# THIRD CONSERVATION & HUMAN RIGHTS FORUM

***Furthering self-determination, practicing interculturality, and working in solidarity towards common purpose***

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*Co-convened by the Pawanka Fund and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) with support from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and Nia Tero*

*Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates*
*October 6-7, 2025*

PAWANKA FUND

Wildlife Conservation Society

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This Page - Aerial view of the coastline of Peava village located on Nggatokae Island, Solomon Islands | Photo credit: Tom Vierus ©WCS

Front cover - A woman weaves baskets from palm leafs on Loaua Island, Papua New Guinea | Photo credit: Tom Vierus ©WCS

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Rethinking conservation models and translating shared values into collaborations*

Climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation, and threats to human rights are interconnected, not separate issues which the entire conservation sector, including governments, are making efforts to understand better when developing scientific, technical, and political solutions. The multiple and interconnected crises of our world reaffirm the need for solidarity, partnership, and a wholistic approach to nature and various sectors that interface with it. As such the Conservation and Human Rights Forum recognizes that protecting human rights is essential to protecting nature.

Fragmenting discussions about nature, biodiversity and climate risks excluding Indigenous Peoples and local communities' voices and values. Fragmentation also contributes to not being able to tackle many of the root causes and challenges that undermine our ability to protect nature. When climate is discussed in isolation from Indigenous governance and land stewardship practices, we lose critical nuances that are often rooted in Indigenous or traditional knowledge systems.

Within the conservation sector, actors are constantly evolving by enacting institutional reforms and advancing systems change. Several are enabling human rights-based approaches that go beyond the traditional 'do no harm' mindset—towards actively exploring how to 'do better.' Although there are successful examples of initiatives that advance human rights and self-determination, implementation remains uneven and, at times, unsystematic. This coupled with the lack of funding for human rights and for certain geographies makes progress uneven. To bridge these gaps, efforts are underway to shift mindsets, build new skills, and introduce diverse perspectives that demonstrate how conservation can be effective through rethinking conservation and designing multiple models to protect nature wholistically.

The Third Forum on Conservation and Human Rights (the Forum) was co-organized by the Pawanka Fund and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and held in Abu Dhabi from 6-7 October 2026. It was co-chaired by Edna Kaptoyo on behalf of Dr. Myrna Cunningham Kain, Chair of the Pawanka Fund Guiding Committee and Sushil Raj, the Executive Director of the Rights and Communities global program at the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS). It took place at a time of escalating global crises: the climate emergency, biodiversity loss, and multiple threats to health from zoonotic pathogens, as well as those related to pollution, heat, and food systems. Amidst these crises, Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities also continue to face increasing threats to their lands, territories, and cultures.

The agenda of the Forum built on the previous meetings with an emphasis on collaborations for cross-regional learning and the development of joint strategies to address the interconnected crises facing people and the planet. The meeting was guided by the framework and common agenda distilled from the Second Forum and this report summarizes the Third Forum's major themes, discussions, and outcomes in accordance with Chatham House Rules. Where people or presentations are quoted in this report, their consent has been obtained.

In contributing to furthering a collaborative agenda, participants were invited to bring one recommendation for joint action and one collaboration idea based on their comparative advantage and capacities. Participants were also encouraged to think beyond their individual roles and functions to identify problem areas that required partnership, coalition, or complementary strategies for scale and impact.

The Forum served as a critical touchpoint for Indigenous Peoples (IPs), people of African descent (PAD), local communities (LCs), conservation organizations, and donors to move beyond "inclusive conservation" as a term into a lived reality. Discourse at the Forum moved the needle from basic human rights awareness towards self-determined priorities, epistemic parity of Indigenous Science, and the restructuring of financial governance systems with ideas to bring in more recognition and human rights accountability viz. Governments and private sector actors. The Forum also emphasized the importance of working on co-design, co-production, collaboration, and mutual support across the conservation sector to address complex problems, while being mindful of the challenges, differences, as well as inspiration that comes from working collectively.

The deep inter-connection between protecting nature and protecting people continued to resurface in discussions and the roles of people of African descent, caste affected peoples, and women in conservation were examined further with a call to bridge gender gaps and also promote restoration efforts that are gender-responsive.

**Participants identified several issues and questions in need of further examination. These include:**

- How to better equip public and private funders to partner effectively and ethically with IPs and LCs?
- Which corporate/extractive actors should the Forum engage with, what are the risks, and what is the ideal format for dialogue?
- How can grant criteria be redesigned to include IPs and LCs who do not meet traditional "large-scale" eligibility?
- How to transition from the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge to respectful, sovereign integration?
- How can we engage the youth in the future Forum discussions?
- How can funding be effectively directed to elders and knowledge holders to combat rapid cultural loss?
- What strategies can mitigate the impact of military occupation and human conflict on nature?
- How can the Forum advocate for shifting of funding to IPs & LCs, Afro-descentants Peoples, and for equitable funding in regions where IPs lack formal legal recognition?
- Should a sub-group develop indicators to track the practical application of the UNEP Core Principles at the regional and local levels?
- Who can lead a deep-dive analysis into how global caste systems drive resource denial and environmental vulnerability?
- How can members of this Forum benefit from the voices and expertise of community paralegals working on carbon justice?
- What are the remedy frameworks that are used in practice and could this be a topic of future discussion?
- What can we celebrate together as a group in the next Forum?

**Participants identified several issues and questions in need of further examination. These include:**

**Expanding the table:** Invite some from the private sector, academic actors, more from philanthropic, conservation and development organizations.

**Identifying topics for future Forums:** Solicit suggestions for topics and outcomes from Forum participants that we should be collaborating towards.

**Formalizing a Joint Program of Work:** Move from reflections and insights to a codified strategy that links recommendations to financing and joint endeavors at the regional and national levels.

**Creating sub-groups on some issue areas:** These would develop work in between annual sessions to further some of the recommendations and prepare for future discussions, including on private sector engagement.

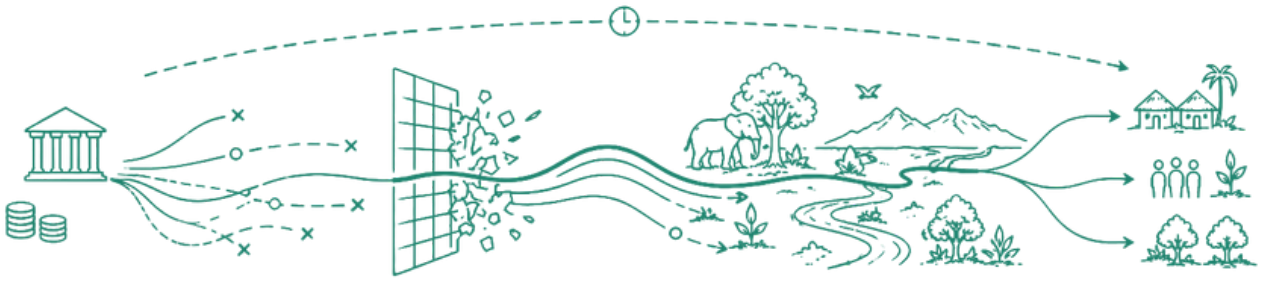
**Identifying opportunities for side events at regional and international platforms** which can amplify the discussions and outcomes of the Forum.

**Partnering further to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, Western science, and human rights perspectives** as a key means to addressing complex challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss.

The following recommendations also emerged from the Forum. These are addressed to the broader conservation sector constituting funders, governments, private sector, and civil society:

## TRANSFORMING CONSERVATION FUNDING

**Goal: Move from short-term, metric-heavy funding to long-term, equitable, and rights-based financial partnerships.**



- Move beyond "hectares protected" toward funding models that value the complex social and cultural systems of Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant Peoples, and local communities.
- Replace short-term "projects" with generational funding that respects community-led timelines and builds long-term institutional strength and solidarity.
- Conduct impact assessments of funding pledges to identify barriers and develop ways to overcome them for resources to reach the ground in ways that do not unintentionally reinforce regional or social inequities.
- Link funding to the operationalization of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and human rights safeguards, ensuring accountability even when national governments are non-compliant.
- Partner with conservation organizations and other intermediaries to unlock sustainable capital beyond traditional grants, including risk-informed and innovative financing instruments designed in consultation with IPs and LCs.

## CENTERING HUMAN RIGHTS & LAND TENURE

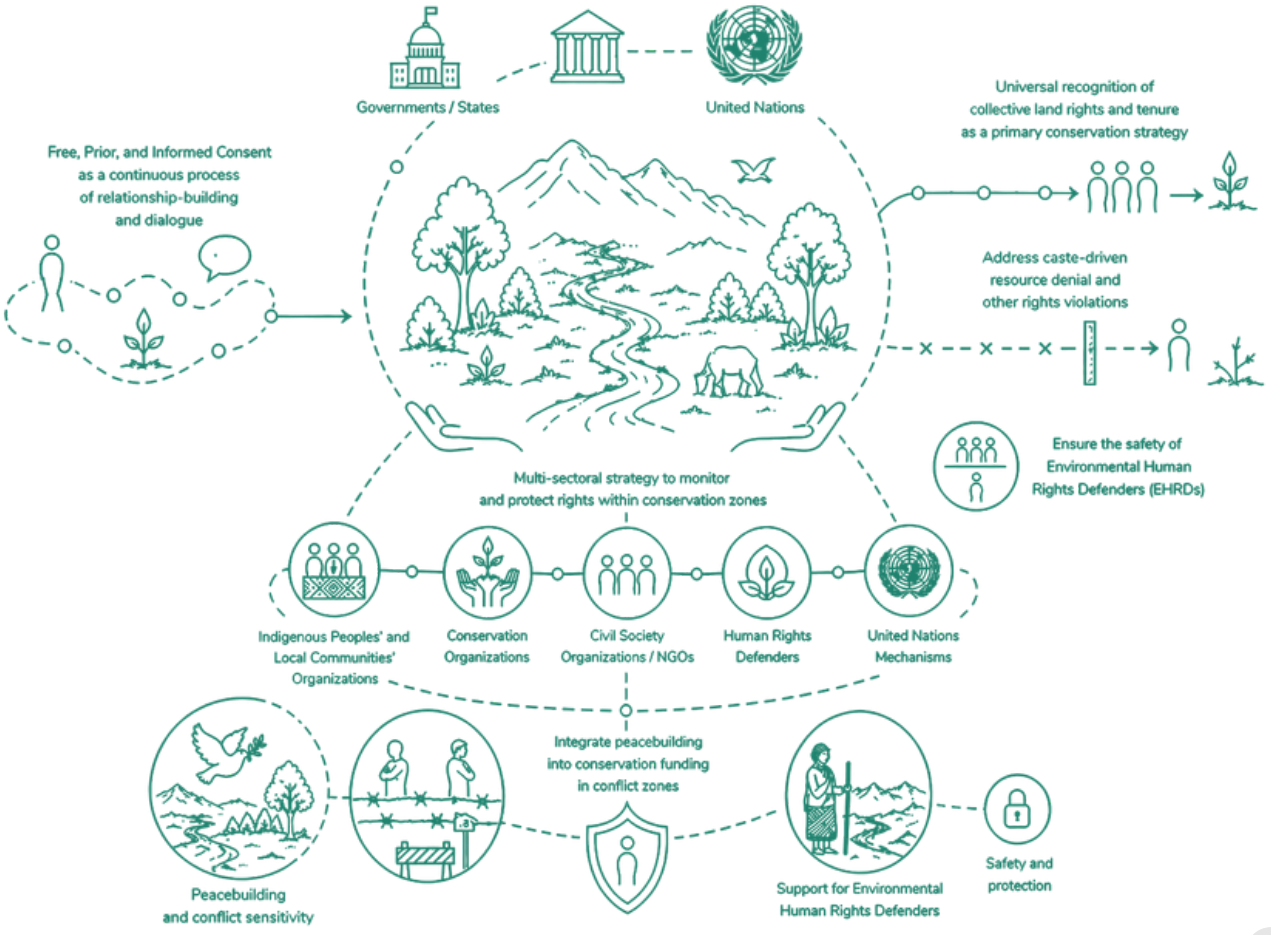
**Goal: Secure legal protections and collective land rights as the foundation of conservation.**

