

International Day for Biodiversity

Why protected areas alone are not enough to prevent the loss of biodiversity

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Bonn, 21 May 2024. 22 May is the International Day for Biodiversity (IDB). Yet despite the historic new global framework on biological diversity adopted in December 2022 – the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) – and the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011–2020, including the Aichi Targets, which preceded the framework, around 1 million species are still at risk of extinction. ‘Be Part of the Plan’, the theme of this year’s IDB, once again emphasises the need for concerted efforts by society as a whole to preserve biodiversity.

One of the key elements of the global biodiversity plan is to conserve at least 30 per cent of land, waters and seas by 2030 (KMGBF Target 3). Around 16 per cent

of terrestrial areas and 8 per cent of the world's oceans have been designated as protected areas to date. Yet not all protected areas contribute to preserving biodiversity and creating new protected areas will not be enough to halt biodiversity loss. The share of protected areas across the globe has actually been steadily increasing in recent years, yet this has had little impact on the pace of species extinction. There are two main reasons for this. Firstly, protected areas alone cannot halt the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss. Indirect drivers include our consumption patterns and our economic system predicated on perpetual growth. These causes are only partially addressed by the KMGBF (e.g. in Target 15: 'Businesses assess, disclose and reduce biodiversity-related risks and negative impacts' and Target 16: 'Enable sustainable consumption choices to reduce waste and overconsumption').

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Secondly, protected areas are not effectively monitored and managed worldwide. Germany's marine protected areas are a good example: Germany has designated 45 per cent of its marine areas as protected areas, yet marine activists have been pointing out for years that these protected areas are ultimately merely 'paper parks' that primarily exist on paper alone. Although regulations on protected areas were introduced in 2023 along with relevant management plans for some of the national marine protected areas, WWF claims that they are insufficient because activities that jeopardise biodiversity are still taking place even within the protected areas. Exploration for hydrocarbons is explicitly permitted in the Borkum Reef Ground, for example, and shipping lanes run through the Fehmarn Belt. Moreover, climate change and large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the deepening of the shipping channel of the Elbe Estuary, are jeopardising the protected areas. Plans to create a new Baltic Sea National Park in the north German state of Schleswig-Holstein were thwarted by resistance from the tourism and fisheries sectors. Paradoxically, these are the very stakeholders who would

benefit directly from efforts to preserve the Baltic Sea and who are advocating for the preservation of the river landscape and of the fish population in the context of the project to dredge the Elbe Estuary.

In our view, the concept of protected areas needs to be fundamentally revised in order to increase acceptance of new protected areas in society and at the same time enhance the impact they have on preserving biodiversity. One of the reasons for the strong resistance to new protected areas in Schleswig-Holstein and other parts of the world is the persistent belief that the only way to protect nature is to keep people away from it. In many parts of the world, this is leading to sometimes deadly conflicts and to human rights violations. Instead, community protected areas and joint management of protected areas could be effective solutions for nature conservation. The management of protected areas should enable stakeholders with rights (land rights, rights of use, common law rights, human rights) to participate in decision-making processes. Indigenous groups and local users of resources who have traditionally used areas in a sustainable way should be permitted to continue doing so. Brazil's environmental law allows local traditional communities to play an active role in the management of protected areas, for example. Unfortunately, this has not been sufficiently enforced in practice to date.

To enhance the societal status of species and their habitats, it might also help if endangered species and ecosystems were given legal personhood status. Rivers have been granted legal personhood in Colombia, India and New Zealand, for example. In Ecuador, the rights of 'Mother Earth' have been enshrined in the constitution. Although neither the River Elbe nor the Elbe water dropwort, an endemic plant endangered by the project to deepen the shipping channel of the Elbe, is or was able to represent itself and take the matter to court, this move would emphasise the fact that we humans are part of nature and would make it more difficult – at least from a legal point of view – to destroy nature.