


Editorial

An Editorial to Introduce the New Journal *Wild*: Issues, Approaches, Ideas and Proposals

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Why have we established this journal, and how does it differ from other journals concerning the environment, land management, ecosystem restoration, biodiversity and ecological philosophy?

To understand this, we must answer the following questions: What is meant by wild? What is truly wild? What are the differences between wild and natural? Are humans part of nature, environment and biodiversity?

These are questions that might seem irrelevant or meaningless to people who pay only superficial attention to this topic. In reality, they are such essential and complex questions that are difficult to answer briefly, since each one opens up issues and discussions based on a broad spectrum of positions, experiences, ideas, studies and research results in numerous disciplines that require a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach. This is an area of study that deserves more attention and requires deeper development through logic and scientific approaches. Too often, actions or studies in this field are watered down or contaminated by excessive ideology or opportunism, to the point of passing off as green, pro-nature, pro-environment, pro-land restoration, pro-avoidance of natural catastrophe risks, pro-local population development, pro-renaturalization or pro-biodiversity action, even when they are in fact contrary to these principles.

Often, areas that are man-made or that are the result of human action are considered within natural environments. We often consider wild areas to be remote, archaic environments that are difficult to live in or sparsely populated; however, such areas are often the result of centuries of human activity that has profoundly altered the appearance of the landscape, as is the case with many open environments of the Andean Altiplano, various alpine and steppe-like environments, the so-called false savannah areas in Africa, secondary tundra formations and false primary meadows. On the contrary, there are environments that may appear to have been anthropized for centuries or millennia, when in reality, they have only “recently” been modified by humans. Some landscapes that appear wild to us today may have been highly anthropized in the past and vice versa. Especially in regions that have been heavily anthropized for a long time, it can be increasingly hard to understand what is natural and what is not, including whether the species presences are native or not.

In aquatic, wetland and mesic ecosystems, over time, human-induced stressors have often qualitatively and quantitatively altered them, leading to significant changes in their morphology, chemistry, physics, ecology and biology [1–3] through direct and indirect actions linked to water and land use activities, which can extensively alter even large areas. This can also be true for systems considered in many ways to be natural, green or rich in biodiversity, as in the case of the Black Sea system and the Danube River basin [4] with its delta estuary [5]. Estuaries [6], but also rivers [7,8] and their more upland streams, have often been modified by humans, even those that look natural and picturesque [9]. Regarding water and ecosystems, we should also consider how many natural lakes have disappeared and how many artificial lakes have appeared on Earth as a result of human actions. Additionally, let us consider how many natural waterbodies have been anthropized and artificialized (through hydraulic-forestry works, reclamation, canalization, rectification,



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deviation, filling in, narrowing, widening, pollution, deforestation, etc.). Like land and freshwater systems, seas and oceans are also increasingly threatened by human activity, as is the case, for example, for *Posidonia oceanica* vegetation, coral reefs, mangrove forests, etc.

We are concerned about the deforestation of the world's last large primary forests, such as the Amazon and the forests in Borneo, Africa and Siberia. But in Europe and in many other parts of the other continents, we have already witnessed this phenomenon, and today, this land is occupied by agriculture, urbanization, pastures, managed forests and woodlands that are regenerating following the land's abandonment, although these often cannot return to the state they were in before humans used them.

Despite everything, even today is possible to see European forested areas increasingly impacted by controversial policies [10,11] and silviculture choices [12–14], or being replaced by crops, pastures or by urbanization, and by biomass fuel purposes [15,16] and other "green" energies type production.

Ecosystems may often retain traces of the past, although they may look very natural. Sometimes, what seems wild to us, while being green, beautiful, clean, lush and flowery, may still be determined by humans, such as environments that have been established by human practices, or those characterized by forests utilized by humans, plantations, human-managed primary pastures, environments flooded or drained by humans, altered rivers, etc.

In anthropic systems, the main marker is the human fingerprint; semi-natural environments are characterized by some spontaneous characteristics and others induced by humans; ecosystems that may seem quite natural while being markedly managed are sometimes referred to as "naturaliform", to distinguish them from other systems that have more spontaneous features.

