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IUCN World Conservation Congress | Forum Event

Transboundary Conservation Around the World: Ecologically and Culturally Well-connected Landscapes and Seascapes

SUMMARY REPORT

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Event Link: <https://iucncongress2025.org/programme/transboundary-conservation-around-world-ecologically-and-culturally-well-connected>

Introduction

In its Resolution [75/271 ‘Nature knows no borders’](#), the United Nations General Assembly (UN/GA) encourages Member States “...to maintain and enhance connectivity of habitats, including but not limited to those of protected species and those relevant for the provision of ecosystem services, including through increasing the establishment of transboundary protected areas, as appropriate, and ecological corridors based on the best available scientific data.” The [8th IUCN World Conservation](#)

Congress (9-15 October, 2025 in Abu Dhabi, UAE) was a prime opportunity to bring together diverse perspectives from all geographies and sectors to advance implementation of the UN/GA's resolution, as well as other environment-related commitments across intergovernmental fora. As part of the Congress, the official Forum Event "Transboundary Conservation Around the World: Ecologically and Culturally Well-connected Landscapes and Seascapes" was organized under the leadership of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) Transboundary Conservation Specialist Group (TBCSG) and Connectivity Conservation Specialist Group (CCSG).

Approximately 50 people from over 20 countries participated in the 90-minute event that served as a platform for leaders in the field and participants engaged in transboundary and connectivity conservation efforts to work towards implementation of the UN/GA resolution, the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), and other international policy mandates. It promoted discussion among participants to identify existing and new efforts, while highlighting how to strengthen and create initiatives informed by authoritative IUCN guidance on [transboundary conservation](#) and [ecological connectivity](#), as well as the growing body of practical experience and innovation in planning and management to achieve conservation goals and cooperation across and despite international boundaries. This Summary Report provides insights into the objectives, presentations, breakout group discussions, and conclusions from the event.

Objectives

The event highlighted common interests, benefits, practices, and opportunities for conserving nature and its inherent connectivity across political boundaries to accelerate efforts to achieve the KMGBF and continue to bolster cooperation, dialogue, and peace among neighbouring communities, regions, and countries around the world. There were three main objectives:

1. Enhance understanding of the contribution that transboundary and connectivity conservation efforts are making toward scaling up implementation of countries' international environmental commitments, while promoting peace and cooperation for healthy and resilient ecosystems and communities.
2. Highlight the values, threats, and activities in existing and planned transboundary and connectivity conservation efforts that provide nature-based solutions to climate change.
3. Discuss how to strengthen and create initiatives that integrate transboundary and connectivity conservation approaches that are fair and equitable, and that underpin transition to nature-positive economies and societies.

Opening Presentations

Welcome and Introductory Remarks

Welcome remarks were shared by **Madhu Rao** (Chair, WCPA). **Stefania Petrosillo** (Chair, TBCSG) and **Gary Tabor** (Chair, CCSG; CEO, Center for Large Landscape Conservation (CLLC)) then offered introductory remarks on transboundary and connectivity conservation.

Framing: Principles of Transboundary Connectivity

The session then offered further context on transboundary connectivity. **Gabriel Oppler** (International Policy and Partnerships Specialist, CLLC) began by presenting on opportunities to connect lands and seas through ecological corridors and networks.



Maja Vasiljevic (Senior Advisor, TBCSG; Senior Advisor, Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA)) then offered further detail on transboundary conservation principles and values.



Puri Canals (Director, Institutional Relations and Scientific Advisor at Underwater Gardens International; Project Coordinator, Global Network of MPA Manager Networks) concluded by offering marine-specific insights on transboundary cooperation and connectivity.

Breakout Groups

Following presentations, **Aaron Laur** (Manager, International Connectivity Program, CLLC; Executive Officer, CCSG) explained the breakout group structure to participants. As participants had entered the room, they had selected a sticky note that corresponded with a breakout group they were most interested in (blue: marine and coastal focus, orange: terrestrial and freshwater with a sociopolitical/economic focus, and green: terrestrial and freshwater connectivity with an ecosystem management focus). Each breakout group was capped at 20 people to ensure an even number of participants per group.

Each breakout group spent approximately 20 minutes discussing four prepared questions in the context of their topic. Facilitators assigned one participant to record answers to report back to plenary at the end of the session. Breakout groups were invited to answer at least two of the following questions:

- What are some of the most pressing transboundary and connectivity conservation challenges around the world and/or in your region/country? **[Challenges]**
- What are some exemplary transboundary and connectivity projects/initiatives around the world and/or in your region/country? What are lessons learned from these experiences which can be replicated? **[Successes]**
- What are some of the main transboundary and connectivity priorities around the world and/or in your region/country? **[Priorities]**
- How can transboundary and connectivity conservation support dialogue among people and peace building among nations? Provide concrete examples based on your experience if possible. **[Dialogue]**

Here follows a summary of the discussions from each breakout group:

Marine and Coastal

Facilitator(s): Puri Canals

Challenges

- Monitoring, enforcement of regulations around marine protected areas (MPAs), common agreement on laws, and involvement of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) from the beginning are all challenges. Pollution from rivers was noted as a threat to marine connectivity.
- Access to information and resources is unequal, especially for smaller island states. Metrics and indicators aren't always standardized.
- Our understanding of three-dimensional connectivity is evolving. The third, vertical, dimension makes marine connectivity distinct and more complex than the terrestrial realm.



