



United Nations Environment Assembly Background Guide 2025

Written by Johanna Güntel and Nathan Poon



NATIONAL MODEL UNITED NATIONS



Dear Delegates,

Welcome to the 2025 National Model United Nations Conference in Banff, Canada (NMUN • Canada)! We are pleased to introduce you to our committee, the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA). This year's staff members are Director Johanna Güntel and Assistant Director Nathan Poon. Johanna has a Bachelor's Degree in International Relations and a Master's Degree in Food Politics and Sustainable Development. She currently works for Plan International, an international non-governmental organization that promotes children's rights. Nathan Poon is a Bachelor of Science in Computer Science with a Double Minor in Political Science and Finance at MacEwan University. Nathan is the President of the Students' Association of MacEwan University, advocating full-time for post-secondary students' rights to an affordable, accessible, and high-quality education.

The topics under discussion for UNEA are:

1. Promotion of Safe and Sustainable Use of the World's Oceans
2. Reaffirming Legal Protections and Rights of Natural Protected Areas

UNEA is the highest global forum for environmental decision-making, bringing together all 193 United Nations Member States to strengthen international environmental governance. As the main governing body of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), it defines priority actions, guides policy development, and coordinates responses to emerging ecological challenges. UNEA promotes dialogue among Member States, ensures broad stakeholder participation, and fosters science-based decision-making, partnerships, and resource mobilization to advance global environmental objectives.

This Background Guide serves as an introduction to the topics for this committee. However, it is not intended to replace individual research. We encourage you to conduct additional research, explore your Member State's policies in-depth, and examine the policies of other Member States to improve your ability to negotiate and reach consensus. In preparation for the conference, each delegation will use their research to draft and submit a [position paper](#). Guidelines are available in the [NMUN Position Paper Guide](#).

The [NMUN website](#) has many additional resources, including two that are essential both in preparation for the conference and as a resource during the conference. They are:

1. The [NMUN Delegate Preparation Guide](#), which explains each step in the delegate process, from pre-Conference research to the committee debate and resolution drafting processes. Please take note of the information on plagiarism, and the prohibition on pre-written working papers and resolutions. Delegates should not discuss the topics or agenda with other members of their committee until the first committee session.
2. The [NMUN Rules of Procedure](#), which includes the long and short form of the rules as well as an explanatory narrative and example script of the flow of procedure.

In addition, please review the mandatory [NMUN Conduct Expectations](#) on the NMUN website. They include the conference dress code and other expectations of all attendees. We want to emphasize that any instances of sexual harassment or discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, religion, age, or disability will not be tolerated. If you have any questions concerning your preparation for the committee or the conference itself, please contact the Deputy Secretary-General Ana Williamson at dsg.canada@nmun.org.

We wish you all the best in your preparations and look forward to seeing you at the conference!

Sincerely,
Johanna Güntel, Director
Nathan Poon, Assistant Director

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Committee Overview

Introduction

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) is the primary governing body of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and is the international community's highest-level decision-making body on environmental matters.¹ In partnership with other United Nations institutions, it outlines the international environmental agenda and sets priorities for the international community.² Although its resolutions are not binding, UNEA brings together relevant international actors to address global environmental issues and shape environmental governance.³

Mandate, Function and Powers

Twenty years after the adoption of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development called for the strengthening and upgrading of UNEP so it could better execute its mandate.⁴ UNEA was created in 2012 as the successor to UNEP's Governing Council.⁵ Whereas the Governing Council was composed of 58 Member States and sat within UNEP, UNEA is structured as a distinct entity and enjoys universal membership with 193 Member States.⁶ As a high-level governance body, UNEA reviews and coordinates the work of the international community on environmental matters while serving as a forum for and initiator of debates to be continued by other, more specialized bodies.⁷

While the following list is not exhaustive, the mandate of UNEA can be summarized as:

- **UNEA will generally:** set broad priorities for global environmental policy; identify emerging themes in environmental governance; progressively develop international environment law and begin negotiations on environmental treaties; define the work and priorities of UNEP; create ad-hoc committees and subsidiary bodies to further discussions on specific areas of environmental concern when necessary; make recommendations to Member States and other international organizations.⁸
- **UNEA will not generally:** engage in operational projects; complete negotiations on environmental treaties, but rather identify emerging issues and promote an architecture for future environmental governance.⁹

¹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

² Ibid.

³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Q&A: UN Environment Assembly*. 2024.

⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *The future we want (A/RES/66/288)*. 2012. p. 18.

⁵ United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

⁶ Ibid.; United Nations Environment Programme, Governing Council. *Proceedings of the Governing Council at its Nineteenth Session (UNEP/GC.19/34)*. 1997.

⁷ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *The United Nations Environment Assembly's Role as a Governance Architect*. 2022.

⁸ United Nations Environment Programme. *What you need to know about the United Nations Environment Assembly*. 2024.

⁹ Ibid.; International Institute for Sustainable Development. *The United Nations Environment Assembly's Role as a Governance Architect*. 2022.

UNEA and UNEP are distinct entities. UNEA is the primary governing body and priority-setting mechanism of UNEP and does not operationalize these priorities itself.¹⁰ In contrast, UNEP undertakes programs, projects, and awareness campaigns and provides support to national governments to achieve environmental obligations in line with the priorities set out by UNEA.¹¹

Governance, Funding and Structure

All 193 United Nations Member States are represented in UNEA.¹² The Assembly meets every two years to set priorities for global environmental policy, discuss developments in the area of environmental legislation, and assist in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) (2015).¹³

Consisting of ten Ministers who each serve a two-year term and are selected based on geographical rotations, UNEA's Bureau is responsible for the general conduct of business.¹⁴ UNEA also has a Committee of Permanent Representatives (CPR), a subsidiary inter-sessional organ of UNEA that meets at least four times a year.¹⁵ The CPR contributes to the preparation of the UNEA agenda, holds an advisory role in policy matters, and monitors the implementation of decisions.¹⁶ The CPR also holds discussions on key issues, promotes the inclusion of non-resident members of the Committee, and performs other tasks given by UNEA.¹⁷ The CPR consists of all accredited Permanent Representatives to UNEP and is led by a five-member Bureau that is elected for two years.¹⁸

UNEP relies on three main financial sources: earmarked funds, the Environment Fund, and the United Nations's regular budget.¹⁹ Earmarked funds, also known as earmarked contributions, are funds appropriated for specific projects, themes, or countries.²⁰ These funds aim to expand and/or replicate the results of United Nations Environment's work in more countries and in cooperation with more partners.²¹ The Environment Fund aids in maintaining the capacity, balance, and efficiency needed for UNEP to function.²² Earmarked contributions and the Environment Fund are comprised of voluntary contributions; hence, 95% of UNEP's income is received on a voluntary basis from Member States.²³ The United Nations' regular budget supports the regular work of UNEA and the UNEP Secretariat.²⁴

¹⁰ Office of the United Nations Secretary-General's Envoy on Youth. *UNEP: United Nations Environment Programme*. N.d.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² United Nations Environment Assembly. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *Committee of Permanent Representatives*. 2024.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *How is UNEP funded*. 2024.

²⁰ Ibid.; United Nations Environment Programme. *Earmarked Contributions*. 2024.

²¹ Ibid.