It is therefore not enough for an environment to just to be green or flowery in order for it to be wild. Neither being strictly tied to or recalling ancient traditions nor being tied to bucolic romantic feelings is sufficient for an environment to be defined as wild, just as it is not enough to plant trees in order to reforest; to convert a coppice into a tall forest structure in order to rewild; or to eliminate reforestation in order to renaturalize. Likewise, recovering biodiversity cannot be achieved by endeavoring to eliminate all alien taxa, just as we should not limit our efforts to girdling or felling trees in forests with the hope of recreating dead wood. The preservation of the largest trees could be not sufficient itself if we ignore the forests and even those trees that are young today but can grow large, replacing the current veteran trees when they will die, one day. We cannot be reduced to cut trees, forests or the understory to rejuvenate forests. We cannot be shocked by every tree cut down in the city if we ignore entire forests of trees that are cut down.

Sometimes, the word "wild" takes on a different meaning, as is the case, for example for wild apple, wild pear, wild chestnut, wild grapevine, wild cat and wild walnut, even if the considered taxa have been created by humans or are alien, or when fruits are considered inedible if compared to other more palatable varieties. In this regard even free-standing (direct, non-grafted) fruit trees and rootstocks can be considered wild specimens in agriculture.

"Wild" can thus take on a meaning of high naturalness, or of being determined more by spontaneous dynamics than by human action. Consequently, rewilding means increased naturalness and, conversely, decreased human influence.

As we can see, the same term can thus take on different meanings in time and space, and vary in time just as uses of natural resources, perceptions, customs and habits can vary. For an indigenous person living in the forest who has never been in contact with Western civilization, what does "wild" mean? This word or this distinction probably does not even exist in their perception and in their local language.

For many years now, human beings have faced the problem of the increasing anthropization of natural environments and the resulting problems, such as land consumption, deforestation, pollution, hydrogeological disruption, climate change, biodiversity loss and overpopulation. As a result, words such as sustainability, durability, green, hu-

man footprint, human impact, conservation, biodiversity, extinction, climate change and pollution are increasingly prevalent in our lives, drawing more of our attention and causing increasing concern, including with respect to environmental disasters [17], and, thus, repeatedly impacting human quality of life.

Antonio Stoppani, in 1873 [18] wrote that human activity represented a new force and proposed calling our epoch the “Era Antropozoica” (Anthropozoic Era). Humans are now increasingly capable of influencing, dominating, characterizing and altering the environment and biodiversity to such an extent that the Earth is increasingly marked by human activity, in some cases, more than by other environmental factors [19]. This topic has prompted many debates and controversies, regarding criticisms of current socio-economic development, human overpopulation, and environmental management strategies, as well as climate change and biodiversity loss, as phenomena related to human activity. A more rational and less prejudice-based outlook can help us improve our approach to these issues.

In alternating phases throughout history, many places have been able to renaturalize, or at least regain more natural characteristics, as a result of human abandonment. Not only have wars, epidemics and famines caused human’s presence on the Planet to fluctuate throughout time, but so have “natural” or human catastrophes related, for example, to an incorrect land use and to pollution. One of the best-known cases is the Chernobyl disaster near Prypiat, Ukraine, where—as a result of radioactive pollution in the area—we witnessed a drastic decrease in human presence; consequently, many natural dynamics have developed, and the forest is regaining the spaces it used to occupy in the past, even within the buildings and roads of the urban area.

Another example of the naturalization of highly artificial environments, which helps us understand how important the notion of time is in ecology, are the so-called “terracones” (terrikons), the artificial mountains made from mine or foundry waste, which, over time, have developed primary biological successions to the point of becoming very interesting environments, hosting wetlands, grasslands and even both pioneer and more mature forests.

Among the oldest and best-known artificial mountains is Monte Testaccio, located in Rome, consisting of a mound about 36 m high (from base to top) and with a circumference of about 1 kilometer. This hill was known in the ancient Roman Empire as “Mons Testaceus”, meaning mountain of shards, being composed of several layers of terracotta debris, mostly from oil amphorae, placed there in Roman times over a period of about two centuries. In this “dump”, the terracotta debris were stacked with the maximum economy of space and with the sole provision of lime, intended as sanitizer, to eliminate the problems caused by the decomposition of the oil residues. This hill primary succession has advanced over time with different degrees of speed and development, especially due to human activity. Progressive erosion of this hill, which is believed to have reached up to eighty meters in ancient times, was caused by the removal of material for new building purposes especially from the Middle Ages [20,21].

