MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES: EXPLORING MALAYSIA'S IUCN GREEN LIST EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas provides an international benchmark for effective and equitable conservation management. This study examines the motivations and challenges of six different Malaysian protected or conserved areas agencies; covering government departments, private sector entities, and a community cooperative pursuing Green List recognition. Semi-structured interviews revealed that key motivations include enhancing international credibility, accessing funding opportunities, strengthening long-term protection, and achieving professional or organisational recognition. Community-managed sites additionally valued cultural heritage and ecosystem service preservation. Reported benefits of the process included improved documentation, strengthened management systems, enhanced staff capacity, and greater team cohesion. However, sites face significant challenges, such as procedural burdens, low technical capacity, and institutional constraints. Community-managed areas additionally face hurdles such as uncertain land tenure and constrained resources that hinder their involvement with the Green List. The findings highlight the enabling roles of strong leadership, donor support, and policy alignment, while underscoring the need for streamlined processes, targeted mentorship, and sustained institutional backing. Our insights offer practical recommendations to enhance Green List implementation in Malaysia and provide guidance for other countries navigating similar socio-political contexts in conservation governance.

Keywords: protected areas, community-managed sites, international recognition

INTRODUCTION

The IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas (Green List) was developed to help protected and conserved areas deliver successful conservation outcomes through effective and equitable governance and management. This is achieved by benchmarking sites' management practices, outcomes, condition of values, and threat mitigation against a global standard. Although voluntary, the Green List encourages sites to strengthen governance and management, with certification recognising those that have achieved successful conservation outcomes. To achieve Green List status, a site must demonstrate and maintain successful implementation of the Green List Standard, and this is evaluated in three phases: Application, Candidate and Green List Phases. The Green List Standard consists of four components, 17 criteria and 50 indicators. Since the first sites were added

to the Green List in 2014, 84 sites worldwide have been listed, while 284 additional sites are in the process of nomination. The main objective of the Green List is to increase the number of protected and conserved areas that deliver successful conservation outcomes through good governance, sound design and effective and equitable management (Hockings et al., 2019).

There are only a few published papers using empirical evidence to showcase the motivations and challenges of sites seeking to achieve Green List certification. Wells et al. (2016) conducted a study with six Marine Protected Areas (MPA) that took part in a pilot programme to achieve Green List status and documented their experiences. The study interviewed managers involved to ascertain the benefits and challenges of the Green List process and identified areas for improvement. Another study in Australia's Lamington National Park assessed

Table 1. Respondents interviewed and the agencies and sites they represented

Protected/ conserved area management agency	State of the site location	Name of site(s)	Green List status (as of August 2025)
R1. Reef Guardian	Sabah	1. Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area	Green Listed on 16 May 2022.
R2. Sabah Forestry Department	Sabah	2. Pin Supu Forest Reserve	Green Listed on 16 May 2025.
		3. Lumaku Forest Reserve 4. Sook Lake Forest Reserve	Candidate: Site Self-Assessment for the 50 indicators
		5. Ulu Kalumpang-Wullersdorf Forest Reserve 6. Sugut Forest Reserve 7. PINTAR Forest Reserve 8. Timimbang-Botitian Forest Reserve	Application: Awaiting the Expert Assessment Group for the Green List (EAGL) confirmation
R3. Sawit Kinabalu	Sabah	9. Sungai Pin Conservation Area	Candidate: Site Self-Assessment for the 50 indicators
R4. Jagoi Cooperative	Sarawak	10. Jagoi Heritage Forest	Candidate: Site Self-Assessment for the 50 indicators
R5. Sarawak Forestry Corporation	Sarawak	11. Bako National Park 12. Santubong National Park	Candidate: Site Self-Assessment for the 50 indicators
		13. Gunung Lesong National Park 14. Gunung Buda National Park	Application: Site Self-Assessment
R6. Department of Wildlife and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia	Pahang, Peninsular Malaysia	15. Tengku Hassanal Wildlife Reserve	Application: Awaiting EAGL confirmation

