

# COMMONLAND AND THE 4 RETURNS FOR COMMUNITY AND LANDSCAPE REGENERATION

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## **Abstract**

This case investigates how two regenerative entrepreneurs working for the organization Commonland create a shared narrative of regenerativity among multiple stakeholder groups using their “4 Returns Framework for landscape restoration”. Commonland’s mission is to regenerate degraded landscapes into thriving ecosystems, resilient communities, and responsible economies. Practical insights are extracted from Commonland’s ongoing work to embed, and therefore normalize, a holistic approach to landscape restoration and community building. It is hoped that this will provide inspiration, references and guidance for students and others interested in regenerative entrepreneurship. In the following pages, we describe the founding of Commonland and describe how founder Willem Ferwerda worked with opportunities and overcome barriers to make Commonland a success.

## **The Commonland Foundation**

Commonland is a for-purpose foundation. Formally, this means that it is an organization that is legally constituted to achieve a particular purpose but does not have a defined owner. The purpose it was founded for was to establish, through its activities, a new balance between ecology, economics and hope for a more equitable and environmentally sustainable world. Commonland was founded by Willem Ferwerda and supported by scientific institutions and several entrepreneurs with a vision of the future where business did things differently, where it was not profit margins that drove the strategies of the organization or the motivations of its members, but nature and community inspired optimism.

Regenerative entrepreneurs face ethical dilemmas because sustainability requires significant changes to the Business-As-Usual (BAU) approach to conducting commerce. Consequently, Commonland leaders and staff have faced many difficult situations where voicing values was essential for maintaining the integrity of their mission. In this chapter, we explore some of

these situations using the business ethics lens of normalizing ethical challenges, that is, helping stakeholders prepare for the normal, everyday occurrence of ethical dilemmas and opportunities. This lens is crucially important in the challenge of transitioning to sustainable futures. To avoid the worst impacts of the environmental challenges that societies now face, the aspirations of regenerative organizations like Commonland may well need to become the norm, the default mode of business purposes. Shifting whole economies through normalizing the regenerative mission and vision that Commonland utilizes to achieve its purpose is an extremely ambitious goal. However, transitioning from the current extractive modes of economic activity to more prudent ones needs to be accomplished over the next several decades if the turmoil of cascading disruptions across planetary biophysical systems are to be avoided (Brovkin et al., 2021; Buldyrev, Parshani, Paul, Stanley, & Havlin, 2010; Lenton et al., 2019).

Commonland has successfully created regenerative impacts since 2013 but that success has not come without challenges and dilemmas. In this chapter, we will dig into Commonland's business philosophy and strategy and see how, from the very beginning, its founders and guiding entrepreneurs worked to normalize the ecological view among stakeholders. We aim to gain some insight into how Commonland and leaders have effectively voiced their values to shift how we understand economic prosperity and how it can support the flourishing of human communities and the natural systems they depend on.

**Co-Founder Willem Ferwerda: “We are all part of nature”**



Willem Ferwerda – Founder and CEO

Willem was born in 1959 in the Netherlands. The young Willem had a very strong connection to nature throughout his upbringing. He was raised to enjoy being outdoors, to be curious about living things and to experience the beauty and power of the natural world. When Willem was eight years old, he had a simple yet profound insight into his own inextricable connection to nature. He and his father were hiking around a lake when suddenly they saw adults screaming and throwing rocks at a snake. Willem did not share people's fear of the snake, instead, he was curious to see it up close. He loved animals and, although he had previously only seen a snake in a zoo, he approached the creature, which turned out to be a harmless grass snake, and looked it in the eyes with an open heart and an unspoken, "What are they doing to you?" Willem felt the mirrored response from the snake's perspective. These people are throwing rocks at themselves, he thought to himself. They are unnecessarily harming another living creature. Harming something that they themselves are part of. At eight years of age, Willem experienced this deep sense of connection to nature that some might even call a spiritual or transcendent experience. An insight that shifts the individual perspective beyond the ego and into a feeling that one's being is inseparable from the natural world in which it is embedded. Powerful experiences like this can greatly shape how we interact with nature throughout our lives, and they give us opportunities to think and plan for how we act when encountering similar situations.