- Advocate for universal recognition of collective land rights and tenure for Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants Peoples, and marginalized groups as a primary conservation strategy.

- Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) should be a continuous process of relationship-building and dialogue rather than a compliance checklist.

- Build a multi-sectoral strategy linking Indigenous Peoples' organizations, Human Rights Defenders, NGOs, Conservation Organizations, and the UN to monitor and protect rights within conservation zones.

- Integrate peacebuilding into conservation funding in conflict zones and address underexplored issues like caste-driven resource denial and the safety of Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs).

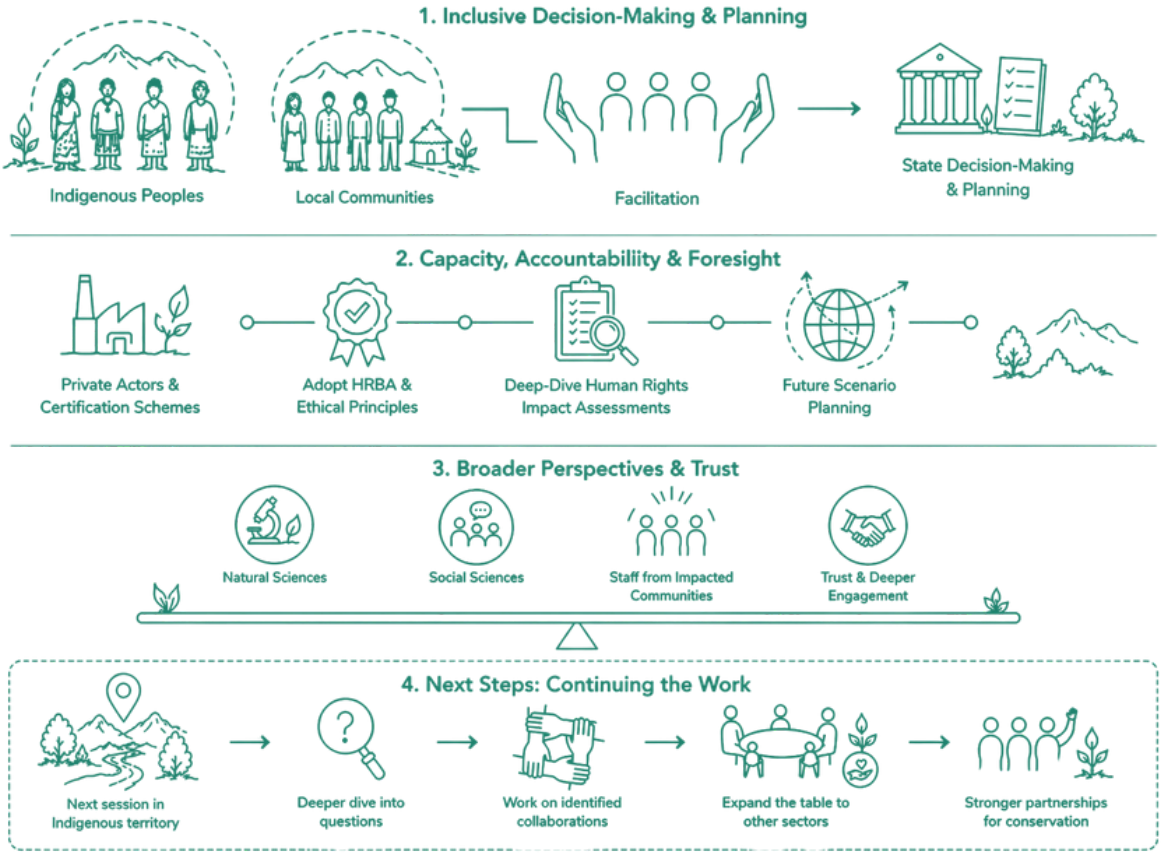


## STRENGTHENING GOVERNANCE & ACCOUNTABILITY

**Goal: Facilitate inclusive decision-making across government, private, and civil sectors.**

- Conservation organizations should act as facilitators to integrate Indigenous Peoples and local communities into formal state decision-making and provincial-level planning.
- Build the capacity of private actors and certification schemes to adopt Human Rights-Based Approaches (HRBA) and ethical principles.
- Require governments and organizations to conduct deep-dive human rights impact assessments and future scenario planning for all major conservation initiatives.
- Increase diversity of disciplines beyond natural sciences to include social sciences and bring on more staff in conservation organizations from impacted communities to build trust and deeper engagement with communities.

Co-Chairs of the Forum intend to organize the next session in an Indigenous territory, take a deeper dive into the questions raised at this forum, work on identified collaborations, and expand the table to bring in other sectors for discussion.



# PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS

*Updates from Conservation Organizations and Rights Holders*

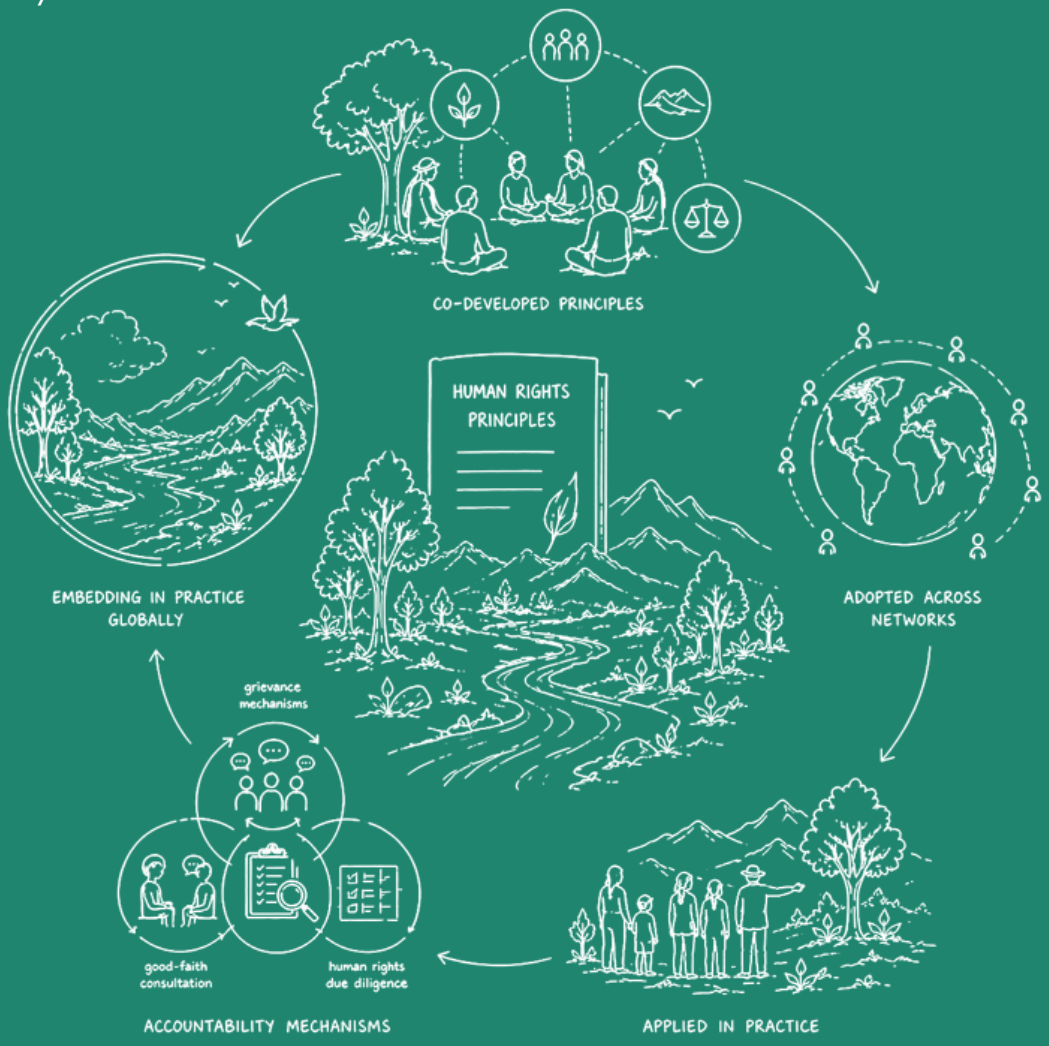
The Forum began with a recap of the previous Forum discussions, reflections, and updates from participating conservation organizations on what they have done since. This ranged from the development of principles and policies to cultural and resource shifts happening within organizations. They highlighted how these are having a positive impact in their relations and partnerships with Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPs & LCs).

Conservation organizations further shared how they are moving beyond inclusion towards active co-design conservation efforts with Indigenous Peoples and local communities at field sites as an approach that helps reduce risks and fosters mutual learning. Several groups are forming advisory committees and bringing communities into decision making to ensure respect for Indigenous Peoples' rights and to collaboratively reimagine the 'language of conservation.' There is growing recognition that developing and implementing policies aligned with this vision is a multi-year process involving cultural integration, capacity building, and continuous learning, simultaneously evolving in approach and ensuring that these policies become lived values rather than mere compliance tools.

