



Don't dream but do





10 years of COMON

**Don't dream
but do**



A person wearing a hat and a light-colored shirt is sitting on a wooden deck, looking out over a savanna landscape. The deck has a wooden railing. In the background, there are trees and a clear sky. The entire image has a green tint.

‘COmON will need to exist
for many years to come
because the world is always
asking for improvement.’

Wijnand Pon



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Top left - Peace Parks Foundation, Simalaha

Bottom left - Charles Darwin Foundation, Baltra

Right - Commonland, Australia



Foreword

More than 10 years ago on 28 March 2011, at 9 am, I opened the first meeting of the COMON Foundation at 'De Hunzebocht'. At the table with me were Hans Heersink, Maas Jan Heineman, Coos van Egmond and Hans van Poelvoorde. I declared: "We are going to do something good for the world!" and read out what we had decided:

- *To do things that permanently improve the world, adding something useful, with substance and in a smart way.*
- *The initiatives must be of long-term benefit to society.*
- *Based on a project-centred approach.*

Now, 10 years later, we can look back. Have we achieved these ambitions? Have we found our way? Have we grown and established a focus? In short, are we on the right track?

We asked a copywriter, Deirdre Enthoven, to interview the key players. In front of you is an easy-to-understand document in which the history of the COMON Foundation, the first 10 years of its existence, is described in a colourful way with anecdotes, photos and stories.

I have already concluded that yes; we are on the right track, but we are far from there yet. COMON will need to exist for many years to come because the world is always asking for improvement.

Enjoy reading!

Wijman

CHAPTER
01



Don't dream but do

Comon, let's go for it!

Wijnand Pon has been walking around for some time with a folder with information that keeps him busy. It contains articles and documents about various major world problems, about poverty and in particular about the destruction of our planet. Wijnand loves this planet. He made his money by running two very successful businesses – the original family business, Pon Holdings, and his own cattle farm, Koepon, which he started at 23 in Garnwerd, Groningen. He bought out the family and extended Pon Holdings, but he is foremost a farmer, he says. Since childhood, his real interest lies with the forest, the cows and the Earth.

Depleted Earth

The information in the folder is disturbing. Earth is warming up quickly, there are far too much CO₂ emissions, the disparities between rich and poor are increasing, and there are now areas where people can barely survive because the soil has been exhausted. Nothing grows anymore and entire tribes have moved away.

'IN TWO HUNDRED YEARS, WE HAVE BROUGHT THE WORLD TO ITS KNEES. WE HAVE TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THIS.'

Of course, this is not news to him, but running his two companies, he had never got around to doing anything about it. Now that he has retired as the director of Pon, the seriousness of it is unyielding. In two hundred years, we have brought the world to its knees, Wijnand thinks, but also immediately considers: we have to do something about this. Wijnand, as he himself says, is not a dreamer. He prefers to take immediate action. He muses on

how he could contribute to tackling these immense problems, and about how he can give something back after all these years of respectable farming in the broadest sense of the word.

At agricultural school, where he was taught the basics of farming, he learned how to fertilise and how to get the most out of the soil. Nothing about the ecosystem, though. But life is a great learning process, he has observed throughout his career. Return is important. Without profit, you have no right to exist, but he is now convinced that you should pass on the world in a better condition than how you received it. This means that besides generating returns, you also have to ensure fertile soil, a thriving ecosystem and to maintain or restore the landscape. Anyone who only focuses on maximising profit is at a dead end, because it all ends up with an exhausted earth from which there is nowhere to go. Because of this advancing insight, he and Koepon are shifting more and more towards circular agriculture. In Germany, Kuhpon has already completely switched to organic.

But Wijnand already knows: it's not enough, it's too local. If you really want to change something, start a movement that can be felt worldwide. Inspire others to do the same. Starting a flywheel. Or – a more beautiful metaphor – throwing a stone into the river that causes many more ripples, currents, preferably an enormous flood. Wijnand is simply someone who thinks big and is ambitious. If he does something, he wants to do it right, otherwise why bother at all?

Wijnand has become quite wealthy with his successful companies. Enough to plant a lot of trees and fight poverty. But how can he best do that? Randomly transferring money to one or more of the many projects already underway in this area is not an option for him. The money will certainly end up being useful. But that's not how you start a flywheel or current. He then set up his own foundation to support more targeted and sustainable projects. He soon came up with the name COMON, a combination of Coopon, the name of the Scottish and Canadian branches of Koepon, and Pon, with the coherent message: 'COMON', let's go for it!

The right people

If Wijnand has to name one factor that has contributed to making two companies successful at the same time, it was attracting the right people and then daring to delegate. He is not a man who wants to keep a tight hold of the reins; on the contrary. He has a good sense of who can best help him and when he has found the right person, they easily gain his full confidence.

"If you mess up, you'll be out in no time," he says. "But if you do it right, I'll hand it over. I'm quite rigorous about that." He also knows exactly who he wants for COMON, usually from his immediate environment. And he once again attracted the right people.

Coos van Egdom

Coos van Egdom had been working at Pon Holdings for 28 years when Wijnand asked him to take care of the private finances of the family. He liked this position of trust and Wijnand saw him as the right man to also steer the foundation's finances in the desired direction. He said to him: "Coos, we're stuck with those polluting cars. It's time we did something about the

environment and gave something back to the Earth. And you have to make sure that everything is financially and fiscally in order.” Coos immediately said yes. He enjoyed working for Wijnand, and that the owner of Pon clearly liked cows more than cars.



Maas Jan Heineman

Wijnand also asked a few good friends, each with their own specialism and expertise, to participate. He knew Maas Jan Heineman from the North Netherlands Golf & Country Club and from several trips they had made together. Maas Jan was a gynaecologist and professor of obstetrics and gynaecology, and had a wealth of experience in the field of education and training. “A very important factor, of which I have no knowledge,” says Wijnand. Based on his knowledge, he could work out how you could best teach people to develop on the spot, so that they could approach things differently themselves. He could also connect people like no-one else, a skill that Wijnand calls indispensable, both within the foundation and when entering into partnerships. Wijnand had been talking to Maas Jan for some time about his ideas for a foundation, and also about his belief that if you want to restore nature, you should also look at the people who live there. As a doctor, Maas Jan was immediately enthusiastic about this priority, formulated as ‘opportunities for the underprivileged’.

Hans (John) Heersink

Hans Heersink, also known as John after emigrating with his parents to Canada as a child, had been a friend of Wijnand for over forty years. They had met in 1978, because Wijnand had an investment company together with Hans’ father. Hans also worked in animal husbandry. The friends even worked together for a while, when Hans was looking for suitable bulls for Koepon in Canada. He was not surprised by Wijnand’s ideas, because he knew him above all as a naturalist. “He invited me in so we could play golf more often,” he chuckles. “I was technically given the position of treasurer, but I did nothing at all.” Wijnand did indeed like to spend time with his friend, enjoyed playing golf with him and spending pleasant evenings together – Hans always stayed over afterwards – but he certainly also wanted to have him around because of his knowledge and experience as a successful businessman and investor. Hans knows how to ‘turn money into more money’. Wijnand asked him to join the board of an investment company whose profits would flow to COMON in order to finance projects. The company would be named PONOOC, again a loose variation on the letters of Pon and Coopon.

Hans van Poelvoorde

Like Coos, Hans van Poelvoorde comes from the Pon stable. He worked there for many years, eventually as Director of Business Development on the board of Pon Equipment & Power Systems. Van Poelvoorde was a mechanical engineer and had a wealth of experience in strategy, supply chains and IT. Wijnand knew Hans as a reliable and intelligent force; at an early stage he asked him to contribute ideas about the set-up of COMON, the investment vehicle that COMON was to finance, PONOOC, and viable projects that would fit with Wijnand’s ideas.

Hans remembers Wijnand said straight out: “I’m going to put a large amount into it and then you have to do the work.” Hans dove into the NGO world, about which he and Wijnand still knew very little at that time. He bought a whole pile of books



Hans van Poelvoorde comes from the Pon stable, where he worked for many years as Director of Business Development.

on philanthropy and sent Wijnand the same pile. An eye-opener was the book *Billions of Drops in Millions of Buckets. Why Philanthropy Doesn't Advance Social Progress* by Steven H. Goldberg. It painted a disconcerting picture of the enormous number of charities and NGOs, who take all kinds of action and with the best intentions, but who all seem to operate on their own planet, have little or no cooperation and therefore bring about little real change. These are the examples Wijnand did not want to compare himself to: there must be another way, he thought.

Project scan

To prepare for the first COMON meeting, Hans asked Wijnand to complete around ten forms with many questions that would provide insight into what Wijnand exactly wanted with his foundation. With questions such as 'Should it be structural aid or emergency aid?' and 'Do they have to be projects that are close by or can they be anywhere in the world?'

Hans wanted to draw up a profile based on which the board can properly determine which projects they want to support. Hans was also already selecting a long list of projects that could qualify for support from COMON. He and Wijnand went through thirty of them; in the end they made a small selection that best met COMON's goals and mission. Based on the preparation, Hans put together a booklet that would serve as a guideline for selecting projects in the longer term, called COMON Foundation Project Scan.

Goals and mission

It was 28th March 2011, at 9 am, when Wijnand welcomed Hans Heersink, Maas Jan, Coos and Hans van Poelvoorde to his farm De Hunzebocht in Garnwerd and opened the first board meeting of the COMON Foundation. Everyone introduced themselves and was given a clear function (if only on paper). Wijnand was of course chairperson, Hans Heersink treasurer ("but Coos does all the finances!"), Maas Jan secretary, Coos board member and Hans van Poelvoorde director.

Wijnand then clarified the main motives behind and objectives of the COMON Foundation, a kind of initial goals and mission.

**'YOU JUST HAVE TO START.
KEEP IT SIMPLE, WAS WIJNAND'S
MOTTO. OTHERWISE, YOU WOULD
NEVER START.'**

Quoted verbatim from the minutes of that first meeting, they concerned:

- Doing things that permanently improve the world, adding something useful, with substance and in a smart way.
- The initiatives must be of long-term benefit to society.
- Based on a project-focused approach.

This wording was so broad, it covered everything you would want, but it was a start. It would be regularly reviewed and fine-tuned – more on that later. You just have to start. Keep it simple, was Wijnand's motto. Otherwise, you would never start. The board members further decided that overhead costs would be kept low, they accepted they would not be rewarded for their services; at most, they would declare expenses. The project overview must also be clear, current and accessible and must be assessed on the basis of the *COMON Foundation Project Scan*.

The board noted that there were many significant projects, but they must be critical to have chosen a clear direction. Projects which, for example, tackled the phosphate problem, or asked the blind to test a digital cane, deviated a bit too far from what they had in mind and were rejected. The interesting and suitable topics included 'More food without malaria' (later known as SolarMal), originated from the Wageningen University Fund, for which a previously developed method against malaria was to be tested at Lake Victoria in Western Kenya. And TYM, a project from the Rabo Foundation for micro-financing enterprising women in Vietnam.

Perhaps the most appealing project, because it directly responded to Wijnand's wish to plant trees, was the [Hurri Hills](#) project, also in Kenya, where Pieter Hoff had big plans with his Waterboxx method. More information was needed on all projects before a COMON fund would be awarded.

The relevant organisations and initiators would be asked to give a presentation to the board. Pieter Hoff could do that right away at that first meeting. Hans van Poelvoorde had already invited him; the beginning of a long and winding path that COMON would walk with him. ~



**‘The arrival of COmON
was an enormous gift.
They complete our work.’**

Werner Myburgh

SCALE UP - The slums of Nairobi are the focus for developing an effective and efficient model to combat cardiovascular diseases

CHAPTER 02

Fall and rise

Regarding idealists, scientists, adventurers and projects with potential

Typical for the early days of COMON was that there was a lot of money and Wijnand's will and desire to invest it in several projects which were making a difference, but that there was not really a clear direction at that point: there was still a lack of focus. We mainly looked at projects that presented themselves, that Hans van Poelvoorde came across, or that the other board members put forward from their own field.

Subsequently, a critical look had to be taken, and definitely also at the financial feasibility. There were sometimes lively discussions about this, in which people kept each other focused and complemented each other well. Sympathy, especially in those early days, certainly played a major role in deciding whether a project was chosen. It was also striking that no one hesitated to say whether they had a good feeling about a project or person. If it didn't feel right, as Maas Jan stated, then it was a 'no'. If there was a click and trust, then it was a 'yes'. COMON embraced several projects in its first period, which Wijnand and the board still look back on with satisfaction and pride.

The Waterboxx

Pieter Hoff from North Holland was a lily grower and importer and exporter of flower bulbs. He travelled all over the world for his company. When more and more customers complained about the falling groundwater level, deforestation and the increasing eroded areas, Hoff sold his lily business and started Groasis in 2003. With this company, he wanted to focus on more efficient water use. His first product was the Waterboxx® plant cocoon, the Waterboxx for short. It was an affordable product that allowed you to plant trees, vegetables and shrubs in an effective and water-saving way, even on totally degraded soil. Wijnand immediately thought it was a marvellous invention.

During the first COMON board meeting, Hoff explained in detail how the Waterboxx worked and which projects were underway. In 2010, he sold around 30,000 units and 90 percent of the trees planted grew well. His next step was the Hurri Hills project in Kenya, where he wanted to reforest the area through the Waterboxx in collaboration with two Kenyan universities.



To help finance this project, he turned to COMON. The board was not only charmed by the product but also by the idea of involving the residents directly in the project. They contributed land and their labour was paid. What was also interesting was the involvement of a CO₂ specialist in view of the CO₂ credits that could contribute to the project's revenue. Hoff hoped COMON would finance the production of the Waterboxx. But that's not where the board saw its role: COMON then became a partner in the company, while the aim was to support projects. It had been decided that Hans van Poelvoorde, together with Pieter Hoff, would draw up a solid business plan based on which it would be decided whether COMON would invest in Groasis.

"Pieter was a scatterbrain," Wijnand recalled from the start, "but above all an idealist pur sang, with creative ideas and enormous perseverance. I like people like that!" he says. "But if it's just great ideas and they're not turned into clear actions with the potential to become huge, I can't do much with them." Yet Wijnand continued to support Hoff over the years, if only by purchasing significant quantities of Waterboxxes.

Pieter Hoff unfortunately passed away on 13 April 2021. The news of his death was completely unexpected for COMON. The special, iconic man would be greatly missed by the board.

Pieter Hoff with the Waterboxx® plant cocoon in Ecuador

SolarMal

Another project from the early days was SolarMal. Wijnand had contacts at Wageningen University from his agricultural background, so it was easy to check with the board which projects they had that were looking for finance. From the list, the board quickly picked the aforementioned malaria project in West Kenya. [Willem Takken](#) was a professor of entomology at Wageningen University and researched alternative ways to combat malaria. Mosquito nets were not sufficient, and mosquitoes were becoming increasingly resistant to insecticide. He and his team were developing a completely innovative method, based on catching mosquitoes (this had never been done before) and was a participatory approach (the population itself had to participate in the intervention).

The method comprised an attractant, that simulated human scent, to which a trap was attached. To turn the trap, which used electricity to spread the scent, Takken connected it to a solar cell. In many malaria areas, people usually have no electricity; their lamps ran on kerosene and they charged

their phones at the nearest convenience store. To investigate whether the trap was effective, he wanted to start an investigation with the trap in western Kenya, on [Rusinga Island](#), an island in Lake Victoria. The advantage of the island was that it was a closed area. There was no migration of mosquitoes from land. To take part, people only needed to attach the solar panel to their roof and hang the trap outside their house. He called the project SolarMal. It was very promising. Wijnand selected it because it helped to solve a health problem and to develop this innovation in the field of malaria control.

**‘CATCHING MOSQUITOES
IS A COMPLETELY
INNOVATIVE METHOD
AND HAD NEVER BEEN
DONE BEFORE.’**

SCALE UP

Wijnand also asked Maas Jan to look at projects from within his medical expertise that might suit COMON. Maas Jan immediately thought of an intervention for cardiovascular diseases in the slums of Nairobi, which tropical doctor and former doctor at Doctors Without Borders Steven van de Vijver – who had completed his medical studies in Groningen under the supervision of Maas Jan – was working on. He was affiliated with the Amsterdam Institute of Global Health & Development and would later become director of the associated research agency, Urban Health.

The project was already supported by the [AMC Foundation](#), which meant that Maas Jan was familiar with it. Van de Vijver would use the scientific insights of this intervention to obtain a PhD from Professor Joep Lange, known for his extensive research into HIV in Africa and founder of Pharm Access, a foundation that makes medical facilities available and medicines affordable for the poor. (*Lange and his wife sadly died in the MH17 disaster in 2014; a tremendous loss.*) Lange and Van de Vijver shared their love and connection with the African continent. Both were amazed at the rapid increase of Western diseases of affluence, especially in the large African cities, and especially among the poorer population.



The SolarMal mosquito trap is attached to a house

It turned out later that this was mainly because of a combination of lifestyle, diet and exercise, but also to the stress of life in the slums. And because of a genetic and epigenetic element: the African population was more predisposed to these diseases. When a baby lacked nutrition, it was more likely to develop obesity later in life: the so-called hunger winter cohort.

Lange and Van de Vijver contacted the [African Population and Health Research Centre](#) (APHRC) in Nairobi, which employed many highly trained doctors and had been researching the health of people in the city's slums for more than ten years. Van de Vijver eventually joined a project ran by Catherine Kyobutungi, a Ugandan doctor who later became director of the APHRC. He moved to Kenya with his wife and two small children – their third child was born there – and undertook three years of fieldwork. His goal was to develop a cost-effective, scalable, and sustainable model for the prevention of cardiovascular diseases of the urban population in the slums. It would be called SCALE UP, an acronym for *sustainable model for cardiovascular health by adjusting lifestyle and treatment with an economic perspective in settings of urban poverty*. The AMC Foundation was looking for another party to finance Van de Vijver's project. COMON decided to step in.



TYM

And then there was TYM, the microcredit project for women in Vietnam, which came into the picture through the [Rabo Foundation](#). The project was a defined and clear project, with which you could easily make a big difference for the poorer population in Vietnam. This also included loans that the women received; the money would eventually be refunded. They didn't think about it for long and decided to finance the project. It would turn out to be a good choice. 'Money well spent' was the board's conclusion.

Zambia Barotseland Project

The Zambia Barotseland Project was part of the [Peace Parks Initiative](#). The aim of this was to restore and harmonise nature in a number of neighbouring countries in southern Africa, and to achieve free passage for people (tourism) and animals. Creating economic activity for the very poor population in this area was also prioritised. An important aspect was that central government powers would be returned to the local communities.



‘EVERYONE AGREED THAT IT WAS A WONDERFUL PROJECT AND HAD EVERY CONFIDENCE IN THE PEACE PARKS FOUNDATION.’

Everyone agreed that it was a wonderful project and had every confidence in the Peace Parks Foundation, set up by Prince Bernhard, Nelson Mandela, and Anton Rupert. But the support requested here would mean that COMON would only have a minor sponsorship role. This did not fit with the way in which Wijnand wanted to exert influence as well as investment, in order to have a maximum impact.

At first, this meant a ‘no’, but they decided to continue discussing other possibilities

for cooperation. At that time, it was inconceivable that Peace Parks would be on the agenda a short time later and would become one of the parties that structurally support COMON.

Smooth salesmen

There were other projects that seemed promising, but which COMON decided to abandon at an early stage, such as [The Naga Foundation](#), a platform that established and connected organisations engaged in large-scale world greening, boosting local economies and making people aware of the problems and solutions in that area. The ambition was to ‘leave the largest ecological footprint ever’. The Hurri Hills project, to which Pieter Hoff also wanted to contribute with his Waterboxx, was an example of this. An underlying project called [Justdiggitt](#) also appealed to the imagination, an initiative that aimed to restore the parched earth in a sizeable number of areas in Africa, together with the local population and by means of various greening techniques. It all fitted perfectly with what COMON wanted. There was a group of enthusiastic young men behind it: Peter Westerveld, Fried-Jan Unger, and Dennis Karpes. Their ideas were good, and they knew particularly how to present them with brilliant campaigns.

Two consecutive meetings took place, one of which was with Marcel Brenninkmeijer’s co-sponsor of Good Energies, and a grant of 1 million euros was awarded. The men were also later invited to the opening party for the

rebuilt Hunzebocht, the farm which had been almost completely destroyed by a fire in 2009. In 2011, Wijnand invited around eighty people to celebrate that the beautiful building had risen again. Justdiggitt gave a presentation about their further ambitions.

“These guys came across as sort of adventurers with a very good speech,” Maas Jan remembered. “The content was fine, but they made it too smooth. It was a commercial story that raised a lot of questions.” The board supported them, but there was also doubt. Coos soon saw that they were moving far too fast. “We had divided the donation into tranches, but they immediately went over that. And there was the necessary mutual friction, so it didn’t get off the ground properly.” In the end, Wijnand decided to leave the project. “The guys got into an argument with each other. Then I immediately thought, I won’t put another cent in that. I don’t like arguing.” Wijnand knows that the current COMON director John Loudon is now talking to these guys again, but remains sceptical. “They’re still there, I think they’re doing well, and I wish them every success,” he says, “but once I’ve said goodbye, I won’t be back soon.”

