

WCS AT UNCCD COP17

Restoring Land, Restoring Hope

*WCS and the conservation
of the world's rangelands.*



WCS Introduction and Rangelands Work

Rangelands cover 54% of the planet's land surface, yet remain among the most neglected biomes for conservation.

The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) is an international non-governmental organization (NGO) that has been working across the globe for more than 130 years to save wildlife and wild places. We have active conservation programs in more than 55 countries that work in partnership with governments, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, other conservation organizations, academia, the private sector, and other stakeholders on science- and evidence-based conservation efforts. We work in 17 countries in Asia, Africa, South America, and North America directly on rangeland/grassland conservation.

WCS envisions a world where wildlife thrives in healthy lands and seas, valued by societies that embrace and benefit from the diversity and integrity of life on earth. In the context of the UNCCD theme "Restoring Land, Restoring Hope", WCS finds its mission and global rangelands work aligned with this important moment. This year's conference coincides with the UN International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP 2026), a milestone initiative declared by the UN General Assembly and championed by the host country, Mongolia. WCS embraces this historic convergence. We remain deeply committed to advancing the UNCCD CoP17 objectives, particularly regarding land restoration, drought resilience, Land

Degradation Neutrality (LDN), and safeguarding the rights and livelihoods of pastoralist and Indigenous communities, fully in the context of biodiversity conservation.

WCS has provisional accreditation as an observer non-governmental organization with UNCCD. In addition, WCS has Special Consultative Status at the UN through ECOSOC, we are an accredited NGO with the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), and we are an approved observer organization with several multilateral treaties and organizations including, but not limited to the: Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS), and UNESCO-World Heritage Convention.

In the UNCCD context, we focus on many issues, including: ecological integrity and land degradation; wildlife conservation; protected and conserved areas; climate change; natural resource exploitation; One Health and the connections between wildlife and ecosystem health and human and livestock health; and livelihoods and sustainable development.



The global values of rangelands.

Rangelands store vast amounts of carbon, and are essential for climate mitigation.

Rangelands* cover 54% of our planet's global land surface. High integrity rangelands are essential for climate adaptation, and rangelands store vast amounts of carbon and thus are also essential for climate mitigation. Rangelands either originate or serve as freshwater catchment areas for most of the world's largest rivers and wetlands. Rangelands are home to millions of people, from hunter-gatherers to pastoralists to ranchers, and feed hundreds of millions of people worldwide.

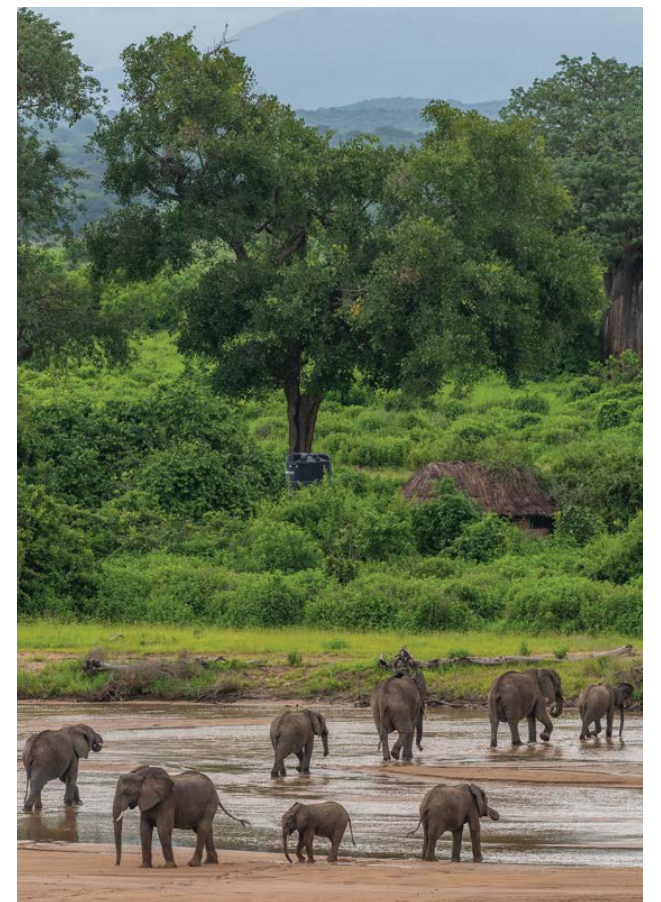
Rangelands have significant cultural and aesthetic values in addition to their biodiversity values, and for many, are places of inspiration and beauty. Finally, rangelands sustain some of the world's greatest concentrations of wild mammal biomass and are home to many of the planet's most spectacular large-mammal migrations, which play a critical role in maintaining ecosystem integrity, nutrient cycling, and ecological resilience.

