

Indigenous peoples wary of UN biodiversity rescue plan

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In 1872, Native Americans were violently evicted from what would become Yellowstone National Park

As crunch UN talks to reverse the accelerating destruction of nature

loom, indigenous peoples are sounding an alarm over proposed conservation plans they say could clash with their rights.

The COP-15 UN biodiversity summit in Kunming, China—provisionally slated for early October—will see nearly 200 nations attempt to thrash out new goals to preserve Earth's battered ecosystems.

To limit the devastating effects of species loss caused by pollution, hunting, mining, tourism and urban sprawl, the draft treaty proposes to create protected areas covering 30 percent of the planet's lands and oceans by 2030.

Global leaders from over 50 countries pledged on Monday at the One Planet Summit to back the plan, which could become the cornerstone of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) meet in China.

But the past experience of indigenous populations has made them wary of the proposal.

Earlier efforts to create protected areas such as national parks sometimes led to their eviction from [ancestral lands](#).

"By just setting a target without adequate standards and commitment to accountability mechanisms, the CBD could unleash another wave of colonial land grabbing that disenfranchises millions of people," said Andy White, coordinator of the Rights and Resources Initiative.

When the Kahuzi-Biega National Park in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo was dramatically enlarged in 1975, for example, the Bambuti community lost more than access to the forest.

A whole culture intertwined with nature perished.

"We no longer have access to medicinal plants," said Diel Mochire, regional director of the Integrated Programme for the Development of the Pygmy People.



Global leaders will meet for a critical biodiversity summit in Kunming, China to set new goals for protecting nature

"Our diet changed. In the forest we had easy access to resources, now we have to buy everything."

'Less biodiversity loss'

Arguably, the first conservation-related evictions date back to the last 19th century, when the US government violently expelled native Americans from lands that became the Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks.

"That model was exported around the world," White told AFP.

It is still the dominant model today, he added.

The RRI, which defends indigenous peoples' rights, estimates that 136 million people have been displaced globally to date during the creation of the world's protected areas, which cover some 8.5 million square kilometres (3.3 million square miles).

It further calculates that over 1.6 billion people could be affected—directly or indirectly—by the so-called "30-30" initiative.

A UN report from 2016 concluded that some of the world's leading conservation groups had violated the rights of some indigenous people by backing conservation projects that ousted them from ancestral homes.

A 2019 BuzzFeed investigation implicated the World Wide Fund (WWF) in serious rights abuses—including torture and murder—carried out by rogue anti-poaching units in [national parks](#) in Asia and Africa.

An independent audit released in November found that none of the group's staff participated in any abuses, but that WWF should be "more transparent," and needed to more firmly engage governments to uphold human rights. WWF vowed to "do more".



Forests under indigenous management are less prone to wildfires than many "protected areas" controlled by business concessions, research has shown

Scientists and environmental groups alike are increasingly emphasising indigenous peoples' role in conservation.

At the same time, however, efforts to protect and restore nature on a global scale have failed spectacularly.

The planet is on the cusp of a mass extinction event in which species are disappearing at 100 to 1,000 times the normal "background" rate, most scientists agree.

The UN's science advisory panel for biodiversity, called IPBES, warned

in a 2019 landmark report that one million species face extinction, due mostly to habitat loss and over-exploitation.

Indigenous peoples' know-how represents a glimmer of hope in an otherwise bleak picture, the same report found.

IPBES said at least a quarter of global lands are traditionally owned, managed or occupied by indigenous groups.

"Within that 25 percent, the lands managed by indigenous peoples tend to have less biodiversity loss," a lead author of the report Pamela McElwee told AFP.

'Bottom up'

Research has shown that forests under indigenous management are more effective at storing carbon and are less prone to wildfires than many "protected areas" controlled by business concessions.

Private companies that manage huge tracts of forests under a UN-approved financial mechanism to curb deforestation—known as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+)—too often bulldoze the rights of forest-dwelling peoples, earlier research has shown.



The UN says one million species face extinction, due mostly to habitat loss and over-exploitation

Indigenous peoples are "disproportionately attacked for standing up for their rights and territories," watchdog Global Witness said in July.

In 2019, a record 212 environmental campaigners, nearly half from indigenous communities, were murdered around the world, according to the group's annual tally.

Major conservation groups ranging from the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to WWF now emphasise the importance of indigenous peoples' role in conservation.

"WWF firmly believes that we will only be able to halt and reverse our unprecedented loss of nature if we work hand in hand with indigenous peoples and local communities," the group said in a statement.

IUCN Programme Development Manager James Hardcastle told AFP: "The biggest single determinant of success in conservation is ... having the rights included and having something that's bottom up.

"That's where you will be successful on all accounts—you'll be able to defend the rights, territory, integrity, the ecological functions or species in the area."

Canadian Basile van Havre, co-chair of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) insisted that "the CBD makes ample room for indigenous peoples."

Accountability mechanisms

But indigenous leaders have yet to be convinced that a shift in narrative will translate into a change in practice.

"Until I see action I will not believe it," Peter Kitelo, a 45-year-old telecommunications engineer from the Ogiek community in Kenya told AFP.



Environmental groups are increasingly emphasising indigenous peoples' critical role for conservation, but not all are convinced of a change in practice

"Most conservation organisations have perfected the art of public relations."

The draft treaty for the October "COP15" summit says 30 percent of the planet should be covered by "protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures".

For Hardcastle, "other effective" measures could include governance by indigenous communities.

Mochire from the DRC also said he is not necessarily opposed to

expanding protected areas, but need to see how the measures would be carried out.

"We are currently putting forward proposals to the government on how to get there without damaging communities," he said.

The COP15 treaty should enshrine [indigenous peoples'](#) land rights and devise accountability mechanisms to ensure that expanded protected areas do not lead to human rights violations, said White from RRI.

"In many cases local people cannot complain to their own governments when they are abused by the national park service. So they have to have recourse through the international arena."

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