



Ecosia

Steward-ownership ensures that profits are used to fight deforestation

In a nutshell

Christian Kroll founded Ecosia in 2009 after a trip around the world exposed him to the environmental and social impact of deforestation. An alternative search engine, Ecosia uses the profits it generates from search queries to plant trees in areas most impacted by deforestation. Unlike Google and other dominant search engines, Ecosia is privacy-friendly, meaning it never sells data to advertisers, has no third-party trackers, and anonymizes all searches a week after they're conducted. Ecosia is also contributing to European digital sovereignty by creating new and more diversified search indexes to build fairer and more democratic tech. What's more, all its servers run on 100 percent renewable solar energy, and each search removes 1kg of CO₂ from the atmosphere. Since 2009 Ecosia has successfully planted more than 200 million trees across 35 countries. It has 80 million regular users and a team of 120 employees. Ecosia is steward-owned, meaning its mission-orientation is safeguarded in the long-term.



FOUNDED: 2009



BERLIN, GERMANY



**SALES: €35.3 MILLION
(2023)**



**120 EMPLOYEES
(2024)**

STEWARD-OWNED SINCE: 2018

STEWARD-OWNERSHIP MODEL:
Veto-share

Environmentalism with a business mindset

Environmental activism and advocacy have typically been the work of non-profits. These organizations depend on charitable donations to fund their projects and operations; as a result, they often spend a significant portion of their manpower maintaining relationships with donors and raising funds. These institutions are commonly restricted by their charitable tax status in how they define their mission, use donations, and generate revenue.

Although non-profits are an effective solution for some leaders and organizations, Christian wanted to bring a business mindset to environmentalism. He structured Ecosia as a for-profit social enterprise, which has given him and his team the entrepreneurial freedom to experiment, invest in the product, and iterate on business solutions.

Challenge: mission protection

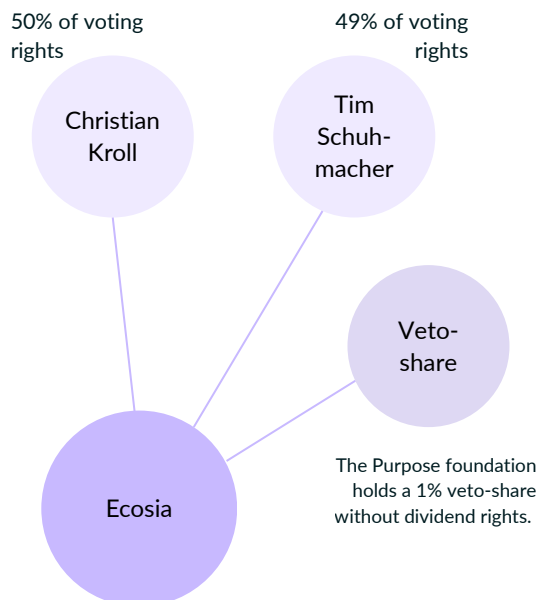
After nearly a decade of significant growth, Christian and co-owner Tim Schumacher started to wonder: What would become of Ecosia if something catastrophic happened to one of us? How do we ensure that the company, which would theoretically be worth millions of dollars on the market, is never sold? How do we protect its mission and independence for the long-term? The team considered several alternative ownership solutions to address these questions, including converting the business to a German non-profit or establishing a foundation.

Both of these solutions had constraints, though: A non-profit, for example, would have restricted the team's ability to dictate strategy on how best to use profits to fulfill the company's mission. What's more, a nonprofit could theoretically be converted back into a for-profit and sold. A foundation would have been a more secure long-term ownership solution, but foundations are expensive to establish and operate, and could have limited Ecosia's entrepreneurial freedom.

Solution: Veto-share

Ecosia needed an alternative, a solution that would provide the security of a foundation without the cost and overhead. With the support of the Purpose Foundation, Christian and Tim transitioned Ecosia to steward-ownership in 2018. By protecting its independence, Ecosia's veto-share model ensures that the company's profits will be used to combat deforestation for generations to come. No one in or outside the company holds economic rights to Ecosia. The company will never be sold, and control of it will always remain with people directly involved in its mission and operations.

Ecosia's ownership structure



The veto-share 'hack'

Using a 'legal hack', the veto-share (or golden-share) model builds on the structure of foundation-ownership by setting up different classes of shares to separate economic rights and voting rights in the articles of association of a normal GmbH - limited liability company.

