

Award winning conservationists call for empowering local initiatives with sound agreements to ensure biodiversity conservation

Humanity is facing a global environmental crisis as a result of the way we have utilized our planet and its natural resources over the past century. Recovery plans and recommendations laid out in global conventions, Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEAs), or scientific frameworks that aim to reverse extinction and maintain the planet's health, have up until now failed or been inadequately implemented. Despite numerous stark warnings from top scientists, world conservation organizations, and calls for emergency action, the rate of species extinction is continuing to accelerate. There has been an average 69% decline of monitored wildlife populations since 1970, and 28% of all species assessed by the IUCN Red List are currently threatened with extinction. At the same time, ecosystem degradation and loss of ecosystem services is advancing more rapidly than any comparable time in human history. These trends warn of the dangers that will soon imperil the well-being, and ultimately the survival, of our own species.

Nature conservation is not a luxury, nor is it 'only' a virtuous cause that gives satisfaction to a privileged minority. It is a matter of urgency, and humankind's future depends on it, especially since biodiversity and habitat losses will amplify the effects of climate change, and severely impact development and livelihoods, threatening our own existence. Today, effective protection of the planet and its biodiversity cannot be limited to the conservation of a few designated areas of land and sea that usually lack efficient management and mostly depend on political will. Sustainable and effective conservation requires a systemic change in how we perceive and utilize our home planet and its natural heritage. The current predominant political and economic system based on dominating nature and seeing it as 'just a resource' has proven to be ineffective and unsustainable, and is leading to environmental bankruptcy. With the exception of communities that consider biodiversity conservation as their primary priority, it is still largely disregarded by many. Yet, biodiversity conservation can no longer be politically and economically side-lined. Conservation must be recognized and treated as a vital policy decision that helps solve key issues such as food security, poverty, human well-being, and vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters. In fact, in some countries, protection of wild species and habitats is regarded as a constitutional duty. It is the responsibility of human society as a whole to uphold and execute these duties. Today, world leaders can, and must, act as catalysts to bring about a holistic, societal approach that strives to prioritize long-term ecological sustainability of the planet. Only within these boundaries can the short-term goals and aspirations for the growth and development of human societies be pursued.

The successful and sustainable recovery of ecosystems depends not only on the resilience of biodiversity, but on our own persistence to safeguard it. Many citizens, grassroots organizations, social enterprises, and businesses around the planet are positively and effectively contributing to behavior changes that improve habitat and biodiversity conservation on a local scale. However, these successful bottom-up strategies are still underrepresented, and underestimated by international organizations and governments that continue to spend most of their efforts and resources on implementing top-down strategies with limited connection to an understanding of local realities. Importantly, the long-term sustainability of grassroots efforts depends heavily on the successful implementation of global conventions and MEAs at the national and international scale and on cross-sectoral integration of environmental and ecological objectives of such policies. Too often the agreed targets of these conventions are not met, diluting and perhaps sabotaging the impact of grassroots initiatives. Decision-makers urgently need to recognise the many successful local initiatives whose positive impacts can be scaled up with joint efforts from international organizations and national governments.

Examples from the Future For Nature Laureates

Sharks and Rays in India

Sharks and rays have seen drastic population declines globally and, with India being a top shark and ray fishing nation of the world, it has significant influence on global shark and ray populations. India has implemented policies to protect sharks and rays, such as banning shark finning and the export of fins, targeting the supply for the demand of shark fins in South-East Asia. However, these efforts have failed to reduce shark and ray

fishing in Indian waters. Conversely, grassroots movements aiming to stem the decline of sharks and rays have identified the true drivers of the issue, i.e. the demand for seafood in India. In a region with little research on sharks and rays, collating and documenting local fisher knowledge has been the key to identify critical areas for breeding, nurseries, and aggregation of shark and ray species, as well as the numbers that are harvested intentionally or unintentionally landed as by-catch. Conservation efforts subsequently involved promoting shark-friendly behaviour by fishing communities, such as seasonal area closures and live release of certain critically endangered species, such as guitarfishes. Creative economic incentives have been instrumental in supporting this behaviour, particularly between shark-friendly fishermen and restaurants who market themselves as sustainable, through the creation of new and transparent supply chains. By working with fishing communities, traders, chefs and seafood consumers, local conservationists are creating a gradual, but holistic, shift in seafood consumption away from threatened species. Such efforts have clearly demonstrated the success of conservation strategies that originated with grassroots work, driven by local people and organizations, which can be appropriately scaled up if supportive policies are put in place.

