THE Hope DISPATCH

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

EDITION 4 · OCTOBER 2026



IN THIS EDITION

The Island That Turns Off Its Lights

How Corvo Gives Its Seabirds the Stars

A Bridge for Elk and Pronghorn

The Colorado Overpass That Cut Collisions by 91 Per Cent

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What a Decade-Low Tells Us About Guarding What We Love

The Numbat Steps Back From the Brink

How Fences, Patience and Science Rewrote an Australian Story

Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Subscribe free on LinkedIn

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INTRODUCTION

The Hope Dispatch: October 2026

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu

Edition 4 of The Hope Dispatch: 5 pieces for October 2026.

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

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

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- The Island That Turns Off Its Lights: How Corvo Gives Its Seabirds the Stars
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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 Island That Turns Off Its Lights: How Corvo Gives Its Seabirds the Stars

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

On the smallest island in the Azores, about 450 people agree each October to give up their streetlights so that thousands of young seabirds can find the sea. It is one of the quietest acts of collective kindness in Europe, and one of the most effective.

A village at the edge of the Atlantic

Corvo is easy to miss on a map. It is the smallest and the northernmost island of the Azores, the Portuguese archipelago that sits far out in the North Atlantic, well west of mainland Europe. It has one village, Vila do Corvo, and a population of around 450 people. There is a small airport, a harbour, a volcanic crater lake, and a great deal of wind.

What Corvo also has, every summer and autumn, is noise. After dark the cliffs and slopes around the village fill with a strange, wailing, almost human call. It belongs to the Cory's shearwater, *Calonectris borealis*, a long-winged ocean bird known in the Azores as the *cagarro*. Islanders grow up with the sound. For many of them it is simply what an Azorean night is supposed to sound like.

The Azores matter enormously to this species. Positive News, summarising the 2026 effort, reported that about 75% of the world's breeding population of Cory's shearwaters nests in the archipelago, and that around 6,000 pairs nest on Corvo alone. For an island with fewer than 500 human residents, that is a remarkable ratio: more than ten pairs of seabirds for every person.

That ratio is the starting point for this story, because it means the people of Corvo carry a responsibility that is far larger than their numbers. And each October, they choose to carry it.

The problem with light

Cory's shearwaters spend almost all of their lives at sea. They come to land only to breed, laying a single egg in a rocky crevice or burrow. The chick spends roughly three months in that dark cavity, fed by its parents, growing heavy on fish and squid.

Then, from about mid-October to mid-November, the young birds leave. They do it at night, and they do it alone. The parents have usually already gone. The fledgling crawls out of its nest, spreads wings it has never really used, and launches itself towards the ocean.

Scientists and conservationists who work with these birds describe the same basic mechanism. On a dark night, the brightest part of the horizon is the sea, lit faintly by the moon and stars. A young bird heading towards that faint glow will reach the water. But a village lit by orange streetlights can be brighter than the sea. The fledglings fly towards it instead, become disoriented, circle the lamps, collide with walls and wires, and come down on roads, in gardens and in doorways.

Once a shearwater is on the ground, it is in serious trouble. Its body is built for long-distance gliding over the ocean, not for walking. Its legs are set far back, and on flat ground it struggles to get airborne again. A grounded fledgling is exposed to cars, to cats, to dehydration and to exhaustion. Many simply do not make it.

This is not unique to Corvo. The same pattern has been recorded across the Azores, in Madeira and in the Canary Islands, and in shearwater and petrel colonies in many parts of the world. Light pollution is now widely recognised by ornithologists as one of the significant threats to young seabirds. What makes Corvo different is what the island decided to do about it.

1991: the year the village noticed

The story of Corvo's response begins with ordinary residents, not with a government program. According to an October 2026 report in Infobae, drawing on reporting by The Guardian, islanders became seriously concerned in 1991, when the community noticed large numbers of young shearwaters dying in and around the village.

What followed was not a grand plan but a habit of care. Residents and volunteers began walking the streets at night during the fledging season, looking for birds that had come down. They picked them up, kept them safe overnight, and released them the next morning where they could reach the sea.

In 1995, the Regional Government of the Azores turned that kind of grassroots effort into an official campaign, SOS Cagarro. It spread to all nine islands of the archipelago and has run every autumn since. The 2025 edition was the 31st, running from 15 October to 15 November, with a free, 24-hour hotline for anyone who found a grounded bird. The campaign asks drivers to slow down at night during the season, asks the public to pick up stranded birds carefully, and organises volunteer brigades to patrol and release them.

The numbers are striking. More than 30,000 Cory's shearwater fledglings have been rescued across the Azores since 2015, according to SOS Cagarro campaign figures reported by The Guardian in October 2026. Around 6,000 of those rescues happened on Corvo.

That is a lot of birds for a village of 450 people to pick up off the ground. It is also, in a sense, a measure of the problem. Every rescue is a bird that light pulled off course.

From picking up birds to switching off the cause

For years, rescue was the main response. Then the people of Corvo started asking a simpler question. If the lights are the problem, why not turn them off?

SPEA (the Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds), the Portuguese partner of BirdLife International, has worked with the island's local authority, the Câmara Municipal do Corvo, on exactly that question. In a statement published in October 2020, SPEA said that since 2017 the municipality had switched off public lighting during the most critical periods of the SOS Cagarro campaign. In 2019 the island tried a full one-night public blackout. In 2020 it went further, announcing that public lighting would be switched off from 9pm to 4am on five consecutive nights at the end of October, the peak of the fledging period.

Before that 2020 blackout, SPEA surveyed 207 Corvo residents about the idea. The result, as SPEA reported it, was unanimous support. On an island that small, 207 people is a substantial share of the adult population, and unanimity on anything is rare. It tells you something about how deeply the shearwaters are woven into local identity.

The blackout has since become an annual tradition. Infobae's October 2026 report describes the arrangement as it now works. For five autumn nights, public lighting across the village is switched off. Residents are not required to turn off the lights in their own homes, but many choose to. Only a few safety lights remain on. According to the reporting, Corvo is the only island in the Azores that fully suspends its public lighting for this purpose.

In 2026 the island extended the effort. Positive News reported on 30 October that Corvo Municipal Council had pledged to turn off the lights of its streets and public buildings for almost three weeks from 21 October. The 2020 blackout was run as part of two European cooperation projects, Interreg LuMinAves, which worked to reduce the impact of light pollution on seabirds across Macaronesia, and Interreg EElabs, which focused on more sustainable approaches to artificial lighting.

What a blackout night looks like

It is worth pausing to imagine what this actually means for the people who live there.

On blackout nights, Vila do Corvo goes dark in a way that few European villages ever do. The streets are lit only by porch lights, torches and the sky. Overhead, the stars come out in numbers that most city dwellers never see. Reporting from the island describes that as part of the point: with the artificial glow gone, the stars are visible again, and the young birds have their natural reference points back.

Then the volunteers go out. Many of them are young people. They walk the lanes with torches, checking under parked cars, along walls and in corners where a confused fledgling might shelter. Among the search team described in the October 2026 coverage is the island's forest warden, Rui Pimentel. When they find a bird, they pick it up gently and place it in a ventilated cardboard box for the night.

At dawn, the boxes are carried to a nearby cliff. The birds are released there, away from the village, with nothing between them and the open ocean. From that moment, if all goes well, they will not touch land again for years. Like many long-lived seabirds, young shearwaters typically spend several years at sea before returning to breed, often close to where they hatched.

There is something quietly beautiful in that arrangement. A child on Corvo might help carry a box to the cliff one October morning, and the bird inside it might come back to the same island to raise its own chick when that child is a young adult.

Does it work?

The honest answer is that switching off the lights does not solve every problem, but it clearly helps.

SPEA has said, as reported by Positive News, that switching off the lights has reduced the number of birds that become grounded or are killed in collisions. Published coverage does not give detailed before and after counts for Corvo, so the claim should be treated as encouraging rather than definitive. But the direction is consistent with what researchers have found elsewhere: less light at the critical time means fewer young birds pulled off course.

Light is also not the only threat. The October 2026 reporting notes that cats are among the main predators of shearwater chicks on Corvo, and that SPEA has installed ultrasonic devices around nests to discourage them. At sea, the adults face other pressures, including fisheries bycatch, changes in prey availability and plastic pollution. The International Union for Conservation of Nature currently lists the Cory's shearwater as Least Concern, based on a BirdLife International assessment, but that status depends on large colonies like those in the Azores staying healthy.

What the blackout does is remove one of the few threats that a community can switch off with its own hands, literally overnight.