²² United Nations Environment Programme. *How is UNEP funded*. 2024.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

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United Nations, General Assembly. *Institutional and financial arrangements for international environmental cooperation (A/RES/2997 (XXVII))*. 1972. Retrieved 27 October 2024 from: [https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2997\(XXVII\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2997(XXVII))

United Nations, General Assembly. *The future we want (A/RES/66/288)*. 2012. Retrieved 27 October 2024 from: <http://undocs.org/en/A/RES/66/288>

1. Promotion of Safe and Sustainable Use of the World's Oceans

Caring for, and using, our oceans in sustainable ways is critical to achieve ecological and economic goals for communities everywhere. However, the future of our oceans is burdened by numerous threats - such as climate change and ocean acidification, pollution, unsustainable and destructive fishing practices, - and the lack of capacities to address these threats.²⁵

Introduction

The ocean encompasses approximately 75% of the Earth's surface, contains 97% of its water, and accounts for 99% of the planet's living space by volume, thereby constituting its largest ecosystem.²⁶ It absorbs about 23% of the global CO₂ emissions and provides important resources for food, medicines, and biofuels.²⁷

However, the ocean is endangered by various threats such as coastal eutrophication, ocean acidification, ocean warming, marine pollution, and overfishing.²⁸ Eutrophication is caused by an excess of nutrients in the water, leading to the rapid growth of algae and plants and resulting in oxygen depletion, harmful algal blooms, ocean acidification, and damage to marine life, including fish and shell-forming organisms.²⁹ Ocean acidification is the process in which carbon dioxide from the atmosphere dissolves in seawater and lowers its pH, leading to increased acidity that can harm marine organisms, reduce biodiversity, disrupt ecosystems, and impact fisheries, aquaculture, and marine protection, among others.³⁰ The ocean absorbs most of the excess heat from greenhouse gas emissions, causing average global sea surface temperatures to rise by approximately 0.13°C per decade over the past 100 years, with projections estimating an overall increase of 1 to 4°C by the year 2100.³¹ This rise in temperature disrupts marine ecosystems, causes coral bleaching and habitat loss, and threatens food security, coastal protection, as well as climate stability.³² Marine pollution is the contamination of oceans and seas by harmful substances and activities, including oil spills, plastic pollution, chemical pollution, waste disposal, as well as noise pollution.³³ Overfishing occurs when more fish are caught than the population can reproduce, either directly or through bycatch, and it poses a major threat to marine biodiversity by depleting fish populations, damaging habitats, disrupting food webs, and reducing the ocean's ability to store carbon and regulate the climate.³⁴

Addressing these threats to the ocean requires international cooperation.³⁵ Around two thirds of the world's oceans are areas beyond the national jurisdiction of states, meaning that not one state has the

²⁵ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres: Message on World Oceans Day*. 2017.

²⁶ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Facts & Figures*. 2025.

²⁷ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *What is goal 14 - Life below water?* 2023.

²⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Infographic: Life below water*. N.d.

²⁹ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. *What is eutrophication?* 2024.

³⁰ United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. *Ocean Acidification*. N.d.

³¹ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Issues Brief. Ocean Warming*. 2017.

³² Ibid.

³³ Next Generation Institute for UPSC Civil Services Examination Preparation. *Marine Pollution: Causes, Effects, Control Measures & More*. 2024.

³⁴ United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change. *Plenty of Fish?* 2022.

³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *Why international cooperation is key to preserving the world's oceans*. 2020.

sole responsibility and jurisdiction for their management.³⁶ These areas, also referred to as the high seas, account for more than 60% of the ocean's surface, thereby constituting approximately 40% of the Earth's surface.³⁷ Therefore, ensuring sustainable use of the high seas is an important aspect of protecting the oceans from threats, which requires international cooperation and responsible ocean governance.³⁸ Ocean governance is the regulation of the use of the ocean with the aims of preserving marine biodiversity, mitigating the effects of climate change, and promoting sustainable livelihoods.³⁹ It comprises the establishment of legal and institutional frameworks as well as implementation mechanisms.⁴⁰ One key platform for developing such frameworks is the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA), which brings together United Nations Member States to address environmental challenges through global policy.⁴¹ Governments play an important role in ocean governance by adopting and implementing international frameworks for the safe and sustainable use of the ocean.⁴² Governments can also establish Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which are areas of the ocean that are reserved for conservation purposes to support climate change adaptation and mitigation as well as providing other ecosystem services, such as promoting species survival.⁴³ MPAs are divided into several categories based on their level of protection and permitted activities, ranging from strictly protected areas, such as nature reserves that prohibit nearly all human activity, to multiple-use areas that allow for sustainable human activities like traditional fishing or tourism.⁴⁴ Currently, about 6% of the ocean is protected by MPAs, but less than 2% is covered by exclusive MPAs that prohibit all extractive activities, such as fishing, mining, or drilling.⁴⁵

An important aspect of fostering sustainable ocean management is the blue economy, which refers to the sustainable use of marine resources to drive economic growth and create jobs, prioritizing the conservation and restoration of marine ecosystems.⁴⁶ While the focus of the blue economy has often been on economic growth, it is increasingly recognized that a sustainable blue economy is essential to support ocean-based solutions to climate change, including ecosystem restoration that helps reduce the impacts of storms, flooding and erosion exacerbated by climate change.⁴⁷

International and Regional Framework

The United Nations has been engaged in developing an international legal framework for ocean governance since its first United Nations Ocean Conference in 1958.⁴⁸ The outcome documents of this

³⁶ Global Environment Facility. *Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction*. 2025.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Pickerell et al. World Resources Institute. *The High Seas Treaty: A 20-Year Journey to Transform Ocean Governance*. 2025.

³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Ocean Governance*. 2025.

⁴⁰ Baillet. International Ocean Institute. *Ocean Governance: Towards an Oceanic Circle*. 2002.

⁴¹ United Nations Environment Programme. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

⁴² German Advisory Council on Global Change. *Flagship Report. World in Transition: Governing the Marine Heritage*. 2013.

⁴³ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Issues Brief: Marine Protected Areas and Climate Change*. 2017.

⁴⁴ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Guidelines for applying the IUCN protected area management categories to marine protected areas*. 2019. pp. 2, 9-10.

⁴⁵ International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources. *Issues Brief: Marine Protected Areas and Climate Change*. 2017.

⁴⁶ United Nations Development Programme. *Blue Economies and Nature-based Solutions for Enhanced Climate Action in Latin America and Caribbean Small Island Developing States*. 2023.

⁴⁷ International Institute for Environment and Development. *Climate change and the blue economy*. 2022.

⁴⁸ Treves. United Nations, Office of Legal Affairs. *1958 Geneva Conventions on the Law of the Sea*. 2013.

conference were the *Convention on the Territorial Sea and the Contiguous Zone*, the *Convention on the High Seas*, the *Convention on Fishing and Conservation of the Living Resources of the High Sea*, the *Convention on the Continental Shelf*, and the *Optional Protocol of Signature concerning the Compulsory Settlement of Disputes*.⁴⁹ These conventions provided the initial framework for ocean governance under the traditional laws of the sea, but were replaced following the adoption of the 1982 *United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea* (UNCLOS), which reflects a more modernized and comprehensive framework for the use and regulation of the oceans.⁵⁰ UNCLOS is legally-binding for its 170 States parties who have ratified the convention.⁵¹ UNCLOS established the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, which has jurisdiction over matters related to ocean governance.⁵² Building on UNCLOS, the International Seabed Authority was founded in 1994 as an autonomous international organization through which States parties of UNCLOS are working together to protect the oceans.⁵³

The *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD), adopted in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (“Rio Earth Summit”), applies to “terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part [...]”, according to its Article 2.⁵⁴ Thus, the regulations on the protection of biological diversity agreed upon in this convention apply to the preservation of the world’s oceans.⁵⁵ The provisions of the CBD require States parties to develop and implement national biodiversity strategies, take conservation measures and promote access to education, technology and information exchange, as well as international cooperation on biodiversity.⁵⁶

In 2008, the General Assembly declared 8 June as World Oceans Day in its resolution 63/111 to raise awareness on the importance of protecting the world’s oceans.⁵⁷ Moreover, the General Assembly adopted the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* with resolution 70/1 (2015), establishing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).⁵⁸ SDG 14 (Life Below Water) promotes the protection of oceans, seas, and marine resources.⁵⁹ In 2017, with its resolution 72/73, the General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030) (Ocean Decade) to promote research on sustainable management of ocean resources.⁶⁰ General Assembly resolution 72/249 (2017) established the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, which was tasked with developing an international legally binding instrument for the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources in areas beyond national

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid; Alfred-Wegener-Institut. *UN Agreement for the Protection of the Ocean*. N.d.

⁵¹ United Nations Treaty Collection. *Chapter XXI. Law of the Sea. 6. United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea*. 2025.

⁵² International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. *Home. Latest News*. N.d.

⁵³ International Seabed Authority. *About ISA*. 2025.

⁵⁴ Conference of the Parties to The Convention on Biological Diversity. *Convention on Biological Diversity*. 1993.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ United Nations World Oceans Day. *What is World Oceans Day?* 2025.

⁵⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015.

⁵⁹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources*. N.d.

