



SHORT COMMUNICATION: REFLECTIONS FROM INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH ON THE SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF IMPLEMENTING 30×30: FIVE WAYS FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

Area-based conservation is critical for conserving biodiversity, but its success depends on understanding and addressing its social dimensions. Here we share key reflections from an interdisciplinary working group studying the social implications of expanding area-based conservation under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's Target 3, also known as 30×30. Over two years, our interdisciplinary working group collaborated through workshops, quantitative spatial analysis and qualitative case studies to explore how approaches to implementing Target 3 may create challenges and opportunities for people living in and around protected and conserved areas, particularly since international and even national priorities can sometimes conflict with local aspirations. Our reflections emphasise that implementing Target 3 is not only an ecological challenge but also a profoundly social one. Based on insights from our collective work, we identify five ways forward for a socially just Target 3: (1) fostering dialogue across perspectives to support more inclusive solutions; (2) giving greater attention to who is affected; (3) balancing the focus on 'where' conservation is implemented with more attention to 'how' it is governed and managed; (4) mainstreaming social data in conservation planning; and (5) connecting insights across scales. By sharing these reflections, we aim to support ongoing efforts to foreground social considerations in conservation policy and practice.

Keywords: Target 3; Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework; Equitable conservation; Just conservation; Social data; 30 by 30

INTRODUCTION

Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), also known as the 30×30 target, aims to:

Ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, recognizing indigenous and traditional territories

where applicable, and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean, while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories (CBD, 2022).

The target's ambitious scale – almost doubling global coverage of protected and conserved areas by 2030 (UNEP-WCMC & IUCN, 2025) – has made it central to conservation discourse among conservation organisations, researchers and practitioners. However, while some view the target as a crucial opportunity to halt biodiversity loss and strengthen Indigenous and

community rights (Campaign For Nature, 2022; High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, 2020), others have raised concerns about risks such as displacement, exclusion, or insufficient attention to social issues in conservation expansion (Kedward & Poupard, 2024; Survival International, 2022). Navigating these tensions is crucial to enable just and effective future conservation (Sandbrook et al., 2023).

This paper emerges from the 'The Social Implications of 30×30' working group funded by the Science for Nature and People Partnership (SNAPP; <https://snapppartnership.net/>), which worked from 2023 to 2025. The group brought together around 30 researchers and practitioners across disciplines, sectors and geographies. Our activities have included developing global- and national-scale quantitative analyses of the potential social implications of 30×30, as well as qualitative analysis of how case study countries have sought to incorporate social considerations into their planning, with initial outputs already published (Sandbrook et al., 2023). Drawing on insights from a series of group discussions held throughout the project, including five workshops, we identify five ways forward that can help address Target 3's social dimensions, illustrated with quotes from a questionnaire completed by working group members at the end of the project (see Supplementary Online Material for details).

TARGET 3 INTEGRATES MULTIPLE SOCIAL AS WELL AS ECOLOGICAL OBJECTIVES

Although often understood as an ecological target, Target 3 is also profoundly social in nature, as evident in the explicitly social elements embedded in its language. This reflects the fact that millions of people rely on access to landscapes and seascapes for their livelihoods in areas that are already or might become protected (Allan et al., 2022; Schleicher et al., 2019).

Recognising the social nature of Target 3 means asking not only what areas to conserve, but also who will be affected, what impacts may arise, who makes decisions and how, and which values and knowledge systems are prioritised. This is essential for informing social safeguards, but also for identifying potential co-benefits such as for health, empowerment, security, employment, or inter-generational equity, and the pathways by which these might be achieved. Recognising such dimensions is key to engaging both conservation and development actors towards fairer, more effective implementation of Target 3.