The spread of a good idea

SPEA has been explicit that it hopes Corvo's example will spread. In its public statements it has said it hopes other towns and islands in the region will follow. There are signs that the idea is travelling. The LuMinAves project brought together the Azores, Madeira and the Canary Islands to tackle light pollution and seabirds, and seabird rescue campaigns operate on several Macaronesian islands each autumn.

This is how positive change often works in practice. One small place proves that something is possible, practical and popular. It becomes a reference point. Then larger places, which might have assumed the idea was unrealistic, find it harder to dismiss.

Corvo's version is particularly persuasive because it is so modest. The island did not need a major infrastructure budget, a new law or a technological breakthrough. It needed a light switch, a few dozen volunteers, some cardboard boxes, the cooperation of its local council, and the willingness of several hundred people to spend a handful of evenings each year in the dark.

What we can learn from 450 people in the dark

It would be easy to treat this story as charming but small. A remote island, a few nights of darkness, some seabirds. I think that would miss what makes it important.

Responsibility does not scale with size

The people of Corvo could have argued that their 450 residents were too few to matter, or that light pollution is a global issue far beyond the reach of one village. Instead they recognised that because so many shearwaters breed on their island, their choices mattered more, not less. Being small did not reduce their responsibility; it concentrated it.

Most of us are in a similar position more often than we admit. A school, a workplace, a street or a sporting club can seem too small to make a difference to big problems. But very often, the place where you stand happens to be exactly where a problem is concentrated. That is where action counts most.

Start with care, then fix the cause

The history of Corvo's response follows a pattern worth noticing. First, residents noticed suffering and responded with direct care: walking the streets, picking up birds, carrying them to the cliff. Only later, after years of rescue work, did the community move upstream to address the cause.

That sequence is common in positive change. Direct help builds knowledge, trust and commitment. The people who have spent nights picking up exhausted fledglings are the people best placed to argue for switching off the lights, because they have seen what the lights do. Rescue and reform are not competing approaches; the first often makes the second possible.

Ask people, and they may surprise you

When SPEA surveyed Corvo residents in 2020, it might have expected some resistance. Streetlights feel like a basic service, and people reasonably worry about safety and convenience. Instead, every one of the 207 people surveyed supported the blackout.

There is a lesson there for anyone who assumes that the public will not accept a small sacrifice for a larger good. Sometimes the assumption is wrong. People are often more willing to act than their leaders expect, especially when the reason is concrete, local and visible. On Corvo, everyone can hear the shearwaters. Everyone knows what the blackout is for.

Some pollution can be reversed overnight

Many environmental problems take decades to reverse. Carbon dioxide lingers in the atmosphere for centuries. Plastics persist in the ocean. Degraded soils take years to recover. Light pollution is different. The moment a light is switched off, the pollution it caused is gone.

That makes light one of the most hopeful environmental challenges we face. It does not require us to wait for the next generation to see a benefit. On Corvo, the stars return the same night the lamps go out, and the young birds can use them that night too.

Tradition can be invented

Finally, Corvo shows that a community tradition does not have to be ancient to be meaningful. The blackout is only a few years old as a full annual practice. Yet it already seems to belong to the island in the way that festivals and harvests belong to other

places. Children who grow up with it will think of the dark October nights, the torches and the cardboard boxes as simply part of who they are.

Every community can choose what kind of traditions it wants to create. Corvo chose one built around restraint, patience and care for creatures that most people will never see up close.

What the rest of us might borrow

Few of us live on a seabird island. But the principle behind Corvo's blackout travels well, and it is worth spelling out what it could look like elsewhere.

Councils can ask whether every streetlight needs to burn at full strength all night, every night, or whether some can be dimmed, shielded or switched to warmer, downward-facing fittings during sensitive seasons. Businesses can ask whether illuminated signs and empty office floors need to stay lit until dawn. Households can draw curtains, switch off garden floodlights and choose lighting that points down rather than up. None of these steps is dramatic. Each one returns a little of the night to the creatures that depend on it.

The Corvo model also suggests a way of going about it. The island did not impose darkness on an unwilling public. It explained the reason, asked residents what they thought, partnered with a respected conservation organisation, set a clear and limited window, and paired the blackout with practical rescue work so that people could see the purpose with their own eyes. That combination of explanation, consultation, a defined time frame and visible results is a useful template for almost any community change, whether it concerns light, noise, traffic or waste.

Perhaps most importantly, Corvo shows that environmental action does not have to feel like loss. As the reporting from the island makes clear, the dark nights are not simply an inconvenience to be endured. They come with torches, volunteers, stars, and the satisfaction of watching a bird you rescued glide away over the water at dawn.

A note of realism

It is important to keep this story in proportion. The blackout covers a handful of nights. It does not solve the many pressures that seabirds face at sea, and it does not, on its own, guarantee the future of the Cory's shearwater. Rescue counts from a single island cannot tell us everything about long-term population trends. Conservationists themselves stress that sustained work, including predator control, nest monitoring and broader action on lighting across the archipelago, remains essential.

But hope does not require a story to be complete. It requires it to be true, and to point in the right direction. Corvo's story is both.

The sound of an Azorean night

Marine biologist Tania Pipa of SPEA, who travels to Corvo each year to check on the nests, put the islanders' feeling into words in The Guardian's October 2026 coverage: "To me, the day I don't hear Cory's shearwaters in the Azores, it will certainly not be the Azores."

That is why 450 people switch off their lights. Not because a regulation forces them to, and not because anyone is watching, but because they understand that the wailing calls on the cliffs are part of their home, and that home is worth a few dark nights.

Somewhere out on the Atlantic right now, young shearwaters that left Corvo this October are learning to feed, glide and survive on the open ocean. Some of them were carried to the cliff in cardboard boxes by volunteers with torches. Some of them found the sea on their own, guided by stars that were visible only because a village chose to let them shine.

In a year with plenty of loud news, it is worth remembering that some of the best things happening in the world are happening quietly, in the dark, on a small island in the middle of the ocean.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

A Bridge for Elk and Pronghorn: The Colorado Overpass That Cut Collisions by 91 Per Cent

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

On one of the busiest highways in the American West, drivers used to hit a wild animal roughly once a day. In the ten months after a wildlife overpass opened across Interstate 25 in Colorado, they hit two. It is one of the clearest pieces of good news about people and nature sharing space that 2026 has produced.

A road through the middle of a home

Interstate 25 is the spine of Colorado's Front Range. It runs north to south along the eastern edge of the Rocky Mountains, linking Denver and Colorado Springs, two of the fastest-growing metropolitan areas in the United States. Between those cities, south of Denver, the highway passes through a stretch of rolling grassland, ponderosa pine and ranch country between the towns of Larkspur and Monument.

To a driver, it is six lanes of fast-moving traffic. To an elk, a mule deer, a pronghorn or a black bear, it is a wall across the middle of its home. According to reporting by The Colorado Sun in October 2026, the crossing sits between about 39,000 acres of habitat in this area. Animals on one side need to reach food, water, mates and seasonal ranges on the other. For decades, the only way across was over the asphalt.

The results were predictable and grim. Before the new crossing was built, drivers on this stretch hit a wild animal about once a day. Each of those collisions was a death or serious injury for an animal. Many were also a danger to people. An adult elk can weigh around 700 pounds, more than 300 kilograms. Hitting one at highway speed can destroy a car and kill its occupants.

What was built

The solution was not a single structure but a system. The Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT), working with Colorado Parks and Wildlife (CPW), built what The Colorado Sun described as North America's largest wildlife overpass, together with a network of supporting features.

The centrepiece is a vegetated bridge measuring about 209 by 200 feet, roughly 64 by 61 metres, spanning all six lanes of the interstate. Unlike a normal road bridge, it is designed to look and feel like part of the landscape, with soil and plants on top so that wary animals are willing to walk across it.

The overpass is supported by five wildlife underpasses, which allow animals that prefer to go under rather than over to cross beneath the road, and by miles of fencing. The fencing is crucial. It does not stop animals from moving; it guides them. Running along the highway, it funnels animals away from the traffic lanes and towards the crossings. Without it, many animals would continue to try to cross the road wherever they happened to reach it.

The project cost about US$15 million and was completed in December 2025.

The results

The figures reported in October 2026 are remarkable.

Measure	Before the crossing	About ten months after opening
Wildlife hit by vehicles on this stretch	About one per day	Two in total
Reduction in wildlife collisions		About 91 per cent
Travel delays on the corridor		Down about 9 per cent

The collision figures come from crash reports filed by the Colorado State Patrol and from CDOT maintenance crews, who keep track of animal carcasses removed from the road. A drop from roughly one collision a day to two in ten months is not a marginal improvement. It is close to the elimination of a problem that had been accepted for decades as an unavoidable cost of driving.

