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Reimagining conservation: Toward a flourishing future



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reimagine
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Advancing Indigenous and community leadership of conservation requires confronting barriers to change

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Introduction

The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KM-GBF), adopted under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), presents opportunities, responsibilities, and risks for recognition of the rights and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and of local communities in conservation.¹ This is reflected in Target 3² on area-based conservation, in Section C (considerations for implementation) and the framework as a whole.

This article reflects on barriers to advancing Indigenous- and community-led conservation, and actions to address those barriers. While considering conservation initiatives broadly, we focus on governance of protected and conserved areas (PCAs).³ The article draws primarily on discussions and outputs from recent workshops, including the [Nanyuki Roadmap](#).⁴ It was developed by members of the IUCN CEESP/WCPA task force on Advancing Indigenous and Community-led Governance of Protected and Conserved Areas.

Indigenous and community leadership is crucial for conservation

Protected and conserved areas can be governed by governments, private actors, non-governmental organisations, Indigenous Peoples, or local communities; governance can

1 A note on terminology - In this paper, the terms Indigenous Peoples and local communities are both used, at times in a linked way. This use follows understandings from the CBD and international human rights law. Local communities are, thus, understood here as collective groups of individuals who have a stewardship relationship with their lands and resources, and who have developed and sustained traditional or collective ecological knowledge that they use in this stewardship. It is not used to refer to all local communities, and its applicability to any given community must be understood in context. As noted in the [IPBES glossary](#) “The term is not intended to ignore differences and diversity within and among Indigenous Peoples and between them and local communities; Indigenous Peoples have recognized and distinct rights, which are not extendable to the broader and encompassing concept of local communities”. See also HRBWG, 2024:16

2 Target 3 reads: “Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas... are effectively conserved and managed through...**equitably governed** systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, **recognizing indigenous and traditional territories where applicable**, and, **recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories.**”

3 According to the IUCN, protected areas are formally designated areas with a primary focus on conservation. ‘Conserved areas’ is a broader term referring to areas where effective conservation is happening in practice, whether or not conservation is an objective.

4 The article draws on discussions at two workshops of the IUCN Task Force Advancing Indigenous and Community-led Governance of PCAs, in June 2023 in Cambridge, UK and in March 2025 in Limuru, Kenya; as well as the discussions at the [Nanyuki workshop on Advancing Rights and Equity in the Implementation of Target 3+](#).

also be shared between them (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013; SCBD, 2018).⁵ Appropriate recognition and support for these diverse governance ‘types’ – including governance by and with Indigenous Peoples or local communities – has a profound impact on conservation equity and effectiveness. There is clear and growing evidence of the expansive coverage of, and conservation effectiveness in, territories and areas governed by Indigenous Peoples and by local communities (e.g. Dawson et al., 2023, 2024; Fa et al., 2020; ICCA Consortium, 2021). For example, a recent study of deforestation rates in 19 Indigenous territories in Southwestern Amazonia found that, while not immune to deforestation, all of the studied territories had avoided significant deforestation. “Their effectiveness (...) is largely associated with distinct land-based governance, resilient leadership, as well as temporal perspectives and socio-bioeconomies inclusive to more-than-human beings.” (Virtanen et. al., 2025). At the same time, many Indigenous Peoples and local communities face sustained threats, including to their lands and territories, arising in part from lack of rights recognition and security (ICCA Consortium, 2021). Indigenous and community rights and leadership in conservation are thus crucial for equitably and effectively achieving global targets (e.g. Loring & Moola, 2020; ICCA Consortium, 2021).

Implementation gap

The need for appropriate recognition and support for Indigenous- and community-led governance has been acknowledged by conservation organizations and agencies for decades (e.g. in the 2003 [Durban Accord](#)). However, control over decisions about area-based conservation remains extremely concentrated in the hands of government and – to a lesser extent – private actors and NGOs.⁶ Despite increasing international, national, and local progress, implementation lags behind conservation’s increasingly socially inclusive principles. While some national systems now recognize protected areas (PAs) under shared and community-based conservation arrangements, these remain limited and, as explored below, do not necessarily involve substantive shifts in leadership/governance roles.

