

NEWS FROM AFRICAN PROTECTED AREAS

NAPA 204

CONSERVING NATURE IN AFRICA



THIS MONTH IN THE NAPA

**COMMUNITIES AND
CONSERVATION IN AN AGE
OF AUTHORITARIANISM**

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The broader political context influence how we relate to nature and how we govern protected areas...

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How to deepen the incorporation of social justice objectives into restoration projects? Learn more...



Communities and conservation in an age of authoritarianism

By Geoffroy Mauvais
IUCN-Papaco coordinator

» We are living in a paradoxical moment. Never before has the language of “participation”, “inclusion”, and “sustainability” been so widely used; yet never before has individualism felt so dominant, nor authority so concentrated. Around the world, governments increasingly bypass laws, silence dissent, and impose decisions on their citizens or neighbours in the name of security, growth, or national interest, whatever.

This broader political context does not stop at borders or institutions; it reaches deep into how we relate to nature and how we govern protected areas.

In many regions, protected areas are still managed through centralized, top-down approaches where decisions are made far from the landscapes and the people affected by them. Communities living in and around protected areas often find themselves spoken about, but rarely with. Their voices are consulted selectively, their knowledge undervalued, and their consent assumed rather than earned. In such contexts, conservation risks reproducing the very injustices it claims to address.



This is not a new problem. The history of conservation, at least in some places, is deeply entangled with exclusion and control. The so-called “fortress conservation” separated people from their lands, criminalized customary practices, and imposed rigid boundaries on living landscapes. While the language has changed, echoes of this model remain. Today, they are sometimes reinforced on the ground by security-driven conservation, rushed climate commitments, or global targets that prioritize hectares protected over rights respected.

At the same time, individualism, understood as the erosion of collective responsibility, weakens the social fabric that conservation depends on. When societies emphasize competition over cooperation, authority over dialogue, and efficiency over justice, communities are reduced to stakeholders to be managed rather than partners to be trusted. Yet conservation is a collective endeavour. Ecosystems thrive not through unilateral control, but through long-term stewardship, shared rules, and mutual accountability.

So how can we ensure that the voices of communities are not only heard, but genuinely listened to?

First, we must recognize that participation is not a box to be ticked. True inclusion requires shifting power, not merely organizing consultations. Communities need legal recognition of their rights to land, resources, and governance, not just invitations to meetings once decisions are already made. Without rights, participation remains fragile.

Second, conservation must take community diversity seriously. “The community” is never a single voice. Women, youth, elders, pastoralists, farmers, and marginalized groups often experience conservation very differently. Listening requires time, humility, and attention to internal power dynamics, especially in contexts where authoritarian norms already silence certain voices.

Third, Indigenous and local knowledge must be treated as knowledge, not folklore, not anecdote, and not something to be rebranded. These knowledge systems are adaptive, evidence-based, and deeply tied to place. Respecting them means accepting that communities may define conservation success differently than international institutions do.

Fourth, accountability must flow downward as well as upward. Too often, conservation actors are accountable to donors, governments, or global targets, but not to the people who bear the costs of conservation. Mechanisms for grievance, co-management, and benefit-sharing are not technical details; they are instrumental safeguards.

In an era marked by growing authoritarianism, community-centred conservation is not naïve, it is necessary. It offers a counter-narrative to domination and exclusion, reminding us that lasting protection of nature depends on trust, justice, and shared responsibility.

If conservation is to have legitimacy today, it must resist the pull of control and instead invest in collaboration. Listening to communities is not a concession of power; it is the foundation of resilience: social, ecological, and political. This is what **our new MOOC on Communities and Conservation** is all about and it has never been more important than in this crazy era of institutional and political brutality.

Join now!!!

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MOOC Conservation is the platform that hosts IUCN-Papaco's online training courses, developed in partnership with the Senghor University, in Alexandria (Egypt).

See you on:

www.mooc-conservation.org

THE MOOCs THEME-BASED TRAINING

MOOC BUNDLE FOR THE ONLINE CERTIFICATE

The following MOOCs must be completed to sit the exam and obtain the Online certificate in protected area conservation:



PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT



ECOLOGICAL MONITORING



LAW ENFORCEMENT



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VALORISATION OF RESOURCES AND SUSTAINABLE TOURISM



NEW TECHNOLOGIES



MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

[Learn more about the online certificate here](#)

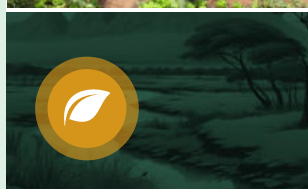
Next date: 16 June 2026 for English speakers

TUTORIALS TECHNICAL TRAINING



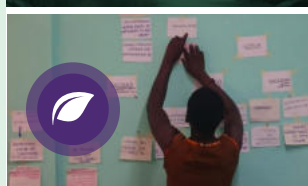
NATURE CONSERVATION EDUCATION

For teachers, educators, parents, etc., to provide them with the tools and methods they need to teach the children in their care about nature conservation...



