



## IUCN Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur in the Field of Cultural Rights

**IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)** is the world's largest environmental network, comprising over 1,400 member organisations including states, government agencies, Indigenous peoples and local communities, and other civil society agencies across more than 160 countries, along with some 18,000 experts organised into specialist commissions, working to achieve a just world that values and conserves nature. This submission draws on the expertise of IUCN's Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP), the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA), and the Protected and Conserved Areas and World Heritage Teams in the IUCN Secretariat.

### Links between cultural rights and conservation initiatives

- 1. Cultural rights and conservation practice are closely linked.** Indigenous peoples' and traditional local communities' worldviews, cultural values, customary institutions and traditional practices are bound in diverse knowledge systems, which commonly centre on a reciprocity and ethic of care for nature and territory (e.g. IPBES 2022). Cultural rights relate to issues of access, decision making and freedom of cultural practice for these Indigenous and local knowledge systems to thrive in contemporary society and political arenas. Evidence across conservation, restoration and climate science increasingly highlight the long-term ecological effectiveness of Indigenous and local knowledge systems relative to state and privately led initiatives, with no evidence to the contrary (Corrigan et al. 2018, Garnett et al. 2018; Reyes-Garcia et al. 2019; Fa et al. 2020, Dawson et al. 2021, 2023, 2024; Benzeev et al. 2025). Yet Indigenous and local knowledge systems continue to face severe pressures of discrimination and assimilation through the dominance of external, western scientific knowledge (Orlove et al. 2022).
- 2. Indigenous- and community-led stewardship can both advance and be advanced through exercise of cultural rights,** including in relation to values, knowledge systems, research, innovation, and practice. See, among others:
  - a. *Reimagining Conservation Forums*, convened bi-annually by NAILSMA and partners, including the IUCN National Committee of Australia, seeking to "redefine the concept of conservation by moving beyond conventional 'western' approaches, to valuing and empowering Indigenous-led conservation supported by non-Indigenous allies." (see [reports on NAILSMA webpage](#) and [McCreedy et al., 2025](#))
  - b. *Reimagining Conservation* - CEESP Policy Matters issue 24, comprised of four chapters (collections of articles and stories) on reimagining conservation action, leadership and justice, power and money, and relationships. Among others -
    - i. The articles in *Reimagining Relationships* (pages 236 – 305) start with "reflections on the Doctrine of Discovery, which arguably kickstarted a path of disconnection" and then explores (1) "Stories of relationship explores real-world examples of different or restored connections – between communities, across cultures, and with the natural world"; (2) "Rethinking rights questions traditional ideas of ownership and entitlement, asking how legal and ethical frameworks could better reflect interdependence."; and (3) "Relationships of renewal looks ahead, proposing new ways of relating that are reciprocal, compassionate and based on new consciousness."
    - ii. "*Conservation through an Inuit lens: A case study of marine planning in Nunatsiavut*" highlights participatory research and a marine planning initiative

- led by Labrador Inuit are supporting self-determination and sustained access to and relationships with the land. ([Saunders et al., 2025:28-30](#))
- iii. “*Revitalizing traditional fire management knowledge: A bold pathway for innovative conservation*” highlights Traditional Fire Management (TFM) as an innovative conservation model that “revitalizes traditional fire management knowledge as a powerful solution for both people and nature”. ([Ramos & Tricone, 2025:38-43](#))
  - c. Seven detailed case studies documenting shifts towards enhanced recognition of rights and leadership, and evidencing pathways are presented in CEESP Policy Matters issue 23 ([Dawson et al., 2023](#)). For example:
    - i. “Collaborative conservation on Ulithi Atoll, Federated States of Micronesia: Indigenous\* leadership supported by Western\* science promotes effective, adaptive stewardship” ( )
  - d. In Iran, participatory rangeland management integrating traditional rotational grazing knowledge with university collaboration, and wetland restoration combining environmental education with cultural storytelling, demonstrate that when communities' cultural rights to participate and transmit heritage are recognised, conservation outcomes are more durable (see Annex 4)
- 3. Some conservation initiatives have also led to alleged violations or erosion of cultural rights:**
- a. A [database of alleged violations](#) against Indigenous Peoples' human rights in protected areas and natural parks’ (developed by the Indigenous Peoples Law & Policy Program Initiative on Indigenous Rights & Protected Areas, University of Arizona) includes 30 cases categorized as including (though not necessarily limited to) cultural rights violations
  - b. ‘Indigenous Peoples' Struggle for Survival in Protected Areas: Cases from Nepal, India, Cambodia, and Thailand’ ([Sherpa et al., 2025a](#)) - “captures the lived experiences of Indigenous Peoples from Asia, with cases from Nepal, India, Thailand and Cambodia.”
  - c. A policy brief from the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and the Environment includes cases illustrating both “the devastating impacts of fortress conservation on Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendants, local communities, peasants, rural women, and rural youth” and the “promise of rights-based approaches for both people and nature” ([Boyd & Keene 2021](#)).
- 4.** There are also **persistent and systemic barriers** to advancing recognition and support for Indigenous- and community-leadership in conservation. A global taskforce established through IUCN CEESP/WCPA is exploring barriers and actions to overcome them and developing guidance and case studies (see early summary in [Lassen et al. 2025](#)).
- 5.** In the Socotra Archipelago, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve with exceptional endemism and cultural heritage, biodiversity loss directly threatens rights to food, water, cultural identity and traditional livelihoods, while ongoing conflict challenges conservation implementation despite international designations (see Annex Case Study 2).