What do we mean by Indigenous- and community-led governance?

Ultimately, the question above must be answered in context and by the Indigenous Peoples and the local communities concerned. Here, we explore some key considerations in relation to decision-making power and relationships in conservation governance.

Across the governance types mentioned above, PCA governance (including leadership) is largely a matter of who holds decision-making power. In practice, Indigenous Peoples and local communities play various roles in conservation initiatives – from being excluded, to merely consultees or informed parties, to stakeholders with one seat among others at the table, to being equal partners in shared governance, to holding primary or even complete control (Dawson et al., 2024). The ‘higher’ (more power-holding) ends of this ladder – i.e. shared or primary control - do not simply mean that Indigenous Peoples and local communities can influence decisions, but crucially, that conservation governance is shaped and management enacted through their experiences and knowledge systems – their values,

⁵ While these governance types offer a general framework, in practice the question of which ‘type’ best describes a given area can be very complicated - including where there are overlaps (Stevens et al., 2024) and/or differences between de jure and de facto authority (e.g. Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013; WWF & WPCA, 2023).

⁶ In the World Databases on Protected Areas and on OECMS, 83% of records reported are government-governed. Over 9% are reported as being under private governance, only 1% as shared governance, and a mere 0.6% as governed by IPs or LCs. The remaining 6% have no governance information reported. These figures may reflect the fact that data is primarily reported by governments, which may not recognise diverse governance approaches by non-state actors. Further, these databases cover only PAs and OECMs, while many territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and by local communities are not (and may not be appropriate to report as) either of these. Nonetheless, the global power imbalance in who designs, decides and implements conservation is undeniable.

institutions, and practices (*ibid*).

Understanding decision-making and other roles, and looking more closely at the balance of power, can offer a better understanding of whether, and in what ways, progress is truly being achieved. For example, while government recognition and support for Community-Based Natural Resource Management arrangements have increased, many of these initiatives are not community-*led*, as governments or private actors maintain decision-making powers over most issues (Nelson et al., 2021). Similarly, many so-called shared-governance arrangements struggle to progress beyond token participation of Indigenous Peoples’ and of local communities’ representatives with limited influence. More powerful actors tend to hold on to key dimensions of authority such as defining conservation objectives, measuring success, allocating funding, land ownership, sharing of benefits etc. (Gambon & Bottazzi, 2021; Gienger & Nursey-Bray, 2025; Nepal, 2002).

Further advancing Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities’ leadership in conservation is essential

In summary, there is clear interest – for both people and nature – in advancing Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities’ leadership of PCAs. While progress has been made, there is a long way to go in policy and practice. Approaches focused on rights and equitable governance can foster cooperation rather than conflict, and strengthen community custodianship. To realize these transformations, change is necessary on several levels – not just on paper (e.g. in standards, policies, laws and programs) or even just in the design and funding of initiatives, but also in the mindsets, narratives, and assumptions that underpin people’s actions, their ways of working, and the nature of their interactions (O’Brien 2018).

Revealing the punawai (spring) at the Hui Malama Loko l’a Gathering 2023 at Alekoko Loko l’a (fishpond) Kaua’i.

Credit: Scott Kanda courtesy of KUA



Barriers to change... and actions to help address them

Barriers to Indigenous Peoples', local communities', and allied actors' leadership in conservation vary widely.⁷ The following are shared as prominently mentioned and inter-related issues, rather than an exhaustive set. This list moves from more immediate (and perhaps more easily tackled) issues in policies, institutions, and processes to more systemic issues. The latter are harder to overcome, and conservation actors may initially think that these are beyond their mandates or capacities to address. However, as evidenced by IPBES, transformative change – defined as system-wide shifts in views, structures and practices – is necessary to address nature's decline (IPBES, 2019, 2024). It is therefore important to reflect on how collective action can impact them.

There are also already many actions being taken to address these barriers. A handful of such actions are explored below. Collectively, these reflect the need for action by different actors and at different scales, as well as for collaboration between these.