Unfortunately, this intimate experience of nature is something fewer and fewer people are experiencing today because of increasingly urbanized lifestyles. More than half of the world's population lives in cities and is cut off from everyday experiences of the natural world. In some ways the origins of Commonland are to be found in Willem's portentous experience and instinct for "reconnecting to the biosphere" (Folke et al., 2011). It is also important to note however, that this is not a romantic quest or infantile wish for simpler times. We will see in Willem's and Commonland's story that reconnection with nature plays a fundamentally integrative role in the foundation's work in that it consolidates and embodies economic, social, and psychological aspirations.

This insight of deep interconnectedness with nature became a guiding light for Willem's whole adult life. He studied biology, specializing in tropical ecology and environmental science first at the Free University and later at the University of Amsterdam and the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá, Colombia. He specialized in tropical ecology, and the

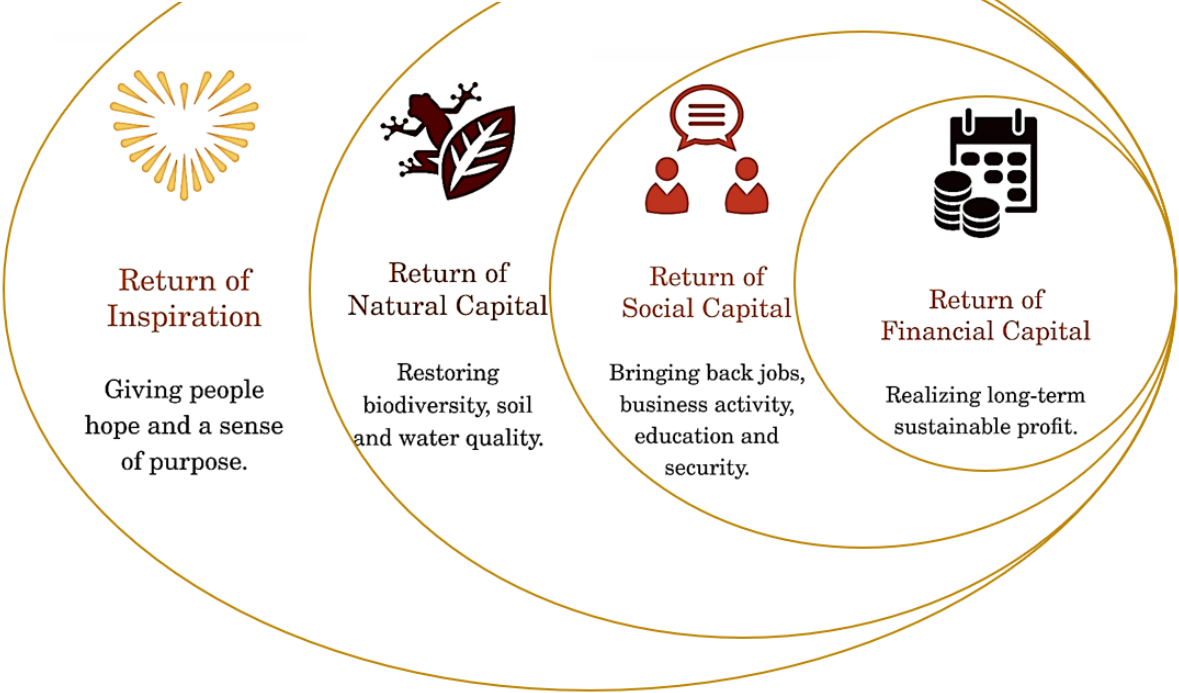
interaction of poor farmers in clearing virgin tropical mountain ecosystems (páramos) and the recuperation of these ecosystems after people left. He worked with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) for 17 years on a multitude of projects around the world, where he learned about the impact through funding 1,500 conservation projects in the tropics and set up a business network on nature (Leaders for Nature) with parties McKinsey and Egon Zehnder. He gained knowledge grounded in the experience of being grounded in social communities and ecological localities. He learned first-hand the importance of integrating different stakeholder perspectives for facilitating nature conservation. For 12 years, from 2000 to 2012, Willem was Executive Director of The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Netherlands and was very successful in helping the Dutch environmental NGO become one of the most important international conservation organizations in The Netherlands. He loved his work but felt deeply the need for an even deeper understanding of ecology among different groups of stakeholders, including farmers, businesspeople, and town dwellers. Knowledge about how nature works and understanding our relationship to nature is essential for making the right decisions. He wanted to create both a practical means and a narrative framework for bringing diverse stakeholders together to restore natural landscapes *and* areas impacted by human activities, such as agricultural lands, local towns, and regional zones. He wanted every stakeholder to be guided by the realization that we are *part* of nature and not *apart* from it and allow that realization to guide our economic and social planning and decision-making.

