

## How to achieve an equitable and just “30 by 30”

No doubt protecting marine areas is an effective tool to combat climate change and the damaging effects of industrial fishing. But the best way to protect nature is to protect the human rights of those who live among it and depend upon it, our author maintains.

By Steve Rocliffe

All eyes have been on COP 26 in Glasgow recently, and the world’s attempts to curb emissions and avert catastrophic climate change. But 26 isn’t the only COP in town, nor the only major meeting focused on ensuring our planet is liveable for generations to come. COP 15, the UN biodiversity conference in Kunming, China, may not be capturing all the headlines, but it’s every bit as crucial for life on Earth as its Glaswegian big brother.

The conference, delayed repeatedly by the Covid-19 pandemic, is taking place in two parts – online in October 2021 and in person in April 2022. It’s bringing together 196 nations and territories and is billed as one of the last, best opportunities to halt biodiversity loss and put the world’s lands and oceans on a pathway to sustainability. At the top of the agenda is a new strategy to advance nature protection for the next decade. Known as the Global Biodiversity Framework, this strategy will replace and extend the current plan with its 20 Aichi Biodiversity Targets, agreed in 2010.

### Protecting 30 per cent of the ocean by 2030

As part of this process, Aichi Target 11, concerned with establishing effective, equitable and globally representative systems of protected areas covering 10 per cent of the ocean and 17 per cent of land by 2020, is set to be replaced with an ambitious new goal: “30 by 30”. Simply put, 30 by 30 seeks to protect 30 per cent of the planet by 2030. It’s being backed by large nonprofits and governments all over the world, including the G7 group of wealthy nations (though not, notably China). There are good reasons for this support.

First, when properly managed and funded, protected areas can create win-wins for people and nature alike, replenishing fisheries and strengthening local livelihoods. They are one of the most valuable tools we have to combat climate breakdown, coastal poverty and the damaging effects of industrial fishing. We urgently need more of them, and we urgently need to make sure existing areas live up to their promise. Second, most

nature exists where local communities and Indigenous Peoples live. It’s estimated that such communities manage or hold tenure over lands containing 80 per cent of the world’s biodiversity. Along tropical coastlines, they govern or oversee areas of seabed covering tens of thousands of square kilometres, and have often proved to be better stewards of these lands and fishing grounds than governments.

Third, an expanded and effective system of protected areas can deliver real economic returns. According to a recent study led by the University of Cambridge, the global economy stands to gain 5-to-1 from delivering 30 per cent protection, an increase of at least 250 billion US dollars in annual economic output. Because of these benefits, “30 by 30” has a critical role to play in achieving key Sustainable Development Goals to end hunger (Goal 2), ensure sustainable consumption and production (Goal 12), combat climate change (Goal 13) and conserve and sustainably use marine resources (Goal 14).

Yet there are also good reasons to be cautious. With protected areas currently covering 15.4 per cent of the Earth’s surface and 7.6 per cent of the oceans, achieving 30 per cent by 2030 would mean doubling the current land area under protection and quadrupling the ocean area. This would make 30 by 30 the most extensive governance project in human history, requiring an additional area of land that is two thirds of the size of Africa and 20 times that of the world’s largest terrestrial protected area (Northeast Greenland National Park). The area of ocean needed would be greater still: nearly three times larger than Africa and 40 times that of Marae Moana in the Cook Islands, currently the world’s largest marine park.

Such an unprecedented scaling of conservation efforts brings several challenges, opportunities and trade-offs that will need thorough consideration, particularly by tropical coastal nations, who are among the most endangered by the twin emergencies of runaway climate change and biodiversity loss. There are both enormous practical difficulties in putting 30 by 30 into practice effectively



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and potentially widespread negative consequences to local communities and Indigenous Peoples from doing so (also see *Rural 21, issue 2/21*). Failing to recognise these challenges risks creating more failed conservation efforts than ever before, as well as marginalising those who are not only least to blame for the biodiversity crisis, but best placed to help solve it.