the benefits of using the Green List for implementing effective park management and documented their journey (Tanner-McAllister et al., 2024). Building on these two publications, this paper intends to systematically document selected sites in Malaysia on their journey towards meeting the Green List standards, and to provide more empirical evidence in the published literature to aid other protected and conserved area managers seeking to achieve Green List certification. Specifically, the objective of our paper is to understand the motivations for seeking Green List certification, and the challenges faced while undergoing this process in Malaysia. These insights could be used to promote the benefits of the Green List, improve the process, and support the standard as a global benchmark for identifying well-managed protected and conserved areas, thereby delivering positive outcomes for biodiversity and society as the original intent of the Green List Programme (Hockings et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

One representative was interviewed from each of six protected or conserved area agencies or organisations in Malaysia (Table 1) that have either achieved Green List status, are currently at Applicant or Candidate stages or

have started exploring the Green List Standard. As of August 2025, Sugud Islands Marine Conservation Area and Pin Supu Forest Reserve have achieved the Green List status. The other respondents manage sites in the Applicant or Candidate phases. As such, the benefits we present here are mostly on the process of achieving the Green List.

We used semi-structured interviews to assess the respondents' motivations for pursuing Green List status and their experience of the process. The respondents were chosen to provide perspectives from a variety of organisations, and identified as R1–R6 (Table 1). R1 is from a private non-profit company with a lease to manage a protected area. The other five representatives were from government agencies, an oil palm company and a local community cooperative. At the time of the interview, R6 was from an agency in Peninsular Malaysia that had yet to apply for Green List certification; therefore, the challenges reported are what R6 perceived would be faced once the process was underway. Moreover, we wanted representation from Malaysia's two geopolitical regions: Peninsular Malaysia, consisting of 11 states, and Borneo Island, with two states, Sabah and

The picturesque Sapi Cape at Bako National Park, Sarawak. © Sarawak Forestry Corporation

Sarawak. The Bornean states are semi-autonomous and have control over their land and natural resources as compared to all states of Peninsular Malaysia. Respondents R1–R5 were directly responsible for Green List nominations and listing for their organisations. Respondent R6 is the Director for the protected area programme at the Department of Wildlife and National Parks, Peninsular Malaysia and oversees the effective management of all protected areas in the region.

The questionnaire (Supplementary Online Material 1) was developed and tested with a volunteer knowledgeable about the research matter and improved in response to their comments. The interviews were conducted online and face-to-face in November and December 2024, and were recorded with the respondents' permission. Content analysis of the interview transcripts was performed by first reading all the respondents' answers to the same questions and coding them into four themes: (1) their motivations for pursuing the Green List, (2) the benefits of going through the process, (3) the factors enabling them to pursue the Green List and (4) the challenges they faced when undergoing the process. Next, the coded data were analysed by assessing the commonalities or unique answers in responses to each question, allowing for the identification of patterns, shared perspectives and divergent views across the four themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reasons sites in Malaysia seek Green List certification

All six respondents stated that the key motivation for pursuing Green List certification is the recognition that their sites are being managed according to international best practices. As R4 aptly stated, Green List status "*gives us boasting rights*". Across all sites, achieving Green List certification is perceived as a validation of adherence to rigorous conservation standards, enhancing the site's credibility, both nationally and globally. The case of Arakwal National Park in Australia, which was one of the earlier pilot sites that achieved Green List certification, supports this notion, demonstrating that the Green List serves as a benchmark for well-managed protected areas (Bushell & Bricker, 2017). Additionally, four respondents (R3, R4, R5 and R6) anticipated that Green List recognition of their sites would lead to financial incentives and funding opportunities, as funders and investors are perceived to more likely support protected and conserved areas with proven governance and management effectiveness. This was also reported by Wells et al. (2016) in their case studies of MPAs participating in the Green List pilot phase. In this regard, Green List certification functions similarly to other incentive mechanisms such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), which operates on the assumption that consumers are willing to pay a premium for sustainably sourced timber (Fagundes, Schreiber, Nunes, & Fernandes, 2021; Richards, 2000). Likewise, in the Green List context, it is assumed that funders are

