

“And/also”, not “Either/or”—The need to restore nature AND cut emissions



Amidst the tragedy of the COVID-19 pandemic and home confinement, many people long for the joy and refuge of nature. The restrictions have heightened our collective awareness of nature’s many benefits—from the tranquillity of the outdoors to clean air and water, natural resources, disease suppression, and the capacity to help slow climate change and protect us from its impacts.

Last week also marked the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. Earth Day was created to call the world to action on our most serious and systemic environmental challenges of that moment. Today we face the long-standing global environmental crises of climate change and biodiversity loss. We can no longer delay acting on the clear and growing [evidence from science](#) and practice that Nature-Based Solutions can help tackle those crises.

We have been losing intact ecosystems worldwide for unsustainable commodity production. It is simply essential that we halt these losses and tip the scales in the other direction. Reversing the current high rates of loss and growing the global carbon pools in healthy vegetation and soil can help reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. The right investment in ecosystems around the world—such as forests, grasslands and wetlands—can tremendously benefit climate change, biodiversity, and human health and wellbeing.

The world is ready to take Nature-Based Solutions to scale. The launch of ‘trillion tree’ initiatives to protect and restore ecosystems, along with the upcoming [UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#) add momentum to existing efforts such as the Bonn Challenge, New York Declaration on Forests and others to scale Nature-Based Solutions. This unprecedented financial and political backing by governments, corporate leaders, NGOs, civil society and others could be the game-changer that drives a resurgent bottom-up movement of local actions with global significance.

We must not squander this opportunity. Nature-Based Solutions cannot be used as a reason to defer ambitious cuts to greenhouse gas emissions, cover for investments that lock-in high-carbon resources, nor an excuse to lift environmental protections. It's important that nature-based activities be complemented by emissions reductions at source, comprehensive climate policies and proper accountability.

To ensure that we capitalize on the immense opportunity that Nature-Based Solutions provide, environmental scientists and NGOs have been collaborating to provide clarity and guidance to the increasing interest in Nature-Based Solutions. In a [letter to the President of COP26](#), 20 organizations outlined evidence-based guidelines for Nature-Based Solutions. In June this year, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) will launch new Global Standards as a socially and ecologically responsible benchmark for state and non-state actors, following two-years of consultation across 100 countries.

Among all the emerging guidelines and standards, which are critical for successful restoration and conservation, we see four high-level principles that pervade them. We call on those committing to Nature-Based Solutions to uphold and practise these principles:

1. Cut Emissions

Nature-Based Solutions are powerful tools to capture carbon from the atmosphere, but they are not a substitute for cutting greenhouse gas emissions. From a climate change perspective, we must rapidly cut fossil fuel emissions, decarbonize economies *and also* maintain, sustainably manage and restore ecosystems.

2. Conserve and Protect Existing Ecosystems

Intact soils, forests, grasslands, shrublands, wetlands and aquatic ecosystems are vital repositories of carbon and biodiversity. Yet, we are losing them at an alarming rate. Protecting these last remaining strongholds of nature is critical.

3. Be Socially Responsible

We must fully engage Indigenous peoples and local communities and respect and uphold their rights and leadership. We must also proactively contribute to fair and sustainable economic models that create new employment opportunities while avoiding competition with existing activities such as food production. Only when local communities benefit from the social, economic and ecological benefits that ecosystems provide can restoration be sustainable.

4. Be Ecologically Responsible

Nature-Based Solutions must be founded on rigorous ecological principles. Biodiversity is vital for healthy ecosystems which are more productive, resilient and beneficial. Diverse mixtures of native species are most likely to provide desired benefits such as carbon storage, food production, and protection from floods, drought and disease. Monocultures of exotic species or low-diversity plantations are unlikely to provide these desired benefits.

We live at a time when Earth's ecosystems are more vulnerable and depleted than they have ever been. But this is also an exciting time because we now understand both the scale of the

problem and the potential scale of the solution. We also have unprecedented capacity, momentum and scientific information to successfully implement Nature-Based Solutions.

We all have the opportunity to engage in the fight against the global threats of biodiversity loss and climate change. We can be less damaging—by drastically cutting emissions and protecting our remaining natural areas—AND we can be more beneficial by supporting socially and ecologically responsible Nature-Based Solutions that support planetary and human health. With the right approach, we can make sure that we do not let this opportunity pass us by.

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A global call from organizations supporting Nature-Based Solutions