The reduction in travel delays is a less obvious but important benefit. Collisions with large animals close lanes, bring out emergency crews and slow traffic for everyone. Fewer collisions mean fewer of those disruptions. The crossing, in other words, is not only good for wildlife. It is good for commuters, freight drivers and emergency services too.

Bridget O'Rourke, a spokesperson for Colorado Parks and Wildlife, told The Colorado Sun the agency was thrilled with the outcome. Lisa Schwantes, a regional communications manager for CDOT, described the joint effort to reduce collisions as a fascinating piece of work.

The pronghorn that crossed the road

The statistics are impressive, but one detail in the reporting stands out above the rest.

In June 2026, wildlife biologists confirmed that a pronghorn had crossed Interstate 25 at this location for the first time in an estimated 20 to 30 years.

Pronghorn are among the most remarkable animals in North America. They are the fastest land mammals on the continent, capable of extraordinary bursts of speed across open plains. They are also famously reluctant to jump over obstacles, preferring to go under fences or around them. That makes highways and fencing particularly hard barriers for them. A pronghorn population divided by a major road can become isolated, with reduced access to forage and reduced genetic mixing over time.

Tracking data reported in October 2026 shows pronghorn using the new underpasses as well. After a generation in which the interstate had effectively split their range, they are moving across it again.

It is hard to think of a better symbol of what the crossing has achieved. A road that had been an impassable wall for decades has, in a matter of months, become a place that animals can move through safely.

Not just the big animals

The crossing was designed with large mammals in mind, but it is being used by a much wider range of wildlife. According to the reporting, the animals detected using the structures include pronghorn, and also smaller species such as rabbits, toads and northern leopard frogs.

The leopard frogs are a particularly encouraging sign. The Colorado Sun reported that they have seen steep population declines in recent years and now have protected status. Small, slow-moving animals like frogs and toads are extremely vulnerable on roads, and they rarely feature in collision statistics because nobody files a crash report after hitting one. Their use of the crossing suggests the structures are restoring connections for an entire community of wildlife, not only for the animals large enough to damage a car.

Why this works: the science of crossings

Colorado's result is exceptional in size, but it is not a surprise to the people who study wildlife crossings. It builds on decades of research and experience in North America and Europe.

Banff, Canada

The best-known example is in Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada, where the Trans-Canada Highway passes through some of the most important wildlife habitat in the Rocky Mountains. Over several decades, Parks Canada built a network of 44 crossings there, 38 underpasses and six overpasses, combined with fencing. Research led by ecologist Anthony Clevenger and colleagues, published in 2001, found that highway fencing reduced collisions with large hoofed animals such as elk and deer by about 80 per cent. Parks Canada reports that 11 species of large mammals have used the Banff structures, recording more than 150,000 crossings between 1996 and 2012.

Banff also offered an important lesson. Not every species responds the same way, and fencing on its own is not a complete answer for every animal. Researchers found that bears in particular needed further attention. That kind of honest evaluation is part of why crossings have improved over time.

The Netherlands

In Europe, the Netherlands has been a pioneer, building dozens of wildlife bridges, known as ecoducts, across its dense road and rail network. One of the most famous, the Natuurbrug Zanderij Crailoo near Hilversum, is about 800 metres long and at least 50 metres wide, connecting nature areas across a railway, a road, a business park and a sports park. It was opened in May 2006.

California

In southern California, the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing over the US 101 freeway near Los Angeles has been under construction since 2022, with completion expected in late 2026. It is intended in part to reconnect habitat for the region's mountain lions, which have been hemmed in by freeways and development.

The common thread is that crossings work best when they are designed as systems, combining well-placed bridges or tunnels with fencing that guides animals towards them, and when they are located using good data about where animals actually try to cross.

The cost of doing nothing

It is worth putting the US$15 million cost of the Colorado crossing in context.

Wildlife and vehicle collisions are a significant public safety problem in the United States. A long-cited national estimate, published by Michael Conover and colleagues in 1995, put the toll at about 1.5 million collisions involving deer every year, causing around US$1.1 billion in vehicle damage, about 29,000 human injuries and more than 200 human deaths. Those figures are dated and vary between studies, but every estimate points to a heavy toll in lives, injuries, insurance claims and emergency response costs.

On a single stretch of road where drivers were hitting an animal every day, each collision avoided is money saved, a vehicle undamaged and, potentially, a life preserved. Over the lifetime of a structure designed to last decades, the case for investment becomes very strong. Crossings are sometimes presented as a conservation luxury. The Colorado numbers suggest they are better understood as road safety infrastructure that happens to help wildlife too.

What comes next in Colorado

Colorado is not stopping at one crossing. According to The Colorado Sun, six more crossing systems are being designed across the state. They include what would be the first overpass built specifically for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, on Colorado Highway 40 east of the town of Empire. Other planned locations include Interstate 70 westbound at East Vail Pass, Interstate 25 near the New Mexico border, US Highway 160 east of Cortez, Colorado Highway 40 west of Craig, and an area near US Highway 287 south of the Wyoming border.

The state is also finding new ways to pay for this work. From January 2027, Colorado drivers will be able to opt in to a US$5 fee when registering their vehicles, with the money going towards wildlife passages statewide. There is precedent for Coloradans supporting this kind of scheme. The Colorado Sun noted that the state's US$29 Keep Colorado Wild pass, which supports state parks and wildlife, has raised US$146 million since its launch in 2023.

The timing of the reporting is also a reminder of why this matters. Wildlife officials note that collisions with animals rise sharply in autumn, and particularly after the end of daylight saving time, when more commuting happens in the dark, just as many animals

are on the move. Drought and wildfire have also pushed some animals, including bears, to move earlier and further than usual in search of food.

The bigger picture: room for both

Colorado's human population is growing, and as Bridget O'Rourke of CPW noted in the October coverage, people are increasingly moving into areas that were once wildlife habitat. That pattern is repeated across much of the world. Roads, housing estates, fences and farms break landscapes into fragments, and animals that need to move find themselves trapped.

It is easy to see this as a zero-sum contest: every new road a loss for wildlife, every protected corridor a cost to people. The Interstate 25 crossing suggests a more hopeful framing. With good design and enough investment, the same piece of land can carry six lanes of traffic and a working wildlife corridor at the same time. Drivers get safer journeys and fewer delays. Animals get their range back.

Lessons from a bridge

Measure what matters

Part of what makes this story persuasive is that it is measured. Colorado did not simply build a bridge and declare victory. Crash reports, carcass counts and tracking data were used to see whether the structures were working. That evidence is what allows the state to argue for six more crossings, and what allows other places to learn from it.

Good intentions are a starting point, but evidence is what turns a single project into a movement.

Partnerships multiply impact

The crossing was a joint effort between a transport agency and a wildlife agency, with the state highway patrol helping to measure the results and a broader alliance of partners helping to choose where crossings go. Transport engineers and wildlife biologists do not always speak the same professional language, and their priorities can differ. Here, they found a shared goal: fewer animals on the road. Each brought something the other lacked.

That is a useful model for any organisation trying to solve a problem that crosses departmental boundaries. The most effective solutions often sit in the gap between two disciplines.

Design for the whole system

The bridge gets the headlines, but the fencing and underpasses are what make it work. A beautiful overpass without guide fencing would be used only by animals that happened to stumble across it. The lesson for any change effort is that the visible centrepiece rarely succeeds on its own. The supporting structures, which often seem less exciting, are what turn an idea into an outcome.

Small creatures count

The northern leopard frogs crossing under Interstate 25 will never make a headline the way an elk does. Yet their presence is one of the most encouraging parts of the story. Well-designed solutions often produce benefits that their designers did not specifically target. When we restore a connection, we restore it for everything that needs it.

Old barriers can fall quickly

For 20 to 30 years, pronghorn could not cross that stretch of interstate. Within months of the crossing opening, they could. Barriers that seem permanent are sometimes only waiting for someone to decide they are worth removing.

Why this matters far beyond Colorado

Readers in Australia will recognise the problem immediately. Anyone who has driven a country road at dusk knows the sudden shape of a kangaroo or wallaby in the headlights, and the roadside carcasses that mark the most dangerous stretches. Wombats, koalas, echidnas, cassowaries and many smaller species are also killed on roads every year. Australian road agencies and conservation groups have built rope bridges for gliders and possums, underpasses for koalas and fauna fencing on major highway upgrades, and Australian researchers have contributed to the international evidence on what works.

The same is true in many other countries. Wherever fast roads cross wild land, the question is not whether animals will try to cross but how many will die doing so. The Interstate 25 result matters because it is such a clear, well-measured demonstration that the answer can be close to none.