Another club with an interesting concept, as well as a smooth salesman at the helm, was the [Black Jaguar Foundation](#). The founder was a young man who firstly handed over to Wijnand his book about his adventurous motorbike trip across the United States and who talks about the Jordanian princesses on his advisory board. But smooth men don’t suit Wijnand. He thinks it’s a nice story, but was mainly curious about what had already been done and achieved in concrete terms. As great as the concept was, the club would not receive a cent from him at that time.

Trial and error

Some projects simply did not get off the ground sufficiently, which meant that COMON departs after a short period. In the beginning, it was just a matter of trying, of trial and error. One example was the [Medical Knowledge Institute](#), which was committed to providing basic hygiene education to the residents of slums in South Africa. The slogan ‘Women and children first’ appealed to the board; the primary aim of the aid was to combat mortality among women and children in the slums. The MKI also already received support from Desmond Tutu, and could have easily been rolled out in other countries.

COMON also decided to support the project, on the condition that the formula must be proven to work in the forthcoming years. Ultimately, the support ended – not only because the project did not go well, but mainly because of its health character, which no longer fitted with COMON's more stringent mission.

Another project that Hans van Poelvoorde put on the agenda in those early days was Avalon, by Martien Lankester. Young people in the slums of Cape Town were trained in urban agriculture. The project fulfilled the part of the mission: creating opportunities for the underprivileged, and COMON joined in. But the number of students delivered was meagre. Looking back, Maas Jan states that urban agriculture was a perfect fit with COMON's policy, but that the return on the project simply remained too low: 'They were simply too expensive!' Ultimately, it remained a one-time donation.

WikiForest

Wijnand started to devise his own project. In order to get a good overview of where reforestation projects are, or should be, set up, he wanted to map out where in the world forests were disappearing and being planted. It would become a portal, a kind of digital reforestation library, under the name WikiForest. For example, a single mouse click would show what the project would entail, which methods would be applied, what the results would be and what lessons could be learned from it.

The ultimate goal was to make people aware and take action, thereby making landscape restoration mainstream. There was a lot of thinking and talking, but there was no action. It was a great idea, but to roll it out properly, you had to work with large and reliable parties, such as Oxford University or Wageningen University. If it didn't get off the ground, Wijnand would quickly say goodbye. Ten years later, the idea was still taking shape, albeit with a slightly different interpretation: mapping mangroves around the world.


ANBI status

An important step that COMON managed to take a year after its foundation was acquiring ANBI status. This means that you are a public benefit institution and therefore enjoy certain tax benefits. Coos was committed to it. "It was perhaps the most important thing I have been able to do for COMON," he says.

"Above all, you had to arrange a lot of formalities, submit the annual accounts every year and be able to have a good website, but it is important. Without that status, you can't deduct anything and each donation is twice as expensive." ~



Avalon - Urban agriculture was a perfect fit with COMON's policy, but ultimately, it remained a one-time donation



‘The three zones were
thus set in motion, and
people’s prosperity
increased through
regenerative agriculture.’

Maas Jan Heineman

CHAPTER
03

Development of the mission and objective

The 4 Returns philosophy, a language everyone understands

‘Doing things that permanently improve the world, for the benefit of society and with a project-based approach.’ There are many good causes that can be covered by this first definition of COMON’s mission and objectives. Wijnand knew that when he chaired the first meeting. But if you wait for everything to be perfect, you’ll never start. You have to start somewhere; the focus would present itself. And that’s exactly what happened.

In the early years, each meeting began by examining the mission and goals. Initially, two tracks emerged: Health and Green. They were superseded a year later. The definition of ‘giving people in the countryside opportunities to earn money, while at the same time making areas that have fallen into disarray green again’ had passed. This included education for residents, along with the idea: ‘initiate something substantial that can be replicated elsewhere’.

Making choices

After a year of investing in a great number of projects – sometimes with success, sometimes with disappointing results – the directors sat back and took stock. Had the money been well spent? How could it have been done better? And how could more targeted choices have been made? The choice sometimes felt a little arbitrary. Four of the first five projects also concerned health care, which was actually not the intention. According to Wijnand, Green and Water should have been spearheads. The need was growing for more demarcation and focus. “We were too much of a generalist,” Coos recalls. “We increasingly saw that we had to become specialists.”

Wijnand was now sure that he wanted to focus on ‘re-greening the planet’: giving more back to nature, for example, through reforestation. He was also convinced that this would not be possible without the involvement of the local population. “And,” he underlines, “to really make a difference, they had to be projects with the potential to become enormous. COMON’s support should inspire other parties to take part as well, it should create that flywheel effect.” More focus also meant: making more choices. As a result, the creation of opportunities for the underprivileged and projects purely in health care were

receding into the background. Hans van Poelvoorde summarises it as follows: “Green, replanting and employment, and those areas where the need was greatest.” But the focus only really became definite when Willem Ferwerda entered COMON.

Loss of biodiversity

Although he was born in Amsterdam and grew up among the concrete, Willem Ferwerda as a child is one of those boys who preferred to play outside in nature, catch frogs, and take insects home to examine. He studied biology and specialised in tropical ecology. While undertaking research in Colombia, he saw more and more how nature was being transformed into agricultural land. “An understandable choice for the short term, it provides food,” he looks back, “but even then, in the 1980s, the farmers themselves saw that it was destroying their land in the longer term.”

Ferwerda then worked for various conservation organisations, including 17 years at the Dutch branch of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the world’s largest and oldest nature conservation union and parent organisation of the World Wildlife Fund. He worked there for five years as the Rainforest Fund manager and twelve years as a director. Over those years, he became acquainted with IUCN’s ecosystem approach model (ecosystem approach), and he built up a huge network within international nature conservation, consultancy and multinationals and smaller companies. He befriended Herman Wijffels and regularly talked with Paul Fentener van Vlissingen (who unfortunately passed away in 2006) and Alexander Rinnooy Kan. His goal: to seriously put ecology on the map within governments and companies. “Almost all of them engage in greenwashing”, he explains, “but it often ends with good stories or dancing around in the margins. CEOs are tied to shareholders and could therefore not make a real change.”



Willem Ferwerda studied biology and specialised in tropical ecology. His goal is to seriously put ecology on the map within governments and companies.

However, Ferwerda knew from experience that, in the long-term, shareholder maximisation always led to the destruction of nature. And above all: the loss of biodiversity. “The consequences of this are many times greater than those of climate change,” he says. “But the great thing is: you can do something about it.” For years, the theoretical model of IUCN’s ecosystem approach had been his guiding principle, now realising this in practice became his theme. That was his mission.

Pipeline of projects

Although Ferwerda could exert a great deal of influence through IUCN, he was also bound to his senior position and was unable to avoid the slow, bureaucratic processes. However, he was impatient; the problems were urgent; he wanted to speed up and drive a drastic change in the mentality of consuming more and more at a price that was far too low. In 2012, he took a sabbatical to think about how to achieve a practical and systemic move in the field of ecological restoration. He travelled, talked to entrepreneurs, farmers and investors in many countries, and concluded that people generally shared the same dreams and frustrations: they wanted to leave a better world to their children, but in the current system, that was impossible. As he saw in Colombia, people in all these countries saw that their deforestation and agriculture were disastrous for the future, but to survive now, they had little choice.

Ferwerda decided that he had to create a pipeline with only regenerative projects: projects that were constructive for nature and the environment as well as the people themselves. Because if you forgot that third pillar, you would never have people on board, and everything would be doomed to fail. He published his findings in a small book called *Nature Resilience* at the Rotterdam School of Management. At that time, Ferwerda was already in regular consultation with Pieter Hoff and Eduard Zanen, the owner of Bugaboo, who was already involved in Hoff’s Waterboxx and was also prepared to invest in Ferwerda’s plans. He was also involved with the Chinese-American filmmaker John D. Liu a few years earlier. He made the beautiful film *Hope in a changing climate* about nature restoration in the Chinese loess plateau. “John’s films perfectly illustrate this message,” says Ferwerda. “He can show what I mean like no other, that’s why I hired him.” More documentaries would eventually follow, also about Ferwerda’s [4 Returns philosophy](#).

4 Returns

Ferwerda was looking for a language that everyone understood, from governments and companies to farmers and conservationists. He noticed everyone talked about *return on investment*, but didn’t always mean the same thing. For example, an investor looks at what something yields financially, a farmer at what he can harvest. “If you want to build a bridge, speak a language that everyone understands,” he says, “and that appeals to everyone.” The word ‘return’ is essential, he notes. But we have to distinguish between different types of returns.

He ultimately defined four:

1. the [Return on Inspiration](#): meaning the driving force behind everything; if people enjoy it, the rest will follow automatically;
2. the [Return on Social Capital](#): involving people in a project, for example by creating project-related jobs, their welfare increases and they become more willing to restore the area;
3. the [Return on Nature](#): regenerative agriculture restores biodiversity, increases the value of the land and makes it more attractive for the people who live there. By investing in the right trees and crops, you increase the CO₂ storage and therefore your capital in emission rights also grows;
4. the [Return on Investment](#): by investing in employment and nature you stimulate the entire economic activity and thus the financial capital of an area.

The first three Returns generate a sustainable return, so that people may continue to live there, the fourth also provides a financial return. “That return is lower than the return under the old system,” explains Ferwerda, “you cannot avoid that, but maximising the Return on Investment per hectare simply leads to degradation. Only maximisation of the 4 Returns per landscape will lead to recovery.” To put these 4 Returns into practice, two more components are essential. They should take place in three zones: the natural zone, the combined zone of nature and where people live, and the economic residential zone. “This zoning approach is mainly aimed at helping people understand step by step how the ecology of a landscape works.” And finally, time is needed: at least twenty years, preferably more. In summary, he calls it the [4R/3Z/20Y philosophy](#).



RETURN OF
INSPIRATION



RETURN OF
SOCIAL CAPITAL



RETURN OF
NATURAL CAPITAL



RETURN OF
FINANCIAL CAPITAL



RETURN OF INSPIRATION

Giving people hope and a sense of purpose



RETURN OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

Bringing back jobs, business activity, education and security



RETURN OF NATURAL CAPITAL

Restoring biodiversity, soil and water quality



RETURN OF FINANCIAL CAPITAL

Realizing long-term sustainable profit

'WILLEM'S 4 RETURNS WERE THE FOCUS AND DEFINITION THAT COMON WANTED TO ACHIEVE, IT MATCHED PERFECTLY.'

Measurable results

It would be Pieter Hoff who would put [Nature Resilience](#), by Willem Ferwerda, on Wijnand Pon's desk. "Willem was a man with dreams in the fields Wijnand was looking to go into," Hoff adds. Wijnand read the book and found it promising. He immediately saw that the 4 Returns offered a concrete handle with which you could get started. "Willem's 4 Returns were the focus and definition that COMON wanted to achieve, it matched perfectly."

Wijnand had seen so many companies that talked about the climate problem, that were full of greening, recycling and cradle to cradle. He was surprised and delighted that Willem had not only thought about the Why, but also the What and the How. The biggest plus was that formulas could be developed for the 4 Returns to actually measure them. Wijnand expected that this would make the method more business-like and that the chance that companies

would go along with it would increase exponentially.

That battle became a main theme for Wijnand. Together with Wageningen University and KPMG, they would actually develop these formulas later.

"The only thing Willem didn't have an answer to was the financial issue, the money," says Wijnand. "And I did."

Strong discussions

On 18 December 2012, Willem Ferwerda attended the COMON board meeting in Garnwerd. He presented his Nature Resilience concept and the 4 Returns, also showed the film by John D. Liu. In it, the filmmaker had depicted how the loess plateau, an area in China the size of Belgium, completely eaten bare by goats and exhausted by the people who live there, was evaluated and completely restored in ten years. Willem emphasised that this is what he wanted to achieve, on a large scale and worldwide, by starting new projects where necessary and linking up with existing projects where possible.

As a kind of broker, Willem wanted to bring all relevant parties together and thus increase and accelerate their effectiveness. The story caught on and, in particular, the film left a deep impression. But there were also critical questions. If so many organisations were already doing this, what exactly was the added value? Was Ferwerda just enthusiastic or did his model also represent the facts? Willem remembered that there were many discussions. "In particular, Wijnand did not fully understand the importance of investing heavily in the restoration of biodiversity. I tried to convince him that the restoration and preservation of biodiversity is the most important part of a sustainable landscape approach, and that he had to accept that, because otherwise it wouldn't work." When Wijnand asked what Willem exactly wanted from COMON, what he needed, Willem didn't hesitate and said that he needed financing for at least twenty years to be able to pay a team, roll out the concept, and prove that it worked. However, COMON was looking for projects, not a foundation to walk into and commit to for such a long time.

Missing link

Looking back on that first meeting, Willem says: "Now that I have got to know Wijnand better, I think he was testing me at the time. He wanted to know what kind of meat he had in his barrel. I often thought: these are people with good intentions, but they have no idea of my field. It was a good meeting and the fact that we were both critical provided mutual respect, but I didn't immediately get the feeling that they were going to support me." When he left Garnwerd, Willem could have kicked himself for being so intense. "I thought: sh*t, that didn't work. When I finally get to meet a philanthropist, who could really make a difference, I lend up leaving empty-handed. But I was also glad that I had stood my ground. I had a mission, and I firmly believed in it. That was the direction I wanted to go and nowhere else." Willem, however, underestimated the impact of his story on COMON's board members. Although the directors still had many questions, what was clear was that Willem could undoubtedly add something significant to COMON. He had exactly the defined focus that the foundation was looking for. And he knew everything about the content. He had the knowledge, the experience and an enormous network in the world of nature restoration. He knew the people at the NGOs, the farmers, the ecologists, and the companies. In that respect, he was the missing link that was needed to make COMON's mission and goals definitive. ~



‘Now that I have got to
know Wijnand better, I think
he was testing me at the time.’

Willem Ferwerda

CHAPTER
04

A new love

Farewell to health projects and the discovery of the Galapagos Islands

With a clear mission in mind, the question was whether some projects that did not contribute entirely or not at all should continue. SolarMal was one such project. The testing phase of the mosquito trap on Rusinga Island was taking a long time. Investments needed to be made in information and education. The islanders often had a large knowledge gap. They left school at the age of twelve to work on the land.

“They knew nothing about malaria,” says Willem Takken, “and they were not aware that the disease is often transmitted by mosquitoes.” Hans van Poelvoorde, Takken and Maas Jan visited the project in its initial phase and attended an information session. He recalls a community representative stepping up and saying, “Malaria isn’t a big issue for us, but electricity is.” The mosquito trap was therefore especially welcomed because of the solar cell and the battery that went with it. “They could use that to keep their lamps on and to charge their telephones,” says Hans.

30 percent less malaria

Takken appointed a postdoctoral who, together with a small team – including a sociologist to convince people that the trap was really good for them – would supervise the project. There was some friction in the beginning. “Particularly because the costs seemed to be skyrocketing,” says Takken. “This made the COMON board nervous.” Wijnand came along with his wife Harryet to see the project, and Maas Jan visited Rusinga Island three times. “That was good,” Takken remembers, “I was a little affected by the mistrust. But Maas Jan really understood what we were doing and was able to feed that back to the board.”

In retrospect, the financial stress in the beginning was a small ripple in an otherwise enjoyable collaboration. After two years of research, developing the trap and educating the population, the implementation finally started. It was a big day when three shipping containers full of mosquito traps arrived at Rusinga Island. But the logistics and installation of the traps were a huge challenge.

There were 84 villages on the island, 4500 families lived there, sometimes spread over three houses, sometimes in one house. They all got a [SolarMal](#). It took a week per village to install the traps, including the solar cells. This phase also lasted two years, at the end of which almost all houses were equipped with a trap. Finally, the evaluation took place. The results were amazing: the trap had reduced malaria on the island by 30 percent. “Never before had a malaria intervention project been successfully carried out with the active participation of the residents,” says Takken. “If you achieve a risk reduction of 30 percent, that is a unique result for this deadly infectious disease. Other methods against malaria have never achieved more than a 20 percent reduction.”

In the drawer

Takken published an article about the method and the results in the leading medical journal *The Lancet*. After that, he would have loved to continue, but unfortunately he couldn’t find a party that was willing to finance it. “I wanted to set up a commercial venture to further roll out and scale up SolarMal,” he says, “but no one dared to do it. Very unfortunately, my team and my Kenyan colleagues were very disappointed that despite a successful result, a second phase was not supported, because there were high expectations, also among the population.”

COMON would also stop its support after the test case. Maas Jan says: “SolarMal was one of the coolest projects, but it no longer fitted COMON’s objectives, which were now mainly focused on nature restoration.”



Willem Takken was a professor of entomology at Wageningen University and researched alternative ways to combat malaria.



"The SolarMal had nothing to do with restoring ecosystems, which was our mission," Wijnand recalls. "So, no matter how great the result was, after this test phase it stopped for us; we were strict about that. It was a shame no one else wanted to pick it up after that." To date, there has been no sequel, but who knows, maybe there will be. Takken says "it has been quite a few years now, and a lot has changed. The WHO is now very interested in what we did at the time and is even conducting follow-up studies on the basis of SolarMal to integrate scent traps into existing malaria projects." With good reason, because malaria is still the number one cause of death among children, the number of malaria deaths is increasing, urban malaria is on the rise and mosquitoes are increasingly resistant to pesticides. Alternative ways to fight malaria are therefore welcome. And because at least fifty percent of the people there now have solar energy, the cost has also become more attractive. "I am now retired," says Takken, "but I follow it closely. I know there are proposals to pick up the scent trap again."

'THE RESULTS WERE AMAZING: THE TRAP HAD REDUCED MALARIA ON THE ISLAND BY 30 PERCENT.'



The SolarMal solar panel is installed on the roof and provides both electricity and proper functioning of the mosquito trap

Visit to SCALE UP

SCALE UP, the model from tropical doctor Steven van der Vijver for the prevention of cardiovascular diseases in the slums of Nairobi, was also focused not on Green but on Health. But in the initial phase of COMON, it had attracted great interest from both Maas Jan and Wijnand himself. During the same trip in which Wijnand and Harryet visited Rusinga Island, they also visited the SCALE UP project. Van de Vijver picked them up from their hotel, drove them through the busy streets of Nairobi and took them to the office, where his promoter, Joep Lange and Ugandan epidemiologist and project leader Catherine Kyobutungi were also at that time. The meeting was warm, and the visit to the slum was impressive. "It was so important that we were there," says Van de Vijver. "It is the forgotten places and forgotten people of this world, which were never included in science. The fact that they were now seen and heard, that attention was being paid to their health, and that Wijnand also visited them, it all had great symbolic value." The trip itself was also special. Van de Vijver spent a weekend intensively with Wijnand and Harryet. They wanted to see and hear everything, and in the evening there was a dinner with everyone involved.



"It was dear to me that Wijnand and Harryet were so sincerely interested," says Van de Vijver, "I have very good memories of that".

**‘THEY ARE THE
FORGOTTEN PLACES AND
FORGOTTEN PEOPLE OF
THIS WORLD.’**

Efficient and effective

Van de Vijver was impressed by the fact that Wijnand dared to stick his neck out. SCALE UP was an innovative project because prevention was a new kind of healthcare. And it was in a difficult place, where there was a lot of violence, and where the poorest people in the country lived. The model was good, but the chances of success were uncertain. When you invested in something, you want to be able to measure the effect, on the basis of returns in money, or people's lives. Van de Vijver was discussing this with Hans van Poelvoorde. How could they create more impact? How could they measure how many people they reached and how many people may achieve lower blood pressure afterwards? However, it was difficult to quantify the effect.



‘IT WAS DEAR TO ME THAT WIJNAND AND HARRYET WERE SO SINCERELY INTERESTED. I HAVE VERY GOOD MEMORIES OF THAT.’

Nevertheless, COMON decided to finance SCALE UP. “It was already in the portfolio of the AMC Foundation,” says Van de Vijver, “but they didn’t provide any money, they only helped to find a donor. COMON made it 100 percent possible.”

Results

After three years, Van de Vijver returned to the Netherlands, obtained his PhD on the project and published an article about it, also in *The Lancet*. “Of course, you can also see that as a concrete result,” he laughs. And that’s not all, it turned out. SCALE UP was the first to visualise the extent of the cardiovascular problem in the large African cities. And it led to a much greater awareness among both the very poorest population and policy makers in this area. “Illness is often the reason that people fall back into poverty,” says Van de Vijver. “People saw that by preventing illness, they had many more opportunities. And that worked like an oil slick: more and more people are committed to informing others in this area.”

SCALE UP appeared to be an efficient and effective method that sparks a whole new movement committed to cardiovascular prevention in vulnerable groups. “And that continues to this day,” says Van de Vijver. “Our knowledge from this project has now also been adopted by China and America.” When the project itself has been completed, COMON’s involvement also stops. A lot is still happening in this area, but neither poverty alleviation nor healthcare fall within COMON’s new focus area.