Willem left his work at IUCN Netherlands in 2012 and took a sabbatical year to speak with farmers, investors, politicians, ecologists, and other stakeholders to understand what motivated them, what stimulated their thinking, and what drove their actions on environmental issues. Willem already knew that economic systems should be about creating and sustaining the real value of our global and local life support systems, but the question was *how to do that*. Ecological conservation and restoration needed to be integrated into the work and thinking of all stakeholders if transformational change were to occur. How we think and work with nature starts with our internal psychology, and this was something that needed to be emphasized in the framework. Willem came to see that, beyond the three often cited capitals - financial, social, and ecological capital - a fourth source of capital was desperately needed, and he knew what that missing fount of value was - inspiration. It is inspiration, hope, and optimism that drive people's planning, investment, and expectations for the future. Why grow food if there is no hope for a harvest? Why invest money, time, or energy if you don't

believe the value will be increased and returned to *all* those who take the risk? Why commit to anything if it is not inspiring?

With these insights in hand, Willem developed the “The 4 Returns” framework (Ferwerda, 2015) that became Commonland’s core investment and motivational vision (Commonland, 2022) and founded Commonland in 2013 with the aim to implement large-scale landscape restoration projects to build a proof of concept of the 4 Returns framework. The 4 Returns were the economic, social, environmental, and inspirational rewards that stakeholders could receive from their long-term pecuniary and non-pecuniary investments. He had his narrative framework and his investment model but what about the practical vehicle to make it all work? The narrative of the 4 Returns was a bold vision, but the boldness needed to be anchored in economic and social realities. Conventional business venturing often aims for financial returns to be built into a business model’s short-term planning with a significant level of return, if not profit, often expected within one or two fiscal quarters. Nature, however, works in much longer timeframes. To create a regenerative return in social and ecological capital, the minimum timeframe would need to be much longer, years and perhaps even decades longer.

## The 4 Returns Framework & The Embedded Model of Integrated Sustainability



## **The Creation of Commonland**

In 2013 Willem connected several players in his organizational network, especially the IUCN Commission on Ecosystem Management, the Rotterdam School of Management, and others, while finally the support of the COMON Foundation led by Wijnand Pon, was instrumental to establish Commonland. Leveraging the knowledge, social network, and shared trust that this supportive network provided, Commonland was able to develop partnerships based on timeframes of twenty years and more. It scaled up existing restoration projects by developing collaborations that would generate very long-term investment returns in sustainable and even regenerative ways.

But there were many obstacles to be overcome in the founding of Commonland. Not only did Willem need to deal with the problem of leaving a secure, rewarding, and prestigious job but he had to face his fear of not being taken seriously by the different stakeholder groups he needed to engage with. He needed villagers, farmers, investors, and companies to trust in and align with his goals, some of which could seem quite radical. And, as with any new venture, there was the problem of finding financial and other needed forms of investment. Extremely patient investors and partners were needed for the 4 Returns to work. Conveying the 4 Returns narrative and communicating it persuasively and powerfully presented a major communication challenge. Another obstacle was finding a strategy to fund Commonland projects that didn't compete with the same financial capital that goes to other NGOs. There were risks in pursuing financial capital to the neglect of the other returns that would distort the core purpose of the organization.

Willem wanted to find the right people to work with and thus establish a multidisciplinary team. An organization like Commonland required people who were independent thinkers and doers from diverse backgrounds who could co-create the leadership of the organization, and these people needed to be fully on board with the organization's vision, mission, and guiding values. Irrespective of their professional suitability, experience and educational qualifications, if he couldn't connect with his staff on the fundamental levels of why a fully regenerative perspective was needed for a restorative project, then it was simply not going to work. Fortunately, the first appointment Willem recruited was business consultant Michiel de Man, who became the Director of Strategy. Michiel was key to founding the strategic direction of

Commonland. Soon after in 2015, soil scientist Simon Moolenaar was brought on to become part of the senior management team.

