



INTERNATIONAL
LAND CONSERVATION
NETWORK

Undercover COP: the 30x30 challenge

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It may come as a disappointment to our readers that the following story, though relevant to our work, is not a police thriller. Rather, it is the narrative of what was agreed in Part Two of the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the United Nations **Convention on Biological Diversity** (CBD) held from December 7 to 19, 2022, in Montreal, Canada.

The word “undercover” is used in this article’s title because, despite the best efforts of its Secretariat, the CBD enjoys only modest name recognition. The purpose, or even the existence of this particular United Nations “convention” (a type of international agreement), is not well understood by the citizens, or even by many of the policy makers, of nations that adhere to the CBD.

As such, a little history is in order. The first version of the CBD was presented to the nations of the world at the June 1992 United Nations Convention on Environment and Development, known colloquially as the Earth Summit or the Rio Conference. One year later, some 168 nations had signed the resulting agreement, intended to protect ecosystems and their biodiversity. In a history of the convention, the CBD website describes these natural resources as “a global asset of tremendous value to present and future generations” and explains that their rapid decline is driven by human activity.

Since it was initially adopted by most nations across the globe, the CBD’s reach and impact has grown. There have now been 15 official COPs, hosted by various nations. Its growing impact was visible at COP15, in Montreal, where 198 nations attended—20 more than were represented at the first conference. The United States and the Vatican were two high-profile hold-outs, each opting out of signing the agreement, although the U.S. had a significant “observer” delegation in attendance

One of the measurable outcomes of the CBD thus far stems from COP10, held in Japan’s Aichi Prefecture in 2010. At that conference, nations adopted a resolution that called on members to protect 17 percent of the earth’s terrestrial areas and 10 percent of global coastal and marine areas by 2020. According to the World Database on Protected Areas—the most authoritative assessment of progress toward these targets—global protection of terrestrial areas is nearing the 17 percent mark. Marine areas lag, with only about 8.3 percent protected at the close of 2022. A few regions are more than pulling their weight; Latin America and the Caribbean have each already protected 25 percent of both land and sea area.

This progress is far from enough, given the ongoing decline of species on every continent. The biodiversity crisis was—and still is—far from resolved. This was the challenge facing delegates at part one of COP15 in Kunming, China, in 2020. At this meeting, nations hoped to agree on a post-Aichi strategy. Unfortunately, the Kunming meeting was postponed twice due to COVID-19. It was finally convened in Kunming in 2021 as a hybrid event, with most international parties attending online and a

few representatives coming together in person. There, part two of COP15 was scheduled to be held in person in Montreal the following year.

At the 2022 meeting in Montreal, 196 member countries adopted the **post-2020 Kunming-Montreal Global biodiversity framework** (GBF). The landmark agreement has been critical in guiding global action to halt biodiversity loss and in the fight to restore natural ecosystems by 2030. It is also a huge step toward another goal of achieving a “world living in harmony with nature” by 2050.

The Kunming-Montreal framework has been dubbed the Paris Agreement for Nature by many commentators, in recognition of its similarity to the better-known pact, adopted at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in 2015. The Paris Agreement aims to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. The Kunming-Montreal Framework also leans into measurable targets. One of the most notable is Target 3, or 30x30, which challenges nations to collaborate to protect and restore at least 30 percent of the world’s lands, inland waters, coastal areas, and oceans by 2030.

Target 3 emphasizes areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functioning and services. These areas should be effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected, and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs). Practitioners should also take care to recognize and respect Indigenous and traditional territories while expanding and adding protected areas.

The 30x30 movement draws inspiration from the Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson who had a vision to protect half the planet to reverse the extinction crisis and stabilize the environment. The plan has been endorsed by myriad organizations, scientists, and leaders through initiatives such as the High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, Campaign for Nature, Leaders’ Pledge for Nature, Global Ocean Alliance, the International Union for Conservation of Nature’ World Conservation Congress, and the Biden-Harris administration’s Executive Order to conserve, connect, and restore 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030.

In total, the Kunming-Montreal agreement features four goals and 23 targets for member nations to achieve by 2030. These include cutting global food waste in half; phasing out or reforming subsidies that harm biodiversity by at least \$500 billion per year; requiring transnational companies and financial institutions to disclose the risks, dependencies, and impacts of their activities on biodiversity; mobilizing at least \$200 billion per year from public and private sources for biodiversity-related funding; raising international financial flows from developed to developing countries to at least US \$30 billion per year; and avoiding digital biopiracy of genetic resources.

The Montreal-Kunming agreement is not legally binding, but it does require governments to show their progress toward targets by publishing National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs). Similar to nationally determined contributions used to show progress toward commitments to the Paris Agreement, these documents provide transparency that generate political pressure and stimulate national action.

The impact of this pressure is notable, as the past decade has seen an addition of 42 percent of existing terrestrial protected areas and 68 percent of existing marine protected areas. Despite this progress, less than half the world’s 823 terrestrial and 232 marine ecoregions meet the 17 percent and 10 percent coverage targets that are set, respectively, according to the 2020 Protected Planet Digital Report. Reaching these goals does not guarantee that areas are effectively protected. In many cases, areas that are formally protected are not managed correctly on the ground.

Land conservation efforts are led by governments' work implementing National Systems of Protected Areas. These systems include areas categorized under several conservation categories, including National Parks. In 2018, WDPA reported that 82 percent of the world's recorded protected areas were managed by government agencies.

Governments are likely to remain the main stewards of protected areas, but complementary and collaborative work from the private sector is increasingly relevant and necessary. Civil society is ever more conscious and committed to playing an active role in establishing, protecting, and strengthening the legal framework for protected areas. Private and Non-Governmental-Organization initiatives continue to contribute to national conservation goals and complement government efforts to create and expand protected areas networks. These organizations also share the financial burden of biodiversity conservation.

Privately Protected Areas (PPAs) and OECMs are crucial to achieving ambitious conservation targets, such as those set out in the Kunming-Montreal agreement. To do so, these tools must properly define and measure management of the land they are meant to protect to ensure long-term and effective conservation. Although private reserves are typically smaller than government-protected areas, they are often located in critical and strategic spots. As such, they are crucial to establishing biodiversity corridors and buffer zones.

The difficulty with private conservation tactics arises, in part, from their varied standards. The independent nature of many of these tools can encourage adoption but also make it difficult to compare and categorize private reserves or OECMs between countries. This legal precariousness, paired with underreporting of protected areas, frustrates attempts to chart the progress of private conservation initiatives in many regions. Standardizing private conservation mechanisms and improving the process for registering these areas will go a long way in enabling effective use and tracking of PPAs and OECMs. Many parameters used for measuring state-governed protected areas may be transferable to the private sector.

Whether you are interested in the low-profile Biodiversity COP or the more popular Climate COP, these issues are deeply interlinked, and neither can be solved on their own. Expanding mechanisms for land protection and strengthening and restoring green infrastructure remain key to conserving biological diversity and sustaining agro-economic and socio-environmental systems. In doing so, we strive to manage human-made carbon emissions and recognize that proper stewardship of our lands is the most cost-effective nature-based solution for mitigating climate change.

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