⁶⁰ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development (2021-2030)*. N.d; United Nations, General Assembly. *Oceans and the Law of the Sea (A/RES/72/73)*. 2018.

jurisdiction.⁶¹ In 2019, the General Assembly launched the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030) with its resolution 73/284 to support and scale up efforts for ecosystem restoration, including marine ecosystems.⁶²

Through advocacy and awareness raising, World Oceans Day contributed to the adoption of the *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework* (GBF) in 2022 and the *Agreement under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction* (BBNJ Agreement) in 2023, among others.⁶³ The GBF, adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the CBD in 2022, includes targets aimed at protecting marine ecosystems, such as restoring a minimum of 30% of degraded marine and coastal habitats (Target 2), ensuring effective conservation and management of at least 30 percent of ecologically significant marine and coastal areas (Target 3), and reducing the adverse effects of climate change and ocean acidification through adaptive and nature-based strategies (Target 8).⁶⁴ The BBNJ Agreement, which was drafted by the Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction, sets out steps to implement UNCLOS, particularly focusing on marine genetic resources, area-based management tools, environmental impact assessments, and capacity-building and the transfer of marine technology.⁶⁵

Role of the International System

UNEA has adopted multiple resolutions and decisions to promote the protection of the world's oceans.⁶⁶ The most recent resolution on the topic was adopted during UNEA's sixth session in 2024, namely resolution 6/15 on "Strengthening ocean efforts to tackle climate change, marine biodiversity loss and pollution."⁶⁷ This resolution emphasizes the need to strengthen the Regional Seas Programme of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and requests UNEP to provide enhanced technical support to Member States and United Nations' entities in protecting marine biodiversity.⁶⁸ UNEP is actively promoting the protection of oceans, seas, and coasts, focusing on a wide range of topics such as ecosystem-based approaches, finance, international waters, regional seas programmes, Small Island Developing States (SIDS), and science and innovation.⁶⁹ UNEP's Regional Seas Programme covers 18

⁶¹ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction*. N.d; United Nations, General Assembly. *International legally binding instrument under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction* (A/RES/72/249). 2018.

⁶² United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030. *About the UN Decade*. N.d; United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030)* (A/RES/73/284). 2019.

⁶³ World Ocean Day. *Mission and History*. N.d; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction*. N.d.

⁶⁴ Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework* (CBD/COP/DEC/15/4). 2022.

⁶⁵ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction*. N.d; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction*. N.d.

⁶⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *Resolutions, Decisions, and Declarations*. N.d.

⁶⁷ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Strengthening ocean efforts to tackle climate change, marine biodiversity loss and pollution* (UNEP/EA.6/Res.15). 2024.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ United Nations Environment Programme. *Ocean, Seas and Coasts*. 2025.

Regional Seas Conventions and Action Plans to foster regional ocean governance.⁷⁰ Working with various stakeholders, the Regional Seas Programme aims to protect marine biodiversity by restoring critical habitats, conserving key ecosystems, protecting deep-sea environments, and promoting sustainable coastal development through marine spatial planning.⁷¹

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is advancing research on sustainable management of ocean resources.⁷² UNESCO also published the 2024 State of the Ocean Report, which assesses the current state of the world's oceans, including challenges such as "ocean warming, rising sea levels, pollution, acidification, de-oxygenation, blue carbon and biodiversity loss."⁷³ UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission is responsible for advancing ocean science to promote the sustainable governance and management of ocean resources as well as for coordinating the Ocean Decade.⁷⁴ The International Maritime Organization (IMO) is a United Nations agency tasked with ensuring the safety of shipping and preventing marine pollution from ships.⁷⁵ To achieve this objective, IMO has adopted multiple regulations, including the *International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships* (1973) and the *International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea* (1974).⁷⁶ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) works to promote a blue economy transformation through ocean finance and innovation.⁷⁷ In this context, UNDP has launched its Ocean Governance Programme and, together with various partners, the Global Fund for Coral Reefs, which supports the sustainable management of ocean resources by mobilizing public and private funding and advancing environmentally responsible business practices.⁷⁸

To improve coordination of the United Nations' efforts to promote the safe and sustainable use of the world's oceans, UN-Oceans was established as an inter-agency mechanism in 2003.⁷⁹ As such, UN-Oceans is tasked with enhancing coordination among United Nations entities working in the areas of ocean and coastal areas by fostering collaboration, facilitating the exchange of information, sharing best practices and lessons learned, and supporting contributions to key United Nations reports on ocean and fisheries governance.⁸⁰

With its resolution 70/226 (2016) on the "United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development," the General Assembly established the United Nations Ocean Conference to bring together stakeholders, discuss innovative initiatives and agree on commitments for

⁷⁰ United Nations Environment Programme. *UNEP Regional Seas Programme*. 2025.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *International Oceanographic Commission*. 2025.

⁷³ United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development. *2024 State of the Ocean Report*. 2024.

⁷⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *International Oceanographic Commission*. 2025.

⁷⁵ International Maritime Organization. *IMO's role in protecting the world's oceans*. N.d.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ United Nations Development Programme. *Ocean Governance*. N.d.

⁷⁸ Ibid; Global Fund for Coral Reefs. *About*. 2025.

⁷⁹ United Nations, Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea. Office of Legal Affairs. *UN-Oceans*. 2012.

⁸⁰ UN-Oceans. *Home*. 2017.

the sustainable use and protection of the oceans.⁸¹ The first United Nations Ocean Conference was co-hosted by Sweden and Fiji in 2017 in New York and the second United Nations Ocean Conference was co-hosted by Portugal and Kenya in 2022 in Lisbon.⁸² In June 2025, the governments of France and Costa Rica co-hosted the third United Nations Ocean Conference in Nice, France, to advance efforts to promote the safe and sustainable use of the world's oceans.⁸³ The conference brought together stakeholders from governments, United Nations entities, financial institutions, non-governmental institutions, academia, Indigenous Peoples, and the private sector.⁸⁴ The conference, which was held under the theme "Accelerating action and mobilizing all stakeholders for the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans," aimed to improve the implementation of SDG 14 by strengthening action for the conservation and sustainable use of the oceans, seas and marine resources.⁸⁵ A key outcome of the third United Nations Ocean Conference was the adoption of a political declaration titled "Our ocean, our future: united for urgent action," also called the Nice Ocean Action Plan.⁸⁶ The action plan sets out science-based global commitments, including tackling marine pollution and acidification, promoting marine biodiversity and deep-sea research, strengthening a sustainable ocean economy, and promoting legal frameworks, financing and inclusive governance to accelerate the implementation of SDG 14.⁸⁷

In addition to the various United Nations entities working to protect the ocean's biodiversity, organizations such as the Blue Nature Alliance implement initiatives aimed at protecting marine environments.⁸⁸ The Blue Nature Alliance is a global partnership that brings together governments, civil society, Indigenous communities, academia, and the private sector to protect marine ecosystems.⁸⁹ Another organization that is committed to protecting the oceans by working to end overfishing and improve the sustainability of fisheries is the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).⁹⁰ Among others, MSC certifies sustainable fisheries with its MSC Fisheries Standard to raise awareness and promote sustainable fishing practices.⁹¹ Through accredited certification bodies, MSC evaluates whether fisheries are sustainable, have low environmental impact, and follow environmental regulations, certifying those that meet its Fisheries Standard to sell their catch with the MSC label.⁹² Moreover, Conservation International is a non-governmental organization (NGOs) that aims to protect nature and biodiversity by promoting innovations in the areas of science,

⁸¹ United Nations University, Institute for Environment and Human Security. *What is the UN Oceans Conference and How Does it Help Achieve SDG 14?* 2025; United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Conference to Support the Implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development (A/RES/70/226)*. 2015.

⁸² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *2025 UN Ocean Conference*. N.d.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Nice Conference Adopts Declaration Underscoring Vital Importance of Ocean to Life on Our Planet, Essential Role in Mitigating Climate Change*. 2025.

⁸⁷ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Our ocean, our future: united for urgent action (A/CONF.230/2025/L.1)*. 2025.