Willem and other founders of Commonland left long-term, financially secure, and professionally rewarding jobs to start up the Commonland enterprise. But they were willing to take these risks in pursuit of their mission. From an ethical perspective, they were normalizing the risk dimension of regenerative entrepreneurship. At least to some degree, it is a normal part of entrepreneurship to take risks, even career-threatening ones, to follow the right path and expand the degrees of freedom for decision-making (Gentile, 2010). Regeneration is important work, arguably among the most important work of our time. Like other business entrepreneurs, regenerative leaders risk failure in loyally following their dreams. Critically reflecting on what strategies will truly express that loyalty helps prioritize decisions and increases the tolerance for taking risks. After all, there are severe risks in not pursuing regenerative sustainability goals. Doing nothing means following the BAU trajectories that are heightening catastrophic global risks to unacceptable levels of possibility (World Economic Forum, 2023). Taking these risks at the personal level of professional careers and financial security demonstrates something that should cause many more of us to reflect on. We might ask ourselves questions here about the implications of regenerative entrepreneuring for our own work and career aspirations. In what ways does our professional work contribute to regenerative or extractive economy? How might we reframe the risks of doing nothing about the big environmental challenges that we face? In what ways can we exercise “greater degrees of freedom” to contribute to regenerative outcomes in our current work?

#### **The 4 Returns in practice - Altiplano Estepario**

Commonland’s pragmatic focus can be illustrated by one of its main projects in Spain. In 2014, Commonland mobilized farmers, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders in Altiplano Estepario in Southern Spain. This region, which spans a million hectares, has been heavily impacted by generations of poor agricultural practices, land degradation, deforestation, drought and now the added impact of climate change. The region receives less than 80mm of annual rainfall and there is little vegetation to stop runoff from eroding topsoils and washing them into the local streams and eventually into the Mediterranean. Together with their partners, Commonland has embarked on an ambitious initiative to halt desertification and restore sustainably productive drylands using the methods of the 4 Returns Framework. This

framework is based on the landscape model of land restoration but goes well beyond working with soil and land to include economic and community development. The landscape approach works within the defining bioregional limits of the geographical integrity and ecosystem features of a region, for example, a river system, a plateau, or a mountain range. A recent report from the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration state that:

The “landscape approach” seeks to balance competing stakeholder demands in a mosaic of different management approaches, to supply a full range of natural, social and economic returns. (Dudley et al., 2021, p. 4)

The Altiplano plateau was a perfect bioregion for Commonland to work in. Simon explains the choice of this area as follows.

The first and main reason to start a project in this region of Spain was the quality of the people on the ground who could drive the process. They were already active in various entrepreneurial projects, some restoration related. Second, the rain-fed almonds grown in this region presented a strong potential business case. And third, a restoration project in this region offered good possibilities for scalability. (Moolenaar et al., 2023)

They started by creating a vision of the landscape with a group of local farmers, and conservationist entrepreneurs in November 2014 for 2034, 20+ years from the project’s initiation. This period of a minimum of twenty years is a standard “project” planning period for Commonland collaborations. A minimum of twenty years provides enough time for ecological and economic restoration. This long period also signals to stakeholders, who are often farmers, farming families and local regional businesses, that Commonland knows the realities of landscape restoration and that it is a partner that can be trusted over the long-term. Twenty years of committed collaboration provides a realistic timeframe to people who know the land and want to see the benefits of that transformation for their children and the next generation of farmers.





*Regenerative farmer Alfonso, leading the Regeneration Academy at La Junguera, Spain.*

Commonland activities and processes have helped the farmers of the Altiplano Estepario region to establish regenerative farming practices, including making swales (a sunken, shady marsh or swampy area), low-density rotational grazing, planting multiple complementary crops, creating windbreaks, and supporting ecological corridors and conservation. These practices retain soil and water in the landscape and enhance biodiversity. They also create markets for the organic produce from these farms ensuring that farmers receive higher prices. This creates opportunities for these farmers to continue investing in their farms and to witness the long-term impact of regenerative agriculture<sup>1</sup>. The main idea to note is the inspirational vision, which helps local people imagine a thriving future in their lands instead of seeing a dystopic vision of desertified lands that can't sustain them with either produce or livelihoods. This is of course the return of inspiration, which then leads the way for the other returns such as the creation of jobs, thriving people and communities, flourishing natures, and sustainable income.