### The gulf between rhetoric and reality

Much of the promise of 30 by 30 lies in the simplicity and near universal appeal of its messaging. Aside from the strong backing from governments and multinational environmental groups for 30 by 30 specifically, there is broader public support for protecting more of the planet. A recent synthesis of surveys led by academics from Canada's Dalhousie University and involving over 32,000 respondents from 21 countries found that more than 70 per cent wanted to see at least 20 per cent of the ocean protected, with most supporting 50 per cent protection.

Biodiversity loss and climate change are two sides of an unevenly weighted coin. Humanity needs to address both crises urgently and concurrently, but climate change has historically received significantly more attention and financing, even more so since the 2015 Paris Agreement. In much the same way that nations rallied around a simple and clear target with broad appeal on that occasion – limiting warming to 1.5 degrees – there is hope that the same will happen with 30 by 30 in Kunming next year. For the goal's supporters, the UN Biodiversity Conference will be a “Paris moment” for biodiversity, dramatically increasing funding and support for conservation efforts, and putting the natural world on a pathway to sustainability.

However, while agreeing a vision of where the world needs to be is not without its challenges, the far harder part lies in making that vision a reality. Doing so effectively will mean resolving two sets of complex and interrelated challenges: those concerning 30 by 30's feasibility, and those that deal with the consequences to communities and Indigenous Peoples from implementing it.

### How feasible is 30 by 30?

As we saw earlier, this is not the first global plan to save nature. The 20 Aichi nature protection targets agreed in 2010 covered everything from tackling pollution to protecting coral



Local or collaborative stewardship should be the principal mechanism by which conservation is achieved in near-shore waters.

Photo: Garth Cripps/ Blue Ventures

reefs. Some progress was made over the past decade, particularly on protected area coverage (Target 11). Today, there are far more marine protected areas (MPAs) than there were in 2011. After a slow start, which saw the global goal of 10 per cent protection pushed back from 2012 to 2020, the pace of establishment accelerated. MPAs currently cover more than 28.7 million square kilometres of the Earth, 7.9 per cent of the world's oceans and 18.4 per cent of national waters.

Yet while the world got close to reaching headline protection goals, it fell well short when it came to ensuring that the areas were representative, well connected and effectively managed. In the rush to meet Target 11, speed trumped quality. Many of the protected areas established are paper parks, and lack the financing, management, local engagement and enforcement they need to deliver the promised biological and social benefits. Against this backdrop, the substantially more ambitious increases in coverage demanded by 30 by 30 seem unlikely to be realised, especially once the requirements for effective management and connectivity are taken into account.

That said, 30 by 30's achievability does rest to a large extent on the type of protected area that is being proposed. And unfortunately it appears to mean different things to different people. The Campaign for Nature, leading the 30 by 30 initiative, suggests that all conservation efforts should have outcomes that are at least equivalent to highly or fully protected areas. However, many of the international conservation NGOs and governments supportive of 30 by 30 have differing views, with some calling for complete bans on fish-

ing in all protected areas. This latter view is stricter and likely to lead to more negative outcomes for Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

### Consequences for communities

Beyond the questions around the feasibility of the 30 by 30 proposal, there are fundamental issues concerning the consequences for local and indigenous communities. What will 30 by 30 mean for power dynamics, equity, equality, and engagement in the stewardship and governance of affected seascapes?

Here, the Campaign for Nature certainly talks the talk. It has produced a report about the critical role played by Indigenous Peoples and local communities in biodiversity conservation and acknowledges that local stewardship has often proved more effective than government-driven approaches. Expanding recognition of local and indigenous land rights, it concludes, is “an effective, moral, and affordable solution for protecting our world”.

Encouragingly, this is a view that's been increasingly echoed in international fora in recent weeks. The Kunming declaration, adopted by more than 100 countries during part 1 of the COP 15 biodiversity conference, calls for recognition of the rights of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in conservation initiatives and for their full and effective participation. And at COP 26, governments pledged to give at least £1.25bn to Indigenous Peoples and local communities in recognition of their key role in protecting the planet's natural resources.

