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# Photographer And His Wife Plant 2 Million Trees In 20 Years To Restore A Destroyed Forest And Even The Animals Have Returned

GOOD NEWS, NATURE

Good News, Nature

By [Ilona](#)

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According to the [United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization](#), 129 million hectares of forest, an area almost equivalent in size to [South Africa](#), have been lost from the Earth forever since 1990. An area roughly the size of the country of Panama is being lost each and every year.

With some [15 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions](#) come from deforestation, and countless species of plants and animals losing their habitats every single day, these are absolutely devastating figures for the health of our planet, and it simply cannot be allowed to continue.



Image credits: [Ricaro Beliel](#)

But what to do in the face of such massive environmental carnage? It can make the [individual](#) feel small and helpless, as we ponder the impact that we can actually make. Will anything that we do make the slightest bit of difference? Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado and his wife Lélia Deluiz Wanick Salgado decided to show what a small group of passionate, dedicated people can do by turning deforestation on its head, and begin the process of reforestation.



Image credits: [Sebastiao Salgado](#)

Because really, Mother Nature is a hardy soul that will always find a way to bounce back, given the right conditions. Salgado is a renowned figure, having won nearly every major award in photojournalism and

documenting the horrific barbarity of the Rwandan genocide, he returned home to his native area of Brazil, which was once covered in lush tropical rainforest. He was shocked and devastated to find that the area was now barren and devoid of wildlife, but his wife Lélia believed that it could be restored to its former glory.



Image credits: [institutoterra](#)

“The land was as [sick](#) as I was – everything was destroyed,” Salgado [said in The Guardian](#) back in 2015. “Only about 0.5% of the land was covered in trees. Then my wife had a fabulous idea to replant this forest. And when we began to do that, then all the insects and birds and fish returned and, thanks to this increase of the trees I, too, was reborn – this was the most important moment.”



Image credits: [institutoterra](#)

Together, Sebastião and Lélia founded [Instituto Terra](#), a small organization that has since planted 4 million saplings and has brought the forest back from the dead. “Perhaps we have a solution,” Salgado said. “There is a single being which can transform CO2 to oxygen, which is the tree. We need to replant the forest. You need forest with native trees, and you need to gather the [seeds](#) in the same region you plant them or the serpents and the termites won’t come. And if you plant forests that don’t belong, the animals don’t come there and the forest is silent.”



Image credits: [institutoterra](#)

And so, after taking utmost care to ensure that everything planted is native to the land, the area has flourished remarkably in the ensuing 20 years. Wildlife has returned, where there was a deathly silence there is now a cacophony of birdcalls and insects buzzing around.



Image credits: [institutoterra](#)

In all, some 172 bird species have returned, as well as 33 species of mammals, 293 species of plants, 15 species of reptiles and 15 species of amphibians, an entire ecosystem rebuilt from scratch.

2000



2006



2012



Image credits: [institutoterra](#)



Image credits: [Sebastião Salgado](#)

The project has inspired millions by giving a concrete example of positive ecological action and showing how quickly the environment can recover with the right attitudes.





Image credits: [Weverson Rocio](#)



Image credits: [Sebastião Salgado](#)

“We need to listen to the words of the people on the land,” Salgado explained. “Nature is the earth and it is other beings and if we don’t have some kind of spiritual [return](#) to our planet, I fear that we will be compromised.”



Image credits: [YASUYOSHI CHIBA](#)

## Here's what people had to say about the amazing reforestation initiative

**JohnPlayerSpecialRed** 2.1k points 18 hours ago

This warms my heart. Fantastic work by everyone involved.

**call\_of\_the\_while** 6.2k points 19 hours ago

In the early 1990s, Brazilian photojournalist Sebastião Ribeiro Salgado was stationed in Rwanda to cover the horrific accounts of Rwanda genocide. The on-ground experience left him traumatised. In 1994, he was returning to his home in Minas Gerais, Brazil, with a heavy heart, hoping to find solace in the lap of a lush green forest, where he had grown up.

But, instead, he found dusty, barren land for miles and miles, in place of the forest. In only a few years, his beautiful hometown underwent rampant deforestation, leaving it fallow and devoid of all the wildlife. For him, everything was destroyed. "The land was as sick as I was. Only about 0.5% of the land was covered in trees," he shared in an interview with The Guardian. Salgado was shattered.

Saldago's[sic] wife wanted to recreate the forest. It was at this time that Salgado's wife Lélia made a near-impossible proposal. She expressed her wish to replant the entire forest. Salgado supported her idea, and together the couple set out on a heroic mission.

Salgado bought an abandoned cattle ranch from his parents and started building a network of enthusiastic volunteers and partners who would fund and sustain their mammoth project. In 1998, the couple founded Instituto Terra – the organisation which tirelessly worked to bring a forest back to life...

**Niko\_Seydel** 884 points 19 hours ago

We need more people like this

**TherealMcInnes** 61 points 16 hours ago

Reminds me of an old Chinese proverb - The best time to plant a tree is 20 years ago, the second best time is today.

**boyboyy000** 636 points 19 hours ago

People in 2025: "Look at that... cutting down so many trees just to build a house in the middle of the forest. How self-centered."

**deanosaurus\_chenz** 36 points 19 hours ago

WOW! Fantastic effort. Looks great!

**Pomiwl** 90 points 18 hours ago

Im Brazilian and that makes me feel so proud of my country... finally there are nice people on this damn place

**slaem36** 86 points 18 hours ago

Beautiful! Planting trees is definitely one of the most effective tools we have when combating global warming. These people are straight up heroes.

**deadmanskey** 16 points 19 hours ago

I have hope for this world

**Looking for more good news? Check out how this guy cleaned up 20 years' worth of litter from a beach in India**