Magallenic penguin colony at Estancia San Lorenzo. Argentina | Photo credit: Martín Brogger ©WCS

## Core Human Rights Principles for Private Conservation Organizations and Funders

Through UNEP's leadership, the Core Human Rights Principles for Private Conservation Organizations and Funders were developed with the input of major conservation organizations. These principles were also adopted at the IUCN Congress through a motion, which would extend them to over 1,400 members worldwide. Follow-up meetings have shifted the focus toward practical implementation, asking how these principles can be applied on the ground. A publication titled, "Human Rights-Based Approaches to Conservation: Demonstrating Progress in Practice" highlights examples like grievance mechanisms, good-faith consultations, and human rights due diligence processes undertaken by major conservation organizations such as CI, Fauna and Flora, TNC, WCS, and WWF, who are members of the Conservation Initiative on Human Rights. This ongoing work signals a critical step toward embedding human rights into conservation practice globally.



The Nature Conservancy (TNC) shared how they recently began embedding these human rights principles into the organization's conservation work by commissioning a third-party organizational gap analysis. These assessment findings were shared with the executive leadership and the audit board committee, leading to strong commitments to resource this work and elevate human rights as a critical organizational risk alongside legal and reputational risks. The process reinforces the principle of "do no harm" and offers lessons for both large and mid-sized organizations on creating systems that respect human rights. Ultimately, this approach demonstrates how practical tools and continuous learning can help conservation organizations align with global standards and UNEP's principles.

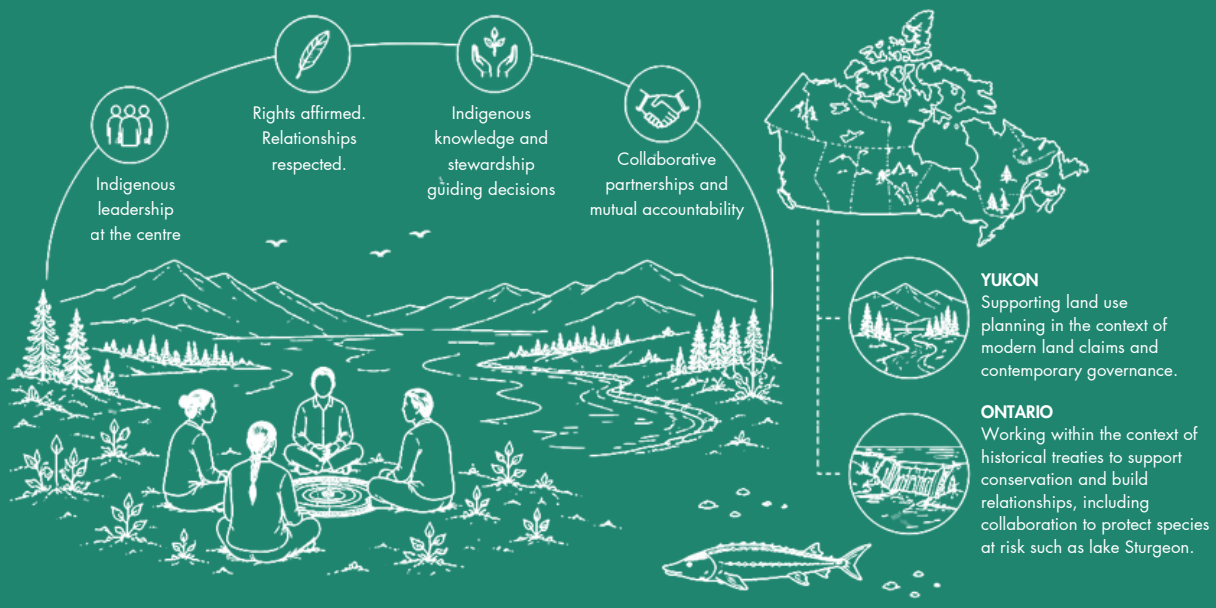
The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) discussed its adoption of the Gender and Social Inclusion Policy, updates to the Code of Conduct to include caste as a protected category, and work underway to develop an Indigenous Peoples' policy, as well as an ongoing review of existing policies and frameworks. A robust Grievance Redress Mechanism is now operating across 21 countries and expanding. In terms of organizational shifts, its efforts continue to unlock and share financial resources. The previously established Indigenous-led Territorial Fund in Bolivia has channeled more than $1.2 million to Indigenous territories and the roll out of the Community Fund for Forests in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) continued with majority representation from Indigenous Peoples and local communities on the steering committee. Initial grants have been made under this mechanism and efforts are underway to identify further funding.

Two makret vendors at the Saturday Market in Kavieng, the capital of the New Ireland Province. Papua New Guinea | Photo credit: Tom Vierus ©WCS

## WCS Canada's support to Indigenous-led conservation models

All lands in Canada lie within the traditional territories of Indigenous Peoples, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis. Across the world's second-largest country, many areas remain ecologically intact. With more than 600 First Nations in Canada, and with First Nations' rights recognized and affirmed under section 35 of the Constitution Act, Canada's conservation future depends on First Nations leadership. In the Yukon, WCS Canada's work takes place in the context of a modern land claim, to support land use planning processes in the context of relatively contemporary governance structures. In Ontario, the work takes place in the context of historical treaties, where conservation efforts are shaped by ongoing treaty relationships that are often treated as settled. There, WCS Canada provides technical support and helps strengthen relationships between First Nations and development proponents, including in cases where collaboration with a hydro project can help protect the culturally and ecologically-significant (and highly endangered) lake sturgeon.

Building an inclusive and collaborative conservation model requires accountability to Indigenous leadership. It also depends on strong partnerships among donors, conservation organizations, local organizations, and Indigenous Peoples' organizations.



WWF-International highlighted the work of the Ombudsperson, which is a key accountability mechanism for the organization. It has established rigorous systems in place to do no harm while building the mindsets and a culture of adopting a new lens that use the term inclusive conservation. The focus is on systems change with respect to contracts, funding arrangements, and addressing bottle necks. The organization has been examining several questions through its champions group focused on the meaning of being inclusive in operations and examining the barriers to change. Among the key objectives of WWF leadership is to amplify locally-led conservation while enabling the agency and sovereignty of communities. WWF has also constituted an Indigenous Peoples' consultative group to provide feedback on ways of protecting Indigenous Peoples' rights and taking more collaborative action.

Conservation International mentioned how it advanced the mainstreaming of gender to achieve gender equality. It has moved from awareness raising to having an Indigenous Peoples policy. It has continued to serve as the Secretariat of the Conservation Initiative on Human Rights to advance issues in this discussion and practice forum. Challenges include funding and the backlash against inclusivity.

## From the Indigenous Peoples' perspective participants highlighted the following ways of engaging in conservation:

### Community-Led and Rights-Based Conservation

Indigenous Peoples Organizations (IPOs) prioritize community leadership, ensuring that Indigenous Peoples have substantial influence over conservation decision-making and governance. This includes recognizing customary land tenure, supporting local institutions, and upholding the rights and agency of Indigenous communities. Human rights-based approaches emphasize Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) and the integration of human rights into conservation planning.

### Integration of Indigenous Knowledge Systems

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous Knowledge Systems are central to IPOs conservation strategies. These knowledge systems guide sustainable resource management, restoration, and monitoring, often through practices adapted over generations to local environments. Concepts like "Two-Eyed Seeing" encourage the integration of Indigenous and Western scientific knowledge for more holistic conservation outcomes.

**Co-Management and Partnerships**

Many IPOs engage in co-management arrangements with governments, NGOs and other stakeholders. These partnerships are most successful when they respect Indigenous leadership, share decision-making power, and align with local priorities and values. Co-productive conservation frameworks emphasize co-planning, co-learning, and co-assessment to ensure ethical and culturally relevant conservation.

**Biocultural and Relational Approaches**

IPOs often adopt biocultural approaches that recognize the inseparability of people, culture, and nature. Conservation is viewed as a relational practice, emphasizing reciprocity, stewardship, and the maintenance of both biological and cultural diversity.

Indigenous Peoples' networks and rights holders spoke about collaborations with conservation organizations that yielded positive benefits. Agenda alignment at multilateral fora and strong support from conservation organizations like WCS to support the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity (IIFB) in its advocacy led to the creation of a permanent subsidiary body to Article 8(J) – a key important milestone. Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) discussed the overhaul of its five-year manifesto with a focus on interconnected solidarity and support for self-determined priorities.

The session moved into rethinking conservation models, funding challenges, and how these can be addressed through different approaches.

Indigenous Bunong People in Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary, Cambodia | Photo credit: Filip Agoo & Everland

# RETHINKING CONSERVATION MODELS

*The Whole of Nature and People Approach*

***"Indigenous Peoples are reimagining what conservation could look like as they are confronting a lot of complex challenges. For Indigenous Peoples innovation could be revitalizing. Strengthening new governance models can lead to new initiatives and new ways of impact to support nature" – Edna Kaptoyo***

Climate change, biodiversity loss, land degradation and threats to human rights are interconnected, not separate issues which the entire conservation sector, including governments, are making efforts to understand better when developing scientific, technical, and political solutions.

Fragmenting discussions about nature, biodiversity and climate risks excluding Indigenous Peoples and local communities' voices and values. Fragmentation also contributes to not being able to tackle many of the root causes and challenges that undermine our ability to protect nature. When climate is discussed in isolation, we lose critical nuances that are often rooted in Indigenous or traditional knowledge systems. It is therefore essential to recognize and embed Indigenous and traditional knowledge systems as foundational elements to understanding and addressing the inter-connected environmental challenges.

Within the conservation sector, actors are constantly evolving by enacting institutional reforms and advancing systems change. Several are enabling human rights-based approaches that go beyond the traditional 'do no harm' mindset—towards actively exploring how to 'do better.' There are successful examples of initiatives that advance human rights and self-determination. However, implementation remains uneven and, at times, unsystematic. This coupled with the lack of funding for human rights and for certain geographies makes progress uneven. To bridge these gaps, efforts are underway to shift mindsets, build new skills, and introduce diverse perspectives that demonstrate how conservation can be effective through multiple models while protecting nature wholistically.

The whole of nature approach should be a departure point for the future of conservation practice, both governmental and nongovernmental.

**Developing overarching global strategy with a wholistic approach to protecting nature that includes and values people.**

WCS is developing its new global strategy which takes a wholistic approach to nature that draws upon Indigenous values. It focuses on ecological integrity which is underpinned by an understanding that biological and cultural diversity are interlinked through livelihoods, identity, culture, language, well-being, biodiversity, and sustainable living. The strategy looks at the role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities as natural stewards and active defenders of nature. Through a human-rights-based approach that is grounded in conservation social sciences, WCS honors self-determination; prioritizes justice and non-discrimination; and is increasingly focused on co-creation with Indigenous Peoples and local communities. This new strategy will guide the organization's programming across themes, countries and engagement with governments and the private sector to further its mission of saving wildlife and wild places.

