



## EDITORIAL ESSAY: TRENDS IN PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS: REFLECTIONS FROM REGIONAL PARKS CONGRESSES

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### ABSTRACT

In 2022, two major regional congresses on protected and conserved areas, the 2nd Asia Parks Congress and the inaugural IUCN Africa Protected Areas Congress, were convened in Sabah, Malaysia and Rwanda, respectively. These well-attended and highly inclusive congresses were significant milestones for setting regional priorities for the next decade, and for preparing for CBD COP15, highlighting conservation successes, challenges and opportunities and fostering commitment and collaboration. They gave an important voice to both Indigenous Peoples and local communities, as well as to youth, to discuss challenging issues in each region. This editorial summarises trends and recommendations from these major gatherings.

**Key words:** inclusive conservation, equity, governance, Global Biodiversity Framework, Asia, Africa, 30x30

### INTRODUCTION

The year 2022 is particularly important for biodiversity conservation with nations coming together at CBD COP15 in December to make commitments for an ambitious Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). The GBF is being negotiated to put biodiversity on a path to recovery by 2030 for the benefit of planet and people. In the lead up to this important global conference, IUCN – including the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) and IUCN Members – plus host country partners successfully delivered two major regional congresses for protected and conserved areas in Asia and in Africa. More than four years in preparation and delayed by the Covid-19 pandemic, these two congresses were an opportunity for a diverse range of conservation practitioners to come together to discuss opportunities

and challenges to strengthen systems of protected and conserved areas across the regions, and to contribute to the achievement of the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

In late May, the Second Asia Parks Congress (APC) was convened in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia, nine years after the first APC in Japan in 2013. The congress, jointly convened by Sabah Parks and IUCN in one of the most diverse natural and cultural regions of the world, was one of the first large environmental gatherings to be held in Asia since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. It attracted more than 1,250 participants from 49 countries across Asia and beyond, representing government agencies, NGOs, international organisations, youth, representatives of both Indigenous

Peoples and local communities, academia and the private sector. Under the theme of Parks for Nature and People, the congress highlighted important conservation successes and identified the priorities for the next decade to strengthen effective systems of protected and conserved areas across the region, and to contribute to the achievement of the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. The theme of the 2nd APC celebrated the relationship between nature and society through two forums, Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, and Youth, making it a truly inclusive conservation gathering.

Just six weeks later, a similarly diverse group of conservationists gathered for the first-ever IUCN Africa Protected Areas Congress (APAC), held from 17–23 July 2022 in Kigali, Rwanda and convened jointly by the Government of Rwanda, IUCN and the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), with strong support from WCPA. The congress attracted more than 2,400 participants from 53 African and 27 other countries representing governments, African regional bodies, NGOs, national and international experts and organisations, local community members, Indigenous Peoples' representatives, youth, academia, the judiciary, development partners and the private sector. It was a congress organised by Africans for Africa – celebrating and acknowledging the skills and commitment of Africa to conservation, sustainable use of nature and human well-being under the theme For People and Nature.

The Asia and Africa congresses were noteworthy for the diversity, enthusiasm and action-oriented approaches of their participants. They were significant milestones in conservation practice, reflecting a stronger focus on improving inclusivity in conservation and the role that protected areas can serve in addressing the multiple environmental challenges facing humankind. Messages from these two events in Africa and Asia reflect and confirm many of the key messages delivered previously by the Congress of Protected Areas of Latin America and the Caribbean (CAPLAC III) held pre-pandemic in 2019 in Peru. All three regional congresses brought together conservation practitioners and other rights-holders and stakeholders to share experience, debate strategies and craft a vision for moving forward. While there were some regional differences in focus and recommendations, there were many common themes and messages, including strong participation from Indigenous Peoples and youth, with dedicated pavilions and forums organised by them. The congress initiatives, priorities and recommendations can be seen as a proxy for global trends since the last IUCN World Parks Congress in 2014. All three congresses concluded with

declarations and calls for action. This editorial explores some of those messages and themes, with a particular focus on the two most recent events, APC and APAC.