Laws, policies, and institutions

National laws and policies

The KM-GBF marks a shift in international law and policy towards recognising the distinct roles, responsibilities, and rights of Indigenous Peoples and of local communities, including women and youth (Tugendhat et.al., 2023). Since its adoption, a challenge has been translating this international step into national laws and policies related to recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples, and the rights of local communities stewarding nature and traditional knowledge.

Barriers

Indigenous Peoples are often not recognised. There is often a lack of comprehensive laws recognizing their existence, and securing their rights, such as those related to customary and collective tenure and institutions, and a lack of context-specific solutions to integrate them with statutory systems. Even where recognised, there can be overlapping mandates and unresolved contradictions between customary and statutory law, and within national frameworks, often including provisions on conservation and Indigenous rights.

National and sub-national **conservation related laws, policies, and strategies** often lack provisions to recognise and support Indigenous and community participation and leadership in conservation. For example, a multi-country review found that, rather than explicitly recognizing territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and by local communities, "relevant rights... in national law are [if recognized at all] often dispersed across legal frameworks". This poses challenges because, among others, "[t]hrough Indigenous Peoples and local communities can utilize... sectoral legal frameworks to affirm their rights to lands, territories, and resources, they offer insufficient protection to external threats" (UNDP, 2022, via Natural Justice). At the same time, rigid, top-down PCA frameworks hinder local innovation and action, and often do not reflect the diversity of governance systems, biocultural values, and conservation approaches. Emerging frameworks to recognise Other

⁷ Discussions in Nanyuki and within the Task Force over the last two years surfaced a number of barriers to progress, not all of which can be addressed in an article of this size. Some were general barriers stemming from, for instance, geopolitical contexts or economic models. While these are important, this article focuses on barriers specific to the PCA contexts, and only touches on transversal issues where they manifest in specific ways in this context and can be tackled by the key actors in the sector. Other discussions focused on internal barriers that communities struggle with, such as internal inequities, lack of capacity or loss of cultural identity. As this article focuses on how other actors can contribute to joint action, we are not specifically focusing on these.

Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs), for example, risk over-legislation and rigid regulations that could stifle conservation efforts by local actors. As shown from experiences with PAs declared on ancestral territories, this can result in the displacement of existing, functioning governance models and the erosion of traditional knowledge and self-determination (Stevens et al., 2024). Most countries, so far, lack enabling frameworks for recognition of Indigenous and traditional territories as a pathway distinct from PAs and OECMs, and ways to address overlap between them (Oliva et al., 2025).

Actions

A growing number of national legal frameworks ostensibly aim to recognize rights and/or support Indigenous- and community-led conservation. Promising examples (though not without challenges) have been highlighted in [Australia](#), [Brazil](#) (e.g., Bocardi de Miranda et al., 2025), [Canada](#), [Colombia](#), [Liberia](#) (e.g. Lomax and Warner, 2024) and [the Philippines](#), among others. Rights-holders and their organisations play key roles in advancing legal recognition, e.g. through their innovation, advocacy, and sustained engagement, often over many years. This is reflected in the examples noted above, as well as cases in the [Territories of Life report](#) (ICCA Consortium, 2021) and systems level assessments ([here](#)), among others.

There is clearly no simple ‘recipe’. Law and policy frameworks must be responsive to and reflective of their context, and effectively and equitably implemented, to be meaningful. And achieving this can be a long, uphill journey. Nonetheless, existing frameworks can offer ideas, including about how legal recognition evolves and what approaches have (and have not) worked well, and for whom.

