



SHORT COMMUNICATION: PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS IN A CHANGING WORLD: KEY THEMES FOR A GLOBAL RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

Much has changed in the ambition for and challenges to protected and conserved areas since the last IUCN World Parks Congress in 2014. As such, the IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress 2027 (WPC27) will be a critical milestone for global conservation, arriving at a time of ecological urgency and profound societal shifts. WPC27 will be organised around three integrated themes, each designed for their transformative potential: 1) Global Change and Biodiversity – Opportunities and threats for protected and conserved areas; 2) Scaling Effective Conservation – Securing gains and catalysing scalable, sustainable action; and 3) Conservation and People – Rights, responsibilities and relationships in a changing world. This paper synthesises the thematic vision and proposes sub-themes and key outcomes for each, outlining how they can inspire action, innovation and investment at scale. Although the themes were developed for the IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress 2027, the challenges and opportunities are relevant to discussions on protected and conserved areas at the World Conservation Congress 2025 and other global meetings leading up to 2030 and beyond. The programme of WPC27 will be developed to influence and inform a range of related multilateral meetings and negotiations.

Keywords: Protected area networks, OECMs, IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress, Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, 30x30

INTRODUCTION

Much has changed since the last IUCN World Parks Congress in 2014. A significantly more ambitious global target for protected and conserved area coverage was agreed as part of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) in 2022 – at least 30 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas and of marine and coastal areas by 2030 (Target 3; CBD, 2022). There has been greater understanding of the role and contribution of privately protected areas (Bingham et al., 2021; Mitchell et al., 2018; Stolton et al., 2014). Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs; among other conserved areas) have been defined (IUCN-WCPA Task Force on OECMs, 2019; Jonas et al., 2024a), debated (e.g. Fitzsimons et al., 2025a) and are increasingly being recognised at national levels and reported to global databases (Jonas et al., 2024b). The role of Indigenous and traditional territories and their importance to global conservation targets are increasingly recognised (Lumosi et al., 2025; Oliva et al., 2025; Stevens et al., 2024), as is the crucial role of protected and conserved areas for climate change mitigation and adaptation – representing a key mechanism to jointly address biodiversity loss and climate change impacts (Duncanson et al., 2023; Pörtner et al., 2021). During this time, protected areas have been challenged by a global pandemic and related restrictions of movement (Hockings et al., 2020; Waithaka et al., 2021), and, despite the popularity of the 30x30 target by residents of most countries surveyed (Fitzsimons et al., 2025b; Michaelsen et al., 2025), political and economic upheaval are challenging support in some regions (e.g. Villagomez & Hidayat, 2025).

In addition to the Convention on Biological Diversity's Conference of the Parties meetings, global summits such as the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025 and IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress 2027 provide important and focused opportunities to advance thinking and discuss progress towards the Global Biodiversity Framework, particularly Target 3.

THE IUCN WORLD PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS CONGRESS 2027

The IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress 2027 (WPC27) will be a critical milestone for global conservation, arriving at a time of ecological urgency and profound societal shifts. Since the last WPC in 2014, climate impacts, biodiversity decline, inequality and socio-political fragmentation have intensified. WPC27 is uniquely positioned to respond, bridging the final years towards meeting the 2030 targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework with a bold agenda for the ensuing decade.



Alpine grasslands, Alpine National Park, Victoria, Australia
© James Fitzsimons

To fulfil this ambition, WPC27 will be organised around three integrated themes, each designed for their transformative potential. These themes are not just topical entry points, they are frameworks for action, each capable of shaping global and local strategies for lasting conservation impact. The themes were shaped during a workshop held at the BfN International Academy for Nature Conservation in Vilm, Germany, from 21 to 24 July 2025. The workshop brought together experts from across IUCN networks along with partners for the first time to begin framing the WPC27 programme. Building on the Congress's legacy since 1958 as the only large-scale global gathering dedicated to all aspects of protected and conserved areas, the workshop reviewed lessons from 2014, identified potential objectives and outcomes, explored thematic priorities, and initiated mapping of the preparatory process. Its remit was clear: to set the foundation for an event that both reflects the diversity of today's conservation practice and delivers concrete pathways for nature-positive outcomes.

The agreed themes, which are grounded in the WPC mandate, are:

1. Global Change and Biodiversity – Opportunities and threats for protected and conserved areas;
2. Scaling Effective Conservation – Securing gains and catalysing scalable, sustainable action;
3. Conservation and People – Rights, responsibilities and relationships in a changing world.