Lamington National Park, Queensland, Australia © James Fitzsimons

DOMINANT GLOBAL NARRATIVES OVERSIMPLIFY THE REALITY OF AREA-BASED CONSERVATION

Public, policy and scientific debates around 30×30 often portray it either as a powerful solution to biodiversity loss that can also advance rights and human well-being (Campaign For Nature, 2022; High Ambition Coalition for Nature and People, 2020), or as a neocolonial agenda that risks harming local people and territories (Büscher, 2025; Survival International, 2022). These contrasting narratives, while effective for advocacy, often emerge from and reinforce polarised positions, reducing space for interdisciplinary learning – even when participants share many underlying values (Sandbrook et al., 2019).

In practice, governance of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) differs widely across countries, as do their ecological and social implications. For example, Australia recognises a mix of public, private and Indigenous protected areas, characterised by diverse governance and conservation models (Fitzsimons et al., 2023). Canada incorporates Indigenous-led conservation initiatives emphasising rights and collaboration (Mansuy et al., 2023). In contrast, recent forced evictions tied to protected area expansion in Tanzania highlight serious governance challenges and human rights issues (Human Rights Watch, 2024), which can in turn also jeopardise conservation objectives. This diversity of approaches also extends to recognition of the role of Indigenous peoples and local communities under Target 3. Perhaps because of the multiplicity of existing governance approaches, how additional

territories will be recognised (or included as protected areas or OECMs) remains undefined (e.g. Lumosi et al., 2025), creating ambiguity about this aspect of the target's implementation.

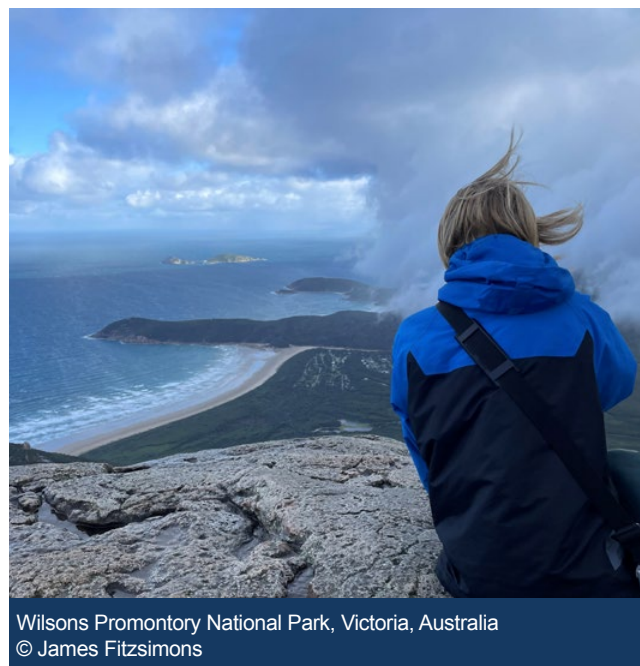
Oversimplified narratives can obscure risks, suppress difficult questions, or suggest that technical solutions alone can resolve deeply socially challenged realities. Researchers and practitioners have called for more interdisciplinary approaches that recognise these complexities and centre equity and human rights (e.g. Gurney et al., 2023; Rakotonarivo et al., 2025; Sandbrook et al., 2023). Recognising these issues, we see moving beyond polarised framings as both possible and necessary. With Target 3 now agreed, there is an opportunity – and an imperative – to clarify and develop narratives that embrace the social complexity of area-based conservation. Our work responds to these calls by engaging with the social implications of 30×30 and offering interdisciplinary insights into practical ways forward.

WAYS FORWARD FROM OUR INTERDISCIPLINARY WORK TOWARDS A SOCIALLY-JUST TARGET 3

There is no single way to implement Target 3 that will work well for people and nature across all contexts. Below we share reflections from our interdisciplinary discussions, synthesised into five ways forward to inform approaches to implementation that better account for social dimensions.