Box 1. Sinjajevina, Montenegro: Between protected common lands and military training site

The montane pastures of Sinjajevina in northern Montenegro are in many parts still managed traditionally as commons, and other parts that are privately owned still follow community rules and jurisdiction. Up to eight main tribes have traditionally used this pasture since the 19th century. The rich and rare flora and fauna are recognised through the area’s status as part of the Tara Canyon Biosphere Reserve, an Emerald site under the Bern Convention, an Important Plant Area, a proposed Natural Regional Park, and a proposed EU Natura 2000 site. However, this was completely overlooked in 2019 when it was designated as a military training site for international exercises. The military ground has now been cancelled by the Montenegrin Government, but only in response to the pressure exerted through a five year lasting civil protest and campaign by the Save Sinjajevina civic initiative, an alliance of local community members, activists, academics and national and international NGOs. This resistance has successfully prevented any military exercises since late 2020, and achieved the legally binding cancellation of the military ground, but threats will remain until these community governed areas are fully respected. <https://sinjajevina.org/>

Contributor: Pablo Dominguez, researcher, ICCA Consortium

National policy processes

Barriers

One reason for inadequate policies and laws concerning Indigenous Peoples’ and local communities’ rights and roles in conservation is limited access to **policy formulation processes**. This can arise from many sources, including insufficient government transparency and consultation processes, not having direct (or self-determined) representatives present during key decision-making forums, language barriers, insufficient information and resources for participation, etc. These barriers hamper constructive collaboration in developing national enabling conditions for Indigenous Peoples and local communities-led governance.

Actions

Laws and policies can be influenced through participation in legislative and policy processes, e.g. procedures for updating National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plans (NBSAPs)⁸ and other relevant reforms. Indigenous- and community-led innovation and advocacy often precede and can inform policy reforms (e.g. case below; ICCA Consortium, 2021; HRBWG et al., 2024; Mako, 2025). However, NBSAPs and other law/policy reform processes take time (Carbon Brief & The Guardian, 2024), and often enable limited direct input by Indigenous Peoples and by local communities (Climate Focus & Parabukas, 2023). The [Escazú Agreement](#)⁹ is an example of strategies that enable participation in legislative and legal processes in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Rights-holders also develop self-determined plans and policies as stand-alone instruments and to inform and/or to complement national frameworks. Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines, for example, produced their own biodiversity strategy and action plan as a formal complementary input to the national policy (IPBC, 2024).

Box 2. Recognising locally-managed saphari forests among Machakhela National Park, Georgia

In the southwest corner of Georgia and into Turkey, a large area of forest is conserved within a network of protected areas, including Machakhela National Park, established in 2012. Initially included within the park was around 1,400 hectares of forest neighboring the settlements, which also included *saphari* or ‘shelter’ forest, an important part of the livelihoods and identities of local communities who strictly managed the area. Although an informal agreement between communities and state forestry agency had previously supported community autonomy over the saphari forests, this couldn’t be ensured by the National Agency of Protected Areas who oversee the National Park based on the National Forestry Code, which does not recognise saphari forests. Villagers protested their loss of access to and control over the forests and eventually the National Park border delimitation committee was set up in 2015 involving communities, local government and the park administration. As a result, the protected area was reduced by about 20% so that community governance and management of the saphari forests could continue as before. These customary forms of governance are missing from national policies in Georgia as in many countries. The saphari forests, along with the community use forests are now included as a part of the ‘Protected Landscape’ to be governed through a management committee of local members and others approved by the Municipality.

<https://report.territoriesoflife.org/national-and-regional-analysis/west-central-asia/forests-shrublands/>

Contributor: Irakli Goradze, UNDP Georgia

Implementation of laws and policies

Barriers

Even where robust legal and policy frameworks are in place, there are often barriers to their implementation. Among other factors, they are often disregarded when they stand in the way of more powerful interests (e.g. Mako, 2025). Likewise, cumbersome processes often lead

⁸ NBSAPs are the key instruments through which governments implement CBD agreements. All NBSAPs needed to be updated to reflect KM-GBF commitments, including to human rights based approaches

⁹ The Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, adopted at Escazú, Costa Rica, on 4 March 2018

to tenure insecurity at the local level and to reliance on external support (from NGOs etc.) to secure territories (Alden Wily, 2018).

Actions

Necessary actions at government level include the formal recognition of customary land rights, and political support for the concerns of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (Tran et al., 2020), as well as mechanisms for transparency and accountability, and the application of Free, Prior and Informed Consent. Capacity-building efforts that strengthen local institutions and reduce dependency on external actors are also essential. Network building, allyship, and technical support (e.g. to navigate complex legal processes) can also be helpful in getting to implementation (e.g., Mako, 2025).