Successes

- The establishment of a Regional Seas Convention in the Mediterranean is a significant success. Also in the Mediterranean, the Pelagos Sanctuary is an example of a transboundary cooperation success.
- It is necessary to start "testing" rather than continuing to write standards, because much of the information has already been gathered. In other words, take action on imperfect information, rather than striving for perfection.
- The Caprera Canyon off the coast of Sardinia and the Eastern Tropical Pacific Marine Corridor (CMAR) were both identified as priorities for marine conservation efforts. However, participants suggested that these areas need to be addressed at the political level *before* being addressed at the technical level.

Dialogue

- Networks can facilitate value exchange among implementers.
- WCPA can establish best practices for marine management via its publications.

Terrestrial and Freshwater (Ecosystem Management Focus)

Facilitator(s): Gabriel Oppler and Liyuan Qian (Regional Coordinator Asia, TBCSG)

Challenges

- Conflicts, war, and political isolation are all political challenges. Incursion by poachers has led to the stationing of armed guards at certain crossings.
- Differences in management approaches are a significant institutional challenge, especially in the presence of asymmetric capacities and financial constraints.

- Balancing conservation, the minimization of habitat fragmentation, and the development of linear infrastructure has been a challenge. The spread of disease across wildlife populations exacerbates challenges that arise due to fragmentation.
- There's a disparity in whether adjacent areas are designated as PAs or not, and in how land is used across borders.
- Open, continuous conversation between governments is sometimes absent.

Successes

- The Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area (KAZA); the Sangha Tri-National (TNS) across Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and the Republic of the Congo; connectivity between Cameroon and Chad; and the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration were all noted as successes.



Priorities

- Continued international communication and long-term funding mechanisms are necessary. Conservationists also need to collaborate with *other* international institutions that aren't specifically conservation-focused.
- Conservation needs to have a conflict-sensitive, well-structured, and proactive approach to planning. In some places, this coincides with post-conflict disarmament measures.
- Regional species-based coalitions must be formed with diligent monitoring and data collection efforts.
- Laws and regulations across countries need to be harmonized. Governing institutions in conflict-ridden countries need to be functional as well.

Terrestrial and Freshwater (Socio-political/Economic Focus)

Facilitator(s): Stefania Petrosillo and Marco Vinicio Cerezo Blandón (General Manager, Fundación Para el Ecodesarrollo y la Conservación (FUNDAECO)), supported by Jamie McCallum (Director EU and UK, Peace Parks Foundation)

Challenges

- Geopolitical situation can impact transboundary collaboration (e.g. countries like Georgia that border Russia). But there may also be political leverage in withdrawing from transboundary cooperation (e.g. Finland removing itself from collaboration with Russian Pasvik National Park to show solidarity with Ukraine.)
- Treaties and ongoing governance can be informal or formal, with implications for accountability and follow-through. But this flexibility can also be a strength in politically sensitive environments.

- Governments often take a short term view and TBCA projects require long-term planning and commitment. The challenge is to combine these different approaches and needs.
- Trust between governments can be challenging - especially in pre- and post-conflict periods. Trust underpins collaboration, which is the engine of successful TBCA initiatives.
- Poaching and trafficking remain a challenge in TBCA landscapes as border areas often have less central control and are often frequented by criminal elements - who in turn may exploit porous boundaries. The example of Selva Maya area, between Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, demonstrates how cross-border territories can be affected by criminal activities and illegal invasions. Often, in these cases, rangers are the only defense for territorial integrity and environmental protection, but without adequate human and economic resources and without administrative and political support, they face great difficulties.
- Many environmental risks (disease, fire, flood) can spread from a source country to an adjoining one, and where there is a difference in capacity and governance, cooperation may be hard, leading to more widespread and severe impacts.
- Community herding can be a threat to successful TBCA initiatives as herders may cross international boundaries, capitalising on porous borders to access fresh (and less well managed) pasture.



Successes

- Shared governance structures such as Community Trusts in which government, communities and NGOs participate are on the rise - examples include Peace Parks Foundation's Integrated Co-management model.
- Increased activity from civil groups including citizen diplomacy. This is especially valuable where governments may not be able to collaborate directly due to political or practical reasons (language, funding, geography).
- Growth of innovative finance options including carbon credits, debt for nature swaps and outcome bonds.
- For example the Meso American Reef Fund (MAR) is a regional trust fund created by four national environmental funds to provide long-term, pooled financing for priority marine protected areas across Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, rather than project-by-project support.

