

Radical Ruralism

Regeneration on the Edge

IMAGE FROM RAJASTHAN'S DHUN

WRITTEN BY ROSANNA VITELIO

A revolution is unfolding away from the city. When the bat phone rings at our London studio, The Place Bureau, it's often a call from the countryside – a park ranger on an Icelandic peninsula, a landowner in Rajasthan, or an ecologist on the Isle of Wight.

They face urgent, complex crises that make city challenges seem simple: colossal wildfires that cause billions in damage; a total collapse of soil health that eradicates water, food and life from a place; or the slow social dereliction of tourist towns that haven't kept pace with the world around them. All roads lead to demographic breakdown, economic decline, and widening inequalities.

Yet our callers come armed not just with warnings, but with brilliant place-based frameworks and informed experiments in planetary repair. They seek support in articulating how rural places can support a progressive local economy, attract (rather than lose) young people, and build viability and vitality for the future. That runs from defining a whole new vocabulary for socio-ecological solidarity, through to the need to tell these emerging stories in ways that provoke attention and build wider support.

These are people who intuitively understand the risk of sticking with the status quo. But they also know they can't do this by themselves. Their work aims to shift mindsets, spark action, and connect with others who share their regenerative vision to finally shift the systems that are fast breaking down.

We call this emerging ethos Radical Ruralism – a movement that sees the rural not as a nostalgic idyll but as a living laboratory for regenerating ecological, economic and social systems. It tackles entrenched challenges while imagining new structures of care, governance, and resilience.

Here's a whistlestop tour of the guiding lights – the places and people that we've had the pleasure of speaking with, working among and learning from.

Rosanna Vitellio guides us around three projects in Rajasthan, New Mexico and the Isle of Wight where the countryside is being reimagined as a crucible for ecological repair, social innovation and systemic change.

The Isle of Wight: Gardening the Descent, or Planting the Future?



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First stop: the Isle of Wight. Known for its scenic beauty and status as a UNESCO Biosphere, it's also grappling with deep, hidden struggles. When we started collaborating with ecologist Ian Boyd of local NGO The Common Space, he pointed to disturbing trends buried in government data. "One of the big problems of being largely rural," he explains, "is that human misery and despair is ignored. When it surfaces, it's immediately pushed back under."

The national government tends to dismiss rural claims of deprivation, cutting funding and services. "Hidden rural collapse is everywhere... Rurality is an absolute horror show." Ian argues.

The Island faces a demographic time bomb. Young people are leaving. Mental and physical health outcomes are worsening. Infrastructure is visibly deteriorating.

Meanwhile, well-off retirees often dominate local politics, resisting change in favor of a 'let's keep things nice please' preservation. "We are quite literally gardening the descent," Ian warns.

But from a hidden crisis forms hope. Ian and local collaborators have launched The Better Island Project, a 15-year plan to transform the Isle of Wight into a regenerative biosphere of global relevance. Their plan includes attracting £20 million+ in green and social investment by 2030; putting 30% of land under nature-positive management; creating of parish-level federations delivering housing, health, and food; and creating open-source tools and replicable governance models to create an infrastructure we can all hold together.



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The vision centers on four major transitions

- 01 Embed the Biosphere**
Turn the UNESCO designation into a practical tool for place-based renewal. Through investment zones, ecological enterprise and "Biosphere Bonds," the island uses its biosphere status for resilience.
- 02 A New Educational Settlement**
Build lifelong, place-based learning focused on biosphere literacy, creativity, and regenerative economies.
- 03 A Care and Repair Coalition**
Transform care into critical infrastructure. A "Care Compass" links community wellbeing, ecological restoration, and economic resilience.
- 04 Better Pay, Better Work**
Escape cycles of low pay by doubling jobs in land-based and cultural sectors. This goes way beyond a pilot project – Better Island is 'a compass for the future' with potential to inform regenerative futures far beyond its shores.

Rajasthan's Dhun: A Sandbox for Future Living



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In Rajasthan, India, a similar transformation is taking place – one that began with barren, degraded land. Just outside Jaipur, Dhun is a settlement for regenerative living led by land-owner Manvendra Singh Shekhawat and his team. When we asked Manvendra what his aspiration for Dhun was, his response surprised us: “We didn’t have a singular vision. Dhun was conceived as a sandbox.”

When they started, the site was a dry, saline expanse with fewer than 30 trees. A decade later, it’s been transformed into a vivid ecosystem.

The first step was water. Drawing on traditional water management systems from Manvendra’s ancestral Thar Desert and blending them with modern techniques, Dhun built five water bodies capable of harvesting 400 million litres of rainwater.

Then came trees. Over 300,000 were planted using the Miyawaki method, and revived soils followed. This created the conditions for a thriving local food system, offering nourishment and economic opportunity.

Dhun today is a full-scale prototype for regenerative living integrating soil regeneration, circular water systems, food growing, renewable energy, community architecture, and importantly culture and knowledge-sharing.

Cultural programming, art residencies, educational workshops, and experimental architecture are core to the site’s mission. Residents, visitors and researchers collaborate to refine this model, creating a toolkit that can be scaled to other places worldwide. On our last trip we met film students, furniture designers, gardeners, weavers and aspiring young makers, all working with Dhun as a platform for learning.

Manvendra calls it a “complete reversal of the way cities are planned today.” Instead of extracting from their surroundings, Dhun is designed for the flourishing of human potential, intended to inform how future villages, towns and cities might operate anywhere.



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Northern New Mexico: Meeting Fire with Fire



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Thousands of miles away in Northern New Mexico, we see similar challenges born from a different crisis. Author, activist and scientist Charles Curtin is confronting a landscape increasingly defined by fire.