What drivers can do in the meantime

Until every dangerous stretch of road has a crossing, drivers remain part of the solution. Wildlife agencies in Colorado and elsewhere give consistent advice that is worth repeating:

- Take extra care around dawn and dusk, when many large animals are most active.
- Treat wildlife warning signs as real information, not decoration. They are usually placed where collisions have happened before.
- Slow down at night in rural areas, which gives you more time to react and reduces the force of any impact.
- Where one animal crosses, expect others. Deer, elk and kangaroos often travel in groups.
- Avoid swerving violently into oncoming traffic or off the road. Agencies generally advise braking firmly and staying in your lane where it is safe to do so.

Those habits will not replace a well-designed crossing. But they save lives, human and animal, on the thousands of roads where crossings have not yet been built.

A note of balance

It would be wrong to suggest that wildlife crossings solve every problem. Ten months of data is a strong start, but longer-term monitoring will be needed to see how animal populations respond over years and through different seasons and weather conditions.

Some species adapt to crossings faster than others. And crossings address only one of the pressures facing wildlife; habitat loss, drought, wildfire and disease remain serious challenges.

Crossings are also expensive, and there are many more dangerous stretches of road than there is money to fix them. Choosing where to build requires good data and difficult priorities.

But none of those caveats changes the core finding. On a busy interstate where drivers once hit an animal every day, a single well-designed system has nearly eliminated the problem in less than a year.

The view from the bridge

Picture the overpass on an autumn evening. Below, headlights stream north towards Denver and south towards Colorado Springs. Above, on a strip of grass and shrubs that looks like any other piece of Colorado hillside, a small herd of elk walks unhurriedly from one side of the highway to the other. Somewhere nearby, a pronghorn that might never have crossed this road is grazing on ground its parents could not reach.

Most of the drivers below will never know the animals are there. That is the point. The best infrastructure often works invisibly, preventing harm so quietly that nobody notices the accidents that did not happen.

In a world where so many stories about nature are stories of loss, the Interstate 25 wildlife crossing is a reminder that we can build our way towards coexistence, not only away from it.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

The Smallest Pig Comes Home: Three Decades of Patience Return Pygmy Hogs to Assam's Grasslands

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

Once written off as extinct, the world's smallest wild pig is being returned, a few animals at a time, to the tall grasslands of north-east India. In 2026, fifteen more pygmy hogs were released into Manas National Park, bringing the total returned to the wild since the program began to 194. It is a story about a tiny animal, and about the long, unglamorous persistence that real conservation demands.

An animal you could hold in your arms

The pygmy hog, *Porcula salvania*, is not what most people imagine when they think of a wild pig. According to Durrell, an adult is about 65 centimetres long and around 25 centimetres tall. It is the smallest wild pig species in the world, and it is the only member of its own genus.

It lives in one very particular kind of habitat: the tall, wet grasslands of the southern foothills of the Himalayas, in what is now the Indian state of Assam. These grasslands can grow higher than a person, forming a dense, shifting sea of stems along river floodplains. Pygmy hogs move through it in small family groups, rooting for food in the soil. Females build sturdy, waterproof nests from grass, and once the young hoglets are old enough, they help with the repairs.

It is easy to underestimate how important such a small animal can be. By digging and foraging, pygmy hogs turn over soil and spread seeds. More significantly, conservationists describe the pygmy hog as an indicator species. Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, which has worked with the species for decades, explains it this way: when the grasslands begin to fail, pygmy hog numbers fall first, before the decline shows up in larger and more famous animals such as elephants, rhinos and tigers. A healthy pygmy hog population is a sign of a healthy grassland. A vanishing one is a warning.

Lost, and found in a fire

For much of the twentieth century, the pygmy hog was in deep trouble. Its grassland home was being converted to settlements, farmland and commercial forestry. Grasslands were burned, grazed by livestock and altered by flood control works. The hogs were hunted for meat. By the early 1960s, the species was widely thought to be extinct.

Then, in 1971, a small group of pygmy hogs was found in Assam, sheltering from a grassland fire in a neighbouring tea plantation. It is one of the more dramatic

rediscoveries in modern conservation: an animal presumed lost, revealed only because a fire drove it into the open.

The rediscovery did not mean the species was safe. It meant there was still a chance. Over the following decades, wild populations continued to shrink as grasslands disappeared or degraded. According to Durrell, habitat loss eventually left only one surviving wild population, in Manas National Park in western Assam, near the border with Bhutan.

Today the pygmy hog is listed among the most threatened mammals on Earth. Durrell's own description of the species makes the point bluntly, calling it one of the most threatened mammals on the planet despite once being thought extinct.

A program built for the long haul

Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust, the organisation founded by the naturalist and author Gerald Durrell and based in Jersey in the Channel Islands, has been involved with pygmy hogs since the 1970s. In 1995 it helped establish the Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme, a partnership that brings together the Assam Forest Department, India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the IUCN Species Survival Commission's Wild Pig Specialist Group, and the Indian conservation organisations Aaranyak and EcoSystems-India.

In 1996, the program took six pygmy hogs, two males and four females, from the grasslands of Manas to begin a captive breeding effort. Six animals is a very small foundation on which to build the future of a species. Everything that has followed has grown from that start.

The program now runs two centres in Assam, a research and breeding centre at Basistha near Guwahati and a pre-release centre at Potasali near Nameri National Park. Hogs bred in captivity do not go straight into the wild. They first spend a period of pre-release conditioning at Potasali, in enclosures designed to resemble natural grassland, where they learn to forage, build nests and behave as wild hogs would, with as little human contact as possible.

Then comes the hardest part: finding somewhere for them to go.

Releasing hogs into a grassland that has to be rebuilt first

A captive breeding program is only as good as the habitat waiting at the end of it. For pygmy hogs, that means tall, healthy, well-managed grassland, which is exactly what has been disappearing.

Beginning in 2008, the program released 116 captive-bred hogs into three protected grasslands in Assam, according to Durrell: 35 in Sonai Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary, 59 in Orang National Park and 22 in Barnadi Wildlife Sanctuary. Those releases established new populations and demonstrated that hogs raised in captivity could survive and breed in the wild.

The return to Manas has been especially symbolic. Manas was the last stronghold of the wild population, the place from which the original founders were taken in 1996. Releases

into Manas National Park began in 2020, and in October 2024 Durrell reported nine more captive-bred hogs returned there. Then, in a release reported in August 2026, a further fifteen pygmy hogs were returned to the Kuribeel grasslands of Manas, the park their ancestors had come from three decades earlier.

According to the Natural World Fund, which reported the 2026 release, the site's grassland had been restored over about eight years before the hogs were reintroduced. There had been no sign of a wild pygmy hog population there for around a decade. Restoration work typically involves cutting back invasive weeds and spreading trees, which shade out the tall grasses the hogs need, and carefully managing fire and grazing.

With this latest release, the program has now bred and released 194 pygmy hogs since it began. It plans to release around 80 more over the next five years, with a long-term goal of a self-sustaining wild population of 300 hogs by 2040.

Watching the hogs after they go

Releasing animals is not the end of the work. The program monitors how released hogs survive and use their new habitat. For the 2026 release, the Natural World Fund reported that five of the hogs would be tracked by radio telemetry, alongside camera traps and sign surveys, to assess their behaviour, survival and habitat use. Program director Dr Parag Jyoti Deka said each step would help the team "learn and create a better, stronger future for this fascinating species."

This kind of follow-up matters enormously. Many reintroduction efforts around the world have struggled because animals were released without enough understanding of what happened to them afterwards. Tracking tells conservationists whether hogs are staying in suitable areas, how far they range, whether they are finding food and shelter, and what is killing those that do not survive. That knowledge shapes where and how the next groups are released.

Dr Vinay Gupta, Assam's principal chief conservator of forests and chief wildlife warden, described the reintroduction as a "remarkable conservation achievement". Durrell's chief executive, Rebecca Brewer, said she was proud to lead the initiative that "saved the pygmy hog from extinction and helped the wild population to grow and thrive."

On 9 October 2026, Durrell reported that Dr Deka had received the Assam State Friends of the Environment Award, recognition of years of work leading the program on the ground.

Manas: a park that came back too

It is worth saying something about the place these hogs are returning to, because Manas has its own story of recovery.

Manas National Park sits along the Manas River where it flows out of the Himalayan foothills from Bhutan into the plains of Assam. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, inscribed in 1985 for its extraordinary range of habitats and wildlife, including tigers, Asian elephants, greater one-horned rhinoceros, wild water buffalo and the Bengal florican, one of the world's rarest bustards.