⁸⁸ Blue Nature Alliance. *A Global Partnership Catalyzing Momentum for Large-Scale Ocean Conservation*. 2025.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Marine Stewardship Council. *About the MSC*. 2025.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Marine Stewardship Council. *How the MSC Fisheries Standard Works*. 2025.

policy, and finance.⁹³ Conservation International works together with governments, businesses, local communities and Indigenous Peoples to protect the oceans.⁹⁴

Fostering Ocean-Based Solutions to Climate Change

According to the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, ocean-based solutions to climate change, which use the ocean's potential to reduce emissions or increase long term carbon removal from the atmosphere, can contribute to up to 35% of the annual greenhouse gas emission reductions needed to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees celsius by 2050.⁹⁵ Ocean-based solutions to mitigate the effects of climate change include promoting marine renewable energy sources, strengthening marine carbon dioxide removal (CDR), and restoring coastal ecosystems and vegetation, or blue carbon ecosystems.⁹⁶ Marine renewable energy sources include wind energy, wave energy, tidal energy, and ocean current energy, among others.⁹⁷ Marine CDR is an ocean-based method of removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and storing it in the ocean, for instance by increasing the alkalinity of the ocean, adding nutrients to promote phytoplankton growth or sinking organic material such as seaweed in deep waters.⁹⁸ Marine CDR thus contributes to combating climate change by reducing global carbon levels, which in turn supports efforts to limit global warming.⁹⁹ Blue carbon ecosystems, including mangroves, seagrasses, and tidal marshes, are coastal habitats that capture and store carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.¹⁰⁰ Their restoration and protection are important in mitigating climate change by enhancing carbon sequestration, preventing significant greenhouse gas emissions from ecosystem degradation and supporting coastal resilience, biodiversity and fisheries.¹⁰¹

Climate change is intensifying the frequency and severity of natural disasters, thereby increasing the vulnerability of coastal populations and heightening the importance of ecosystems such as mangroves, coral reefs, and wetlands in mitigating impacts like storms, flooding, and erosion.¹⁰² However, the destruction of habitats, exacerbated by the effects of climate change, is undermining these natural protection mechanisms and accelerating the destruction of coastal and marine ecosystems.¹⁰³ This not only reduces the ability of the marine ecosystem to mitigate the effects of climate change, but also jeopardizes the blue economy.¹⁰⁴ This is particularly critical for SIDS, where communities are dependent

⁹³ Conservation International. *About Conservation International*. 2025.

⁹⁴ Conservation International. *Report issues 'sobering reality check' for world's oceans*. 2024; Conservation International. *Doubling Ocean Protection*. 2025.

⁹⁵ Wood et al. World Resources Institute. *The Ocean Can Play a Bigger Role in Fighting Climate Change than Previously Thought*. 2023; Naturance. *Ocean-based solutions*. N.d.

⁹⁶ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. *Ocean Decade. Vision 2030. White Papers. Challenge 5: Unlock ocean-based solutions to climate change*. 2024.

⁹⁷ World Ocean Review. *Living with the oceans. A report on the state of the world's oceans. Renewable Energies*. 2010.

⁹⁸ United States Environmental Protection Agency. *About mCDR*. 2024.

⁹⁹ Carbon Direct. *Marine carbon dioxide removal: What it is and how it works*. 2025.

¹⁰⁰ National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. *What is Blue Carbon?* 2024; The Blue Carbon Initiative. *Mitigating Climate Change Through Coastal Conservation*. 2019.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Griffin. The Nature Conservancy. *Newsroom: New study finds continued loss of coastal ecosystem may jeopardize millions of lives in the face of tropical storms*. 2023.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ International Institute for Environment and Development. *Climate change and the blue economy*. 2022.

on healthy marine environments for their livelihoods and resilience.¹⁰⁵ SIDS are among the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, especially sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and extreme weather events.¹⁰⁶ Despite their limited resources, SIDS play a key role in advocating internationally for stronger climate action and sustainable use of the oceans.¹⁰⁷ Their dependence on healthy marine ecosystems for livelihoods, food security, and disaster resilience underscores the importance of their involvement in the development and implementation of ocean-based climate solutions.¹⁰⁸ According to United Nations Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 36 out of the 39 SIDS have outlined over 600 ocean-related measures to tackle climate change, focusing on climate adaptation, coastal conservation, ecosystem restoration, and the sustainable management of key sectors such as marine fisheries and coastal tourism.¹⁰⁹ Many SIDS promote innovative ocean-based solutions, such as Cuba, where cooperation between scientists, communities, and government agencies has restored degraded coastal ecosystems while strengthening sustainable approaches such as agroforestry and aquaculture.¹¹⁰ Additionally, Seychelles was the first country to establish a Blue Bond, a financing instrument that mobilizes capital specifically for sustainable ocean use and maritime industries, and this model is now being adopted by other countries.¹¹¹ However, UNCTAD data shows that 64% of ocean-related climate commitments by SIDS are conditional on external support, highlighting the importance of international cooperation in areas such as finance, technology transfer, and technical assistance for effective implementation.¹¹²

The Ocean Decade defined ten key challenges to the sustainable use of the world's oceans.¹¹³ Challenge 5 focuses on ocean-based solutions to climate change, and it includes recommendations such as promoting research on marine renewable energy, reducing pollution and restoring vegetated coastal ecosystems, and promoting equitable, co-created solutions with the active participation of local and Indigenous communities.¹¹⁴ It also calls for better ocean governance, improved knowledge of the oceans and the development of adaptive management tools to support resilience to climate change.¹¹⁵ In order to scale up ocean-based solutions to climate change, there is a need for increased investments.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁵ United Nations Development Programme. *Small Island Developing States are on the frontlines of climate change - here's why*. 2024; United Nations Environment Programme. *UNEP & Small Island Developing States (SIDS)*. 2025.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. *A deep dive into ocean-related measures in the nationally determined contributions of small island developing States*. 2024; United Nations Trade and Development. *Small island nations: How oceans offer solutions to climate change*. 2025.

¹¹⁰ United Nations Development Programme. *Why we must put ocean-positive solutions at the heart of global development*. 2025; United Nations Development Programme. *Small island, big results*. 2025.

¹¹¹ World Bank Group. *Seychelles launches World's First Sovereign Blue Bond*. 2018; The Nature Conservancy. *Blue Bonds: An Audacious Plan to Save the World's Ocean*. 2023.

¹¹² United Nations Trade and Development. *Small island nations: How oceans offer solutions to climate change*. 2025.

¹¹³ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *10 Challenges. Ocean Decade Challenges for collective impact*. N.d.

¹¹⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. *Ocean Decade. Vision 2030. White Papers. Challenge 5: Unlock ocean-based solutions to climate change*. 2024. pp. 5-6.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Wood et al. World Resources Institute. *The Ocean Can Play a Bigger Role in Fighting Climate Change than Previously Thought*. 2023.

According to the World Resources Institute, a minimum of one trillion dollars is needed to leverage the ocean's potential for carbon reduction by 2030.¹¹⁷

Protecting and Restoring Ocean Ecosystems and Biodiversity

Marine biodiversity faces risks through overfishing, bycatch, climate change, pollution, and migration of invasive species.¹¹⁸ Overfishing and destructive fishing practices such as bottom trawling and bycatch have led to significant declines in fish populations, the destruction of marine habitats, and the disruption of marine ecosystems.¹¹⁹ These impacts are exacerbated by illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, which undermines efforts to manage fisheries sustainably and threatens the long-term survival of endangered species and the health of the oceans.¹²⁰ Climate change leads to ocean warming, acidification and deoxygenation, which result in the destruction of marine habitats and population declines, contributing to widespread biodiversity loss, and ecosystem degradation.¹²¹ As marine biodiversity is essential for a functioning and sustainable blue economy, its loss through overexploitation and pollution further threatens the long-term sustainability of ocean-based economic activities and the communities that depend on them.¹²² Therefore, the protection and restoration of marine ecosystems is also needed to ensure that they can both contribute to mitigating the effects of climate change and fostering economic growth.¹²³

Both the GBF and the BBNJ Agreement entail regulations to protect marine biodiversity.¹²⁴ The GBF, specifically through Targets 2 and 3, aims for the restoration of at least 30% of degraded marine and coastal ecosystems to ensure the protection of marine biodiversity.¹²⁵ The BBNJ Agreement, notably in Articles 4, 7, and 10, includes regulations on MPAs and environmental impact assessments, aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction.¹²⁶ In addition, efforts to protect and restore marine biodiversity include SDG 14 (Life Below Water), particularly Target 14.2, which aims to protect and restore marine ecosystems by 2020.¹²⁷ Challenge 2 of the Ocean Decade focuses on the protection and restoration of ocean ecosystems through enhanced knowledge generation and information sharing on marine ecosystems between existing organizations and networks.¹²⁸ As part of the Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the United Nations highlights innovative

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Marine Stewardship Council. *Marine biodiversity*. 2025.