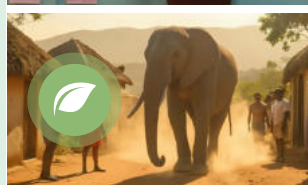
WORDS OF CONSERVATION

An interactive glossary with 100 essential words and expressions you need to know if you want to conserve nature and understand PA management...



MANAGEMENT PLANNING OF PROTECTED AREAS

A step-by-step guide to organising the preparation, implementation and evaluation of your protected area management plan...



HUMAN-WILDLIFE CONFLICT

A simple method for understanding, anticipating and responding to conflicts between humans and wildlife...



RESTORING PROTECTED AREAS

A practical guide explaining the different steps to follow to prepare, restore and assess a damaged protected area...



SUSTAINABLE FINANCE FOR PROTECTED AREAS

Coming soon

OTHER MOOCs AVAILABLE ON MOOC-CONSERVATION.ORG



GOVERNANCE OF PROTECTED AREAS



COMMUNITIES AND CONSERVATION

MOOC CONSERVATION IS
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L'ENVIRONNEMENT MONDIAL



ON MOOC-CONSERVATION, THIS MONTH: MOOC COMMUNITIES AND CONSERVATION



NEW: MOOC COMMUNITIES AND CONSERVATION

This course follows on from the MOOC on protected area governance. It focuses on the community aspect of PA conservation, an essential approach for an effective and sustainable conservation strategy.

Open since 20 January, more than 1,000 of you have already joined this MOOC and started learning. Here is some feedback from learners collected over the last few days:



This training provides essential keys to better understanding the interactions between biodiversity conservation and community dynamics, particularly in field contexts. Topics covered include local governance and community participation, the links between livelihoods and conservation, inclusive and sustainable approaches, and the social, cultural and economic challenges of conservation. These are cross-cutting issues for protected areas around the world, and ones that resonate here in Asia.

A., head of an environmental NGO in Cambodia

I found this course particularly relevant because of its clarity, the topics it covers and, above all, its practical and pragmatic nature. By taking it, I learned more about community engagement methods and, above all, about methods for safeguarding the livelihoods of communities, which we don't necessarily pay attention to when we are in the field.

I can say that I have just filled some important gaps in my knowledge thanks to this MOOC.

Frédéric, veterinarian (among other things) in Cameroon

THE COURSE IS OPEN, FREE, AND CAN BE TAKEN AT YOUR OWN PACE: [CLICK HERE](#).

The discussion forum for this MOOC is particularly rich, so feel free to take a look and read feedback from around the world.

ALSO IN FEBRUARY

Our new MOOC on Protected Areas sustainable funding starts on the 16th of Feb

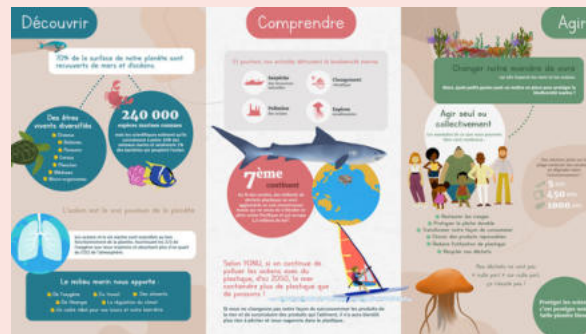
YOUTH CONSERVATION

DEDICATED RESOURCES FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE TO RAISE AWARENESS AND INSPIRE THEM TO TAKE ACTION!

On the [Youth Conservation environmental education platform](#), you will find dedicated resources tailored to children and young people, available in a variety of formats to suit different needs. Everything is 100% free and open access, and the content is offered in several languages, including national and regional languages. Please feel free to share widely to help educate, raise awareness, and inspire younger generations to take action!



