



EDITORIAL: TOWARDS IMPAC6 AND WPCAC

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Saharan dust travels across the Atlantic and settles over the Amazon, carrying minerals that will nourish its soil. Tiny wasps slip inside figs through a narrow opening into a chamber lined with hundreds of flowers ready for pollination. Beneath the forest floor, mycorrhizal networks connect neighbouring trees, quietly carrying nutrients from one root to another. Across scales, life and its processes are threaded through such relations. A world shaped by movement, exchange and interdependence.

These dynamics do not end at the boundaries we draw between human societies and nature, boundaries that exist more as habits of thought than as lines in the world. We, too, are also embedded in complex dynamics of socio-environmental transformation. Because our very existence and futures are interwoven with these systems, humanity has built architectures of cooperation to match them. It is within this broader web that the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), shaped by its Members, Council, Secretariat, committees and seven Commissions, also operates. Among these, the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) is now preparing for two key events: the [sixth International Marine Protected Areas Congress](#) (IMPAC6) and the [World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress](#) (WPCAC). Soon, thousands of people will converge from across continents and disciplines: organisers setting things in motion, speakers taking the floor, researchers exchanging ideas, practitioners comparing experiences, conversations spilling into new ones. Different backgrounds, languages, and ways of knowing will meet in the same space, pulled together by a common purpose: strengthening efforts to conserve nature through protected and conserved areas (PCAs).

IMPAC6 and WPCAC in 2027: Coordinated action shaping conservation

Throughout the history of nature conservation, global commitments and agreements have proven capable of unleashing fresh waves of bold actions among stakeholders worldwide. These decisions are often the result of productive discussions at international gatherings, setting change in motion across governance, investments and technologies. This momentum extends to the upcoming IMPAC6 and the WPCAC happening next year in Senegal and Panama, respectively. The year 2027 will therefore mark a major turning point, this time for world marine and terrestrial PCAs. It will ultimately shape our common fate *vis-à-vis* the achievement of Target 3 of the [Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework](#) (KM-GBF), which calls on the global community to effectively protect 30 per cent of land and oceans by 2030.

The IMPAC6 and WPCAC represent unique opportunities for the global area-based conservation community to come together. With IMPAC6 convening only every four years and WPCAC every 10 years, ensuring their success is crucial. That success will be measured by how we refine our priorities, reimagine better collaboration across actors and countries, innovate, and design a strong yet flexible action plan capable of carrying us beyond the KM-GBF Target 3. In addition, we will need a strong focus on societal issues, including those related to socio-economic and socio-political dynamics amidst the current context of shifting global powers and national priorities.

Against this backdrop, IMPAC6 will provide a global forum for the marine conservation community to share knowledge, experience and practice around

marine protected areas (MPAs). Its sixth gathering will convene more than 3,000 participants from over 50 countries across five days with more than 100 sessions and workshops. Discussions will centre on four strategic priorities: inclusive, fair and appropriate governance; production, enhancement and sharing of useful knowledge to strengthen MPAs' effectiveness and resilience; promotion of representative MPA networks connected all the way to the open sea; and, sustainable financing linked to a fair and regenerative blue economy.

Conversely, WPCAC will bring together governments, the private sector, civil society, Indigenous Peoples and local communities to advance effective, equitable and enduring area-based conservation. Over seven days, with more than 600 sessions and 6,000 expected participants, the Congress will focus on three major themes: building resilient societies and economies with nature at their core; scaling up effective, equitable and sustainable conservation; and strengthening the rights, capacity and resources of those who steward nature. All of this will culminate in a High-Level Outcome Statement, the Panama Action Plan, recommendations and commitments – building on WPCAC's longstanding contribution to global biodiversity policy and practice. This trajectory is rooted in previous congresses, which have helped shape major milestones such as the Convention on Biological Diversity's Programme of Work on Protected Areas in 2004; more than 60 commitments to expand PCA systems in 2014; the IUCN Green List of PCAs; and PANORAMA: Solutions for a Healthy Planet.

The WCPA is playing a major role to ensure better preparedness and successful outcomes for the global conservation community, bridging strategic coordination with the development of high-impact content. To this end, the Commission is currently working to produce technical knowledge products across a wide variety of topics relevant for both congresses. These include two special guest edited issues of PARKS for IMPAC6 and WPCAC; a stocktaking publication on the state of play on PCAs since the [Promise of Sydney](#); and a series of white papers that explore emerging and debated issues in PCAs, helping stimulate critical thinking and discussion ranging from contested approaches such as fortress conservation and rewilding to emerging issues like artificial intelligence. In addition, WCPA as a key player in the organisation of these congresses is ensuring that actors, particularly early-career professionals (ECPs) and Indigenous Peoples, are engaged, involved and motivated at every stage.