This paper synthesises the thematic vision and proposes sub-themes and key outcomes for each, outlining how

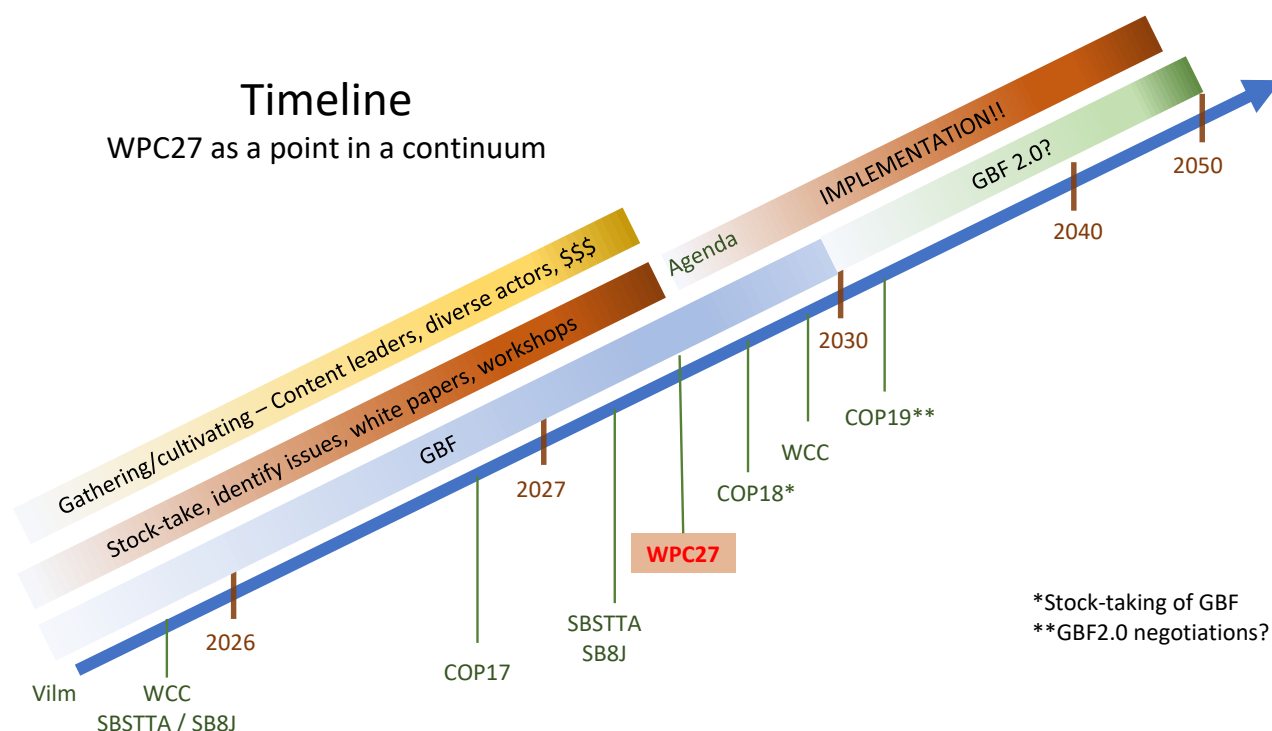


Figure 1. Timeline with major meetings leading up to 2030 that have relevance for protected and conserved areas, Target 3 of the GBF and the development of post-2030 global biodiversity goals. (SBSTTA = Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice of the Convention on Biological Diversity; SB8J = Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) - Traditional Knowledge, Innovations and Practices of the Convention on Biological Diversity)

they can inspire action, innovation and investment at scale, similar to the work of Sandwith et al. (2014) ahead of the IUCN World Parks Congress 2014. Although the themes were developed for the IUCN World Protected and Conserved Area Congress 2027, the challenges and opportunities are relevant to discussions on protected and conserved areas at the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025 and other global meetings leading up to 2030 and beyond. In fact, the programme of WPC27 will be developed to influence and inform a range of related multilateral meetings and negotiations (Figure 1).

Theme 1. Global Change and Biodiversity: Opportunities and threats for protected and conserved areas

The core question for this theme is: “How can protected and conserved area (PCA) systems be made more resilient to the impacts of global change factors such as climate change, human movement and land use changes, and how can they contribute meaningfully to global responses to climate, ecological and socio-economic disruption?”. The ten-year outcome statement is: Resilient and adaptively managed PCA systems are at the heart of global strategies to respond to climate change, systemic uncertainty, and planetary risk including those related tipping points (Deutloff et al., 2025).