Fishing Cat in India

Another example of positive local impact is the decade-long effort in eastern India to conserve the globally endangered fishing cat. Local conservation programs focused on enhanced fishing cat conservation have involved multiple stakeholders, including local communities, policy makers, NGO partners, students, artists and the media, to bring more attention to and appreciation of this lesser known feline. This approach effectively influenced regional policy changes, strengthened litigations to safeguard wetland habitat, and minimized negative interactions with humans to protect the fishing cat and its wetland ecosystem. However, problems outside the local scale are now affecting the effectiveness of these actions. The majority of wetlands that sustain fishing cats lie outside the protected area network, are mostly treated as 'wastelands,' and are now being urbanized or converted into intense production landscapes. This development contradicts the country's wetland law, which was formed to fulfill its commitment to the Ramsar Convention by protecting all wetlands larger than 2.5 hectares. Moreover, river basins throughout Asia are heavily disturbed due to dams causing erratic floods, decreased fish catches, and ultimately leading to the rapid decline in health of wetlands downstream. Throughout Asia, wetlands are being decimated in the name of development. Yet, wetlands are integral to achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and most importantly to sustaining human civilization and ecological communities. Accordingly, plans to sustain local conservation projects, as well as upscaling all such positive impacts, are critical. This can only happen with support from national governments to implement socio-ecological approaches to manage remaining wetland habitats and by combining principles of the Ramsar Convention and the Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD).

Puddle Frogs in Ghana

That local initiatives can be the foundation for formal, international protection of species and habitats is well depicted in the Atewa forest in Eastern Ghana. The Atewa forest is one of the most intact forests in West Africa and home to over 100 species at risk of extinction according to the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species. The forest is also the source of clean drinking water for more than 5 million Ghanaians. The main threat to this forest is strip bauxite mining, a form of mineral extraction that involves removal of the entire surface layer of soil, which significantly affects the landscape. This method of mining translates into a total loss of both the forest (in mined areas), and all the biodiversity it contains. By creating grassroots awareness and reaching out to local communities via a conservation awareness campaign dubbed 'conservation evangelism', conservationists have been able to build strong local support for conservation of the Atewa forest in Ghana. This locally tailored outreach approach involves conservationists acquiring talk time in existing religious programs that people routinely attend as part of their social life. By highlighting religious writings that focus on environmental stewardship, local people have come to understand and accept their role - both naturally and ethically - in protecting their natural environment. Recently, two species of critically endangered amphibian were discovered and described from the Atewa forest: the Atewa slippery frog and the Afia Birago puddle frog. These two frog species are endemic to the Atewa forest. Working through the challenging bureaucratic procedures, local conservation organizations managed to list the forest as an Alliance for Zero Extinction (AZE) site in April 2021. For the Atewa forest, and all the endangered and endemic species living there, the new AZE status is highly significant. It means that the forest now falls under the International Finance Corporation's (IFC) No-Go areas for project financing, which will make it difficult for companies to finance strip mining, or any other detrimental practices, in the area. Species such as the Afia Birago puddle frog and almost its entire home range are now protected from mining activities. In-country, grassroots research leading to the discovery

of the endemic Afia Birago puddle frog and subsequent conservation efforts have resulted in reduced hunting pressure on wildlife and the formal protection of the Atewa forest giving hope to 100 threatened species and 5 million Ghanaians who depend on this unique forest. When protection is achieved by bottom-up approaches, and is approved and supported by the local communities, conservation outcomes are sustainable and significantly more effective.

