

Key points

There is broad consensus that conservation needs to better address rights and promote Indigenous and local leadership, for more just and effective conservation. Yet progress remains slow.

More attention is needed to overcome the persistent barriers to justice, but they are being overlooked in strategies to pursue the ambitious Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework 2030 targets.

Different types of interrelated barriers are outlined — from policy gaps on community tenure to historically rooted power inequalities — to improve understanding and guide action.

Transforming conservation requires actors to challenge common assumptions and shift mindsets about who conserves and how, forming broad alliances to uphold rights and accountability, and creating spaces for cross-cultural learning.

Tackling barriers to social justice in conservation

There are growing efforts to transform area-based conservation towards more equitable governance that recognises the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPs and LCs), their roles in decision making and their customary values and practices. Yet addressing past and ongoing injustices proves challenging and has been slow in practice. This briefing outlines ten barriers discussed in academic and policy- and practice-related publications that are holding up the transformation of conservation towards greater social justice. Reflexively and proactively engaging with these barriers is necessary to not only avoid reproducing harms, but to also unlock the social and ecological potential of the ambitious Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) targets.

The elusive target of equitable and effective governance

The KMGBF sets out an ambitious vision for halting biodiversity loss, by transforming societal relationships with nature. It stipulates that all implementation should follow a human-rights based approach and that Target 3 (to conserve 30% of global land, waters and seas by 2030) be pursued through equitably governed systems of protected and conserved areas (PCAs). This is particularly important for IPs and LCs, to acknowledge long-term and continuing harms, to respect and fulfil their rights, and to enable their meaningful influence in decision making. Evidence increasingly and overwhelmingly shows that meaningful partnerships with, and empowered leadership by, IPs and LCs produce better conservation outcomes than externally controlled approaches.¹

Yet despite multilateral principles and evidence urging equity and rights-based approaches, this involvement remains elusive in practice. PCAs led

by governments dominate, followed by those managed by nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and private institutions. Shared forms of governance are relatively rare, while IP and LC-led governance represents less than 1% of recorded areas.² Many national biodiversity strategies and action plans (NBSAPs) appear to follow this inequitable pattern of control rather than reforming the balance of power.³ They therefore risk reproducing past harms and failing to stem biodiversity loss.

Despite progressive policy principles, the reproduction of inequitable and ineffective conservation represents a persistent justice gap. Some progress is evident in the strategic rhetoric of conservation organisations and states, and through the inclusion of IPs' and LCs' voices in global governance. This includes the recent creation of a Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Subsidiary Body (Article 8(j)) on the traditional knowledge of IPs and LCs. In recent years, more funding has been made directly

Overcoming the barriers to social justice is pertinent for all types of conservation areas

available to IPs and LCs, though still in small proportions relative to protected area (PA) funding. Principles for equitable governance and respect for rights are reported to be central to implementation efforts in some places (for example, locally managed marine areas in Madagascar⁴ and recognition of Indigenous PCAs in Canada⁵).

But the overall quality of governance has not shifted widely or rapidly enough, with regression on rights and equity in other places. IPs and LCs continue to call for an end to displacement without adequate consent processes, criminalisation of cultural practices, overriding of customary tenure and political marginalisation.⁶

Are we overlooking the barriers?

If consensus is clear and targets set, what is holding us back? Transformative change does not happen on its own. To turn the tide, conservation actors must confront the forces maintaining the status quo. We should expect systems established through highly unequal power and colonial politics to be inflexible, even though we may think such inequalities have been overcome. Particular narratives and views, practices, networks and forms of interaction are deeply entrenched and resistant to change.

In principle, the equity framework adopted in 2018 by the CBD voluntary guidance for PCA governance⁷ recognises that achieving more equitable distribution, procedure and recognition requires us to create the necessary enabling conditions and adapt to local contexts. It does not, however, specify what such enabling conditions entail, how to create them or who is responsible for doing so. There is also a lack of clarity over what the barriers currently are to implementing the existing international commitments on justice and rights.

Interrelated barriers: from local to global and visible to hidden forms

This briefing brings together lessons from 46 academic and 43 policy and practice publications about the factors constraining or supporting social justice in PCAs. These lessons characterise the barriers and enabling conditions, and draw insights about potential actions to realise transformative change. The publications identified numerous types of barriers, collectively covering a range of political, economic, social, institutional, cultural, epistemic and psychological dynamics, which are characterised in Table 1 (page 3).

Crucially, the barriers are rarely considered as separate, individual factors. Instead, the literature paints a clear picture of multiple interrelated factors operating across scales to constrain a shift towards the rights, roles and contributions of IPs and LCs in conservation.