### **Working with obstacles through “connection and love”**

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<sup>1</sup> There are many details available on the internet on the Altiplano Estepario project and free online courses are available on regenerative farming and Commonland projects. For more information see: The 4 Returns website and Rotterdam School of Management – Commonland Case Study - <https://www.rsm.nl/cdc/multimedia-cases/commonland/>

As an entrepreneur, Willem needs to regularly overcome obstacles to Commonland’s development and impact. As a *regenerative* entrepreneur, he needs to work with even more challenging barriers to achieving the organization’s mission. The first step for Willem in undertaking all this is to reframe these hindrances as everyday events that offer opportunities for moving forward. Willem regards the big and small challenges he faces every day not only as building resilience but also as enabling opportunities for deep growth and expressing core values. He says that “Values are everywhere” and that, ultimately, “most people share the values he expresses ... wherever they are from and political standpoint”. Two of the foundational values for Willem are “connection and love” where “love is caring about yourself and others”. The allied goals of equality and unity for all of humanity are guiding principles for Willem and this applied not only to the domain of values but to knowledge. He sees local and traditional knowledge and experience about the land as just as valuable as the best scientific knowledge. Ultimately, all this knowledge comes from nature, and it guides and nurtures us.

“We all come from nature and are a part of nature - unity and holism - empathy for nature - if I am nature, then nurturing nature outside me nurtures me and moves me towards ego-transcendence”.



This sense of unity with nature is a key source of the fourth and most important of the 4 Returns framework that Commonland works with – inspiration. Inspiration was chosen by Willem as a neutral term to convey a sense of spirituality, positive potential and reconnection that can speak to “multiple stakeholders”.

In placing inspiration, connection, and love at the centre of the Commonland organizational values, Willem is flipping the typical model of how leaders and managers respond to the many challenges and demands facing contemporary businesses.

Figure 3.1 depicts this distinction between a defensive and a regenerative response to business environment pressures. From the perspective of the defensive business, internal and external sources of tension and demands create increasing levels and multiplying points of pressure that organizational leaders must react to in some way. Community interest group demands, regulatory requirements, competitive pressures, and standards compliance are loaded on top of the conventional business pressures of making profits. The result of this in many businesses is that managers feel themselves under immense pressure to do things they see as peripheral to their core business function of generating revenue. A fragmented response results that refocusing on financial priorities while simultaneously ‘managing’ non-pecuniary responsibilities and expectations. This fragmented response to business environment pressures can push many organizational decision-makers into ‘hunkering down’ and trade-off mentalities that focus on the business case while minimizing the “competing logic” of environmental and social demands. In contrast, a values-based, regenerative response reframes these demands and pressures as opportunities for expressing core values. Commonland exemplifies this regenerative response, in that multiple pressures are taken as opportunities for the voicing of values and the alignment of economic and social-ecological goals, strategies and performance (See Figure 3.1).