Organizations like Namati have helped to democratize the law by equipping frontline organizers with practical legal knowledge and skills in facilitation, negotiation, and mediation. This enables communities to secure tenure rights and strengthen local governance. Their approach begins with communities identifying and formalizing stewardship practices through inclusive by-laws, management bodies, and participatory decision-making, followed by pursuing formal recognition of land rights through legal mechanisms such as land registration or community forest certificates. This process has been implemented across Africa and Southeast Asia for over 15 years, empowering communities to resist harmful land uses and engage external actors from a position of collective strength. This same approach is now being applied as a tool for ensuring conservation finance and carbon market initiatives uphold community rights. Rights-based tools like Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) are essential to ethical conservation planning.

Indigenous Peoples and local communities-led conservation is rooted in ancient wisdom, where people, land, and animals co-exist in harmony through local practices (e.g. rotational grazing) reminding us that protecting nature also means sustaining the communities that depend on it. Indigenous-led examples of co-existence with wildlife in migratory corridors of Kenya's South Rift Association of Land Owners (SORALO Approach) was presented. It focused on how communities are rethinking conservation approaches. These are grounded in community concepts of collective responsibilities and traditional knowledge of the landscape to inform actions in areas that are facing immense external pressures. The living landscape model is supporting co-existence with nature and pastoralists' livelihoods to thrive. It highlighted how intergenerational perspectives offer valuable insights for navigating current challenges while equipping future generations to engage with and care for the landscape with a deep respect for cultural values that connect people to nature and to one another.

Another example of an Indigenous-led initiative, the Abya Yala Forum Approach, highlighted the importance of spiritual connections to land, which are often missing in dominant conservation models, and how integrating Indigenous governance through traditional councils and tenure rights can embed cultural identity and values into conservation efforts. This model emphasizes the need to support culturally centered local economies, recognize diverse leadership structures, and invest in youth, gender inclusion, and community-identified training and capacity building to help communities thrive.

Spiritual connections and values are generally misinterpreted or disconnected from the wholistic approach during the design and implementation of national laws, policies, or programs as these try to quantify or limit the demarcation of lands or waters.

- There is an opportunity for conservation organizations to bridge this gap within government frameworks by improving their understanding and engaging in multiple paradigms when it comes to intangible values like cultural and spiritual rights and the importance of strengthening cultural identities.

In order to overcome this, we need to acknowledge the Indigenous and traditional knowledge of IPs & LCs and their methods, tools and approaches when it comes to protecting, restoring and conserving nature.

- In addition to capacity building of state institutions, a primary role of conservation organizations should include facilitation of processes and mechanisms that integrate Indigenous Peoples and local communities in formal decision-making processes through the human rights-based approach to conservation.

## THE ROLE OF ACADEMIA IN RETHINKING CONSERVATION MODELS

Academia can continue to play a crucial role in research and curricular development to further a whole of nature agenda. National universities are increasingly being engaged in research related to biodiversity monitoring, climate change, and other pressing environmental issues. At the same time, many local communities maintain rich repositories of traditional knowledge, often preserved through oral histories passed down across generations. These forms of local knowledge offer valuable insights into sustainable practices and environmental stewardship.

A key question arises: How are Indigenous Peoples' knowledge and local knowledge systems being integrated into academic curricula and research frameworks?

- Such knowledge should be recognized and incorporated into formal education to strengthen the relevance and impact of research, while also honoring and preserving such knowledge systems.

## INNOVATION IN MARINE AREAS

When it comes to securing rights, key areas of focus such as marine territories and governance need further technical support. Conservation organizations could help bridge this gap to ensure proper consultation with IPs & LCs, as governments strive to establish marine protected areas (MPA).

**Western Indian Ocean (WIO) Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA)**

The WIO LMMA Alliance is advancing locally managed marine areas (LMMAs) through legal recognition, capacity building, direct funding access, and support for blue business and investment. The initiative also promotes inclusive governance, values traditional knowledge alongside research, and contributes to global conservation goals like 30x30 by expanding marine management and enhancing visibility through storytelling and data tracking.

The initiative emphasized the need to empower Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPs & LCs) as leaders in ocean and coastal climate action, including securing legal recognition and tenure of their territories. The 15x30 strategy aims to conserve 30% of land, inland waters, and oceans by 2030, with 15% led by IP & LC and Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures (OECMs). Ensuring direct access to funding, inclusive governance, and technical support were identified as critical for effective marine and coastal conservation. Strengthening data systems to track IPs & LCs and OECM contributions, and expanding community-based marine management, were highlighted as key priorities. Participants also called for elevating IPs & LCs and OECM stories through storytelling and investment strategies to support advocacy and sustainable livelihoods.

# SHIFTING CONSERVATION FUNDING PARADIGMS

***"Recognition and respect moves the conversation from a transactional one focused solely on resources to a deeper one of partnerships."– Ivana Fertziger***

Funding organizations mentioned that many within philanthropy are learning from Indigenous Peoples organizations and moving toward people-centered grantmaking, recognizing that conservation success is inseparable from Indigenous self-determination, human rights, traditional knowledge, spirituality, and well-being. Rather than directing priorities, funders are increasingly supporting the existing visions of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

A spearfisher near a healthy hard coral reef just off Emirau Island. Murat LLG, New Ireland Province, Papua New Guinea | Photo credit: Tom Vierus ©WCS

## REIMAGINING METRICS AND PARTNERSHIPS

Indigenous participants emphasized that funding must be assessed for its impact on Indigenous values and ways of life. IPs & LCs measures of well-being, which generally include forest health and access to medicinal plants, are often replaced by data-driven donor metrics, prompting reflection on whether this shift aligns with or alters Indigenous value systems. Funders are therefore encouraged to consider how their reporting demands may unintentionally reshape Indigenous perspectives. There is a critical need to move beyond "data-driven" donor metrics (like forest hectares) that can unintentionally reshape Indigenous values. Funding should therefore support:

- **Long-term Generational Processes:** Moving away from short-term project cycles toward restructured and long-term partnerships.

- **Collective Rights:** Funders have the responsibility to avoid the "hero" narrative that focuses on individuals at the expense of the community.They should work with existing change agents, movements, and approaches that are on the ground rather than create new ones while not flattening the diversity of views within communities and upholding collective rights.

- **UNDRIP Integration:** Explicitly incorporate the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples into funding contracts to address power imbalances and foster more honest, transformative approaches.

The lives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities are not static in places where conservation takes place. Rural life and livelihoods are changing and with them communities as well. New systems of farming, family life, and cultural practices are evolving as are migration patterns. Partners and funders must pay special attention to how these dynamics are unfolding within communities especially for Indigenous women, youth, or ethnic and caste minorities. There should be a special invitation to funders to visit Indigenous Peoples territories and the communities that they are supporting.

Indigenous Bunong People in Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary, Cambodia | Photo credit: Filip Agoo & Everland

## IMPROVING ACCESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Despite an increase in the number of pledges for Indigenous Peoples and local communities, participants mentioned that rigid institutional procedures often exclude smaller organizations. Progress therefore requires co-designing funding mechanisms that reflect lived and cultural realities of communities.

- Conservation organizations and funders have a role at the negotiating table to promote the values of co-design and decision-making by IPs & LCs when identifying entry points for financial and technical support to government bodies.

- Conservation organizations and funders have a role to strengthen and support the ecosystem of direct funding to IPs & LCs, Dalit, Afrodescendant communities, and others.

**Legacy Landscapes Fund (LLF) opening up access to direct funding for Indigenous Peoples and local communities**

The Legacy Landscapes Fund (LLF) shared their call for proposals dedicated to Indigenous Peoples and local communities for area-based conservation. In designing the call they took into consideration the importance of aligning funding priorities with community priorities based on discussions held in previous Conservation and Human Rights Forums. They also looked at the recommendations of the multilateral finance reform paper. While reflecting on their broadened scope in funding, they have identified some key challenges, including donor risk aversion, exclusion of IP territories from IUCN Category I and II areas, and complex No Objection Letter (NOL) requirements such as from governments.

## GOVERNMENT, PRIVATE SECTOR, AND MARKET MECHANISMS

As engagement with carbon and biodiversity markets grows, stakeholders must ensure that ethical safeguards are implemented and not just developed as a tick the box or compliance approach. Sustainability frameworks employed in the private sector need to be reviewed because these often overlook Indigenous Peoples' rights and broader human rights. This would enable a more meaningful discussion and progression around shared interests, while amplifying positive contributions in the private sector, and promoting collaborative approaches.

Models must be co-designed to ensure benefit-sharing is transparent and inclusive, particularly when national governments fail to respect these rights. This may be linked to political dynamics, ground realities, and the roles of funders or conservation organizations.

Some participants highlighted the need to move funding relationships into more meaningful partnerships and identify new ways of negotiating with governments. A notable example was the exchange and learning amongst Indigenous governments from different regions, where finance mechanisms shaped by Indigenous leadership enabled an Indigenous government-to-state government dialogue in order to advance Indigenous Peoples' self-determination.

Discussions raised questions on the importance of engaging with private finance, blended finance, and innovative financing mechanisms (carbon credits and biodiversity credits), under GBF Target 19 while ensuring that rights are respected within market-based mechanisms.

International conservation organizations that act as intermediaries between funders and communities play a vital role in unlocking capital to reach the ground, in particular to create mechanisms for sustainable financing for communities that move beyond grant mechanisms.

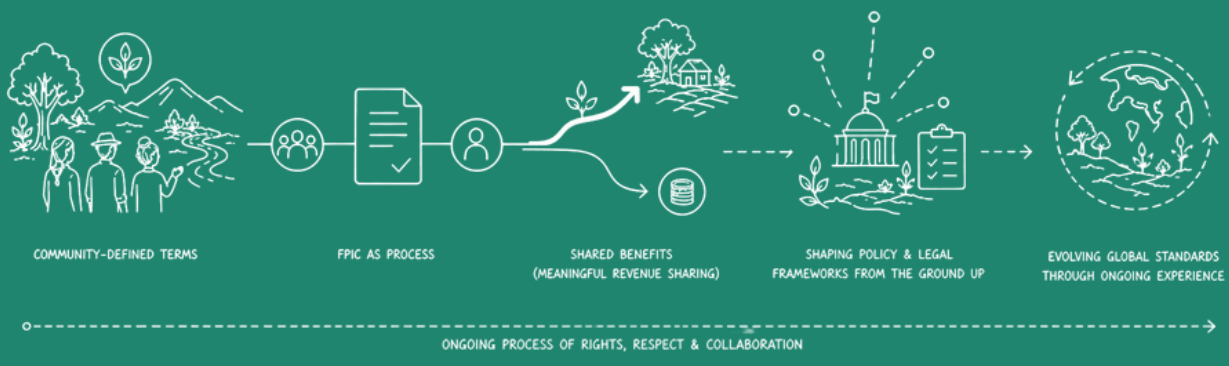
As more private and public funders engage with IPs & LCs on the ground, there may be value in involving certification schemes and private sector actors in conservation dialogues, as they often require guidance to implement projects responsibly.