Some publications, especially those from conservation NGOs and international agencies, give greater prominence to higher-level and the more obvious barriers of finance, policy and capacity building. However, most academic and policy- and practice-oriented publications highlight that pathways to equitable governance also require a rebalancing of power, by addressing the entrenched ideas and narratives that shape choices, practices and deeply unequal interactions.⁸ This resonates with the recent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) assessment on transformative change, which emphasised that deeper forms of transformation require change across structures, views or mindsets, practices and interactions.⁹

For example, progressive policy changes that allow for the legal registration of customary lands as reserves often result in some positive results. But without complementary shifts in financing, systems to administer and support change, and inclusive and accountable governance structures, they often fail to benefit many communities and effectively defend community rights. Further, more fundamental changes in relationships are needed to truly develop respect of local knowledge, values and uses of nature and to enable genuine local leadership. But without also shifting away from the systemic prioritisation of and incentives for commercial resource extraction, even strong local customary conservation will remain at risk.

Towards just and transformative conservation

Transforming conservation by embracing truly equitable governance and rights-based approaches will not be achieved through single actions or by single actors. The barriers to change are interrelated across scales and reinforcing. Therefore, overcoming them requires collaborative actions on multiple levels.

Overall, the key actions in the literature for addressing and overcoming barriers do not suggest large investments or costly tools and technology. Rather, they call for a shift in underlying mindsets, ways of relating to one another and more cohesive interconnected strategies to inform the ways in which conservation efforts are pursued.

Some actions involve long-term processes and require collective action across the board; others may be more immediate or specific to certain actors.

Recommendations for **collective action** include:

- Shifting paradigms: reframe conservation efforts around strong, recognised local/customary institutions and their active connections to nature. Focus both on how Indigenous and local knowledge and culture support conservation, as well as how conservation science and practice can strengthen Indigenous and local sovereignty.
- Allyship and coalitions: build and sustain meaningful alliances that reduce the burden on IPs and LCs, instead driving change through state, NGO and private-sector commitment and resourcing. Support rights-based approaches by working together to uphold and defend IPs' and LCs' rights, and actively respond when these rights are threatened.

Table 1. Barriers to justice

Category	Barrier
Policy and economic resources	Law and policy that fail to support IPs' and LCs' rights, customary institutions and equity at different scales: formal laws and policies can either strengthen or undermine IPs' and LCs' rights, tenure, customary institutions and capacity to conserve; many nations have not ratified or implemented rights conventions like the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP); Indigenous and traditional territories (ITTs) and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) lack institutional foundations relative to PAs. Limited distribution and access to resources such as funding for IPs and LCs: unequal access to funding means powerful actors still dominate agendas; direct funding to IPs and LCs is disproportionately small and often conditional; benefit sharing is often compensatory and detached from local conservation strategies.
Socioeconomic and political context	Lack of awareness and capacities, poverty and unequal access to technology: leadership and participation require awareness and capacities, which are often distorted by unequal access to information, education, technology and wealth; poverty is a key factor in decisions to prioritise short-term livelihoods over biocultural sustainability. Local culture, gender norms and sociopolitical contexts: local culture and beliefs shape what justice means and what can be discussed; gender, race, class, ethnicity, age and sexuality influence access, voice and control over resources; national political contexts shape opportunities for leadership by IPs and LCs.
Governance and institutions	Deficiencies in governance processes and accountability mechanisms: free, prior and informed consent is frequently lacking or misapplied; formal governance processes are favoured over customary institutions, which tend only to be respected when already strong; local engagement is commonly seen as additional rather than intrinsically essential; social considerations are often pursued minimally through safeguards rather than integrated in governance; responsibilities of duty bearers are often not well understood or institutionalised; accountability mechanisms are usually difficult to access, requiring external support. Exclusionary planning, monitoring and learning, and data injustice: planning, monitoring and learning processes are often led by governments or NGOs with bias towards ecological management over social concerns; limited local access and control over information hinders sovereignty and custodianship and brings political disadvantage.
Relational power dynamics	Historical legacies and ongoing racial discrimination, dominance of Western values and interests reproduced within conservation practice: conservation areas are shaped by histories of who controls land; unresolved conflicts, often with colonial histories of displacement and racialised oppression, result in lasting mistrust; a lack of government and NGO willingness to acknowledge and address grievances often reproduces unconscious bias and racial discrimination; a tendency to focus on equity only within project timeframes. Epistemic injustice and colonialities of knowledge, values and identities: lack of intercultural processes and recognition of diverse worldviews and knowledge systems; dominance of Western knowledge displaces local and customary institutions and custodianship; conflicting pressures for IPs and LCs between tradition and modernity. Relationships based on unequal power, lack of trust, and limited openness to reflect, listen and learn: limited willingness to question one's own biases, engage in inner transformation of views and values, and to explore changing roles in leadership; lack of critical reflection on how power is exercised — even initiatives intended to be community-led are often externally controlled, with limited cultural recognition.
Systemic misalignment with goal to live in harmony with nature	Global capitalism and protected areas promote separation of people's values and livelihoods from nature: local practices are often targeted instead of distant drivers of biodiversity loss — for example, demand for resources, incentives for extraction and infrastructure development; environmental human rights defenders are threatened, not protected; economic priorities work in tandem with strict PAs by restricting rather than supporting traditional livelihoods, serving to crowd out local solutions and stewardship.