The principles of steward-ownership (purpose-orientation and self-determination) are written into the statutes of the company and can only be changed with 100% of the voting rights. A guardian entity holding a minor percentage of the voting rights as a veto-share safeguards the principles of steward-ownership in the long run.

Steward-shares are currently held by Christian and Tim, who hold 50 and 49 percent respectively. These shares represent voting rights, but not dividend rights. In the event that Christian or Tim leaves the company, their steward-shares must be passed on to new team members. In that event, a five-person succession committee would select new steward(s) for the business.

Veto-share

One share was issued to the Purpose Foundation. The veto-share holder is responsible for vetoing any attempted sale of the company, along with any changes to the structure of Ecosia's charter that would undermine its steward-ownership structure. The veto-share holder does not have any further rights, and cannot weigh in on the company's operations. In its charter, the Purpose Foundation is obliged to use its veto to help Ecosia to stay independent and mission-driven.



Long-term mission protection with entrepreneurial freedom

This structure protects Ecosia's environmental mission and also gives Christian, Tim, and their team the entrepreneurial freedom to strategically determine how to best meet their goals of nature restoration and protection. That could mean, for example, reinvesting profits in product development, or expanding their team in the short term to scale their environmental impact in the long term.

It also gives Ecosia the freedom to develop its environmental strategy, from planting trees to advocacy work and beyond. In 2024, Ecosia planted over 18 million trees, developed a Global Biodiversity Standard with leading experts and produced double the renewable energy needed to power all Ecosia searches. That means that Ecosia searches also actively contribute to pushing fossil fuels out of the energy grid. Beyond that, Ecosia also collaborates with different advocacy and non-profit environmental organisations like Greenpeace to raise awareness on environmental destruction and how to improve our systems.



Ecosia is rapidly becoming one of the biggest environmental movements in the world. We believe that a movement should not be owned by a single person and therefore steward-ownership is the perfect solution for us. Our new ownership model protects our mission but also provides entrepreneurial freedom.

– Christian Kroll



Deep dive – Digital monopolies and an unusual offer

Ecosia is a prime example of the diversity of steward-owned enterprises and especially showcases the relevance of alternative business models and ownership structures in the digital world. The recent events in August 2025 around the Chrome browser exemplify this: Authorities are stepping up their review of Google's near monopoly in online search. Regulators are considering remedies, including separating Chrome from its core business. And while no decision has been made, major players like OpenAI or Perplexity have already expressed their interest in acquiring the browser. They are offering sums up to 3.45 billion dollars.³⁹ But what if Google could still earn around 400 billion dollars and yet it would be more beneficial for society and nature?

Here comes Ecosia, which has stepped in with a very different idea. Instead of a sale, it sent a proposal to the responsible judges as well as to Google, suggesting setting up a foundation-ownership model where Ecosia would take on stewardship for Chrome for the upcoming 10 years.

So effectively, Chrome would be held by a foundation managed by Ecosia. The current Chrome team would stay on board to continue developing Chrome, Google would retain intellectual property of Chrome and receive 40 % of net revenues. The remaining 60 % would be controlled by Ecosia to be used for climate projects. After 10 years, a new steward could be chosen. Jobs would stay, Google would still benefit, but – society would benefit too: monopoly profits repurposed for the public good, not just for private shareholders.

"For once, we don't have to imagine utopia. The math is here, the opportunity is real, and the only barrier is political will." Ecosia states in their blog.³⁹ Ecosia estimates Chrome's net profits over the next 10 years to be around 1 trillion dollars. Already 60% of this would mean some of the biggest investments into climate protection to date. Ecosia's team already worked out a proposal on how to invest the \$60 billion annually, from rainforest protection to establishing biodiversity corridors.

As Ecosia's founder and CEO, Christian Kroll, puts it in an interview with German newspaper ZEIT: a sale just moves Chrome "from one Big Tech company to the next" without changing the fundamental problem of power concentration. With their stewardship proposal, Ecosia, as a frontrunner of independent, user- and data-friendly digital infrastructure, reminds us that the future of digital infrastructure doesn't have to be linear or uniform. And particularly, it shows regulators and tech companies that other alternatives exist.

There are other pathways – successful models where technology can be governed in service of the public, not just shareholders. And these alternatives, like steward-ownership and similar models, are being proposed, tried, and lived today.



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We don't pay out dividends and cannot be bought. That way, we're able to use 100% of our profits for the planet.

– Ecosia

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