Make money

While that focus area was taking shape, [PONOOC](#), the investment company where the money Wijnand wanted to invest in COMON, was being worked on ensuring it flourished. The aim was for PONOOC to be able to pay out five million euros annually for COMON’s projects. The investments should concern green companies: COMON’s mission also applied here.

Hans Heersink focused on this with his experience as an entrepreneur and in private equity. “I had a feeling for it,” he says, “different companies were offered and if it seemed interesting on paper, we went to take a look.” PONOOC invested in windmills and bicycles, the most famous success being the [Swapfiets](#). If they proved successful and grew, the investments would be taken over by Pon Holdings. But first they generated money for COMON. Although the board of PONOOC was growing – including Janus Smalbraak, CEO of PON Holdings, and Peter Mensink, CEO of Booz & Company, the investment company was eventually acquired by PON and Wijnand decided to finance COMON entirely from his private assets.

Sharp leadership

Both the COMON board meetings and the PONOOC meetings were characterised by a relaxed and usually good-humoured atmosphere, but also by Wijnand’s efficient and sharp leadership. He always started exactly on time; meetings rarely ran late. For each item on the agenda, a certain amount of time was reserved that everyone strictly adhered to. “It had a fixed structure,” says Hans, “we would discuss the status of the projects, whether everything was in order financially and then, in those early years, we would discuss which direction we wanted to go next.”

Hans always carried a list of new projects that he discussed. “There were many organisations that called on COMON. I rejected most of them, but I still shared that with the rest of the board. Transparency was essential. Sometimes I was rebuffed.” This probably rarely happened, because Hans cannot remember a single example of it.

From left to right: Hans van Poelvoorde, Eduard Zanen (business partner of Pieter Hoff), Pieter Hoff, the pilot, professor and guide Sam Chema



Not the right place

So, the money was there, and the supply of wonderful projects was not a problem either. The main challenge was to find and properly monitor the projects that COMON did want to support. The Hurri Hills project in Kenya, where Pieter Hoff was putting his Waterboxx into practice, did not immediately get off the ground. Hans went to see what was going on locally that made things difficult. They flew there together with Pieter Hoff and Eduard Zanen, also a loyal sponsor of Pieter Hoff. In Nairobi they were received by Professor Sam Chema, who would be their guide. Pieter had rented a plane that would take them to the north of Kenya, the area where the project would take place. When Chema saw it, he said that it was on the tight side and that Hoff should rent a larger one, with two pilots. Everyone was surprised that they actually fitted perfectly in the small plane, but Pieter did what the professor asked.

‘THEY TURNED OUT TO BE RELATIVES AND ACQUAINTANCES OF CHEMA, THEY ALL FLEW BACK WITH ME.’

A Toyota pick-up awaited them at their destination, sitting among the Kalashnikovs, and the journey continued overland. “Are these foresters or rebels?” I kept thinking,” says Hans. When they arrived, he was shocked at how barren and dry the area was. It was a dense jungle until the 1930s, but was now a kind of moonscape. Via two interpreters – everyone spoke a different dialect – Pieter gave a presentation to the people who have to work with the Waterboxx. They all turned out to be nomads, not farmers. They herded livestock and never stayed in one place. Hans immediately realised that you would not ask them to plant and care for trees. This was clearly not the right target group, and not the right place to test the Waterboxx. As they got ready to fly back to Nairobi, more and more people joined them. Suddenly, it became clear why Pieter should have rented a larger plane. “They turned out to be relatives and acquaintances of Chema,” laughs Hans, “they all flew back with me.” That’s how it worked, and they had to laugh about it. But it was also decided that the project would not take place in Kenya.

To Ecuador

Pieter Hoff brought COMON to Ecuador a few months later. He ended up there himself through his girlfriend and started a new project with his company Groasis: [Aqua y Vida](#). He wanted to grow vegetables in a dry area with a farmer's cooperative using the Waterboxx. The advantage of vegetables over trees was that it was faster and that farmers could earn money sooner. When Pieter presented his proposal to COMON, the board was enthusiastic. Because it concerned farmers and because there was a revenue model for the farmers, the chance of success seemed many times greater than in Kenya. In a short time, he also managed to involve a university and to make contact with the Charles Darwin Foundation in the Galapagos Islands. "Pieter was clever and bold," says Wijnand. "He spoke Spanish well and got in everywhere. He also often had disagreements, but was charming enough to always straighten things out."

Hoff, Zanen, and Hans hastily visited the project in Ecuador, accompanied by Willem Ferwerda. There they also met Swen Lorenz, director of the Charles Darwin Foundation. He invited them to visit the Galapagos one day. They also saw the huge greenhouse that Hoff had built on the coast near Santa Helena. With this, he showed the local population how quickly you could grow tomatoes and courgettes. University students helped too. This resulted in a second project, [The Green Musketeers](#).

Green Musketeers, a big welcome

For his seventieth birthday, Wijnand donated a tree to each student in the 800 schools in the Santa Helena region for them to take care of. A year later, he travelled to the area, together with Hans and his eldest daughter Geraldine, to see what had been done with them. They were given a wonderful reception, which made Wijnand feel uncomfortable. "We visited a school and were sung to by a class. The teacher did a little dance! A table full of fruit was waiting for us. As if the great benefactor had to be lauded," he says. "I didn't like that very much, but I had to deal with it, as it was a present for my birthday." They visited three schools and ended at the university, where a closing party was held. There was a VIP tent, but Wijnand soon sneaked away. "I went behind the ice cream parlour and treated all the children to an ice cream. Leave the others in the VIP tent – I'd rather eat a scoop or two with a few thousand children." The visit, as well as the project, were a great success. The trees were doing well; they were growing like weeds. The children were very proud, and they learnt a lot from it. Not only about how to grow trees but also what they would yield and what they were worth. They learnt it was not smart to cut down all the trees and turn them into charcoal. For Wijnand, it was an example of how he wanted to work. "You start something and others made it an even bigger success, that's my kind of fun." Also, for his birthday, Wijnand asked his friends to make a donation to the Green Musketeers, and they all gave generously.

**'LEAVE THE OTHERS
IN THE VIP TENT – I'D
RATHER EAT A SCOOP
OR TWO WITH A FEW
THOUSAND CHILDREN.'**



No tiredness

Wijnand also visited the Galapagos Islands. Pieter Hoff had started a Waterboxx project on the island of Floreana that he wanted to share. They also saw Baltra, one of the smaller islands, for which Hoff also had ideas. A team from the Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) was waiting for them. These included the very young Johanna Carrión, a permanent resident of the Galapagos, who had just finished her university studies in philosophy and sustainability and had recently started working for the CDF. During their five-day stay, she showed the delegation around. “Floreana Island is the Galapagos on a micro-level,” she says, “which means you see exactly what lives and grows there and how everything functions.” During the tour, Wijnand wanted to look everywhere, and see and hear everything. Carrión was surprised by his energy. “He didn’t get tired and was full of questions. The fact that I come from a family of farmers immediately clicked. We didn’t stop talking.”



After placing, the Waterboxx is filled with water so that trees, vegetables and shrubs can grow even on totally degraded soil

She immediately saw that Wijnand was enthusiastic and was hopeful that he would at least want to support the Waterboxx project on Floreana. “I found that he was really impressed with what we were doing here, and also with the way we worked, with relatively few resources. And I heard him say to Hans: ‘If we can’t save the Galapagos, the world is lost.’ He immediately saw how important it was.”

A doubtful look

During that first visit, Patricia Jaramillo Diaz, researcher on endangered species and staff member of the CDF, was less sure that COMON would support them. "In conversations with our executive and technical directors, Mr. Pon was very reserved, critical and at times rather sharp, especially when it came to the finances of the CDF," she says. "He had a straight face and a look of doubt." Half an hour beforehand, she heard that she also had to give a presentation about the first Waterboxx pilot on Floreana. "I had 30 minutes to prepare it, very uncomfortable."

Jaramillo also asked her daughter Patty Isabela Tapia Jaramillo, a young girl still in school, to tell us about her involvement in various scientific and restoration projects. A golden move, she thought afterwards. "I thought he was converted when he listened to her passionate story. Through her he saw that the entire community, including the young generation, finds it very important that the special nature here is preserved. He understood that it was really everyone's dream here to save this special place. His stern gaze thawed, and we saw a compassionate and warm person emerge. Someone who did his best to absorb and understand everything we said."

In love with the Galapagos


In reality, Wijnand was already convinced of this. When he saw the unique nature of the islands, he immediately fell in love. "The Galapagos is not only breathtakingly beautiful," he says, "but also fascinating. The archipelago is located on the equator; as a result, you have both northern and southern currents, each of which creates a unique living environment for flora and fauna. For example, you can see both tropical birds and penguins. I was immediately captivated by it."

Wijnand also immediately realised that it was a unique area for observing the climate problem. "The Galapagos is a kind of thermometer of the world. Here you can see, for example, what the situation is with regard to pollution. And that's not good. From here, you can show the world how we as humans are destroying things. And also, what we can do to turn that tide." During this visit, the first seed was planted for a long-term, fruitful collaboration between the Charles Darwin Foundation and COMON.

Jaramillo says: "It was the start of what we call one of the most ambitious ecological restoration projects today." That same year, Swen Lorenz gave a presentation on the restoration of the Galapagos Archipelago and the donor conference that was planned for this, with the support of COMON. And in addition to Pieter Hoff's pilot project on Floreana and later also on Baltra and Santa Cruz, COMON soon became the main sponsor of the [Galapagos Verde 2050](#) project. From the start, COMON would not only contribute to the financing of the CDF's fieldwork but also paid salaries and other administrative expenses. And that, provided everything goes according to plan, will be for an indefinite period. As would become apparent later, it would be the first beneficiary of COMON – a party in which COMON invested for a longer period and which gained the confidence to spend it as it saw fit. ~



**‘THE GALAPAGOS
IS A KIND OF
THERMOMETER
OF THE WORLD.’**



**‘It was the start of what
we call one of the most
ambitious ecological
restoration projects today.’**

Patricia Jaramillo Diaz

CHAPTER
05

Changing of the Guard

A partly new board and the desire to drive something bigger

When COMON began to better stabilise after a few years, changes would arise within the management team. In 2013, Coos announced his departure. Not because he didn't enjoy it anymore, but because he was retiring and also ending his secondary activities. It was a big moment for Wijland: "Coos worked for the family for forty years, so he was just part of it." Fortunately, he found a good successor in Gerard van Hengstum, partner at KPMG, accountant at Pon Holdings and also part of the family property.

Wijnand had also known Gerard for thirty years, so he knew exactly what to expect from him. He succeeded Coos on the board and was a full-time financial advisor to the Pon family. And once again Wijnand turns out to have a razor-sharp sense for who the best man for the job should be. “Gerard knows better than anyone else where the dangers are if we spend too much and is an expert at drawing up budgets and financially screening organisations with which we want to work,” says Wijnand. “He has a very important voice for me, because he ensures that everything remains solid financially.”

Successor wanted

About a year later, Hans van Poelvoorde also announced that he was retiring and would step down as director of COMON. His wife got a job at the Inter Development Bank in Washington DC and he decided to go there with her. It was stated on the agenda that a successor for Hans must be sought. It was noted that ‘they must be able to lead a team and be representative, convey warmth and work with all different kinds of people, ‘from porter to king’. Shortly after, while Wijnand was travelling for Pon Holdings with Janus Smalbraak, CEO of Pon, he recommended [John Loudon](#). According to Smalbraak, he perfectly met the requirements, and much more besides. Janus said: “John works for Peace Parks, knows the world like the back of his hand, he is good at his job, has an enormous network and he opens many doors.” COMON was already supporting several Peace Parks projects, and Wijnand had met John before while finalising a donation from COMON to Maputo Special Reserve in Mozambique. But they didn’t really know each other. As usual, Wijnand followed his intuition and immediately knew that

he must have John join the team. He felt he could trust him and was charmed by his unwavering enthusiasm about Africa, the wildlife parks, and Peace Parks in particular.

Lunch at De Hoefslag

Initially, John was not so keen on making the move to COMON. Of course, he didn’t know Wijnand very well, and he didn’t know exactly what kind of man he really was and his long-term goals with COMON were not clear to him at this point. “I thought, in retrospect, somewhat irreverently: this is an extremely successful farmer and businessman who also wants to give ‘something’ back to the world with his wealth, but what exactly?” John didn’t want to leave Peace Parks, where he had been happily working for twenty years. “I was Peace Parks minded, that’s where my heart was.” But Wijnand was not about to give up that easily. He knew that John’s work at Peace Parks only took up two and a half days a week, and he also undertook individual consultancy projects. He suggested that John could combine his work at Peace Parks with the director position at COMON.

They decided to meet. They became acquainted during lunch at De Hoefslag restaurant in Bosch en Duin. Wijnand talked about how he inherited his love for animals and hunting – “hunters are nature managers”, he emphasised – from his father. He was a member of the WWF. Wijnand remembered the [Africa Wildlife Fund](#) bumper sticker that was always on his cars. He talked about his connection with Africa, where Koepon also had a branch and where he experienced the most delicious braai. But it is only when he started talking about COMON and shared the ideas from Willem Ferwerda – his 4 Returns and his newly established organisation, the [Ecosystem Return Foundation](#) – that John saw how passionate Wijnand was. Wijnand talked about how they brainstormed for a ‘catchier’ name. “Because, he said, ‘the Ecosystem Return Foundation, doesn’t sound great does it?’”



Gerard van Hengstum succeeded Coos on the board and was a full-time financial advisor to the Pon family.

Hans came up with Commonland, but Wijnand, who liked puns, preferred COMON-land. “That’s way too confusing!” said John forcefully. Before he knew it, he ended up in an agitated discussion with Wijnand about Commonland and much more that engaged and inspired them both. There appeared to be a strong click. Afterwards, Wijnand made a proposal to John: 50 percent Peace Parks and 50 percent COMON. John decided to do it.



John Loudon (left) has a strong click with Wijnand Pon and decides to combine his work at Peace Parks with the director position at COMON.

A new board

A special board meeting was held on 22 August 2014. After the meeting opened, not only did Hans van Poelvoorde resign, but so did Hans Heersink. “Because Coos and Hans had left, I was left with mostly spring chickens,” laughs Hans Heersink, “so time to leave too!” Van Poelvoorde and Heersink were honourably discharged. *(Both have remained closely involved with COMON, Heersink through his work for PONOOC, Van Poelvoorde because he became a board member of the Charles Darwin Foundation a few months later.)* Gerard van Hengstum was appointed secretary/treasurer, Maas Jan as ordinary board member. The powers of attorney of the outgoing directors were revoked, and a full power of attorney was granted to John Loudon. After that, the meeting was adjourned, the new secretary hurries to prepare the minutes. The meeting was reopened, and the minutes were approved. The new board was in place.

Unlimited possibilities

John soon found himself having to watch out for conflicts of interest. If it was decided to give more money to Peace Parks, was that at the initiative of COMON or because John also worked for Peace Parks? Did it work wearing

these two hats? he wondered. At the same time, he was captivated by the almost unlimited possibilities he had at COMON. Wijnand gave him complete freedom in his way of working and gave him the space to continue doing other things. He says: “The most important thing is that you keep an eye on how much money is available, that you find out which buttons in the world we need to press in order to have more impact, and that you report accurately and transparently on everything that is going on, including us, so that we can provide solutions to problems if necessary.”

John immediately experienced a great deal of trust, which he felt was good. Wijnand said, “John had great ideas from the start, instinctively understood exactly what I wanted. And his enthusiasm is infectious. I keep an eye on the line and say what I do or don’t want. But I have full confidence that John is a great leader. Sometimes he goes too far, and I pull him back. But most of the time we agree.” The rest of the board were also happy with John being the new director. “The chemistry between Wijnand and John is excellent,” says Maas Jan, “it was really nice to see those two together and even better what comes out of it.” Two years after his appointment as director, John would take up full employment with COMON.

New phase

With the arrival of John and the early collaboration with Willem Ferwerda, COMON entered a new phase. John made the focus even more specific. He asked Wijnand what he actually wanted. Due to the developments in previous years and the introduction to Ferwerda’s 4 Return philosophy, Wijnand now had a much clearer answer to this. “We’ve all screwed up the world for the past two centuries,” he says. “I want to make amends. So not nature conservation, but nature restoration. And not by supporting all kinds of projects, but by starting a movement, creating a system change: COMON steps in and pulls other parties along, making it big, having a real impact.”

Based on this, it was decided that they would remain open to new projects that were in line with the mission, but before John proposed them to the board, he looked at whether such a project had the potential to stimulate something bigger.

‘THIS IS AN EXTREMELY SUCCESSFUL FARMER AND BUSINESSMAN WHO ALSO WANTS TO GIVE “SOMETHING” BACK TO THE WORLD WITH HIS WEALTH.’

Wijnand Pon gives His Royal Highness Senior Chief Inyambo Yeta of the Kingdom of Barotseland in Zambia the first electric bicycle for the rangers to go on patrol



Top - The board and donors of the Charles Darwin Foundation
Bottom - Wijnand and John visit a Spanish landscape with Willem Ferwerda and Santiago Sánchez

Process money

It was clear to the board that this was the case for the CDF, Peace Parks Foundation and also for the Ecosystem Return Foundation and that they wanted to focus on that. Ferwerda was very happy with COMON's promised involvement. After his presentation in Garnwerd, and pessimism about what it would yield, he experienced an exciting time. Although he firmly believed in his Ecosystem Return Foundation, he was not sure that he would be able to manage financially.

"After that first meeting, I had a lot of contact with Hans van Poelvoorde," he says. "I took him to various international meetings in the United States and we travelled together to the field in South America, showing him what the green network looked like. I knew people at the World Bank, The Nature Conservancy, IUCN and WWF, all the major players in the field of conservation and restoration. But whether I could persuade COMON remained unclear."

Eduard Zanen of Bugaboo already supported him; Ferwerda sat in his office among the designers. He now also receives money from the Doen Foundation, partly thanks to Commonland's second man, Michiel de Man, who strengthened the team from the start, at Ferwerda's request. "But that was project money, and I needed a lot of process money," he says, "above all to be able to hire a good team."

Supreme boss

Ferwerda then received a request to apply to become the highest-ranking director of his former employer, IUCN, in Switzerland. He had two weeks to consider it. "That was a great honour and of course also offered enormous opportunities." But he also realised that the job mainly involved a lot of politics and required patience. And Ferwerda is impatient: he wanted to speed up, he had already decided. "I'd given it some serious thought," he says. "My heart told me to follow my own path, but I wasn't sure if I could. A lot of people around me supported me, but I especially needed someone with deep pockets."

In the end Ferwerda took the plunge and opted for his Ecosystem Return Foundation. One day before the IUCN deadline expired, he was informed that COMON had also decided to go for it.

Caroline Brouwer

Hans had already recruited marketing and communication expert Caroline Brouwer to help clarify the definition of the Ecosystem Return Foundation. She quickly convinced Ferwerda and De Man that things should indeed be done slightly different. Brouwer – currently known as a radio DJ and participant in the TV program *De Slimste Mens* – also came from the Pon stable and set up The Brand Identity. She also frowned upon the name the Ecosystem Return Foundation and sees more in Hans' alternative: Commonland, with the subtitle '4R's of landscape restoration'. Ferwerda reluctantly agreed. He explained his resentment: "I was just starting to pick up steam, had gathered board for the foundation, had come up with the name the Ecosystem Return Foundation, simply because it stated exactly what we were doing, and had just spent a few thousand euros on a logo and design, so I had to change gears. It was undoubtedly a small ego thing too."

Ferwerda and De Man were impressed by Brouwer's international experience in strategic marketing and brand positioning and immediately attached great value to her critical view. "We held sessions about exactly what my ideas were, and she forced me to formulate it a little more sharply each time," he says. "In the end she said, 'I see what you mean, it's promising, but it doesn't sound like much.'" Brouwer then took on the entire branding of Commonland and co-devised the logo with the Sankofa bird looking backwards, taking an egg from its back, 'symbolic of the message that we must take the lessons of the past with us to secure the future'.

Closer

Much more drastic than the name change and focusing on Ferwerda's ideas was the more intensive collaboration with Commonland that Wijnand envisioned. He firmly believed in that philosophy, but also saw that the foundation needed to be better managed in order to achieve it. He wanted COMON to take a seat on the board of Commonland.

**'BROUWER
CO-DEvised
THE LOGO WITH
THE SANKOFA BIRD.'**



"If we invest that much money for a longer period, I want to be closer to it, maintain a certain control over the expenditure, and above all learn from what Commonland did, i.e. how the 4 Returns are expressed in practice," was his explanation. Wijnand became chairman, and Maas Jan, Gerard and John joined the board of Commonland. "They took over a bit," admitted Ferwerda, "but I was fine with that. It was clear that nothing had changed in substance, and that it would actually help me put my ideas into practice. It was great that someone with so much money would be so involved."

And Ferwerda worked well with John. They had known each other for at least twenty years. "John understands this world like no-one else," he says. The new name was registered, the statutes were changed, and with the new board and the right people at the helm, Commonland could really take off.