The oxbow lake at Pin Supu Forest Reserve, Sabah. © Rio Gatulik

more inclined to invest in protected and conserved areas that demonstrate strong governance and sustainable management practices. Eppich and Grinda's (2019) study found that World Heritage recognition enhances a site's credibility, visibility, and access to international support and donor networks, even though these sites continue to rely heavily on government funding. While FSC and World Heritage Sites have different objectives to the Green List, they are used for comparison because all three share a common underlying mechanism, which is the international recognition that the site has met certain standards, thereby enhancing its credibility as a well-governed site.

Green List certification is also viewed as a branding strategy, particularly for sites affiliated with private entities producing commodities. R3, a state-owned oil palm company, is seeking to become the first in Malaysia to achieve Green List certification on a 2,632 ha High Conservation Value Area (HCVA), thereby establishing a good reputation for managing their HCVA effectively. This distinction will enhance the company's environmental credibility and serve as a market differentiator, attracting buyers interested in sourcing sustainable palm oil. Similarly, R2, from a government department that once preferred FSC certification as a branding tool to demonstrate good management in its forest reserves, has shifted to pursuing Green List certification, driven by its significantly lower cost compared to FSC (Becker & Laaksonen-Craig, 2006).

Another motivation for site managers (R3, R4 and R6) to pursue Green List status is the belief that it can enhance the long-term security of their managed areas, and reinforce the permanence of their conservation status, thereby reducing the risk of land-use conversion. While this is viewed as a potential benefit, it should be noted that none of these sites are currently at risk of losing their protected or conserved status; rather, respondents perceive Green List recognition as an additional layer of protection. While Malaysian protected areas are officially considered 'permanent', they remain vulnerable to degazettement and downsizing, particularly in the event of political shifts that prioritise development over conservation. Although no research has directly established a correlation between Green List certification and prevention of degazettement and downsizing of protected areas, international recognition has previously played a role in safeguarding a natural area from further environmental degradation in Malaysia. A notable example is Chini Lake in Pahang, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve that faced severe threats from mining and logging in 2022. In response to the risk of losing its UNESCO status, the Pahang state government took decisive action to prevent further deforestation by halting mining operations around the lake and designating it as a Permanent Forest Reserve. This case demonstrates that governments are often reluctant to jeopardise international recognition, particularly when it carries significant prestige. By extension, the Green List could serve as a similar safeguard, strengthening the conservation commitment of protected areas and disincentivising policy decisions that might lead to their degazettement or downsizing.

For some PA managers, the drive to achieve Green List accreditation stems from personal motivations to achieve recognition. R1 shared how their experience of being tasked to manage the Green List certification process has led to invitations to share their expertise with other sites seeking Green List certification. R6 sees pushing for Green Listing as a career legacy, contributing to a
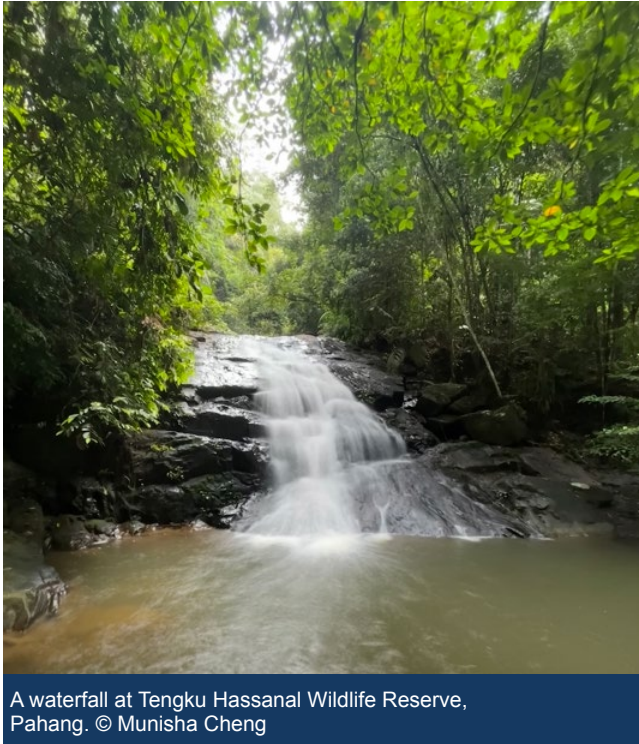
A waterfall at Tengku Hassanal Wildlife Reserve, Pahang. © Munisha Cheng

