



EDITORIAL ESSAY: WILD12 AND THE 10TH IRF WORLD RANGER CONGRESS: TWO CONGRESSES BUT SHARED MESSAGES

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ABSTRACT

IUCN WCPA was one of many sponsors supporting two important conservation congresses over the last few months. The World Wilderness Congress (WILD12) and the 10th International Rangers Federation World Ranger Congress (WRC10) brought together two groups on the frontline of conservation, Indigenous peoples and rangers, with parallel goals of fostering connections, building capacity and understanding and renewing hope and energy for reversing biodiversity loss. This short editorial essay provides an overview of both events and how they relate to the global decision-making around implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Keywords: wilderness, rangers, Indigenous peoples, WCPA, Global Biodiversity Framework

WILD12

In August 2024, the 12th World Wilderness Congress (WILD12)¹ was held in the *He Sápa* (the Black Hills) of South Dakota, USA, the sacred territory of the *Oceti Sakowin Oyate* (Lakota Nation). Hosted by the Sicangu Lakota Treaty Council, directed by Phil Two Eagle, and organised by the WILD Foundation, the congress brought 700 Indigenous leaders, conservation professionals and wilderness advocates from 36 countries, including representatives from over 50 Tribes and Indigenous Nations, together for a week of ceremony and discussion.

This event was particularly notable as one of the largest international conservation congresses hosted by Indigenous peoples, with Indigenous perspectives on wilderness playing a central role in many sessions. Acknowledging past and ongoing injustices to Indigenous peoples was a central theme, recognised as an essential step in building relationships and developing a strong foundation for conservation of the world's dwindling wilderness.

Discussions spanned a wide range of issues including reconciliation and co-stewardship, methods and approaches to wilderness management, community led conservation, rewilding, restoring and connecting social and ecological systems and storytelling. A Global Indigenous Peoples Caucus was held alongside the Symposium, providing a place for Indigenous attendees to share stories, reflections and perspectives.

The outcomes of WILD12 included a set of Resolutions² which will be incorporated into the global environmental agenda and adopted by individual organisations. The central He Sápa Resolution and Declaration *On Sovereignty and Wilderness: Deepening the Wilderness Concept Through Indigenous Knowledge and Wisdom* calls for the acknowledgement that nature is multi-dimensional, transcending the material and physical realms. The resolution urges that the language used around conservation respect the rights and roles of Indigenous peoples, Indigenous knowledge and wisdom

¹ <https://wild.org/wild12/>

² <https://wild.org/wild12/resolutions/>



WILD12 delegates led by Maida Andersson, a Sámi reindeer herder, present a resolution during the closing ceremony calling for a ban on all old growth deforestation in Sápmi © Giulia Gasparrini

systems and natural and customary law. The declaration stresses the need to reconcile differing worldviews to expand and strengthen the wilderness concept, ensuring that Indigenous perspectives are fully integrated. The committee that developed the Declaration (made up equally of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people) fully appreciated the difficulty, perhaps impossibility, of integrating knowledge of nature transmitted orally for millennia into an English language document. However, embracing Indigenous words and terminology that are equivalent to the English language concept of wilderness, in addition to making sector-wide commitments that prioritise keeping Indigenous peoples on their traditional lands and territories, were generally regarded as necessary actions for the improvement of the global reputation of the wilderness concept.

Other resolutions focused on *Advancing the Rights of Antarctica and Ratifying the High Seas Treaty*. Resolutions themed on Indigenous rights and world views included: *Through the Eyes of Buffalo: A Strategic Platform to Restore All Natural World Relationships, Indigenous Law and Guardianship of Nature* and *Making Space to Protect White Animals, Messengers of Peace*. A strong youth focus ran throughout the congress and was encapsulated in the resolution on *Mainstreaming Mentorship of Young Ecological Stewards*.

10th IRF World Ranger Congress

Just over a month later, in early October 2024, WCPA, through its role as a partner in the Universal Ranger Support Alliance (URSA), was one of the many sponsors

of the 10th International Ranger Federation (IRF) World Ranger Congress (WRC10) in Hyères, France. Organised by the IRF and the Gardes Natures de France, 450 rangers and supporters from 88 countries came together for a week of discussions and events.