In 2022, the largest wildfire in New Mexico's history scorched 340,000 acres, causing \$7 billion in damage. Federal agencies, Charles argues, were unprepared – applying “old tools to novel situations.”

It might seem like a paradox, but traditional practices of managing and burning the land prevent such huge wildfires. “We’re trying to get fire back on the landscape to help restore it,” Charles says. Regenerative networks that combine ancient wisdom with modern innovation offer great potential for managing fire risk. The cause isn’t just climate. It’s rural abandonment, land tenure changes, and absentee ownership – all social conditions that drive ecological vulnerability. “This isn’t a forestry problem,” he insists. “It’s a social justice problem.”

Applying his locally gained knowledge, Curtin has developed a framework where controlled burns and community-based land management could become critical tools for preventing larger disasters. But modern technologies and economic benefits are also deployed to ensure positive returns on investment and an ability to stack the benefits. One of their initiatives is the use of biochar – a charcoal-like material that sequesters carbon and restores soil health. Burnt trees and animal waste are transformed into fuel, enhancing drought resilience while reducing wildfire risk. They’re linking fire-prone forests to degraded agricultural lands in the nearby Great Plains, creating symbiotic systems that rebuild both food and water networks.

Just as importantly, they aim to revive local governance. Charles comes back to a proverb he was taught after collaborating with Masai leaders to share rural practices: “Never have more decision-makers than you can fit under a tree.” Small, empowered groups can often make faster, better decisions than large, bureaucratic institutions.

This work is relevant far beyond New Mexico. “Recent studies suggest every forest in the West will burn within 50 years,” Charles warns. “And that means cities near forests will burn too.” His regenerative models are blueprints for fire-prone regions worldwide – both rural and urban.

“Never have more decision-makers than you can fit under a tree.”

MASAI LEADERS



ONE OF THEIR INITIATIVES IS THE USE OF BIOCHAR – A CHARCOAL-LIKE MATERIAL THAT SEQUESTERS CARBON AND RESTORES SOIL HEALTH.

A shared ethos: place as the solution

Despite vast differences in geography – from the verdant Isle of Wight to the deserts of New Mexico and Rajasthan – these leaders are aligned by a shared strategy rooted in place. A quote on The Commons Space’s website by nature writer Richard Mabey sums it up : “Perhaps knowing one place intimately is to have a way of knowing all places.”

These communities are not relics, they’re leading us forwards. In writing this piece, Ian sent me a note (‘a thing I think you might like, Rosanna’): “The Isle of Wight is not a theme park. It is not a lost cause. It is not a quaint retreat. It is not dying. It is becoming.”

And part of that becoming is sharing knowledge with others. Charles’s forthcoming book ‘Place-Based Solutions: The Power of Regenerative Thinking in the Face of Crisis’ is due out in 2026. His central thesis resonates across all three projects: that solutions must be proactive, adaptive, and equitable - and deeply attuned to the dynamics of their landscapes.

Where global systems fail, these places bring about the future. The world often looks to cities as the engine of progress, yet it’s clear that the rural edges are where the most vital work is happening.

Across these diverse contexts, clear patterns emerge:

- Systemic decline is met with place-rooted innovation.
- Traditional knowledge is combined with next-generation tools.
- Care, ecology, culture and economy are treated as interwoven systems.
- Landscapes become laboratories for learning, iteration and renewal.
- Importantly, the leaders in these places refuse to give up on each other.

Perhaps these are the ingredients for Radical Ruralism? Whether it’s biosphere democracy on a British island, biochar-powered fire resilience in New Mexico, or regenerative living in Rajasthan, each offers practical blueprints for how humanity might navigate the crises ahead.

Yet pragmatic ‘solutions’ are simply the surface. What runs deeper is a reawakening of belief systems that are born from local landscapes, and a sense of collective imagination that comes from within rural communities themselves. We don’t have to look far back to find clues. In Rajasthan, we found an innate creativity among everyone we met, a mindset of abundance where others see a desert of scarcity, evident in traditional technologies like stepwells and desert foraging. In the Isle of Wight, through our work coastal communities we encountered a desire to connect to sea and land for health of mind, body and spirit. And New Mexico weaves layers of indigenous, hispanic and American culture that brings a unique combination of modern entrepreneurship with timeless land-based practices. When you live in a rural place, landscape and nature are so much a part of collective identity that they are also your community.

The greatest challenge remains: convincing centralized power structures that cling to outdated paradigms to recognize that this isn’t just about sustainability. It’s about survival. It’s a fundamental shift in how we live, govern and care for our places.

As Charles remarked just before our last call ended, “If we keep using the same old tools, we’re going to keep getting the same old problems. This isn’t just an environmental strategy. It’s a whole new way of seeing our place in the world.”

Learn more about the projects



The Isle of Wight: Gardening the Descent, or Planting the Future?

thecommonspace.org



Rajasthan’s Dhun: A Sandbox for Future Living

dhun.life



Northern New Mexico: Meeting Fire with Fire

charlescurtin.com

Rosanna Vitiello

Rosanna Vitiello is the founder of The Place Bureau, a research, strategy and design studio exploring the evolving relationship between people and place. Her regenerative, co-creative practice helps communities imagine and design the futures they want to inhabit. Through narrative and spatial storytelling, she reawakens connections with place and invites us to see our world through new eyes. She is co-author of Natural Futures, exploring nature as a partner in placemaking.



Pick up your copy of Natural Futures, which features more interviews and case studies from the Isle of Wight, Rajasthan and dedicated chapters on Radical Ruralism.