



**REPORT:**

# International Geographical Societies Gathering

The Biodiversity Crisis

ahead of COP15 

30th March 2022



**Royal  
Geographical  
Society**  
with IBG



# Foreword

**Elizabeth Maruma Mrema**

Executive Secretary

UN Convention on Biological Diversity

Ladies and gentlemen, greetings! It is an honour to deliver a message for this important meeting. I thank the Royal Scottish Geographical Society for inviting me and for bringing together representatives of the international geographical community to discuss biodiversity-related issues.

For many years, scientists have warned us about the severe consequences of the complex global environmental crisis caused by biodiversity loss, climate change, land degradation and desertification and pollution; as well as the impacts they have on human systems. These challenges are jeopardizing our efforts towards sustainable development.


One of our main challenges is reconciling environmental protection with economic prosperity and human well-being. Ecosystem degradation already affects the well-being of at least 3.2 billion people which is about 40 per cent of the world's population. Over 800 million people went hungry in 2020. And when we factor in the COVID-19 pandemic, we have an additional sense of urgency to ensure a healthy planet and people.


Creating and maintaining mechanisms to protect, conserve and sustainably use biodiversity, and ensuring equitable benefit-sharing is not only urgent but crucial for survival on Earth. The multiple benefits of biodiversity conservation range from health, livelihoods, food and water security as well as disaster risk reduction to resilience to changing socio-economic and environmental conditions.

For instance, healthy ecosystems support nearly 55% of global GDP, and nature-based solutions provide an estimated 37% of the climate change mitigation needed by 2030 to keep global warming below 2°C. By providing 60 to 80% of all freshwater resources, mountains are known as 'water towers' and fulfil the needs of more than half of humanity.

Geographical societies worldwide can play a huge role in facilitating conservation and sustainable use by inspiring and informing people, and by helping provide solutions to complex issues using geographical knowledge. I congratulate the Royal Scottish Geographical Society for their exemplary outreach and educational materials, public events and research, which in turn help to inform conservation policies.

Biodiversity is our shared responsibility, and we need to act fast, as the cost of inaction threatens our own existence. The tasks ahead of us are difficult, but they can be achieved through concerted efforts. Through your international reach, I believe that geographical societies can be a key player in this great challenge.





Accurate geographical information is crucial to understanding key biodiversity areas, and for effectively designing and implementing conservation and restoration activities. Some societies' collections of items tracing many years of geographical discovery are crucial tools to inform educators, scientists, and experts; raise awareness; and advance conservation science and activities towards a sustainable future.

However, the issue is not only about halting biodiversity loss by 2030. It also concerns achieving recovery and restoration by 2050 to reverse the current crisis and turn this vicious circle into a virtuous one, through a transformative change that ensures sustainable development.

The post-2020 global biodiversity framework, to be adopted later this year at the UN biodiversity conference in China, is our roadmap. Its implementation a necessity for the transformative change and sustainable future that we want. The draft framework has 4 goals and 21 targets and is intended to be used not only under the Convention and its Protocols, but also by the broader international community.

The framework will also include a decision to aid its effective implementation. This includes obligations with respect to reporting, review and means of implementation, resource mobilization, capacity-building, and the long-term strategic approach to mainstreaming, as well as other related topics, including digital sequence information.

Accordingly, we need to appropriately account for the value of biodiversity; raise awareness that the biodiversity crisis is a shared responsibility; enhance interdisciplinary, inter and cross-sectoral multidisciplinary research and advances in conservation science, education, mainstreaming and integration. Here, geographical societies can make a substantial contribution.

Above all, we need a high level of willingness, cooperation, and concerted efforts by all sectors: public, private, financial, academia, and by all members of society, to achieve a sustainable future with a focus on intergenerational fairness and legacy.

The next 10 years will be the most critical of our generation. Urgent actions are required. I extend my appreciation and gratitude to the Royal Scottish Geographical Society for hosting and organizing this event, and to all other contributors. Let us strive to halt and reverse the current crisis, build back better and greener, and move forward towards the future we want: a life of Living in Harmony with Nature. Thank you.