Let us also consider the ancient cities now engulfed by forests that have been discovered in Central America and Asia. In the first case, we have Guatemala, in the Peten region, which today is largely covered by rainforest and in which, between the vegetation, are hidden some ancient ruins of Mayan cities that are still largely undiscovered. In Asia, there is the City of Angkor in Cambodia, with its buildings semi-covered by jungle and brought to light for archeological purposes.

Despite periodic fluctuations, the world has lost more and more natural land—that is, places where biodiversity and the environment are manifested by their characteristics and spontaneous dynamics—in favor of more useful, manipulated or human-maintained environments, where the characteristics and dynamics are mostly dependent on human action, with communities and environments increasingly characterized and sculpted by humans and determined by their presence, land use, needs, visions and choices.

In contrast to the increasing awareness of the incremental human activity and its effects on the planet, there is a growing discussion about the abandonment of places that were

once most impacted by humans because they were inhabited, used and sculpted by human activity, but which are now gradually being renaturalized (through forced and spontaneous ecological successions) to a greater or lesser degree, as a result of human abandonment, declining populations, or less anthropogenic pressure on the environment. Discussions along these lines are often overly based on the fear of change, human abandonment and the possible resulting problems, without instead focusing on rationally analyzing the phenomena occurring, their reasons and the possible resulting benefits and opportunities.

Even in the management of natural environments and in conservation today, there is increasing emphasis on maintaining “secondary” and human-managed ecosystems (from the most anthropogenic to the most semi-natural) in an artificial way, that is, maintaining environments that depend at least partially on human activities and human choices, and preventing their spontaneous renaturalization.

In areas historically inhabited and used by humans, we often cannot know what the potential vegetation is, or we do not have habitats natural enough to show us. Biological communities have undergone such changes that they are often disrupted, not only in terms of species occurrence (with species that have disappeared and species that have been introduced), but also in terms of their specific frequency, cover and even structure. But this upheaval also applies to environmental dynamics, to landscape forms and to geomorphology (e.g., lakes drained on one side and artificially created elsewhere, mountains flattened on one side and created elsewhere, rivers shifted or channelized, etc.).

But can an environment really renaturalize itself? If so, what does this mean, what does it imply, and how can it occur? In fact, when human disturbance ceases or subsides, somehow, everything can renaturalize, in the sense that the dynamics once blocked or driven by humans resume their natural course, spontaneously. Every environment tends to do this, when given the possibility, following the ecological successions, that is, tending toward what we can define as maximum naturalness and toward increasingly structured and complex vegetation and soil (e.g., in terms of volume, height, the amount of biomass, layers and horizons and topsoil), following the vegetation series until we reach potential vegetation. This does not necessarily mean that the environments return back to their original (pristine, primeval) state; however, they can evolve differently, regaining some of their primordial characteristics and even keeping some traces of past human presence/land use/land modification, always following the ecological successions, according to the potential vegetation (when we know it) or the expected series head (when we do not know the potential vegetation).

How should we consider the human traces that remain in a renaturalized or renaturalizing environment? As traces of degradation? Human heritage? As something else? This is very much determined on a case-by-case basis. In general, we can most simply consider these traces as inherent or typical environmental features and, therefore, as a fossil landscape or as components of a fossil landscape [22].

The issues discussed above, beyond a mere ideological or conservationist concern, pose many problems at the scientific level, both for study and with respect to applications related to policy choices or for land and natural resource planning [23,24]. This is mainly because we often do not have sufficient reference areas in terms of surface, structure or representativeness to make the comparisons and take the measurements we would like to. This, also in order to know whether our actions would bring advantages or disadvantages.

Moreover, we can never truly understand the phenomena of interdependence between vegetation and other biological factors (such as animals, fungi, micro-organisms, etc.), even abiotic factors (climate, geology, geomorphology, hydrology, etc.), unless we study them in areas where protection of nature is at its peak, that is, where we can observe the dynamics and physiology of systems and not their pathology [25]. Additionally, protected areas and environmental impact assessments should not be designed to justify every possible intervention, but should be used to make a clear statement that not everything is usable and modifiable, and therefore, it is also necessary to consider conservation [25].