Sub-themes and focus areas

1. Shaping political will and systems thinking

- Transforming global narratives to position PCAs as solutions to planetary crises
- Incorporating suggestions from the IPBES Transformative Change report (IPBES, 2024)
- Engaging policymakers, civil society and industry with stories of success and urgent need
- Advancing partnerships that align commitments on climate, health, peace and biodiversity (e.g. International Partnership on MPAs, Biodiversity and Climate Change, 2025)

2. Designing for resilience and uncertainty

- Developing PCA networks that are resilient: responsive to shifting climatic zones, human migration, species migration and ecosystem change
- Tools for decision-making under uncertainty, scenario planning, and trade-off management (e.g. increasing popularity of biodiversity offsets, despite well-documented problems)
- Mainstreaming ecosystem services (e.g. urban water security, health, disaster risk reduction) into PCA design and management



Women in Sa Pa Vietnam © Iveslves@unsplash

3. Strengthening connections between urban PCAs and wider PCA networks to ensure ecological and social integration

4. Shifting financial flows for nature-positive outcomes

- Redirecting perverse incentives, investing in nature-based solutions (IUCN, 2020) such as PCAs, and integrating PCAs into sovereign economic strategy
- Engaging Ministries of Finance, Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG)-aligned investors, and nature-based markets (e.g. carbon, biodiversity credits)
- Addressing corruption, illegal economies and new threats

Theme 2. Scaling Effective Conservation: Securing gains and catalysing scalable, sustainable action

The core question for this theme is: “How can we move beyond quantity to ensure quality in PCA expansion and embed conservation as a shared societal and economic goal?”. The ten-year outcome statement is: A globally scaled, well-governed, resilient system of protected and conserved areas forms the backbone of national development and sustainability strategies. Scaling includes spatial expansion, replicating working models in multiple locations, building up human capacity and emphasising quality consideration.

Sub-themes and focus areas

1. Reframing/elevating conservation in society and policy

- Positioning conservation as a foundational value, not a marginal pursuit
- Enabling PCA integration into food, health, urban development and national economic planning
- Creating public narratives that elevate PCAs as infrastructure for resilience and well-being

2. Integrating PCAs across landscapes and sectors

- Designing systems embedded within broader landscapes and seascapes, and integrated within wider sectoral planning (e.g. water, agriculture, cities)
- Supporting transboundary and mosaic conservation approaches, especially in globally significant biomes, such as tropical rainforests, and the High Seas
- Advancing spatial planning and cross-sectoral governance mechanisms (e.g. Giokoumi et al., 2025; Grantham et al., 2024)

3. Strengthening internal capacities and financing for resilient and healthy PCAs

- Investing in the PCA workforce: rangers, stewards, planners and community leaders
- Scaling what works: successful conservation models, effectiveness frameworks with an emphasis on conservation outcomes

- Blending finance to strengthen PCAs for effectiveness and climate and biodiversity outcomes: public, private and community sources
- Building real-time monitoring and decision support systems through technology and data analytics

Theme 3. Conservation and People: Rights, responsibilities and relationships in a changing world

The core question for this theme is: “What would it take for PCAs and conservation to be fully inclusive and participatory – especially those already stewarding nature, and how do we shift power and resources accordingly?”. The ten-year outcome statement is: A globally supported and locally led conservation movement that recognises and supports diverse custodians, communities and knowledge systems.

Sub-themes and focus areas

1. Rights, responsibilities and recognition by and for nature stewards

- Recognising, supporting and amplifying the leadership of Indigenous peoples, local communities, and civil society custodians of nature
- Expanding legal recognition and governance diversity (e.g. OECMs, territories of life, co-management) (e.g. Stevens et al., 2024)
- Addressing threats: criminalisation, environmental defenders, land tenure conflict, and green extractivism (appropriating natural resources, such as minerals for renewable energy technologies or land for carbon sequestration)

2. Planet and people on the move

- Reimagining conservation and more significantly, economic growth and human development for a mobile world: climate migration, urbanisation, shifting socio-ecological landscapes
- Innovating governance models for urban–nature relationships and transboundary responses
- Actively promoting new models for One Health (an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimise the health of people, animals and ecosystems, human–wildlife cohabitation, zoonotic risk management)