FPIC is fundamentally a process of dialogue and relationship-building — not a box-ticking exercise. Recognizing this distinction is essential for meaningful engagement with IPs & LCs and achieving better outcomes.

**The advancement of rights and benefit sharing in the Carbon Markets space**

Namati shared how the advancement of rights using Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) can be seen in carbon market projects. When communities proactively define their vision for conservation and propose terms for an agreement with a carbon project developer, they engage as an equal partner. This has led to examples of projects that secure tenure rights for local communities and put in place structures for co-governance and revenue sharing, with some projects committing up to 50% of carbon credit revenue for local stewardship and development priorities. Alongside project-level engagement, communities are organizing collectively to influence national carbon market policies and legal frameworks, ensuring they start from existing land rights and reflect on-the-ground realities, as seen in Kenya's requirement for FPIC and Sierra Leone's community-driven recommendations shaping its national carbon strategy. From these experiences, bottom-up principles have emerged such as tenure rights as a precondition for high integrity carbon markets.

The principles of FPIC as an ongoing process and meaningful revenue sharing with communities have shaped global carbon standards, including the Article 6 grievance mechanism as one example. To bridge the gap between norms and practice, Grassroots Justice Network is developing practical tools for communities, conservation organizations, and project developers to strengthen negotiations and implementation, while engaging with voluntary carbon standard bodies like Verra to embed customary rights and address challenges in implementation. This work also includes strengthening local governance and resource management through bylaws, ensuring compliance with FPIC, and promoting community-centered investment models that channel carbon finance into conservation and livelihoods while shaping national and global policy spaces through Carbon Justice principles.



## ADDRESSING FUNDING GAPS

A large proportion of funding is often concentrated in tropical rainforests or large-scale projects. To be truly effective funding must expand to other under-resourced geographies. Further, a more comprehensive approach is required to support restoration and prioritize Indigenous Peoples and local community-led restorations initiatives at a smaller scale in community-conserved areas covering different ecosystems. Greater inclusion of Indigenous women, youth, people of African descent, Dalit communities, and other minorities in funding portfolios is essential. And funding pledges have to keep in mind potential impact so they do not unintentionally reinforce local or regional inequalities.

Ultimately, both donors and recipients must engage in mutual reflection to ensure that Indigenous value systems are respected and strengthened through collaboration.Funders recognized the value of this Forum in fostering collaboration around shared conservation goals, even amidst differing perspectives with a key role for international conservation organizations.

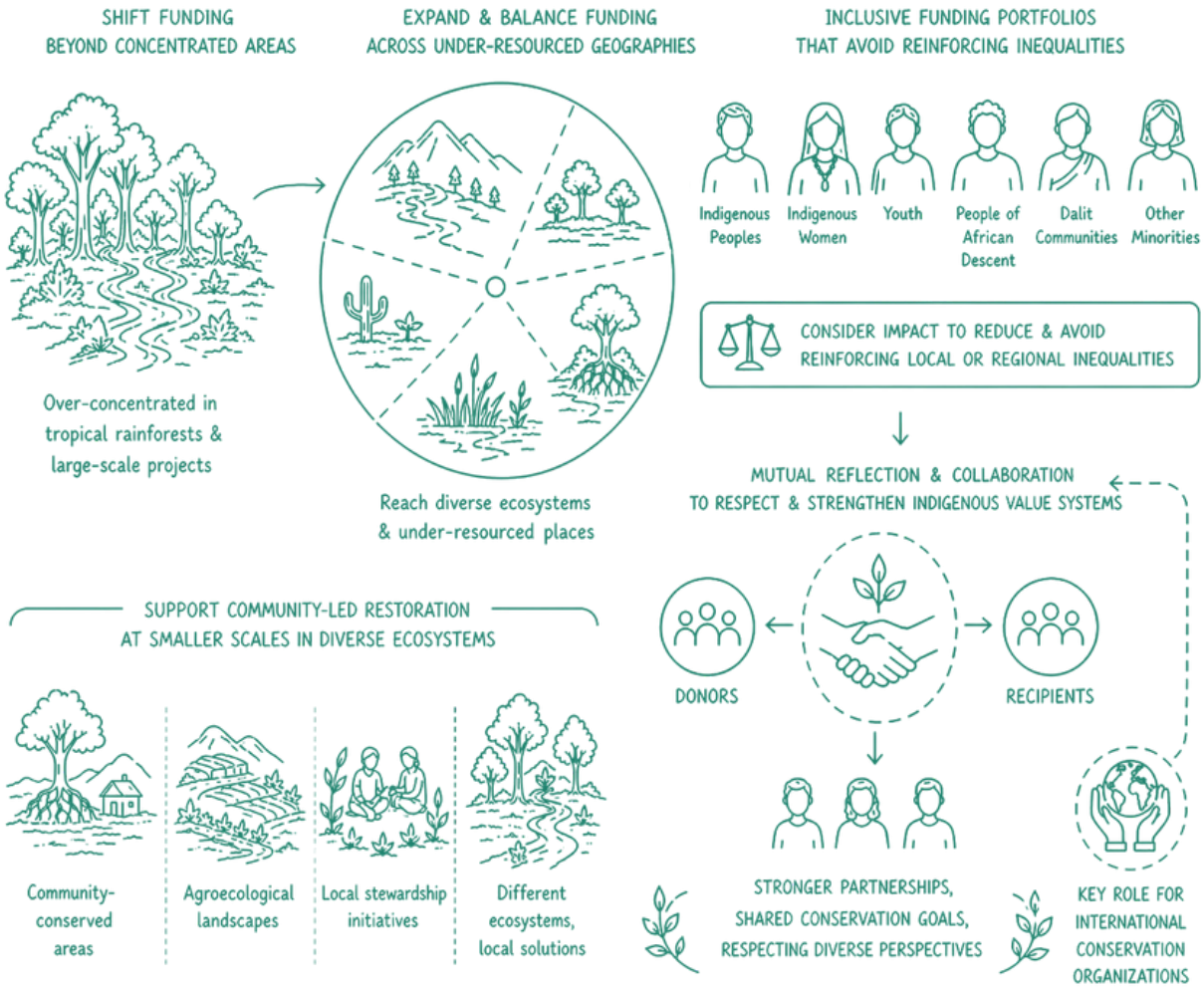



**Figure: Key pathways to address conservation funding gaps redistributing funding geographically, supporting diverse ecosystems and community-led initiatives, and ensuring inclusive, equitable portfolios through collaboration between donors and recipients.**

# GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

*Addressing Conflict Through Collaborations*

Engagements at the international fora have led to the development of international human rights standards and principles but the challenge often remains their translation into national and sub-national practice on the ground. To move forward international standards and principles must be grounded in local realities and informed by diverse knowledge systems. It is extremely important to invest in practical, collaborative action across different layers of society to influence real-world practices.

Take the example of UNDRIP Article 39 on the right to access financial and technical assistance from states and international cooperation. Both conservation organizations and rights holders can work with governments on simplifying access to different governmental mechanisms. For example, Free Prior and Informed Consent processes are at times administered by one branch of government, traditional knowledge preservation by another, and human rights and justice by yet another. This makes it hard to know who has responsibility, where communities should build partnerships, and whom they can trust. Governance also needs to be reinforced using traditional and customary authorities as they interface with local government to increase access to finance under Article 39.

***"How do we bring it back to ground where it matters?" – June Rubis***

In countries where the state does not recognize Indigenous Peoples, funding and protection become very difficult to access especially where human rights protections might be dismantled.

Guatemala | Photo credit: Sergio Izquierdo ©WCS

Various strategies to overcome this hurdle should be considered and explored such as:

- Inter-governmental exchanges, primarily bilateral or regional, on human rights and budgeting.
- Increased coordination between ministries on human rights in conservation, and where possible conservation organizations should play that facilitation role.
- Working at the local level with government and government champions can create openings to help them be more inclusive.
- Building the capacity of field teams within conservation organisations to navigate local and traditional governance structures
- Link conservation to provincial level issues and how this affects the vote bank.
- In some countries human development indicators matter to governments, hence integrating the whole of nature approach which looks at human well-being can be yet another entry point.

Apart from governments, participants raised the question of engaging the private sector, especially around extractives and carbon developers. They acknowledged the need to engage without compromising on the values of this Forum and its objectives.

Additionally armed and criminal groups continue to affect what happens locally in and around conservation zones. This makes the implementation of international commitments and protection of human rights a complex challenge.  In this regard:

- Conservation organizations can continue to play a role that is complementary to advocacy and policy groups by facilitating discussions on the ground. This could be complemented through publications on how conservation organisations apply human rights based approaches within their work.
- A combination of community and outside mediators can be identified to address political and land rights challenges when communities are under threat and at high risk.

Discussions also delved into questions about supporting Indigenous Peoples and local communities in countries and regions that may be facing corruption, governance challenges, political instability, and human rights violations. In such geographies funding is often limited due to their classification as high-risk.

The challenges extend when important issues like environmental and human rights defenders (EHRD) receive little to no funding within conservation initiatives. Over the last few years a larger proportion of foundations are recognizing the crucial role of frontline defenders. While intermediaries often act as donors, they do not hold the same level of influence as funders. Nevertheless, there are strategic opportunities for intermediaries to play a meaningful role in supporting the efforts of environmental and human rights defenders.

- When it comes to the environmental and human rights defenders, Indigenous Peoples collective protection remains a priority, particularly for those in remote or challenging geographies. Championing individuals of those communities must acknowledge the collective within which they are embedded.

- In conflict zones, funding models need to also support frontline peacebuilders, as protecting biodiversity and peace are mutually reinforcing.Supporting local change agents and external advocacy efforts should link biodiversity to larger peacebuilding themes.

- It is also critical to ensure sustainable funding for the protection of EHRDs especially in contexts impacted by extractive industries.

Organizations like the PeaceNexus Foundation have been working to promote conflict-sensitive conservation by encouraging systematic analysis of local dynamics, adaptive programming, and organizational positioning to prevent exacerbating tensions and foster collaboration. To build capacity, they launched an online self-study course as a foundational tool for integrating conflict sensitivity into conservation practice. This course, which was co-developed with a steering committee of leading organizations (including African Wildlife Foundation, Conservation International, WWF, Environmental Peacebuilding Association, and others) is supported by a broader reference group to ensure diverse expertise and relevance. As next steps, PeaceNexus will launch a new call to identify up to three new conservation and environment-focused partners; and they aim to support one or two peer learning cohorts that can use the course as a basis to exchange experiences and strengthen strategies for working in contested, high-risk, and socially complex contexts.