## Pathways and enabling conditions

- 6. Pathways for recognizing and sustaining cultural rights and their links to conservation include:**
- a. Securing closely linked collective and individual rights, within an overall human rights-based approach (HRBA). This includes rights to lands, territories, waters, resources, as well as to FPIC and self-determination. Rights recognition, and HRBAs more broadly, must not only be advanced in policies but integral to program/project

requirements, funding stipulations, and to be reflected in forums and interactions between communities and external conservation actors. See, among others,

- i. “*Securing collective land rights for justice and sustainability in Tanzania*” highlights how Ujamaa Community Resource Team (UCRT) “facilitates innovative legal and community-led approaches to promote secure, collective land tenure and sustainable governance and management”, noting both that substantial transformations have been made through this collective action, and that “they may be difficult to sustain without changes in the broader context, including political and legal recognition of Indigenous Peoples and stronger protections against conservation- and investment-driven eviction and displacement.” ([Mako, 2025:50-55](#))
  - ii. Examples and guidance shared throughout guidance on advancing HRBAs in KM-GBF implementation (HR&BWG, 2024a) and Target 3 implementation ([HR&BWG et al., 2024b](#))
- b. Centring leadership, governance, customary institutions and knowledge systems of Indigenous Peoples and of local communities. See, among others:
- i. The *Territories of Life* report includes 17 detailed cases about the innovative pathways custodians have taken in self-strengthening and assertion of collective rights ([ICCA Consortium, 2021](#))
  - ii. The *Indigenous Peoples Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (IPBSAP)* - Philippines is a landmark document, developed by a coalition of Indigenous Peoples organizations and allies, reflecting a collective commitment and assertion of rights by Indigenous Peoples, in relation to roles and responsibilities, traditional knowledge, values, rights and interrelationships with their territories and biodiversity (see [Reyes, 2025:16-26](#))
  - iii. “*Reimagining conservation through Indigenous remembering, revitalisation, and the recognition of Indigenous and traditional territories*” ([Rubis, 2025:8-12](#)) explores how practices of remembering, ritual revitalisation, and concealment operate not only as forms of resistance, but also as “grounded modes of governance, survivance, and ecological care”
  - iv. Many of the 40 cases in ‘Solutions in Focus: Governance in Protected and Conserved Areas’, [Volume I](#) & [Volume II](#) highlight experiences and approaches for advancing recognition and support for Indigenous- and community-led and inclusive PCA governance.
- c. Equitable approaches to conservation initiative governance and management overall, including re: recognition, procedure, and distribution. Indigenous Peoples and local communities continue to be commonly treated as stakeholders or consultees in externally devised initiatives, focusing on consent, participation and material benefit sharing.
- i. Many of the 40 cases in ‘Solutions in Focus: Governance in Protected and Conserved Areas’, [Volume I](#) & [Volume II](#) highlight the importance of and approaches to advancing governance quality.
- d. Inclusive local processes and leadership, including leadership roles for women and active engagement of youth in forming future aspirations and revitalising knowledge transfer.
- e. Allyship and collective action - Seldom do Indigenous Peoples or local communities act alone to secure rights, particularly in achieving transformational change. Substantive shifts are often facilitated through collaboration in networks and (rights-holder led) engagement with allied, external organisations, including advocacy and financial support.