Maputo Special Reserve

A good example of how to bring about a system change was the investment in Maputo Special Reserve in [Mozambique](#), a project that fell within Peace Parks. Wijnand and Harryet had bought a house there and wanted to do something for this area. Maputo lends itself well to Wijnand's idea of being the first to support the people who live there, with the aim of benefiting the entire area, and ultimately the park as well. This was also where the first contact took place with Werner Myburgh, CEO of the Peace Parks Foundation.

"We have had financial support for our work in the game parks themselves for many years," he says, "but we also know that every dollar you invest in the park should also be put into the local communities around the parks. For example, the creation of employment, quality of life and education, otherwise the population would plunder the park and much of what you do would be lost. Unfortunately, we were less likely to get people enthusiastic about it, we didn't have enough resources for it."

‘WE WERE FREE TO INVEST THE MONEY IN THOSE COMMUNITIES AS WE SAW FIT.’

Myburgh talked about this with Wijnand and then Hans, and later also with John. It led to an initial investment in Maputo Special Reserve of 3.5 million euros. “A great gift,” says Myburgh, “because Wijnand also showed that he had every confidence in us. We were free to invest the money in those communities as we saw fit.”

According to Myburgh, this typified Wijnand. He did what he thought was right, even if it goes against the grain. “It was a time when things were not going well here and there was hardly any attention for this area from the rest of the world. But Wijnand believed in Maputo and if he believes in something, he supports you one hundred percent.”

Effect on other donors

John explained how this first investment in Maputo enabled COMON to secure good management, to improve the water supply for some 20,000 people, and to set up numerous small businesses on the edges of the park, which greatly improved the quality of life for the local population, who also became involved in the park. “Buffalo farms, chilli farms, fish farms, bee and honey farms, and people learned to make the land more fertile with the manure from their cows and chickens, making their maize yields four times higher than before.”

In addition, there was another effect. Because the villages around the parks were starting to flourish, many larger parties suddenly became interested. “When it turned out that our investment really brought about a change, the World Bank, the Rupert Family Foundation, the Hansjurg Wyss Foundation and the Prince Albert of Monaco Fund came forward with money for Peace Parks,” says John. “After five years, our 3.5 million had indirectly generated 35 million euros.” COMON did not interfere with that fundraising, Peace Parks did that itself. “They are good at that,” John says, “they bring in about 50 to sometimes 100 million euros a year. But we do see that if a private funder like us dares to take a risk and sticks out his neck with a good result, it also convinces other parties.” And see: that’s the intended flywheel effect!

Structural changes

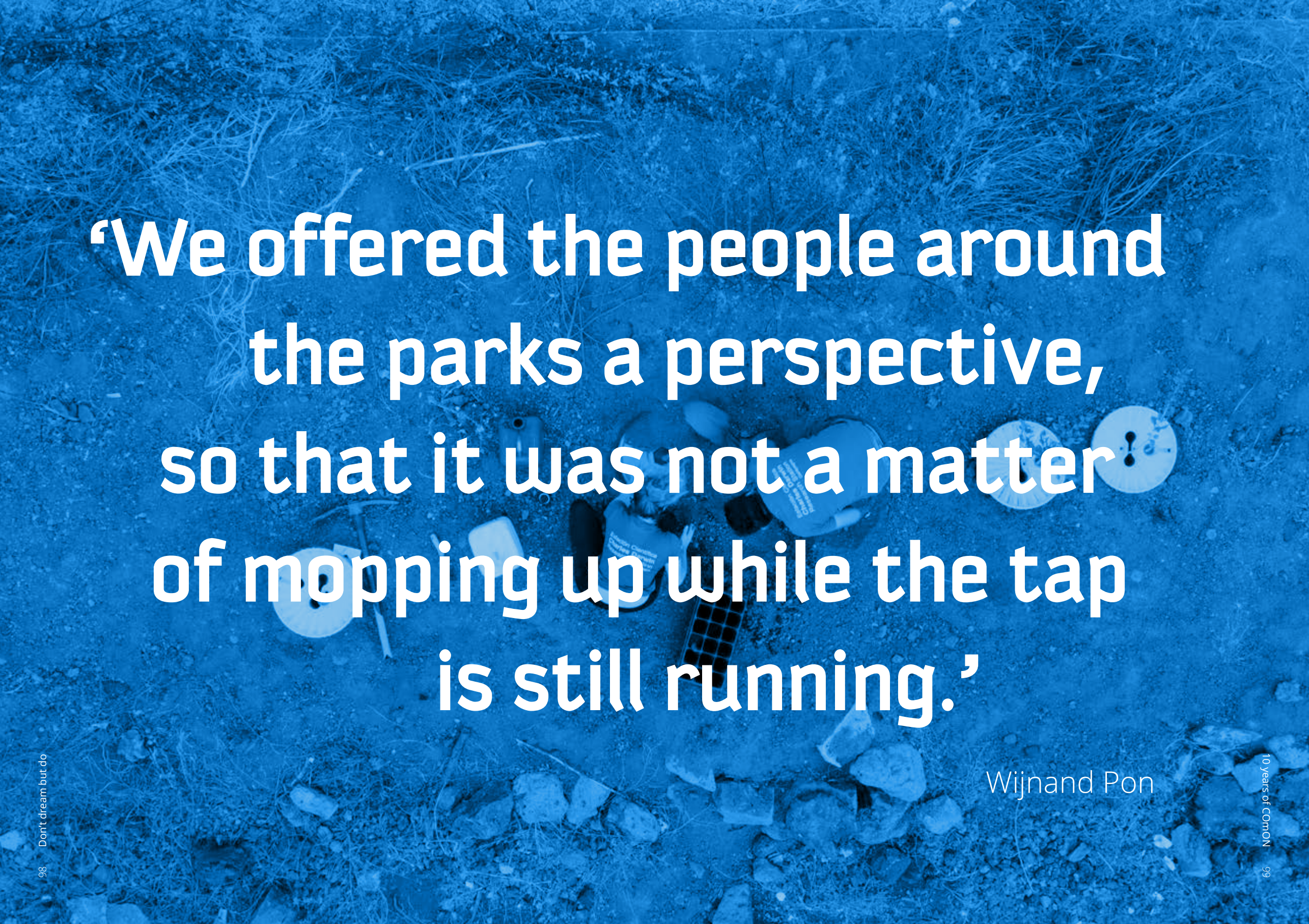
As far as Wijnand is concerned, however, the most important thing is that his investment changes something structurally among the people themselves. “Maputo really shows that therein lies the strength. We offered the people around the parks a perspective, so that it was not a matter of mopping up while the tap is still running.” COMON’s commitment to Maputo Special Reserve was therefore also a realisation of what Commonland wanted. Because the people here get a better life, they become happier; they improve financially; they do not leave, but they also invest in their country and economy, and they realise that no one should touch the animals or the park, because this threatens their improved life. Wijnand: “The local population as ambassadors for their own country, that’s how you secure the future of nature.” John: “Actually, this project laid the foundation for a new way of nature conservation and nature restoration for African nature reserves, based on the 4 Return philosophy, including deployment in three zones and over a period of twenty years (the ‘4R/3Z/20Y’), with the aim of developing and financing more communities around the parks of Peace Parks in this way. This philosophy would only really take shape in 2021 when COMON became the major financier of Banhine National Park, also in Mozambique.” ~



Peace Parks - Honey farm
in Simalaha, Zambia



Commonland - Aerial view of the plant of the Baviaanskloof DevCo in South Africa (Living Lands)



‘We offered the people around
the parks a perspective,
so that it was not a matter
of mopping up while the tap
is still running.’

Wijnand Pon

CHAPTER
06



Landscape planning with
the AIVelAI association

COmON in full swing

Closer collaboration with three major parties

The minutes of the meetings after August 2014 showed that John Loudon had more than a full-time job to give COmON wings. Many projects were running side by side. During a meeting, John sighs that managing all current projects while developing the strategy for the future, in addition to his private life in which he ran an estate single-handedly, was actually too much to do alone. The board advised him to hire a secretary.

When the third candidate from a recruitment & selection agency walked up the stairs in John's office in Wassenaar, he immediately knew it was her. That feeling was confirmed when Annemieke Gerritsen-Nouwens said that, in order to do her job really well, she preferred a personal assistant role. "She wanted to manage my professional and private life. My travel, my business appointments, but also my holidays and my leisure time. But then I had to give her my full confidence," says John. "She understood exactly what I needed. I immediately hired her." John is still very happy with that move. "Annemieke is very good at structuring, brings order to chaos, sees when it gets too busy, communicates everything well and completely, she reads my emails, she knows everything about me. Without her I wouldn't be able to get it all done, and COMON wouldn't run the way it does now."

Community development around the parks

Although there are still many individual projects that COMON supports, most attention is paid to the three organisations to which COMON has now pledged structural support, like Peace Parks. John did not wait for local partners to come forward, but proactively looked for projects in the relevant communities. It quickly led to seven projects that focused on community development, similar to the approach around Maputo Special Reserve. One of the more interesting ones was the [Conservation Farming Project](#), also in Mozambique, aimed, among other things, at bringing back more biodiversity into the area.

John managed to persuade the Peace Parks board to pay closer attention to community development in the periphery of the cross-border parks in this area. A project was also underway on the Machangulo Peninsula, near Maputo Special Reserve, with the primary aim of acquiring an affordable daily ferry to make life easier for the local population there, expanding the sales potential of Conservation Farming products and to boost ecotourism to Maputo. Another good example is the [Bindzu & Tchia Agricultural Project](#). In a relatively short time, a vacant land and an empty greenhouse were turned into fertile terrain, where 70,000 seedlings were planted, 1.3 tons of beans were harvested and the greenhouse was bursting at the seams with cucumber and pepper plants. The local community was undergoing a transformation. But let's be honest: these projects are not yet breaking even. Philanthropic money is still needed.

Learned lessons

Things do not go smoothly everywhere: sometimes the processes are very slow. Or there is no process at all, once COMON has left. Several lessons have been learnt. "Wijnand wanted to spend a lot, and there is also a lot of money, but on a global scale it is small," says Gerard. "That is why it is essential that we inspire others to participate, so that something can be achieved on a larger scale. We mainly wanted to give the impetus to something bigger, start something like a small cog that others could continue with, and then move on to the next project. But that has proved to be really difficult, especially in Africa. When we leave, things often go wrong, even at professional organisations. Then we go back after a while and find out that nothing had happened since our departure. We have learnt that you can only leave something behind when you have put in place very good management."

According to Werner Myburgh of Peace Parks, the main lesson is that you should also invest a lot of time in education at the beginning. He remembers that often, and also in Maputo, for example, people first had to be really taken by the hand. "We thought that if you gave the residents some money and a piece of land, they would get their own business off the ground. But they didn't even have a clue how to apply for the project. We had to sit down with them, explain everything, and also work hard to convince them that it was in their best interest to participate."

Another lesson, according to Myburgh, is that you can think of and want all kinds of things, but that if you want to get the locals involved, you first have to listen carefully to their story. “We have learned that it is arrogant to immediately propose solutions without knowing what the situation is like for the people themselves. If you listen to what they say and then anticipate it flexibly, you get a lot more done.”

Simalaha Community Reserve

Another area where COMON was looking at whether the 4 Returns approach had a chance of success was the Simalaha Community Conservancy, on the south side of Zambia. It turns out that this is certainly the case. Two so-called *chiefdoms* were approached; they responded enthusiastically. Together with [Kadans Foundation](#) (now COFFR Foundation), a foundation that also focuses on acquiring land in this area for the benefit of the local population, COMON



Water supply from the Zambezi river, Zambia

'THE ARRIVAL OF COMON HERE WAS AN ENORMOUS GIFT.'

was not only investing a considerable amount in further developing the plans but also in research at Wageningen University into the soil quality in this area. The aim was to find out how nature can best be restored here and how areas can be built on at the same time for the benefit of the local population. "The quality of life, safety and food supply in this area were under severe pressure," says Myburgh. "With the investments from COMON and Kadans, a real metamorphosis took place. People learned new techniques to cultivate their land with which they could improve the fertility of the soil."

Self-sufficient versus dependent

When the project in Simalaha had been running for a while, Werner Myburgh went to have a look. He had already heard that the quality of life of the local population had been given an enormous boost and that the new way of working sometimes yielded ten times more harvest than before. He now wanted to see it with his own eyes. As he walked across the country, he struck up a conversation with a woman. She told him that as a single mother of

three children, she always had to hold out her hand to survive. "She depended on charities and donations from neighbours," he says. "This project had given her a piece of land and she learnt how to cultivate it without depleting the soil. Since then, she was no longer dependent, but self-sufficient in food. And by selling part of her crop, she could also buy clothes and shoes for her children." Myburgh was deeply impressed. "The arrival of COMON was an enormous gift," he says, "especially because the

people here have learnt how to cultivate their land in a different way, which is structural. Education makes all the difference in that regard, because once people know how to do it, they would never do it any other way. The project has really changed the lives of many farmers." And here too, Myburgh knows, COMON's investment led to investments by numerous other parties.

On a large scale

The great thing about this project was that it resulted in cross-fertilisation with Commonland. Exactly those activities that Commonland had in mind and for which the foundation was always looking for suitable projects could be found

in Simalaha. This literally and figuratively fruitful collaboration resulted in a master plan for the entire area, whereas many as 300,000 farmers live and work. "COMON is not a core funder of Peace Parks," John emphasises, "the Postcode Lottery already is. But we do make annual policy-related donations that often lead to great changes, on a large scale."

"Our influence at Peace Parks is relatively small," says Wijnand. "But they are open to what we think." During the Dunhill Cup, Wijnand regularly has a drink with Werner Myburgh and also with Johann Rupert, the son of one of the founders of Peace Parks. "Then I don't hesitate to force our ideas on them," he chuckles. "And that way we manage to make our mark here and there."

For example, it was COMON that introduced 'community thinking' to Peace Parks, with great results. And from Simalaha, which lies in the heart of the [Kavango Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area \(KAZA\)](#) – the largest trans-border nature reserve in the world, connecting Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Angola and Botswana – everything has been set in motion across a vast area. From Pieter Hoff's Waterboxxes to a very successful [Cookstove project](#) that has made cooking in the area much safer – more on that later – from CO₂ storage projects to agricultural programmes, the local population is developing on a large scale around the park. Not always easy, the government is a difficult partner due to continuous changes of governments, and drought also makes everything difficult, but steady steps are being taken.

Regenerative agriculture

While the areas to support projects at Peace Parks were reasonably demarcated, namely in the periphery of the wildlife parks that Peace Parks managed, the world was open to Commonland and they had to look for places where they could use the '4R/3Z/20Y' to put it into practice. The main goal was to bring back more [biodiversity](#). Wijnand thought of Kenya, but Willem Ferwerda had been doing research for a long time. In the year he travelled around the world, he visited more than fifty areas together with Eduard Zanen and John D. Liu. He knew exactly what he was looking for. The areas must be large, at least 100,000 hectares; from an ecological point of view and for the local economy, it must be possible to achieve something structural in twenty years' time; farmers had to live there; there must be NGOs and a government that were

benevolent and offered incentives and subsidies, for example. And there must be projects that lent themselves to regenerative agriculture: where organic farming was mainly good for the product, regenerative farming went one step further, it was good for both the product and the earth because you passed the land on to your children in a healthier way. And not, as with traditional agriculture, only aimed at a maximum profit per hectare for the short term, but aimed at acquiring more biodiversity – and therefore soil fertility, less nitrogen and more CO₂ storage.

Based on all these criteria, he had his eye on Spain, South Africa, and Australia. “I had worked in countries where cooperation with the often-weak governments is difficult, such as Cambodia and Congo,” he says. “To have any chance of success, I wanted to start in countries where it would be easier. After all, I still had to prove that the 4R philosophy makes sense.” It was also essential that people are open to his ideas. If you want to bring about a process change on a really large scale, you have to get everyone on the same page. “In an area where about 200,000 people live, that is quite a job; it makes a big difference if the government is on your side.”

Monoculture

With COMON's long-term financing, the team of Ferwerda and Michiel de Man were off to a flying start in these three countries. In Spain, things were initially difficult: due to the cold winters and hot summers, little grows. But gradually there were four companies that were committed to it. Maas Jan came along once to take a look and was surprised when he saw how well Commonland's philosophy was put into practice here.

“In an area where only almonds were grown and where there was a monoculture that exhausted the soil, people had now started sowing flowers between the almond trees. As a result, the diversity of nature increased, and the flowers attracted bees, which in turn resulted in honey production. The three zones were thus set in motion: pieces of land with only nature, with nature combined with the processing of the products, and land where people lived and worked. Regenerative agriculture took place and people's prosperity increased.”



Aboriginal network

Similar projects were also getting off the ground in South Africa. Projects in Australia, after a start in which a lot was learnt, are going well; the company [Wide Open Agriculture \(WOA\)](#), founded there in 2015, has now been listed on the stock exchange. A network of Aboriginal leaders who wanted to restore natural zones together was also set up. “And that network is growing fast,” says Ferwerda, “because more and more people there understand what the intention is.”

In the autumn of 2014, the board learned that an Australian, whose three children died in the MH17 disaster, had contacted Hans Schut of Commonland. The Return on Inspiration gave them hope again, he said. “It was bizarre,” says Maas Jan, “because Joep Lange, who advised Steven van de Vijver on his SCALE UP project, and his wife also died in that disaster. So COMON was involved in this horrific event in two ways.”

**‘REGENERATIVE
FARMING WENT
ONE STEP
FURTHER, IT WAS
GOOD FOR BOTH
THE PRODUCT
AND THE EARTH.’**



Commonland taking action in the Australian landscape

From Commonland, New Zealander Jim MacKintosh built a special bond with the Australians, from which WOA originates. When Commonland was asked by the Ministry of Economic Affairs, which at the time still included Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality, to set up something in the Netherlands, De Man and Ferwerda got down to business. They ended up in the peat meadow area around Amsterdam. "It may sound startling for the Netherlands, but this is really a crisis area," says Ferwerda. "This is where the CO₂ emissions are by far the highest, it is a biodiversity desert with few species and salinisation is already occurring in some places."

Various organisations have emerged from this, of which [Wij.land](#) would become the Dutch landscape partnership. It is an enterprising foundation, led by Danielle de Nie, and is committed to regenerative agriculture in the Netherlands. Maas Jan would later become chairman of this foundation. In addition, COMON also partly finances Commonground (later called [Aardpeer](#)), a land bank that was established by Wij.land. This is an innovative initiative in which landowners were asked to sell their land, with the issuance of bonds. Aardpeer then looks for tenants who want to cultivate and farm



the land in a 4R way. Another initiative that concerned 4 Returns Lab was 'For the Harvest of Tomorrow', a special collaboration with the Consultative Body for the Physical Environment of the national government, which initiated landscape restoration in Gelderland, Texel, North Brabant and Friesland, among others.

Unique ecological area

The Charles Darwin Foundation (CDF) as a 'project' was a bit of an oddity in the sense that it was a defined, small-scale area that wouldn't grow any larger than it is now. But because it is such a unique ecological area, and – as Wijnand pointed out – the thermometer of the world, he wanted to work on restoring the ecology on the archipelago as much as possible. "Restoring nature here may not have an impact on the world, but it is an important showcase." Maas Jan, who accompanied Wijnand on one of his visits to the islands, understands very well why Wijnand was so captivated by the Galapagos. "All over the world, animals conform to humans," he says. "I immediately noticed that people adapt to animals. When we walked through the harbour and a sea lion crawled on a bench, it was not chased away, but others sat on the benches respectfully distanced themselves. The Galapagos Islands are first and foremost about the animals, and that's something that Wijnand cares about."

**'RESTORING
NATURE HERE
MAY NOT HAVE AN
IMPACT ON THE
WORLD, BUT IT
IS AN IMPORTANT
SHOWCASE.'**

Unfortunately, with the arrival of tourism, and of people generally – until the 1960s the islands were uninhabited – more and more exotic plants and animals have emerged that have disturbed the natural balance of nature. Under the name [Galapagos Verde 2050](#), the CDF is working to remove the exotics, bring back the indigenous flora and fauna, and thus restore the original nature on the islands.



Humble man

COMON was the first to be involved in the pilot project with Pieter Hoff's Waterboxx on Floreana Island, followed by Baltra and Santa Cruz. Arturo Izurieta was director of Galapagos National Park during that period and met Wijnand during a visit to Floreana. He was surprised that Wijnand was such an 'ordinary man'. "I knew he was the great donor, a man who made it, but when I met him I found a humble man, warm and smart; someone who mainly asks a lot of questions and spoke with great enthusiasm about his work as a farmer." When Izurieta became director of the CDF a few years later, he got in touch with Wijnand and a pleasant cooperation developed. Izurieta noticed Wijnand enjoyed nature a great deal. "Often when we were watching something, I could see a spark in his eyes and hear him laugh out loud, very contagious."

