

Bridge the North-South Divide for a UN Biodiversity Framework that Is More Just

By [Subhankar Banerjee](#)

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This month, the leaders of nation states from around the world have been gathered in New York City to attend the 76th Session of the United Nations General Assembly. Covid, climate and biodiversity are among the topics they are expected to address. Indeed, on September 21, in his sobering yet passionate [address to the assembly](#), UN Secretary-General António Guterres focused attention on all three crises.

Since the turn of this century, I have been involved in [biodiversity](#) conservation in several places in North America and India, including the [Arctic National Wildlife Refuge](#) in the U.S.-Canada borderlands; the desert in the U.S.-Mexico borderlands; and the mangrove forests of the Sundarbans in the India-Bangladesh borderlands. Such biodiversity conservation efforts also take into account environmental justice and rights of Indigenous peoples, a form of collective engagement I call, ‘[multispecies justice](#)’. Drawing from these experiences, I offer my humble assessments in this moment of entangled crises and great cultural and political divides for all to consider.

I was born and lived the first twenty-two years of my life in the global South, in India. And the past thirty-one years, I have lived in the global North, in the United States. I consider myself a bridge between North and the South. And even though I do not have a degree in civil engineering, I like to say that professionally, I’m always “[Building Bridges](#)” across and among varieties of differences—places and peoples, human and nonhuman kin, academic disciplinary silos and archipelagoes, and academia and the communities in which we live and work.

In his address to the UN General Assembly, Secretary-General Guterres spoke about the urgent need to build bridges.

“I see 6 Great Divides—6 Grand Canyons—that we must bridge now,” the Secretary-General [said](#) and then listed: peace, climate, the gap between rich and the poor, gender, the digital divide, and the divide among generations. Even though the

biodiversity crisis didn't make his list, the Secretary-General did briefly mention the "Shocking biodiversity loss."



Snow geese over the Coastal Plain, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska. Photo courtesy of Subhankar Banerjee.

A North-South divide

I now speak of a great divide that exists in the intensifying human-caused biodiversity crisis, a North-South Divide, and the need to bridge that chasm.

After several postponements due to the pandemic, the UN Biodiversity Conference COP-15 was recently [rescheduled](#) as a two-part event: the first of which (online only) will be largely procedural and will take place from 11 through 15 October 2021, and the second will be in-person in Kunming, China, and will take place from 25 April through 8 May 2022. During the in-person meeting next year, the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is expected to draft and adopt a post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework.

As we slowly march toward the Kunming Conference, I've been taking a close look at the [30x30 biodiversity conservation proposal](#) that the North has been pushing, a proposal that is masquerading as "global," but in reality was largely developed by scientists who live in the United States and Europe.

The 30x30 biodiversity conservation proposal may work well for the North, including the United States where it is currently being advanced by the Biden-Harris administration under the banner, "[America the Beautiful](#)." It has taken nearly 150 years, since the founding of the Yellowstone National Park in 1872, for the United States to arrive at this point when 12% of land is considered protected. How will the United States add 18% to reach a total of 30% in less than ten years? Is the goal overly ambitious? Perhaps there will be a new way of assessing what counts as protected, as the *E&E News* in a recent [article](#) alluded to, "When it

comes to '30×30', everything counts until it doesn't."

For the poorer nations of the global South, however, the 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal is not about creative assessments and accounting. If implemented, it would lead to a colossal disaster, including likely mass evictions of Tribal and poor peoples. We must tread this water with care and caution.

The proposal is coming from the North and so, I first focus on the North.

It's not that eminent biodiversity scientists like Edward O. Wilson and Thomas E. Lovejoy, whose scholarship and advocacy provided the foundation for the 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal, do not have big ideas for wildlife conservation. Nor is it that a billion-dollar wildlife conservation initiative like "[Campaign for Nature](#)" does not know how to popularize and implement a wildlife conservation agenda. Nor is it that the influential "[The age of extinction](#)" series of the *Guardian* does not know how to publish some important articles on wildlife conservation.



Buff-breasted paradise kingfisher at "Kingfisher Park," Julatten, North Queensland. Image by Graham Winterflood via Wikimedia Commons.

The problem is this: the scientists and the conservation leaders of the global North do not know how to talk to the grassroots conservationists of the global South when it comes to biodiversity conservation. They are simply not interested in engaging in sincere listening and learning. They have long been arrogant and authoritarian in their [colonial approaches](#) to conservation and never considered building global biodiversity proposals that would be rights-based, inclusive and justice-attentive. They also keep amplifying each other's ideas and agendas without ever pausing to do a self-critique. For example, *Guardian's* "The age of extinction" series has yet to publish a critical analysis of the 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal as it may affect the poorer nations of the global South. Part of the reason may be because the series is in part supported by the Wyss Foundation, which is the primary funder of the "Campaign for Nature" initiative that has been advocating for the

30x30 biodiversity conservation proposal. Is *Guardian* losing journalistic autonomy due to this close association?