Box 3. The Siekopai Nation versus the Ecuadorian state

The Indigenous Siekopai have struggled for over 30 years to reinhabit Pë'kë'ya, a key part of their ancestral territory in Ecuador. Despite court rulings that validate their claim, as the legal system and constitution recognize their rights, the Ecuadorian government has failed to comply. *In contrast, the Ministry of Environment even signed a “use and management agreement” in 2008 with other communities, further infringing on the Siekopai’s rights.* This lack of recognition, government accountability and compliance is a threat to the continued cultural survival of the Siekopai Nation and their ability to sustain nature within their ancestral territory.

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/abac0d4970ce42bbaec563dc05faed5d>

Contributor: Amazon Frontlines

Monitoring and reporting

Barriers

Indigenous Peoples and local communities are often poorly represented in the **development and implementation of conservation monitoring systems** – regarding biodiversity as well as social dimensions, including governance. Their expertise, including traditional knowledge, is not sufficiently recognised. Reporting mechanisms led by government agencies do not sufficiently include evidence generated by Indigenous Peoples or by local communities, or their values and priorities. While there are increasingly available approaches to assess the equity and governance of PCAs, including community-based approaches (Dawson et al., 2025), uptake is insufficient (e.g. Campese & Sulle, 2018). The lack of data and evidence from diverse sources, including that generated by Indigenous Peoples and by local communities, leads to biases in reporting and poor understanding of their conservation related visions and contributions. As a simple example, the coverage of PCAs governed by, or with, Indigenous Peoples and local communities is significantly under-reported in the World Database on Protected Areas (UNEP-WCMC & IUCN, 2024).

Actions

Despite the barriers, there are growing examples of Indigenous- and community-led monitoring related to conservation (e.g. Dawson et al., 2025). These include monitoring rights recognition and implementation (e.g. *Indigenous Navigator*) as well as internal reflection and monitoring for self-strengthening and rights assertion (e.g. *Territories of Life SSP*). Support for the development of participatory monitoring systems that are sensitive to local worldviews is critical.

Data governance and sovereignty are also important dimensions of monitoring and reporting;

guidance for ethical and equitable practice have been developed by Indigenous Peoples organizations and networks (e.g. Carroll et al., 2020; ICC, 2021; ITK, 2018).

Conservation sector institutions

Barriers

Conservation projects are often strongly **dominated by state agencies and (often large, international) NGOs**. Their approaches can hamper the rights and leadership of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, even when safeguards are in place (Orozco-Quintero & King, 2018; Waylen et al., 2015; West, 2011). They typically operate with shorter-term “project logic”. In these approaches, Indigenous Peoples and local communities often (and at best) hold roles as beneficiaries, rather than partners in relationships of long-term solidarity that reflect their rights and interests.

While partnership models are (ostensibly) increasingly sought, in practice, **conservation objectives, governance, and management often continue to be externally imposed**. This can result in tokenism and false legitimacy. Similarly, community-based organisations and other grassroots organisations, especially in the Global South, struggle with imbalanced partnerships with international NGOs. Issues include inequitable sharing of resources, unnecessary and overly bureaucratic processes, and unaddressed racial and cultural biases (Paul et al., 2022)

The **mindset and attitudes** of some NGO and agency staff are, in places, still based on negative beliefs towards Indigenous Peoples and local communities and a lack of recognition and respect for their contributions and leadership. In part, these mindsets are underpinned or exacerbated by a lack of capacities – including in social sciences, cross-cultural skills, and human-rights based approaches.

Overall, there is a **lack of accountability** on the parts of conservation organisations (be they NGOs or government agencies) towards the Indigenous Peoples and local communities with whom they interact, even when activities take place in, or impact, traditional territories.

Actions

Some **initiatives to integrate human rights** into conservation planning and implementation are being undertaken by conservation organisations directly (e.g. CIHR, see Springer et al., 2011) and by coalitions of other actors (e.g. IIED, 2016; UNEP, 2024). Other initiatives are more directly focused on supporting Indigenous-led approaches, grounded in traditional knowledge and practice, such as the [Indigenous Rangers Programme](#) in Australia or the [Indigenous Leadership Initiative](#) in Canada.