Accelerated and scaled up

After the pilot project on Floreana Island with Pieter Hoff's Waterboxx, Galapagos Verde 2050 (GV2050) would be the first major project to be supported by COMON. "It was a long-term project, aimed at the future," says John, "which therefore also required money for a longer period. We could guarantee that with COMON."

"With the arrival of COMON as a donor, the processes were accelerated and scaled up and the research we undertake here was also taken to a higher level," explains Johanna Carrión of the CDF. According to her, COMON became much more than just a financial donor. "They are involved in everything we do and support us 100 percent, and I especially like their open attitude towards us, the employees. Mr. Pon always asks what our vision is, what we would most like to do and what we need. And he is great to work with. He asks me to accompany him and his company on every visit; he came with his wife, his daughters, nieces and nephews. He'd rather show everyone why he loves the Galapagos so much."

Izurieta also finds the collaboration very satisfying: "Both John Loudon and Mr. Pon are very direct and pragmatic, I like that, and are genuinely interested in my opinion. I felt I had found a friend with COMON who understood the importance of the Galapagos."

"The best part is that you notice that Mr. Pon really likes the Galapagos Islands," says CDF researcher Patricia Jaramillo Diaz. "That is his true motivation to support us. You don't often see that with donors."

The pilot project with Pieter Hoff's Waterboxx on Floreana Island, Baltra and Santa Cruz

Five hundred plants

According to Jaramillo Diaz, a visit that Wijnand and Harryet paid to Baltra Island, where the GV2050 team was busy planting five hundred plants, was entirely typical. When they arrived at the project, they encountered a group of very tired and sunburnt people. Wijnand and Harryet rolled up their sleeves and helped out. "They weren't afraid to get dirty," says Jaramillo Diaz, "they enjoyed working with us, it was so motivating for the team and everyone was energised." Everyone is impressed by what Wijnand and Harryet show here; out of gratitude, the Maytenus Octogona plant (a native species of the Galapagos) was subsequently renamed the 'Harryet'.

Crisis

Although the projects continued as usual, the CDF was not doing well financially. The global financial crisis that was then underway also hit hard here. "It was really make or break," Carrión remembers. It was during this period that Izurieta took over as director and found herself in a worrying financial situation. "The CDF was on the brink of bankruptcy. It was our salvation that we had found such a good partner in COMON, who literally saved the CDF. They gave us the financial support we needed and, at the same time, the confidence to set up a financially healthy organisation again." The trust was certainly there, but COMON was also involved intensively in the organisation. Wijnand had many discussions with other stakeholders.

"It didn't always go smoothly," he says. "One of the most difficult aspects of COMON is that you operate in countries where there is often a lot of corruption and a slow government. It's not like 'boom, we're going to do this and we're going to do it now'. No, you have to be patient, long-term. And I don't actually have that, and I'm afraid I never will." However, he did get a lot done through his conversations. "At one point I spoke to the responsible Ecuadorian minister," says Wijnand. "I said, we'll support the Galapagos Islands, and we'll save the CDF, but only if you give us a 20-year lease for the campus on the islands. That contract expired, and without it we could have done little or nothing."

**'WIJNAND AND
HARRYET ROLLED
UP THEIR SLEEVES
AND HELPED OUT.'**



Out of gratitude, the Maytenus Octogona plant was renamed the 'Harryet'



Wijnand and Harryet Pon plant a cactus on Baltra Island in 2018

Inspiration Complex

Wijnand and Harryet were so captivated by the Galapagos Islands that they would love to have their own home there. Their house on the Machangulo Peninsula in Mozambique is beautiful, but the location is unfavourable and the beach difficult to reach. So, they sold it. But buying a house in the Galapagos is a complicated matter. “You can own property there,” explains John, “but it’s not easy and it also felt a bit contradictory. For the preservation of the islands, it is so important that as few people as possible come, so you shouldn’t build a holiday home there.”

However, another possibility presents itself. In addition to GV2050 and the core funding of the CDF, COMON decided to also invest in the scientific field. This resulted in an entirely new complex that, on the initiative of John, was eventually given the name Inspiration Complex. Johanna Carrión is instantly delighted by that name. “We see Mr. Pon as a wise man,” she says, “and someone who inspires others. He always says everything starts with inspiration, and that is so true. So, there was no better name.” Built with local materials and by local people, the Inspiration Complex consists of two zero-emission complexes, each with three units, and contains a conference centre, a bio marine laboratory, including water basins to study animals and plants, and offices for scientists. John then came up with the idea of building two studios where international scientists can stay for a longer period, but where Wijnand and Harryet can also spend a few weeks a year. This is currently being finalised.

New law

Meanwhile, John managed to make Noemi d’Ozouville, formerly the finance lady of the CDF and then a researcher at the Presencing Institute in Boston, enthusiastic about the 4 Returns philosophy. Based on the [U-Theory](#), she developed an approach similar to that of the 4R/3Z/20Y, which she rolled out on a large scale and also applied to the Galapagos Islands.

“With the help of the Prime Minister of the Galapagos, Norman Wray, she was able to bring together many parties, from high-ranking officials to the residents themselves,” says John, “and convinced them to take a more holistic approach to the Galapagos problems and to cooperate much more to that end.”

It resulted in a unanimously approved [Galapagos Masterplan 2030](#) for the archipelago, in which a great deal was laid down with regard to the role of tourism, sustainable energy, infrastructure, and the conservation of biodiversity. Building a new future for Galapagos together. “In this way, COMON had set something in motion that would eventually lead to something much larger.”



**‘COMON HAD
SET SOMETHING
IN MOTION
THAT WOULD
EVENTUALLY LEAD
TO SOMETHING
MUCH LARGER.’**

Galapagos Masterplan 2030

It is one of the achievements that Maas Jan finds typical of what Wijnand wanted and accomplished. “Wijnand’s love for the Galapagos Islands is great,” he says. “With his investment, he did not primarily look at the chance of a project succeeding, but at what structurally needed to be done to save this beautiful place. This example showed that this ultimately led to a real structural result. By investing in the process to bring the involved and responsible parties together, a new [Galapagos Law](#) has been set in motion to do justice to the Masterplan 2030 and that will certainly benefit Galapagos in the longer term.” ~



The Inspiration Complex under construction
on the Galapagos Islands



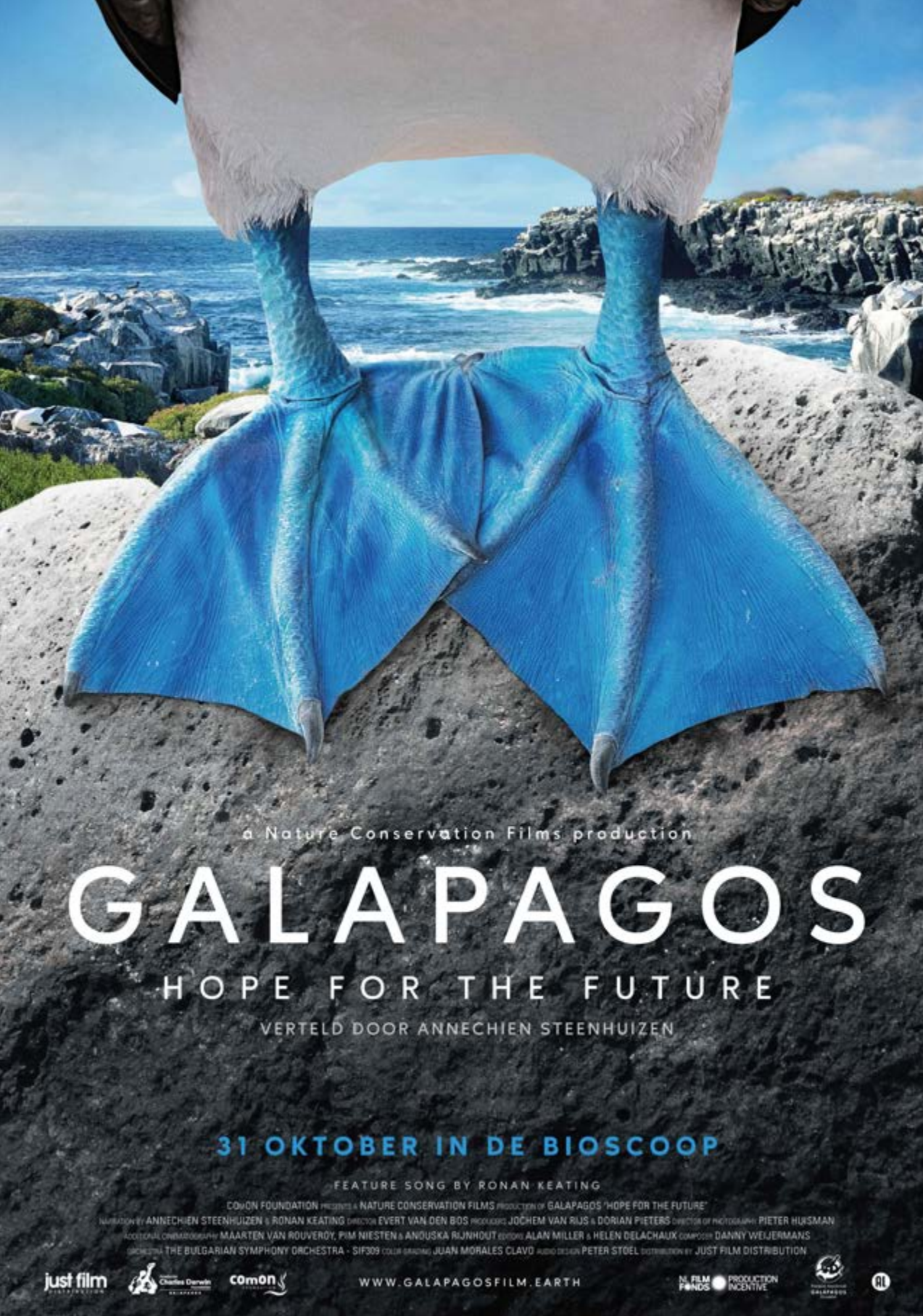
**‘That is why it is
essential that we inspire
others to participate,
so that something can be
achieved on a larger scale.’**

Gerard van Hengstum



CHAPTER

07



Sympathetic projects

A turtle sanctuary, a book about bears and a wildlife film

During a trip through Zambia, Wijnand met Benny Liwena and Greet Habasimbi, two farmers from the Sesheke district, at the Royal Establishment of Barotseland. He chatted with them about Family Farming, their venture on the outskirts of Simalaha Conservancy. They grew cabbage, maize and tomatoes there and wanted to involve the community more structurally. There was an immediate click, they were enthusiastic and sympathetic men and they had good ideas.

Wijnand was impressed, and the company seemed to align well with what COMON wanted to support and what Commonland did. He agreed with Liwena and Habasimbi that they would make a proposal for co-financing. That took a while and when it finally arrived, the amounts were in kwacha, the Zimbabwean currency, which led to some confusion – but the project eventually got the green light. To really support the farmers, COMON would also own 40 percent of Family Farming.

Flying start

The farm was off to a flying start. In addition to growing vegetables, there was also a chicken and goat farm. Detailed reports followed on a regular basis regarding the numbers of plants that would be planted, the number of chickens and goats already there, the number of farmers involved and the expected harvest. Profit was being hinted at, which was, of course, great because COMON could then invest further in Family Farming and grow the company faster. Liwena and Habasimbi also presented plans to train farmers from further afield to work in the same way, and talked about creating a continuous water source 'to be sure to have a hunger free Simalaha Community'.

But then it suddenly went quiet around the company. Through Professor Andrew Nambota, who worked for the government of Zambia, who was familiar with Family Farming and who was also an acquaintance of John's, the board learnt that Family Farming was struggling with a major drought. Water had to be brought in by trucks and was primarily intended as drinking water for the population. That year's maize crop failed. A little later, it turns out that there was more to it. Greet Habasimbi's wife had passed away, so he was

out of action for a while. Despite a number of updates from Nambota that followed, and in which the professor continued to emphasise that the farmers were doing their best, communication was becoming increasingly difficult and results were not forthcoming. Although the thought persists that no news is good news, the COMON board eventually decided to withdraw from Family Farming.

A good conversation

"We always kept an eye on whether the money we invested in something actually got to the person for whom it was intended, and also whether it ultimately yielded any benefits," says Coos. "If they took too long, we sometimes stopped halfway through, no matter how sympathetic a project was." But although the approach is certainly a business one, COMON also regularly participates in projects that Wijnand simply finds charming, or because he had 'clicked' with someone he met. This was not only true of Family Farming. During a visit to the Galapagos Islands, when he met Todd Schreiner, the founder of the [Turtle Island Restoration Network](#) in California – an American non-profit organisation that wants to restore and protect marine animals and their habitats – and had a pleasant conversation with him, he decided to accept the application for financial support that followed shortly afterwards. John raises his eyebrows.

He had previously seen the project at the Prince Bernhard Nature Fund, where John was also a board member, and it did not pass the screening. "Wijnand just thought Todd was a nice man," John says. "I thought it was a waste of money, it led nowhere and didn't necessarily fit with COMON. But of course, it's Wijnand's money and if he wants to support someone out of kindness, that's up to him."

Scholarship

Another 'project' that was only indirectly related to COMON's objectives, but which they decided to support, is a study fund for Patty Isabella Tapia Jaramillo, the daughter of Patricia Jaramillo Diaz, responsible for the Galapagos Verde 2050 project, and the girl who impressed with her inspired story during



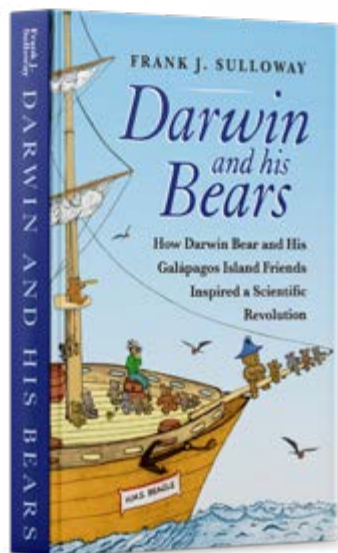
Hans van Poelvoorde lends
a hand to a sea turtle

Wijnand's first visit to the Galapagos Islands. "Patty is a bright girl who grew up in the Galapagos Islands and was driven by her mother's work at the Charles Darwin Foundation," says John.

Her mother goes on to say that it had been Patty's dream for years to study biology in Europe, and then also be able to work for the Galapagos Islands. "That Mr. Pon decided to pay for her college education is something I'll be grateful to him for the rest of my life," she says. "It showed that he had faith not only in our projects and our work but also in us as people. He and his family will forever be in my heart." Patty herself is also very grateful, and gets high marks, as is apparent from the heart-warming reports that she sends the board of COMON every six months.

Darwin and his bears

Sometimes the sympathy for a project did not come from Wijnand but from one of the other board members. In 2017, Wijnand and Maas Jan visited the Galapagos Islands together. After they attended a workshop by marine biologists, they had lunch in the open restaurant at the marine complex. They started talking to a somewhat eccentric man. "He wore a thick coat in tropical temperatures, had a large backpack on his back from which a bear was dangling, and he seemed somewhat autistic," says Maas Jan.



**'IT WAS A STORY
REMINISCENT
OF WINNIE THE
POOH, INCLUDING
BEAUTIFUL
ILLUSTRATIONS.'**

Darwin and his bears by Frank J. Sulloway

It turned out to be a scientist from the American University of Berkeley, Frank Sulloway. Soon, the conversation turned to Darwin, about whom Sulloway appeared to know a lot. "I asked him whether it was a coincidence that Darwin developed his teachings in the Galapagos Islands, or whether he had deliberately gone there because he suspected that he would find answers there. He replied that he was the right person to ask that question and then told us the whole story of Darwin in such an appealing way that it was easy to understand even for small children." Wijnand and Maas Jan hung on his every word, and Wijnand asked him if he had written that story too. "He had," says Maas Jan, "and it was called Darwin and his bears. It was a story reminiscent of Winnie the Pooh, including beautiful illustrations. The manuscript was ready, the good man said, but no publisher wanted it."

Wijnand told Sulloway to send it to Maas Jan. "He has published other books." Two weeks later, it was in his mailbox. The entire board read the manuscript, they liked it, but it was not something that COMON should particularly pay for. It was mainly Maas Jan who was interested in having it published. John enlisted his friend and publisher Maurits Rubinstein, who would publish it in English, Spanish, and Dutch for a friendly amount, with a circulation of 9000 copies in total. "It was published in 2019, but it has not yet been a success," says John. "That's not primarily due to the book. Six months after its publication, Covid-19 started, so the book has not had much chance to prove itself." Maas Jan concludes: "I really liked that we did this. Even if the book fails completely, it has always yielded something: lots of pleasure."

Promotional film

And then there was Galapagos – Hope for the future, a COMON-funded documentary about the special and beautiful ecosystem in the Galapagos Islands and the work of the Charles Darwin Foundation. That idea had come from up John's sleeve. He spoke to Evert van den Bos, the filmmaker who had made more than a hundred nature films and documentaries and is the owner of Nature Conservation Films World Wide. John once started his career with him when he organised the financing for two Van den Bos cinema films, *The Leopard Son* and *Serengeti Symphony*, both filmed by the famous Hugo van Lawick. Van den Bos wanted to make a film about Zambia and talked to John about it.

"I immediately thought: why not a movie about the Galapagos? The Charles Darwin Foundation is sixty years old, the perfect moment," says John. "Evert had never been there, but I knew immediately: you won't find such a natural film set with so many unique stories anywhere. I invited him to come and see it." Of course, it was also in his own interest. John was convinced that a wonderful film that beautifully portrayed the work of the CDF could convince other large donors to invest in the CDF. "I had already talked about using film as a marketing tool before, but now it suddenly became a concrete idea."

Two weeks after Van den Bos had been to the Galapagos, he sent John a proposal for a script. "It was so good," John says, "and he could make it for \$1.2 million, which isn't much for a film like that." He went to see Wijnand, who was not immediately convinced, but then said: "Oh, why not, let's just do it!"

Royal premiere

Evert van den Bos got to work, closely followed a number of dedicated CDF employees during their work and a number of animals, such as the blue-footed booby, the hammerhead shark and the giant tortoise. Van den Bos found that *NOS Journaal* presenter Annechien Steenhuizen and the Irish musician and philanthropist Ronan Keating were willing to provide the voice-overs for the images.

A Royal gala premiere took place on 28 October 2019, in Tuschinski in Amsterdam. *Galapagos – Hope for the future* was screened for the first time in the presence of His Majesty King Willem-Alexander and Her Majesty Queen Máxima, a large group of guests and the press. On 9 November, the film had a premiere in its home port: close to the town square of Puerto Ayora on the Galapagos Islands themselves.

The event in Tuschinski was a great PR moment. The film was received enthusiastically, but was also criticised. "Maybe it was a bit too much of a promotional film," says John. "But if you look at the relatively small budget Van den Bos used to make it, and how he beautifully portrays how unique Galapagos is and what the people of the CDF do to protect and conserve its nature, it is still a very successful project." In any case, it was the most beautiful fundraising



document imaginable, and the film is timeless, a beautiful monument to the Charles Darwin Foundation. And who knows what happens next? Netflix was interested at the time. "Unfortunately, everything came to a standstill due to Covid, but who knows, maybe the film will be shown on that platform in due course." The film soon proved itself as a fundraising tool; after a seven-day trip around the islands with four other philanthropists and their presence at the movie premiere in the Galapagos, more than \$3.5 million has been raised by the CDF.

King Willem-Alexander
and Queen Máxima at the
premiere in Tuschinski



Structured process management

Besides all the activities of the benefactors and the extra work for these sympathetic projects, there are sometimes as many as thirty projects running simultaneously in which COMON is involved. As an outsider, you would expect at least an entire office working full time on it. But the whole operation still takes place in John's office in Wassenaar, where he runs the 'toko' together with Annemieke Gerritsen-Nouwens.

"Do specifically underline 'Annemieke'", says John, "because she does the entire organisational process management. Think of e-mail traffic, arranging all appointments, taking care of communication with project leaders, checking what they have to deliver, reports, photos, recording plans and objectives, drawing up contracts and making payments. And also, the evaluation of everything. No day is the same and everything is interrelated. And the best thing: Annemieke brings structure to all this, so that I have an overview. And then she also reminds me when I have to go to the dentist."


'SHE COMES FROM A BUSINESS BACKGROUND, WHERE EFFICIENCY AND A STRICT FINANCIAL POLICY ARE PARAMOUNT.'

Critical look

Annemieke laughs about it. "That's my job," she says modestly. "It's not rocket science to do this. And it helps that we have a strong bond. John and I have learned to work well together in recent years. When I started five years ago, there was nothing, no organisation and no structure. Now we can read and write together."

John emphasises that Annemieke not only brings structure to everything but also has a very critical view of everything that goes on and keeps him on his toes. "Actually, Annemieke is averse to the NGO world," he reveals. "She comes from a business background, where efficiency and a strict financial policy are paramount." Annemieke noticed that in the charitable world there was a lot of talking and meetings, and that money is sometimes very easily spent. "I often encourage John to do more due diligence, and if I suspect it could be a little less, I don't hesitate telling him."

