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LOCATIONS

USA

225 Wyman Street,
Waltham, MA 02451
Please direct telephone enquiries to
our UK office +44 (0) 20 7611 1200

UK

110 High Holborn,
London, WC1V 6EU
Tel +44 (0) 20 7611 1200
Fax +44 (0) 20 7611 1250

Australia

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CONTACTS

Contact us

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Who's who

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General & media enquiries

enquiries@newscientist.com

Editorial

Tel 781 734 8770
news@newscientist.com
features@newscientist.com
opinion@newscientist.com

Picture desk

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Display advertising

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Syndication

Tribune Content Agency
Tel 800 637 4082

© 2015 Reed Business
Information Ltd, England.

New Scientist ISSN 0262 4079 is
published weekly except for the last
week in December by Reed Business
Information Ltd, England.

New Scientist (Online) ISSN 2059 5387
New Scientist at Reed Business
Information, c/o Schnell Publishing Co.
Inc., 225 Wyman Street, Waltham,
MA 02451.

Periodicals postage paid at
Boston, MA and other mailing offices.
Postmaster: Send address changes
to New Scientist, PO Box 3806,
Chesterfield, MO 63006-9953, USA.
Registered at the Post Office as a
newspaper and printed in USA by Fry
Communications Inc, Mechanicsburg,
PA 17055



IGNACIO YUFERRA/FLPA/IMMIDEN

Out of the wilderness

Ecology and economics have been separated for too long

OIKOS. The Greek word for home is the root of both “ecology” and “economics”. But the two subjects parted ways long ago, and for much of the 20th century their students paid little heed to each other. In the 21st, however, it is obvious that they are inextricably linked. Ecological economics is now securely on the curriculum at universities around the world.

Conservationists have learned that support is easier to garner when fuzzy sentiments are backed up with hard numbers: talking up the value of “natural capital” and “ecosystem services” has proved effective in areas such as forestry and flood protection.

But ecological economics is still more of an academic pursuit than

a practical one. Attention has recently turned to “rewilding” – returning formerly native flora and fauna to their prior range. The idea is popular, particularly among urbanites who thrill to the idea of a wilder countryside.

Those who actually work there are often less enamoured. Big predators such as the wolf, bear and lynx are not welcome: farmers across Europe fear for their flocks and herds. And even the return of herbivores such as the beaver is resisted, some arguing that it will harm rural livelihoods (see page 10).

How to strike a balance? The emotional argument revolves around competing ideas of what is “natural”. That is a question of

timescale: many countryside icons are alien if you go back far enough, from rabbits and fluffy white sheep to the grassy hills they graze on. And their presence often depends on subsidies.

The economic argument centres on the costs of dead livestock and unproductive land. Those are fair concerns, but the other side of the cost-benefit equation is often missing. For example, predators keep down deer and fox numbers; and beavers can protect farmland and boost fisheries.

We have a duty to fix battered ecosystems. But if we are to make progress, we must consider ecology and economics as two sides of the same coin. After all, we need both to make a home. ■

Bouncing forward

MORE than a fortnight after a bomb brought down a jet over Sharm el-Sheikh, there are still holidaymakers waiting to be evacuated. The problem is not the supply of planes, it's the stricken airport's ability to deal with them.

Resilience is high on the agenda for planners everywhere: our complex societies are vulnerable to cascading failures. The effects can be similar whatever the cause.

Borders may be left impassable by a pandemic (as when Ebola struck Africa), terrorism (as in France last week) or disaster (volcanic ash across Europe in 2010). There may be similar responses, too.

Resilience is often taken to mean “bouncing back”. That is, of course, fervently to be hoped for when it comes to individuals who endure such atrocities as the Paris attacks (page 6).

But when it comes to essential infrastructure, bouncing back is not enough. At a recent resilience event, the talk was of “bouncing forward” – not just rebuilding the status quo, but future-proofing at the same time. For example, we might formalise the *ad hoc* use of social media to offer succour.

That's the spirit in which we should pick ourselves up after whatever setback comes our way. Because sadly, the many threats to our societies are not going away any time soon. ■