An increase in anthropized areas eventually disfavors species, communities and habitats characterized by a more anthropofuge species (species that are threatened by human activities, or that preferentially avoid humans and anthropogenic environments), and instead favors the presence of more synanthropic species (species that are aided by human presence and human activities, preferring anthropogenic environments), including alien and invasive species. This results, on the one hand, in new biodiversity, along with new communities and new values/disvalues, but it also causes a range of concerns, including native species' extinction and risks that are known or actively discussed in scientific and conservationist communities. These are issues that should be analyzed not only from a "hard" science perspective, but also from a humanities point of view.

In many cases, the same phenomenon can be interpreted in different ways, even from diametrically opposed points of view, with related applications, suggestions and fears. For example, the same forest, with old trees and rich in dead wood, may appear to some to be as ugly, dirty, degraded and of reduced value, with wasted timber, and to be a source of tree pests and diseases; but fortunately, others may attribute positive values to these forests, considering them to be extremely beautiful and a symbol of naturalness, giving them high ecological value and recognizing their high biodiversity and strong complexity. Similarly, even a specimen that effectively vegetates and propagates on its own can be perceived as beautiful to some but ugly and invasive to others.

For that reason, for some, alien species are a problem to be radically eliminated, without reservation, while fortunately, others show less drastic judgment, seeing them as a possible resource and a phenomenon to be observed and studied, that is, without feeling obliged to eradicate them or push other people to eradicate them a priori.

Likewise, the abandonment of places by humans is often seen as a serious danger, but it can also be seen as a great opportunity for the different development of human communities and to seek new paradigms, as well as to regain more natural and expanded areas for nature; this represents an opportunity for species and habitats that have been threatened, degraded, reduced, transformed or eliminated (due to human activities) to regain their spaces and dynamics as much as possible, which may also be possible thanks to ad hoc actions that humans could take, such as studies, land use changes, experiments, reintroductions and other focused research.

Another critical issue regarding ecological ethics and how today we pay contradictory attention to ecosystems and nature conservation, is that paradoxically today there is the risk that some ecosystems can be more easily anthropized or re-anthropized because they are located in protected areas, with available money that must be spent, or because it is easier to find money to manage and manipulate those areas thanks to the protected area status of these places, or simply to try to justify their existence showing that they are doing something. However, if no protected area status is assigned, the same places may risk being destroyed because they are unknown places or because they are not subject to any protection or limitations. This should remain an open question for discussion; however, it needs to be contextualized on a case-by-case basis. Obviously, this should also encourage us to consider how to improve the weak and distortable points of actual protected area systems.

Other open questions are related to how fair it is to create protected areas and protection measures, or conversely, to create areas and policies that force landowners to use the land, to harvest their forests, both based on restricting private property rights [12,13].

To limit conflicts, protected areas should try to buy the areas to be protected and establish agreements with local landowners as much as possible regarding possible wildlife management and control measures. On the other hand, state, local or international institutions should avoid forcing landowners to use their land if they prefer leaving them unused or subjecting them to reforestation (or other forms of spontaneous renaturation). Certainly, even in this last case, the more we broaden the horizons of discussion, the more new possibilities we uncover.

This can open up endless debates and deep discussions, possibly leading people to question even principles that seem to be increasingly accepted in the scientific community, to the point of almost becoming dogmas. Reasoning risks open minds; in any case, we must not feel compelled to find answers that are always valid everywhere. Rather, we must strive to reject trivialization, to engage in more complex and higher reasoning not necessarily tied to utilitarianism or business, and thus, to reason more on a case-by-case, context-by-context basis, eschewing pre-packaged ideas to be applied in all situations based on preconceptions and prejudices.

Ethical, cultural, deontological and philosophical issues are subjects of very important studies and research, and the humanities prove to be equally as important as issues more related to so-called “hard” science.

Observing and studying natural ecosystems and the spontaneous dynamics is important to the point that even agriculture and forestry science often draw inspiration from it to find more advantageous practices, as is the case, for example, for the grassing (cover crops) of woody crops (e.g., vineyards, orchards, olive groves, etc.) as an alternative to frequent tillage, now considered a more sustainable and beneficial agricultural practice.

Another example lies in trying to leave more room for natural dynamics and natural species in certain types of silviculture of the so-called “naturalistic” type to achieve a greater economic gain with less effort and with less environmental impact.