So, how do the grassroots conservationists and Tribal advocates of the global South (this writer included) rise up against the tyranny of colonial conservation of the global North?

Come along with me on a bumpy ride, in which we expand our conversations to also include a little bit about Covid and climate, in addition to biodiversity. All three crises are simultaneously illuminating a chasm filled with injustices, between the North and the South, between the rich and the poor, a chasm that is only growing in scale and severity.

From Gandhinagar to 'Species in Peril'

Late February 2020. Gandhinagar, India. I have [come to attend](#) the UN migratory species conservation summit [CMS COP13](#), the last time a fully in-person global biodiversity summit could take place. Over the course of the few days of the gathering in the beautiful Mahatma Mandir Convention and Exhibition Center, I learned a lot about how conservation of wildlife in the global South is not a simple one-size-fits-all top-down approach but rather a daily practice and negotiation with challenging issues. How do you live with tigers? With elephants? With rhinoceros? No easy answers, only creative accommodations.

In particular, “Elephant Conservation Beyond Borders” was a memorable panel. No one talked about helping to save the endangered Asian elephants simply by increasing “Protected Areas” but instead, human rights defenders and species conservationists sat side-by-side and discussed transnational co-operation that also took into consideration the plight of the Rohingya refugees who were resettled along the migration corridors of elephants in Bangladesh. I learned that elephant conservation is no easy task in crowded South Asia.



Elephants have the right of way on Highway SH-78 in the Western Ghats, India. Image courtesy of

I returned to the U.S. at the end of that month. Within a few weeks, we learned of Covid, cases started to rise, and lockdowns began to get instituted. But upon realizing that the root causes of the coronavirus pandemic are situated in the intensifying biodiversity crisis, specifically the destruction of wildlife habitats and trade of wildlife, I founded the [Species in Peril](#) project at UNM in April 2020. At the time, I was foolishly hopeful, like many around the world, that the pandemic would bring the global community together—to co-operate with each other, to share ideas and resources, to listen to and support each other. Additionally, I was also hopeful that the pandemic would finally bring the much-needed attention to the biodiversity crisis that continues to [fester from public inattention](#). That did not happen, at least not at the level and in the manner many of us had hoped that it might.

“Our Land, Our Nature”

On September 20, Andrea Germanos [wrote](#) in Common Dreams that “A new [analysis](#) projecting that 100 million Covid-19 vaccines stockpiled by rich nations and set to expire by the end of the year could be left to waste is prompting an outcry from social justice campaigners who warn of a potential atrocity as poor nations are refused access to doses.” The next day, in his address to the UN General Assembly, Secretary-General António Guterres [said](#) this as a matter of fact: “A majority of the wealthier world vaccinated. Over 90 percent of Africans still waiting for their first dose. This is a moral indictment of the state of our world. It is an obscenity.”

Fearing that such low levels of vaccinations would force inadequate participation of environmental justice advocates and Tribal leaders from the global South at the upcoming UN Climate Change Conference COP26 scheduled to take place this coming November in Glasgow, Scotland, [environmental campaigners](#) and [Indigenous leaders](#) have issued calls to postpone the UN conference until the majority of the world has been vaccinated and participation from the global South would be appropriate and adequate. It remains to be seen what the United Nations decides in the coming weeks.

Ignoring similar calls with concerns, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) went forward and hosted their World Conservation Congress in Marseille, France earlier this month, with a hybrid model. The IUCN has been a leading proponent of the 30x30 biodiversity conservation proposal for several years now.

Last month, ahead of the IUCN Congress, the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights released a 36-page [policy brief](#), “Human rights-based approaches to conserving biodiversity: equitable, effective and imperative.” Referencing a post-2020 UN Global Biodiversity Framework draft that was released in July, the brief urges that “in light of past failures, the achievement of the Framework’s conservation goals demands a dramatic departure from ‘conservation as usual’.”

What are those “past failures”?

I offer one example from personal experience: the UN forest conservation program REDD. According to the UN, the acronym REDD stands for, “Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation,” but which many Indigenous peoples [define](#) instead as “Reaping profits from Evictions, land grabs, Deforestation and Destruction of biodiversity.” Tom Goldtooth, executive director of Indigenous Environmental Network, [pointed out](#) that, “REDD

is promoting what could be the biggest land grab of all time.” I first learned about REDD in December 2009, from leaders of the Indigenous Environmental Network, when we [participated](#) at the Klimaforum09, the counter-summit shadowing the 2009 UN Climate Change Conference COP-15 in Copenhagen, Denmark. “Everyone who cares about our future, forests, Indigenous Peoples and human rights should reject REDD because it is irremediably flawed, cannot be fixed and because, despite efforts to develop safeguards for its implementation, REDD will always be potentially genocidal,” Goldtooth said.



A family taking part in a REDD project [in Brazil](#) called the Consortium and Densified Economic Reforestation Project (RECA) harvests forest products. Image courtesy of RECA.

Is the current 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal a reincarnation of REDD with new bells and whistles but no significant change in the process of how it was developed? Like REDD, does 30×30 also exclude the voices, aims and wishes of the Tribal and other poor peoples of the global South?

Following the release of the policy brief from the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, Fiore Longo, head of Survival International’s conservation campaign [said](#) that, “Many Indigenous peoples and Survival have been saying for decades that the fortress conservation model pushed by big conservation organizations like WWF and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) is disastrous for both nature and tribal peoples. This policy brief from the UN expert on human rights and environment says the same thing, loud and clear. It’s past time for these organizations and governments to abandon their failed, racist and colonial model and put human rights and indigenous peoples at the heart of conservation and the fight against climate change.”

Unsurprisingly, protests erupted in Marseille, organized by Survival International who highlighted the policy brief and brought sharp focus to the 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal.

Survival International also hosted a counter-congress, “[Our Land, Our Nature](#),” in Marseille

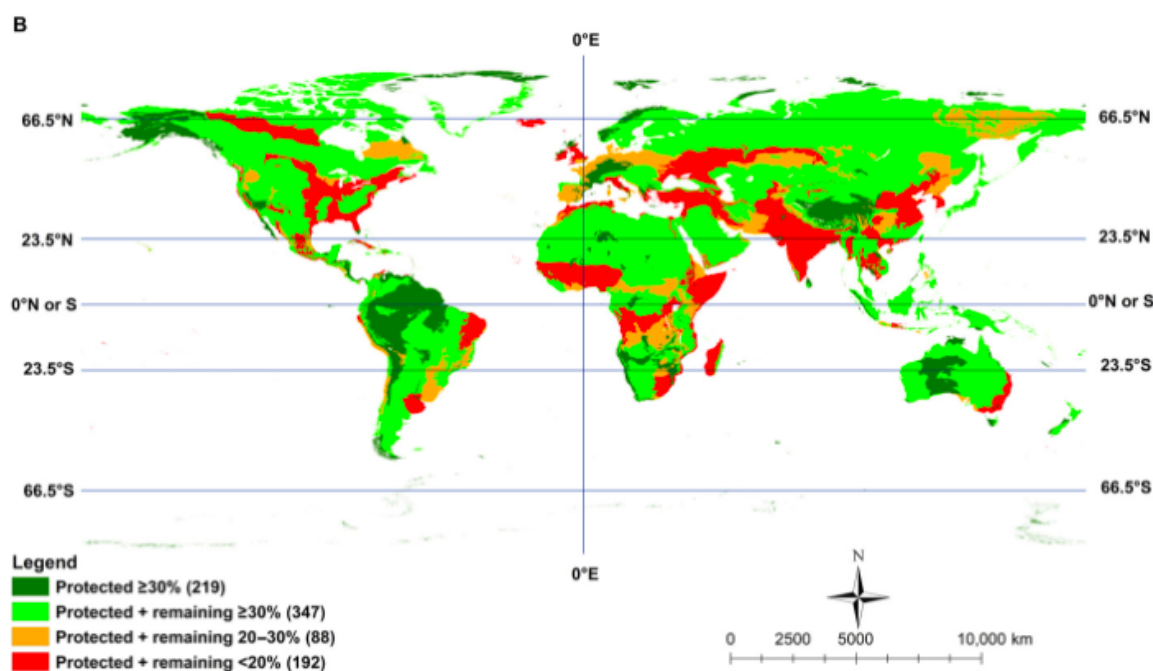
on 2-3 September to “discuss how to decolonize conservation.” The organizers asserted that “The conservation industry’s bid to make 30% of the world ‘Protected Areas’ and the claim that ‘Nature Based Solutions’ will solve biodiversity loss and climate change are wrong,” and highlighted the aims of the counter-Congress stating that, “This alternative congress will expose these as colonial and false solutions to the crises we are facing today, and as approaches that devastate the best guardians of the natural world: the Indigenous peoples who safeguard 80% of biodiversity.” (watch the full conference on the “Our Land, Our Nature” website from this [link](#)).

Is India doomed?

I now offer a concrete example with a deeper dive into the call for the 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal as it relates to India, the country of my birth.

A group of sixteen scientists, fourteen of whom live and work in the United States and Europe, one in China, and one in Sri Lanka, wrote a paper to chart a path for mitigating the biodiversity crisis, “A Global Deal for Nature,” which was [published](#) in *Science Advances* in April 2019. The paper calls “to conserve at least 30% of the Earth’s surface by 2030,” which is “viewed as a milestone toward the larger end goal of half of the planet protected by 2050,” a call Edward O. Wilson issued in his 2016 book, *Half Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life*.

There is a [color-coded map](#) in the “A Global Deal for Nature” paper which shows expected levels of protection by 2030: dark green represents areas that already have at least 30% protection; lighter green represents at least 30% protected and remaining land that can be candidate for protection; orange represents 20-30% protected and remaining; and solid red represents less than 20% protected and remaining. Except a few patches of green, almost all of South Asia looks red or orange. Almost all of India is solid red.



Levels of protection by 2030. Map via the 2019 [article](#) in *Science Advances*, “A Global Deal For Nature: Guiding principles, milestones, and targets,” by E. Dinerstein et al.

The map, along with the call for the 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal, may make

you believe that India and South Asia don't have much to contribute to global species conservation—a sad situation, isn't it?

It also raises important questions: Does India even have much animal and plant species left? Is advancing biodiversity conservation a hopeless endeavor in India? Is biodiversity a thing of the past in the denuded and densely populated India?

As it turns out, India, with only 2.4% of the world's land area, is home to 7-8% of all recorded species on Earth; has 4 of the 34 global biodiversity hotspots; and is considered to be a mega-diverse country.

The post-2020 UN Global Biodiversity Framework draft [includes a proposal](#) to protect 30% of Earth's lands and seas by 2030. If that proposal does get included and adopted in the final Framework next year in Kunming, China, as a one-size-fits-all approach for the whole Earth, how will India respond?

Will India start to evict millions of Tribal and poor peoples from their homes to satisfy the UN biodiversity goal?

Sadly, such a prospect came dangerously close to becoming a reality two years ago. Urged by a group of wildlife conservation organizations in India, the Supreme Court of India ruled in February 2019 to evict millions of forest dwelling peoples from their homes. "A verdict from India's Supreme Court has ordered 20 state governments to evict 1.5 million families living on forest land before the 24th of July," the IWGIA (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs) [wrote](#) on 6 March 2019. The IWGIA further pointed out that "These families live in and around 500 wildlife sanctuaries and 90 national parks; but many live there sustainably and have protected the forests long before these areas were declared parks and sanctuaries."

Fortunately, that horrendous mass eviction did not get realized as was desired by the wildlife conservation organizations; the issue has since been caught up in India's bureaucratic and legal quagmire.



A Tribal woman cleaning grains in Andhra Pradesh, India. Photo by ICRISAT/Flickr.

“Varieties of Environmentalism”

I urge all environmental justice campaigners and Tribal human rights advocates in the global South and their allies in the global North, including the United Nations Human Rights Council and the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, to take a close look at the 30×30 biodiversity conservation proposal that now exists in the post-2020 UN Global Biodiversity Framework draft, and do all that is necessary to make it null-and-void for the global South, and force the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity to start from scratch and build a UN Global Biodiversity Framework with a process that is inclusive for the North and the South.

Biodiversity conservation is contextual. What works for one place and in a particular culture may not work for another place and in another culture. What makes biodiversity conservation so beautiful is that it is a pluriverse—so many ideas, so many practices, so many forms of human-nonhuman kinship that exist around the world, which in a different context, a quarter-century ago, Indian historian Ramachandra Guha and Spanish ecological-economist Juan Martinez-Alier called *Varieties of Environmentalism*.

We would do well to [speak again](#) of “varieties of environmentalism” as it relates to biodiversity conservation. Any effort to build a Global Biodiversity Framework must begin with [sincere listening](#) and learning from it. And it would need to be inclusive and justice-attentive. If we can make that happen, we will have built a bridge between the North and the South for more just biodiversity conservation.

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Subhankar Banerjee is editor of Arctic Voices: Resistance at the Tipping Point and co-editor of Routledge Companion to Contemporary Art, Visual Culture, and Climate Change. He is the Lannan Foundation Endowed Chair and a professor of Art & Ecology at the University of New Mexico where he serves as the founding director of both the UNM [Center for Environmental Arts and Humanities](#) and the [Species in Peril](#) project.

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