Foster dialogue across perspectives

Effective implementation of Target 3 depends on dialogue across disciplines, sectors, and knowledge systems, since each brings different priorities and no single perspective can capture its ecological and social complexity (Bennett et al., 2017; Reed, 2008). Engaging across perspectives can reveal what is missing from individual approaches and encourage new ways of thinking. Our experience highlighted both the value and the difficulty of this process. Within the group, even widely used terms like ‘impact’ or ‘local communities’ carried different meanings across disciplinary traditions or languages, creating misalignment. Building mutual understanding took time, and the pressure to reach consensus sometimes flattened disagreement. For instance, as one of our group members said, “Some held back to maintain cohesion ... much like diplomacy.” Even inclusive processes can inadvertently reproduce exclusion, particularly when urgency prioritises agreement over pluralism (Matulis & Moyer, 2017).



Wilsons Promontory National Park, Victoria, Australia
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Consider who is affected

Implementing Target 3 requires recognising who might be affected by conservation, what social characteristics and needs they bring, and how this shapes both social outcomes and ecological effectiveness. An interdisciplinary perspective shaped our discussions about what existing data could reveal about people living in and around areas that might be protected and conserved under Target 3. Rather than focusing narrowly on population size or standard economic proxies of conservation-related costs, a broader framing – for instance, attending to development status, livelihoods and other social characteristics such as age, gender or Indigenous identity – can open space for more context-sensitive and equitable planning (Ban et al., 2013; Stephanson & Mascia, 2014). In our work, this led us to explore indicators of development status and nature-based livelihoods to reflect socio-economic diversity across geographies.

It is also important to reflect on which groups are visible in analyses, and which remain overlooked. This led us to refrain from using some datasets – for instance, those capturing forest-proximate populations but missing harder-to-detect forest dwellers and lacking equivalents for other ecosystems – because they risked incomplete or misleading representation of groups (Cobb et al., 2024; Watmough et al., 2019). As one group member reflected, “Interdisciplinarity enabled discussions about who gets overlooked (e.g. non-forest dependent people, local communities outside the tropics, etc.).” The group’s thinking shifted from asking how many people might be present to asking who they are and how they interact with local environments.

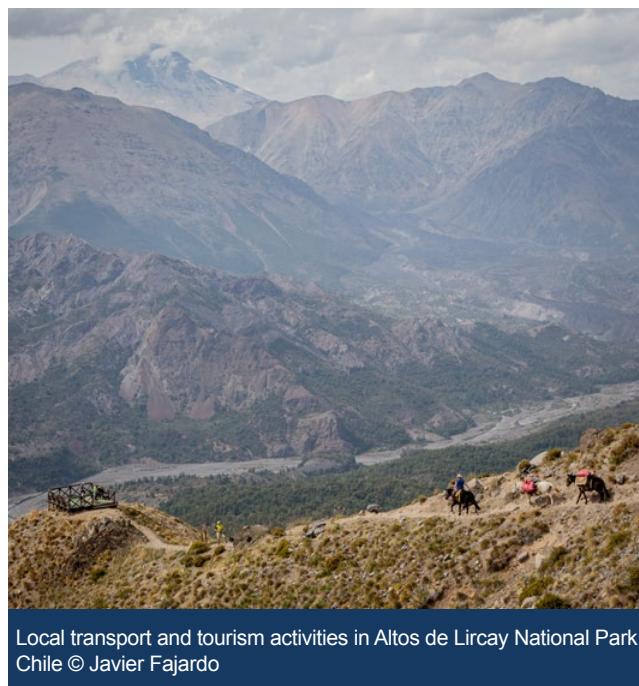
Attend to the ‘how’ of conservation

Moving towards a socially just and effective Target 3 implementation requires greater attention to the ‘how’ of conservation (the concrete governance and management arrangements adopted) alongside the ‘where’ and the ‘what’ (the areas identified for conservation and the values that are prioritised) by planners and research. Assessing the impact of different approaches on people remains highly complex and context-dependent, often involving trade-offs that create both winners and losers (Meyfroidt et al., 2022). Case studies, literature reviews and data-driven analyses can offer insight on this complexity, but many gaps remain. Ultimately, effective and equitable implementation depends on context-specific decisions involving stakeholders that balance local, national and international interests (Meyfroidt et al., 2022). Interdisciplinary groups, particularly those that bring practitioners and researchers together, can help spotlight empirical regularities in social considerations and trade-offs to inform decision-making.