### **Calls for more, and better, area-based conservation**

Both the Asia and Africa congresses called for greater ambition in setting targets for protected and conserved areas while recognising the critical roles of different rights-holders and stakeholders in the stewardship of nature. The Kota Kinabalu Declaration (Supplementary Online Material) explicitly calls for conservation of at least 30 per cent of lands and of oceans across Asia to ensure that the most important biodiversity areas, with their associated ecosystem services and cultural and spiritual values, are conserved in effective protected and conserved area systems to deliver both conservation and social outcomes. The Kigali Call for Action for People and Nature (Supplementary Online Material) was less explicit in terms of percentage targets but, in both individual events and ministerial speeches, there was strong support for protection of at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems by 2030, as proposed for Target 3 of the GBF, currently under negotiation. These recommendations for more ambitious targets, with more effective, equitably governed and well-connected protected and conserved areas echo declarations from CAPLAC III and, indeed, from the IUCN World Parks Congress 2014 in Sydney. At all three regional congresses there were calls to encourage, support and undertake assessments of the governance and management of protected and conserved areas benchmarked against universal standards such as the IUCN Green List Standard, and the Conservation Assured standard. At all three congresses, special events were held to celebrate the Green-listing of sites, and the commitments of countries to implement the Green List Standard. At Kota Kinabalu, the Sugud Island Marine Conservation Area was the first area in Sabah to achieve this listing.

### **Putting people at the centre of conservation**

Governance and equity were major themes at both APC and APAC, emphasising the need for more inclusive and equitable approaches to conservation and recognising the diversity of rights-holders and governance arrangements for protected and conserved areas (a theme first highlighted at the Fifth IUCN World Parks Congress in Durban in 2003, where an entire stream was devoted to the topic of governance). While at CAPLAC III, themes related to Indigenous Peoples and local communities were threaded throughout the streams, and the entire congress, both APAC and APC, notably set out dedicated streams of work on these



Welcome with open arms to the Africa Protected Areas Congress, Kigali, Rwanda © Sean Southey

topics. A focus on People was one of the three main themes of APAC emphasising the recognition of diverse values and the stewardship roles and rights of Indigenous Peoples, local communities and women, while APC dedicated an entire stream to the topic of shared governance.

The APAC proceedings were enriched by a two-day pre-congress Indigenous Peoples and local communities event convening more than 200 participants, many of whom had also participated in the ICCA General Assembly in Kigali immediately prior to the Congress. In addition to providing input to the overall congress declarations, Indigenous Peoples and local communities also issued their own powerful statements calling for recognition and redress of past injustices, better respect for the rights, identities, traditional knowledge, governance systems and customary laws of all rights-holders and stakeholders and more direct involvement in future conservation efforts. The formal declarations from both congresses reflected these important inputs and responded to the calls for respect and inclusion (see the Api Api Declaration).

At both congresses there were strong recommendations for an ambitious post-2020 GBF that enhances and empowers the diversity of governance in protected and conserved areas and the need to take a rights-based approach to identify, recognise and support other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), privately protected areas and ICCAs/Territories of Life. Many events focused on community governance and management and the crucial role that OECMs will play in achieving the proposed new targets under the GBF. There is still some confusion about what qualifies as an OECM, though WCPA has issued clear guidance (IUCN WCPA, 2019; Jonas & MacKinnon, 2021). Since the definition and criteria for OECMs were only approved at COP 14 in 2018, there was much discussion on the challenges, opportunities and need for capacity building to help countries to identify, recognise and support

these areas while respecting the rights and concerns of Indigenous Peoples and local communities and other private actors and stakeholders. Like protected areas, OECMs can have a wide range of governance and management models but could offer a particular opportunity to recognise and support the stewardship of important biodiversity by both Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and other actors. It is essential, however, to ensure that the establishment of new protected areas and the reporting of OECMs on community lands and waters are only undertaken with the involvement of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, with recognition of their governance and customary management systems, and with their free, prior and informed consent.

There was a particular emphasis in Africa to promote the truly sustainable use of natural resources and investment in building an appropriate wildlife economy through rights-based approaches and strategies to reduce human-wildlife conflict while halting human rights abuses associated with park management and enforcement. This would require stronger support and resourcing of rangers to carry out their work professionally, responsibly and accountably in a way that respects human rights. Governments and other organisations were urged to adopt the new International Ranger Federation Code of Conduct<sup>1</sup> presented at APAC. An inspiring evening event celebrated recipients of the IUCN WCPA International Ranger Awards, several of them community and Indigenous rangers.

