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Is the status quo ambitious enough?

Why protecting and
conserving **50x30**
is the best target
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Overview

More than 30% of Earth's lands are already conserved through a combination of protected areas (17%) and the territories stewarded by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (also 17%). As the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) convenes in Montreal, December 2021, around the "ambitious" agenda of 30x30 (protecting 30% of Earth's lands and seas by 2030), WILD urges world leaders and national delegations to stop confusing ambition with the status quo, and to stop playing politics with the survival of life. The accelerating, twin existential crises of the climate and extinction emergencies demand truly ambitious commitments and actions, based in scientific consensus and concern for the welfare of all life.

At this crucial moment in our history, as we confront the looming devastation of planetary ecological collapse, it is critical for the world to commit to effectively protecting Half of Earth's lands and seas by 2030 (50x30) while simultaneously doubling the size of Indigenous Peoples' lands (biodiversity's best stewards) and increasing ten-fold the number of resources allotted to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) for the stewardship of their lands.

Author

**Amy Lewis,
Vice President, Policy & Communications,
WILD**

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Background/Problems

Exploitative relationships lacking in respect have increasingly come to define many sectors in global society. Politics, labor, and social media have all succumbed to a disturbing trend that reduces vibrant individuals – people – to mere numbers in a bottom line. Even so, **few relationships are as abusive and as dysfunctional as humanity’s relationship with the wild and living natural world.**

The symptoms of **nature abuse** are manifold: accelerating extinction rates, plastic pollution overtaking the world’s oceans, suffocating air quality, a global climate emergency, and the omni-present destruction of Earth’s remaining wild spaces – the diminishing homelands to over 8 million distinct species (that we know of). **But the underlying cause is singular: disrespect for nature and a wholesale disregard for other lifeforms, and even, sometimes, for ourselves.** Earth, after all, is our home, too. The more we damage it, the more we do serious harm to our own communities, bodies, and futures.

In such a context, the parties attending the 15th Convention on Biological Diversity

(COP15) in Montreal, Canada in December of 2022 show a troubling lack of ambition to commit to the actions required to heal this broken relationship. As the world sinks deeper and deeper into ecological crises wrought from an indifference to life, the conversations dominating COP15, especially around spatial protected-area targets, but not limited to them, seem indifferent to anything but the status quo. **What has come to define “high ambition” at this COP is the slogan 30x30 – the protection of 30% of Earth by 2030.** And even this level of “ambition” is being watered down by some actors who conflate “sustainable production systems, including agriculture” as contributing to biodiversity conservation.[i]

While 30x30 is the largest spatial target on the agenda at COP15 (other recommendations are for 20% or no targets at all) – and for this reason those who advocate for 30x30 are to be commended – not surprisingly, perhaps, 30% is far from ambitious in anything other than political will. **Ecologically, Earth’s terrestrial surface is already more than 30% protected and conserved.** With approximately 17% of lands designated as protected areas and

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another 17% stewarded by the proven millennia-old lifeways of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), **34% is currently the status quo. Anything less would be, technically, contrary to ambition.**[ii]

Given the many ecological challenges we now confront, it would seem 34% is not enough; by extension, **30x30 is wholly insufficient to the project of healing the damage done by humanity's unconscious and abusive relationship with nature.**

Successful relationships are **respectful relationships. And respectful relationships are grounded in appropriate boundaries and a commitment to the equitable sharing of resources.** When it comes to our relationship with wild nature, the scientific consensus confirms this view. **Over two-thirds of conservation scientists agree**[iii] that if we are to successfully address the twin existential crises of the climate and extinction emergencies **it is imperative that we protect, conserve, and steward at least half of Earth's lands and seas in a high-functioning, wild and intact state. This is iterated in the 2022 International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report stating that "conserving half may be necessary to restore the ability of natural ecosystems to cope with the damage wreaked on them."**[iv]

What exactly is at stake if we fail to protect Earth's biodiversity by not setting aside enough space for wild nature? **According to the United Nations, more than 1.6 billion people (including 2,000 Indigenous cultures) derive their livelihoods directly from wild lands and marine areas.**[v]

For this 20% of Earth's population, wild places are their homes, grocery stores, and communal areas all-in-one. Destroying even a fraction of our remaining forests, which store between 130-220 ppm carbon, thus releasing significant quantities of carbon into the atmosphere, would spell certain doom for the Paris climate targets.[vi] A broken relationship with nature only exacerbates ecological and social problems.