During a long period of civil unrest in the region, Manas suffered heavily. Infrastructure was damaged and wildlife, including rhinos, was badly affected by poaching. In 1992 UNESCO placed Manas on its List of World Heritage in Danger. After years of work by authorities, local communities and conservation organisations, including the reintroduction of rhinos and improved protection, UNESCO removed Manas from the danger list in 2011.

The return of pygmy hogs to Manas is therefore part of a larger arc. A park that was once at risk of losing much of what made it special is now a place where one of its most threatened species is being restored.

How many pygmy hogs are there?

Precise numbers are hard to pin down for a small, secretive animal that lives in dense grass. Durrell's species page gives an estimated wild population of around 250, with a captive population of roughly 70 animals held at the program's two centres in 2022. Survey methods and dates vary, so any single figure should be treated as an estimate.

Whatever the exact figure, the trend that matters is clear. A species once thought extinct, then reduced to a single wild population, now exists in multiple protected grasslands, with a breeding program producing animals for release and a defined plan to build a self-sustaining population.

The grassland, not just the pig

One of the most important things about the pygmy hog program is that it has never been only about pigs.

Because the hogs depend so completely on tall, healthy grassland, bringing them back requires bringing the grassland back. Restoring that habitat benefits a whole community of species: the Bengal florican, hog deer, many birds and insects, and the larger grazing animals and predators that depend on the same ecosystem. Durrell has also described community-led grassland restoration work in Assam, involving local people in the management of the landscapes on which both wildlife and livelihoods depend.

This is a pattern that repeats across conservation successes worldwide. The most effective efforts to save a single species usually end up saving a place.

Grasslands: the overlooked ecosystem

It is worth pausing on why the pygmy hog's habitat is so vulnerable. Forests attract attention. Coral reefs attract attention. Grasslands, by comparison, are often seen as empty or unproductive land, waiting to be put to better use. Across the world, they have been ploughed, grazed, planted with trees and built over on an enormous scale, often with little public concern.

The tall floodplain grasslands of the Himalayan foothills are anything but empty. They store water, shape the flow of rivers, support grazing animals and provide habitat for a remarkable range of birds, reptiles, insects and mammals. They also depend on natural disturbance, including seasonal flooding and occasional fire, to stay healthy. When those

processes are disrupted, or when invasive plants and spreading trees take hold, the grassland slowly turns into something else, and the species that depend on it disappear.

That is why the work of restoring the Kuribeel grasslands over eight years before the 2026 release matters so much. It was not just preparation for the hogs. It was the repair of an ecosystem that many people would never have thought to value.

A tradition of second chances

The pygmy hog program belongs to a broader tradition of conservation breeding that has saved several species from the very edge of extinction.

Gerald Durrell opened his zoo in Jersey in 1959 with the then unusual idea that a zoo's main purpose should be to breed endangered animals and, wherever possible, return them to the wild. Over the following decades, that approach became mainstream. The Arabian oryx, declared extinct in the wild in 1972, was bred in captivity from a small number of animals and reintroduced to Oman from 1982; its status has since improved markedly. The California condor was reduced to just 27 birds in 1987, when the last wild individuals were taken into captivity; captive breeding and release have since returned condors to the skies of the American West.

None of these programs has been simple. All have faced setbacks, from disease to poaching to lead poisoning. But together they show that a species reduced to a handful of individuals is not necessarily lost, provided people are willing to commit to decades of careful work.

The pygmy hog now joins that list of second chances.

What three decades of patience can teach us

Some things take a generation

The Pygmy Hog Conservation Programme began in 1995. The first hogs were taken into captivity in 1996. The first releases came in 2008, twelve years later. The return to the very grasslands the founders came from has taken place in the 2020s. The target of 300 wild hogs is set for 2040.

That is a timeline of nearly half a century. In a world that often expects results within a budget cycle or an electoral term, it is a powerful reminder that some of the most important work cannot be rushed. The people who started this program knew they might not see its full results in their working lives. They started anyway.

Small foundations can carry great weight

Six hogs. That was the starting point in 1996. It would have been easy to decide that six animals were too few to matter, and that the species was already lost. Instead, the program treated those six as the foundation of a future population, and built carefully from there.

There is a broader lesson in that. Many good things in life, whether a school, a business, a community organisation or a movement, begin with very few people and very modest

resources. What matters is not the size of the start but the quality of the care and the persistence that follows.

Indicators deserve attention

The pygmy hog's value as an indicator species is worth reflecting on beyond conservation. It is the small, overlooked signals that often tell us something is going wrong before the larger, more visible problems arrive. In ecosystems, that might be a tiny pig in the grass. In organisations and communities, it might be the quiet withdrawal of a group of people, a small change in behaviour, or a minor complaint that keeps recurring.

The pygmy hog teaches us to look closely at the small things, because they are often the first to tell the truth.

Partnership across borders

The program brings together a trust based in Jersey, an Indian state forest department, a national ministry, international specialist scientists and Indian non-government organisations. None of them could have done this alone. The partnership has lasted through changes of staff, funding and political leadership over three decades.

Lasting partnerships of that kind are rare and valuable. They depend on shared purpose, mutual respect and a willingness to keep showing up.

Local leadership matters

It is notable that the award in October 2026 went to Dr Deka, the program's director in Assam. International organisations can provide funding, expertise and attention, but the day-to-day work of breeding, releasing, monitoring and protecting animals is done by people on the ground who know the landscape and the communities. Recognising that leadership is not just fair; it is essential to keeping conservation rooted in the places it serves.

A note of realism

The pygmy hog is not safe yet. Its wild population remains small and concentrated in a handful of protected grasslands. Grassland habitat across the region continues to face pressure from development, invasive plants, changing fire and flood patterns, and the effects of a changing climate. A single disease outbreak, a severe flood or a run of poor management decisions could undo years of progress at any one site.

The 2040 goal of 300 wild hogs is ambitious, and it depends on continued funding, political support, habitat management and community cooperation for many years to come. Conservationists involved in the program are clear that the work is far from finished.

Still, it is worth measuring the progress against where the species started. In the early 1960s, the pygmy hog was presumed extinct. In 1971, it was a handful of animals running from a fire. In 1996, it was six animals in a breeding program. In 2026, it is 194 hogs returned to the wild, fifteen of them released into the park their ancestors came from, with a plan for many more.

The view from the grass

Picture the Kuribeel grasslands of Manas in the months after the 2026 release. The grass stands tall after the monsoon. Somewhere inside it, invisible to anyone passing on the park's tracks, a small family of pygmy hogs is rooting through the soil, building a nest of woven stems, perhaps raising the first wild-born hoglets this patch of grassland has seen in years. A radio collar on one of them sends a quiet signal back to the researchers who have spent much of their careers making this moment possible.

Few visitors will ever see a pygmy hog. That does not make their return any less important. Some of the most hopeful stories in the world are happening at ground level, a few centimetres tall, in places most of us will never go, because a small group of people refused to accept that a species was lost.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

Namibia Halves Rhino Poaching: What a Decade-Low Tells Us About Guarding What We Love

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In late September 2026, Namibia's environment minister confirmed that rhino poaching in 2025 had fallen to its lowest level in more than a decade, down by more than half on the year before. She was equally clear that the fight is not over. Both halves of that message deserve to be heard, because together they explain how hope is actually built.

The announcement in Windhoek

On 28 September 2026, Namibia's Minister of Environment, Forestry and Tourism, Indileni Daniel, addressed the Third National Stakeholder Forum on Wildlife and Environmental Protection in the capital, Windhoek. The forum brings together government agencies, prosecutors, police, conservation organisations, community representatives and private sector partners to coordinate the country's response to wildlife and environmental crime.

The minister's headline figures were striking. According to reporting by The Namibian and the Ghana News Agency, drawing on her remarks:

Year	Rhinos poached in Namibia
2024	91
2025	43
2026 (to late September)	24

The 2025 figure, she said, represented Namibia's lowest level of rhino poaching in more than a decade. WWF reported the same figure of 43 in July 2026, drawing on the Blue Rhino Task Team's 2025 Namibia Wildlife Protection and Law Enforcement Annual Report, and described it as a 53 per cent decrease on 2024. Some outlets have quoted 41 for 2025, and the 2024 figure has also moved: the national report for 2024, published in 2025, recorded 83 rhinos poached that year, while the minister now gives 91. Revisions like these are normal, because Namibia's statistics are based on the estimated date of death of each carcass, and older carcasses found later are added to earlier years. The direction of travel, however, is consistent across every source: poaching roughly halved in a single year.