long-term vision of expanding Green List-certified sites in Peninsular Malaysia.

R4, the respondent from a local community-managed site, had more community-oriented motivations. They decided to pursue Green List to preserve their cultural heritage and to provide a recreational space for communities living nearby. R4 sees the Green List as a tool for promoting both biodiversity conservation and community well-being, as well as a mechanism to secure continued protection of ecosystem services, such as protection of the water catchment.

The benefits of going through the process of Green Listing and achieving certification

 Four respondents (R1, R3, R4 and R6) cited that by going through the Green List process, their documentation and management systems improved. The process encourages teams to organise their documents systematically, establishing proper filing systems that are also beneficial for sites pursuing multiple recognitions. Other Green List case studies have reported similar benefits in the improvement of their management systems (Bushell & Bricker, 2017; Wells et al., 2016). R1 reported that going through the process helped ensure the adoption of more effective management strategies, based on a clear framework according to international standards. Another benefit reported by R2, R3 and R5 was the improved capability of staff, as team members gained essential skills in wildlife monitoring, data collection, structured reporting, and

outcome-based management, thus improving overall management capability. A similar outcome was noted in Lamington National Park, Australia, where the Green List process contributed to uplifting the capacity and capability of the park's staff by highlighting gaps in its management, leading to better linkages between strategic planning and day-to-day operations (Tanner-McAllister et al., 2024). R3 and R5 reported that the process and framework also improve team cohesion, as it fosters stronger coordination among the teams working towards a common goal. Such cohesion helped promote organisational improvement in the MPAs that participated in the pilot phase of the Green List (Wells et al., 2016). Furthermore, all respondents reported that achieving Green List certification will enhance a sense of pride and motivation among their team members.

Factors enabling the pursuit of Green Listing

Respondents (R1, R3, R5 and R6) indicated that leadership and internal advocacy were crucial enabling factors for pursuing the Green List. They noted that strong support from a dedicated individual within the organisation or department significantly influenced the decision to pursue certification. Those with prior exposure to the Green List like R1, who was previously a member of the Malaysian EAGL, were particularly instrumental in driving the process forward. External support from conservation organisations, notably the World Wide Fund for Nature Malaysia (WWF-Malaysia), proved essential for R2, R4 and R5. As a well-funded conservation organisation, WWF-Malaysia played the role of a boundary spanner, which is an individual or organisation that connects different types of actors and enables interactions through logistical, facilitation and financial support (Bodin, 2017; Goodrich et al., 2020). WWF-Malaysia introduced the Green List into Malaysia, mentoring selected sites, funding Green List meetings and serving as an implementing partner.

Likewise, federal government funding through Ecological Fiscal Transfers (EFT) and its annual budget allocation provided further momentum. State government departments as reported by R5 and R6 accessed EFT funds specifically allocated to support the Green List process, ensuring financial stability to proceed with certification. Alignment with state strategies and policies reinforced the Green List's significance within governmental frameworks. The Sabah Forest Policy 2018 and the Sarawak Post-COVID-19 Development Strategy 2030 explicitly emphasised the importance of international recognition for protected areas. Similarly, within the strategic plan of the Department of Wildlife

and National Parks Peninsular Malaysia (DWNP), international accreditation has been institutionalised as a framework to ensure conservation excellence and effective protected area governance.