Not everyone involved is always happy about this, because it is not usual for a donor to interfere with the content. "Some parties find it difficult when we criticise what they do," John agrees. "But good entrepreneurship is definitely part of the 4 Returns. Think of the Return on financial capital: you also have to pay attention to the money, otherwise the R will not get off the ground properly." ~



‘After five years, our
€ 3.5 million had indirectly
generated € 35 million.
That’s the intended
flywheel effect!’

John Loudon

Elephant corridor from Botswana through
Namibia to Angola and Zambia

CHAPTER
08

To collaborate

You need others to scale up and accelerate

While COMON is satisfied with the direction they are heading, John also regularly thinks about how they could accelerate. They are on the right track, and Wijnand is investing more and more in the projects they have now committed to for a longer period. But in an absolute sense, they are also only a small player. The ecological problems are urgent, much more should be done, on a much larger scale, and above all, with faster results. How can you convince others that there needs to be a global systemic change?

The 4R's/3Z/20Y philosophy is now a leading factor for COMON, but how much bigger could the impact they make be if many more organisations worldwide embraced that philosophy? How could they make that happen? Could it be simpler? More unambiguous? When John was introduced to the book *The Blue Economy* by Gunter Pauli, the former owner of the Flemish cleaning products company Ecover, he thought: this is it! He made his thought clear, in one sentence, what everyone should do. Pauli's philosophy is based on the principle that every product has its origin in the earth, from copper and lithium to steel and oil. It is becoming increasingly clear that those resources and thus the earth are being exhausted. So, the only way to prevent that is for everyone to take less than they give back.

The Blue Line Society

John regularly talks with Willem Ferwerda about [The Blue Economy](#). "We find the symbolism powerful," says John, "in the sense that when we deplete our natural resources further and further, the light should be on red: we are then on a red line. However, if we take less than we give back, that line would turn blue again and the earth would be healthy again. That's the direction we have to go." Together with Michiel van Schooten, a communication strategist with whom John often collaborated, he devised the slogan *Wouldn't we all want to live in a Blue Line Society?* and thus the Blue Line Society concept. "This concept is simple and powerful for what we should strive for in everything we do."

John presented the concept during a COMON board meeting. They discussed it. Wijnand liked the sound of it, but was not immediately convinced. "I liked it," he says, "but otherwise it remained somewhat abstract for me." Until, during a later meeting, John showed a film that illustrated the principle of the Blue Line Society in 1 minute, and which he had recorded by Sommer, one of Wijnand's granddaughters, in fluent English. "I saw Wijnand think: 'I know that voice!' When he heard it was Sommer, the message suddenly came very close: we owe it to future generations to embrace the Blue Line Society and to convince as many others as possible to do the same."

Club of Rome

But how do you get others involved? How do you convince them? How can you really take a hit by exponentially increasing and accelerating what you're doing? These are questions that keep John busy. When he went with Wijnand and his daughter Fanja to the annual meeting of the Club of Rome and attended a lecture by the German Petra Kuenkel, the penny dropped for him.

Kuenkel is founder of the Collective Leadership Institute and wrote the book *The art of leading collectively*. During her lecture she shares her ideas that problems in the world cannot possibly be solved on an individual basis. The only way to achieve real system change is to make everyone a stakeholder and do it together. "It was a perfect fit with what Commonland was doing and what the Blue Line Society stood for," says John. "So, it wasn't so much new, but Kuenkel's emphasis on the power of the collective struck a chord with me."

Painful misconception

Following the Club of Rome meeting, John flew from Berlin to Ecuador, where he attended a board meeting of the Charles Darwin Foundation. During the 28-hour flight, he read Kuenkel's book. The further into the book he got, the more a painful misconception dawned on him:

"It was insane that so many parties were more or less doing the same thing, wanting to get the same thing done and believed in the same ways of doing it, but all stayed on their own island. And therefore, not really bringing about major changes. More and more I realised that we were missing the boat

because we were not working together. To start in Africa. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Peace Parks, we want the same thing, why don't we unite a lot more instead of competing? In order to press the right buttons to gain strength, the assignment Wijnand had given me when I started, we had to bring parties together much more than we already had."

Elephant corridor

During a stopover, John sent an email to Marco Lambertini, WWF's director general, saying that he had seen the light and that they should work together. He immediately took the bull by the horns and proposed a meeting in Zambia in March 2017, to bring together senior Peace Parks and WWF officials to solve Botswana's [elephant problem](#). At that time, Botswana was overrun by

elephants, who had nowhere to go, were destroying the environment and posed a great danger to the population because they walked right through the villages and towns. A mass slaughter of the animals was imminent.

"If nothing was done, there would be no forests left in the country in 20 years, and no elephants either," says John. "Everyone knew that the only solution was a major corridor, from Botswana through

Namibia and Angola to Zambia, but no one could make it happen, there were too many people, politics and interests involved. Yet we could only solve it together." Upon arrival in the Galapagos Islands, John was surprised to find an answer from Lambertini in his mailbox. "You are so damn right," he wrote, "let's do it!"

'EVERYONE KNEW THAT THE ONLY SOLUTION WAS A MAJOR CORRIDOR, FROM BOTSWANA THROUGH NAMIBIA AND ANGOLA TO ZAMBIA.'



Top - Elephant at the Chobe River in Botswana
Bottom - John Loudon in Chobe National Park, Botswana

Heels in the sand

It took another six months to get the right people together. "It was all very sensitive," explains John. "Local WWF organisations accused organisations such as WWF and ours as 'typical white leadership'. They said: 'this is our continent; we will solve this ourselves.'" In the end fifteen people came together, including six WWF senior people from Africa, Willem Ferwerda and Dieter van den Broek – also a staff member of Commonland – to explain the 4R/3Z/20Y theory, a Theory U specialist, specialised in resolving quarrelling parties, and John, on behalf of COMON. When he arrived in Johannesburg, his euphoria over the meeting quickly faded. "It immediately became clear to me that the delegates saw the meeting as an obligation, but had little faith in it. They were already dragging their feet; everyone was stuck in the belief that the other was too difficult to work with." John felt the pressure: how would they solve this? How could he get everyone to at least listen to each other?

Connecting stories

"John, tell your story about the Club of Rome, how you came up with this idea and why it is so urgent," suggested Van den Broek during the flight to Livingstone in Zambia, where the meeting would take place. John immediately recalled a passage from Kuenkel's book: 'Never think that a few people in a room can't change the world, it is all that ever happened'.

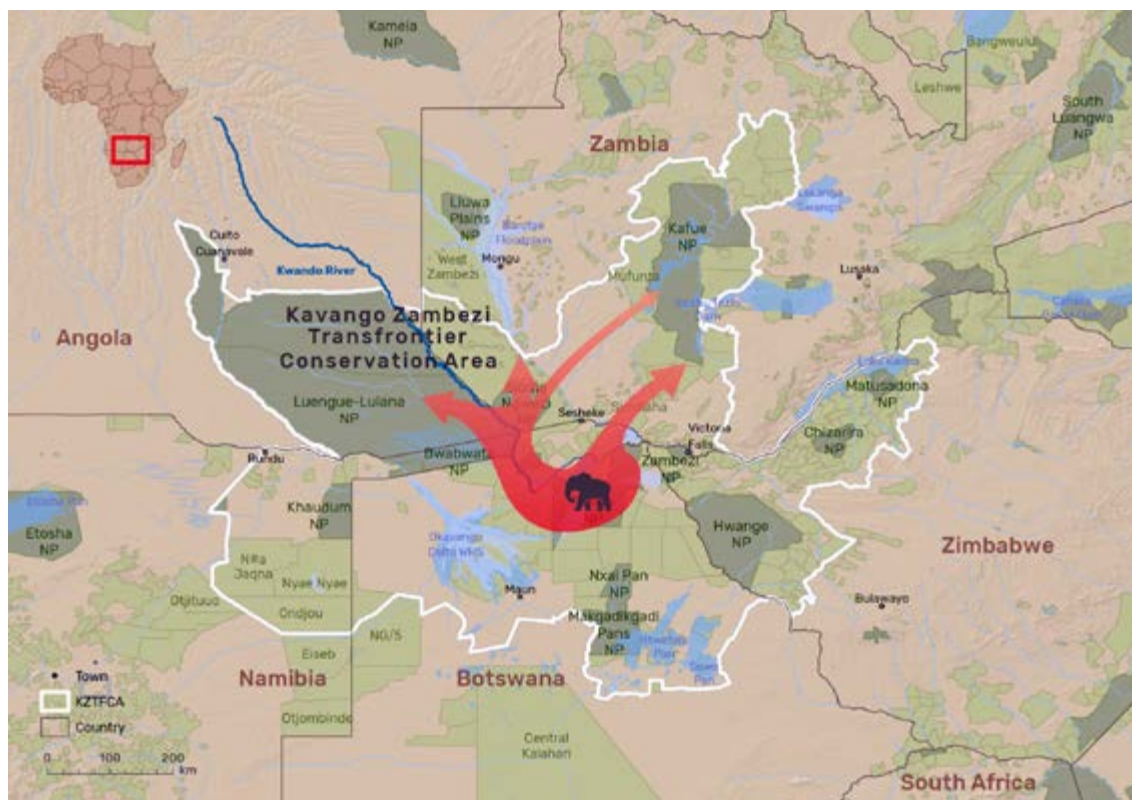
That gave him confidence again. He decided to tell his story and then asked everyone to do the same. The approach was good. "I told how, as a child, I went fishing with my father in Scotland where, for the first time, I was captivated by the magnificence of nature. And how I wanted to become a litter picker afterwards, to keep nature clean. Willem Ferwerda then told us about an encounter with a snake, a defining moment for him. The ice was broken and more stories followed." The boss of WWF Zimbabwe also talked about how, as a little boy, he went fishing with his father, not for fun but to gather food for his family. "It was a moving story," John remembered, "when his ailing mother and sister were starving because there were fewer and fewer fish in the river. Because of mankind."

**'EVERYONE SHARED
THEIR HISTORY AND
MOTIVATION TO
FIGHT FOR NATURE.'**

Everyone shared their history and motivation to fight for nature. It became an emotional, but above all, a connecting meeting, which paved the way for another, much larger meeting. The following day a plan was created together: "The Kwando Corridor Initiative, in which we determined what we could do to accomplish the largest elephant corridor in the world."

Twenty parties around the table

There is a lot involved in organising a gathering of this size: apart from the fact that the elephants' route crosses several countries, it is full of obstacles. For example, dams in the Okavango Delta, long fences in border areas that need to be removed, landmines in parts of Angola, and deforestation in Namibia by the Chinese, turning the country into a desert and which makes it impossible for elephants to get there.



'IT WAS GREAT TO SEE HOW WELL THOSE PERSONAL STORIES WORKED.'

"We made a long list of people who had to be at the summit," says John. Finally, in 2018 he and COMON organises a four-day conference in Botswana, with twenty parties, including representatives of the governments of the five countries involved, the World Bank and various NGOs, such as the WWF and Peace Parks. John had to argue hard for it with the board, but COMON financed the conference. Maas Jan remembers how everyone first thought: are we really going to pay for a conference? It's so far removed from our core goal: *re-greening the planet*.

But when he accompanied John to the meeting in Kasane, Botswana, he also saw how you could get something done in this way that would contribute to that core goal. "Here too, the approach was to first let everyone share their story," he says. "The governmental representatives spoke in the first half and the NGOs sat in the second row, in the second part, it turned around. It was great to see how well those personal stories worked, and everyone really

listened to each other and gained more understanding and empathy for each other. That led to consensus. It was an impressive trip, and the yield was fantastic."

"It was well worth the investment," says John. "We got everyone on the same page. This resulted in a master plan for the corridor and an application to the Postcode Lottery for a so-called dream fund to finance it. Although a dream fund is usually a maximum of 15 million

euros, they paid the full 18 million euros we needed to achieve the corridor." Work on the corridor is now in full swing. "This way of working, including involving the Postcode Lottery, is a perfect example of how COMON should work," says Gerard. "We made a substantial contribution, which inspired confidence in other parties, and they then gave a project wing, financially. In addition, we also provided the much-needed management, direction and expertise, so that has actually been achieved."



Special fund

John saw it as a big breakthrough himself. "I knew for sure that this was a role that COMON must take in order to push the right buttons: bring together parties with the same goals but who operated individually, connect them, and thus create the intended flywheel effect. In the beginning, there were still doubts within management."

But John knew how to convince everyone that it was the way to organise so-called Blue Line Societies, to initiate cooperation on a large scale, and to encourage others to also work according to the 4R/3Z/20Y philosophy. "We were the only ones who could show, in concrete terms, what you could do in practice, how, for example, chilli farms and fish farms on the edges of the parks could initiate tangible change." The result was a small grants fund within COMON that would be used to connect parties, finance meetings, accommodations and flights. "It was a cost that no one wants to pay for," says John, "that kept people from getting together, seeing each other, and hearing each other's stories to begin with. And that's where it all started, that was clear to me."

The Postcode Lottery awards €16.9 million to (from left to right): WWF (Kirsten Schuyt), the KAZA Secretariat (Nyambe Nyambe), African Parks (Peter Fearnhead) and Peace Parks Foundation (Werner Myburgh)

The Reforestation Accelerator

COMON itself was also embarking on a path that increasingly involved collaboration with other parties that had the same goals in mind. Such as at the end of 2017 with [The Nature Conservancy \(TNC\)](#), one of the oldest (over 70 years) and largest conservation organisations in the world, with an annual donation income of more than 800 million dollars. The organisation worked with more than 4,000 people, many of whom were scientists, in 79 countries and territories on six continents, with the goal of 'creating a world where people and nature thrive together'. The organisation focused on mitigating climate change by protecting waters and oceans and restoring forests. During the period that TNC was in contact with COMON, they developed a programme to speed up greening and tackle it on a much larger scale. The program was called the Reforestation Accelerator and had a concrete goal – to have greened 150 million hectares by 2030 and thus store substantially more CO₂. But how they could structurally roll out the programme remained unclear.



**‘THE ORGANISATION
WORKED WITH THE
GOAL OF “CREATING
A WORLD WHERE
PEOPLE AND NATURE
THRIVE TOGETHER”.’**

George Loudon

In the spring of 2017, Norwegian Marianne Kleiberg, regional managing director for TNC Europe and also involved in TNC's global projects, met George Loudon, a trustee of TNC's UK department, in London. She told him about the Reforestation Accelerator and the search for more funds to put the programme into practice. "We were large and work worldwide, but we were always looking for suitable partners," says Kleiberg. "We were convinced that we could only achieve real results if we work together." George Loudon advised Kleiberg to also talk to his cousin, John Loudon, in the Netherlands. "He's very much into those things," he told her.

In the summer of 2017, a first meeting took place between Kleiberg, John, and also Willem Ferwerda. Kleiberg experienced the meeting as very pleasant. "What struck me was that they really took the time to get to know me and hear all about our plans and ideas. Often these kinds of meetings remain very business-like. I was surprised by John's sincere and personal questions about how I felt and what inspired me, at work and beyond. He wanted to know what drove me, perhaps also to be able to assess whether we could work well together, would fit together."

Financial and content


Further meetings followed in which there would be an in-depth discussion of TNC's work around the world and, in particular, in Africa. COMON was impressed by the Reforestation Accelerator itself, but Ferwerda noted that replanting trees and sustainable forestry were only part of the solution for large-scale greening. "Reforestation only impresses when it is based on an ecosystem approach, on which the 4Returns is based," he explained, "which is the philosophy of Commonland for a reason." He rewrote the programme from a Reforestation Accelerator to a '[Landscape Restoration Accelerator](#)', in which the 4Returns were incorporated. John distributed Willem's version at the next COMON meeting and explained that TNC already had a few large donors for the programme, such as [Good Energies](#), a program from the Brenninkmeijer's family, and the [Children Investment Fund Foundation](#) (CIFF), but that they were very happy to involve COMON; and also, Commonland, for the content. The board agreed to an initial donation.


Involved and active

"That meant a lot to TNC," Kleiberg says. "COMON stepped in at a time when the Reforestation Accelerator still had to prove itself. They had stuck their necks out with that." She recalls John saying, "I'm not quite sure what we're investing in right now, but it feels good, you're a great club with good people, so let's see what happens." This showed that COMON was prepared to undertake new things, and 'has real guts'. Kleiberg gradually found a solid partner in COMON, according to her words. "Of course, because of the financial support, but not only that. COMON was also very involved and active. John was at many meetings, was interested in everything we did and wanted to meet all the other donors. And thirdly, we saw COMON as a critical friend, who asked good questions and made us better, helped us grow." And as often happened when COMON stuck its neck out: their involvement also convinced other parties to commit to TNC, bringing in a multitude of funding for the program.

Strategic collaboration

For COMON itself, the collaboration with TNC was also an important development. "It was a partnership of a different order," says John. "Parties such as Peace Parks, Commonland and the Charles Darwin Foundation were active on the ground; we invested in concrete projects and quickly saw whether the results are successful. The collaboration with TNC was more strategic in nature and more remote in content, but TNC was so large and did so many things that tied in with what COMON also wanted, for example, with large projects in India - in which Commonland was directly involved, - Brazil and also in Europe, with a combination of sustainable forestry planting and the use of [CLT wood](#) (Cross Laminated Timber). It was really a partnership that allowed us to create an impact on a much larger scale and at a much faster rate than we ever had before."

And besides the fact that COMON contributed financially to this, the collaboration with TNC also increased their network of interesting, large, international donors. By joining forces with TNC, COMON sat around the table with parties such as CIFF and Good Energies, and came into contact with the IKEA Foundation and the - also Swedish - Arcadia Foundation, major parties that were also following COMON's lead and to do more for TNC. 



**‘I was surprised by
John’s sincere and personal
questions about how I felt
and what inspired me.’**

Marianne Kleiberg

Simalaha Community Conservancy - Clean and safe cooking with a so-called 'cookstove'

CHAPTER
09

Intercropping - A One Acre Fund farmer
has just planted his maize and beans

09

The beneficiaries

Longer-term support and new parties

Because COMON increasingly focused on organisations that worked according to the 4R/3Z/20Y philosophy, and the parties they support were therefore also asked to think in the longer term in their projects, John argues that their commitment should have also been one of several years. “We realised that if organisations could really make that system change, we would have to commit ourselves to them for a longer period, to really give them that chance to make it happen.”

John had seen how the Postcode Lottery did this by choosing so-called beneficiaries: parties in which they invested for a longer period and whom they give the confidence to spend as they see fit. “I saw that this has a refreshing effect,” he says, “and invited good internal coordination, forces organisations to set priorities and, of course, also provided more certainty.”

Three beneficiaries

John proposed to the board to allocate ‘unmarked funding’ on contracts of, for example, three or five years, and to renew it every time if they do well. However, a major step had to be taken with regard to the amount that Wijnand wanted to invest. To support organisations for a longer period, much more money had to be put in the pot, so that there was sufficient return to guarantee that continuity. Wijnand first talked about it with his daughters – they were co-owners of Pon Holdings – and, of course, with Gerard, but the money was there, and he actually thought it was a great idea. He wanted to start as soon as possible.

It had long been clear to COMON who the first three beneficiaries should be, i.e. the parties they had been systematically supporting for some time. This concerned the [Charles Darwin Foundation](#), for nature restoration in the broadest sense on the Galapagos Islands, the [Peace Parks Foundation](#), for nature restoration by creating involvement of the population on the edges of the game reserves, with an emphasis on KAZA in width and Zambia in particular, and [Commonland](#), where COMON focused on specific projects in addition to setting up the organisation and a solid board.

CDF out of the red

All three organisations were very pleased to hear about this development. Employees at the Charles Darwin Foundation breathed a sigh of relief. “It was a fantastic moment to hear that COMON wanted to support us for the longer term, they would probably be a partner for at least the next 25 years,” says Arturo Izurieta. “Not only because it simply saved us and could really look ahead but also because their confidence radiated on other donors and sponsors. And also, at the [Galapagos Government Council](#), which itself promised to take their contributions to the CDF more seriously.”

Gradually, COMON helped the CDF out of the red. John did note that, with a view to the longer term, more needed to be done than research and nature restoration. For example, the CDF must develop better leadership and a sustainable agenda for the future, and involve the local population more in their activities. Attention must also be paid to a sustainable energy transition. John cites the Canary Island of El Hierro as an example, which is on its way to becoming energy and water independent. Water management is a concern in the Galapagos. There is a great shortage, while people still use it lavishly.

Lease construction

But John also agreed that many projects were now well on track. When Wijnand visited the Galapagos again, he also visited the Green Musketeers project that was previously hit hard by the heavy rainfall and hurricane El Niño. Due to the sudden surplus of water, the Waterboxxes were no longer needed. Those had been removed, and the children took care of the trees as they saw fit. Wijnand was surprised to see how well that had worked out. The trees had adapted and were growing beyond expectations.

Things were not going well in other places where the Waterboxx was being used. This was often due to opposition from the government, which did not want to contribute. As a solution, COMON devised a lease construction that made the purchase more accessible. This way, several projects could also still be started on the small Baltra Island. Both the original plastic and new, biodegradable versions were used here.