## 7. Recognition of contributions in Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework

- a. Under Target 3 of the Global Biodiversity Framework, recognition of rights and the conservation contributions of Indigenous Peoples and of local communities in Indigenous and traditional territories, and, where appropriate, protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, offer significant opportunities to safeguard cultural values, including traditional knowledge, customary laws and sustainable use, and the spiritual connections between Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and their lands and territories while contributing to biodiversity targets and supporting the rights-based approaches enshrined in the Framework.

## Approaches, measures, and policies

A wide variety of approaches can enable assertion, recognition, and appropriate support for cultural rights in the context of conservation. Specific approaches are best understood in context, and with the leadership and full, equitable and effective participation of rights-holders, such as:

### 8. Approaches and collective actions by and with rights-holders include:

- a. [Territory of life self-strengthening process](#) supports reflection, discussion, and action that communities can define and shape according to their needs and aspirations. The process consists of 7 self-strengthening elements, each with guiding questions, tools and examples.” (ICCA Consortium)
- b. [Bio-cultural community protocols](#) “articulate community- determined values, procedures and priorities [and]... set out rights and responsibilities ...as the basis for engaging with external actors ...They can be used as catalysts for constructive and proactive responses to threats and opportunities posed by land and resource development, conservation, research, and other legal and policy frameworks.” (Natural Justice)
- c. Policies, protocols and practices upholding [Indigenous data sovereignty and governance](#), e.g. [CARE Principles](#)
- d. [Community-led mapping](#) as expression of traditional knowledge and cultural practice, and assertion of related rights (including to lands and territories)

### 9. Legal and policy frameworks and their implementation: There are diverse law and policy frameworks for recognition of cultural rights, in the context of conservation, yet such frameworks are lacking in many places, and where they exist often face barriers. It is often through the sustained, collective action of rights-holders and allied actors that laws and policies change (or move towards implementation):

- a. National analyses of the status of territories of life in [Ecuador](#), [Indonesia](#), [Iran](#), [Madagascar](#), and [the Philippines](#), and a regional analysis for [East and Southern Africa](#), collectively illustrate a range of law and frameworks, as well as several contexts where such frameworks are not yet in place, together with strategies for and challenges in implementation ([ICCA Consortium, 2021](#)).
- b. [“Recognising territories and areas conserved by Indigenous peoples and local communities \(ICCAs\) overlapped by protected areas”](#) stresses that “appropriately recognising and respecting overlapped ICCAs in protected area governance, management and practice can strengthen conservation, affirm rights and promote equitable protected area governance.” and provides guidance on implementing approaches and good practices for doing so in existing, new and expanded protected areas of all governance types and management categories. (Stevens et al. 2024)
- c. [“Indigenous Customary Governance and Livelihood in Conservation: A Case Study of Kanchenjunga Conservation Area, Nepal”](#) “explores the customary governance systems of Limbu, Sherpa, and Rai Indigenous Peoples within the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area ... with recommendations for incorporating customary institutions and self-governance systems in the conservation management policies and processes

to protect and continue our Indigenous knowledge, traditional livelihoods, values, and practices ...” (Sherpa et al., 2025b)

**10. Rights-holder led and inclusive monitoring and reporting:**

- a. Monitoring efforts led or co-led by Indigenous Peoples and by local communities are crucial for addressing existing gaps in monitoring of rights, governance and the social impacts of conservation, both to guide methodologies and contribute grounded, applicable data. A global scoping study (Forest Peoples Programme 2025) shows that extensive, detailed and robust local-level monitoring already occurs with data and information being collected at large scales and widely distributed across regions, geographies and types of conservation. Lack of secure funding is a major obstacle, and should be integral to more conservation initiatives, and a priority for the CBD Global Biodiversity Framework.
- b. Relevant global platforms include The [ICCA Registry](#), The [Indigenous Navigator](#), Mapeo, Terrastories, SOCMON (Socioeconomic Monitoring Initiative for Coastal Management), Nia Tero’s Guardian Connector (biocultural monitoring platform for Indigenous communities), and [Landmark](#), while numerous other national and regional registries also occur.

## Annexes

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## 2. Case Study 1: Flathead Indian Nation (Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana, U.S.)