Challenges of Green List nomination

### Capacity of protected and conserved areas to meet the Green List standard

All respondents indicated that the process of reporting on the 50 Green List indicators presents significant challenges for protected or conserved area managers, especially when they do not have an existing or organised information management system to monitor and evaluate their management effectiveness. One of the primary difficulties is the time-consuming nature of locating and uploading the necessary documents onto COMPASS (IUCN Green List's digital platform that facilitates site applications). Writing site justifications for the indicators adds another layer of complexity, as site managers (R2, R3, R4, R5 and R6) struggle with the technical aspects of answering the indicators, necessitating the guidance of a mentor. All sites except R1 mentioned that the most challenging indicators pertained to natural values and thresholds, as many sites lack the necessary data to support their claims, potentially due to the absence of a monitoring framework within the sites. R1, the lead marine biologist for their site for over 15 years, found it relatively easier because they had the necessary expertise to address the indicators, unlike the managers at other sites, who were primarily administrators without in-depth technical knowledge. The challenges described above were also faced by the six MPAs that participated in the pilot phase of the Green List in Wells et al. (2016).

R2, R4 and R5 reported that the sheer volume of 50 indicators can feel overwhelming, particularly for those who are not working on the Green List full time and have other responsibilities. Specifically for the government-managed sites (R2, R5 and R6), staff turnover presents a risk, as successors may not be interested in continuing the efforts, which can result in delays or the abandonment of the process altogether.

The findings above regarding the technical aspects of the 50 indicators do not suggest that the Green List standard should be made easier to achieve; rather, they point to key areas where many Malaysian protected and conserved areas must build capacity, improve data systems, and strengthen technical skills to meet global standards. The Green List process itself has acted as a catalyst for such improvements. For example, R3 reported that since beginning the process, their team has been collecting higher-quality data and conducting

Seagrass habitat for Green Turtles. Underneath the jetty of Lankayan Island, SIMCA. © Archier
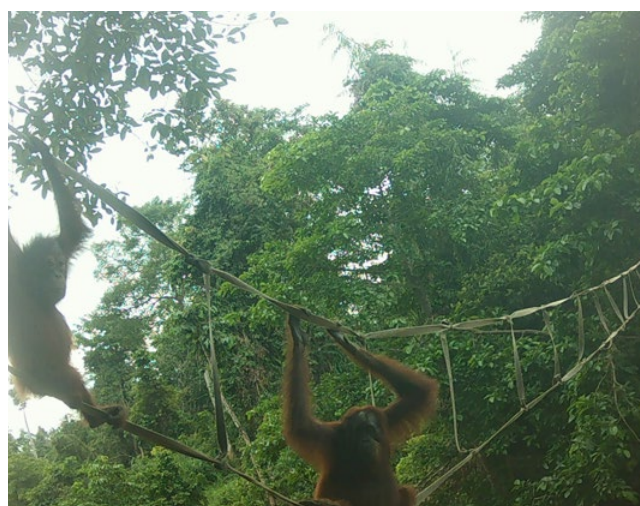
Caught on camera. Bornean orangutans using a man-made bridge to cross a river at Sungai Pin Conservation Area, Sabah. © CBU, Sawit Kinabalu

regular biodiversity monitoring. Similarly, to build their own capacity, R2 partnered with other organisations to help fill in their gaps, such as assistance and training in biodiversity monitoring.

