

Following the trail of conservation successes

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A paper by researchers from the National University of Singapore (NUS), James Cook University and Mongabay.com, which was published in *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* in early August, showed that although large-scale biodiversity declines are ongoing, certain conservation actions have made a positive difference.

This paper was led by the late Professor Navjot Sodhi of NUS, a renowned [conservation](#) ecologist who, more than anyone, understood the dismal outlook of conservation, having focused much of his career highlighting the biodiversity crisis.

According to one of the authors, Luke Gibson, a PhD student from the Department of Biological Sciences at NUS who was mentored by Prof Sodhi, "Identifying the scope of different conservation achievements can help to guide further conservation successes."

To assess the conservation achievements, the researchers classified them into three different scales: micro-, meso- and macroscales.

Microscale conservation encompasses direct efforts to protect species or habitats, including the creation of protected areas and the control of illegal hunting. For instance, in Brazilian Amazonia, the largest remaining tract of tropical rainforest in the world, protected areas have helped to reduce deforestation rates. An estimated 37% of the decline in annual deforestation rates in Brazil between 2002 and 2009 can be attributed to the preservation of 709 000 sq km of forest in newly established protected areas.

Mesoscale conservation covers regional efforts including transboundary agreements and the regulation of international wildlife trade. A successful example of this scale comes from the Virunga landscape of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Uganda and Rwanda, where adjoining national parks have led to population increases of elephants and gorillas. The population of mountain gorillas (*Gorilla beringei beringei*) has increased from 250 to 480 over the past 30 years.

Macroscale conservation targets the ultimate global drivers of habitat loss and species endangerment by changing consumer demands and passing laws to regulate unsustainable business practices. For example, following the revelation from Greenpeace that prominent Western brands were promoting deforestation by purchasing beef and leather from ranchers in the Amazon, major companies including Nike and Walmart, pressured slaughterhouses to implement sourcing safeguards to ensure that cattle products would no longer be produced at the expense of rainforests. As a result, ear tags and genetic testing are now used in Brazil to track cattle from ranches to slaughter-houses.

There is a clear need to synthesise information about conservation projects so as to guide future projects and provide much needed hope for the conservation community.

The authors elaborated, "Conservation successes can span differing scales and they have sometimes reversed endangered species declines in even the most desperate situations. However, better connections among different scales of conservation are needed."

To achieve this, conservation goals in projects should be clearly stated from the onset, and provisions should be made to evaluate their progress. Because the effects of conservation interventions on target populations and species can manifest over a protracted period, long-term commitments by funders are needed to document such positive

outcomes. Results from both successful and unsuccessful conservation projects should be widely disseminated so that future successes can be repeated while past failures can be avoided.

"More conservation projects fail than succeed, and our highlighting of successes here should not be taken as a call to rest on our laurels. Instead, our aim is to engender hope and inspire others to continue their dedicated efforts," the authors wrote.

"Having achieved some notable successes, conservationists should pat themselves on the back and then redouble their efforts at all conservation scales," they added.

Provided by National University of Singapore

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