



Refugio Tinti, a conservation project in southern Costa Rica aiming to transform a contaminated swamp to a biodiverse wildlife sanctuary.

Clara Rowe '07 is Building a Greener Future

GRAY MATTERS

STORY BY PRUDENCE BAIRD P'10

PHOTO BY SIMEON MAX

QUICK!

What color comes to mind when you hear the words ecosystem restoration, sustainability, and biodiversity?

Green, right?

Don't be surprised if, by the end of this piece, your mind turns to that emblematic color of nuance, gray.



Above: Clara Rowe at work with Restor. Below: Members of Humans for Abundance getting involved in restoration projects. PHOTO BY FIDEL CHIRIBOGA



According to Clara Rowe '07, CEO of Restor (restor.eco), a mapping and open data platform that supports, promotes, and connects a multitude of environmental causes ranging from small agroforestry initiatives in Latin America to urban wetland rehabilitation in South Africa to koala habitat reforestation in Australia, "It's in the gray zones that the work gets done."

Clara says this at the end of a long, spirited interview that covered a lot of territory—beginning with her journey from a log cabin at the base of New Hampshire's White Mountains to the picturesque city of Zurich, Switzerland, where Restor is headquartered and she now lives.

With career stops along the way in Costa Rica, Cameroon, Mexico, and a master's degree from Yale, Clara has the bona fides and dirt under her nails from years of advocacy, diplomacy, and on-the-ground know-how to grasp what Mother Earth is up against—a worldwide economy built on extractive industries and now on the verge of a sustainability tipping point.

Through her work at Restor, Clara hopes that the technology and user community her organization offers will speed up the delivery of accessible solutions and tools, while bringing much-needed attention and funding to ecosystem restoration for the benefit of people, biodiversity, and climate.

"We can fundamentally transform the way humans value nature by showing people what environmental projects are happening and where," says Clara. "You can imagine Restor as a Google Maps for nature. We offer users a global platform to showcase their projects and share information and techniques. We also connect the people doing the hard work on the ground with one another: scientists, funders, and the broader movement to restore and sustain Earth's ecosystems. You can't go anywhere else to find this many projects in one place."

To say that Clara's current position as a 34-year-old CEO of a nonprofit startup that melds technology with the environment comes to her naturally is an understatement. Her remarkable career began in one of the most iconic natural settings on earth, a forest.

WHERE DID YOU PICK UP YOUR LOVE OF FORESTS? I was born in a small log cabin in New Hampshire. We ran a hose in for water in the summer and hauled water in the winter. Living so close to nature, I had a very special young childhood. I witnessed and participated in our big garden and stacking wood, and I fell in love with the forests surrounding our home.

I UNDERSTAND THERE WAS A DETOUR THAT TOOK YOUR FAMILY OUT OF NEW ENGLAND FOR A WHILE. We moved to Monteverde, a small town in the mountains of Costa Rica, when I was three. My mom was director at a Quaker school and my dad ran a non-profit focused on sustainable development. It was easy to grow to love the forests of Costa Rica and see how their protection is intertwined with both stewardship and the economic opportunities and choices around sustainable development. It's a huge privilege to grow up in two cultures and with two languages and it fundamentally shaped how I interact with the world. We returned to New Hampshire in 2005.

YOUR PARENTS HAVE A PUTNEY CONNECTION, RIGHT? My dad, Nat Scrimshaw '76 met my mom at Putney when he returned there after college to coach soccer. My mom, Jenny Rowe, was the German teacher at the time. You may notice that I have my mother's last name and my brother, Ben Scrimshaw '09 has my father's last name—it's unconventional and something that I love! Putney and the lore surrounding it were always in our home, so it felt very natural that I ended up there.

Putney was an incredibly fun part of my life. Highlights include 3AM barn work terms; apple pie in White Cottage with advisor-extraordinaire Margie Levine, who was a parent away from home for many of us; ecology with Hans Estrin '85 (Hans, I still remember a lot about Vermont tree species and soil!), poetry classes with Harry Bauld, and visiting UMass Lowell's bat lab to study the physics of baseball with Paul Fomalont.

WHERE DID YOU GO AFTER GRADUATION FROM PUTNEY? I studied biology and environmental studies at Amherst College, including a spectacular study abroad experience in the national parks of South Africa with the Organization for Tropical Studies. After Amherst I worked in fishery management for the Environmental Defense Fund in Mexico, environmental education back in Costa Rica, and youth development in Cameroon.

I returned to school for a master's degree from the Yale School for the Environment (formerly the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies), which