Herbarium

The Galapagos Verde 2050 project was also running smoothly. A new donor that had come forward, the [Helmsley Charitable Trust](#) of New York, was only involved in project financing and had taken over the project from COMON. But Wijnand remained closely involved. And when the Helmsley Charitable Trust decided a few years later to focus solely on health care projects and withdraw, COMON picked it up again. "They were a big donor," says Johanna Carrión. "Their departure left a gap. So here too you can safely say that COMON saved us."

"That was so nice of COMON and of Mr. Pon in particular," says Patricia Jaramillo Diaz, Galapagos Verde 2050s project leader. "Unlike many other organisations, they were really engaged and rely on us, the local professionals, rather than placing themselves above us or only hiring external experts. And their financial contribution was, of course, crucial. In this way, I was also able to train numerous young people who could do the same work. With all that together, you as an employee also do everything you can to not disappoint COMON." And so, there is also extra support for another project that is running here, the Herbarium. It is a laboratory where living native flora and fauna of the islands are preserved as a source of research into biodiversity, taxonomy and species formation. It is owned by the Ecuadorian government, but is managed by the CDF and is now being expanded with financial support from COMON.

More donors

In the meantime, the final phase of the construction of the Inspiration Complex was also getting closer. John mentioned it as an example of how COMON also created a flywheel effect here. "Because COMON put so much effort into this, under the leadership of the energetic Renée Monroe – used for fundraising – it attracted a number of other large donors, such as the [Wyss Foundation](#) and the [Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation](#). A longer-term connection is being agreed with both, for substantial core funding of the CDF." Hans van Poelvoorde became chairman of the CDF board. "I was away from Pon and COMON, lived in the US, but I didn't have much more to do. This was, of course, a wonderful job." Hans was not as madly in love with the Galapagos as Wijnand, but the unique archipelago is close to his heart.

"You see how special it is there, but also how we humans have thoroughly ruined it. There is a great need to tackle that, and I think it's great that I can contribute something to this."

Sustainable in ten years

Monroe also organised a donor cruise, which included a government delegation, in addition to several important donors. John knew how to open doors here like no other. "The plans for the Galapagos Masterplan 2030 were already there," explains Johanna

Carrión. "But there was still insufficient funding for it. On behalf of Wijnand, John promised money from COMON and then others came forward, including the government. That was great, but I was especially impressed by the fact that it again showed that

COMON did much more for the islands than just supporting the Charles Darwin Foundation." Arturo Izurieta stepped down from the board after five years. His term was over. But he hoped he could fulfil a role for the Galapagos 2030 Master Plan. "I live here, my heart will always go out to what the CDF does. I think it's great how COMON continued to support that work and I would always do my best to continue to contribute to it." Rakan Zahawi, half Iraqi, half American and former director of the Lyon Arborethum in Hawaii, succeeded him.

**'I THINK IT'S GREAT
THAT I CAN CONTRIBUTE
SOMETHING TO THIS.'**

Master plan

With the second beneficiary, the Peace Parks Foundation, the results were also diverse. Some projects that COMON supported were sluggish and made slow progress. This was often because of the great drought in certain areas. But progress was also being made. For example, a master plan had been made for the entire area in Mozambique. This involved promoting tourism for Maputo Special Reserve and developing a broader vision of Conservation Farming for the residents of Machangulo. After the plan was discussed with government officials, it was welcomed with great applause. "We were hoping for that," John says. "Because with their approval there was a growing chance that [MozBio](#), the Mozambican branch of the World Bank, also wanted to

contribute financially to community development in Maputo Special Reserve." And indeed, that happened shortly after. The board of COMON was pleased to see that the flywheel effect continued to work there. Their contribution constantly encouraged other parties to provide substantial support. Johann Rupert and the Swiss billionaire Hansjörg Wyss each invested millions in [Conservation & Tourism Development](#). According to John, the biggest challenge was making projects financially successful so that they could eventually go ahead without their support. "That is not yet the case, but the developments are positive. If tourism increased, the sales market for farmers would also continue to grow. There are opportunities there. And the government had also been doing a lot about tourism. Maputo National Park was increasingly becoming the pearl of the Mozambican parks."

Illegal logging

A major step was also being taken regarding the development of the elephant corridor. When Wijnand, Harryet, and Maas Jan and John and their spouses Anouk and Yolanda visited Namibia for their first cross-border tourism experience, from Namibia to Botswana and Zimbabwe, Chris Weaver of WWF Namibia accompanied them. He expressed his concerns about the deforestation by the Chinese in an area of 142,000 hectares of primeval teak trees through which the corridor would run, the [Namibia Zambezi State Forest](#). According to Weaver, they had an illegal license. He wanted to organise a meeting with all parties involved and shareholders to see how this could be stopped, and asked COMON to finance it. John and Maas Jan knew how such a meeting can make a difference and would present it in the board meeting. The board agreed, and it paid off. After the meeting, logging in those areas would be completely banned, and it was also impossible that the Chinese would get a new permit. Procedures were also being launched to make Namibia's Zambezi State Forest an officially protected area.

Cookstoves

During the same trip, they also visited the aforementioned Cookstove pilot project in Simalaha. This project was a collaboration of 4 Returns partners, the Simalaha Conservancy Trust and the Peace Parks Foundation. It concerned specially developed [cooking pots](#) for numerous farming families who usually cook in their houses on an open fire, where many accidents occur.



Chris Weaver of WWF Namibia in an organised meeting with the board

These cooking pots, developed with local materials, were safe, according to the pilot. And that's not the only gain. "Women in this area spent a lot of time every day collecting wood for cooking," says Werner Myburgh. "This cookstove was not only safer but also made the lives of these women easier, resulted in 80 percent less wood use (and therefore much less logging), also reduced CO₂ emissions by no less than 60 percent and also delivered money because CO₂ emission rights could be traded. In this way, more cookstoves could be purchased with the proceeds."

Myburgh called it 'an incredible story, with an incredible business plan'. The project was a great success. Caroline van Tilborg, who is a CO₂ expert associated with Commonland and closely involved in this project, reported and then asked COMON for financial support to further roll out the project to 10,000 farming families. Ultimately, Pon Holdings would take over this project as soon as the CO₂ credits had been accredited, so that the loan that COMON had provided to Commonland for this project would also be repaid. The project was therefore going very well, and it seems that it could be replicated in other parts of Africa.



**‘THIS COOKSTOVE WAS NOT ONLY SAFER
BUT ALSO MADE THE LIVES OF THESE
WOMEN EASIER.’**

The Cookstove pilot project in Simalaha

One Acre Fund

At that time, there were more projects running in Simalaha that COMON supported and followed, such as the [Conservation Farming](#) project. Interestingly, in many African countries, even the poorest people had a cell phone. For that reason, the organisation had developed two apps to help farmers deal with drought and effective farming practices. It appeared to work well. A peanut pilot was also underway, a collaboration between Conservation Farming and Grounded, a South African consultancy company originating from Commonland that supported farmers in their transition to regenerative agriculture. That was also running, but the Simalaha Conservation Agriculture Manager, Chrispin Muchindu, was struggling with staff shortages. He had to reach 10,000 farmers with his Conservation Farming programme with three men. Upscaling was only possible if a professional party was added, with manpower and expertise.

This was where One Acre Fund (OAF) came into the picture. This was an American non-profit organisation that provided, among other things, small farmers in East Africa with asset-based financing and agricultural training services to reduce hunger and poverty. Peace Parks and Grounded saw opportunities with this player; they advised John to look to see if it was indeed something worthwhile.

Scoop of fertilizer

Together with the director of Simalaha Conservation Trust, John travelled to Rwanda to visit One Acre Fund; a fruitful trip. It resulted in an application for funding to COMON. One Acre Fund had access to an enormous number of *smallholders*, small farmers who needed to become self-sufficient by farming a small piece of land. "OAF was a really interesting party," says John, "they were in daily contact with 1.2 million farmers, in Rwanda, Kenya and Malawi, which was unique and super valuable. They would carry out the largest tree project in the world: 1 billion trees will be planted between now and 2030 and *agroforestry* would be used on a large scale: the combination of tree planting, agriculture and livestock farming."

Together with Focussing Philanthropy, an American party that brought together funds, the board of COMON decided to invest in this. "What was striking here," says John, "was that OAF had never heard of the 4R method, but more or less were already working this way. Everyone who joins their program gets a better life. The only downside is that the farmers had to make the land fertile with a scoop of fertiliser." Although COMON decided to support OAF, this fertiliser was a strong point of discussion. "We wanted to invest in an alternative, so we helped them with this first," says John.

‘WHAT WAS STRIKING HERE WAS THAT OAF HAD NEVER HEARD OF THE 4R METHOD, BUT MORE OR LESS WERE ALREADY WORKING THIS WAY.’

Left - OAF farmer applies compost to his land
Right - OAF Field Officer provides a compost training





Millions of trees

The project to investigate alternatives to fertilisers was a great success. Both in Kenya and Rwanda there were tests with intercropping, the cultivation of different crops at the same time. The technology was catching on and would be initially rolled out to 800,000 farmers. Only switching to a different form of fertilisation appeared to be more difficult. But with COMON's investment, a new type of lime was being developed, with the Lime project, which appeared to have a very good effect on soil quality. This natural fertiliser has been distributed to the first 200,000 farmers. The shovel of fertiliser could then probably be dismissed.

Large-scale tree planting would be the next big project together, which is where OAF's activities stand out. Several governments of neighbouring countries are asking OAF to come and help them plant trees as well. "So, in addition to the 1.2 million farmers already in the picture, more and more farmers would do the same. And millions of trees will be planted," continues John. "This is a really interesting project, where there is clearly enormous acceleration. It fits very well with what we want and aspire to. As far as I'm concerned, COMON will invest much more in this in the near future."

Sowing seeds

For a long time, Commonland, the third beneficiary, focused mainly on setting up the organisation properly, finding the right people and forming a solid board. John visited one of the first projects in Spain and concluded that things are going slow. Drought also played a major role here. When were we going to see the first green areas? the board wondered in despair when John reports. "We were too impatient," says John, "there was a reason that Willem Ferwerda had said at the start that he would need at least twenty years to make areas greener. We are still in the period of sowing, sowing and sowing some more. Harvesting is not yet in the picture, but that will certainly come." The return on investment is also not yet visible. "That will certainly come too, but it takes a long time," says Ferwerda. "Most projects are going well and are growing fast, but are often still driven by philanthropy, or it is simply not the right time to cash in. A company in Australia in which we are a shareholder (Wide Open Agriculture), for example, is now worth eight times as much. We could get that money out, but we won't. Because we want it to remain successful in the longer term."



‘MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ARE “INFECTED” WITH KNOWLEDGE AND WANT TO APPLY THE 4RS.’

Formulas

What makes it especially difficult now is that if you really want to bring about a cultural change, many more parties have to get involved. And that the government is going to legislate on this. “As long as the current system does not pass on the degradation costs, such as nature degradation, in the product prices, visible returns will remain,” explains Ferwerda. “The parties that do,

are then left behind, the parties that do not, offer cheaper products and take off with the profit.” He is confident that this will change in the long run. “You can already see it in the area of climate change, where the courts are now enforcing different rules, even if that means less profit for companies.” Wijnand adds: “Companies with a larger negative footprint must therefore also be taxed more heavily.”

Commonland, together with KPMG and Wageningen University, is at an advanced stage in developing formulas to measure the 4Rs.

And he continues to tell his story. “I talk to myself,” says Ferwerda. “I talk with farmers, entrepreneurs and other partners and in many countries. More and more people are ‘infected’ with knowledge and want to apply the 4Rs.”

The 4 Returns Framework, as it has now been registered, is open source knowledge. That means that anyone who wants to can apply it. “There are guidelines for how to do that,” says Ferwerda, “but you shouldn’t be too rigid with this, it only slows things down. The more parties that get to work with it, the better. Maximising the 4Rs per landscape (assuming plus or minus 100,000 hectares) must become the norm, instead of maximising profit per hectare.”

The projects in Spain, South Africa, Australia and also the Netherlands are going well, in total there are now almost a hundred people working on them. “Just like me, Wijnand is impatient, but even if he pumped 50 million euros into it, it wouldn’t make the trees grow any faster. The most you can do is plant more and hire good people.”

Grateful

John was very positive about the developments in Commonland. “There was a 4 Returns vibe going through the world,” he says, “and this will greatly increase the demand for Commonland’s help in realising those 4 Returns. We have to prepare seriously for that, so that we can handle the demand later on.” Wijnand saw this too and indicated that he wanted to build up an iron reserve for Commonland. “Here it remains essential to focus on good people,” he believes. “Commonland has mapped out a strategy for the future and above all needs extra manpower for to be ready for it later.”

Ferwerda is grateful for the trust Wijnand placed in him from the start. “It was very valuable that Wijnand took the time to listen to me and keep asking good questions, and vice versa,” he says. “As a farmer, he understood what I was doing. With philanthropists who only have experience within a large company, you miss that down-to-earth feeling for what this is all about. He’s a nice person, averse to game-playing and expensive things; in that sense we just click really well.” And of course, he’s also immensely grateful for the longer-term funding. “Without COMON, this would never have been possible. And they also get something in return,” he emphasises. “Like the network, the knowledge and the ideas. Ideas are nothing without money, but the same goes for money without ideas. Thanks to Commonland, COMON has invested more and more specifically in organisations that pursue similar goals, such as One Acre Fund, and such as Wetlands International.” The latter will be discussed in the next chapter.

The International Red Cross

New partners sometimes arose from the collaboration with the three beneficiaries. One Acre Fund was one of them. The International Red Cross (IRK) was another example. Together with the Princess Margriet Fund Green Pearls, the IRK had wanted to initiate a 4R movement within the entire Red Cross for some time. However, there was no money for that within the IRK. When the IRK started a nature restoration project in Haiti, to which Princess Margriet also committed, the organisation turned to COMON. John was immediately ahead. “Because if the IRK initiates such a movement worldwide, it really accelerates,” he says. “They are in 190 countries, so then you can really talk about pushing the right buttons.” This also convinced the rest of the board.



Because of unrest in Haiti, the project had difficulty getting off the ground. But expectations were high within the International Red Cross. The 4 Returns method was seen as the answer to the Red Cross's desired change, of course. The lobby was well underway and more and more countries were joining in with the idea that a landscape must be made *resilient* in order to prevent subsequent natural disasters.

Concrete results

It was not a benefit, but The Nature Conservancy was an important partner for COMON, which was making progress worldwide in a way that fit well with what COMON strived for and what Commonland did. Their Reforestation Accelerator was doing well. More and more relevant parties were joining, such as the [World Resources Institute](#) (WRI), an international NGO that made research-based proposals for more sustainable management of natural resources. COMON's contributions regularly lead to concrete results. For example, COMON was involved in organising a meeting in India with the National Finance Committee, the organisation that distributes taxpayers' money.


The aim was to convince key stakeholders that a specific tax measure could motivate parties to implement TNC's nature restoration plans. John says: "We helped TNC write a policy stating that when provinces preserve existing forests or restore degraded areas, they receive additional money from the IRS." It was a tremendous success. The Indian government approved a bill incorporating this policy, and it has immediate effect. "Over the past two years, 12 billion dollars has gone to the provinces based on their greening. 60 billion dollars has been planned for the next five years. That money will go not only to more trees and landscape restoration but also for new roads and traffic lights, for example. It is widely used to improve the living conditions of the people who live there."

Role models

"It is really great what we have achieved with the help of COMON," says Marianne Kleiberg of TNC. "I remember John saying he didn't quite understand what we were doing. He summed it up as a small investment, drinking a lot of coffee and talking a lot, and then suddenly there was a huge pile of money! That is of course simplistic, but it shows the great confidence that COMON placed in us to achieve it. And I'm proud that we could make it happen." Kleiberg hoped COMON would be a long-term partner, with the primary goal of inspiring many more parties to support their work financially. "Most really large donors focus on health and poverty, not on nature restoration. While that is directly related to those two goals. We need to highlight that much more. Wijnand Pon and John Loudon are outstanding role models in this."

The collaboration with TNC in India once again showed how COMON brought people and organisations together on themes that matter, in order to subsequently arrive at 'mighty projects' with 'amazing results', as recorded in COMON's minutes. "The costs are small," says John. "Often it concerned travel and accommodation costs, and it paid off enormously, in terms of fundraising, but above all in the area of doing something concrete." ~

**'IT IS REALLY
GREAT WHAT WE
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WITH THE HELP
OF COMON.'**



‘I have taken good care of
my daughters for a long time.
Now it is important to
take good care of the future
of their children.’

Wijnand Pon

Mangrove restoration is more important than ever

CHAPTER 10

The future

The answer lies in the sea

Perhaps Wijnand's greatest achievement is his impatience, which has been discussed before, and his desire not to talk too much, but above all, to take action. It leads to many completed and ongoing projects that have been initiated, supported and sometimes fully completed by COMON. And that's what he wants to keep doing. He himself says about this: "After ten years of COMON, I know that many people and organisations are working on the theme of 'greening' and continue to struggle with it. Ten years ago, I thought: do something about it! and I still think so. I also want to encourage others to do that. That's how we started COMON and nothing has changed in that regard as far as I'm concerned."

Mangroves

So, when reports appear more and more often that mangroves store up to ten times as much CO₂ as rainforests and only really make a big difference in the fight against climate change, Wijnand immediately knew: we are going to invest in that with COMON. Mangroves are trees and shrubs that grow mainly in tropical coastal areas and river deltas and have a prominent root system that protrudes above the ground and water. "I looked into this," says Wijnand, "and the same appears to be true for kelp forests, algae and seaweeds. They also store much more CO₂. So, it was simple: coastal protection, that's where we have to go."

"This new knowledge about what aquatic plants can mean for the preservation of the earth was a revelation," says Gerard. "We always looked for solutions to the climate problem on land, but now the answer turned out to be in the sea."

Seaweed, for example, also appears to be very nutritious for animals and could therefore be an excellent alternative to grain and soya." One project that COMON joined first was the [Global Mangrove Watch](#), just like the 4 Returns Framework, an open source platform on which the most important mangrove scientists share data and applications to protect mangroves. TNC is also a partner in the project. "Mangroves not only store much more CO₂," says Marianne Kleiberg of TNC, "they are also a natural buffer and protect coasts against storm damage, flooding and erosion. This type of crop was therefore particularly important, and that is why it has now also received our full attention." The beauty of this project is that it uses specific equipment to visualise where in the world mangrove ecosystems are, how they are doing and what is being, or can be, done to protect them. "It's actually what we once envisioned with WikiForest," says Wijnand, who invented the digital reforestation library ten years earlier. Unfortunately, it didn't get off the ground.



'WE'RE ALWAYS LOOKING FOR OTHERS TO HELP DO THE SAME.'

The source of life

Another partner of the Global Mangrove Watch is [Wetlands International](#), an international non-profit organisation dedicated to raising awareness and sustainable use of 'wetland ecosystems'. According to the organisation, wetlands are the source of all life and the ultimate landscape for optimal biodiversity, and they also connect all nature, including people. "That's why Wetlands International invests in the well-being of the people who live there,

besides the wetlands themselves," says Jane Madgwick, CEO of Wetlands International. She emphasises that the organisation works based on scientific research, but that they are keen not to get stuck in fancy ideas, but to look for practical solutions and above all want to 'do'. "And we're always looking for others to help do the same," Madgwick says. "We believe we can only make progress if we work together, share knowledge and connect parties."

Wetlands International officially celebrates its 25th anniversary, but it grew out of other organisations with a similar focus that has been active for at least 60 years. Their head office is in Wageningen. The philosophy fit remarkably well with what COMON and Commonland were striving for. Yet no one from COMON had heard of Wetlands International before. "John Loudon was surprised he hadn't found us sooner," Madgwick said, "and I'm afraid it's our fault. We are always so focused on our core business that we forget to let the world know what we do and that we exist." Madgwick knows COMON. "I had been talking to Willem Ferwerda for years," she says, "and was even on the advisory board of Commonland. So, I knew about COMON's existence, but not what they did exactly and what their ideas were. We never met during that period."

Not a fundraiser

When John came into contact with Wetlands International, he was indeed surprised. "Wetlands turned out to be a leading club, which was highly regarded worldwide. Governments support them, so I expected their



Top - Community group in Guinea-Bissau
Bottom - Jane Madgwick visits the Ruoergai Marshes and speaks with local herders about the impact of rising water levels

fundraising to be fine. But that turned out to be anything but the case. They didn't even employ a fundraiser!" Their collaboration at the Global Mangrove Watch and the contact with John led to the idea of submitting a fund proposal to COMON on behalf of TNC and Wetlands. "We also had a proposal pending with the Postcode Lottery," says Madgwick. "I spoke to John about that. He read it and said, 'I have a much better idea: why not let COMON be your Postcode Lottery?' An insane idea, of course, but he seriously invited us to come up with a proposal."