¹¹⁹ Marine Biodiversity Science Center. *Saving Our Seas: The Devastating Human Impacts on Marine Life*. 2025.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ European Environment Agency. *How climate change impacts marine life*. 2023.

¹²² Problue. *Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Marine Spatial Planning*. 2022.

¹²³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *5 reasons you should care about our ocean*. 2022.

¹²⁴ Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD/COP/DEC/15/4)*. 2022; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction*. N.d.

¹²⁵ Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (CBD/COP/DEC/15/4)*. 2022.

¹²⁶ United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction*. N.d.

¹²⁷ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. Targets and indicators*. N.d.

¹²⁸ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *10 Challenges. Ocean Decade Challenges for collective impact*. N.d; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization,

marine restoration projects that offer approaches which could be replicated in other contexts.¹²⁹ Recently highlighted initiatives include a regional collaboration in Mozambique to restore coral reefs, mangroves, and fisheries; invasive species removal in Mexico to aid seabird recovery and enhance ecological resilience; and restoration efforts in Spain's Mar Menor lagoon combining legal protections and ecological measures to address pollution and restore coastal biodiversity.¹³⁰

Conclusion

The ocean plays a crucial role in combating climate change, but it faces threats like pollution, overfishing, acidification, and warming.¹³¹ To mitigate the impacts of climate change and protect marine ecosystems, international cooperation is essential, especially in areas beyond national jurisdiction, with frameworks such as UNCLOS and the BBNJ Agreement guiding sustainable ocean management.¹³² Various United Nations agencies such as UNEP and UNESCO, among others, promote sustainable ocean management through scientific research, policy measures and conservation initiatives, with their efforts coordinated through the inter-agency mechanism UN-Oceans.¹³³ Ocean-based climate solutions, such as marine renewable energy and blue carbon ecosystems, can significantly reduce greenhouse gases, but require increased investment and better governance to be effective.¹³⁴ Protecting marine biodiversity from overfishing, habitat loss, and impacts of climate change requires enhanced knowledge sharing, stronger regulations, and ecosystem restoration efforts.¹³⁵

Further Research

When researching this topic, delegates may consider the following questions: How can international cooperation in the area of ocean governance be strengthened, particularly regarding areas beyond national jurisdiction? How can the efforts of governments, United Nations agencies, financial institutions, NGOs, academia, Indigenous Peoples and the private sector be effectively coordinated to promote the safe and sustainable use of the oceans? How can ocean-based solutions to mitigate climate change be scaled up? What measures can the international community take to enhance efforts to protect and restore marine ecosystems and biodiversity?

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¹²⁹ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. *Make the ocean blue again: UN recognizes World Restoration Flagships in East Africa, Mexico, and Spain*. 2025.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *Infographic: Life below water*. N.d.

¹³² United Nations Environment Programme. *Why international cooperation is key to preserving the world's oceans*. 2020; Alfred-Wegener-Institut. *UN Agreement for the Protection of the Ocean*. N.d; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *Agreement on Marine Biological Diversity of Areas beyond National Jurisdiction*. N.d.

¹³³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Ocean, Seas and Coasts*. 2025; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *International Oceanographic Commission*. 2025; United Nations, Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea. Office of Legal Affairs. *UN-Oceans*. 2012.

¹³⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. *Ocean Decade. Vision 2030. White Papers. Challenge 5: Unlock ocean-based solutions to climate change*. 2024.

¹³⁵ Marine Stewardship Council. *Marine biodiversity*. 2025.

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World Ocean Day. *Mission and History*. N.d. Retrieved 8 June 2025 from: <https://worldoceanday.org/about/mission-history/#:~:text=30%C3%9730-.2023,Kunming%20Montreal%20Global%20Biodiversity%20Framework.>



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2. Reaffirming Legal Protections and Rights of Natural Protected Areas

“Nature is humanity’s best friend. Without nature, we have nothing. Without nature, we are nothing.”¹³⁶

Introduction

Pursuant to the *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework* (GBF) (2022), maintaining and preserving protected areas is a key pillar of global biodiversity conservation by providing biological safe havens and protecting critical ecosystem functions.¹³⁷ According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a natural protected area, also referred to as a protected area, is “a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.”¹³⁸ According to the World Database on Protected Areas, as of July 2025, there are 303,418 protected areas, covering 16.43% of the Earth’s land, and 9.61% of its oceans.¹³⁹

An essential aspect of protected areas is translating them from a legal and conceptual framework into a broader societal commitment.¹⁴⁰ To this end, long-term effectiveness depends on perpetual public interest and active stewardship of these conserved spaces by Member States.¹⁴¹ Furthermore, protected areas are consistently under the threat of external factors such as climate change, rapid commercial development, and armed conflict caused by human activities.¹⁴²

Globally, there is a wide range of definitions of protected areas established through international agreements, with different understandings of what constitutes protection, as their designation and implementation vary widely across Member States.¹⁴³ Due to this disparity of definitions in a domestic legislative context between individual Member States, what is considered as a protected area is often difficult to clearly define.¹⁴⁴ Further, Member States who have differing biodiversity priorities, governance structures, and resource capacities may apply varying standards of protection, enforcement, and recognition.¹⁴⁵

In addition to the environmental role of protected areas, they uphold cultural, heritage, and spiritual values, especially serving as vital spaces within the context of Indigenous communities.¹⁴⁶ According to

¹³⁶ United Nations, Secretary-General. *Secretary-General’s Remarks at the UN Biodiversity Conference - COP15*. 2022.

¹³⁷ Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*. 2022.

¹³⁸ International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Effective Protected Areas*. N.d.

¹³⁹ United Nations Environment Programme, World Conservation Monitoring Centre. *July 2025 Update of the WDPA, WD-OECM, and GD-PAME*. 2025.

¹⁴⁰ Grazia et al. International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Governance of Protected Areas: From Understanding to Action*. International Union for Conservation of Nature. 2013. p. 5.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. p. 5.

¹⁴² United Nations Environment Programme. *UNEA Resolution 2/15: Protection of the Environment in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict*. 2016; Grazia et al. International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Governance of Protected Areas: From Understanding to Action*. International Union for Conservation of Nature, 2013. p. 5.

¹⁴³ United Nations Environment Programme. *Protected Planet Report 2024*. 2024.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Indigenous Peoples make up an estimated 476 million individuals across 5,000 communities, occupying approximately 20% of the world's land area.¹⁴⁷ Indigenous Peoples have faced many historical and systemic challenges in achieving and having communities acknowledge land recognition, often facing violations of their land rights, as enshrined in the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) (2007).¹⁴⁸ Often, there is a direct correlation between the survival and livelihoods of Indigenous Peoples and the protection of biodiversity and their lands, which often take the form of protected areas.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, legal marginalization and lack of recognition of harm to Indigenous communities are perpetuated by a societal norm where land rights aren't typically associated with human rights.¹⁵⁰

International and Regional Framework

The international community has established a broad range of legal protections relevant to the intersection of human rights and the conservation and governance of protected areas through various global instruments.¹⁵¹ Early foundational instruments include the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) (1948), which declares in Article 17 that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.”¹⁵² This principle was among the first to be articulated in an international human rights instrument, laying the groundwork for the recognition of land tenure as a fundamental human right and establishing a direct textual connection between land rights and human rights.¹⁵³ In addition to the UDHR, the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (ICESCR) (1966) through Article 1(2) affirms the human right to self-determination, including the right of all peoples to “freely dispose of their natural wealth and resources.”¹⁵⁴

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* (World Heritage Convention) (1972) is a multilateral international treaty that establishes legal protections for areas that posit cultural and natural heritage of “outstanding universal value,” aiming to ensure their preservation for future generations.¹⁵⁵ The World Heritage Convention incorporates the preservation of cultural heritage into the broader framework of environmental protection, and functions as a key mechanism of recognition for natural protected areas.¹⁵⁶

¹⁴⁷ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *UNPFII Mandated Areas – Environment*. N.d.