Mainstream social data in conservation

Using a wider range of social data can help ensure that Target 3 implementation reflects diverse human realities (Polasky, 2008; Stephanson & Mascia, 2014). Conservation planning often relies on socio-economic indicators such as land use, anthropogenic pressures, or costs (Ban et al., 2013; Kukkala & Moilanen, 2013), which are useful to estimate trade-offs but offer limited insight into local realities (Adams, 2024; Adams et al., 2010; Cobb et al., 2024; Larrosa et al., 2016). A broader range of spatially explicit social data, including poverty and development status (e.g. Chi et al., 2022; Sherman et al., 2023; Watmough et al., 2019), different types of livelihoods (e.g. Lesiv et al., 2019; Wells et al., 2024) and local cultural values (e.g. Pironon et al., 2024; Whitehead et al., 2014), can offer a more meaningful picture of who is present, how they rely on natural systems, and what engagement is needed (Hinchley et al., 2023; Whitehead et al., 2014). As one participant put it, “There’s a need to bring in broader social datasets into conservation planning, not just for ethics but for long-term feasibility.”

Integrating such data is challenging. Data availability and quality remain uneven, especially at global levels, with gaps across regions and inconsistent resolution. Some key dimensions – such as tenure, identity or governance – require on-the-ground research or national datasets. Indigenous and local knowledge offers critical insight into ecological values and governance, but demands intentional inclusion pathways (Hinchley et al., 2023). Understanding derived from large-scale datasets cannot replace direct engagement with local communities,



Local transport and tourism activities in Altos de Lircay National Park, Chile © Javier Fajardo

Indigenous peoples, or institutions, but interdisciplinary, data-driven approaches can help shift how practitioners think about conservation evidence. As one participant noted, “It gave me confidence to look at area-based conservation not just through a biophysical lens but through a social one too.”

Connect insights across scales

Insights from global, national and local scales each provide distinct perspectives, and connecting them contributes to balance broad patterns with place-specific realities. Global perspectives can help frame the broader picture but must be interpreted carefully (Wyborn & Evans, 2021). Aggregating information at global or regional levels can reveal large-scale patterns, support advocacy, and shape high-level policy debates, but global datasets often lack relevance or resolution for national or local decision-making. Our experience highlighted the value of connecting insights across scales, while recognising the distinct role each scale plays in conservation. Our project linked work across scales, from global to national, which allowed participants to appreciate the value and limitations of each scale, and to challenge scepticism towards other levels. Engaging at local scales can both enrich high-level analyses and bring critical information about global changes to local decision-making. As one participant reflected, “I was initially sceptical that we would be able to say much with global data, but I now understand the power of aggregating information to tell a global story – even if local realities remain complex.” Connecting insights across scales, without assuming that one can stand in for another, is key to effective implementation.



Food transport by canoe on the Mazan River, Loreto, Peru © Javier Fajardo.

CONCLUSIONS

Target 3 will shape area-based conservation for years to come. Its outcomes – for both biodiversity and human well-being – will depend on how implementation engages with its social dimensions. The target’s text acknowledges rights, governance and equity, but how these principles translate into practice remains unclear.

As one group member reflected, “Identifying breakthrough solutions is difficult. 30×30 is a hard, complex topic riddled with trade-offs. The enabling conditions for success are not available in many countries.” Acknowledging this complexity and drawing on diverse perspectives and knowledge systems is essential to ensuring conservation outcomes are effective, fair, lasting and grounded in realities. The reflections we have shared in this short communication, many of which extend beyond Target 3 to other KMGBF area-based targets such as Targets 1 and 2, offer practical ways forward that can inform these debates and support the integration of social dimensions into implementation. As the conservation community comes together in spaces like the IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2025 and the IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress in 2027, there is a pressing need to turn this recognition into action by making dialogue, equity and social justice central to how Target 3 is implemented.