Threats to Rangelands

Rangelands in all their forms are one of the most at-risk biomes across the globe yet have been neglected and have received the least attention for conservation. Rangelands are intensely threatened by climate change, including intensifying drought, agricultural conversion, habitat loss and degradation, fragmentation of migratory routes by linear infrastructure, killing of wildlife (e.g., poaching, retaliatory predator killing, over-exploitation), and livestock-wildlife disease transmission. As a result, many of the world's rangelands are close to, or have already crossed ecological tipping points (e.g. desertification, soil erosion thresholds, conversion to shrubland).

*As defined by UNEP in the 2021 'Rangelands Atlas'.

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To achieve the conservation and resilience of rangelands at the landscape scale, WCS's program has five pillars:

1

Anchor protected areas – ensuring there are appropriately located, well-managed protected areas that serve as anchors for rangeland biodiversity, resilience and functionality.

2

Well-designed and governed multiple-use zones – in the multiple-use zones that constitute the majority of rangelands WCS supports land-use planning that balances the needs of communities and wildlife. Much of this work includes collaboration with Indigenous Peoples and local communities, including securing tenure rights.

3

Thriving communities – co-designed livelihoods interventions with rangeland communities that enable biodiversity conservation, climate adaptation, improve well-being, and support their rights.

4

Policy and finance – WCS works to ensure that the policy and financing frameworks at international, national and sub-national scales are well integrated, ensuring that conservation is core to the rangeland/pastoralism policy dialogue at landscape scales.

5

Co-existence – Rangeland communities, conservation agencies, and governments navigate competing interests peacefully and productively, with tools and approaches such as FPIC, grievance redress mechanisms, and early-warning systems.



WCS’s rangelands strategy focuses on three flagship initiatives:

Ecological Integrity and Connectivity

Maintaining functional rangeland ecosystems and the ecological connectivity that enables wildlife movement across protected areas, other effective conservation measures (OECMs), community-managed lands and the wider landscape.

Climate Resilience, Livelihoods, and Coexistence

Strengthening the capacity of rangeland ecosystems and pastoral communities to adapt to climate change and drought, while sustaining biodiversity, securing land tenure, and improving community well-being in line with IYRP 2026 goals.

Science, Policy, and Partnerships

Aligning science, place-based knowledge, policy, civil society engagement, and financial resources to strengthen coordination, empower local partners, and achieve impact for rangelands across the globe.

The following are core to WCS’s approach to rangelands conservation:

Partnerships with governments	WCS deeply understands and respects that governments have the challenging mandate to balance the need for healthy rangelands along with their myriad other responsibilities, including a strong economy, ensuring human health and well-being, providing education, defense and much more. Partnering with governments in finding this balance with scientific, technical and occasionally financial support is core to WCS’s approach to rangelands.
Human-rights based approach	Across the globe, WCS’s rangeland conservation strategies actively respect, protect, and promote the rights of Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, and local communities who live in rangelands — including rights to land tenure and participation in conservation decision-making. As CoP17 convenes its first-ever Indigenous Peoples Caucus, WCS reaffirms its commitment to a rights-based approach to conservation in rangelands worldwide and will continue to develop effective operational dimensions to help realize these rights.
Science and innovation	WCS is a science-based organization and thus on-the-ground evidence of rangeland conservation guides all our work. We bring the highest quality science, whether it is with our in-house scientists, or through partnerships with other world-class scientists, to all our conservation efforts. Our approach is grounded in science, enriched by place-based knowledge and diverse ways of knowing, and strengthened through long-term engagement with Indigenous Peoples, pastoralists, local communities, and land managers, and co-designing of conservation interventions. This integration enables more effective and enduring conservation outcomes across rangelands.
Rangeland field teams	WCS builds and supports field teams in rangelands we work in. These teams play multiple vital roles including providing on-the-ground information about the status of rangelands and rangeland conservation efforts, interacting with local communities and with the field staff of local governments, facilitating the co-development of conservation strategies and solutions that reflect local priorities, knowledge, and realities; and bringing innovative, field-tested approaches to rangeland conservation that can be adapted and scaled across landscapes.
Strengthening Rangelands policies	WCS staff collaborate with governments and inter-governmental agencies at international, national and sub-national levels to build strong, sensible range-land conservation policy frameworks based on long-term experience in the field, science, and stakeholder engagement.



Through our global reach and unique roles, WCS has long played, and will continue to play, an essential role in ensuring healthy rangelands.