Prior to the board meeting on 24 September 2020 in Garnwerd, Marianne Kleiberg of TNC and Pieter van Eijk, programme head deltas and coasts at Wetlands International, jointly pitched for the Mangrove project. The entire board was already convinced that investing in mangroves should become the main thing. "We were already aware of the importance of mangroves," says John, "and now it became clear once again that these crops were under enormous threat. Half of it had already disappeared, because of coastal development, the development of infrastructure and ports, and because pastures were increasingly being built for cows to retain fresh water. As a result, it no longer reached the sea. Mangroves thrive in brackish water, but there is less and less of that. This was clearly a spearhead for COMON."



Perfect match

Marianne Kleiberg of TNC remembers the pitch with pleasure. "The board of COMON was so genuinely interested," she says. "In our joint mangrove project, but also in who we are. They asked about our dreams, what we believed in, what inspired us, and what we all hoped to do in this area. They are so much more than a lender."

Jane Madgwick remembers Pieter van Eijk returned with the message that the pitch was more than a success. "He told Wijnand after the application for a fund for mangroves: 'How about a fund for your entire organisation? What do you need? Do you want to become more visible? Stronger? Do you want to grow? Just say it!' What John had already suggested, that COMON could be our Postcode Lottery, became reality." It was a significant moment for Wetlands. It was exactly the support they needed to increase and accelerate their projects. "And the opportunity to collaborate more with Commonland as a result was also an attractive one," says Madgwick. "we were not really familiar with the 4 Returns philosophy before, but it is not very different from the way Wetlands have been working for years. In this way, we could also offer something. Our years of knowledge and expertise in this area can also benefit Commonland. It felt like a perfect match." In the board meeting that followed, it was unanimously supported Wetlands extensively, both on a project basis and for the organisation as a whole.

**'IT WAS EXACTLY
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Newspaper clipping

A while later, Jane Madgwick met with the board of COMON at the office of Wetlands International in Wageningen. "That was a special meeting, where I was very impressed by Wijnand Pon," says Madgwick. "The first thing he did was hand me a newspaper clipping of a painting called 'Wetlands'. He had torn it from the newspaper on the way. It was a bull's eye. I am a painter myself, and it immediately created a strong click." Madgwick gave the newspaper clipping a prominent place on her desk and thought about making a painting

‘WE HAVE THE TIME; MANY PEOPLE AND ORGANISATIONS ARE BUSY RESTORING MANGROVES.’

for Wijnand based on the image. “It reminded me every day that COMON is not only an important investor, but Wijnand is also a warm, sincere man who is deeply involved in what he invests in. And who sees nothing in competing, but believes, just like us, in working together. All that inspires me a lot.”

Wetlands International also actively works with Commonland and the [Landscape Finance Lab](#), a WWF project aimed at accelerating global landscape restoration. COMON also invested in Wetlands as an organisation, and in several of their activities. Such as a project that helped other parties to plant new mangroves in the right way. “We have the time;” says Madgwick, “many people and organisations are busy restoring mangroves. But 80 percent of initiatives fail. Our program improved this on a large scale.”

John also has a lot of confidence in Wetlands. “What they do is very important. We hope they will become much bigger and have more clout, because many more others will invest in it and the well-known flywheel effect will also arise.” Maas Jan adds: “In any case, COMON will remain structurally involved. Maybe Wetlands International will become our fourth beneficiary.” Jane Madgwick considers it a great honour. “I think it’s special that we belong to the small group of organisations that structurally support COMON. John has also already introduced us to several other parties that could mean a lot to us, which is really great. It means they have a lot of confidence in what we do. And it motivates us even more to work hard for it.”

Disappointments

Wijnand was also happy with this new partner. Looking back on the past ten years, he saw COMON has achieved a lot. “Although there are certainly disappointments,” he confesses. “What I really regret is that Pieter Hoff failed in making his Waterboxx a real success. His ideas were great, and so were his

products. I’m still a big fan of his Waterboxx and its different variants. And also, a fan of the man himself; unfortunately, he passed away in April. But he couldn’t make it big, he was too stubborn, was at odds with too many people. Groasis, his organisation, never really got off the ground. And to make your product successful, you need a good organisation. We continue to look at where we can use the Waterboxx and then invest in it again. But I’m afraid Groasis won’t have eternal life, especially now that he’s gone.”

According to Hans van Poelvoorde, this is a typical example of what Wijnand is like. “He has tremendous perseverance. Once he has grabbed hold of something, he holds it tight. And even if things don’t go well, he still supports you. You saw that repeatedly with Pieter Hoff. Wijnand believed in him and in his Waterboxx, so he never dropped it again. And that’s how he treats the people around him. He has great confidence and gives you it. It is a privilege to work for and with such a person.”

Successes

Although there are other projects that do not go quite as planned, Wijnand prefers to celebrate the successes, like putting the CDF back on track. “I’m proud of what we’ve accomplished there,” he says. “The CDF’s finances are back in order. And there are now a lot of good people, that’s where it starts. We have also been able to influence the government. The Galapagos is now much more prominent in the plans, and it is not for nothing that the Galapagos is on the number 1 of the UNESCO World Heritage List. The archipelago has since been labelled as heritage number 1. After all, we played an important role in that.”

Wijnand is also proud of what they are doing in Africa, although he sees a less prominent role for COMON there, if only because Peace Parks is so large and COMON is a small player compared to all other donors. But Werner Myburgh thinks otherwise. “COMON completes our work,” he says. “The missing element in our work was the people themselves, the people around the parks without whom their preservation is doomed to fail. Through COMON we understood that if you want to save wildlife, you have to save people first. Besides the financial contributions, this was the most important thing COMON had brought us. And don’t underestimate the catalytic effect of their contributions on other donors, we are getting more and more partners.”

Faith Leaders

Unlike in the first few years, COMON is no longer constantly looking for suitable projects. “Things are going fast with the parties we now support,” says Wijnand. “We can’t do everything at once; if we now come across organisations that fit in well with what we already do, we prefer to bring them into contact with our beneficiaries, so that great collaborations can be formed. Because if we support even more individual projects, you will get too fragmentation. A kind of House of Representatives. Nobody wants that, do they?”

The best thing Wijnand has done with COMON is, as far as he is concerned, was to help found Commonland. “The 4 Returns concept is so good, a lot more can be achieved with it, especially if we can calculate the outcomes and yields precisely,” Wijnand believes. “That suddenly makes it interesting for a much larger group. For example, we notice politicians are becoming interested. This allows you to get in touch with much more powerful interest groups that would otherwise remain inaccessible.” As an example, he mentions the Faith Leaders, a group with representatives of all world religions who collectively fight for the most urgent world problems. In October 2021, the group would meet in the Vatican in Rome to determine their position for the [Climate Summit](#) in Scotland a month later. “Willem Ferwerda will probably be allowed to give a presentation about Commonland and the 4 Returns there. If that continues, it could have a huge effect.”

Final trick

Regarding Ferwerda, it was great that Wijnand realised that there were no quick fixes, but that a system change takes a long time. “I’m at least as impatient as Wijnand,” he says, “but we saw you can’t bring down a system that was created over 250 years in a few years. It takes a lot of patience and trust that this is possible and will eventually happen. That trust is what Wijnand has implicitly given us. I am very grateful to him for that. It wouldn’t have been possible without him.”

Wijnand himself emphasises it is precisely for this reason that he is working to secure the future of COMON itself. “How can I ensure everything continues this way after I die? That is now my main challenge. It will be my final trick.”



He talks with Maas Jan about that. “Those are also great conversations,” says Maas Jan, “about money; Wijnand has built up great wealth. How do you invest so that COMON can continue for a very long time, even if the family wants nothing to do with it? And also, about who can take over from him. If he’s no longer with us, and his daughters won’t take his place, who will be in charge? That’s what we’re talking about. How do you ensure continuity? How do you ensure that the capital continues to go to the right clubs?”

Wijnand then set up a fund to guarantee the financing of COMON. “And that is growing much faster than I expected. That often happens with the Pons. We seem to have a good eye for it,” he chuckles. “That’s why I’m not focusing extra on growth now. I’d rather spend a lot more now.”

Pleasure

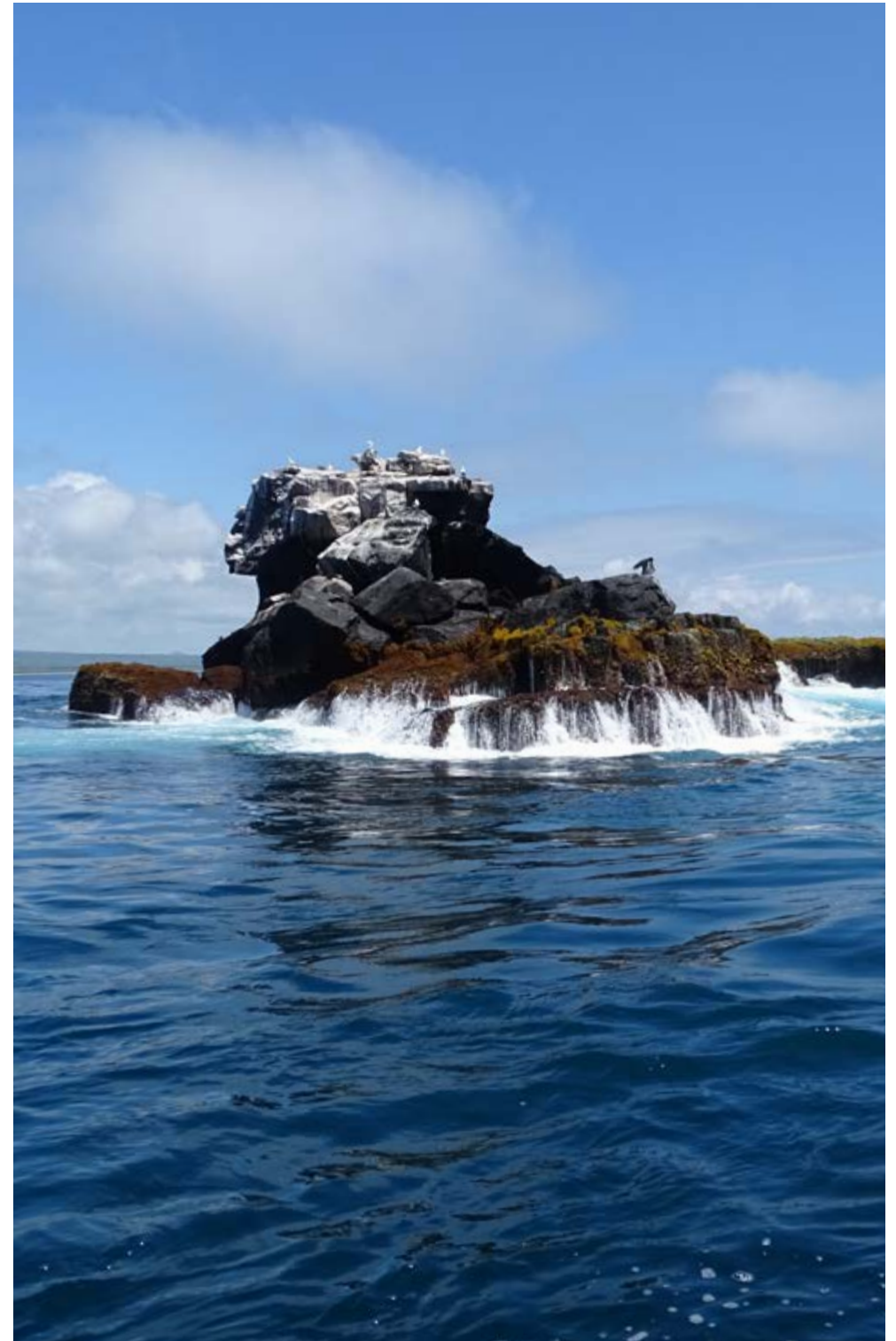
"Wijnand can't wait to spend the money now," Gerard agrees. "He is impatient with that too, and that is increasing more and more. He really wants to spend and if he has a goal, he is unstoppable. But I've known him for so long, I know he doesn't do things that make little sense. He fully listens to others and has a good common sense. I never had to stop him."

Instead, the financial man of the Pon family and of COMON has learned a lot himself in recent years. "In the beginning I was only concerned with the money," Gerard says. "Sustainability, CO₂ and nature restoration, biodiversity, it all meant little to me. Without COMON, I would never have come into contact with it, but now I am ahead of the troops. I have become a kind of missionary; I want to pass this on to my children."

'HE FULLY LISTENS TO OTHERS AND HAS A GOOD COMMON SENSE.'

From behind his desk in Garnwerd, the modest, engaging farmer, Wijnand Pon, emphasises that he also just enjoys spending the money now. "I am proud of what we have achieved with COMON and take great pleasure in helping the great parties that we now support continue on their way, and to see what the effect is. So, while I'm still here, I will not put the brakes on. And it's unnecessary. What I

wanted to amass for the foundation ten years ago, I have achieved. What I had in mind for the future was amply present. And there's a lot more to come," he laughs. "I have taken good care of my daughters for a long time. Now it is important to take good care of the future of their children, and consequently the preservation of the earth. That's why after my death everything that's left goes to COMON." ~



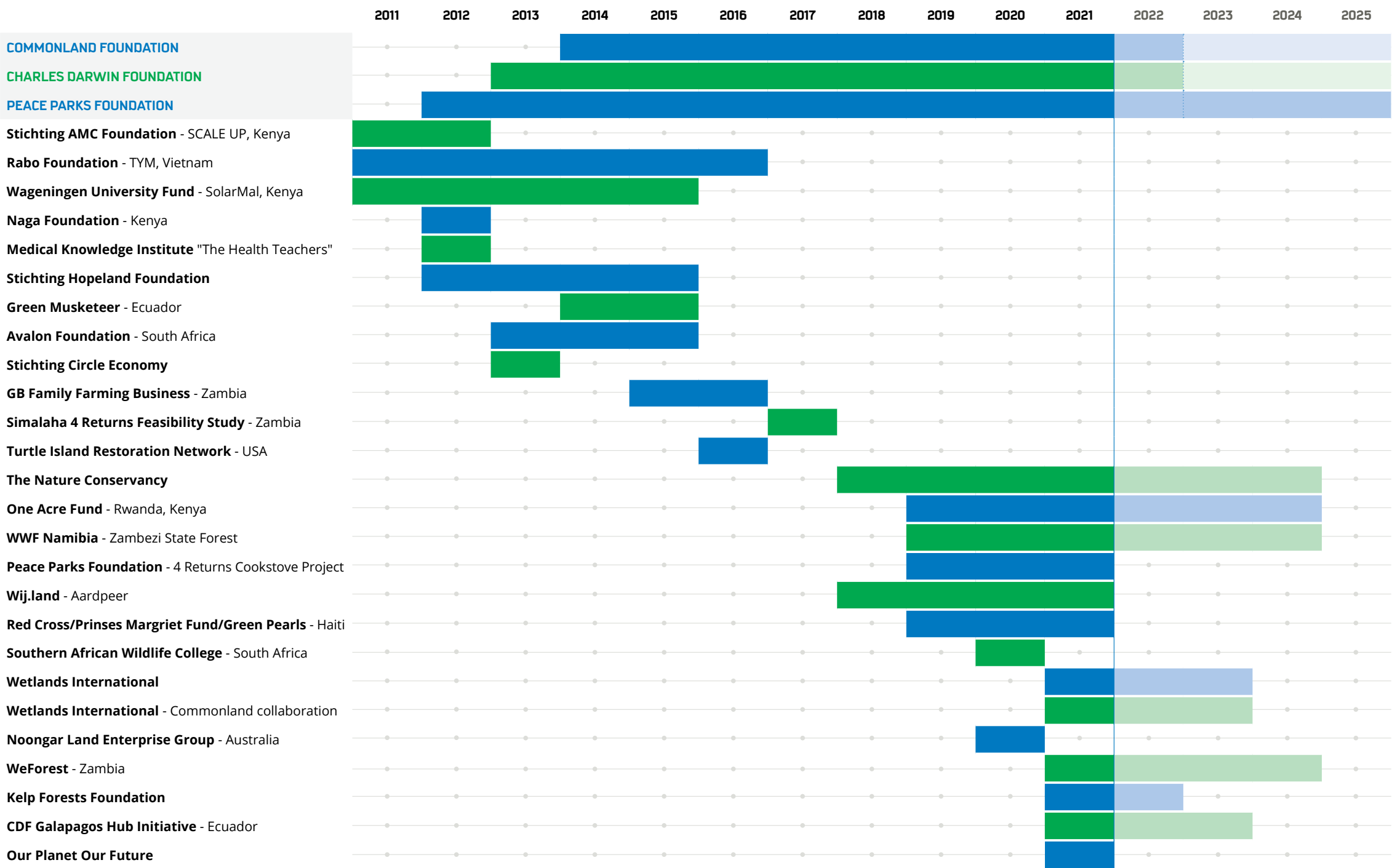
A photograph of a man in a traditional reed boat on a body of water, with a green overlay. The man is shirtless and looking down at his work in the boat. Several vertical poles are visible in the water around him.

**‘We believe we can only
make progress if we work
together, share knowledge and
connect parties.’**

Jane Madgwick

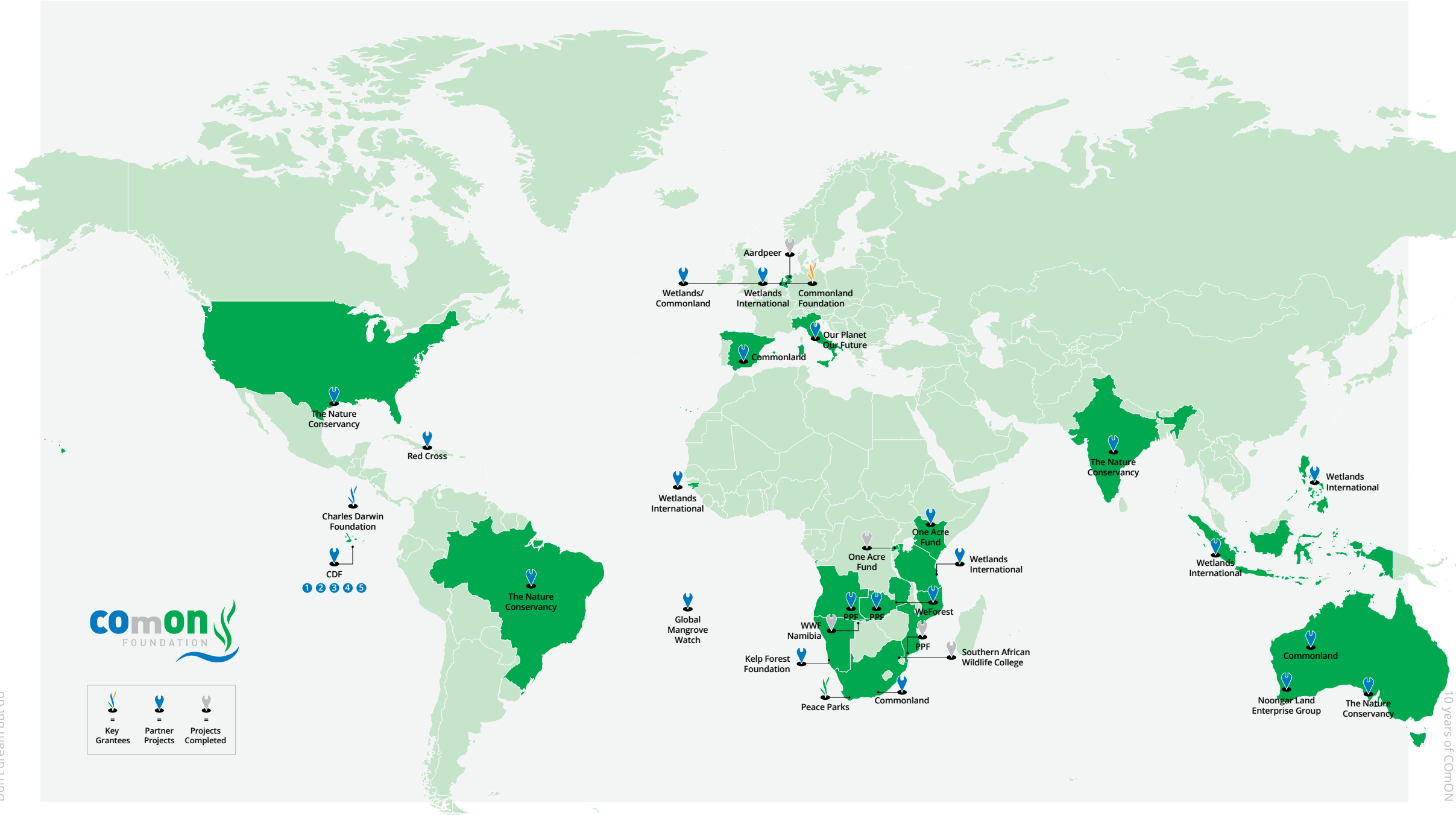
Projects timeline

COMON has committed itself to the partners below for the past 10 years.
Some projects will also continue into the future.



Projects overview

COMON is directly active in many countries in the world.
We operate indirectly in many more countries.





Colophon

Don't dream but do

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