¹⁴⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (A/RES/61/295). 2007; United Nations Environment Programme. *Protected Planet Report 2024*. 2024; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *UNPFII Mandated Areas – Environment*. N.d.

¹⁴⁹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *UNPFII Mandated Areas – Environment*. N.d.

¹⁵⁰ Gilbert .International Journal on Human Rights. Vol. 18. *Land Rights as Human Rights*. 2013. p. 1.

¹⁵¹ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (A/RES/217 A [III]). 1948; United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (A/RES/2200 A [XXI]). 1966.

¹⁵² United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (A/RES/217 A [III]). 1948.

¹⁵³ United Nations, General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (A/RES/217 A [III]). 1948; Gilbert . International Journal on Human Rights. Vol. 18. *Land Rights as Human Rights*. 2013.

¹⁵⁴ United Nations, General Assembly. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* (A/RES/2200 A [XXI]). 1966.

¹⁵⁵ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*. 1972.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid .

Member States adopted the landmark *Convention on Biological Diversity* (CBD) at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro.¹⁵⁷ The CBD establishes conservation, sustainable use, and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits from genetic resources as its core principles, making it the leading international instrument on biodiversity.¹⁵⁸ It recognizes the intrinsic link between human prosperity and the ongoing stewardship of global biodiversity.¹⁵⁹ The mitigation of climate change is addressed through landmark conventions such as the *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* (UNFCCC) (1992) and the *Paris Agreement* (2015).¹⁶⁰ While their primary focus is climate change, both instruments recognize the importance of sustainably managing ecosystems and protected areas as part of broader climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.¹⁶¹

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2030 Agenda) (2015) provides a global framework for sustainable development through the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and examines the intersection of human rights and protected areas through an integrated approach to sustainability and inclusion.¹⁶² As part of this framework, SDG 2 (zero hunger), particularly Target 2.3, emphasizes the importance of “equal access to land,” particularly for small-scale food producers, including women, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities.¹⁶³ Furthermore, SDG 13 (climate change), SDG 14 (life below water), and SDG 15 (life on land) are all goals in pursuance of effective global conservation strategies, and are all targets that protect various aspects of protected areas.¹⁶⁴

Signed in Montreal, Canada at its fifteenth meeting, the 2022 United Nations Biodiversity Conference of the Parties (COP 15) to the CBD saw the adoption of the GBF.¹⁶⁵ The GBF sets out a global plan aimed at preventing and reversing biodiversity loss.¹⁶⁶ Target 3 of the GBF calls for the conservation of 30% of the planet’s land, inland waters, coastal areas, and oceans by 2030 - a goal widely referred to as the “30x30” target.¹⁶⁷ This target emphasizes the expansion and effective management of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, ensuring they are equitably governed and ecologically representative.¹⁶⁸

Many protected areas around the world are located in regions that are traditionally stewarded or conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities.¹⁶⁹ In 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted UNDRIP, which serves as a foundational international instrument affirming the

¹⁵⁷ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. *Convention on Biological Diversity*. 1992.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*. 1992; Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. *Paris Agreement*. 2015.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*. 2022.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ World Wildlife Fund. *30x30: A Guide to Inclusive, Equitable and Effective Implementation of Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework*. 2023.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ International Union for Conservation of Nature. *IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas Impact Report 2024*. 2025. p. 13.

individual and collective rights of Indigenous Peoples.¹⁷⁰ UNDRIP holds historical significance as it established universal standards for the protection and promotion of Indigenous rights, particularly in relation to land, culture, identity, self-determination, and participation in decision-making processes.¹⁷¹ The rights of Indigenous Peoples within the context of land are documented thoroughly in UNDRIP, specifically through Articles 4, 25, 26, and 29.¹⁷² Article 4 affirms the “right to autonomy or self-government in matters relating to internal and local affairs.”¹⁷³ Article 25 recognizes the spiritual and cultural relationships Indigenous Peoples maintain with their lands, territories, and resources.¹⁷⁴ Article 26 affirms their right to the lands they have traditionally owned or used, and obligates states to legally recognize those rights.¹⁷⁵ Article 29 calls on States parties to ensure environmental protection of Indigenous lands and to prevent the storage or disposal of hazardous materials on their territories.¹⁷⁶ Further reinforcing these commitments, the General Assembly adopted resolution 79/159 (2024), titled “Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” which emphasizes the ongoing importance of implementing and respecting Indigenous rights across all levels of governance and development planning in pursuance of protecting the land, territories, and ecosystems of Indigenous Peoples.¹⁷⁷

Regionally, several key multilateral agreements reinforce the protection of biodiversity and natural areas.¹⁷⁸ The *African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources* (1968) promotes sustainable development and environmental stewardship across the African continent.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, the commitment of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Member States to conserve biological diversity, ensure the sustainability of natural resources, and strengthen regional cooperation in environmental governance is reflected in the *ASEAN Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources* (1985).¹⁸⁰ Both of the outcomes for these conventions serve as key methodologies for the safeguarding and conservation of protected areas in these regions.¹⁸¹

Role of the International System

The United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA) holds the highest mandate for environmental policy making within the international system.¹⁸² It plays a central role in establishing global priorities and shaping the direction of international environmental governance.¹⁸³ Established at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, the United Nations Environment

¹⁷⁰ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*. N.d.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/61/295)*. 2007.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ United Nations, General Assembly. *Rights of Indigenous Peoples (A/RES/79/159)*. 2024.

¹⁷⁸ African Union. *African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (Revised Version)*. 2003; Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources*. 1985.

¹⁷⁹ African Union. *African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (Revised Version)*. 2003.

¹⁸⁰ Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources*. 1985.

¹⁸¹ African Union. *African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (Revised Version)*. 2003; Association of Southeast Asian Nations. *Agreement on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources*. 1985.

¹⁸² United Nations Environment Programme. *About the United Nations Environment Assembly*. N.d.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Programme (UNEP) is the lead international authority implementing environmental action and policy.¹⁸⁴ UNEP plays a critical role in advancing sustainable development, fostering cooperation on environmental issues, and aiding Member States in supporting environmental agreements and practices.¹⁸⁵ Through technical expertise, monitoring, policy guidance, and financial assistance, UNEP helps Member States design and enforce effective environmental policies and reports for protected areas.¹⁸⁶ In 2016, UNEA adopted resolution 2/15 on “Protection of the environment in areas affected by armed conflict,” which outlines the need to safeguard environmental integrity in conflict-affected regions, including the protection of natural resources and ecosystems.¹⁸⁷ In 2024, UNEA adopted resolution 6/14, titled “Strengthening international efforts to combat desertification and land degradation, restore degraded land, promote land conservation and sustainable land management, contribute to land degradation neutrality, and enhance drought resilience.”¹⁸⁸ This resolution focuses on enhancing multilateral efforts to mitigate external threats through human activities to land and promotes sustainable land management and conservation.¹⁸⁹

IUCN is a global authority on the status of the natural world and the measures needed to safeguard it, working through a diverse membership and expert network to influence policy and action for sustainable development.¹⁹⁰ In partnership with IUCN, UNEP created the Protected Planet Initiative, a collaborative project that provides a platform for knowledge sharing between Member States by providing data and trends of protected and conserved areas.¹⁹¹ The Protected Planet Initiative compiles monthly submissions from governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), landowners, and communities to provide up-to-date information and databases on protected areas, tracking progress towards the 2030 Agenda and Target 3 of the GBF.¹⁹² On a biennial basis, UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC), an advising specialist agency focused on biodiversity, releases a “Protected Planet Report,” which assesses the current state of protected areas and offers recommendations to support the achievement of international conservation targets.¹⁹³ Established in 1981, the World Database of Protected Areas, monitored and managed by UNEP-WCMC, is a joint project between UNEP and IUCN.¹⁹⁴ It functions as the leading worldwide source of information on protected marine and land areas, developed in partnership with governments, NGOs, academic bodies, and industry to guide evidence-based conservation efforts and policy development.¹⁹⁵ The IUCN’s World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) plays a central role in developing policies, guidance and best practices related to protected areas through a network of 3,200 professionals over 140 Member States.¹⁹⁶ A key aspect of

¹⁸⁴ United Nations Environment Programme. *About Us*. N.d; United Nations, Department of Global Communications. *United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, 5-16 June 1972, Stockholm*. N.d;

¹⁸⁵ United Nations Environment Programme. *Sustainability at UNEP*. N.d.

