



INTERNATIONAL  
LAND CONSERVATION  
NETWORK

## The inaugural African Protected Areas Congress is a first step in the vision for an African Conservation Network

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Within the next five years, Kiragu Mwangi—the International Land Conservation Network’s (ILCN) regional representative for Africa—envisions a private and civic conservation network in Africa equivalent to those already established in Europe and internationally. The inaugural African Protected Areas Congress (APAC) is a key part of the timeline for this initiative.

Mwangi will be a keynote speaker at APAC, which runs from July 18 to 23 at the Kigali Convention Centre in Rwanda. Co-hosted by the Government of Rwanda, the International Union for Conservation of Nature - World Commission on Protected Areas, and the African Wildlife Foundation, the event will bring together leaders, citizens, and interest groups to engage in topics related to sustainable development and land conservation in Africa.

In relation to Mwangi’s work through the ILCN, the conference serves two major roles. First, he hopes it will raise awareness about the ILCN’s vision for an African conservation network. Second, it will allow Mwangi and his colleagues to gauge commitment from the audience and identify and recruit participants. His aim is to come away with the foundations of a community committed to further engagement with the ILCN as it works to develop a functional continent-wide network of conservationists.

During the conference, Mwangi will host a “knowledge cafe” where participants will have an interactive conversation about various options for an African conservation network. The event will take place on July 21 from 8:30am to 10am.

APAC is centered on three “streams”: (1) Promoting effective and well-managed networks of protected and conserved areas in Africa; (2) People and protected and conserved areas; and (3) Africa’s biodiversity as the basis for life on the continent.

The ILCN is participating under the second stream, as its work centers around community engagement and people as stewards of the land. “You cannot manage nature without involving people,” said Mwangi. “It’s important to pay tribute to the role of human beings in shaping the landscape and shaping biodiversity.” He said that the ILCN is working to engage influential people and organizations to help shape an agenda of more productive and sustainable land management.

One challenge the conference is working to address is engagement with historically underrepresented communities, particularly women and youth. Mwangi pointed out that half of Africa's approximately 1.3 billion people are under 30 years old. "You start to appreciate the enormity of the need to engage that demographic meaningfully," he said.

While many youth may be drawn to lifestyles associated with Western countries, he highlighted a need to encourage this community to appreciate Africa's current level of development. As land is passed on from parent to child, he hopes that the next generation of landowners also inherits a commitment to nature-friendly land management and a sense of guardianship over the environment.

APAC will feature a pre-congress session specifically for the engagement of youth groups. Another will focus on Indigenous peoples and local communities. Mwangi said the two sessions will "prepare participants to have a cohesive message during the main conference sessions."

While a continent-wide conservation network in Africa would be the first of its kind in the nation, his goal is not altogether novel. "We're not trying to invent something new," he explained. "We are trying to catalyze something that we observed happening in other parts of the world." Across the globe, people have been mobilizing to establish collaborative and innovative models to protect natural resources. Organizations such as the European Land Conservation Network and the International Land Conservation Network stand as examples off of which an African branch would be based.

Especially as the climate crisis intensifies, Mwangi sees the current moment as an opportunity to join this movement and leverage international enthusiasm to generate meaningful change. "What we hope to do at ILCN is to harness this energy and see what we can do to facilitate a continent-wide network that then feeds on the experiences of other networks in other parts of the world to shape and adapt our own agenda in Africa."

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