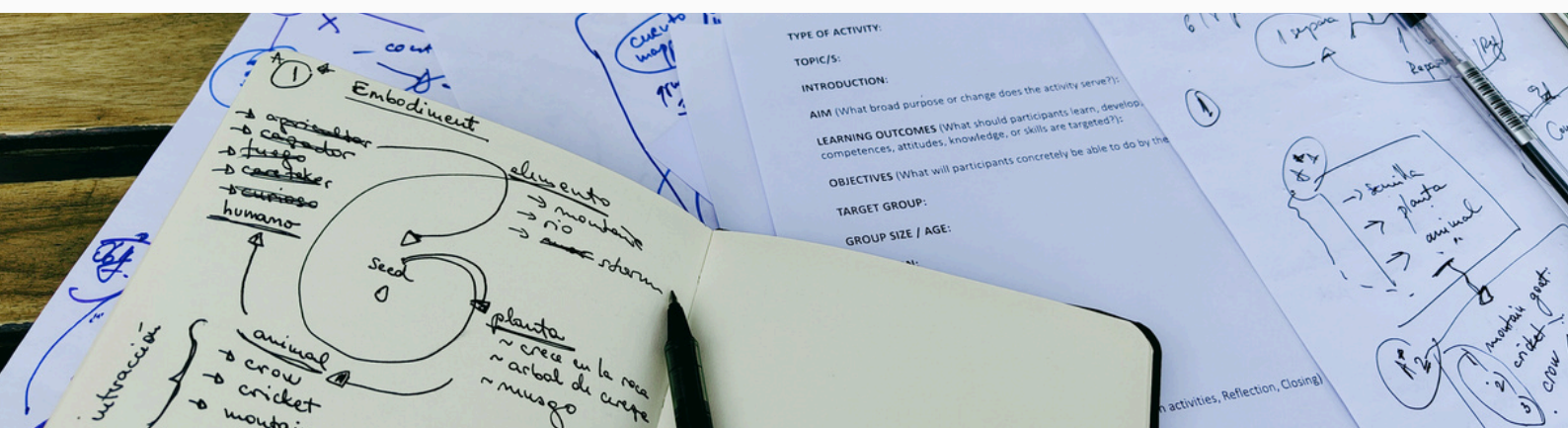
Conclusions and next steps

The research phase of the Rewild Europe project demonstrated the potential of storytelling as a tool for strengthening human-nature connection and engagement in youth work. Through the exploration of stories, local study visits, and exchanges with youth workers, we identified themes, practices, and needs that inform the next stages of the project.

Based on the research outcomes, the next steps of the project include:

- A **youth worker seminar** focusing on the co-creation of methods based on storytelling and human rewilding (already carried out in May 2026).
- Field-testing the developed methods through **local workshops** in Spain and the Netherlands during summer 2026.
- Creating the **Rewild Europe Toolbox**, including educational methods, the story collection, and an interactive map. The publication of the toolbox is foreseen for January 2027.
- Organising an **international webinar** and (virtual) **storytelling evenings** to share project results (February-March 2027).

The research marks only the beginning of the Rewild Europe journey. We hope it encourages youth workers to continue exploring stories as pathways to nature connection and that it lowers the threshold to spend time educating in nature. May many stories – old and new – be shared, transformed and passed on, helping to rewild youth work, one story at a time.



Rewild Europe

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For more information visit our website:
<https://symbioticroots.org/rewild-europe/>

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