Tailored video learning pathways



Clear, illustrated posters



Audio content available on [Spotify](#) and [YouTube](#)

YOUTH CONSERVATION - VOICES FROM THE FIELD

RAISING AWARENESS TODAY TO PROTECT TOMORROW: WHEN STUDENTS IN THE DRC BECOME GUARDIANS OF SEA TURTLES, BY OUR BENEVOLENT MENTOR IN DRC, VICTOIR MYONG CHAM KANDOLO

As part of the activities carried out within the mangrove marine park, awareness-raising sessions on the protection of sea turtles were recently organized for students from local communities. This initiative is led by Myong Cham Kandolo Victor, Community Conservation Program Manager and tutor with Youth Conservation.

The objective is clear: to engage the younger generation in the protection of marine biodiversity, a natural heritage that is both invaluable and increasingly under threat from human pressures.

Understanding in Order to Protect

Through simple, practical discussions tailored to the students' daily realities, participants discovered the essential role sea turtles play in maintaining healthy marine ecosystems. From their life cycle — from nesting on beaches to life at sea — to the many threats they face, the sessions helped make visible what often remains unseen.

Special emphasis was placed on everyday actions that can make a difference, such as:

- avoiding disturbance of nesting sites,
- reporting risky or harmful activities,
- fighting plastic pollution that suffocates marine wildlife.

🌱 Engaged Students, Empowered Communities

The enthusiasm generated by these sessions was immediate. Curious, attentive, and highly engaged, the students became aware of the fragility of their natural environment and of their own role in protecting it. By learning how to safeguard sea turtles, these young people are gradually becoming true environmental ambassadors, capable of sharing this knowledge within their families and communities.

🍌 Education as the Foundation of Sustainable Conservation

This field-based initiative powerfully illustrates a fundamental truth: environmental education is the first step toward successful and lasting community-based conservation. By equipping young people with knowledge and practical tools, the foundations for long-term collective engagement are laid.

Educating, raising awareness, and passing on knowledge are essential levers to ensure that biodiversity conservation becomes a shared responsibility — today and for generations to come.



INTEGRATING JUSTICE INTO RESTORATION PRACTICE

WCPA TECHNICAL NOTE

This NAPA presents a few extracts from a WCPA Technical Note about justice and restoration. The aim of this WCPA Note is to provide evidence-based guidance for deepening the incorporation of social justice objectives into restoration projects, including those located in and around protected areas. The audience is made of conservation professionals, government officials, donors, NGOs and private sector actors, and local organizations involved in the design and implementation of landscape restoration projects, particularly in protected areas, and who are addressing the challenges of social justice in these contexts.

NB: this topic is also covered in our MOOC on Ecosystems Restoration which you can join anytime on www.mooc-conservation.org.

Targets for restoration, such as the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework Target 2 have become increasingly ambitious, placing high demands on professional conservationists, communities and others responsible for their implementation. Landscape restoration is both socially and ecologically challenging because lands often remain in continual use, e.g., for hunting, gathering, farming, grazing, or commercial forestry. These land uses can create tensions between restoration projects and local livelihoods and cultures that can undermine legitimacy and effectiveness.

For example, the 2024 EU Restoration Law had to be modified due to growing claims of injustice from farmers and other primary land users; Indonesia's social forestry program has faced challenges due to conflicts with local values; and Vietnam's forest land allocation system has been criticised for not adequately considering the needs of the marginalised, leading to increased landlessness.

Around the world, many externally driven and corporate-led restoration projects have created conflict with livestock-rearing communities, for example in Chile and Iran.



Whilst tensions about justice continue to hamper restoration projects, some important lessons have been learned about how best to avoid these problems. In particular, there is strong evidence that highly inclusive and respectful practices - especially those involving local leadership - lead to better ecological and social outcomes. Principles of justice already feature in many conservation and restoration policies. For example, in Vietnam, the government considers social justice in the design of its national Payment for Forest Environmental Services scheme, by aiming to recognise and reward local contributions to protecting and restoring forest landscapes.

Similarly, in Scotland, large-scale restoration should in principle contribute to a national 'just transition', requiring awareness of local social priorities such as child poverty, as well as ecological priorities. However, there is still a knowledge gap regarding how to achieve 'just restoration' in practice.



Why justice should be central to restoration?

Restoration must navigate a difficult path to fairness because those most responsible for global environmental damage (wealthy consumers benefiting from luxury consumption) often live far from the sites being restored. Conversely, those least responsible for degradation often bear the greatest burdens. For example, villagers around the Gola forest in Liberia feel they are paying a high price for restoration by foregoing upland shifting cultivation. Meanwhile, those who profited from timber concessions, mining or rubber plantations in Liberia (such as the multinational corporations and distant consumers) are unlikely to bear any costs. These geographical and historical inequities pose challenges for restoration practitioners, who must strive for fair distribution of costs and benefits in the places they operate.