- The Selva Maya landscape (Belize, Guatemala, Mexico) is financed through a combination of KfW German development bank funding, IUCN-implemented regional projects, and dedicated grant mechanisms.

Priorities:

- Reinforce the role of transboundary cooperation for nature in dialogue and peace building processes.
- Standardising and updating definitions leads to improved possibilities for collaboration as parties can communicate and negotiate using a common language.
- Promotion of alternative governance models including community led conservation in transboundary landscapes, taking into account their special circumstances.
- Improve conditions for conservation finance schemes through legislation, incentives and collaborative fora which bring together government, community, corporate (finance or those that depend on ecosystem services) and NGOs.
- Consider how to apply transboundary approaches for internal national borders, in countries that have a high level of internal decentralisation (federal states, autonomous regions, etc.)



General Connectivity (for Online Participants)

Facilitator(s): Trisha Bhujle (Student, Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Science;

Executive Assistant, Center for Large Landscape Conservation)

Challenges

- Discussions on connectivity often put marine/freshwater connectivity at the margins. One participant shared she is working on a case study about a transboundary river between Mexico and Guatemala. While there *is* a transboundary program that aims to improve conservation connectivity in this region, it has a terrestrial focus. Freshwater connectivity is not included, despite the emergence of this very big, very new freshwater connectivity opportunity.
- 25 million miles of new road lanes will be built worldwide by 2050, and this has an equity implication. Most new roads will be built in less-developed countries, though a lot of the



push for connectivity is coming from wealthier countries. If wealthy countries first built extensive linear infrastructure without extensive pushback and without consideration of ecological impacts, to what extent can they now deny less-developed countries of the benefits of linear infrastructure?

Successes

- An agreement between the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda, and Uganda - the Greater Virunga Transboundary Collaboration- has enabled a reduction in deforestation and supported the population of endangered mountain gorillas.
- The Pantanal Wetland is transboundary between Brazil, Bolivia, and Paraguay, which have all agreed to its conservation.
- The Lake Chad Transboundary Initiative hasn't taken hold yet, but it seeks to unify nationally designated wetlands across Chad, Niger, and Cameroon and emerged from the Ramsar Convention.

Priorities

- We should aim to create initiatives that enable both small and large animals to thrive. Discussions on connectivity primarily focus on large charismatic megafauna (e.g. elephants) while smaller animals like amphibians and reptiles often get left behind. Elephants traversing boundaries across East Africa and experiencing conflicts with people in their path is as big a connectivity challenge as salamanders being run over by cars during their migration—it just depends on who you ask.

Dialogue

- Water is an issue of national security. We often frame discussions on dams around their energy benefits and not around their fragmentation threat for fish passages and around their geopolitical impacts. The construction of a dam on the Nile River by the Ethiopian government, for example, has escalated political tensions between Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt because expanded water security for Ethiopia's population may come at the expense of water security in the other countries.
- Border security issues can impede connectivity. At the border of countries with security issues (e.g. human trafficking), it could be dangerous to implement transboundary connectivity projects there because there is no political stability to do so. In that case, political conflict prevents cooperation altogether.

Conclusions

The session ended with a full-group discussion of key points identified by each breakout group, summarized here:

Challenges:

- Political conflicts and wars, weak governance, unclear regulations, and limited trust hinder transboundary connectivity conservation.

- Unequal access to funding and data, accelerating fragmentation and infrastructure development further complicate conservation efforts.
- Marine connectivity adds complexity due to its three-dimensional nature, while terrestrial and freshwater connectivity must account for both large and small species.

Successes:

- Transboundary initiatives —such as Pelagos Sanctuary, Kavango-Zambezi, Greater Virunga, and the Pantanal Wetland and many more—demonstrate that collaboration can succeed.
- Regional conventions, improved governance, and international funding have supported coordinated action.

Priorities:

- There is a need to emphasize moving from planning to action, harmonizing laws and management across borders, integrating connectivity for all species and ecosystems, and applying conflict-sensitive strategies.
- Long-term funding and multi-sector collaboration are critical for sustained success.

Dialogue & Peacebuilding:

- Transboundary connectivity initiatives can foster communication, trust, and shared environmental stewardship across borders, helping to mitigate conflicts over resources like water and create opportunities for citizen diplomacy.
- Peace and existing good relationships across borders are optimal for transboundary conservation.
- Nonetheless, where geopolitical conflicts are rife, environmental conservation can sometimes provide the common ground to bring governmental or nongovernmental actors together.

Overall, transboundary ecological connectivity is achievable but requires coordinated governance, practical implementation, harmonized policies, inclusive planning, sustainable funding, and cross-sector collaboration. This Forum Event was a step forward in sharing experiences from around the world to accelerate this movement.



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