Our contributions and hopes as Early-Career Professionals

For those of us beginning our careers in conservation, these congresses provide the chance to enter the conversation at the moment when our career is still being formed, and when the future of PCAs is, in its own way, still being forged. We are joining the conservation community at a time when many of the questions we face are changing faster than the answers we have inherited. These congresses offer us the opportunity to step into these evolving conversations: to learn from those who have shaped the field, bring our own questions and experiences to the table, and take part in defining the direction of PCAs over the next decades. There are disciplines to cross, assumptions to question, expertise to acquire, and collaborations to begin – an opportunity to solidify our presence in a field shaped by decades of knowledge and experience.

Within this shifting landscape, ECPs are eager to contribute meaningfully. At IMPAC6 and WPCAC, ECPs are prepared to actively engage in the decisions that will determine how area-based conservation actions are delivered in future by: 1) participating in crucial discussions which will inform the future direction of area-based conservation to ensure the global community achieves KM-GBMF Target 3 and beyond; 2) fostering a global and collaborative space that supports youth in strengthening their knowledge, leadership and expertise related to PCAs, beyond the traditional conservation approaches; 3) bringing together innovative ideas and perspectives from various sectors and cultures around the pressing and emerging issues facing PCAs; 4) advocating for a more inclusive area-based conservation, not just as a narrative but also and mostly through meaningful actions.

This is where the value of generations meeting one another becomes apparent by carrying knowledge forward: to test it against new circumstances, revise it where necessary, and let it acquire new meanings in the hands of diverse people whose stories, backgrounds and ways of seeing may be different from those already present at the table. Institutions and the conservation field as a whole, like ecosystems, are stronger when they can accommodate diversity. Bringing together diverse actors and perspectives can strengthen both the social and ecological success of PCAs. In that sense, diversity becomes a source of resilience and a condition for adaptation.

The need for diversity and inclusivity in area-based conservation is no longer optional. More than just a box to tick, it should be at the centre of discussions aiming to deeply understand the social dynamics that influence



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successful PCA conservation. If we want to see positive, consented and lasting changes, we ought to make them necessary components of any area-based conservation strategy or design. The congresses offer an opportunity to do so, provided we initiate and hold such discussions with the right stakeholders. This means asking difficult questions: Who decides what must be protected and why? Who has the final say in decisions concerning PCAs? Are the management documents and subsequent communication files written in a language that is accessible to the communities or landowners? What are the underlying power dynamics? These are some of the questions to address as we approach these congresses, if we hope to ensure the success of PCA conservation over the next decade. Moving beyond traditional stakeholder engagement to foster genuine stewardship is now an absolute necessity. Because recent years have revealed that substantive and impactful conservation outcomes in PCAs have stalled due to weak and poorly targeted stakeholders' engagement (Fidler et al., 2022; Maccioni et al., 2024; Worboys et al., 2015).

The two congresses should not only focus on onsite engagement. We expect them to set the stage for the global PCA community and all relevant actors to rethink conservation approaches that are no longer effective. For instance, we need to collectively move beyond merely testing new financing mechanisms and instead leverage

these gatherings to strategise their implementation at scale while identifying and addressing structural barriers. This, we hope, will help create measurable, tailored solutions ready for implementation. Equally important is unifying management tools: centralising tech-driven data for real-world decision-making, while grounding this technical alignment in cultural and linguistic accessibility so that frameworks truly resonate with the local communities stewarding these spaces.

The challenges of the present are not without precedent: those before us also lived through profound social change, but the conditions through which these challenges are experienced are shifting. Technology accelerates the pace of change, systems have become more tightly entangled, and the consequences of decisions made in one place can arrive with surprising speed somewhere else. Every generation inherits a world it did not make, along with the institutions, habits and assumptions that came with it. A world already in motion. Yet each generation also participates in remaking it. What we receive can be questioned, adapted and carried forward in different ways. For ECPs, these congresses are an opportunity to influence an evolving conversation, learn from those who have shaped conservation, and contribute new perspectives to the future of PCAs. IMPAC6 and WPCAC offer the opportunity to rethink area-based conservation in a

way that is inclusive, evidence-based, and culturally grounded, in order to advance, strengthen and shape the future of marine and terrestrial PCAs.

The scale of the task undertaken by the IUCN, the WCPA and the many entities involved in delivering both events is remarkable. It is an opportunity to bring people together from opposite corners of the world, with different experiences, knowledge systems and worldviews. These spaces as global architectures of cooperation also return us to a connection that is profoundly human: to listen, to engage in dialogue, and to find common ground – without assuming that every way of inhabiting and understanding the world can be translated into a single logic. Through these exchanges, current narratives and practices can be questioned and adapted, helping to shape sound policies, build partnerships, mobilise resources, and promote the effective governance needed to turn conversations, commitments and agreements into meaningful actions. Just as particles travel across oceans, insects co-evolve with plants, and fungi create complex webs to exchange nutrients with other species, conservation advances through the circulation of knowledge, experiences and relationships across cultures and generations.

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