In a profession which is often stereotyped and misunderstood, the importance of diversity, equity and equality were a strong theme of WRC10; 49 per cent of the participants were female and 15 per cent identified as Indigenous people or from local communities, representing a diversity that is often not so evident when people think about rangers. One goal of the IRF is to reposition rangers as Planetary Health Workers (Stolton et al., 2023), a thread that ran throughout the congress and a central call in the final output – the *Hyères Ranger Declaration*.³

The congress discussions were strongly influenced by the progress made since WRC9, held in Chitwan, Nepal in 2019. Implementation of the resultant WRC9 *Chitwan Declaration*⁴ and *Action Plan* (URSA, 2021) has encompassed raising awareness, developing global standards, highlighting ranger voices and advocating for ranger needs on the international stage. *The Hyères Ranger Declaration* includes a wide range of actions, focused on these themes, including calling for:

1. Better recognition of rangers' rights and the many roles and responsibilities they have in protecting our

³ <https://www.internationalrangers.org/resource/hyeres-ranger-declaration-2024/>

⁴ https://www.internationalrangers.org/wp-content/uploads/Chitwan-Declaration_2019_EN.pdf



Rohit Singh, the newly elected vice-chair of the International Rangers Federation, presenting the *Hyères Ranger Declaration* © IRF

- planet and safeguarding ecosystem services.
2. The implementation of a range of tools and standards around rights, safeguarding, competencies and welfare to name just a few, developed with and for the ranger community over recent years, building on the data from the first ever *IRF State of the Ranger Report* (IRF, 2024), which provides a needs assessment and baseline for repeat assessments at each future WRC, on progress made to fill these needs.⁵
3. A substantive increase in ranger numbers not only to address the current conservation requirements but also to support the expansion of protected and conserved areas under Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) along with the need to close the skills and equipment gap to ensure the calls for increased effectiveness under Target 3 are met.
4. Ensuring equity and equality across the ranger profession to meet the inclusiveness targets also stressed in the GBF.
5. Recognising the importance of accountability and responsibility in the ranger profession by continuing to widely disseminate and implement the *IRF Code of Conduct* (IRF, 2021).

The declaration also forms the nucleus of the *Message from Hyères to Cali by the Ranger Community*, which urges governments, NGOs and ranger employers to endorse and thus demonstrate their support for rangers at CBD COP 16.⁶

Taking messages to the CBD COP 16

On the face of it, these two congresses were very different: an Indigenous led congress with a focus on respecting Indigenous peoples' stewardship of wild areas and a Ranger led congress with a focus on the need for recognition of rangers' role as Planetary Health Workers. But in fact, both had similar messages, which go to the heart of achieving the GBF and should be central to the discussion and outcomes of the Convention on Biological Diversity's (CBD) Conference of the Parties (COP) being held in Colombia, which will conclude as this issue of *PARKS* is released.

Both congresses stressed that conservation will only be successful if the custodians and stewards of nature are adequately and sustainably supported. This means ensuring that the roles of Indigenous peoples and local communities are acknowledged and respected where they have traditions and knowledge to support effective conservation. Similarly, the many workers supporting

⁵ <https://www.internationalrangers.org/resources/> and <https://www.ursa4rangers.org/ursa4rangers-resources/>

⁶ [Call-to-Cali.pdf \(internationalrangers.org\)](https://www.internationalrangers.org/resources/)



Rangers gathered for the 10th International Rangers Federation World Ranger Congress in Hyères, France © IRF

area-based conservation worldwide, who go by various names including rangers, wardens, custodians, etc, must be recognised, trained, nurtured and appreciated for the many different roles they play.

Central to both these messages is the need to recognise the rights and roles of the people that are actively protecting and conserving lands, seas and inland waters, their biodiversity and associated ecosystem services. Linked to this is the enduring need for actions to promote equity to ensure equality in conservation as a whole.