- There is a need to bring these issues back to the community level, where they matter most, and to create accessible platforms for communities to voice concerns and influence decision-making.

Governments are slowly starting to recognize Indigenous Peoples needs but are still falling short of recognizing their contributions. Taking an example from Central Africa, where there are both forest-dependent and pastoralist Indigenous Peoples (mainly Mbuti and Mbororo), several governments have started making progress on their commitments to respect Indigenous Peoples rights, to recognize the vulnerable position of these peoples, and also the vulnerability of being "landless" peoples.Recognizing that the traditional lands of Indigenous Peoples are shaped by their unique relationship to land, culture and nature, also helps to understand why so many have been able to maintain these lands as places of high ecological integrity or moderate modification.

- Renewed interest in protecting Indigenous Peoples should not be seen as a benevolent act but an essential strategy for our common future.

- In light of the climate and resource economics changing, participants mentioned future issues that need to be tackled such as the changing patterns of migration, national pooled funds to support Indigenous Peoples, and the safety nets for farmers.

- Governments, conservation, and other organizations will have to undertake deep multisectoral analysis that takes into account human rights impact assessments and future scenario planning.



Indigenous Mbuti women dance after sunset in their hunting camp deep inside the Okapi Wildlife Reserve, Democratic Republic of Congo | Photo credit: Thomas Nicolon ©FAO

# ETHICS, PARITY, AND CO-EXISTENCE ACROSS DIFFERENT KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

There are differing views around use of the terms Indigenous science, Indigenous Traditional Knowledge (ITK), and traditional knowledge (TK) depending on the region and whose perspective is being conveyed or understood. Indigenous Peoples like the Māori, Aotearoa (New Zealand), have started to question or move away from words like science or knowledge towards different framing like 'kin and country' framework, relating to nature and land. Similarly, in Latin America, cosmovision, saberes ancestrales, and cosmovivencia dominate over "Indigenous Science" in many Indigenous movements, which emphasize epistemic sovereignty and ontological pluralism through political channels and state recognition. In many parts of Asia, terms like Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), Adat, and customary knowledge are commonly used in biodiversity policy spaces, where "science" is often tied to state-led modernization and not necessarily to the knowledge, methods, and practices of Indigenous knowledge systems for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystems.

From 2010 onwards global climate and biodiversity platforms like the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the CBD adopted the term Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK), recognizing it as a plural knowledge system with its own protocols such as FPIC, dialogue, and co-production. However, while "Indigenous Science" has gained some strategic recognition, legitimacy, and some funding, it is still relegated in various quarters to traditional knowledge that is placed beneath mainstream science and associated as a knowledge system of the past. In this sense there is a risk of it being reinterpreted through scientific frameworks to hold less validity or to be equated to an inferior status to mainstream scientific frameworks that historically emerged from the era of enlightenment, colonization, and"western thought." The relational and spiritual dimensions of Indigenous worldviews are often not factored into scientific discourse with the dominance of certain epistemologies that marginalize Indigenous knowledge. Further the romanticization of Indigenous Knowledge (IK) or manipulation for external agendas where communities do not have input or power in decision making risks "epistemicide" (the systematic destruction and silencing or devaluation of knowledge systems) with the potential to undermine Indigenous epistemic sovereignty.

Participants discussed the differing perspectives on Indigenous and traditional knowledge within academia, as well as contradictions in views that arise. While some local universities may document traditional knowledge, they may not frame it as science. Simultaneously traditional knowledge holders may not necessarily want it to be referred to as science in the sense of it being associated with mainstream scientific traditions which have developed as legacies of the enlightenment period and associated Western thought and constructs that have historically borrowed or stolen from Indigenous and traditional knowledge but not given credit or recognition.

The above point reveals a tension between the need to elevate Indigenous science and remove barriers to its acceptance by incorporating elements while preventing cultural appropriation. Simultaneously it needs to be lifted up and maintained as an independent body of work that makes its own contributions to mainstream discourse.

Some examples reveal these tensions and perspectives. In the African context countries like South Africa have a formal Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) policy supporting research and innovation, "African Indigenous Science" remains largely within academic and institutional discourse, with governments referencing IKS in national research and development (R&D), agriculture, climate, and education policies rather than adopting it as formal science policy.

Within the international policy and research fora, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) continues to privilege peer-reviewed literature, creating high barriers for oral and experiential Indigenous knowledge, with "Indigenous Science" appearing mainly due to advocacy by North American scholars and NGOs.

Several recent expert discussions suggest this framing may need revisiting and highlights tensions between Indigenous identities and epistemic inclusion in international science-policy spaces.

In contrast, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) explicitly recognizes Indigenous and Local Knowledge (ILK) terminology which was negotiated to respect plural ontologies from different regions of the Global South, institutionalizing protocols like FPIC and dialogue to support epistemic pluralism[1] without assimilating Indigenous knowledge into Western scientific categories.

[1] *Epistemic pluralism is the view that in science it is a good idea to actively pursue several parallel and competing theories of the same phenomena, at the same or at different levels of analysis.*

**Ecological Integrity (EI)** refers to the overall health of an ecosystem and its structure, function, and composition. Incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and Indigenous Knowledge into its metrics can enrich value recognition, improve metric development in complex contexts, and leverage local insights to define reference states, though integrating place-based knowledge into global frameworks remains a challenge. IPs & LCs have frequently been positive stewards of ecological integrity, actively shaping ecosystems through fire regimes, species distributions, and soil types, yet human activities can also degrade integrity through habitat conversion, over-exploitation, and climate change, making active management essential in many cases. Despite its importance, we lack commonly accepted, robust metrics for measuring ecological integrity within mainstream conservation models. WCS efforts on EI are aiming to bridge this gap by identifying and incorporating TEK into its conservation metrics.

Piangüeras (women mollusk harvesters), Colombia |
Photo credit: Javier Silvia ©WCS

Irrespective of the debates and multiple perspectives, the legal recognition of Indigenous Peoples' customary institutions is vital for sustaining their traditional knowledge, cultural values, and practices. There are several examples of how traditional knowledge is being legally recognized through state mechanisms.

**Legal recognition of Indigenous Peoples' customary institutions to sustain traditional knowledge**

In Nepal legal recognition has ensured the continued stewardship of natural resources and biodiversity. Recognition supports traditional irrigation systems that underpin local livelihoods, and safeguards community-managed ponds and sources of drinking water that are integral to Indigenous ways of life. For example, in the Dura community of Nepal, over 1,000 hectares of forest have been successfully protected through a locally governed customary institution despite initial challenges arising from government recognition. The community resisted pressures to adopt formal state or community forest models and after eight years of advocacy with the Centre for Indigenous Peoples Research and Development (CIPRED), they were able to formally get recognition as Ban Samiti, a traditional governance system recognized under local law. This legal recognition has enabled the Dura community to manage the forest sustainably, prioritizing biodiversity conservation, cultural practices, and local livelihoods over commercial timber extraction.

Some participants highlighted several challenges to moving forward in places where colonial legacies and lack of legal recognition of IPs and ITK persist. These include the erosion of connections between Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and Indigenous governance systems along with the erosion of a large amount of knowledge and discovery, due to systems of oppression, repression, and epistemicide more broadly. As a result, many knowledge systems are incomplete and in danger of further decline.

It is important to ensure that the diversity of knowledge holders are represented and are able to drive these issues forward. It is particularly important to ensure that those who do not have access to wide platforms in western science and academia are able to be heard.

**The Co-Production of Knowledge Approach**

In places like Alaska, the WCS Arctic Beringia Program has focused on advancing Indigenous leadership, knowledge systems, and equitable research practices over the last 15 years.There has been a gradual shift toward greater levels of self-determination, including co-management, and more recently, co-production of knowledge (CPK) approaches to address the priorities of local communities and Tribal governments. The WCS program is dedicated to facilitating collaboration between Tribal leadership, businesses, science, and government agencies, emphasizing the importance of ancestral lands and waters, more effective wildlife stewardship, and the weaving of Indigenous and Western science through co-production. The CPK process brings together Indigenous and Western knowledge systems in an equitable and ethical partnership to collaboratively develop shared priorities, problem definitions, and innovative, context-based solutions. CPK offers a guided process to move research partners towards "Two-Eyed Seeing," or Etuaptmumk, a Mi'kmaw "binocular" model for learning how to see the individual strengths of Indigenous and Western lenses (i.e., knowledge systems), and to use both eyes together to envision solutions that could not be seen with one eye alone. Several Native organizations in Alaska have developed guidance documents for researchers seeking to partner with Alaska Native Peoples and communities. These community-centered protocols emphasize obtaining Free, Prior, and Informed Consent from the community, developing research and data sovereignty agreements, respecting the self-validity of Indigenous knowledge systems, and identifying shared values, expectations, and benefits from the partnership.

Some key challenges remain in achieving parity, equality, co-existence and ethical considerations across different knowledge systems, like the loss and under-representation of Indigenous knowledge in global frameworks, despite its foundational role in guiding sustainable practices and biodiversity conservation.

- In order to address this, we must collaborate with Indigenous scholars and Indigenous Peoples to recover, protect, and integrate this knowledge alongside Western science, recognizing that no single system holds all the answers.

A related challenge is to protect Indigenous data sovereignty which has been a victim of colonial practices and legacies. Communities are now asserting control over how their knowledge is collected, used, and returned. In Alaska, initiatives like formal data agreements with tribal governments show promise, but the deeper shift involves moving away from siloed systems and toward Indigenous-led frameworks that reflect wholistic worldviews. This transformation requires not just technical solutions, but a rethinking of whose table we're sitting at, and who gets to set it.

- It is important to ensure that Indigenous communities retain control over their own data, through data sovereignty, which enables them to use it for advocacy, policy making, and community welfare, rather than having it extracted and sometimes misinterpreted by external researchers for their benefit.

The discussion raised a question for further thought: How can collaborations across conservation and human rights platforms honor the role of traditional knowledge holders and ensure that funding is effectively directed to support their work in conservation efforts amid rapid cultural loss?

- There is a need for bottom-up approaches that empower communities to define priorities, ensure flexible funding for livelihoods alongside conservation, and recognize traditional knowledge as a foundation for resilience rather than a cultural artifact.