The minister did not present this as victory. She told the forum that the threat remains active, that criminal networks sometimes adapt faster than the systems built to stop them, and that Namibia is not yet out of the woods. She pointed to the 24 rhinos lost in the first nine months of 2026 as evidence that pressure on the country's rhinos continues.

That combination, real progress and plain-spoken caution, is what makes this a story worth telling.

Why Namibia's rhinos matter

Namibia, a vast and sparsely populated country on the south-west coast of Africa, is one of the most important places on Earth for rhinos. It is home to significant populations of both black and white rhinos, including the remarkable desert-adapted black rhinos of the arid north-west, which survive in a landscape of rock, gravel plains and dry riverbeds that seems almost impossible for an animal of their size.

Rhinos across Africa have been devastated by poaching over the past half-century, driven by illegal demand for rhino horn. Namibia was not spared. White rhinos were wiped out in the country in the 1800s and have been re-established only over the past half-century, according to the national wildlife protection report, and the recovery of both species has depended on decades of determined protection.

Every rhino lost to poaching is a serious blow. Rhinos breed slowly, with long pregnancies and single calves born several years apart. A population can be driven into decline by a level of killing that might seem modest in absolute numbers. That is why a fall from 91 to 43 is so significant. It is not just 48 fewer dead animals in a year. It is the difference between a population under heavy strain and one with room to recover.

What has changed

The minister and other officials described several strands of work behind the decline. None is a silver bullet. Together, they form a system.

Stronger laws and penalties

Namibia has strengthened legislation and penalties for wildlife crime over recent years. At the September 2026 forum, the minister welcomed progress on the long-awaited Wildlife and Protected Areas Management Bill, which is intended to modernise the legal framework for wildlife protection.

Specialist enforcement

The country has established a Wildlife Protection Services Division within the environment ministry, and an Environmental Crime Unit within the Office of the Prosecutor General. Specialist investigators and prosecutors matter enormously in wildlife crime, which often involves organised networks, cross-border trafficking, money laundering and sophisticated logistics. Ordinary policing on its own is rarely enough to dismantle those networks.

Cooperation and coordination

The stakeholder forum itself is part of the response. It was first held in 2022 and has since expanded from a focus on wildlife crime to include plant and forestry crime. Bringing agencies and partners into the same room helps close the gaps that criminal groups exploit.

Long-term strategy

Benette Kahuure, Namibia's director of wildlife and national parks, told the forum that a newly launched 19-year strategic plan will focus on environmental crime, indigenous plants, timber trafficking, marine species and corruption. A plan of that length signals an understanding that wildlife protection is a generational commitment, not a short-term campaign.

Money and partnership

The minister noted that Namibia spends hundreds of millions of dollars every year, across government, the private sector and international partners, on combating environmental crime. Protecting wildlife over vast distances is expensive. It requires rangers, vehicles, aircraft, technology, intelligence work, court processes and community programs, sustained year after year.

The people on the land

Behind the policy and the statistics, one of the most distinctive features of Namibian conservation is the role of local communities.

In 1996, through the Nature Conservation Amendment Act, Namibia introduced legislation that allowed rural communities living on communal land to form conservancies. These are legally recognised bodies through which communities can manage wildlife on their land and benefit from it, through tourism, sustainable use and related enterprises. Namibia's constitution also commits the state to the sustainable use of living natural resources, embedding the idea at the heart of national law.

The conservancy model grew quickly. The first four communal conservancies were registered in 1998. According to the Namibian Association of CBNRM Support Organisations (NACSO), there are now 86, covering almost a fifth of the country and home to roughly 245,000 people. Conservancies typically employ community game guards, local people who monitor wildlife, report suspicious activity and act as the eyes and ears of conservation across huge, remote areas where government rangers alone could never be everywhere.

Wildlife numbers in parts of the communal lands of the north-west recovered strongly in the decades after the conservancies were formed. Researchers have rightly debated how much of that recovery can be attributed to conservancies and how much to other factors such as rainfall and wider enforcement. There have also been legitimate criticisms, including that some conservancies have not met the economic expectations of their members, and that the model can favour high-value species. But the central idea has proven powerful and durable: when local people share in the benefits of wildlife, they have reasons to protect it.

This matters for rhinos in a particular way. Poaching networks need local information, safe passage and silence. Communities that value their wildlife and are respected partners in its protection are far less likely to provide any of those things, and far more likely to raise the alarm.

A continental picture with grounds for hope

Namibia's result arrived just days before a major global assessment of the state of nature. On 8 October 2026, WWF published its Living Planet Report 2026. Its headline finding was sobering: monitored wildlife populations had declined by an average of 73 per cent between 1970 and 2022.

But the report was framed, deliberately, around what it called a rational basis for hope. It highlighted species that have recovered when people made sustained efforts on their behalf. Wild tiger numbers had risen by more than 70 per cent over the past fifteen years. Green sea turtles and Atlantic bluefin tuna were no longer listed as endangered. And, of particular relevance here, the report noted that many African elephant populations are stable or growing.

Mike Barrett, WWF's chief scientific adviser and the report's lead author, summed up the message: "We can still end the loss of nature and indeed reverse it."

Namibia's rhino figures fit that pattern. They do not erase the long history of loss. But they show what is possible when protection is sustained, laws are enforced, communities are partners, and the work continues through setbacks.

The threats that remain

It would be a disservice to the people doing this work to present the story as finished. The minister herself was clear that it is not, and she identified several continuing threats.

Adaptive criminal networks

Criminal syndicates involved in wildlife trafficking are, in the minister's words, adapting rapidly to law enforcement measures, and increasingly operating across borders. When one route is closed, they look for another. When one method becomes too risky, they change it. Effective enforcement therefore has to keep evolving too.

Corruption

The minister named corruption as a major threat and called for stronger internal controls. Wildlife crime at scale often depends on someone, somewhere, looking the other way: at a border post, in a permit office, in a police station or within a protected area. Addressing corruption is uncomfortable but unavoidable work.

Global demand

Poaching in Namibia is ultimately driven by demand elsewhere. The minister called for stronger international and cross-border cooperation and for efforts to reduce global demand for illegally traded wildlife and natural resources. No country can solve that alone.

New forms of trafficking

The minister also highlighted a recent surge in illegal plant trafficking, which she described as a growing and lucrative criminal enterprise. Namibia is home to many unusual and endemic plants, some of which are prized by collectors overseas. The expansion of the forum and the new strategic plan to cover plants and timber reflect an understanding that environmental crime does not stay in one lane.

The myth at the heart of the trade

It is worth remembering what all this killing is for. Rhino horn is made of keratin, the same protein that makes up human hair and fingernails. Despite long-standing beliefs in some markets about its medicinal powers, there is no credible scientific evidence that it cures disease. Much of the demand that drives poaching today is linked to status, gifting and speculative investment as much as to traditional medicine.

That is one of the cruellest features of the trade. Animals that have walked the earth in one form or another for millions of years are being killed for a material that is, in biological terms, no more remarkable than a fingernail clipping. It also points to one of the most important long-term solutions. Every person persuaded not to buy rhino horn, every market where demand falls, every successful prosecution of a trafficker overseas reduces the pressure on rangers and rhinos in places like Namibia.

How ordinary people can help

Most readers will never patrol a riverbed in the Kunene region. But there are practical ways to support the kind of work that has driven Namibia's result.

- **Refuse wildlife products of uncertain origin.** Whether travelling or shopping online, avoid buying ivory, horn, exotic animal parts, rare plants or timber unless you are certain they are legal and sustainably sourced. The minister's warning about plant trafficking is a reminder that the trade is not only about large mammals.
- **Choose tourism that benefits communities.** Where you travel to see wildlife, look for lodges and operators that work with local communities and share income with them. In Namibia, that can mean staying in or visiting areas managed by communal conservancies, whose revenue helps give local people a direct stake in protecting wildlife.
- **Support credible organisations.** Conservation organisations working with governments and communities on anti-poaching, monitoring and community programs depend on steady funding. Look for groups that publish clear information about their work and results.
- **Pay attention to the policy debate.** International agreements on wildlife trade, funding for conservation and action against organised crime and corruption all depend on public support. Informed citizens make it easier for governments to act.

None of these steps is dramatic. Taken together, across many people, they help sustain the system that turns a bad year into a better one.

What this story teaches

Celebrate progress, and keep going

There is a temptation, when good news arrives, either to declare victory or to dismiss the result as a blip. Namibia's minister did neither. She acknowledged the achievement and immediately set it in the context of ongoing risk.

That is a healthy model for any organisation or community. Progress deserves recognition, because people who work hard need to know that their efforts matter. But recognition

should fuel continued effort, not complacency. The moment we assume a problem is solved is often the moment it begins to return.