*There is a link between Indigenous people and nature that is not described or acknowledged in the U.S. Wilderness Act. The Wilderness Act suggests that these protected areas should be “untrammeled,” or unmanipulated, unfettered, when in fact it is common knowledge that, for most areas in North America, Indigenous people have intervened, with respect, for generations. The Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness in Montana, though not part of the National Wilderness Preservation System, was designated to protect many of these same values but also extended to protect important cultural meanings assigned to this wild landscape. The meanings that members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana attach to their (formally designated under Tribal law) Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness were found to include: (1) protecting nature and culture; (2) functional, emotional, and symbolic attachments; (3) wildlife and water shed protection; and (4) access, beauty, privacy, and recreation (Watson et al. 2011a). Protecting the relationship between Indigenous people and relatively intact, complex systems, which we commonly refer to as wilderness in North America, can be an important contributor to sustainability of the landscape and cultural heritage (Watson et al. 2011a). The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes live on 1.2 million acres (518,000 ha) in northern Montana, United States, and are a quasi-autonomous jurisdiction under tribal governance. The Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness Area on the Flathead Indian Reservation in northwest Montana is the only wilderness protected under tribal law found on the more than 300 federally recognized Indian reservations in the United States, and only one of three Category 1b areas designated in the world in the WDPA (UCN and UNEP-WCMC 2022) protected by an Indigenous community. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes are the descendants of Salish, Pend d’Oreille, and Kootenai Indians who traditionally occupied a 20-million-acre (8.3-million-ha) area stretching from central Montana to eastern Washington and north into Canada. After the Hellgate Treaty of 1855, most of these ancestral lands were ceded to the U.S. government, with 1.2 million acres (518,000 ha) remaining and now known as the Flathead Indian Reservation (McDonald 1995). Starting in 1936, there were several attempts to protect the Mission Mountain Range, which is central to the Indians’ physical and spiritual geography, but the main effort to protect it came in the mid-1970s in response to a proposal by the Bureau of Indian Affairs to log the mountains. Three greatly respected grandmothers (yayas) raised the initial protest and led the way for other community leaders to organize a “Save the Mission Mountains Committee.” About this time, Thurman Trosper (a tribal member, retired U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service employee, and past president of The Wilderness Society) returned home to the Flathead Reservation and proposed the idea of a tribal wilderness. Following extended community action, the Tribal Council in 1982 approved Tribal Ordinance 79A and the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness management plan, designating 92,000 acres (38,333 ha) as wilderness. It was the first time that an Indian tribe had taken action to designate wilderness on its own land and to establish policy direction and provide personnel for its protection and management. CSKT Tribal Ordinance 79A states that “Wilderness . . . is the essence of traditional religion and has served Indian people of these Tribes as a place to hunt, as a place to gather medicinal herbs and roots, as a vision seeking ground, as a sanctuary, and in countless ways for thousands of years” (CSKT 2005). Salish Elder Clarence Woodcock (CSKT 2005) described these mountains as lands where the people walked and lived. They are important to elders and for the perpetuation of Indian culture because of stories created and told there. A significant difference between the Tribal Ordinance and the federal Wilderness Act, however, is that Ordinance 79A states unambiguously that a primary purpose of the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness is the preservation of Tribal culture, and it acknowledges the importance of wilderness to the perpetuation of traditional Indian religion. Further management plans ensued for protecting grizzly habitat and for fire management, and a Wilderness Buffer Zone of 23,000 acres (9,600 ha) was later established. The importance of the Mission Mountain Wilderness Buffer Zone (a policy or designation not applied to federal Wilderness in the U.S.) to achieving Wilderness protection purposes has been highlighted in recent research, particularly its role in restoration of fire in the larger ecosystem through buffering the non-wilderness from the wilderness (Watson et al. 2013, Watson et al. 2009). There are also important differences between managing wilderness on the Flathead Nation and managing federal lands under the U.S. Wilderness Act. The needs and values of tribal members take precedence over those of nontribal*

*members resident on the reservation or visiting. Research by Watson et al. (2011a) demonstrates that protecting this tribal wilderness showcases the wisdom of tribal communities in safeguarding their cultural landscape. This protection extends to off-site benefits such as water resources, wildlife habitats, aesthetic values, and other essential resources.*

### 3. Case Study 2: Nature and culture of Socotra Archipelago

**Mazen Aldarhe**<sup>1,2</sup>, and **Vanda Mendonca**<sup>3,4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Socotra Centre for Humanitarian and Strategic Studies, Al-Mahrah, P.O. Box 111, Yemen

<sup>2</sup> Socotra Biosphere Tours, Socotra Island, Yemen

<sup>3</sup> College of Biological Sciences, University of Aberdeen, AB24 3FX, Aberdeen, Scotland, UK

<sup>4</sup> Marine Sciences Centre, University of Algarve, Gambelas Campus, Faro 8005-139, Portugal

Corresponding Author Email: [vandamendonca@rocketmail.com](mailto:vandamendonca@rocketmail.com)

#### General

##### 1. Introduction

The northwest Indian Ocean (NWIO) has several insular and marine biodiversity hotspots (Postaire *et al.* 2014). Socotra Archipelago is located in the NWIO, in the Gulf of Aden, and closer to the Horn of Africa. It is 250 km long, and has four islands, and two rocky islets or outcrops to the west of the main group of islands (Figure 1).