Range-wide protection of Jaguars in America

As a charismatic species, the jaguar has received considerable attention from the research world, but until recently, few conservation initiatives have had a positive impact on their populations. This changed after continent-wide assessments alerted the world to the critical status of most jaguar populations; a condition somehow masked by the large extent of its distribution. In fact, 33 of 34 subpopulations are considered at high extinction risk, with these 33 subpopulations having estimated population sizes below the theoretical threshold for long-term survival. Numerous scientific and conservation groups started addressing threats at a local scale, including conflict reduction, poaching control, and habitat and connectivity conservation, among other interventions. As a result, conservation initiatives flourished across the continent with significant positive results, many of which demonstrate incredible potential for upscaling. For instance, over 20 local initiatives convened to create the National Alliance for Jaguar Conservation of Mexico which recently published the results of the national census. The results indicate a slight increase in jaguar population numbers in the country, mostly due to habitat recovery and maintenance, conflict mitigation, and community engagement. Another example includes the Jaguar Friendly certification of coffee and cacao producers in Costa Rica, Mexico, and Colombia, with pilot projects in other countries, where local producers secure habitat and manage their production systems such that they directly contribute to jaguar and prey conservation in critical habitats. The certificate, endorsed by the Wildlife Friendly Enterprise Network, secures market and premium prices for the products, which not only leads to the protection of habitats and minimized threats, but also contributes to sustainable local livelihoods. These and numerous other initiatives in Brazil, Argentina, Guatemala, and Panama, among others, led to the establishment of the Jaguar 2030 Roadmap signed by 18 countries to safeguard jaguar populations across the continent. It is expected that this framework will have a significant impact on jaguar conservation in the future largely because it was conceived, designed, and is mostly driven and monitored at local scales by grassroots organizations and local people. These boots-in-the-mud stakeholders understand the importance of safeguarding the largest Neotropical predator and that coexistence is possible and can actually contribute to both human development and biodiversity conservation.

Addressing Global Issues at Local Levels

These initiatives are only some of the many that are being implemented around the world, but currently receive little if any attention or support from established authorities. On the contrary, governments around the world continue to prioritize ecologically unsustainable development, often choosing to dilute or change current environment/wildlife laws to expedite economic growth, thereby becoming a direct threat to the sustainability of conservation initiatives and biodiversity conservation at large. This is often exacerbated by the pursuit of short-term goals within political election cycles. The endorsement of overarching agreements and conventions seems to have granted apparent license to ignore direct action, and signatures alone are seemingly used to 'prove' that countries are thinking and caring about the future regardless of whether the targets in these agreements are actually being met.

Future for Nature laureates and the diverse programs they lead across the world are living proof that upscaling successful local initiatives and fostering the participation of more people, especially the next generation, delivers results. The laureates have demonstrated that successful conservation actions are inclusive, particularly of key local leaders and communities that are directly facing the consequences of ecologically harmful development plans. Conservation approaches grounded in strong socio-economic and socio-ecological principles are needed to overcome the current tendency to see habitats and biodiversity as mere resources to be dominated and used by the privileged, while unjustly excluding the under-privileged and vulnerable communities living in, around, and with these natural resources. Such approaches recognize the need for coexistence of society with nature, resulting in a healthy planet and sustained human well-being.

Leading up to the 15th Conference of Parties (CoP) to the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Future for Nature laureates hereby make an urgent call to world leaders. Our appeal is to support the strengthening of bottom-up strategies to effectively ensure nature conservation through sound commitments and implementation at national, international, and global scales. In addition to overarching MEAs and other frameworks needed to guarantee a lasting impact for conservation, grassroots approaches that contribute to achieving the agreed upon goals require integration into current mainstream strategies for nature conservation. The inherent paradigm needs to be shifted to achieve a co-design or horizontal approach involving indigenous peoples and local communities to ensure nature conservation from local to global and vice-versa. Governing bodies and global conventions must both create and endorse mechanisms that empower the implementation of local initiatives and strategies. Similarly, signatory entities must be held accountable for creating these mechanisms.

We therefore call upon all those Party authorities attending CBD CoP15, and all signatory Parties, to:

- Acknowledge biodiversity decline as a serious crisis on par with the climate crisis, and work to implement the obligations under CBD with the same level of commitment as to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), such that actions implemented to tackle climate change do not undermine ecosystem or biodiversity conservation.
- Strengthen the integrated management of natural resources and ecosystems by recognising, valuing, and endorsing locally-led initiatives.
- Strengthen (inter)national financial and political support for grassroots organizations, indigenous peoples, and local communities that implement nature conservation and sustainable resource use.
- Shift conservation strategy design and planning from a 'top-down only' focus to an integrated design including bottom-up approaches in order to achieve a holistic, co-designed strategy.
- Promote the active participation of grassroots organizations and local leaders in multilateral environmental agreements, like the CBD.
- Hold signatories accountable for failing to meet targets or implementing policies that do not align with the agreement.

About the Future For Nature Family

The undersigned conservationists have all been recipients of several prestigious Awards around the world for their important conservation work. They are all united under the Future For Nature Family, a growing network of expert conservation practitioners that currently include 45 laureates of the Future For Nature Award from >30 countries. As individuals, they strive to promote the conservation of species and habitats in their respective countries. Together, they are a voice for biodiversity conservation, systemic societal change, and enhancing conservation governance and accountability for the benefit of nature and people.

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