In short, studying, managing and protecting secondary habitats (including the more anthropogenic ones such as gardens, agricultural areas, urban green areas, etc.) while maintaining their biological, ecological, agronomic and cultural values remains very important [26], but is not sufficient by itself. At the same time, primary habitats must also be studied and protected as much as possible, along with what remains of these environments that represents the most natural possible level of the landscape, along with environments under renaturalization, all of which represents human and environmental values in their own way.

Humans can therefore play a fundamental role in these cases, focusing not only on anthropogenic and semi-natural environments, but also on more natural environments, as well as on the return of nature, on the preservation of environments and their encouragement to evolve freely, and on the preservation of primary residual environments. Forests and other natural habitats not only represent a living book of knowledge, experimentation, observation and study, but should also be considered custodians of history and biodiversity, where nature can simply be nature, an alternative to the vision that sees ecosystems, habitats, the environment and land as something only to be exploited, modified, dominated, guided or useful for obtaining funding. We need to eliminate the logic that reduces everything to “Can you eat it? What do you do with it? What benefit does it have? Can I make money from it? Can I obtain funding working on it? Can I carry out a project with it? Can I obtain votes in an election with it?”

Certainly, we should not think that anthropic environments are better than more natural ones, but neither should we think the opposite. We should avoid placing these environments in opposition or in competition with each other. We should also not be afraid of leaving environments to their spontaneous evolution, nor of assisting them where necessary. It is of no value to think that humans are never part of the environment or that humans always perform negative actions or have a negative impact.

This must push us to more complex and evolved “high reasoning”, including toward biological, ecological and conservation ethics, eschewing reasoning based on fear and hatred, and directing it toward curiosity [27]. Curiosity must also be foregrounded over utilitarian principles. Ethical and deontological reasoning should therefore go far beyond principles such as “I have to feed my family”, “That’s the way it has always been done” and “If I don’t do it, someone else will anyway”.

Certain human communities are still closely linked to nature today, often in such a way that they do not excessively denature their environment or have a visible negative impact on it; this is the case for certain indigenous communities in various parts of the

world, who, not surprisingly, are also endangered and in decline, for the same reasons biodiversity and naturalness are in decline.

The pressure from those who exploit natural resources as a possible means to make a profit, to “turn” the economy and to create “development” often ends up overwhelming the interests of local people, privatizing profits and spreading the costs and negative environmental and social consequences to local and global communities. That is, *Homo utentis*, *Homo dominus*, *Homo oeconomicus*, *Homo pollutans* and *Homo anthropocentricus* will replace *Homo sapiens*, affecting nature and biodiversity.

Among the local peoples, there may be economic or political speculation groups, business groups, groups driven by business lobbies and even delinquent and mafia groups. For these reasons, greater care should be taken to not confuse indigenous communities with those who simply inhabit or exploit their environments. People living close together are not all the same, which is one more reason why we must be careful not to generalize or trivialize when discussing this topic. We must be careful not to be guided by ideologies or opportunism, nor to leave room for reasons that might override the necessary curiosity in research studies. For these reasons, in this journal, we want to provide a platform for scientific and humanistic research on these issues, providing a space where they can be increasingly developed, disseminated and discussed by bringing them back to an objective framework.

It should also be kept in mind that there is often a complex interplay between conservation efforts and communities dependent on forests, grasslands and other natural resource-rich environments for their livelihoods and economic well-being. Despite the global emphasis on sustainability, climate and biodiversity goals, the local people realities and needs of these communities are often marginalized in policy discussions, as other times they are instead used to mask or carry out nefarious deeds. Resource use conflicts can often arise, as well as conflicts between local people and conservationists, and more attention also needs to be paid to these aspects (Conflict Resolution and Collaboration) in relation to the wild issues thus far laid out. At this juncture, humans may play a decisive role. In any case, the need for local community development cannot in any way justify lawlessness, deregulation or pandering to unfair or unjust rules, nor can it conceal indiscriminate development justified by various ideologies, preconceptions and greenwashing, as is increasingly the case.

Natural environments that have been used, shaped and transformed by humans, as well as all secondary ones (from semi-natural to more agricultural and urban) can represent different economic and cultural values for humans, but the same is true for the most natural environments, as well as for environments undergoing renaturalization, including abandoned land. The latter can also continue to preserve traces of the past and characteristics that influence their dynamics, their appearance and their cultural value. Furthermore, we must not forget the value that nature and renaturalization can bring to the development of our society and wellbeing.