- Intercultural learning: embed inclusive processes that bring together different knowledge systems and perspectives. Encourage open dialogue to explore and dismantle power dynamics through joint reflection. Collectively assess governance type and quality in systems of PCAs, and develop alternative visions or pathways to improve conservation in practice.

Recommendations for specific actors include:

Conservationists in NGOs and government

- Include IPs and LCs in spatial planning and strategy development, such as NBSAPs. Identify, promote and recognise forms of shared and IP- and LC-led governance as core components of PCA strategies.
- Acknowledge any past harms suffered by IPs and LCs and engage in reconciliation. Identify where active or planned interventions overlap with IPs' and LCs' territorial claims, and engage in processes to establish and strengthen local governance and transfer authority.
- Undertake human rights due diligence and monitor impacts. Where respect and accountability for human rights is lacking, offer civic space and opportunities to uphold them as part of conservation initiatives.
- Re-orient mindsets to reflect on individual and institutional positionalities, motivations and unconscious biases. This requires humility in questioning one's own approaches, listening to criticism and being open to alternative strategies and change.
- Redirect work to address the underlying threats linked to distant, unsustainable resource demand and markets, extractives and infrastructure.

Funders

- Provide direct, long-term, flexible funding opportunities.
- Foster change by ensuring programme designs are based on analysis of historical factors and

seek to mediate or convene trusting partnerships.

- Identify potential epistemic injustices in project proposals and mandate data justice. Require application of rights-based approaches as a prerequisite for funding.

Academia

- (Re)examine dominant framings of conservation problems and decolonise discriminatory language and framings, learn from Indigenous and local knowledge, and encourage holistic, critical and history-sensitive education.¹⁰

IPs, LCs and civil society

- Build movements, networks and coalitions to advocate for cross-sectoral rights-based approaches and accountability of duty bearers.
- Promote, restore and strengthen knowledge systems.

Taking responsibility

The barriers identified — and the strategies for overcoming them — are pertinent for all types of area-based conservation. Existing government or privately led PAs must engage with them in their pursuit of more equitable and effective governance. Better comprehension of these barriers is also a prerequisite for effective recognition and support for IP- and LC-led conservation areas, including ITTs, as effective pathways to achieving Target 3. Similarly, integrating these strategies into the design and expansion of OECMs will avoid overriding Indigenous and local rights while supporting integral human–nature relations. Explicit engagement with the underlying barriers will not only avoid perpetuating social injustices within conservation but is essential to meeting the ambitious goals for nature conservation.

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Notes

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² United Nations Environment Programme, Protected Planet Database, www.protectedplanet.net/en / ³ RRI, ICCA Consortium and FPP (2025) Enabling Pathways for Rights-based Community-led Conservation. / ⁴ Baker-Médard, M, Rakotondrazafy, V, Randriamihaja, M, Ratsimbazafy, P and Juarez-Serna, I (2023) Gender equity and collaborative care in Madagascar's locally managed marine areas: reflections on the launch of a fisherwomen's network, *Ecology and Society*, 28(2). / ⁵ Townsend, J and Roth, R (2023) Indigenous and decolonial futures: Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas as potential pathways of reconciliation, *Frontiers in Human Dynamics*, 5, p.1286970. /

⁶ Global Indigenous Land Forum (2025) Kwet Kina Declaration by Indigenous Peoples. / ⁷ CBD (2018) Decision Adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity 14/8. Protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (CBD/COP/DEC/14/8). / ⁸ WWF, UNEP-WCMC, SGP/ICCA-GSI, LM, TNC, CI, WCS, EP, ILC-S, CM and IUCN (2021) The State of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' Lands and Territories: A technical review of the state of Indigenous Peoples' and Local Communities' lands, their contributions to global biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services, the pressures they face, and recommendations for actions. Gland. / ⁹ O'Brien, K, Garibaldi, L and Agrawal, A (2024) Thematic Assessment Report on the Underlying Causes of Biodiversity Loss and the Determinants of Transformative Change and Options for Achieving the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services. IPBES secretariat, Bonn. doi:10.5281/zenodo.11382215. / ¹⁰ Archer, LJ, Müller, HS, Jones, LP, Ma, H, Gleave, RA, da Silva Cerqueira, A, McMurdo Hamilton, T and Shennan-Farpon, Y (2022) Towards fairer conservation: Perspectives and ideas from early-career researchers, *People and Nature*, 4(3), pp.612–626. doi:10.1002/pan3.10309.



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