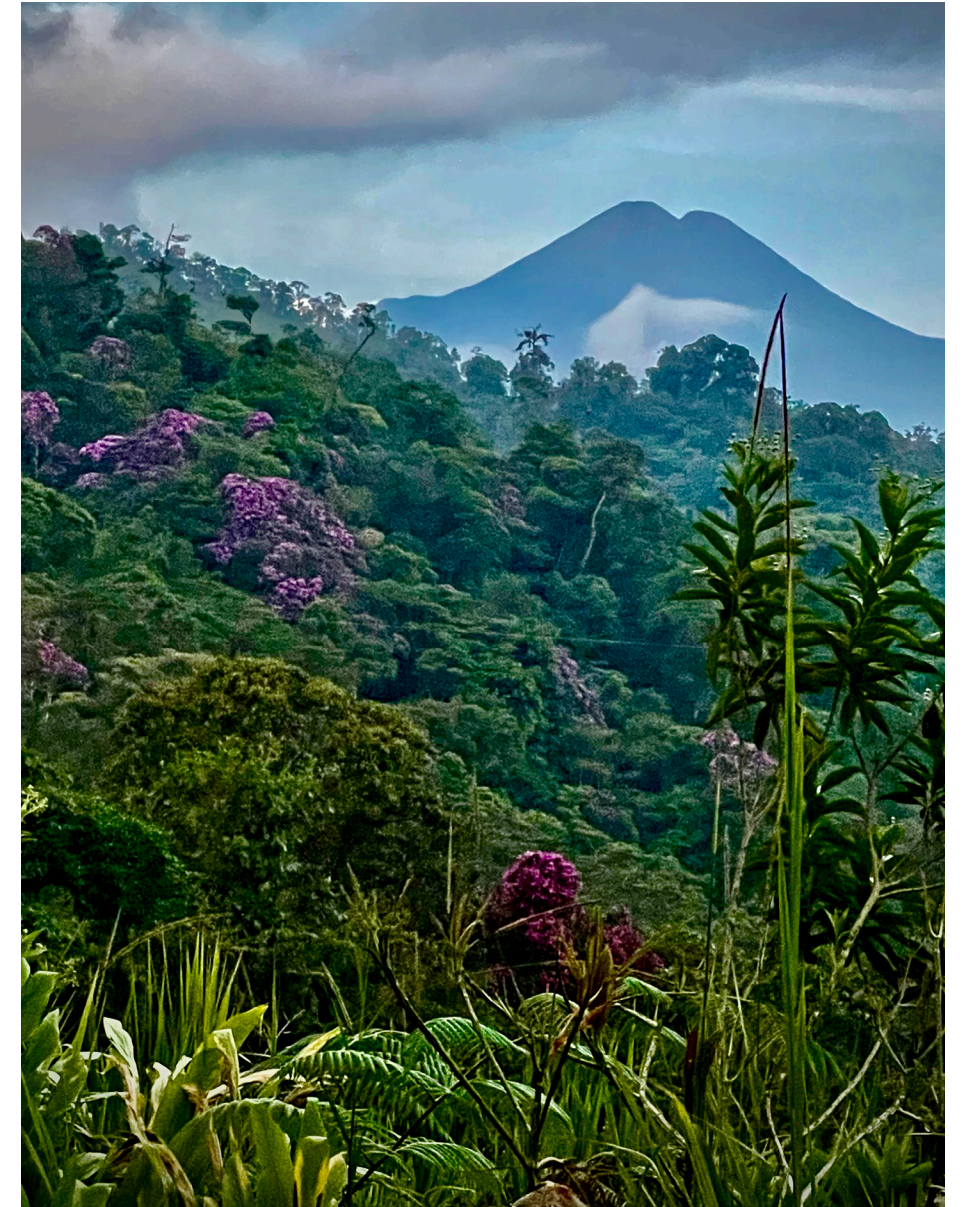
was an amazing community of doers and thinkers. It also ended up leading me to Restor—classmate Tom Crowther eventually founded Restor and recruited me years later.

NEXT? After Yale, I joined The Forest Trust, now Earthworm Foundation, where we worked with big corporations to address deforestation and human rights abuse in their supply chains. This involved tracing ingredients like palm oil and soy and cocoa back to their origin and working with suppliers large and small to change production practices on the ground. I led our work in Mexico and Central America, so I had the opportunity to work with traders, plantation owners, and small farmers across the region. When you're working through supply chains, there is always a carrot and stick balancing act: buyers can offer premiums when good practices are met or they can pull contracts if they are not. I came to learn there's also a more subtle piece of the equation: meeting people where they are and guiding them through change without judgment.

WHO ARE YOUR ROLE MODELS AND HEROES? I grew up in a family and community that brought me into the natural world, taught me to engage with curiosity, and quietly believed in and elevated me. And I've been lucky to find mentorship and support in many places since then from former colleagues. I also greatly admire Christiana Figueres, key negotiator of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. One of the highlights of working at Restor was getting to meet her. And there are other heroes who I will never meet—brave environmental warriors who, like Honduran Berta Cáceres, were killed for their work.

WHAT ARE SOME LESSONS YOU'VE LEARNED ALONG THE WAY? Making change is about an entire ecosystem of actors, often working in different ways, sometimes in competition or in opposition to each other. We need to honor them all—from the activists to the mediators to the policy makers.

There's an increasing tendency in our world to see in black and white, right or wrong. I think embracing the complexity is incredibly valuable. When I find myself drawn into either/or thinking, I try to shift into a place of "Yes, and..." YES, we need to transform the political and economic systems that have created the interlinked climate, biodiversity, and inequality crises. AND transformation can happen in myriad ways—with patient, incremental engagement from the inside and revolutionary action from the outside. There's definitely time for black/white thinking, but many solutions are found in the gray. And the gray zone requires compassion.



I think it's also important to remember that we can all be a part of the ecosystem of change. It feels simplistic, but individual choice does impact larger systems: what we consume, how and how often we travel, and how we engage with the companies and governments that hold so much power over our future.

WHAT PARTICULAR CHALLENGES HAVE YOU FACED AS A YOUNG WOMAN IN THE "BUSINESS" OF SUSTAINABILITY AND RESTORATION? There are a lot of women in the environmental field, but we're underrepresented in leadership, environmental technology, sustainable agriculture, and more. This can make our work lonely. I've had many imposter syndrome moments, wondering Why am I here? Do I deserve to be? Am I being taken seriously? I've had to learn to trust myself. ■

Learn more about Restor:

