



To: Delegates to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

21<sup>st</sup> June 2022

**The ‘science’ does NOT support the target of 30 percent protected areas by 2030. ‘30x30’ could actually have “perverse outcomes”**

Dear colleague,

We are writing to you to express our concern at the misunderstanding and misrepresentation of the ‘science’ used to justify the 30 percent protected areas (PAs) target, the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), draft Target 3.

It is clear that any agreement to nearly double the area under protected area status globally – and thus potentially impacting hundreds of millions of people<sup>1</sup> - should be based on the most rigorous scientific underpinning. However, a review of the scientific literature appears to show at least as much evidence *against* such a numerical target as there is in favour of it. This is particularly true of the science concerning *terrestrial* ecosystems protection, with which this letter is specifically concerned.

In its April 2021 paper providing ‘scientific and technical information to support updated goals and targets’ of the draft GBF, it was claimed by the CBD Secretariat that “*Many recent proposals converge around protecting 30 percent or more of the land and sea surface by 2030, with the possibility of higher targets established subsequently*”.<sup>2</sup> However, scrutiny of the eight documents referenced to support this assertion does not in fact reveal a ‘converging’ scientific view, at least not by truly independent scientists. Of the five that are concerned with terrestrial ecosystems, two were written by scientists working for organisations much involved in protected areas<sup>3</sup>. Two others were led by Dr. Eric Dinerstein, a former lead scientist for WWF-USA, who has subsequently acknowledged that the 30 percent target is

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<sup>1</sup> Schleicher, J., Zaehring, J.G., Fastré, C. et al. Protecting half of the planet could directly affect over one billion people. *Nat Sustain* 2, 1094–1096 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-019-0423-y>

<sup>2</sup> CBD, 2021. Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework: scientific and technical information to support the review of the updated goals and targets, and related indicators and baseline. Note by the Executive Secretary, CBD/SBSTTA/24/3/Add.2/Rev.1 23 April 2021 <https://bit.ly/3MgpcvO>

<sup>3</sup> See Counsell, S, 2022.

“arbitrary”<sup>4</sup>. The remaining paper, a study led by Piero Visconti of IIASA, makes a strong case *against* such percentage targets for PAs<sup>5</sup>.

Visconti and this team point to the potential *perverse outcomes* of setting simple numerical targets for PAs. In relation to the previous Aichi Target of 17%, they state that “*Continuing to protect areas of low opportunity costs for human uses, especially agriculture, in order to cover 17% of land will have negligible biodiversity benefits.*” By contrast, if PAs were strategically sited to protect under-represented threatened species, “*30 times more species could be adequately represented with the same extent of PAs*”.

As the CBD admits, “*Estimates vary regarding the proportion of land and sea that needs to be covered by protected areas and OECMs in order to reach conservation objectives*”. In fact, there is a wide divergence as to exactly what these objectives should be, let alone how best to achieve them. Even Dr. Dinerstein and his team find that all the most endangered and rare species could be protected “*by an addition of only 2.3% more land area if allocated to the right places and well managed*”<sup>6</sup>.

The importance of where protected areas are located, and how well they are managed (rather than just how extensive they are) recurs frequently in the science, and the CBD admits that “*many protected areas are not effectively or equitably managed*”<sup>7</sup>. The extremely poor take-up of IUCN Green Listing (just 0.02% of PAs are listed) strongly suggests that effective and equitable management of the *existing* protected areas is seriously lagging.

A newly published paper – described as “the largest ever study of protected areas”<sup>8</sup> – has revealed that most do not actively benefit wildlife. This study, which looked at 27,055 waterbird populations across 1,506 protected areas, found that only 27% of all populations were positively impacted by protected areas, 21% were negatively impacted and for 48% there was no detectable protection”<sup>9</sup>. The authors conclude that “*Our results raise additional concerns about the ‘30 by 30’ approach by showing that protection alone does not guarantee optimal biodiversity outcomes.*” One of the co-authors has stated that “*An obsession with reaching a certain area-based target - such as 30% by 2030 - without a focus on improving the condition of existing protected areas will achieve little*”<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, B. 2021. The hottest number in conservation is rooted more in politics than science. The goal to protect 30 percent of the Earth is more arbitrary than you might think. Vox. 12 April 2021 <https://bit.ly/3MeXmTe>

<sup>5</sup> P. Visconti et al. 2019, Science 10.1126/science.aav6886. <https://bit.ly/3tljqz5>

<sup>6</sup> Dinerstein et al, 2020, A “Global Safety Net” to reverse biodiversity loss and stabilize Earth’s climate. Science Advances 6(36). <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abb2824>

<sup>7</sup> CBD, 2021. Conservationists claim that their aim to place thirty per cent of the planet in protected areas by 2030 is supported by science. It isn’t. What the science does and doesn’t say about 30x30. REDD-Monitor, Posted on 7 March 2022, <https://bit.ly/3u9tU93>

<sup>8</sup> Gill, V. 2022. Many protected areas do not benefit wildlife, study says. BBC Science 21 April 2022 <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-61164969>

<sup>9</sup> Wauchope, H.S., Jones, J.P.G., Geldmann, J. et al. Protected areas have a mixed impact on waterbirds, but management helps. Nature 605, 103–107 (2022). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04617-0>

<sup>10</sup> Gill, V. 2022. *ibid*

In our view, then, the claim that there is “convergence” on the 30 percent protected areas’ target misrepresents the real state of credible and independent science on the subject. The CBD’s ‘science brief’ on the Targets and Goals circulated on June 14<sup>th</sup>, immediately prior to the OEWG#4 meeting, is similarly misleading in claiming that “*The target level “at least 30%” is well supported in the scientific literature as the lower limit for effective biodiversity conservation*”<sup>11</sup>.

Along with many conservation scientists, we believe that the emphasis of any area-related target in the new GBF should be *biodiversity outcomes*, not extent of protected areas. Given that most biodiversity is found in lands held by indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs), more effective biodiversity outcomes can only be secured through wider legal recognition of these lands. Better management of existing protected areas should include the restoration of the rights of indigenous peoples and the distinct rights of local communities where these have already been negated or undermined.

We thank you for taking the time to consider these issues.

Sincerely,

Simon Counsell, on behalf of:  
**Minority Rights Group**  
**Survival International**  
**Rainforest Foundation UK**

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<sup>11</sup> CBD, 2022. CBD/WG2020/4/INF/2/Rev.2 14 June 2022 <https://bit.ly/3bfTq6E>