The conservation sector often approaches this responsibility through a 'rights-based approach', making the rights of local people central to the objectives and implementation of policy and project initiatives. Recognising long-term rights and tenure over resources and territories is seen as a requirement for providing other human rights, including the right to a clean and healthy environment.

However, whilst restoration might aim to take a rights-based approach, and to deliver substantive rights and social benefits, it can also impose costs. In many cases, restoration creates opportunity costs, such as restricted access to local resources which can also have an impact on community and culture, by preventing valued ways of life.

There is a clear moral imperative for just restoration - the need to avoid unreasonable harms and to ensure fairness for local people. Additionally, research shows that prioritizing justice actually enhances ecological and social outcomes. When justice is neglected, restoration efforts often face resistance, fail to meet local needs, clash with local livelihoods, or reinforce inequalities. Practitioners frequently encounter 'justice barriers' in the field, such as insufficient benefits, lack of meaningful participation, loss of resource access, or failure to address historical and structural injustices, and these dynamics can be a challenge to address.

However, numerous cases show that when restoration projects include local communities and respect their knowledge systems, they achieve better ecological results and promote long-term social stability. This can seem counter-intuitive - for example there is an assumption by some that prioritising local socioeconomic concerns will compromise ecological priorities. There is increasingly an understanding of the reasons why emphasis on social dimensions might support more ecologically effective results: reduced conflict can enhance collaboration; local or customary knowledge can lead to better quality decisions; respect for local institutions can lead to more effective governance; local leadership is more likely to address the drivers causing degradation.

This positive link between justice and effective restoration is increasingly acknowledged. For example, forest carbon project proponents in Vietnam cannot secure government approval unless they demonstrate clear commitments to social justice.

In summary, there are strong reasons to adopt a justice-oriented approach to restoration. However, significant gaps remain in implementation. Most restoration projects are still primarily designed based on ecological considerations, often neglecting local knowledge. Many projects are also criticised for undermining local governance structures, eroding cultures, and contributing to displacement.

Addressing these gaps requires embedding justice into restoration design and practice to ensure fair, effective, and sustainable restoration efforts.

[Read more](#)



QUOTE OF THE MONTH

"Environment and economy are really two sides of the same coin. You cannot sustain one without the other."

Wangari Maathai, ecologist, environmental and human rights activist, and politician

RESSOURCE OF THE MONTH

PODCASTS "LES RDV DE LA CONSERVATION" TO BE INFORMED AND INSPIRED!

Twice a month since July 2024, we give the floor to a nature enthusiast — amateur or expert — to share their commitment and actions in support of the environment.

To date, the channel features **more than 60 episodes addressing major and timely issues in conservation**. Together with our guests, we explore in particular three main thematic areas, presented below along with the titles of recent episodes:

1) Education, youth, and science in support of biodiversity:

- Preserving biodiversity through education and community engagement: the mission of BEES in Benin
- Youth, science, and biodiversity: protecting mangroves in Cameroon
- Raising awareness: environmental education and youth engagement in Congo
- Raising awareness to protect nature in Africa
- Commitments to biodiversity: science, youth, and education in action
- Between zoonoses and conservation: a sentinel of environmental health

2) Community-based conservation, governance, and inclusion:

- Building a sustainable future with communities: IMPACT Madagascar's commitment
- Communities and water: building sustainability together
- Gender and inclusion: levers for sustainable water management
- Gender and sustainability: towards inclusive governance of natural resources
- Strengthening community-based conservation initiatives: synergies between local knowledge and science
- Living with wildlife: tools and solutions to mitigate human-wildlife conflicts

3) Field actors, organizations, and commitment to action:

- Acting for tomorrow: the commitment of Afrika Sini-Gnasigui in Burkina Faso
- Eco-guards in Burkina Faso: on the front line for nature
- Sentinelle de la Nature: taking action for nature in Burkina Faso
- Building resilience for the long term: organizational development with PPI
- Educating and guiding to protect: at the heart of the Mefou National Park
- Food security and environment in Cameroon

These episodes are available on [YouTube](#) and [Spotify](#) in French. Subscribe so you don't miss any episode and help spread the word!



Do you have experience or expertise in conservation and would like to share it?

Write to us at info@youth-conservation.org to schedule an interview.

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To contribute to a NAPA (article or publication on protected areas, cover photo, job offer, etc.), contact us at moocs@papaco.org.

THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS LETTER DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THOSE OF IUCN