### **Nexus of climate, biodiversity and health: protected and conserved areas as nature-based solutions**

Climate Change and Protected Areas was a key theme at both congresses. Both Asia and Africa are especially vulnerable to the impacts of climate change; the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, including floods and landslides; and environmental degradation



incorporating effective area-based conservation measures into Nationally Determined Contributions under the UNFCCC. Recognising that climate change will lead to geographic shifts in the distributions of species and habitats and impact human livelihoods and migration, there were also recommendations to avoid and mitigate the impacts of new infrastructure and to restore fragmented and degraded ecosystems to maintain ecological connectivity through networks of protected and conserved areas, including OECMs and transboundary areas.

Not surprisingly the Covid-19 pandemic has focused attention on the relationship between effective conservation and human health and well-being (Hockings et al., 2020 [see also Phillips, A. & Mitchell, B.A. (2021) PARKS 27 special issue.] Delegates emphasised the need to position protected and conserved areas as significant elements within One Health frameworks, ameliorating land degradation and contributing to sectoral and institutional cooperation and coordination for health promotion – including detection and treatment of disease and better understanding of pathways to human and environmental health and well-being.

### More sustainable financing

All efforts to create effective networks of protected and conserved areas under different governance and management regimes will require mechanisms to ensure more sustainable conservation financing. It is generally recognised that many protected areas are seriously underfunded to deliver effective conservation. The situation has been exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic when revenues from tourism were reduced markedly or lost altogether. Funding challenges were particularly acute in community-conserved areas. As progress is made in recognising OECMs, additional

funding will be needed to help support them. Both APC and APAC had dedicated sessions, including high level panels, on new and innovative financing mechanisms, including the importance of utilising climate finance to leverage additional biodiversity benefits and support human livelihoods.

The congresses called for mobilising and scaling up public and private investment in nature-positive actions; phasing out harmful subsidies and mainstreaming nature into development, production sectors and policy. There was particular emphasis on ensuring that climate and other conservation-financing instruments, including compensation mechanisms for communities affected by human–wildlife conflict, should be fair, equitable and efficient and deliver direct benefits to Indigenous Peoples and local communities. In addition to broader discussions on the merits of specific trust funds and other new and innovative financing mechanisms, a new conservation fund was launched at APAC. Sponsored by AWF and several prominent African leaders, a new Pan-African Conservation Trust (APACT) would complement existing financing mechanisms to mobilise significant public, private and philanthropic funding into protected and conserved areas across all 54 countries.

### Promoting greater youth engagement and urban conservation

Recognising the energy and enthusiasm that youth can bring to conservation and the fact that young professionals will be future leaders in protected and conserved areas, the organisers of both APC and APAC made a special effort to support youth participation through specific forums and events. Under the banner of #NatureforAll, WCPA and the IUCN Commission on Education and Communication collaborated with other organisers to support a very successful Youth Forum at APC and a two-day pre-congress event at APAC. These were designed to share conservation stories and encourage increased stewardship and action for protected and conserved areas. Youth delegates called for more opportunities to promote capacity-development opportunities for young people to enhance their knowledge, and to promote the development and mentorship of young leaders. Korea National Park Service committed to establish the Asia Youth Network for Protected and Conserved Areas as a platform for youth involvement, to enable sharing of experiences in conservation, and to enable youth to voice their concerns regarding conservation. The network was formally launched last September with support from Korea National Park Service, the IUCN Asia Regional Office and WCPA, and nearly 250 youth participated in the 2nd Asia Congress.



WCPA Chair Madhu Rao, Asia Parks Congress © Brent A. Mitchell

While many of the key themes and topics at the regional congresses were similar, there were some specific differences. Urban Conservation was one of the six working group themes in Asia with a strong emphasis on conserving and restoring nature in cities, to strengthen their ecological, social and climate resilience, and to help prevent, manage and recover from human-induced and natural disasters. Events under this topic emphasised engaging stakeholders from all sectors of society, especially young people, in nature-related activities within and beyond cities through regular outreach, innovative experiences and the use of science and technology.