Socotra Archipelago is a Man and Biosphere (MAB) Reserve (UNESCO MAB 2008), and includes a RAMSAR Site, Detwah Lagoon ([RAMSAR 2007](#)). The RAMSAR Convention on Wetlands 1971 deals with the conservation, and sustainable use of wetlands of global importance.

Socotra Archipelago has a complex history. The Mahra Sultan of [Qishn](#) and Socotra refused to sell the archipelago to either Portuguese, or the British Empires. The British then took over Aden in 1835, and made a treaty with the with the Sultan (Aitchinson 1909). After the departure of the British from Aden, and southern Arabia, the Mahra Sultanate was abolished in October 1967. After the Yemen Unification in 1990, administratively, Socotra Archipelago was under the Government of Aden. Then, it was transferred to the Government of Hadramout in 2004. Since December 2013, it has its own government. But, in June 2020, the Southern Transitional Council (STC) took control of the archipelago, backed by Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (The Gurdian 2020).

The human population is between 60,000 and 85,000 individuals. Probably is even higher, due to the displacement of Yemeni citizens, because of the civil war since 2014 (Global Conflict Tracker 2025). Soqotri people are Muslims. Males belong human haplogroup J / Canaanites, and females belong to human haplogroup N / Eskimos (Cerny *et al.* 2009). Minorities include Hindus, and of Bantu origin. Most individuals are concentrated on the capital Hadiboh, and the western town of Qalansiyah. Few are settled on fishing villages.

Socotra Archipelago was hit, in the recent years, by tropical cyclones Chapala, Megh, Mekunu, and Tej (Word Bank 2015).

Despite the civil war, and tropical cyclones triggered by climate change, people live peacefully on Socotra Archipelago. They generally foster the conservation of nature, and the peaceful interaction between humans and nature.

## **2. Natural heritage**

Socotra Archipelago has mountains, wadis, khawrs / coastal lagoons, and sea turtle beaches. The main island has three geographical terrains: narrow coastal plains, a limestone plateau with karst caves, and mountains (Pietsch and Morris 2010).

According to UNESCO (2008), Socotra has a high level of endemism, as 37% of Socotra's plant species, 90% of its reptile species, and 95% of its land snail species do not occur anywhere else in the world. The only native mammals are bats, living in the caves. Socotra has also an endemic forest of xeric shrublands, the dragon's blood forest (*Dracaena cinnabari*). Marine biodiversity includes 253 species of reef-building corals, 730 species of coastal fish, and 300 species of crabs, lobsters and shrimps. Socotra Archipelago also supports globally significant populations of terrestrial, and sea birds. In total, there are 192 bird species, 44 breed on the islands, 85 are regular migrants, and some are threatened species (Birdlife international 2025).

We captured some of the landscape characteristics of the archipelago, as well as some conspicuous biodiversity. For instance, Detwah Lagoon, turtle beaches, the dragon tree forest, the Socotra cormorant, the Egyptian vulture, and sea turtles (Figure 2).

Sea turtles nest, and feed in the northwestern Indian Ocean (NWIO) (Mendonca et al. 2010 a, b). Three sea turtle species, loggerhead sea turtles (*Caretta caretta*), hawksbill sea turtles (*Eretmochelys imbricata*), and green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) feed on the coral reefs, khawrs, mangrove forests, and seagrass beds in Socotra. However, only loggerheads, and hawksbills are recorded to nest on very hydrodynamic shores of Socotra (Figure 3). Olive ridley sea turtles may nest on sheltered areas.

## **3. Cultural heritage**

Socotra cultural heritage ranges from rock art, and other prehistoric monuments such the Eriosh / Iryosh petroglyphs, to built heritage such as cemeteries, medieval buildings, and coral stones with Gujarati script (Figure 4).

The endangered Soqotri language is also a cultural feature. Soqotri language is related to other languages of southern Arabia, but it seems to have Russian roots, or a common origin (Mirovalev 2015).