Community-conserved area challenges

For the community-conserved area (R4), securing land rights to their site remains a significant obstacle due to the complex process of legal recognition. This makes it challenging to meet the fundamental requirement of having a clearly defined and documented governance structure, as outlined in Indicator 1.1.1 of the Green List Standard. This is a common challenge when it comes to other certification schemes like the FSC. As pointed out by Becker and Laaksonen-Craig (2006), tenure rights are needed so that communities can manage and sustain the land in the long term, consistent with the requirements in the certification standards. R4 reported that the pace

Conservation education camp organised by KOPEL, the local community cooperative at Pin Supu Forest Reserve, Sabah. © Rio Gatulik

at which the application progresses causes them to lose momentum and interest. The prolonged timeline of the Green List process is particularly discouraging for local communities because they often lack the resources and capacity to sustain interest and motivation, in addition to the lack of opportunities to access funding compared to sites managed by government agencies.

Using COMPASS

R1 reported that the COMPASS platform poses additional barriers, especially to sites located in remote areas with unreliable internet connectivity, resulting in the site manager facing difficulties in accessing and inputting information into the online platform. Furthermore, R4 found that COMPASS lacks a user-friendly interface, making it challenging for individuals with limited computer literacy. This challenge is particularly pronounced for those unfamiliar with digital tools, such as members of local communities or more mature participants, who may struggle to complete the process within COMPASS.

Misunderstandings regarding the Green List

R2 and R5 observed that within their departments, there was limited understanding of the time and requirements involved in achieving Green List certification, leading to expectations that did not align with the process. In R2's case, prior experience with FSC certification contributed to an assumption that the Green List would follow a similar timeline and evaluation approach, despite substantial differences in scope and methodology. In Peninsular Malaysia, R6 noted that some state governments may be hesitant to engage with the Green List due to perceptions of potential financial implications or concerns about state jurisdiction over protected areas.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the motivations of selected sites pursuing Green List status in Malaysia, alongside the challenges encountered throughout the process. While representatives of protected or conserved areas clearly value the Green List for the international recognition it confers, its alignment with global best practices, improvements in monitoring systems, and its perceived potential to attract funding and enhance protection, the pathway to gaining recognition remains complex, time-consuming and resource intensive. Our findings highlight the need for more coordinated and strategic support from within the Green List community (e.g. mentors, EAGLs, implementing partners, Operations Team) and from the broader conservation community to improve the processes and its benefits, and to keep the sites engaged. At the same time, our findings suggest that engaging in the Green List process helps sites identify gaps and strengthen their capacity, enabling them to progressively align with international best practices, which is a core intention of the standard.

To strengthen the uptake of the Green List process in Malaysia and the rest of the world, the IUCN and the global Green List community could work towards linking Green List accreditation to tangible incentives, such as access to performance-based grants and increased international visibility like the World Heritage Sites.

Addressing the equity challenges encountered by Malaysian community-conserved areas in the Green List application process is of particular importance. This can be achieved by offering targeted support to community-managed sites that are facing systemic challenges such as securing land tenure documentation and meeting

technical reporting requirements. Implementing partners can play a pivotal role by prioritising and strategically appointing experienced mentors and connecting site managers to technical experts for site-specific guidance and oversight.

To address the capacity gaps, improve mentor development and promote better understanding of the Green List process, former EAGL members have recently established the Malaysian EAGL Alumni group. The Alumni retain and pass on EAGL expertise to mentored sites and further support their efforts by introducing the Green List programme to a wider audience. In addition, a national Green List Community of Practice is being developed to foster peer-to-peer learning, reduce feelings of isolation, and build staff confidence at sites aspiring to become Green List certified. It is recommended that both initiatives are acknowledged and officially documented (such as in the *IUCN Green List Malaysia Handbook*) to support their role in implementing the Green List Programme in Malaysia.

Donors and boundary spanners have a key role in enabling success. They can advocate for Green List sites and candidate sites to be prioritised in government and donor funding streams, thus reinforcing the Green List as a credible and recognised standard of protected and conserved areas excellence. Encouraging relevant government agencies to institutionalise support for Green List certification by integrating it into national and state conservation strategies (particularly for the states in Peninsular Malaysia) and providing dedicated resources for implementation at the state level would further enhance the sustainability and impact of the initiative in Malaysia.

