

Rethinking biodiversity beyond 30x30

By WANG Huo

(China Biodiversity Conservation and Green Development Foundation)

Abstract: This article rethinks biodiversity based on an analysis of progress that has been made globally. The author believes that the intense focus on the area of protected lands may lead us to neglect the effectiveness of conservation efforts, especially in regions that truly need protection, such as biodiversity hotspots; we should emphasize the benefits that biodiversity conservation brings to humanity via effective mainstreaming; and we should focus more on the issue of species extinction.

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If people understood how closely the extinction of a frog on a distant island is linked to their well-being, they would probably give it as much, if not more, importance than climate change

Significant milestones in global biodiversity conservation have been making headlines this October. The Regional Assembly of Portugal's Azores Islands officially approved the establishment of the largest marine protected area in the North Atlantic. This newly designated marine reserve, covering nearly 299,998 square kilometers, will safeguard the rich biodiversity of the region, including deep-sea corals and hydrothermal vents.

Earlier, Australian Environment Minister Tanya Plibersek made a high-profile announcement that the government plans to expand the marine protected area around



Heard Island and McDonald Islands by over 300,000 square kilometers, saying that this move will bring the total proportion of Australia's protected ocean territories to 52 percent. This far exceeds the global target of effectively protecting and managing 30 percent of the world's terrestrial, inland water, and coastal and marine areas by 2030, more common as the "30x30" goal.

Plus, this October, the Joe Biden administration of the United States announced the establishment of the Chumash Heritage National Marine Sanctuary, the first tribally nominated marine sanctuary in the US. It spans 187 km of the California coastline and covers over 11,655 sq km of coastal and offshore waters, protecting its rich marine biodiversity.

As the 16th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD-COP16) opened on Oct 21 in Colombia, many countries - both CBD parties and non-parties - are eager to showcase their progress in nature conservation. This year marks the second anniversary of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. How much progress has been made? According to CBD Executive Secretary Astrid Schomaker, 31 parties have submitted their national biodiversity strategies and action plans, while 103 countries have submitted their national targets. The pace of alignment is notably faster than during the 2011-20 Strategic Plan for Biodiversity and the Aichi Biodiversity Targets.

This is certainly a positive sign. At the CBD COP15 held in 2022, countries agreed on the "30x30" goal. As of August 2024, however, only 17.5 percent of the Earth's land and inland waters were protected or conserved, while the protection rate for oceans was only 8.5 percent (with less than 3 percent fully or highly protected). With only six years left to reach the 2030 target, the gap obviously remains significant, making the task ahead daunting.

A closer look reveals that many countries' current reports still focus primarily on the area of protected areas. However, the Kunming-Montreal framework comprises four long-term goals for 2050 and 23 action targets for 2030, aimed at halting and reversing biodiversity loss. The target to protect 30 percent of land, oceans and inland waters is just one of these specific goals. More broadly, the 2050 goals emphasize



ecosystem and species health, including stopping human-induced species extinction, sustainably using biodiversity, ensuring equitable benefit-sharing, and securing funding to close the annual \$700 billion biodiversity financing gap.

Therefore, we need to maintain a necessary vigilance and avoid complacency over the achievements we currently observe, as we overlook the broader context - global biodiversity is rapidly declining, and this trend is accelerating without signs of mitigation.

First, the intense focus on the area of protected lands may lead us to neglect the effectiveness of conservation efforts, especially in regions that truly need protection, such as biodiversity hotspots. A recent study published in *Nature Communications* explored the distribution of global protected areas and their influencing factors. It concludes that there is a significant imbalance in the global distribution of protected areas, particularly in regions of high biodiversity, indicating that current conservation strategies may not effectively encompass critical ecosystems and habitats. Another study published in *Marine Policy* in 2023 found that one-third of the global marine protected areas assessed may be “paper parks”. Among the 184 marine protected areas they analyzed, 30 percent were identified as such, with the majority located in Latin America and the Caribbean (31 percent), Southeast Asia and Oceania (25 percent), and the Indian Ocean (20 percent).

This is why, when Australia announced in October that it would expand its marine protected areas to bring the total protected marine area to 52 percent of its waters - exceeding the global target of 30 percent - it faced a wave of criticism from the scientific community. Experts argued that the government’s statement misled the public, emphasizing that the actual protected areas are far lower and noting that less than 25 percent are designated as “no-take” marine sanctuaries.

Second, I believe we should emphasize the benefits that biodiversity conservation brings to humanity via effective mainstreaming. In fact, compared to climate change communication, the discourse surrounding biodiversity is generally lagging. However, biodiversity directly impacts human life and survival. Many sources of medicine, food and ecosystem services - such as water purification, soil fertility and climate



regulation - depend on healthy ecosystems. Historically, many people believed biodiversity conservation as requiring sustained financial investment. We should shift our communication to more effectively highlight the “returns” on these investments, using real-world vivid examples to create a persuasive narrative. For instance, the establishment of marine protected areas can generate significant benefits through the development of ecotourism (such as whale and dolphin watching), which in turn supports coastal communities or island residents. Similarly, reducing monotonous plant landscaping in urban green spaces, respecting wild areas, and protecting and restoring small wetlands can help mitigate urban water pollution and flood risks through nature-based solutions.

In a conference in 2018, I raised a question to Inger Andersen, the then general director of the International Union for Conservation of Nature and now executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme: why is there significantly more attention on climate change than on biodiversity loss? Her response left a lasting impression on me: People often struggle to connect the extinction of a frog on a distant island to their lives, but they are deeply concerned about whether they can breathe clean air every day. If individuals understood how closely their well-being is linked to biodiversity, perceptions would change dramatically. This underscores the critical importance of communicating biodiversity’s relevance. That’s why mainstreaming biodiversity is the key.

My third recommendation is to focus more on the issue of species extinction. It is important to remember that the Framework is a comprehensive initiative, not just the 30x30 target. The 2050 goals explicitly state that human-induced extinction of known threatened species must be halted, aiming for a tenfold reduction in extinction rates and risks for all species, while enhancing the abundance of native wild species to healthy, resilient levels. Additionally, the genetic diversity within populations of both wild and domesticated species should be maintained to safeguard their adaptive potential. Therefore, rather than just noting newly announced protected area sizes, I hope to see more countries presenting their “report cards” on these critical aspects.



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