The Royal Botanic Gardens of Edinburgh team is working with Yemenis to create a database of Soqotri heritage, providing training on how to preserve the cultural heritage. The database will be integrated, with holistic approaches, for the maintenance of heritage in Soqotra.

Threats to conservation efforts include graffiti on rock art walls. Approaches needed to overcome the situation include more efficient public awareness.

## **Conservation projects, measures and policies**

### **1. Conservation of nature and culture**

Socotra Archipelago is a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO 2008), and within a Ramsar Site Detwah Lagoon (Ramsar 2007). It also has very special cultural features like pre-historic rock art, and engraved coral stones.

List of nature and culture conservation projects:

- UNESCO Man And Biosphere (MAB) programme – Socotra Archipelago, UNESCO World Heritage Centre;
- Rock Art Project, funded by Aliph Foundation for protection in Socotra. Operated by the Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh, in collaboration with the General Organization of Antiquities and Museums of Yemen (GOAM); and
- Integrating Culture Heritage in Conservation in Socotra. Project of The Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh, funded by the British Council.

## 2. Failed attempts

Despite local, and international efforts to protect the landscape, biodiversity, and cultural heritage, people still eat turtle eggs, roast sea turtles, and vandalise pre-historical rock art by doing graffiti on top of ancient murals.

UNESCO Man and Biosphere programme follows up with the implementation of the protecting measures regarding protection of the ecosystems, and biodiversity in Socotra.

Culturally, the General Organization of Antiquities and Museums of Yemen (GOAM), and Aliph Foundation are collaborating to preserve the culture of Socotra.

## 3. Measures to ensure protection

The Environmental Protection Authority (EPA) in Socotra is a branch of the of the Ministry of Water, and Environment of Yemen.

EPA-Socotra implements the environmental legislation of Yemen, but works closely with UNESCO Centre Of Word Heritage.

It also monitors the environment, updates management plans for protected areas, controls traffic of biological materials, regulates developmental projects, awards Environmental Permits based on Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) documents, and relies on international partnerships, such as with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) to fund their projects, since due to the on-going conflict, EPA-Socotra faces challenges with sustainable financing.

## 4. Human rights challenges related to biodiversity loss

Biodiversity loss in Socotra directly threatens the **human rights to food, water, a healthy environment, cultural identity, and traditional livelihoods** for its indigenous people. The primary challenges stems from unsustainable resource management, climate change, and socio-political instability.

Human rights challenges are:

- **Right to livelihoods and food security, threatened by** overgrazing, overfishing, and unsustainable agriculture;
- Right to a healthy environment and water, threatened by climate change impacts, and pollution;
- Right to culture and traditional practices, threatened by loss of traditional knowledge, and uncontrolled development; and
- Vulnerability and governance, increased by socio-political instability, and Invasive species.

## **5. Documentation and preservation of traditional knowledge**

The Royal Botanic Garden of Edinburgh is working with the General Organization of Antiquities and Museums of Yemen (GOAM) to build an holistic database on cultural heritage of Socotra.

Aliph Foundation based in Switzerland is managing the funding.

## **6. Approaches to project implementation**

Several approaches have been analysed for project implementation in Socotra. These include:

- Building local capacities for the protection of the unique cultural, and heritage of Socotra; and
- Promoting sustainable tourism, and heritage conservation.

## **7. The role of intergovernmental organisations, and charities on conservation efforts**

Authorities governing Socotra have been relying on international partnerships, such as with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), to fund their environmental and cultural projects. Since due to the on-going conflict, they face challenges with sustainable financing from the Yemeni Government.

Currently, Alph Foundation is also on board.

## **8. Cultural rights, and carbon markets, and offsetting**

The main industries in Socotra are livestock raising, fishing, and date palm cultivation. The economy is of subsistence.

Trade of frankincense was important in the past, but currently it is in decline.

However, sustainable ecotourism is growing.

## **9. Recommendations for management**

Recommendations for managing natural and cultural heritage of Socotra archipelago focus on strengthening management capacity, controlling threats from invasive species and overgrazing, and promoting sustainable development and tourism.

Key actions include implementing effective Strategic Environmental Impact Assessments (Strategic EIA), for all projects, developing specific management plans for sensitive areas like lagoons, and enhancing the capacity of local institutions to manage, and enforce regulations.