3. Society, culture and technology

- Embracing arts, culture, sport, and digital storytelling in building conservation movements
- Addressing risks and potentials of technology: AI, surveillance, misinformation, digital inclusion
- Building inclusive and evidence-based learning systems: education, mutual learning, capacity sharing



Ranger Anton Mzimba, South Africa © South Africa Parks

WPC27 AS A TURNING POINT FOR THE FUTURE OF NATURE CONSERVATION

These three themes reflect the interconnected crises and opportunities of our time. They challenge the conservation community not only to protect more space, but to transform power, systems, narratives and economies. WPC27 must be more than a gathering, it should be the catalyst for a new phase of global conservation, one that is effective, equitable, scalable and transformative. Momentum is building now to gather information over the next two years, so that the event can look forward to the challenges of the ensuing decades.

To that end, WPC27 will deliver:

- Preparatory white papers and global position briefs for each theme (in advance of the Congress) to document the state of play, lessons learned, barriers, and related insights, to explore new pathways forward;
- Coalition-building platforms that are initiated on the road to Congress and extend beyond the event itself;
- Commitments from governments, cities, business, local communities and others; and
- A shared 2030+ vision anchored in outcomes, not only intentions, to address the implementation crisis.



Ranger in Bhutan © Rohit Singh WWF

NEXT STEPS

The WPC27 International Steering Committee (ISC), to be formed in late 2025, will develop the final programme, in consultation with the host country. The themes identified in this paper will inform that programme. The ISC will engage and consult widely on these themes and subthemes, helping to shape the final programme, which will be informed by this summary but not constrained by it.

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RESUMEN

Mucho ha cambiado en cuanto a las ambiciones y los retos de las áreas protegidas y conservadas desde el último Congreso Mundial de Parques de la UICN en 2014. Por ello, el Congreso Mundial de Áreas Protegidas y Conservadas de la UICN 2027 (WPC27) será un hito fundamental para la conservación mundial, ya que llega en un momento de urgencia ecológica y profundos cambios sociales. El WPC27 se organizará en torno a tres temas integrados, cada uno de ellos diseñado por su potencial transformador: 1) Cambio global y biodiversidad: oportunidades y amenazas para las áreas protegidas y conservadas; 2) Ampliación de la conservación eficaz: asegurar los logros y catalizar acciones escalables y sostenibles; y 3) Conservación y personas: derechos, responsabilidades y relaciones en un mundo cambiante. Este documento sintetiza la visión temática y propone subtemas y resultados clave para cada uno de ellos, esbozando cómo pueden inspirar la acción, la innovación y la inversión a gran escala. Aunque los temas se desarrollaron para el Congreso Mundial de Áreas Protegidas y Conservadas, de la UICN los retos y oportunidades son relevantes para los debates sobre las áreas protegidas y conservadas en el Congreso Mundial de la Naturaleza de 2025 y otras reuniones mundiales que se celebrarán hasta 2030 y más allá. El programa del WPC27 se desarrollará con el fin de influir e informar una serie de reuniones y negociaciones multilaterales relacionadas.

RÉSUMÉ

Beaucoup de choses ont changé depuis le dernier Congrès mondial sur les parcs de l'UICN en 2014 en ce qui concerne les ambitions et les défis liés aux aires protégées et conservées. À ce titre, le Congrès mondial sur les aires protégées et conservées de l'UICN 2027 (WPC27) constituera une étape cruciale pour la conservation mondiale, à un moment où l'urgence écologique et les profondes mutations sociétales sont à leur comble. Le WPC27 s'articulera autour de trois thèmes intégrés, chacun conçu pour son potentiel transformateur : 1) Changement mondial et biodiversité – Opportunités et menaces pour les aires protégées et conservées ; 2) Développer une conservation efficace – Sécuriser les acquis et catalyser une action évolutive et durable ; et 3) Conservation et populations – Droits, responsabilités et relations dans un monde en mutation. Le présent document synthétise la vision thématique et propose des sous-thèmes et des résultats clés pour chacun d'entre eux, en soulignant comment ils peuvent inspirer des actions, des innovations et des investissements à grande échelle. Bien que ces thèmes aient été élaborés pour le Congrès mondial sur les aires protégées et conservées de l'UICN, les défis et les opportunités qu'ils soulèvent sont pertinents pour les discussions sur les aires protégées et conservées qui auront lieu lors du Congrès mondial de la nature de 2025 et d'autres réunions mondiales jusqu'en 2030 et au-delà. Le programme du WPC27 sera élaboré de manière à influencer et à éclairer toute une série de réunions et de négociations multilatérales connexes.