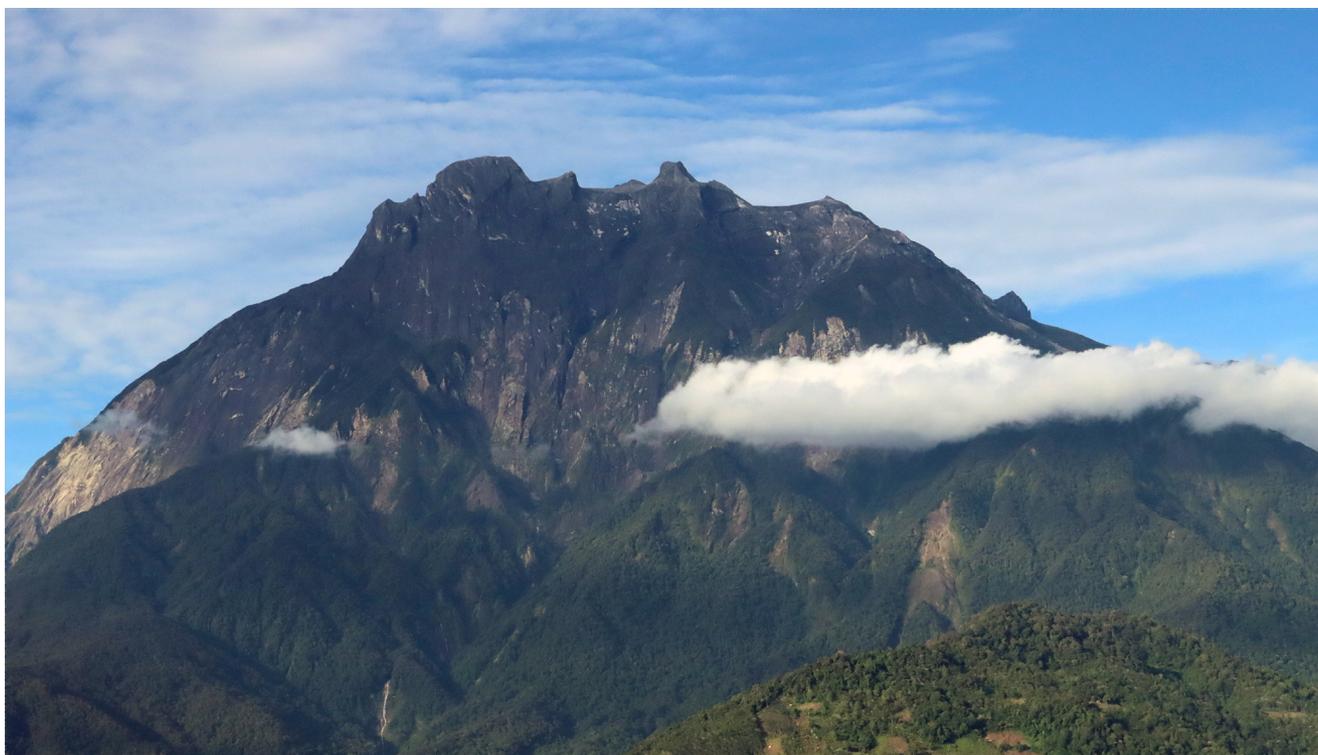
### Follow-up

Like the previous CAPLAC III congress, the APC and APAC concluded with declarations and calls to action to maintain momentum and strengthen conservation efforts in the regions. Delegates committed to convey key messages from the congresses to Biodiversity COP 15 for the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, and to UNFCCC COP 27 as well as to the 7th ASEAN Heritage Parks Conference, the 5th International Marine Protected Area Congress, and to the next IUCN World Parks Congress, tentatively planned for 2027 or 2028.

There were several commitments and recommendations to strengthen regional networks in support of protected and conserved areas. APAC's Call to Action, for example, called for enhanced pan-African collaboration, cooperation and partnership for protected and conserved area systems throughout the continent, involving all governance authorities and organisations as well as a pan-African mechanism to monitor delivery of APAC commitments.