Natural heritage management has to focus on controlling threats, establishing additional protected areas, implementing more monitoring programmes, restoring habitats, managing infrastructure, addressing specific issues, such as land grabbing, and land conflicts, and to develop strategies to mitigate these disputes.

Cultural heritage management has to focus on strengthening legal frameworks, incorporating traditional practices, promoting cultural tourism, and documenting, and safeguard UNESCO intangible heritage.

Governance and capacity building needs to be focused on enhancing enforcement, developing sustainable finance, improving coordination, building local capacity, conducting assessments, and facilitating workshops to have valuable discussions.

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## 4. Submission on Holistic Conservation and Cultural Rights: Building Socio-Ecological Coherence for Restoration and Sustainability

### **Contributor:**

Dr. Mahdi Kolahi

Associate Professor, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Iran

Director, ATAZIS National NGO (Green Empowerment Association)

Board Member, Large-Scale Ecosystem Restoration Section (LERS), Society for Ecological Restoration

Email: mahdikolahi@um.ac.ir

### 1. Introduction

Nature conservation and cultural rights are deeply interdependent. Yet, traditional conservation paradigms often separate ecological processes from social and cultural systems, leading to fragmented outcomes. This separation can undermine both biodiversity protection and community well-being.

This submission advances the framework of holistic conservation and management as a way to align ecological objectives with cultural rights and community resilience. Holistic conservation and management recognize that nature and culture form a single, co-evolving system. It builds on the principles of socio-ecological systems theory, cultural rights frameworks, and adaptive governance, ensuring that the protection of biodiversity and the protection of human dignity proceed hand in hand.

### 2. Cultural Beliefs and Practices that Foster Conservation

Iran, and many societies across the Global South, possess rich traditions that integrate spirituality, ethics, and environmental stewardship. For example:

□ Islamic and Persian ecological ethics emphasize harmony (Tawazun), balance (Mizan), and stewardship (Khalifa). These principles are embedded in rituals of water distribution, planting, and seasonal respect for wildlife.

□ Local narratives and myths such as the reverence of sacred groves, springs, and mountains protect natural habitats through social taboos and collective norms.

Community irrigation systems (Qanats) represent not only technological ingenuity but also governance traditions that link fairness in resource use to spiritual integrity.

Such cultural frameworks foster reciprocity rather than dominance between humans and nature. They can serve as the moral and institutional foundations for modern conservation programs if integrated respectfully.

### 3. Cultural Practices that Impede Conservation

At the same time, certain social and economic transformations—rapid urbanization, consumerism, and institutional centralization—have weakened traditional environmental ethics. Modernity has introduced a dualistic worldview that separates people from ecosystems, replacing stewardship with extraction.

Educational systems that neglect cultural ecology have also led to a loss of environmental identity among youth. The result is what may be termed “cultural ecological amnesia”, a forgetting of intergenerational knowledge that previously sustained local resilience.

Addressing this challenge requires educational and media initiatives that reconnect identity, livelihood, and ecosystem health—a key tenet of holistic conservation.

### 4. Holistic Management and Conservation as an Integrative Paradigm

Holistic Management and Conservation propose a synthesis: ecological integrity and cultural rights should not be seen as competing goals but as co-constitutive conditions for sustainable futures.

This approach integrates four interlinked dimensions:

1. Cultural Continuity – Recognizing that restoration is also a cultural process; the survival of traditional practices (e.g., farming systems, rituals, languages) maintains ecological diversity and collective meaning.
2. Institutional Diversity – Encouraging adaptive governance where community institutions, NGOs, academia, and government agencies share authority and learning.
3. Cognitive Justice – Valuing indigenous, experiential, and scientific knowledge equally within conservation planning.
4. Socio-ecological Reflexivity – Embedding monitoring and reflection mechanisms that help societies learn from environmental outcomes and adjust behaviors accordingly.

In this framework, cultural rights are not add-ons but structural components of ecosystem resilience.

### 5. Successful Examples and Lessons Learned

Several initiatives illustrate the effectiveness of aligning cultural rights and conservation goals:

Participatory Rangeland Management in Eastern Iran: Local herders collaborated with universities to restore degraded pastures using native species and traditional rotational grazing knowledge. Integrating oral history into management plans improved ecological outcomes and reduced conflict.

□ Wetland Restoration and Cultural Memory (Anzali, Iran): Community-led projects combining environmental education and cultural storytelling revived the collective sense of belonging to the wetland ecosystem, leading to voluntary pollution control and habitat restoration.