While on the one hand, these issues are increasingly discussed and considered necessary, at the same time, resistance from detractors is becoming stronger, with the fight becoming increasingly bitter and based on sterile polemics or acts of force and abuse. One example of this is what has happened so far regarding the European “Restoration law”, with polemics, resistance, opposing struggles and attempts made to water it down, sabotage it, oppose it or distort it to the point of making it everything and nothing, as has already happened with the concepts of biodiversity, conservation, greenness and sustainability; these concepts are now increasingly abused to the point of being used to justify contrasting practices. The same happened before, during and after the European farmers’ revolts, where between the economic and social claims (many of which are understandable) were mixed populist claims against the environmental rules, which should have been afforded with a greater understanding and a more careful and balanced approach.

To give due consideration to these issues, this journal wants to provide a platform for everything related to the wild, and seeks studies from any aspect and discipline.

We should not always think dichotomously or think that there is always a contrast between humans and nature. Humans are part of nature, and it is for this reason that in anthropic environments, synanthropic species can easily dominate, together with so-called “alien” ones, which perhaps are not so alien in such contexts, with their presence being so closely linked to and dependent on human presence, unless we arbitrarily choose to calculate only certain human and environmental values/disvalues.

There are probably no truly natural environments in the world, just as there are no truly artificial environments, because if humans always end up influencing (directly or indirectly) even the most natural environments, the reverse is also true, and therefore, even the most artificial environments are always subject to natural laws and pressures.

Many so-called natural disasters are nothing more than the consequences of land occupation, the use of natural resources and the choices made by humans, and vice versa.

We can therefore say that there is a continuous gradient of conditions, such as to have a series of environments ranging from those where natural characteristics and dynamics are dominant to those where the dominant characteristics and dynamics are determined more by humans; between these two extremes are semi-natural environments, as in the case of secondary grasslands and managed forests, where the species are rather natural, but they could also have arrived there in the past thanks to the actions of humans and livestock, and where the succession dynamics are determined or blocked by the actions of humans. In other cases, even anthropogenic grasslands and forests (such as certain chestnut, conifer, cork oak, eucalyptus, poplar, walnut, *Robinia* and *Ailanthus* plantations), after being planted or introduced by humans in certain places, are then abandoned and left to evolve freely.

We must think about rewilding not as a process or an activity aimed at erasing every possible trace of man and the past presence of man, but as a natural phenomenon to be respected as such, to be observed and studied. To be allowed to happen spontaneously, autonomously, but also where we can intervene, for example, controlling it when really necessary, even by reintroducing species or seeds that can complete or favor this phenomenon. Therefore, trying instead to observe and experiment, and when necessary, by adding (reintroducing) rather than eliminating something, at least as far as the vegetation is concerned.

Concluding, in this journal, we welcome contributions that concern not only exquisitely natural environments, but also environments under processes of renaturalization. The focus is on their characteristics and their dynamics, but we are also interested in studies on the impact that humans have on these environments, as well as the interactions and possible interdependencies between humans and nature. Additionally, we are open to studies of natural dynamics and other related issues in the most artificial environments. Methodologies from both the social sciences and biological sciences are welcome.

This journal will concentrate on renaturalization processes, focusing not only on biodiversity, but also on abiotic diversity, cultural characteristics and the ethics of the conservation and management of natural resources. It will pay particular attention to works linked more to the study than to the use of land and of natural resources or to the manipulation of ecosystems, as well as strategies, opportunities, philosophies and territorial political choices that concern these issues. Attention will also be paid to the interactions between secondary environments, human actions and environments left to evolve freely (wild or in rewilding).

Within these environments, this journal will also dedicate space to studies on human perceptions and values; on the management of human conflicts between land uses and conservation; and on ecosystem restoration projects (including hydraulic restoration) based on increasing their naturalness or on their potential vegetation; additionally, we are interested in studies that use natural ecosystems as a reference model for the drafting of projects and interventions. More generally, we also offer a space for theoretical discussions on environmental restoration and on the problems related to such activities. We welcome a broad range of submissions ranging from empirical research articles, reviews, opinion pieces, short communications and essays.

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