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SUPPLEMENTARY ONLINE MATERIAL

End-of-project questionnaire: Summary of the reflective questionnaire used to gather voluntary participant insights on the SNAPP working group and its collaborative process.

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RÉSUMÉ

La conservation fondée sur les zones est essentielle pour préserver la biodiversité, mais son succès dépend de la compréhension et de la prise en compte de ses dimensions sociales. Dans cet article, nous partageons les réflexions d'un groupe de travail interdisciplinaire qui a étudié les implications sociales de l'extension de la conservation fondée sur les zones dans le cadre du Cadre Mondial de Biodiversité de Kunming-Montréal, Cible 3, également connue sous le nom de 30×30. Pendant deux ans, ce groupe a collaboré à travers des ateliers, des analyses spatiales quantitatives et des études de cas qualitatives afin d'examiner comment les modalités de mise en œuvre de la Cible 3 peuvent créer des défis et des opportunités pour les populations vivant à l'intérieur et autour des zones protégées et conservées, en particulier lorsque les priorités internationales, voire nationales, peuvent entrer en conflit avec les aspirations locales. Nos réflexions soulignent que la mise en œuvre de la Cible 3 ne constitue pas seulement un défi écologique, mais aussi un défi profondément social. Sur la base des connaissances issues de notre travail collectif, nous identifions cinq voies à suivre pour une mise en œuvre socialement juste de la Cible 3 : (1) favoriser le dialogue entre différentes perspectives pour soutenir des solutions plus inclusives ; (2) accorder une plus grande attention à ceux qui sont directement concernés ; (3) équilibrer l'accent mis sur le 'où' de la conservation avec une attention accrue au 'comment' en matière de gouvernance et de gestion ; (4) intégrer davantage les données sociales dans la planification de la conservation ; et (5) relier les enseignements tirés entre les différentes échelles. En partageant ces réflexions, nous visons à soutenir les initiatives en cours qui mettent en avant les considérations sociales dans les politiques et les pratiques de conservation.

RESUMEN

La conservación basada en áreas es fundamental para preservar la biodiversidad, pero su éxito depende de comprender y abordar sus dimensiones sociales. En este artículo compartimos reflexiones derivadas de la colaboración de un grupo de trabajo interdisciplinario que investigó las implicaciones sociales de la expansión de áreas protegidas y conservadas bajo la Meta 3 del Marco Mundial de Biodiversidad de Kunming-Montréal, también conocida como 30×30. A lo largo de más de dos años, este grupo desarrolló talleres e investigaciones que incluyeron análisis espaciales cuantitativos y estudios de caso cualitativos, con el fin de explorar los desafíos y oportunidades que la implementación de la Meta 3 puede suponer para las personas que viven dentro y alrededor de áreas protegidas y conservadas, en particular considerando las tensiones que pueden surgir entre aspiraciones locales y prioridades nacionales e internacionales. Las reflexiones que presentamos enfatizan que implementar la Meta 3 no constituye únicamente un desafío ecológico, sino también uno profundamente social. Identificamos cinco vías para lograr una implementación socialmente justa de la Meta 3: (1) fomentar el diálogo entre distintas perspectivas para apoyar soluciones más inclusivas; (2) prestar mayor atención a quienes se ven directamente afectados; (3) complementar el enfoque en el "dónde" conservar con una mayor atención al "cómo" se conserva; (4) avanzar en la integración de datos sociales en la planificación de la conservación; y (5) conectar el conocimiento generado a través del estudio de distintas escalas de análisis. Al compartir estas reflexiones, nuestro objetivo es promover una consideración más adecuada de las dimensiones sociales de la conservación en el diseño de políticas y prácticas.