# THE RIGHTS AND CONCERNS OF AFRO-DESCENDANT PEOPLES IN CONSERVATION

***"Peoples of African descent are neither monolithic nor monochromatic. Our human rights are not black or white; both conceptual and practical. For me, recognition is about our voice, our visibility, our vote, and having our views" - Barbara Reynolds***

The development discourse around the rights of Afro-descendant Peoples (ADPs as referred to in the LAC context), and of People of African descent (PAD as they are referred to in other regions) has evolved while emphasizing both individual and collective dimensions. However, international negotiations are fraught with fragmentation within the Global Africa community, and exclusion with limited political will and investment on the part of the major and middle powers.

Fishermen in Chocó, Colombia | Photo credit: Erika Piñeros ©WCS

- There is an urgent need to secure land rights for people of African descent. This is not only ancestral lands but also access to new forms of land ownership which continue to be challenged due to colonial legacies and complex legal systems.

For People of African descent, land is deeply tied to identity, history, and future sustainability, including blue and green economies such as agriculture, energy, and traditional health practices. Land rights, broadly speaking, encompass ownership, tenure, and use. A major challenge is the tension between environmental protection and economic viability, especially in sectors like mining, where many people of African descent find employment.

The contradiction between denying collective rights while discriminating against a distinct group, and the contested concept of indigeneity in some contexts, further complicates justice and development efforts. States must align policies with UN goals, invest in People of African descent and protect advocates. It is important to recognize their leadership and agency.

- Priorities should include land rights as a pillar of racial reparatory, environmental, as well as digital justice, and the right to development and sovereignty over natural resources. This pillar is codified in international civil, political, economic, and social rights through the two covenants - ICCPR and ICESCR.

- All of the above are rooted in identity, history, and future sustainability.

**Afro-descendant Peoples' Territorial Mapping and Recognition**

Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) shared how they are supporting the creation of an Atlas of Ancestral Territories of Afro-descendant Peoples (ADPs) in Latin America and the Caribbean, led by OTEC at Universidad Javeriana. Over 205 million hectares of customary lands have been mapped, but only 5% is legally recognized. The initiative is expanding to include marine territories in the Caribbean.
The work is part of a regional coalition that produced the Declaration of Brasilia to protect ADP rights, from combating racial discrimination and inequalities to being part of decision making. It aligns with the Baku Action Plan, which promotes ADP participation in global platforms like the UNFCCC, where a special commission was recently created to recognize ADPs under the IPs & LCs framework. In the UN Biodiversity Conference (COP16), when the Cali Fund was established, ADPs were formally accepted into the Article 8(j) process, enabling equal engagement. Likewise, in Colombia, conservation categories are being used to advance territorial recognition for ADPs.

# ADVANCING GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN CONSERVATION

The critical role of Indigenous and local women in environmental governance is more widely acknowledged than in the past, especially as custodians of traditional knowledge systems. However, the recognition is insufficiently integrated into current decision-making processes as Indigenous and local women often lack dedicated representation in global women's movements and national decision-making spaces. This gap highlights the need for specific platforms that reflect their distinct concerns. Furthermore, challenges such as fragmented funding, few initiatives, and spaces within environmental organizations to address land tenure and women's land rights as part of broader gender and collective rights discussions reinforces barriers to advance gender considerations in conservation.


Solomon Islands | Photo credit: Björn Svensson

For example, in South Asia, rural women play a major role in agriculture, and in some countries like Nepal, migration trends (men and youth) have accentuated women's role in agriculture without possession of land ownership or authority over resources.This also impacts their ability to access credit, markets, and ability to make decisions. Despite global progress when it comes to gender equality regions like South Asia continue to face critical gender gaps in practice and old systems clash with new efforts for change.

To overcome such barriers it is important to strengthen collaboration through capacity-building programs and financial support for women-led conservation initiatives. Gender-sensitive approaches must be created within national and global strategies and with adequate funding and visibility for diverse gender expressions, including Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and Dalit women. This would enable meaningful participation and influence in conservation decision-making.

- The increase in presence of Indigenous and local women in high-level policy roles highlights the continuing necessity of supporting mentorship, inclusion, and long-term investment in leadership pathways.

It is crucial to address the gap between international commitments on environmental rights and gender equality, and their weak implementation at national and community levels, where women often face harassment and lack decision-making power.

- This calls for a need to move beyond aspiration towards action. It requires taking concrete steps such as recognition of women's land rights and legal reforms, rather than relying on broad concepts.

Participants reiterated that Indigenous women and girls face compounding barriers to participation due to racism, histories of colonization, gender-based violence, forced assimilation, and systemic inequities. The multiple layers of discrimination and disenfranchisement underscore the need for integrated approaches that uphold rights frameworks and UN treaties like Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women's (CEDAW) and its General Recommendation No. 39 on the Rights of Indigenous Women and Girls.

Globally Indigenous women and girls are advocating for and advancing their right to self-determination as Indigenous Peoples. Some Indigenous women and girls have focused on policy and standards, while others are working directly on the land, protecting the environment and forests.

- Women's capacities in all areas need to be strengthened, with a specific emphasis on Indigenous, ethnic and gender perspectives.

- Indigenous women are building networks to share experiences across territories, as seen in fellowship programs that provide access to diverse spaces and knowledge.

For example, WCS Canada and the Indigenous Leadership Initiative (ILI) co-created and launched the First Nations Women Transforming Conservation Fellowship. Through the fellowship, WCS fellows are embedded in both organizations, creating stronger connections, deeper knowledge exchange, and more effective communication. Being embedded in the community and guided by a group of Aunties also provides fellows with practical and relational support.

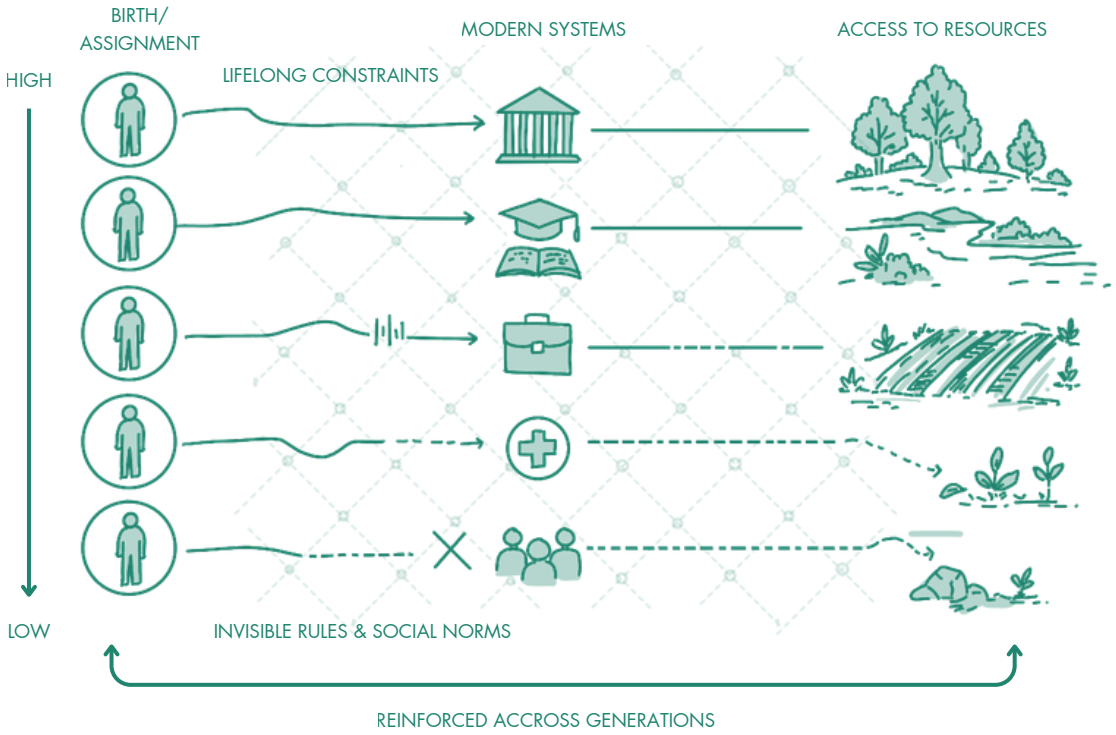
Ultimately, the rights of Indigenous women must be recognized as human rights and fully integrated into conservation programs to ensure their voices and contributions are acknowledged.

- Diversifying staff in identity and expertise that move beyond educational credentials of natural sciences to include social sciences and other disciplines is highly important for inclusive conservation and beyond. Such diversity brings knowledge, networks, and trust with communities as we look at nature as a whole.

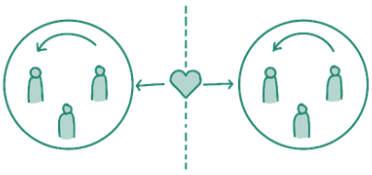
# THE CASTE GAP

*Building A Deeper Understanding*

The concept of caste is immediately associated with South Asia or a Hindu-based phenomenon. However, when we look at the various dimensions of caste it helps us understand the system of hierarchy which has broader application.




Caste as a system of hierarchy includes the following elements:



Endogamy features as an element which can have positive or negative reasons

Purity and pollution are dependent on groups, clans, tribes/ethnic tribes

Purity and pollution are practiced daily through endogamous relations and social and cultural relations.

The inflexible nature of hierarchy along with the stigma associated with caste make it independent of educational achievements or social progress. The individual is affected by the inflexible chamber of caste within which they have taken birth, thereby focused on descent. Reviewing these dimensions in a critical sense demonstrates that caste does not relate to a dimension of society that is ancient but operates in modern form. Caste can therefore be analyzed beyond South Asia in other regions and societies.

Caste in relation to nature and conservation remains poorly understood and largely absent from mainstream environmental discourse. Global discussions on caste and nature are minimal, even if caste-like markers of exclusion appear in different global contexts as they intersect with the struggles of Indigenous and other minority groups who face dispossession, stigma, and systemic exclusion.

Applying a global caste framework helps uncover structural discrimination, under-representation in decision-making, and inequitable resource allocation to affected communities such as Dalits. This highlights a gap and suggests the need for a stronger human rights-based approach to address discrimination of marginalized groups alongside Indigenous identity.

Caste-driven resource denial and environmental vulnerability remain underexplored areas requiring urgent research and advocacy.

Caste analysis should also be integrated into gender considerations when it comes to conservation because caste further restricts women's access to natural resources such as land and water. The intersection of caste and patriarchy shapes the lived realities of Dalit women in South Asia who are further marginalized due to climate change, resource scarcity or exclusion, and ecological degradation. These factors then increase further vulnerability to violence and exploitation thereby creating a vicious cycle. Such challenges are compounded by migration, poor living conditions, and health risks all of which demand urgent discourse to address the intersection of caste, gender, and environmental crises.

# FROM VALUES TO ACTION

*Building Concrete Collaborations*

Participants identified key questions and issues in need of further exploration. These included:

How to better equip public and private funders to partner effectively and ethically with IPs and LCs?