In 2019, CAPLAC III established a Protected Area Day to be celebrated annually on 17 October. Already each year during the ongoing restrictions of the pandemic, the organisers have celebrated the event with well-organised online events. APAC decided to follow suit with a request to the African Union Commission to declare 18 July of each year as the 'Africa Protected and Conserved Areas Day' to be observed and celebrated across the continent. The APC Declaration called for further development of the Asia Protected Areas Partnership as a regional forum for protected area agencies, and encouraged the Partnership to convene regular Asia Parks Congresses in the future.

IUCN WCPA was a key partner in convening all three regional congresses with many Commission members



Mt Kinabalu, Sabah Malaysia © Marc Hockings

contributing to workshops and streams. Immediately after APC, WCPA held its first face-to-face meeting of the new steering committee in Kinabalu Park, Sabah to develop a clear strategic plan of action by the Commission over the next three years. WCPA commits to supporting follow-up actions on the congress priorities including additional emphasis and stronger work programmes on urban parks, ecosystem restoration, and the nexus between biodiversity conservation, climate and human health.

## CONCLUSION

It should not be surprising that declarations from all three regional conferences had common themes. Many of the priority streams and events focused on topics that are of key concern to the conservation community: more inclusive and equitable conservation; effective systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures; sustainable financing. They emphasise the nexus between solutions for both biodiversity loss and climate change, with protected and conserved areas serving as nature-based solutions to these global environmental challenges. Nevertheless, the declarations directly reflect the experience and deliberations of the thousands of people involved in the events, with a few interesting regional differences in priorities and emphasis. Such regional specifics include a greater focus on urban and marine conservation in Asia and on a sustainable wildlife economy in Africa.

Key messages and calls to action align well with global aspirations expected to be agreed in the Global Biodiversity Framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Priorities articulated in each congress align closely with the draft language of the Framework, particularly Target 3, calling for ambitious expansion of the area under some form of conservation, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and its contributions to people, ...effectively managed and equitably governed, ...ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, ...integrated into wider landscapes and seascapes.

From planning to delivery, these regional conferences constitute a powerful example of the commitment of many people and organisations coming together to deliberate and agree on pathways to effective conservation: government agencies, IUCN Members, regional offices and Commissions. The congress declarations express a collective aspiration to do more, with diverse stakeholders, with more support for protected and conserved areas as natural solutions to biodiversity loss, climate change and health crises. In

the words of the earlier CAPLAC III declaration, “The next decade is crucial!” a sentiment that was echoed in Asia and Africa.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>(<https://www.internationalrangers.org/toolkit/ranger-code-of-conduct-2/>)

## SUPPLEMENTARY ONLINE MATERIAL

1. Kota Kinabalu Declaration
2. Kigali Call for Action for People and Nature

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## RESUMEN

En 2022, se realizaron dos importantes congresos regionales sobre áreas protegidas y conservadas, el 2º Congreso de Parques de Asia y el Congreso Inaugural de Áreas Protegidas de la UICN en África, en Sabah, Malasia y Ruanda, respectivamente. Estos congresos, muy concurridos y altamente inclusivos, fueron hitos significativos para el establecimiento de prioridades regionales para la próxima década, y para la preparación de la COP15 del CDB, destacando los éxitos, desafíos y oportunidades de la conservación, fomentando el compromiso y la colaboración. En ambos congresos se dió una importante voz a los pueblos indígenas y a las comunidades locales, así como a los jóvenes, para debatir los problemas más difíciles de cada región. Esta editorial resume las tendencias y recomendaciones de estos importantes encuentros.

## RÉSUMÉ

En 2022, deux congrès régionaux majeurs sur les aires protégées et conservées, le 2e Congrès des parcs d'Asie et le Congrès inaugural des aires protégées d'Afrique de l'UICN, ont été organisés respectivement à Sabah, en Malaisie, et au Rwanda. Ces congrès, qui ont attiré un grand nombre de participants, ont constitué des étapes importantes dans la définition des priorités régionales pour la prochaine décennie et dans la préparation de la COP15 de la CDB, en mettant en lumière les succès, les défis et les opportunités de la conservation et en encourageant l'engagement et la collaboration. Ils ont donné une voix importante aux peuples autochtones et aux communautés locales, ainsi qu'aux jeunes, pour discuter des questions difficiles dans chaque région. Cet éditorial résume les tendances et les recommandations de ces grands rassemblements.