Highlighting the work of IUCN WCPA

The work of WCPA was threaded throughout both congresses. The very first World Wilderness Congress had a powerful stream of Indigenous thinking, and this tradition has continued at every congress. Despite this, the very word ‘wilderness’ has sometimes proved offensive to many Indigenous peoples, with its implication of being empty, uninhabited and unstewardled lands. The WCPA Wilderness Specialist Group has worked diligently over many years to address this misunderstanding, and was very explicit in its *Wilderness Protected Areas: Management guidelines for IUCN Category 1b protected areas* (Casson et al., 2016) that designated wilderness does not exclude humans, rather it excludes certain human impacts. WILD12 was an opportunity to show the progressive work done by WCPA to collaborate directly with Indigenous people to more fully interpret the concept of wilderness in a way that resonates positively with both Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous conservation interests. This work was commended at WILD12, with the resulting collaboration evident throughout the organisation and



During a treaty signing among Indigenous delegates at WILD12, Catherine Murupaenga-Ikern (Māori) and Stephanie Little Hawk Big Crow (Lakota) perform the hongi, a traditional Māori greeting © Giulia Gasparini

execution of the congress. As the outcomes of WILD12 continue to manifest, the organisers sincerely hope that the wilderness movement will continue to grow, enhanced by far more Indigenous leadership at the helm.

At WRC10, the URSA partnership, of which WCPA is a founding member, reported a significant contribution to the implementation of the previous congress action plans, including a wide range of material on ranger professionalisation.⁷ Madhu Rao, Chair of WCPA, gave a keynote address at WRC10, signed a memo

⁷ Home...URSA | Universal Ranger Support Alliance (ursa4rangers.org)

of understanding (MOU) between WCPA and IRF to continue close collaboration and launched the first volume of the *WCPA Good Practice Guidelines* aimed at rangers, developed by rangers (Stolton et al., 2024).

Celebrating those whose work has made major contributions to the conservation world is central to WCPA. At WILD12, WCPA honoured two longtime Wilderness advocates and researchers, Vance Martin and Alan Watson, with the prestigious 'Fred Packard Award for Outstanding service to Protected Areas' in recognition of their extraordinary contributions to conservation in wilderness areas around the world.⁸ At WRC10, the IUCN WCPA International Ranger Awards 2025 were launched, with nominations for the award open until 31 January 2025.⁹

WCPA's collaboration will continue as the outcomes of both congresses are implemented and the various declarations and resolutions are translated into calls for action at the CBD COP 16¹⁰.

8 <https://iucn.org/story/202408/iucn-wcpa-recognises-wilderness-champions-12th-world-wilderness-congress#:~:text=Vance%20Martin%20has%20devoted%20his%20entire%20life%20advocating,a%20long-serving%20co-lead%20of%20WCPA%E2%80%99s%20Wilderness%20Specialist%20Group.%E2%80%9D>

9 <https://iucn.org/our-union/commissions/world-commission-protected-areas/our-work/wcpa-awards/iucn-wcpa-international>

10 <https://iucn.org/our-union/commissions/world-commission-protected-areas/our-work/iucn-wcpa-cop16>

RESUMEN

La CMAP de la UICN fue uno de los muchos patrocinadores de dos importantes congresos de conservación celebrados en los últimos meses. El Congreso Mundial de Vida Silvestre (WILD12) y el 10^o Congreso Mundial de Guardaparques de la Federación Internacional de Guardaparques (WRC10) reunieron a dos grupos en la primera línea de la conservación, los pueblos indígenas y los guardaparques, con objetivos paralelos de fomentar las conexiones, crear capacidad y comprensión y renovar la esperanza y la energía para revertir la pérdida de biodiversidad. Este breve ensayo editorial ofrece una visión general de ambos acontecimientos y de su relación con la toma de decisiones a escala mundial en torno a la aplicación del Marco Mundial para la Biodiversidad de Kunming-Montreal.

RÉSUMÉ

La CMAP de l'UICN a été l'un des nombreux sponsors à soutenir deux importants congrès sur la conservation au cours des derniers mois. Le Congrès mondial de la nature (WILD12) et le 10^e Congrès mondial des rangers de la Fédération internationale des rangers (WRC10) ont rassemblé deux groupes en première ligne de la conservation, les peuples autochtones et les rangers, avec des objectifs parallèles de favoriser les liens, de renforcer les capacités et la compréhension et de renouveler l'espoir et l'énergie pour inverser la perte de biodiversité. Ce bref éditorial donne un aperçu des deux événements et de leur lien avec la prise de décision mondiale concernant la mise en œuvre du Cadre mondial pour la biodiversité de Kunming-Montréal.

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