¹⁸⁶ United Nations Environment Programme. *About Us*. N.d; United Nations Environment Programme. *Sustainability at UNEP*. N.d.

¹⁸⁷ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Protection of the Environment in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict (UNEP/EA.2/Res. 15)*. 2016.

¹⁸⁸ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Strengthening international efforts to combat desertification and land degradation, restore degraded land, promote land conservation and sustainable land management, contribute to land degradation neutrality and enhance drought resilience (UNEP/EA.6/Res. 14)*. 2024.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ International Union for Conservation of Nature. *About Us*. N.d.

¹⁹¹ United Nations Environment Programme, World Conservation Monitoring Centre. *Protected Planet*. N.d.

¹⁹² Protected Planet. *About Protected Planet*. N.d.

¹⁹³ United Nations Environment Programme, World Conservation Monitoring Centre. *About UNEP-WCMC*. N.d; Protected Planet. *About Protected Planet*. N.d.

¹⁹⁴ United Nations Environment Programme, World Conservation Monitoring Centre. *World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA)*. N.d.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ International Union for Conservation of Nature . *IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas 2021–2025*. N.d.

WCPA involves working with Indigenous communities, recognizing their role in achieving equitable and effective conservation outcomes.¹⁹⁷

In relation to Indigenous multilateralism, the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII) functions as a high-level advisory body to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).¹⁹⁸ During its 23rd session in the year 2024, UNPFII focused on “Improving the self-determination rights of Indigenous Peoples,” exploring the critical links between land rights, self-determination, and broader human rights frameworks.¹⁹⁹ Discussions during the 23rd session on the recognition of Indigenous governance and self-government serve as important contributions, as these governance systems are increasingly recognized as crucial to both the realization of Indigenous rights and the effective management and long-term sustainability of protected areas.²⁰⁰

Further, NGOs, such as the Nature Conservancy, also play a key role in reaffirming the legal protections of natural protected areas by advocating for stronger environmental policies, supporting local conservation efforts, and holding governments accountable to international standards.²⁰¹ The Nature Conservancy aims to reach various targets by 2030 including the reduction or storing of 3 gigatons of carbon dioxide emissions annually, and conserving nearly 10 billion acres of ocean through enhanced protections and sustainable practices.²⁰² These goals directly support the sustainability and resilience of natural protected areas by addressing climate impacts.²⁰³ The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) is a global think tank that works to advance solutions for a stable climate, sustainable resource management, and fair economies by conducting research, analysis, and policy engagement on critical sustainability issues.²⁰⁴ IISD has led various nature-based initiatives and publications, which aim to safeguard and strengthen protected areas.²⁰⁵

Regionally, there are various relevant bodies, programs, and actors that contribute to the strengthening of environmental governance and protections.²⁰⁶ The European Environment Agency’s “Natura 2000 network” is an initiative by the European Union (EU) that coordinates networks of protected areas, and is globally-acclaimed for safeguarding EU Member States’ valuable and threatened species and habitats while promoting sustainable land use.²⁰⁷ The African Commission of Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) has addressed the intersection of environmental protection and Indigenous rights.²⁰⁸ In its 372nd resolution, ACHPR affirmed the need to protect natural sites and Indigenous land and territories as

¹⁹⁷ International Union for Conservation of Nature. *IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas Impact Report 2024*. 2025. p. 13.

¹⁹⁸ United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *About the United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues*. N.d.

¹⁹⁹ United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: 23rd Session*. 2024.

²⁰⁰ United Nations, Economic and Social Council. *Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues: 23rd Session*. 2024; United Nations Environment Programme. *Protected Planet Report 2024*. 2024.

²⁰¹ The Nature Conservancy. *Who We Are*. The Nature Conservancy. N.d.

²⁰² IbidThe Nature Conservancy. *Who We Are*. The Nature Conservancy. N.d.

²⁰³ IbidThe Nature Conservancy. *Who We Are*. The Nature Conservancy. N.d.

²⁰⁴ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *About IISD*. N.d.

²⁰⁵ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *Climate Adaptation and Protected Areas Initiative*. 2024.

²⁰⁶ African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. *Resolution on the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites and Territories (ACHPR/Res.372(LX)2017)*. 2017; European Environment Agency. *Natura 2000 Network Viewer*. N.d; The Nature Conservancy. *Who We Are*. N.d.

²⁰⁷ European Environment Agency. *Natura 2000 Network Viewer*. N.d.

²⁰⁸ African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights. *Resolution on the Protection of Sacred Natural Sites and Territories (ACHPR/Res.372(LX)2017)*. 2017.

a facet of cultural, spiritual, and ecological importance, recognizing the strength of “customary governance” for Indigenous peoples.²⁰⁹

Reaffirming Indigenous Peoples Rights in Natural Protected Areas

Published in 2021, the fifth volume of the United Nations’ “State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples,” titled “Rights to Lands, Territories, and Resources,” highlights the persistent challenges Indigenous Peoples face in securing legal recognition and protection of their ancestral lands, many of which are protected areas.²¹⁰ While some Member States have made legislative progress, the report emphasizes that implementation remains uneven and perpetuates systemic human rights violations.²¹¹ Natural protected areas are often compromised by extractive industries, land grabbing, and insufficient enforcement mechanisms due to weak legislative oversight.²¹² In Member States where private sector activities are not adequately regulated, mining companies and other extractive industries often encroach upon Indigenous territories.²¹³ Globally, over half of the remaining mineral resources are located on lands traditionally owned or used by Indigenous Peoples, making these areas frequent targets for exploitation.²¹⁴ UNEA has addressed land issues through various instruments such as its resolution 6/14 (2024) on “Strengthening international efforts to combat desertification and land degradation, restore degraded land, promote land conservation and sustainable land management, contribute to land degradation neutrality, and enhance drought resilience.”²¹⁵

In contradiction with Articles 26 and 29 of UNDRIP, Indigenous communities often have ‘land rights in law, but not in reality,’ where some Member States formally recognize Indigenous land rights, but fail to ensure their effective implementation.²¹⁶ Even when Indigenous Peoples hold legal ownership, they are often overridden by legislation that allows private sector operations, such as mining and logging, without prior consultation or consent.²¹⁷ Article 4 of UNDRIP affirms the right of Indigenous Peoples to “autonomy or self-government in matters relating to their internal and local affairs.”²¹⁸ As recognized by the 2024 UNPFII Session Report and the “State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples” report, territorial self-government and autonomy over land are vital pillars of progress that are needed to maintain fair, equitable land rights and legal protections for Indigenous communities.²¹⁹ Article 40 of UNDRIP states that Indigenous Peoples have the right to access fair and impartial procedures for the resolution of conflicts and disputes, particularly those involving land and resources.²²⁰

²⁰⁹ Ibid .

²¹⁰ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources. Volume V.* 2021.

²¹¹ Ibid. pp. 31-32.

²¹² Ibid. p. 49.

²¹³ Ibid. p. 51.

²¹⁴ Ibid. p. 51.

²¹⁵ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Strengthening international efforts to combat desertification and land degradation, restore degraded land, promote land conservation and sustainable land management, contribute to land degradation neutrality and enhance drought resilience (UNEP/EA.6/Res. 14).* 2024.

²¹⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *UNPFII Mandated Areas – Environment.* N.d.

²¹⁷ Ibid .

²¹⁸ United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.* 2007.

²¹⁹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World’s Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources. Volume V.* 2021. pp. 88-91.

²²⁰ United Nations, General Assembly. *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.* 2007.

Land rights are often treated as property or administrative issues, rather than being recognized as fundamental human rights and extended into broader societal commitments by Member States.²²¹ This limited framing overlooks the deep cultural, spiritual, and existential connection that many Indigenous Peoples and local communities have with their lands.²²² Moreover, there exists a persistent contradiction between international human rights law - which affirms the collective rights of Indigenous Peoples to land, self-determination, and free, prior, and informed consent - and national legal systems, which often fail to reflect or implement these standards.²²³ For example, in alignment with international law, some Member States will set aside land grants for Indigenous Peoples, but when it comes to the approval process, Indigenous communities are often denied.²²⁴

In certain cases, within the context of Indigenous Peoples, legal protections are directly correlated with their right to exist.²²⁵ Some Member States have not formally recognized Indigenous Peoples as a culturally and ethnically distinct group, and this poses a continual challenge to the realization of their land rights.²²⁶ Moreover, Indigenous Peoples are illegally evicted from their lands due to extractive or agricultural projects, and are often relocated without free, prior, and informed consent.²²⁷ This is further perpetuated by a lack of access to remedy and barriers to justice for rights violations.²²⁸ As discrimination within the justice systems is widespread, Indigenous Peoples lack a fair, equitable right to a rectification or legal process, which constitutes a violation of Article 40 of UNDRIP.²²⁹

Preventing and Mitigating Threats to Natural Protected Areas

Natural protected areas play a crucial role in combating climate change and biodiversity loss, as they act as carbon sinks and support ecological stability, such as forests, marine regions, freshwater environments, and many others.²³⁰ Despite their ecological importance, these areas are increasingly exposed to physical threats such as climate change, rapid commercial development, and armed conflict, which are all exacerbated by human activity and pose a hindrance to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda.²³¹ SDG 13 (climate change) and SDG 15 (life on land) are directly impacted, as the degradation of protected areas undermines efforts to combat climate change, preserve biodiversity, and promote sustainable land use.²³² Legal protections and land rights tied to protected areas are also at risk, undermining both environmental security and the rights of affected communities, for example leading to displacement of Indigenous and local communities.²³³

²²¹ Gilbert. International Journal on Human Rights. Vol. 18. *Land Rights as Human Rights*. 2013. p. 2.

²²² United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *UNPFII Mandated Areas – Environment*. N.d.

²²³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources. Volume V*. 2021. p. 50.

²²⁴ Ibid. pp. 34-35.

²²⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *UNPFII Mandated Areas – Environment*. N.d.

²²⁶ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources. Volume V*. 2021. p. 49.

²²⁷ Ibid. p. 58.

²²⁸ Ibid. pp. 62-63.

²²⁹ Ibid. pp. 62-65.

²³⁰ International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Protected Areas and Climate Change Briefing Paper*. 2019 ; United Nations Environment Programme. *Protected Planet Report 2024*. 2024.

²³¹ International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Protected Areas and Climate Change Briefing Paper*. 2019.

²³² United Nations, General Assembly. *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. 2015.

²³³ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources. Volume V*. 2021. p. 36.

As acknowledged in UNEA resolution 2/15 (2016) on the “Protection of the environment in areas affected by armed conflict,” illegal armed groups in several regions exploit protected natural resources, undermining environmental governance and local safety.²³⁴ In armed conflict, international humanitarian law (IHL), such as demilitarized zones and undefended localities, are typically implemented without incorporating international environmental law (IEL).²³⁵ IEL encompasses mechanisms that govern the protection, management, and conservation of ecologically significant areas, such as protected areas, and can complement and enhance IHL by promoting the protection of the environment during armed conflict.²³⁶ According to the International Committee of the Red Cross, to better safeguard protected areas from an ecological perspective, it is essential to consider how IEL can complement and enhance existing IHL frameworks.²³⁷ For example, Member States can consider if ecological zones can qualify for demilitarized zones.²³⁸

To strengthen the climate resilience of protected areas, IISD created the Climate Adaptation and Protected Areas (CAPA) Initiative, which focuses on creating resilient ecosystems within protected areas and safeguarding biodiversity through nature-based strategies.²³⁹ CAPA targets key ecosystems in sub-Saharan Africa, including the Kavango-Zambezi and Greater Virunga regions, as well as areas in Belize and Fiji, aiming to support both protected zones and the surrounding communities.²⁴⁰ The *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction* (Sendai Framework) (2015) seeks to reduce disaster risk and enhance the resilience of ecosystems and communities.²⁴¹ The Sendai Framework emphasizes the importance of protecting environmental assets, including natural protected areas, as essential buffers against climate-induced hazards such as floods, droughts, and wildfires.²⁴² Various international treaties, such as the *Paris Agreement* (2015), lack mechanisms requiring Member States to integrate protected areas into their Nationally Determined Contributions , posing a gap in international environmental strategy for protected areas.²⁴³

There are several gaps in the protection of natural protected areas from human activities.²⁴⁴ Climate change poses a significant threat to protected areas by altering habitats, ecosystems, and increasing the risk of wildfires.²⁴⁵ In regions affected by armed conflict, protected areas often become inaccessible,

²³⁴ International Committee of the Red Cross. *International Review of the Red Cross. No. 924. Protected Zones in Context: Exploring the Complexity of Armed Conflicts and Their Impacts on the Protection of Biodiversity*. 2023; United Nations Environment Assembly. *Protection of the Environment in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict (UNEP/EA.2/Res. 15)*. 2016.

²³⁵ International Committee of the Red Cross. *International Review of the Red Cross. No. 924. Increasing the Safeguarding of Protected Areas Threatened by Warfare through International Environmental Law*. 2023.

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *Climate Adaptation and Protected Areas Initiative*. 2024.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ United Nations, Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. *Protecting Nature to Minimize Disaster Risks*. 2024; United Nations, Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. *Our Work*. N.d.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Protected Areas and Climate Change Briefing Paper*. 2019.

²⁴⁴ International Institute for Sustainable Development. *Climate Adaptation and Protected Areas Initiative*. 2024; United Nations, Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. *Protecting Nature to Minimize Disaster Risks*. 2024.

²⁴⁵ United Nations, Office for Disaster Risk Reduction. *Protecting Nature to Minimize Disaster Risks*. 2024.

leading to weakened enforcement and increased vulnerability to illegal exploitation - disabling the Indigenous and local communities who live there.²⁴⁶

Conclusion

The continuous protection of protected areas is both a facet of global biodiversity conservation and an interconnected human rights issue.²⁴⁷ While international frameworks, such as UNDRIP, have made significant strides in recognizing and promoting environmental and Indigenous rights, challenges remain in bridging the gap between legal commitments and actual implementation, despite ongoing efforts from bodies such as UNEA and UNEP.²⁴⁸ Indigenous Peoples, who often serve as the traditional stewards of the world's most ecologically valuable lands, continue to face systemic barriers in securing land rights and participating in decision-making.²⁴⁹ The existence of "land rights in law, but not in reality" illustrates the disconnect between international human rights law and domestic enforcement.²⁵⁰ Further, threats such as climate change, armed conflict, and commercial practices in protected areas jeopardize the well-being of protected areas.²⁵¹ To achieve the 2030 Agenda, Member States should consider methodologies for strengthening institutional practices, recognizing Indigenous autonomy, and integrating environmental priorities into all levels of governance.²⁵²

Further Research

As delegates conduct further research and consider how to address this topic, they should consider: How can IHL be leveraged to support IEL, particularly in the protection of ecosystems in conflict zones (e.g., through the establishment of demilitarized zones or designation of protected natural areas)? What mechanisms can enhance Indigenous participation in environmental decision-making processes at local, national, and international levels to promote Indigenous governance in protected areas? How can Member States ensure that traditional ecological knowledge is respected and integrated in disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation strategies? What best practices exist for aligning national legislation with the principles of UNDRIP in the context of environmental governance for protected areas?

²⁴⁶ International Committee of the Red Cross. *International Review of the Red Cross*. No. 924. *Increasing the Safeguarding of Protected Areas Threatened by Warfare through International Environmental Law*. 2023; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources*. Volume V. 2021.

²⁴⁷ United Nations Environment Programme. *Protected Planet Report 2024*. 2024.

²⁴⁸ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources*. Volume V. 2021. p. 50.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 31-32.

²⁵⁰ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *UNPFII Mandated Areas – Environment*. N.d.

²⁵¹ United Nations Environment Assembly. *Protection of the Environment in Areas Affected by Armed Conflict (UNEP/EA.2/Res.15)*. 2016; International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Protected Areas and Climate Change Briefing Paper*. 2019; World Resources Institute. *Tree Cover Loss from Mining Has Increased in Protected Areas*. 2024.

²⁵² International Union for Conservation of Nature. *Protected Areas and Climate Change Briefing Paper*. 2019 ; United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples: Rights to Lands, Territories and Resources*. Volume V. 2021.

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