These recommendations could be extended beyond Malaysia and offer valuable guidance for other countries seeking Green List recognition. By sharing Malaysia's experience and case studies, the authors hope to contribute meaningfully to the continuous refinement of the Green List process and reinforce its significance as a global standard for protected and conserved areas. Ultimately, the Green List can only fulfil its aim to deliver impactful conservation outcomes through deliberate, sustained support and decisive on-the-ground implementation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SUPPLEMENTARY ONLINE MATERIAL

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RÉSUMÉ

La Liste verte des aires protégées et conservées de l'UICN fournit une référence internationale pour une gestion efficace et équitable de la conservation. Cette étude examine les motivations et les défis de six agences malaisiennes différentes chargées de la protection ou de la conservation des aires protégées, parmi lesquelles des départements gouvernementaux, des entités du secteur privé et une coopérative communautaire qui souhaitent obtenir la reconnaissance de la Liste verte. Des entretiens semi-structurés ont révélé que les principales motivations sont notamment le renforcement de la crédibilité internationale, l'accès à des possibilités de financement, le renforcement de la protection à long terme et l'obtention d'une reconnaissance professionnelle ou organisationnelle. Les sites gérés par la communauté accordaient en outre une grande importance à la préservation du patrimoine culturel et des services écosystémiques. Parmi les avantages signalés, on peut citer l'amélioration de la documentation, le renforcement des systèmes de gestion, l'amélioration des capacités du personnel et une plus grande cohésion de l'équipe. Cependant, les sites sont confrontés à des défis importants, tels que les lourdeurs administratives, le faible niveau de capacités techniques et les contraintes institutionnelles. Les zones gérées par les communautés sont en outre confrontées à des obstacles tels que l'incertitude du régime foncier et la limitation des ressources, qui entravent leur participation à la Liste verte. Les résultats soulignent le rôle déterminant d'un leadership fort, du soutien des bailleurs de fonds et de l'alignement des politiques, tout en mettant en évidence la nécessité de rationaliser les processus, de mettre en place un mentorat ciblé et d'assurer un soutien institutionnel durable. Nos conclusions offrent des recommandations pratiques pour améliorer la mise en œuvre de la Liste verte en Malaisie et fournissent des orientations à d'autres pays qui s'engagent dans cette voie.

RESUMEN

La Lista Verde de Áreas Protegidas y Conservadas de la UICN proporciona un punto de referencia internacional para una gestión eficaz y equitativa de la conservación. Este estudio examina las motivaciones y los retos de seis organismos diferentes de áreas protegidas o conservadas de Malasia, entre los que se incluyen departamentos gubernamentales, entidades del sector privado y una cooperativa comunitaria que aspira a obtener el reconocimiento de la Lista Verde. Las entrevistas semiestructuradas revelaron que las principales motivaciones son mejorar la credibilidad internacional, acceder a oportunidades de financiación, reforzar la protección a largo plazo y lograr el reconocimiento profesional u organizativo. Los sitios gestionados por la comunidad valoraban además la preservación del patrimonio cultural y los servicios ecosistémicos. Entre los beneficios del proceso se mencionaron la mejora de la documentación, el fortalecimiento de los sistemas de gestión, la mejora de la capacidad del personal y una mayor cohesión del equipo. Sin embargo, los sitios se enfrentan a retos importantes, como las cargas procedimentales, la escasa capacidad técnica y las limitaciones institucionales. Las áreas gestionadas por la comunidad se enfrentan además a obstáculos como la inseguridad de la tenencia de la tierra y la escasez de recursos, que dificultan su participación en la Lista Verde. Las conclusiones destacan el papel facilitador de un liderazgo fuerte, el apoyo de los donantes y la armonización de las políticas, al tiempo que subrayan la necesidad de procesos simplificados, tutorías específicas y un respaldo institucional sostenido. Nuestras conclusiones ofrecen recomendaciones prácticas para mejorar la implementación de la Lista Verde en Malasia y proporcionan orientación a otros países que están navegando por este proceso.