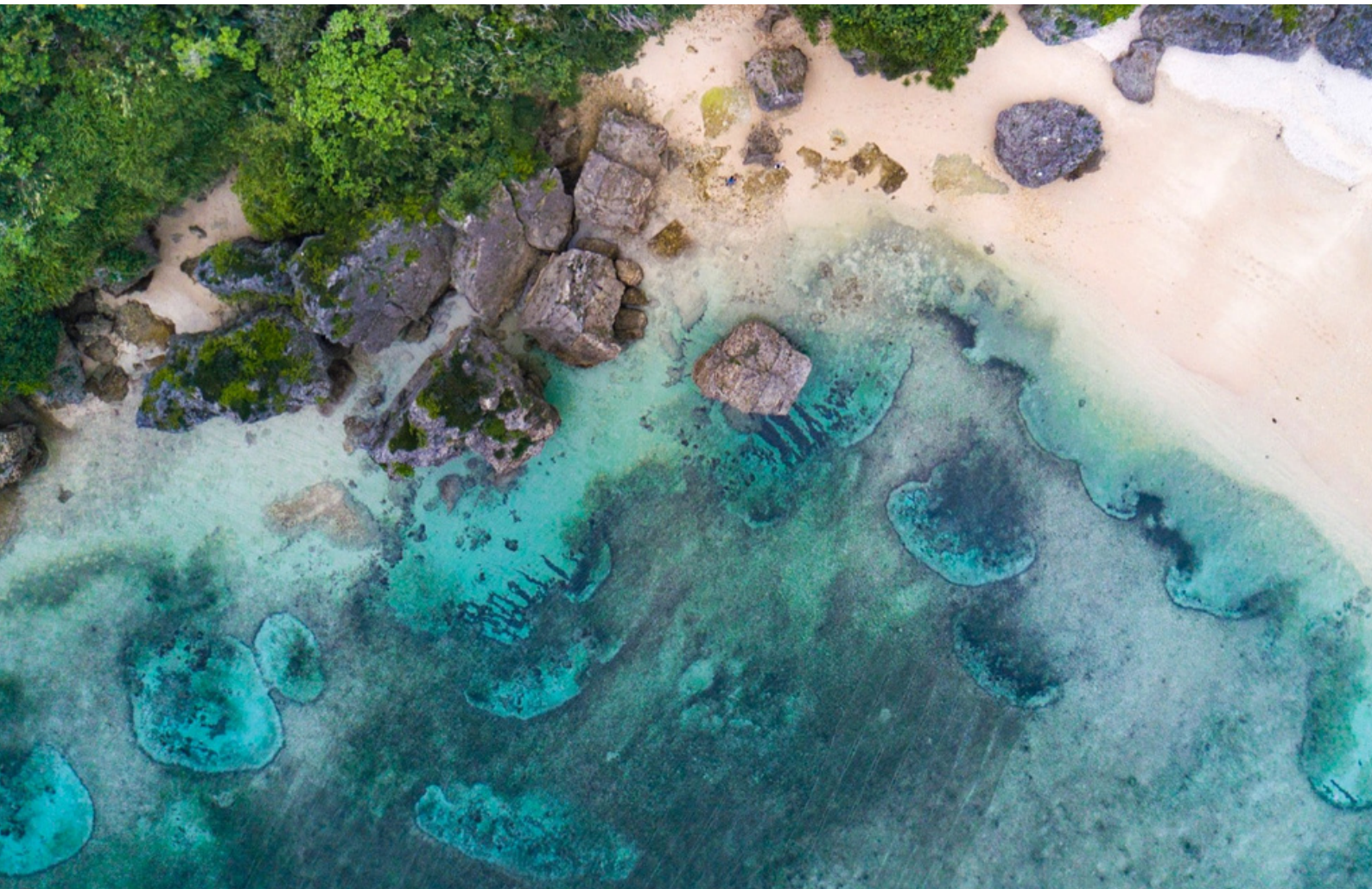
# About

In April 2022, dozens of geographers from across the globe participated in an online meeting of the world's geographical societies ahead of COP15 of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity in Kunming.

An initiative of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, in collaboration with the International Geographical Union, the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), the gathering was devised first and foremost as a moment for geographers and others with an empathy for our subject to come together and challenge ourselves to explore what we can do, both individually and collectively, to address this vital issue of our times: the biodiversity crisis.

The event followed the success of the previous gathering in June 2021, ahead of COP26 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, which resulted in a joint declaration of more than than 80 societies worldwide, all pledging to redouble efforts to address the climate emergency.

The idea was, and remains, that many of our societies have extraordinary potential to effect change through our activities and networks: through our research and educational programmes; our events and publications; our advisory functions with local, regional, and national governments; and our efforts to inspire both geographers and the general public.





# People

*The international geographical societies gathering ahead of COP15 was an initiative of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, hosted in collaboration with the International Geographical Union, the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.*

## **Convenors**

Mike Robinson, Chief Executive, Royal Scottish Geographical Society  
Michael Meadows, President, International Geographical Union  
Joe Smith, Director, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)  
John Geiger, Royal Canadian Geographical Society

## **Provocations**

Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, Executive Secretary, UN Convention on Biological Diversity  
Yadvinder Malhi, Professor of Ecosystem Science, University of Oxford  
Keping Ma, Professor of Plant Ecology, Chinese Academy of Sciences  
Andrés Guhl, Professor of Geography, University of the Andes  
Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim, Coordinator, Association of Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad  
Mike Robinson, Chief Executive, Royal Scottish Geographical Society  
Joe Smith, Executive Director, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)  
Harvey Locke, Founder, Nature Needs Half  
Paula Ehrlich, President & CEO, E O Wilson Biodiversity Foundation; Co-Founder, Half Earth Project  
Jojo Mehta, Executive Director, Stop Ecocide International

## **Event Team**

Alan Kinder, Chief Executive, Geographical Association  
Holly McNair, Communications Officer, Royal Scottish Geographical Society  
Laura Melville, Executive Assistant, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)  
Francesca Nugent, Programmes Administrative Assistant, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)  
Katrina Strachan, Office & Events Officer, Royal Scottish Geographical Society  
Cara Treasure, Director's Office Assistant, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

## **Coordinator**

Sophie Walker, Policy & Events Officer, Royal Scottish Geographical Society

“ Think global, act local. - Patrick Geddes, RSGS Council member, 1892-96





# Themes

*Big ideas from the provocations & discussions.*

## #1 Understand that we are nature.

Indigenous peoples often understand intrinsically a truth which many people in our highly globalised, urbanised, and settled world have forgotten: that we are a part of nature, and not separate from it.

Our disconnect from the living things which surround and sustain us is at the heart of our current crisis, allowing people to think and make decisions about the environment as if it had no bearing on human life. In order to be true champions of biodiversity, we must work to acknowledge our place in nature, and to highlight the great diversity of human cultures and traditions which are threatened as the world's living systems are destroyed.



**Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim**, Coordinator,  
Association of Indigenous Women and Peoples of Chad.

Part of this work will involve making visible our connections with the living world around us. For as Hindou and Andres both observed, if people do not see the biodiversity in their daily lives, or do not know how it supports their basic needs, they will not recognise a problem when nature is threatened.

Geography can help people to remake these connections between biodiversity and life: with nutrition and food security, health and wellbeing, air and water quality, but also our livelihoods, cultures, and communities.

“*Nature is every one of us and we must protect it to protect ourselves. If you only choose to save 30 percent which 70 percent do you choose to sacrifice, especially when it is all connected?* - Hindou Oumarou Ibrahim


## #2 Use appropriate language.

The gathering also identified an urgent need to consider the most appropriate language for engaging the public in the biodiversity crisis. In this discussion, three key points were raised.

First, Because 'biodiversity' is a scientific term, it is not likely to have strong associations for most people. This is in contrast to 'nature', which is widely cherished or valued by most people to some degree, or 'the living world', which may be more widely understood by different audiences.

Second, although widely accepted in scientific and policy circles, 'biodiversity loss' is a very passive description for a problem which is often the result of human actions and decisions. In such cases, a more direct approach to naming the problem may be more likely to resonate with the public, so we should do our best to describe what is actually being done: for example, 'threatening species', or 'killing ecosystems'.

Third, to balance the situation's extremity with reasons for hope which are honest and positive, we should always signpost to ways people can help, learn more, and support the efforts of people on the ground.





### #3 'Think global' with new research partnerships.

Many Geographers are consummate interdisciplinarians, and our university departments form a natural bridge between the physical, social, and life sciences.

We can harness this, but also our ability to connect with and learn from our colleagues internationally, in order to tackle challenges in biodiversity research together.

This means thinking imaginatively to identify and create new partnerships; listening to groups outside of traditional academia; exchanging knowledge and skills where they are most needed, and working strategically to address gaps in our collective understanding.

Notably, delegates in the Research discussion group suggested a China-India collaboration through which researchers would work to close the data gaps in biodiversity distribution data and mapping in both countries.

### #4 'Act local' with new strategic partnerships.

Many societies emphasised the benefits of working purposefully with specific groups to create specific and lasting change in our communities, recognising that it is on this smaller scale that we are often best-placed to understand the specific needs, realities, and opportunities of our stakeholders. So long as local actions compliment or deliver strategic solutions, this approach provides the most flexible and practical response.

These could be local authorities administering our towns, regions, or cities; public bodies for specific sectors such as agriculture or forestry; senior managers in private businesses; residents of a certain neighbourhood; recent graduates in certain field; or people in certain age groups.

For example, the Lithuanian society noted that twelve months of discussions with forest managers and developers has led to a new national agreement on forests.

“Systemic changes are required to address biodiversity, and I would argue that geography is well placed to think about those multiple scales and multiple factors in ways that most other academic disciplines are not.  
- Professor Yadvinder Malhi



**Paula Ehrlich**  
President & CEO  
E O Wilson Biodiversity Foundation

“Biodiversity is everywhere. It's intertwined in our daily lives, but somehow it seems the modern style of living has made us forget that we depend on our neighbours. So we need to make people aware of biodiversity in their daily lives. - Professor Andrés Guhl



## #5 Use and share new media.

We can reach many more people who would not usually engage with environmental challenges through creative uses of media, such as documentary film, photography, and non-academic publications such as magazines.

For example, the Royal Canadian Geographical Society are already working with Indigenous peoples on a multi-part documentary series focused on Indigenous relationships with the land, the serious risks to biodiversity in the region, and the impact that this has on Indigenous cultures and communities.



**Andrés Guhl**

Professor of Geography  
University of the Andes

## #6 Imagine a better future.

In a memorable moment of the gathering, Jojo Mehta recalled an observation made by her late friend and founder of the ecocide law campaign, Polly Higgins, challenging the term 'sustainable' as drab and uninspiring. For example, if someone were to ask themselves the question—'is this marriage sustainable?'—we would probably assume they were in a very lacklustre relationship.

We need to transform 'sustainability' into something that is more emotional, more tangible, and more appealing in order to communicate to people why it is something we should want. This is true not just in the context of biodiversity, but also more generally.

Perhaps the most important way that geographers can do this is to help ourselves and others to imagine what a better future could look like. Many delegates were enthusiastic about the idea that this should go beyond the interim and the arbitrary, and instead take an ambitious and holistic view of sustainability in the long term. Some key aspirations raised at the gathering were:

- Can we imagine our urban spaces as 'biodivercities' where people and nature can thrive?
- Can we work towards nature-positive world by 2030?
- Can we find ways to promote all 17 Sustainable Development Goals?



**Yadvinder Malhi**

Professor of Ecosystem Science  
School of Geography and Environment  
University of Oxford

“*I think geography has never been more relevant throughout the entire history of the discipline. And it is—or it should be—central to how we tackle most of the grand challenges of our time, whether it's poverty and development, whether it's climate change, or whether it's biodiversity.- Professor Yadvinder Malhi*

“*Professor Georgina Mace proposed bending the curve of biodiversity loss. But there are different wordings—reversing loss, achieving a nature-positive world—and we should try to create some kind of methodology to assess this progress, as well as how to define the biodiversity loss.-Professor Keping Ma*



# Actions

*Key recommendations from the final plenary.*

## #1 Develop online courses for the SDGs

Geographers are uniquely positioned to provide the programmes and resources to help people on this journey, so a key recommendation at this gathering was that our societies and institutions should work towards creating a full suite of 17 online courses tackling each of the SDGs.

The International Geographical Union plan to convene a meeting of its Commissions on Education and Biodiversity to look into developing resources focused on the biodiversity crisis and its solutions, covering SDG 14: Life on Land and potentially SDG 15: Life below Water.

This follows the success of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society's online course on SDG 13: Climate Action launched ahead of COP26, which now has over 60,000 learners worldwide.

Those interested to learn more about this work are welcome to contact the RSGS at [enquiries@rsgs.org](mailto:enquiries@rsgs.org).





## #2 Consider Signing the declaration in support of the ecocide law campaign.

Law and policy are some of the most powerful tools we have to protect life on Earth, now and in the future.

The campaign to establish a crime of ecocide, defined as the large-scale or systematic destruction of nature, at the level of international law is arguably one of the most credible solutions to our current crisis, creating a guardrail against harms where none currently exists.

Both through our organisations and as individuals, geographers everywhere can help to build support for this vital campaign, whether internationally or in our own countries.

To aid in this endeavour, we are inviting all geographical societies and institutions to add their names to a declaration of support for the ecocide law campaign, to be published jointly ahead of the next meeting of COP15.

To sign the declaration, please contact [enquiries@rsgs.org](mailto:enquiries@rsgs.org) by no later than 17th June 2022.



**Jojo Mehta**  
Executive Director  
Stop Ecocide International

“*The shifts that are required to fulfil the framework and to support the Convention on Biological Diversity are going to be difficult if not impossible to implement in time without a suitable international criminal law framework in place. - Jojo Mehta*

## #3 Valuing nature.


We urgently need to start costing the damage we are doing to nature and not just try to establish a competitive intrinsic value for it, so we must consider how geographers can help illuminate this principle of valuing nature.

## #4 Encourage action ahead of COP15.

Many of the delegates who were party to biodiversity negotiations in 2021 and Geneva in 2022, expressed concerns that there had been very little energy or profile around the issue compared to that at the UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow.

This led to a passionate plea to geographers to use the full range of their influence to generate as much publicity, urgency, and energy around biodiversity as possible ahead of COP itself, in Kunming later in the year.

Delegates were asked to share resources/platforms amongst international geographical societies, including, shared articles, joint statements, photo essays and social media posting, including hashtags, images, videos and blogs, as well as re-sharing and commenting.







*Delegates from 30 geographical societies attended the International geographical Societies Gathering ahead of COP15. This report will be shared with more than 75 geographical societies across the globe.*

International Geographical Union  
American Geographical Society  
Italian Geographical Society  
Insular Association of Geography  
Royal Geographical Society with IBG  
Geographical Association  
Royal Canadian Geographical Society  
Geographical Society of China  
IGU National Committee, Colombia  
Commonwealth Geographical Bureau  
Croatian Geographical Society  
European Association of Geographers (EuroGeo)  
Jamaican Geographical Society  
Latvian Geographical Society  
Lithuanian Geographical Society  
Geography and Education Research Association of Macau  
National Association of Geographers, India  
Himachal Pradesh Geographical Society, Shimla  
Konkan Geographer Association of India  
Pakistan Geographical Association  
Portuguese Geographical Association  
Royal Belgian Geographical Society  
Royal Danish Geographical Society  
Royal Scottish Geographical Society  
Glasgow University Geography Society  
Society of South African Geographers  
Southern African Geography Teachers Association  
Spanish Geographical Association  
Royal Swedish Academy of Agriculture & Forestry  
Ukrainian Geographical Society