Systems beat heroics

It is natural to tell conservation stories through individual heroes: a brave ranger, a dedicated scientist, a determined community leader. Those people are real and they matter. But Namibia's result is above all the product of a system: laws, specialist units, prosecutors, community conservancies, international partners, funding, strategy and coordination.

The lesson for leaders in any field is that sustainable results rarely depend on a single person. They depend on structures that keep working when individuals move on.

Share the benefits, share the responsibility

Namibia's conservancy model rests on a simple principle: people protect what they value, and they value what benefits them. When communities living alongside wildlife share in the income and decisions it generates, they become its strongest defenders.

That principle applies far beyond conservation. In workplaces, schools and communities, people are more likely to care for shared resources and shared goals when they have a genuine stake in them, a voice in how they are managed, and a fair share of what they produce.

Honesty builds trust

Perhaps the most quietly impressive feature of the September 2026 announcement was its candour. The minister did not inflate the result or hide the 24 rhinos lost in 2026. She spoke openly about corruption and about criminals adapting faster than systems. That honesty makes the good news more credible, not less.

People can tell the difference between spin and truth. Leaders who speak plainly about both progress and problems are more likely to keep the trust and support they need for the long haul.

Widen the lens when the threat changes

When Namibia's stakeholder forum began in 2022, its focus was wildlife crime. By 2026 it had expanded to include plants, forestry and timber, and the new strategic plan reaches into marine species as well. That evolution reflects a hard-won understanding: criminal networks follow opportunity, and a response built only around yesterday's threat will soon be out of date.

Organisations of every kind face the same challenge. The risks that shaped a strategy five years ago are rarely the only risks today. Regularly asking what has changed, and being willing to broaden the response, is part of staying effective.

Long time frames for long problems

A 19-year strategic plan, a conservancy model now three decades old, a wildlife recovery built over generations. Namibia's approach reflects an understanding that serious

problems need patient solutions. Short-term campaigns can raise awareness, but lasting change usually requires commitment measured in decades.

A note of balance

Annual poaching figures can fluctuate for many reasons, and a single year's decline, however welcome, does not guarantee a lasting trend. The full 2026 total will not be known until the year ends, and pressure on rhinos across southern Africa remains serious. Different sources report slightly different figures for 2025. Figures for earlier years are also revised as older carcasses are found.

None of that diminishes the core achievement. In one year, the number of rhinos killed by poachers in Namibia roughly halved, reaching its lowest level in more than a decade, and the country's leaders responded not with complacency but with renewed commitment.

The view from the north-west

Picture a dry riverbed in the north-west of Namibia at first light. The landscape is stark, almost lunar. A black rhino moves slowly along the sand, browsing on the tough shrubs that survive here. Somewhere on a ridge nearby, a community game guard watches through binoculars, notes the animal's condition and position, and radios it in. In an office in Windhoek, a prosecutor reviews a case file against a trafficking network. In a village, a conservancy committee meets to discuss tourism income and how it will be shared.

None of those people will make international headlines. Together, they are a large part of the reason that poaching losses fell so sharply.

Hope, in the end, is rarely a single dramatic event. More often it looks like this: many people, in many roles, doing patient work for years, until one day the numbers begin to move in the right direction. And then, as Namibia's minister made clear, getting up the next morning and doing the work again.

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THE HOPE DISPATCH

The Numbat Steps Back From the Brink: How Fences, Patience and Science Rewrote an Australian Story

By Dr Sukh Rashpal Sandhu | Written for this edition

In July 2026, after a ten-year review, the International Union for Conservation of Nature moved the numbat, Western Australia's striped, termite-eating marsupial, from Endangered to Near Threatened on its global Red List. Fifty years ago, there may have been only around 300 left. This is the story of how they came back, and why it matters well beyond one small animal.

Meet the numbat

If you have never seen a numbat, you have missed one of Australia's most charming animals. It is about the size of a small rabbit, roughly 35 to 43 centimetres long including its bushy tail, and weighs up to about 700 grams. Its reddish-brown back is crossed by white bands that become bolder towards the rump, and a dark stripe runs through each eye, giving it a slightly bandit-like expression.

Numbats eat almost nothing but termites. An adult may eat up to around 20,000 of them a day, which it gathers with a long, sticky tongue after scratching open the shallow underground galleries where termites travel. Unusually for a marsupial, the numbat is active during the day, timing its foraging to when termites are near the surface. Its strictly daytime habits set it apart from almost all other marsupials.

The numbat is the faunal emblem of Western Australia, and for good reason. It is a distinctive, gentle and entirely Australian creature. It is also one of the clearest examples of how close the country came to losing some of its most remarkable wildlife.

How a continent nearly lost it

The numbat once ranged across a vast area of southern Australia, from the south-west of Western Australia across to western New South Wales, and probably into the north-west corner of Victoria. For tens of thousands of years, it lived alongside Aboriginal people across that range.

Within a remarkably short period after European colonisation, that range collapsed. The main cause, according to conservation scientists, was predation by introduced animals. The European red fox was brought to Australia in the nineteenth century and spread rapidly across the continent. Feral cats spread as well. Numbats, which are active by day, move along the ground and have few defences, were extremely vulnerable to both.

By the late 1970s, the species had fallen to an estimated 300 or so individuals, surviving in just a couple of small pockets of woodland in south-western Western Australia, including Dryandra Woodland and the Tone-Perup area. It was listed as Endangered. For an animal that had once lived across much of the southern half of a continent, it was a catastrophic decline.

The first turning point: dealing with the fox

The first sign that the numbat could be saved came from a simple but powerful experiment. In the late 1970s, numbat sighting rates at Dryandra were about a tenth of their 1950s levels. When the Western Australian government began experimental fox baiting there in 1982, later extended across 12,300 hectares, the population grew rapidly, peaking in 1992 at 11 sightings per 100 kilometres of survey transect.

That result confirmed what many suspected. The numbat had not declined because its habitat could no longer support it, or because of some mysterious disease. It had declined, above all, because foxes and cats were eating it. Remove the predators, and the numbat could recover.

Fox control in Western Australia became a cornerstone of numbat conservation. Perth Zoo also became closely involved in breeding numbats for release, supplying animals to establish new populations. But fox baiting outside fences does not stop feral cats effectively, and wild populations in open landscapes remained fragile. Numbers at Dryandra, for instance, fell sharply again within a year of the 1992 peak, and the national recovery plan has described sighting rates there as fluctuating since.

The species needed somewhere it could be truly safe.

The second turning point: safe havens

That safety came from a conservation tool that Australia has developed more than almost any other country: large fenced areas from which feral cats and foxes have been completely removed.

The Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC), a non-profit organisation that manages a network of sanctuaries across Australia, has played a central role in building these havens for numbats. Its account of the work, published in July 2026, sets out how the populations were established.

Sanctuary	Location	What happened
Scotia Wildlife Sanctuary	Western New South Wales, Barkandji Country	Numbats reintroduced in 1999 with 43 founding animals in a 4,000 hectare fenced area, later expanded to 8,000 hectares; a further 33 released in 2011 to 2012
Yookamurra Wildlife Sanctuary	South Australia, Ngarrindjeri Nation land	AWC took over management in 2002, inheriting an existing reintroduced population
Mt Gibson Wildlife Sanctuary	Western Australian Wheatbelt, Badimia Country	A population established in 2016 within a 7,800 hectare fenced area
Mallee Cliffs National Park	South-western New South Wales	A population established by December 2020 in partnership

Sanctuary	Location	What happened
		with NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, with 15 numbats released in 2020 and 31 more in 2021 to 2022

Mallee Cliffs is particularly significant. According to AWC, it contains the largest feral predator-free fenced area on mainland Australia. In October 2025, four juvenile numbats were found there, evidence that the released animals were not just surviving but breeding.

Inside these fences, numbats live much as they would have before foxes and cats arrived. They forage freely by day, raise young and spread through the available habitat. The populations are no longer hanging on by a thread. They are part of functioning ecosystems that have been restored for dozens of other threatened species too.

The 2026 decision

In 2026, the IUCN completed a ten-year review of the numbat's global status. It concluded that the species no longer met the criteria for Endangered, and moved it to Near Threatened. AWC announced the change on 9 July 2026.

Dr Jennifer Anson, a senior ecologist with AWC and a member of the Numbat Recovery Team, welcomed the decision, saying it was great to see that decades of conservation efforts across Australia were paying off. She pointed to the establishment of four secure populations across the species' former range as a key part of the improvement.