□ Faith-based Climate Action Programs (West Asia): Mosque-based initiatives promote environmental ethics grounded in Islamic teaching, linking moral responsibility with conservation action.

These examples demonstrate that when communities' cultural rights to participate, express, and transmit heritage are recognized, environmental outcomes are more durable and self-reinforcing.

## 6. Conservation Failures Due to Cultural Disregard

Conversely, conservation efforts that neglect cultural dimensions often face resistance or fail entirely. For instance:

Top-down protected area designations that restrict local access to forests or rangelands have sometimes displaced communities, creating cultural trauma and eroding trust. Technocratic restoration projects emphasizing “biophysical success” without community involvement often collapse once external funding ends. Uniform policies that ignore regional or ethnic diversity undermine place-based stewardship models. Such cases illustrate the dangers of divorcing ecological restoration from its social and

cultural contexts. A rights-based holistic framework can prevent these failures by institutionalizing participation and cultural respect from the outset.

## 7. Human Rights and the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework

The Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework provides an important platform for linking human rights and conservation. However, its implementation often remains

procedural rather than substantive.

To ensure real integration:

National biodiversity strategies should include cultural impact assessments alongside ecological assessments.

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) mechanisms must be adapted for non-Indigenous but culturally distinct local communities.

Human-rights indicators should be incorporated into monitoring frameworks, including participation, gender equity, and knowledge recognition metrics.

The challenge lies not in drafting policies but in institutionalizing reflexive governance, where monitoring includes both ecological and cultural performance indicators.

## 8. Documentation and Preservation of Traditional Knowledge

Holistic conservation promotes the documentation, revitalization, and transmission of traditional ecological knowledge as living practice, not as static folklore.

This involves:

Creating community knowledge archives accessible to local youth and researchers;

Supporting biocultural education in schools that link ecology, culture, and ethics;

Establishing partnerships between universities and communities for co-production of knowledge, ensuring that intellectual property rights remain with the communities.

In Iran, such approaches are emerging through collaboration between ATAZIS National NGO, universities, and governmental organizations working on sustainable rural livelihoods.

## 9. Participatory Governance and Inclusion

Holistic conservation emphasizes inclusive governance that values diversity as strength.

Effective examples include:

Multi-stakeholder watershed councils combining local elders, NGOs, scientists, and government agencies;

Youth environmental movements integrating art, storytelling, and digital media into conservation campaigns;

Women-led cooperatives managing local ecotourism, medicinal plants, and recycling programs.

These initiatives demonstrate how cultural participation becomes a pathway to ecological citizenship, empowering individuals as active agents rather than passive beneficiaries.

## 10. Carbon Markets and Cultural Rights

While carbon markets and offset schemes can mobilize conservation finance, they risk reproducing inequalities if local communities are excluded from benefit-sharing or decision-making.

Holistic conservation requires social safeguards that:

Guarantee equitable access to revenues;

Respect communal tenure systems;

Prevent “carbon colonialism,” where local landscapes become commodified without cultural consent.

Embedding cultural rights within carbon governance ensures ethical climate action aligned with biodiversity protection.

## 11. Recommendations

1. Adopt Holistic Conservation and Management as a guiding principle for integrating cultural rights within conservation and restoration frameworks.
2. Institutionalize cultural rights assessments in all conservation and restoration projects.
3. Develop interdisciplinary training programs on cultural-ecological systems for practitioners, policymakers, and students.
4. Strengthen participatory governance by ensuring equitable representation of local, Indigenous, and minority voices in decision-making bodies.
5. Protect cultural landscapes as hybrid entities that combine tangible and intangible heritage, recognizing them as living systems rather than museum artifacts.
6. Encourage cross-regional dialogue and exchange between traditional knowledge holders and scientific communities to co-produce adaptive conservation solutions.
7. Integrate temporal scales — acknowledging that restoration involves not only space but also long-term cultural memory and intergenerational responsibility.

## 12. Conclusion

The relationship between cultural rights and nature conservation cannot be reduced to a negotiation between competing priorities. It is a question of coherence — how societies perceive themselves as part of nature, and how they translate that perception into governance, education, and daily life.

Holistic conservation offers an integrative framework that unites ecological restoration with cultural restoration, fostering a resilient, inclusive, and ethically grounded path toward sustainability.

As the world faces ecological crises intertwined with cultural fragmentation, the recognition of cultural rights within conservation is not only a moral obligation but also a practical necessity for achieving lasting harmony between humanity and the natural world.