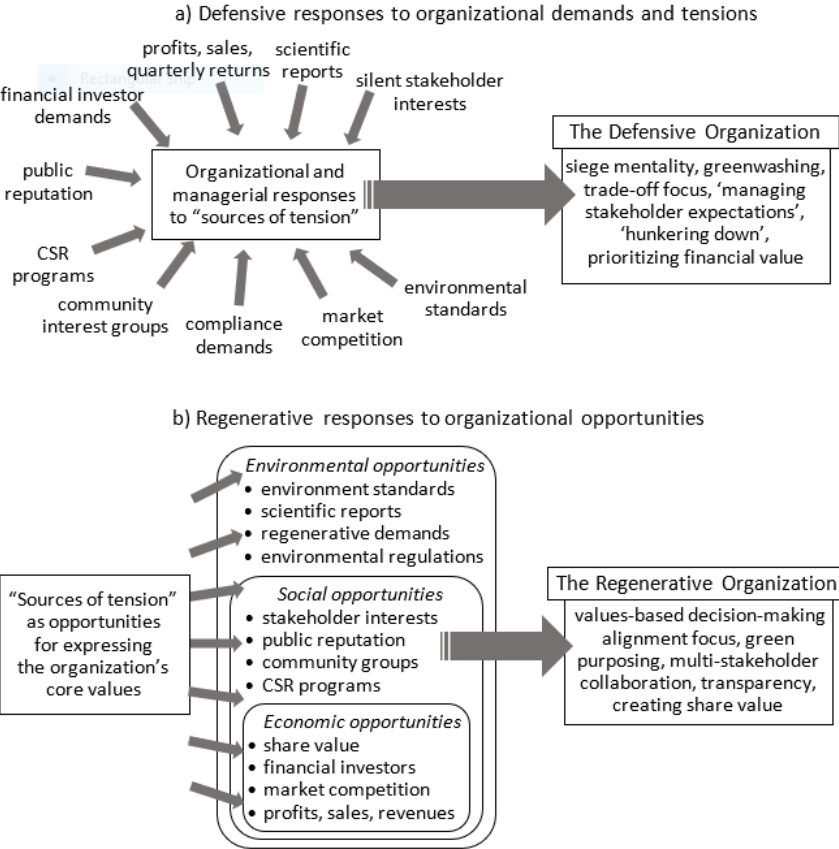


Figure 1: Defensive and regenerative responses to organizational demands

### *Normalizing regenerative investment*

Commonland creates successful long-term projects by collaborating with partners who want to invest their money, time, passion, and labor in restoring and regenerating a region or landscape. Such collaborations do not come without struggle. It is extremely difficult to shift practices from the prevailing short-termism that dominates the agri-business sector and re-anchor new investments into a 20+-year investment perspective. This re-anchoring requires paradigmatic change that does not conform to the conventional assumptions of market capitalism. Willem and his Commonland colleagues quickly realized that it was essential that their partners share their long-term perspective and commitment to the 4 Returns Framework.

This need for vision and values partnering came to a head during the early development of Commonland when Willem was having crucial conversations with investors. A series of conversations were being held with a group of potential investors who were struggling with the idea of a 20+-year minimum investment timeframe. They said that expecting investors to tolerate such a long wait for a return on their investment was a fantasy. Willem responded that it was the investors who were living in a dreamland if they thought ecological restoration and financial returns could come from any shorter investment horizon. He was aiming to normalize the long-term expectation for returns anchored in the conventional physical reality of how ecologies grow and flourish. Willem wanted to contrast the norm of patient capital with the abnormal and unreal norms of current investment expectations and the accompanying long-term risks of thinking in the short- to medium-term. This reframing showed that Willem and his Commonland partners were pragmatic realists while the short-termism of the conventional investment cycle was opportunistic.

The topic of investment is an area that frequently raises ethical dilemmas in the early life of an enterprise. Commonland needs funding to sustain its projects while they work towards financial independence via the revenues derived from revived landscapes. However, the organization is also careful not to dilute its mission by partnering with investors who do not share their regenerative vision and core values. In 2018, Willem was approached by a large corporation with a very substantial investment offer. The corporation was interested in collaborating with Commonland and in the process gain recognition for its sustainability strategy. This was a struggle for Willem. On the one hand, a sizeable investment could do a

great deal of positive impact on the landscapes, but on the other hand, it risked distorting the core values of Commonland and diluting its brand to the other stakeholders. The core operations of the would-be investor were not commensurate with regenerative goals. There was a real danger that the investment was a greenwashing exercise. Realizing that these types of misalignments were a part of being a transformative agent and having made decisions before where values trumped finances, Willem and his team decided to not accept the investment offer.

These kinds of conversations and decisions helped the investment community and other market players to understand Commonland's long-term investment cycle, its regenerative perspective, and the purpose of the 4 Returns framework. Reframing what was taken to be the norm on investment returns did not magically remove the barriers that Willem often encountered when engaging with stakeholders. These examples highlight how both Willem and Simon gain practice in having important conversations with key stakeholders, where enabling arguments could be tailored to the most common rationalizations. Willem thinks about who he needs to talk to, how he might relate to their own lived experiences, and the arguments he needs to present that will persuasively present his vision of optimizing economic, social, ecological, and inspirational returns. One strategy he uses for certain audiences is to try to "open the indigenous perspective within each individual", that is, to speak to the values that resonate with homeland, belongingness to country and to the territory in which we have grown up. If this resonates, then, Willem says, "You can have conversations from a whole different place".