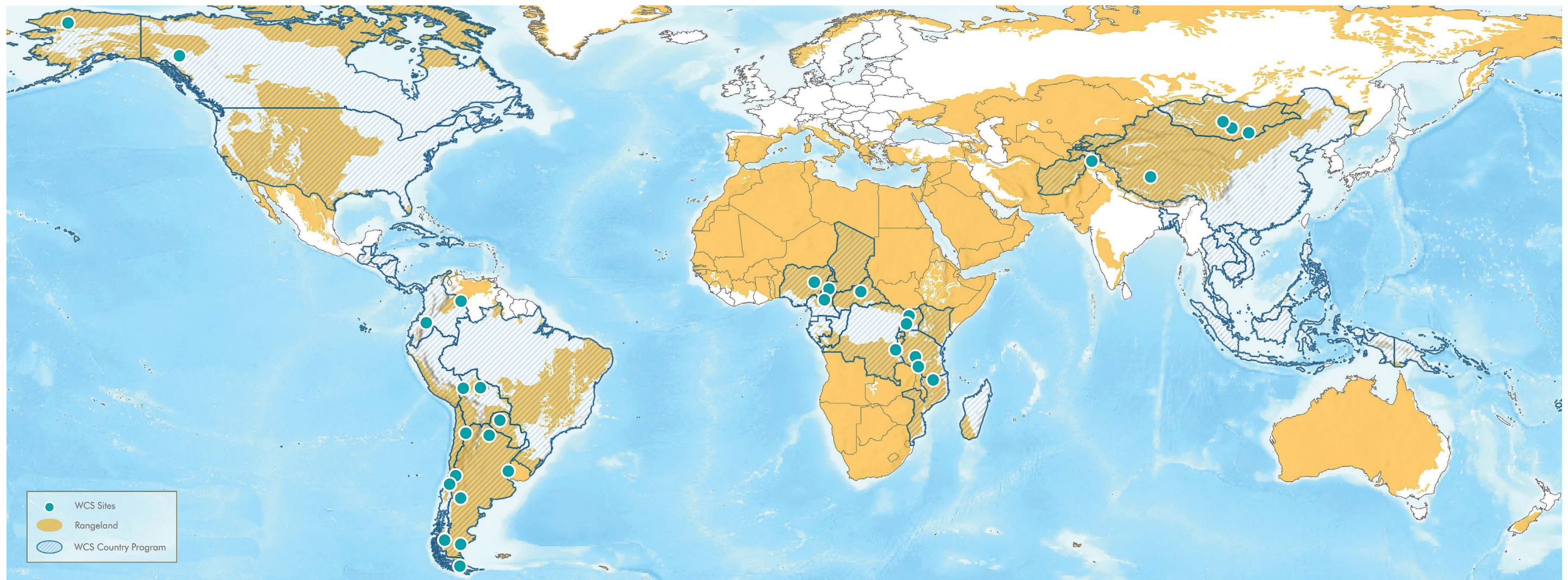
WCS operates robust conservation programs in Africa, Asia, North and South America, focusing on those rangelands where we can make disproportionate impact.

We deliver distinct conservation solutions to rangeland conservation at scale including: collaboration with governments and local communities; identifying local talent; convening key rangeland stakeholders; creation or co-creation of rangeland conservation innovations that we test in the field for impact and share with

government partners and the global rangeland conservation community; and maintaining a nimble operation that can adapt quickly to the changing contexts impacting rangelands across the globe.

Furthermore, through a One Health Approach we work to advance ecosystem, livestock, wildlife, and human health, with particular attention to the livestock–wildlife interface where health, biodiversity conservation, livelihoods, and disease risks intersect.





Since our founding, WCS has a long track record of rangeland conservation innovation and impact.

1

155 PCAs, 27 countries

In collaboration with governments and communities, WCS has helped create 155 protected and conserved areas in rangelands across 27 countries, together covering over 200,000 km² — beginning with the very first protected area WCS helped create, the Wichita Bison Range in Oklahoma, USA, in 1907. These contribute directly to countries' Land Degradation Neutrality targets under UNCCD.

2

Patagonia, Argentina

With local communities in the Patagonian steppe, WCS designed regenerative, wildlife-friendly production models and secured Wildlife Friendly certification — raising the value of Patagonia's regenerative fibers.

3

Mongolia & Alaska

In Mongolia, WCS helped implement the SMART approach for law enforcement, with government-led patrols covering more than 300,000 km² of rangelands by 2023 and continuing today. In Alaska, WCS has quantified the carbon role of intact tundra and boreal ecosystems and is developing rehabilitation options for damaged tundra.

4

Ruaha–Katavi, Tanzania

WCS supported the Government of Tanzania to dramatically curb poaching of savanna elephants across the vast Ruaha–Katavi landscape, one of the top strongholds for the species.

5

Sudano-Sahel

In 2026, WCS is launching its Sudano-Sahel Regional Pastoralism strategy, based upon lessons from a 4-year pastoralism program to center pastoralists as core actors in the sustainable management of over 130,000 km² of intact rangelands.

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To learn more about WCS, please visit wcs.org. Please contact Dr. Susan Lieberman (slieberman@wcs.org), WCS Vice-President, International Policy and Head of Delegation at UNCCD CoP17 with any questions about this document or WCS's engagement with UNCCD.