There are also **accountability mechanisms** aimed at avoiding or mitigating harms to people that may arise from conservation actions (e.g. NGO and donor safeguards) as well as addressing harms that have occurred (e.g. [Whakatane Mechanism](#)).

Funding structures and processes

Barriers

Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and allied, grassroots organisations struggle to access **sufficient, accessible funding to support self-determined conservation actions** (Arreguín Prado et al., 2024; Paul et al., 2022). Most biodiversity and climate funding is channelled through governments or large conservation NGOs (Rights and Resources Initiative, 2022). Despite recent pledges (Forest Tenure Funders Group, 2023), change is slow

(Schroeder, 2023). As mentioned above, NGO-channelled funding tends to focus on external priorities with insufficient transparency on allocation, even where projects are implemented with communities and/or in Indigenous and Traditional Territories. NGOs and states are primarily accountable to funders, rather than to impacted communities. Even where funding is more direct, Indigenous Peoples and local communities often struggle with its complex, inaccessible structure, including burdensome programmatic and financial reporting (often exacerbated by a lack of local financial infrastructure), unrealistic timelines, inflexibility, and imposed objectives.

There is also a need to ensure that funding is **not provided to actions that violate rights**. This need is most often dealt with via safeguards that require, among others, impact assessments and mitigation responses. Such safeguards are now in place for many conservation organisations and some conservation funders. However, Indigenous Peoples and local communities still report a lack of accountability, such as in FPIC processes, and clear grievance mechanisms (GATC, 2023).

Actions

There are growing **commitments and initiatives for direct funding**. Initiatives like the Podali Fund in Brazil and the Indigenous Peoples of Asia Solidarity Fund seek to create direct channels of funding through to the community or people level (Indufor North America, 2023). Financial pledges have been made by governments and philanthropies to support securing tenure (Forest Tenure Pledge, Glasgow, COP26, 2021), and by multilateral funding mechanisms to provide dedicated funding for communities and Indigenous Peoples (GEF 2024, Cali Fund 2025). These are just a few among growing examples. However, the roll-out and implementation of such funds has been complicated and slow at times (Indufor North America, 2023; Sorsby et al., 2025). Further sharing experiences and building on successes can help ensure that such pledges and commitments can be implemented (Ford Foundation, 2023).

Revealing the punawai (spring) from above at the Hui Malama Loko l'a Gathering 2023 at Alekoko Loko l'a (fishpond) Kau'ai.

Credit: Scott Kanda
courtesy of KUA



Systemic issues

Historical legacies and systemic injustices

Barriers

The historical – and current – contexts of far too many protected areas include **unresolved conflict, evictions, and exclusions**, and other rights violations. Some of these injustices persist in current PA laws and policies, including the criminalisation of customary uses that are or could be compatible with conservation. In other cases, historical violations such as evictions have not been remedied, thus contributing to persistent land and resource conflicts. As long as these injustices and grievances go unresolved, it will be difficult to develop the collaborative, trust-based governance arrangements that are needed for PCAs to flourish.

Many protected areas also inherit, and continue to operate in, broader **systems of social discrimination and related injustices**, such as unrecognised land rights or systematic discrimination of Indigenous Peoples and of marginalised groups. Some of these issues stem from colonial policies, institutions, and mindsets. Racism and other forms of discrimination in PCAs and in conservation agencies and organisations undermine the transition to more inclusive and collaborative mindsets and approaches.

In recent decades, there has also been a notable **loss of civic space** in many countries, impacting civil society including movements and organizations of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and their allies. Dissent can result in further discrimination or criminalization, and the risks faced by environment and land defenders are rapidly increasing. Extractive interests in land and resources threaten established protected areas as well as Indigenous and Traditional Territories, and public policies are too often swayed by powerful economic interests. Unchallenged, **extractive economic systems** put pressure on territories and local economies, while local notions of wellbeing and alternative, sustainable economies are not incorporated into development models.