### *Challenging false dichotomies*

Willem and Commonland are both aware of the need to defuse apparent tensions and challenge false dichotomies, that is, the framing of choice into two equally unpleasant alternatives. Why not earn a financial return *and* have a long-term investment horizon at the same time? What if these are not in opposition, but rather in a rare symbiosis? Investments in regenerative projects can be argued to bring financial security in the long-term while ensuring that the investment base for the three other returns is enhanced rather than depleted. Repeatedly engaging in these kinds of interactions with the market and its many players, Commonland is gradually gaining attention as an organization that normalizes the radical, challenges financial assumptions, and provides evidence for questioning the standard

practices of investors. Reframing investment norms means that Willem and Commonland can enter honest and fruitful dialogues with the right kinds of investors. They can talk about the goals and priorities that matter to them rather than spending valuable time trying to persuade the wrong kinds of investors to come on board. This direct approach reinforces their sense of purpose and the strength of their values base. It also saves them from wasting time engaging with people and organizations that aren't ready to take long-term committed action.

### *Normalizing regenerative education*

As well as working with stakeholders in their own long-term partnership, Commonland also communicate and educate public institutions, industry actors, and community members on the methods and impacts of the 4 Returns Framework. An example of this is the 4 Returns Platform, Commonland's education and resource-sharing platform. Spearheaded by Simon, the 4 Returns Academy and other educational initiatives disseminate insights and findings from their projects, supporting stakeholders to share experiences, impact data and rich personal stories. Commonland and its partnering organizations monitor and evaluate what works in the landscapes they work with. The knowledge they build together is utilized for mutual exchange and shared learning. Combining these insights from practice with academic concepts and engaging with transdisciplinary approaches they effectively scale their impact, normalizing the outlandish into something merely innovative.

The digital arena of the 4 Returns Community is building a joint body of knowledge and distributing it freely so that an insight generated in one landscape can be implemented swiftly in multiple similar locations or communicated to pique the interest of the public. In this sense, Commonland is practising a regenerative and "co-evolutionary" form of sustainability that Landrum describes as "developing a mutually enhancing and beneficial relationship of balance, harmony, and synergy as an equal and contributing part of nature" (Landrum, 2018, p. 302). In the words of Commonland's mission: 'making the 4 returns the new norm'.

## **Insights**

### *Embedded priorities*

Something that becomes very apparent when examining the work of Commonland is how they subordinate the socio-economic and inspirational returns to the realities and overarching laws of nature. While operating in a way that respects the needs of financial capital, they do not allow it to set the agenda for others. But it is also the case that regenerative entrepreneurship is not a philanthropic enterprise. It's a novel form of entrepreneurship that embeds financial returns within social returns while social returns are embedded in a natural environment that generates hope or inspiration for the future. This resonates with the embedded model of sustainability put forward by Kurucz, Colbert, and Marcus (2014), Griggs et al. (2013) and Edwards (2021).

### *Organizational Voice*

While Giving Voice to Values is most often applied to the individual and how they address ethical dilemmas, what Commonland shows us is that it can be just as applicable to the organizational level. Commonland was built upon the values of Willem and his partners, but in the process of maintaining and developing the organization, Commonland itself has become a vehicle for voicing values. For better or worse, organizations are something other than the individuals, technologies and spatial domains that constitute them. That something extra is created and reproduced in the communications, structures, cultures and values that go beyond any aggregate of individual persons. Commonland, as an organization, is expressing its core values in its mission and operations and in so doing is incrementally increasing the opportunity for other organizations to express their regenerative ideals.

### *Inspirational Returns*

Commonland uses the language of risk and returns to align the interests of different stakeholders. Of course, with entrepreneurial ventures comes a natural dimension of risk, not least when venturing into the uncharted territory of twenty-year investment periods. What seems to enable entrepreneurs like Willem and Simon to pursue others to commit, to envision and to make brave choices for the sake of regenerating socio-ecological systems is the inspiration they receive from being involved in this work. The inspirational returns lie at the heart of their enterprise. Inspirational returns are what energize the Commonland team and it's what captures the curiosity and passions of their partners.

## *Normalizing the Exceptional*

Commonland's purpose is to regenerate large social-ecological landscapes (above 100,000 hectares) and, more than this, to inspire other organizations, governments, financial institutions and entrepreneurs to move into this opportunity. This is not a standard issue for organizational purpose, but, given the increasingly degraded state of the global biosphere, it is one that should be. With organizations such as Commonland building bridges between the exceptional and the normal, more people will find their way into this type of work and regenerative efforts will themselves become normalized within society. The earlier this social tipping point occurs (Otto et al., 2020), the greater the chances to become a sustainable society within a "safe and just operating space for humanity" (Raworth, 2017). Providing inspiration through the creation of flourishing human and ecological regions should be the default position of our economic systems and the organizations that constitute them.

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