Which corporate/extractive actors should the Forum engage with, what are the risks, and what is the ideal format for dialogue?

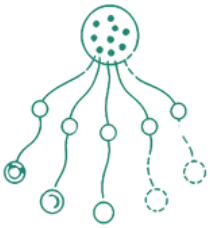
How can grant criteria be redesigned to include IPs and LCs who do not meet traditional "large-scale" eligibility?

How to transition from the appropriation of Indigenous knowledge to respectful, sovereign integration?

How can we engage the youth in the future Forum discussions?

How can funding be effectively directed to elders and knowledge holders to combat rapid cultural loss?

What strategies can mitigate the impact of military occupation and human conflict on nature?



How can the Forum advocate for shifting of funding to IPs & LCS, Afrodescentants and for equitable funding in regions where IPs lack formal legal recognition?

Should a sub-group develop indicators to track the practical application of the UNEP Core Principles at the regional and local levels?

Who can lead a deep-dive analysis into how global caste systems drive resource denial and environmental vulnerability?

How can members of this Forum benefit from the voices and expertise of community paralegals working on carbon justice?

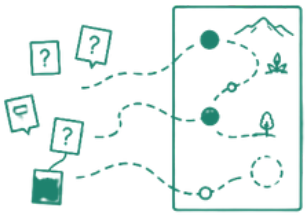
What are the remedy frameworks that are used in practice and could this be a topic of future discussion?

What can we celebrate together as a group in the next Forum?

In addition to several recommendations addressed to the conservation sector, participants identified several next steps that they could undertake under the auspices of the Forum:

1.

**Expanding the table:** Invite some from the private sector, academic actors, and more conservation organizations.



2.

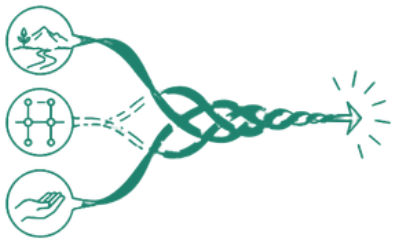
**Identifying topics for future Forums:** Solicit suggestions for topics and outcomes from Forum participants that we should be collaborating towards.

3.

**Formalizing a Joint Program of Work:** Move from reflections and insights to a codified strategy that links recommendations to financing and joint endeavors at the regional and national levels

**Creating sub-groups on some issue areas:** These would develop work in between annual sessions to further some of the recommendations and prepare for future discussions, including on private sector engagement.

**Identifying opportunities for side events** at international platforms which can amplify the discussions and outcomes of the Forum.



**Partnering further to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems, Western science, and human rights perspectives** as a key means to addressing complex challenges like climate change and biodiversity loss.

# CONCLUSION

The Forum served as a critical touchpoint for Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent, local communities, Dalit peoples, conservation organizations, and donors to move beyond "inclusive conservation" as a term into a lived reality which takes into account the wholistic approach to nature. Discourse at the Forum moved the needle from human rights awareness towards self-determined priorities, epistemic parity of Indigenous Science, and the restructuring of financial governance systems with ideas to bring in more recognition and human rights accountability viz. Governments and private sector actors. The Forum also emphasized the importance of working on co-design, co-production, collaboration, and mutual support across the conservation sector to address complex problems, while being mindful of the challenges, differences, as well as inspiration that comes from working collectively.

Several recommendations resurfaced about the role that international conservation organizations can play as intermediaries between funders and communities to unlock capital that can reach the ground. They can help create sustainable financing solutions for communities beyond grant modalities. International conservation organizations can also play a key role between governments and communities to facilitate processes and mechanisms that integrate Indigenous Peoples and local communities into co-design and formal decision making by utilizing the human rights based approach. Such international organizations can also continue to play a role that is complementary to advocacy and policy groups by continuing to facilitate discussions between communities and local governments, as well as national actors on the ground.

With respect to conflicts that arise due to actions by government, private sector, and other actors, participants called on international conservation organizations to facilitate discussions, mediation, and dialogue processes through specialist partners. Funders were called upon to increase support to environmental human rights defenders at risk. Priority issues related to people of African descent included land rights, racial justice, and reparations. Increased representation of Indigenous women and women from various communities in higher level decision making was identified as a key initiative. And discussion on caste reflected the need for further examination and study.

The Co-Chairs of the Forum intend to organize the next session in an Indigenous territory while taking a deeper dive into the questions raised at this forum. The Forum seeks to build further collaborations and expand the table for participation.

# ANNEX 1: PARTICIPANT LIST

| Name | Participation | Title & Organization | Link to Bio |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Alain Frechette** | In person | Director, Rights, Climate & Conservation, Rights and Resources | Staff - Rights + Resources - Supporting Forest Tenure, Policy, and Market Reforms |
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| **Dawa Yangi Sherpa** | Online | Global Safeguards Specialist, Rights + Communities, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) | Dawa Yangi Sherpa - Global Social Safeguards Specialist, Rights + Communities |
| **Diel Mochire** | Online | Director, Programme Intégré pour le Développement du Peuple Pygmée au Kivu (PIDP); Member of WCS High Ambition Fund IP&LC Advisory Committee | Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Partnership |
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| Name | Participation | Title & Organization | Link to Bio |
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| **Hesta Groenewald** | In person | Associate Consultant, PeaceNexus Foundation | Our People - PeaceNexus |
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| **Jennifer Tauli Corpuz** | In person | Senior Global Policy and Advocacy Lead, Nia Tero | Jennifer Tauli Corpuz - Events at Global Landscapes Forum |
| **Jenny Springer** | Online | Director, Equator Group | Board of Directors - Rainforest Foundation US |
| **Joe Walston** | Online | Executive Vice President, Wildlife Conservation Society Global (WCS) | Joe Walston - WCS.org |
| **June Rubis** | In person | Global Council Co-Chair of Documenting Territories, ICCA Global Consortium | June Rubis - ICCA Consortium |

| Name | Participation | Title & Organization | Link to Bio |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Justina Ray** | Online | President and Senior Scientist, WCS Canada | Justina Ray \| WCS Canada |
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| **Mariam Kenza Ali** | In person | Head of Nature and People, Oak Foundation | Mariam Kenza Ali |
| **Martin Robards** | Online | Regional Director, Arctic Beringia Program, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) | Our Team by Arctic Beringia - Exposure |
| **Masego Madzwamuse** | In person | Director, Environment Programme, Oak Foundation | Masego Madzwamuse at IUCN |
| **Minnie Degawan** | In person | Managing Director, FSC Indigenous Foundation | Minnie Degawan, FSC IF |
| **Mrinalini Rai** | In person | Founder & Director, Women4Biodiversity | Mrinalini Rai \| IUCN World Conservation Congress |
| **Myrna Cunningham Kain** | Online | Chair of the Guiding Committee, Pawanka Fund and Board of Directors of Nia Tero | Nia Tero Leadership |
| **Naomi Lanoi Leleto** | In person | Naomi Lanoi Leleto, East Africa Advisory Board Coordinator and Program Coordinator for Global Indigenous Grantmaking, Global Greengrants | Naomi Lanoi LELETO \| IUCN World Conservation Congress |
| **Nisha Owen** | Online | Executive Director, Global Greengrants Fund UK | Global Greengrants Fund UK welcomes new Executive Director, Dr. Nisha Owen |
| **Pamela Castillo** | In person | Director, Marine 30x30, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) | Pamela Castillo - WCS.org |

| Name | Participation | Title & Organization | Link to Bio |
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| **Sushil Raj** | In person | Executive Director, Global Rights and Communities, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS); Former Member of the UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent; Mediator and Board of Directors, New York Peace Institute | Sushil Raj - WCS.org |
| **Taylor Stinchcomb** | Online | Social Science & Co-Production Specialist, Arctic Beringia Program, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) | Our Team by Arctic Beringia - Exposure |
| **Thierry Renaud** | In person | Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Animals and Ecosystems Unit at the Hans Wilsdorf Foundation (Fondation Hans Wilsdorf) | Hans Wilsdorf Foundation (Fondation Hans Wilsdorf) |
| **Vatosoa Rakotondrazafy** | In person | Regional Coastal and Ocean Governance Manager at IUCN; Former National Coordinator of the Madagascar's Locally Managed Marine Areas Network (MIHARI); Member of the WCS Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Advisory Committee | Vatasoa at IUCN |
| **Yolanda López Maldonado** | In person | Founder & CEO, Indigenous Science Systems, A.C. (Indigenous Science) | About Us \| Indigenous Sciences |

# ANNEX 2 : EVENT AGENDA

**Location: Sheraton Hotel Abu Dhabi, Corniche | Date: October 6-7, 2025**

| Day 1 – 6 October 2025 | |
|---|---|
| **Time** | **Agenda Topic** |
| 8:00am – 8:45am | Breakfast |
| 8:45am – 9:30am | Co-Chairs Welcome, WCS and The Pawanka Fund; Welcome to Abu Dhabi |
| 9:30am – 10:00am | Recap of main recommendations from 1st and 2nd convenings |
| 10:00am – 11:30am | Theme 1: Reflections and Sharing (Sessions 1 & 2) |
| 11:30am – 11:45am | Coffee/Tea Break |
| 11:45am – 1:00pm | Theme 2: Rethinking conservation models and processes (Session 3 + Discussion) |
| 1:00pm – 2:00pm | Lunch |
| 2:00pm – 3:00pm | Theme 2: Continued |
| 3:00pm – 3:15pm | Coffee/Tea Break |
| 3:15pm – 4:15pm | Theme 3: Strengthening Local Governance (Sessions 4 & 5) |
| 4:15pm – 6:00pm | Session 6: Reflections on Previous Convenings continued (Funders) |

| Day 2 – 7 October2025 | |
|---|---|
| **Time** | **Agenda Topic** |
| 8:00am – 9:00am | Breakfast |
| 9:00am – 9:45am | Recap of Day 1; Reflections from participants |
| 9:45am – 11:15am | Theme 4: Indigenous Science and Western Science (Session 7) |
| 11:15am – 11:30am | Coffee/Tea Break |
| 11:30am – 1:00pm | Theme 5: People of African descent, Caste and Nature, Indigenous women (Sessions 8 & 9 + Discussion) |
| 1:00pm – 2:00pm | Lunch |
| 2:00pm – 3:00pm | Session 10: Indigenous women and conservation follow-up |
| 3:00pm – 3:15pm | Coffee/Tea Break |
| 3:15pm – 4:30pm | Session 11: Updates and Collaborations |
| 4:30pm – 5:30pm | Session 12: Open Discussions |
| 5:30pm – 5:45pm | Working through collaborations and issues identified |
| 5:45pm – 6:00pm | Closing & Next Steps |

## ABOUT THIS REPORT

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