

Biodiversity treaty: UN deal fails to address the root causes of nature's destruction, say professors

December 22 2022, by Bram Büscher and Rosaleen Duffy



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A major biodiversity conference, recently concluded in Montreal, Canada, was [billed](#) as the event that will decide the "fate of the entire living world." All well then that the meeting closed with what has been hailed as a "[historic](#)" breakthrough: a deal to protect 30% of all land and

water on Earth by 2030.

How historic is this deal, really? Judging from the effect of protected areas and major environment meetings over the last few decades, we should not get our hopes up. In fact, this deal may force us to reconsider the usefulness of such meetings altogether.

If there is anything that defines the history of mainstream conservation it is the steady rise of protected areas, covering about 2% of the globe in the 1960s to around 17% now. This progress was incredibly difficult, and still created many ineffective "[paper parks](#)" where species are protected from hunting and other threats in name only. Worse, it bred [human rights abuses](#) and [violence](#) as people were excluded from land that was declared off-limits.

If it took 60 years to get to 17%, how realistic is a near-doubling of Earth's protected areas over the next eight years? And how will it, despite [the pact's](#) rhetoric of placing indigenous peoples at the center of conservation, ensure that the violence of the past is not repeated?

All this is left to the more than 190 countries under the treaty to implement. Given the pressures of the extinction crisis and the [increasing militarization of conservation](#), we have little faith that history will now suddenly work out differently.

The real problem is non-negotiable

Even if 30% of Earth was protected, how effectively would it halt [biodiversity loss](#)? The proliferation of protected areas has happened at the same time as the extinction crisis has [intensified](#). Perhaps, without these efforts, things could have been even worse for nature.

But an equally valid argument would be that area-based conservation has

blinded many to the [causes](#) of Earth's diminishing biodiversity: an expanding economic system that squeezes ecosystems by turning ever more habitat into [urban sprawl](#) or farmland, polluting the air and water with ever more toxins and heating the atmosphere with ever more greenhouse gas. These [structural problems](#) are mentioned but not actually addressed at global environmental meetings.

Such meetings have become elaborate affairs eagerly organized by host states to reap tourist income and diplomatic goodwill. The idea is that conferences allow countries to negotiate global frameworks for tackling multiple, overlapping crises. Clearly, the planetary scale of environmental change requires cooperation at all levels.

After the second world war, multilateralism based on cooperation between states developed out of a sense of hopefulness and led to global conventions for addressing common challenges in many areas, including the environment. The 1987 Montreal protocol helped close the hole in the ozone layer. The CITES ivory ban has helped alleviate pressure on African elephants [since 1989](#).

But that era is now over. UN summits have become little more than traveling circuses filled with desperate hopes but no real-world influence. Their meetings, announcements and deals are comprised of increasingly trivial language games, empty promises and non-decisions—many about the functioning of the convention itself. After every summit, small and sometimes major wins are celebrated as the breakthrough the world has been waiting for. But what have they actually done for the problems they are supposed to address?

Recent [climate change](#) summits have done very little to halt the [growth in CO₂ emissions](#). And the Convention on Biological Diversity, which led this latest meeting in Montreal, was hobbled at its origin in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 1992. Here it was decided to split climate change and

biodiversity across two conventions, fundamentally placing them on two different tracks when scientists argue that they need to be [addressed together](#).

It was also decided to render biodiversity, especially genes which might be valuable for industries such as pharmaceuticals, into "natural capital" that could be traded internationally. This enshrined capitalist ways of [comprehending the environment](#) at the outset of this process and entrenched a logic of turning nature into commodities. In short, the logic of the problem—the promotion of an ever-expanding economy—became the logic of the solution.

And so, there is a case to be made that international treaties actually deepen environmental destruction by making the problem seem soluble without changing a deeply unsustainable global economic system. They promote [carbon offsets](#), biodiversity credits, [no net loss](#) (the idea that negative and positive consequences for biodiversity can be balanced as if on an accounting sheet) and other non-solutions. Fundamentally missing is a plan for an economy that accepts ecological limits to growth.

While more protected areas may alleviate the damage to some ecosystems and species in the coming years, their historical failure to prevent accelerating extinctions is not encouraging. We may still celebrate the international community coming to an agreement. But high expectations, big promises and negligible results have become the hallmark of UN environmental meetings.

We must therefore ask: have they become empty institutional hangovers of a lingering status quo that must be abandoned? Or is holding on to the fraying shreds of multilateralism worth the effort, even if they are becoming little more than extravagant witnesses to unfolding disaster?

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Biodiversity treaty: UN deal fails to address the root causes of nature's destruction, say professors (2022, December 22) retrieved 8 June 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2022-12-biodiversity-treaty-root-nature-destruction.html>

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