It is important to understand what the change does and does not mean. Under Australia's national environment law, the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act, the numbat remains listed as Endangered. The IUCN change reflects an improved global assessment, not a declaration that the species is safe. AWC itself stressed that active and ongoing conservation management is critical to securing the numbat's future. Remove the fences, stop the predator control, or let fire sweep unchecked through a key population, and the gains could quickly reverse.

But the direction has changed. From around 300 animals in two pockets of woodland in the 1970s, the numbat now lives in multiple protected populations across three states. Mongabay, reporting the downlisting, cited an estimate of about 2,000 to 3,000 numbats in 2026, which Tony Friend of Western Australia's Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions described as "still very low for an entire species."

Why the fences matter for more than numbats

It would be easy to see a predator-proof fence as a single-species solution. In practice, it is much more than that.

Australia's small and medium-sized ground-dwelling mammals, the group that ecologists sometimes describe as being in the "critical weight range", have suffered especially heavily from foxes and cats. Many species of bettong, bandicoot, bilby, hare-wallaby and

native rodent either disappeared from the mainland or were reduced to tiny remnant populations. Some were lost entirely.

The same fenced havens that now protect numbats have become arks for many of those species. Inside them, animals that had vanished from huge areas of the continent are once again digging, foraging and breeding. Their digging turns over soil, helps water soak in, buries seeds and leaf litter, and changes how fire moves through the landscape. In a real sense, the fences are not just protecting animals. They are allowing whole ecosystems to start working again.

For the numbat, that matters too. A healthy woodland with abundant termites, hollow logs for shelter and a varied community of other animals is a better home than a degraded remnant where a single species clings on.

Fire, Country and care

Fire is part of the Australian landscape, and it can be both friend and enemy. Numbats shelter in hollow logs and burrows, and they depend on woodland that provides those refuges and a steady supply of termites. An intense, uncontrolled bushfire can destroy those resources across a whole sanctuary in a single afternoon.

That is why AWC describes carefully managed fire regimes as part of its numbat work. Planned, cooler burns, carried out in a patchwork across the landscape at the right times of year, reduce the build-up of fuel and lower the risk that a single wildfire will sweep through an entire population. This approach echoes the long traditions of Aboriginal land management, in which fire has been used with great care and knowledge for many thousands of years. Several of the sanctuaries that now hold numbats sit on the Country of Traditional Owners, and, in my view, recognising those communities and their enduring connection to Country is part of looking after these places well.

The numbat's recovery, in other words, is not only about keeping predators out. It is also about restoring a way of caring for land.

A bright spot in a hard year for nature

The numbat's improved status arrived in a year when the global picture for wildlife remained sobering. In October 2026, WWF's Living Planet Report found that monitored wildlife populations worldwide had declined by an average of 73 per cent between 1970 and 2022.

Yet the same report deliberately emphasised what it called a rational basis for hope, pointing to species that have recovered when people made sustained efforts on their behalf: wild tigers, green sea turtles, Atlantic bluefin tuna and many African elephant populations among them. The numbat belongs in that company. Its story is not one of luck. It is one of identified causes, targeted action and decades of persistence.

Australia, which has one of the worst records of mammal extinction in the modern world, needs stories like this. They show that the trajectory of decline is not fixed, and that the country has developed tools, including predator-free havens, fox control and conservation breeding, that genuinely work.

Who made it happen

One of the most striking things about the numbat's recovery is how many different people and organisations have been involved over so many years.

- **State government scientists and land managers** in Western Australia, who identified the role of foxes, trialled baiting at Dryandra and protected the last remnant populations.
- **Perth Zoo**, whose breeding work has supplied animals for release.
- **The Australian Wildlife Conservancy**, which built and maintains fenced sanctuaries, conducts monitoring and manages habitat, including through carefully planned fire regimes designed to reduce the risk of destructive wildfires.
- **NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service**, partnering on the Mallee Cliffs population.
- **The Numbat Recovery Team**, which coordinates national efforts.
- **Traditional Owners**, on whose Country the sanctuaries sit, including Barkandji, Ngarrindjeri and Badimia peoples.
- **Donors, volunteers and supporters**, whose funding and labour make long-term management possible.

No single group could have achieved the result alone. The numbat's recovery is the product of a long relay, with each generation of scientists, managers and supporters handing on the work to the next.

What the numbat can teach us

Find the real cause

The numbat's recovery began in earnest only when people understood clearly why it was declining. Once the fox was identified as the key threat, effective action became possible.

That is a lesson for any problem, in conservation or beyond. Effort spent on the wrong cause can be enormous and still achieve little. Careful diagnosis, often through simple experiments like the Dryandra baiting trial, can change everything.

Create safe spaces, then expand them

Fenced sanctuaries are, in a sense, a temporary answer. They create islands of safety in a landscape that remains dangerous. But they buy time, protect breeding populations and allow species to recover their numbers. From those safe spaces, recovery can be extended outward as tools for controlling predators across wider landscapes improve.

There is something in that model for people too. Young people, new employees, newcomers to a community and people recovering from hardship often need a safe space first, somewhere they can build strength and confidence, before they can thrive in a more challenging environment.

Persistence beats brilliance

There was no single breakthrough that saved the numbat. There was a baiting trial, then years of predator control, then AWC's first fenced reintroduction in 1999, then a second, a

third and a fourth AWC population over the following two decades. Each step was modest. Together, over nearly half a century, they changed the species' fate.

Many of the people who did the early work never saw the 2026 decision. They kept going anyway, trusting that the effort would matter.

Celebrate carefully

AWC's response to the downlisting is a model of how to communicate good news responsibly. It celebrated the result, credited the long effort behind it, and immediately stressed that the work must continue and that the species remains Endangered under Australian law.

Good news shared honestly, with its limits clearly stated, is more persuasive and more durable than good news exaggerated.

Hope is a practice, not a feeling

Perhaps the deepest lesson of the numbat's story is that hope, in conservation, is not mainly an emotion. It is a set of actions taken repeatedly over time: counting animals, maintaining fences, controlling predators, managing fire, raising funds, training the next generation. The feeling of hope follows the practice, not the other way round.

What Australians can do

The numbat's recovery has been driven largely by scientists, land managers and conservation organisations. But ordinary Australians have a part to play in the wider effort to protect native wildlife from introduced predators, and many of the most useful actions are close to home.

- **Keep pet cats safe at home.** Domestic cats that roam, especially at night, can kill native birds, reptiles and small mammals. A growing number of Australian councils encourage or require cat containment, and keeping cats indoors or in secure enclosures is better for the cats too.
- **Support predator control and habitat programs.** Many local Landcare groups, Friends of parks groups and conservation organisations run fox and cat control, revegetation and monitoring work that relies on volunteers and donations.
- **Visit responsibly.** Some places, including Dryandra Woodland in Western Australia, are known for offering a chance to see numbats in the wild. Visitors who keep to tracks, drive slowly and avoid disturbing animals help keep those places welcoming for wildlife.
- **Take an interest.** Public attention matters. Conservation programs depend on sustained funding over decades, and that funding is easier to secure when communities show they care.

None of these steps will save a species on its own. But conservation successes like the numbat's are built from many contributions, large and small, made consistently over time.

A note of realism

The numbat remains vulnerable. Its secure populations depend heavily on fences that must be maintained, on ongoing predator control, and on careful management of fire and habitat. Climate change, drought and severe bushfires pose serious risks to small, concentrated populations. Feral cats remain one of Australia's most difficult conservation challenges, and large-scale solutions outside fenced areas are still being developed.

The IUCN reclassification also measures the species globally and at a point in time. Future reviews could move it in either direction depending on how populations fare. And while the numbat is recovering, many other Australian species threatened by introduced predators and habitat loss are not yet so fortunate.

None of that diminishes the achievement. It simply places it in context. A species that was down to around 300 animals is now in a measurably better position, because people decided it was worth saving and kept working until the numbers moved.

The view from the woodland

Picture a eucalypt woodland on a cool, bright morning, inside a long fence in western New South Wales. Sunlight warms the ground, and the termites move closer to the surface. A small striped animal emerges from a hollow log, pauses, sniffs the air, and begins scratching at the soil, its long tongue flicking into the galleries below. A few metres away, a young numbat born inside the fence follows its mother, learning the same routine.

No fox will ambush them here. No cat will stalk them. They are, for now, safe, because of the fence around them and the people who built and maintain it.

Half a century ago, a scene like that had vanished from almost all of the numbat's former range. Today it is happening again, in sanctuaries across three Australian states. It is a quiet, daily miracle of restoration, and a reminder that when we understand what has gone wrong and commit to fixing it, some of what was nearly lost can come home.

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