Actions

There are growing initiatives to enhance access to information about conservation related injustices and pathways to redress. For example, the University of Arizona hosts databases on “[alleged violations](#) against Indigenous Peoples’ human rights in protected areas and natural parks” and related [recommendations](#) from UN bodies and regional courts. A [thematic map](#) within the Environmental Justice Atlas documents conservation conflicts in protected areas in India. Enhancing access to such information, through rights-based processes, is an action in itself, and can inform further action.

Some of the accountability mechanisms mentioned above (e.g. the Whakatane Mechanism) also have an explicit intention moving towards acknowledgement and at least partial **redress and conflict resolution** around legacy injustices associated with protected areas.

In Brazil, the PNGTAQ (National Policy for Quilombola Territorial and Environmental Management) includes the **explicit antiracist policy goal** to “stimulate the antiracist training of protected area managers and environmental and sanitary inspection agents” (Brazil, 2023).

Box 4. Mobilising to secure Indigenous forest rights in the Democratic Republic of Congo

Indigenous Batwa communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo, although displaced from lands now within Kahuzi Biega National Park, have mobilised to secure their rights over lands outside the park. In 2013, they registered their village forests as a Territory of Life. In the first Community Assembly they named it Kisi-Mbosa Chamakasa, Kisimbosa meaning the “fertile ancestral land” and Chamakasa “hands together”.

<https://report.territoriesoflife.org/territories/kisimbosa-drc/>

Contributor: Thierry Birindwa Mwenge, ANAPAC DRC

Shifting power relations

Barriers

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) warned that: “*Transformative change for a just and sustainable world is urgent, necessary and challenging, but possible, to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and safeguard life on Earth...*” (IPBES, 2019). They followed this warning with a multi-year assessment of determinants of transformative change (IPBES, 2024). Among the six approaches they identified to drive or enable transformative change are the “*agency and power assertion by currently marginalized groups in ways that transform power relationships.*”

A significant barrier identified in discussions during the workshops is the perceived or real lack of willingness by those in power and holding authority of different forms – be they governments, international conservation organisations or academic institutions – to **genuinely relinquish or share that power**. Their relationships with Indigenous Peoples and with local communities, even those with good intentions, can be marked by deeply entrenched power imbalances and socially-rooted discrimination. Truly recognising the rights, diverse knowledge, worldviews, and contributions of Indigenous Peoples and of local communities would entail letting go of some of this power and trusting their leadership and agency.

It is also crucial to retain responsibility and accountability. Ceding and sharing power does not mean duty-bearers abdicating their responsibilities to respect, protect, and fulfil rights, or to play fundamental roles such as upholding the rule of law. Further, governments, NGOs, and funders have responsibilities to share and use their power in new ways, such as shifting to allyship and bridging roles, with those role changes to be decided by and with rights-holders.

Actions

An apparent lack of evidence of effective conservation by Indigenous Peoples or local communities in a specific place or in a given ecosystem is often cited as a reason not to transfer power and authority. This challenge makes it all the more important to support communities in documenting more of their own stories of success in formats that are accessible to a range of audiences. Example initiatives include the [Territories of Life report](#) (ICCA Consortium, 2021), [global ICCA Registry](#), [national and regional ICCA Registries](#), and [Landmark](#).

Sharing power is also a challenge for powerful conservation actors, who may need to redefine their roles to include being allies and supporters of conservation efforts by Indigenous

Peoples and by local communities (see, e.g. [Future of Conservation NGOs Resource Library](#)).

Box 5. Overcoming fragmented coastal governance in West Kalimantan, Indonesia

In Kubu Raya, on the coast of Indonesian Borneo, bureaucratic complexities can limit the effectiveness of policies aimed at fostering local participation in natural resource management. Legal authority over the landscape is fragmented between multiple government agencies in ways that local communities often struggle to make sense of. To reassert local leadership, some communities have established their own governance bodies and formed an inter-village forum for coordination. While there are signs of ecosystem recovery already, navigating and negotiating with fragmented state structures places a heavy burden on local community members. NGO partners have stepped in with intensive support, but to sustain and scale up the progress made in Kubu Raya, greater investments are needed. The experience of these communities reveals that inviting community participation in natural resource management is not enough. Additional funding and actions are needed to provide local communities with the necessary skills, resources, and legal authority to (co-)develop and implement decisions about the ecosystems they depend on.