## COMMUNITY-DRIVEN MARINE CONSERVATION IN MADAGASCAR

Fifteen years ago, two dozen fishing villages in southwest Madagascar joined forces to create a locally managed marine area (LMMA) known as Velondriake. Across an area of reefs, lagoons, mangroves and sea-grass beds the size of a quarter of a million football pitches, they banned destructive practices like poison fishing and established marine reserves permanently off limits to all fishing. The first LMMA in Madagascar, Velondriake is managed entirely by communities, for communities.

In Velondriake, Blue Ventures supports members of the community to collect, analyse, and present data on fisheries landings quickly to other community members and management associations in order to inform decisions on livelihood initiatives and fisheries management. Results from this community-led monitoring have led to the recent decision by the community to increase coral reef no-take zones by 59 per cent, establish areas of protection for seagrass and enforce management measures that protect reef flat health. While the area in which no fishing is allowed has increased, it remains small enough that livelihoods are not negatively impacted. And by taking these bold steps towards more protection, the community is helping to secure more sustainable fisheries long into the future.

Inspired by Velondriake's success, coastal communities across the country have followed suit, grouping together to establish hundreds of similar ini-



Velondriake, meaning "to live with the sea" in the Vezo dialect of the Malagasy language, is one of the largest LMMAs in the western Indian Ocean.

Photo: Garth Cripps/ Blue Ventures

tiatives. This growing network now covers a fifth of Madagascar's inshore seabed, several times more than government-run protected areas. In just a decade and a half, this movement has become a dominant force in the conservation of one of Africa's longest coastlines, and it is continuing to expand with a scale and ambition that's unparalleled among coastal countries in the region.

These are reasons for cautious optimism. But behind this rhetoric is the sad reality that the world does not have a strong track record of effectively involving local people in conservation efforts. Over the last century, millions of people have been forced from their lands and fishing grounds in the name of conservation, often violently. The pace of expulsion has slowed in recent years as conservationists have started to appreciate that Indigenous Peoples and local communities can be their allies rather than adversaries, but conservation refugees continue to be created. For example, in Colombia, the military's "Operation Artemis" is "recovering" land by emptying it of its people. The "no people allowed" baggage of traditional fortress conservation is hard to shed, and as such, trying to protect more of the planet risks more of the same: more violations of fundamental human rights, more conflict, more violence, with these impacts falling disproportionately on those who are the most marginalised and least responsible for the biodiversity crisis.

### Realising the promise of 30 by 30

30 by 30 thus holds both enormous potential, and enormous peril. How can we maximise

one and minimise the other? How can we ensure that fundamental rights aren't extinguished and equity undermined in the rush to deliver the additional conservation our ocean so badly needs?

We believe that the solution starts with accepting that the best way to protect nature is to protect the human rights of those who live among it and depend upon it. In practice, this means recognising the centrality of Indigenous Peoples and local communities to conservation success and developing a robust framework to monitor human rights and equity-focused dimensions. It means recognising that local or collaborative stewardship should be the principal mechanism by which conservation is achieved in near-shore waters. It means secure tenure for all coastal communities.

It means an explicit commitment to ensuring that the burdens and benefits arising from protection are shared justly and equitably. It means recognising and protecting human rights in general as well as the specific rights of particular groups such as women and youth.

It means sustainable, flexible long-term funding for community-based initiatives, simpler legal frameworks and democratising fisheries

data – using digital tools to transform access to information, allowing communities to adaptively manage and rebuild their fisheries.

It means establishing open, robust and internationally recognised grievance mechanisms to resolve tenure disputes and ensure that community voices are heard and elevated at the international level.

Finally, it means recognising and respecting the rights of communities and Indigenous Peoples to not participate in the 30 by 30 process and not have their territories designated as protected areas.

Ultimately, 30 by 30 is an unrivalled opportunity to halt biodiversity loss, safeguard human rights, and put the world's oceans on a pathway to sustainability. But it can only succeed if it emphasises the primacy of human rights, and puts communities first. Achieving all this won't be easy, but it's key to a 30 by 30 that benefits people and nature alike, delivering sustainable fisheries, vibrant oceans, and improved food security for over a billion people.