<https://www.planetindonesia.org/news/tag/Kubu+Raya>

Contributor: Planet Indonesia

Values and paradigms

Beyond – and as part of actions to address – the barriers above, there may be a need for deeper, fundamental shifts in the value systems and paradigms through which ‘conservation’ and the natural world are viewed.

Barriers

In 2022 the IPBES published an assessment on the diverse values of nature which came to the conclusion that “*the causes of the global biodiversity crisis and the opportunities to address them are tightly linked to the way in which nature is valued*” but that “*despite the diversity of nature’s values, most policymaking approaches have prioritised a narrow set of values (...) and have often **ignored values associated with indigenous peoples’ and local communities’ world views***” (IPBES, 2022). The later Transformative Change assessment elaborated by identifying “***relations of domination over nature and people, especially those that emerged and were propagated in colonial eras and that have persisted over time***” as one of the systemic barriers that impede transformative change (IPBES, 2024).

This is unfortunately true for the conservation sector as well. With an assumption of universality, questions of which aspects of “nature” are worth conserving, and how, are mostly defined by external actors. More fundamentally, the assumption underlying many protected area systems and their implementation is still that humans and nature need to be separated to protect the latter (Diegues, 1998). Alternative worldviews and paradigms that integrate human well-being, identity, and reciprocal care for the natural world are not sufficiently supported. Ironically, this same paradigm of separation has enabled the commodification of nature and the intensive exploitation of natural resources, resulting in biodiversity loss and further cultural erosion for impacted communities. The IPBES assessments and a growing body of literature call for shifts towards an approach of abundance and reciprocity, and an integration of humans within the natural systems we live in and can care for (Wall Kimmerer, 2013; Teixidor-Toneu, et al., 2025).

Actions

Initiatives aimed at advancing recognition and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems, and exploring their relationships to conventionally conceived western knowledge systems, include the IPBES [Indigenous and Local Knowledge dialogues](#) and UNESCO [LINKS programme](#). Within the conservation sector, examples of efforts to support such values and viewpoint shifts include IUCN CEESP-supported 'Reimagining Conservation' initiative and movement-based networks like the [ICCA Consortium](#).

Box 6. Struggles for recognition of Indigenous territory in Colombia, both in law and in practice

The El Itilla Indigenous Territory in the northwest Colombian Amazon has been included within a National Park at the request of the Indigenous community. However, it took years and great effort after this recognition on paper for this group's way of life, practices, and leadership to be respected in practice. Eventually, park officials came to recognize their Indigenous knowledge system, and proposals have now been made to extend El Itilla to 105,000ha within the NP, a transformational move that may act as an inspiring precedent for other groups across Colombia.

<https://www.iccaregistry.org/en/explore/colombia/kamua-basera-resguardo-indigena-el-itilla>

Contributors: Amancio Yucuna, El Itilla Indigenous Reserve; Carolina Amaya, Centre for Intercultural Medical Studies.



Fortifying the wall foundation at Hô'ai, Kaua'i at the Hui Malama Loko I'a Gathering 2023

Credit: Scott Kanda courtesy of KUA

Conclusion

Fundamental shifts in conservation paradigms – including within the organisational cultures of the government agencies and NGOs who control most conservation funds and programs – will hopefully grow from evidence and acknowledgement that Indigenous and local community leadership work for people and nature. Knowledge that such fundamental shifts are necessary need not stop more immediate and medium-term actions from being taken, such as increased participation, policy reforms, access to funding, and support for local conservation action, monitoring and reporting. However, it is important to expose and openly address issues such as power imbalances, discrimination, and the imposition of external values. Without these challenging but necessary conversations and responses, we run the risk of looking back in 2030 on another lost decade in the pursuit of more equitable and effective governance of protected and conserved areas.

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