Protecting and conserving half does not mean that we have license to degrade the other half, nor does it mean the exclusion of people from living and working in the conserved half. Put simply, we must grant nature and natural processes primacy on at least half of Earth's surface – how we do that, be it through the practice of traditional lifeways or the designation of new protected areas, is for us to decide. **Only the limit is not of our making, determined instead wholly by our partner's needs. Nature has boundaries too. And those boundaries are half.**[vii]

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Obstacles

The most significant obstacle to achieving a healthier relationship with our wild planet is our own lack of ambition. When the most “ambitious” target on COP15’s agenda is well beneath current levels of protection and conservation, the subjective meaning of words takes on new meaning.

Far from being a condemnation of 30x30 leaders, the very fact that this target is optimistically framed as ambitious clearly demonstrates the strength of the opposition that they – and we – face in our attempts to safeguard humanity. **How strange that a movement to ensure that humanity has sufficient nature to survive and thrive and that nature has the space she needs to “ensure her ecological destiny” (in the words of Harvey Locke, the co-founder of the Nature Needs Half movement)** could be considered controversial. And yet, we arrive in Montreal with the scientific consensus on Half all but silenced, the stage immediately set with favorable negotiating conditions for those who oppose sufficient space for life to thrive. In such conditions, the opposition need only worry about creating the perception that the status quo is the “radical,” high-end target.

30x30 and its diplomats have worked against enormous odds. It is an important milestone (one that we have already achieved) and needs to be acknowledged as such.

Even so, we must never lose sight of the fact that Half is the target based in scientific consensus, not the shibboleths of political compromise, and that the sooner we achieve that target, the easier it will be for all life, including our own civilization.

The rationalizations for why we cannot achieve Half, at least not now, center on political and economic concerns: it’s just not feasible in such a short time period. **In actuality, it is likely far easier to achieve Half in the near-term than it is in the distant future.**

By 2050, we can expect that there will be 25 million kilometers of new paved roads globally – enough to encircle Earth 600 times. [viii] Combined with a doubling of urban areas to accommodate the nine billion people that are anticipated to live in cities, it is reasonable to ask where space for wild nature will remain in 2050 if we do not act now.[ix]

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Meanwhile, we still (if only barely) have a planet with approximately half of nature left intact.[x] **When is it more feasible, economically and politically, to take action to protect Half? Is it even possible to rationally consider doing so in the future when we would need to go back and restore and rewild life on an unimaginable scale, including the thousands of species that may be extinct? Why not set aside Half the planet now, when it is ecologically easier to do so, and creatively work within these limits to create a truly sustainable society?**

In ecological terms, we are far more capable of achieving the Half target now than we will be in 2050. **Can we afford to wait for political will to catch up to science, even as the ecological fabric of our world disintegrates? If the current COP15 sentiment holds, the answer to that question is a decidedly unambitious ‘yes.’**

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Opportunities

In the midst of this blockade of our own devising, there is hope if we have the courage to redefine our current levels of ambition. Should we decide to take the next step in efficiently and effectively combating climate change and mass extinction, **we can also begin to right the historic injustices perpetrated by colonialism. Indigenous Peoples are the best stewards of biodiversity. Their lands are home to 80% of Earth's remaining biodiversity. And even though Indigenous Peoples consist of only 5% of the population, they steward nearly 40% of all wildlands.** Defending and expanding the land tenure of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities is critical to achieving Half. This entails increasing resources allotted to Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities ten-fold, and placing them at the center of global, national, and local discussions pertaining to spatial targets.[xi]

Over 150 Indigenous groups and NGOs (and 3.2 million individuals) have endorsed the Global Deal for Nature, calling to protect 50% of the world's lands and seas by 2030, inclusive of all IPLC territories. This was backed in September of 2021 by the passing of Motion 101 (now Resolution 125) at the IUCN's World Conservation Congress which specifies a science-based conservation target of 50%, and included the endorsement of the Coordinating Organization of the Indigenous Peoples of the Amazon Basin (COICA). COICA's secretary general, José Gregorio Díaz Mirabal declared, **"Governments have proposed to protect only 30% of the areas that give life to this planet. Only 30% by 2030! By its own right, humanity must manage to protect at least 80% of our Amazon in a very short period such as 2025 to continue to hope for a just future for all. So that the river continues to feed us, and the jungle continues to heal us, because the Amazon is life, because our watersheds are sacred!"**

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At the same time, COICA successfully passed an IUCN resolution to protect 80% of the Amazon by 2025.

Unfortunately, inclusion also seems to be lacking at COP15, as Indigenous Peoples continue to be sidelined in the global discussion about the defense of Earth's biosphere. **Their contributions, especially around cultural-based conservation approaches, including but not limited to Indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge (ITEK), could provide practical and fresh advice on how to go about devising truly sustainable societies.**

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Solutions/Recommendations

For the above reasons, WILD urgently requests consideration of the following commitments at COP15 in Montreal:

50x30

The science-based target is Half. Achieving this sooner rather than later is the more politically and economically feasible option.

Double the size of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities land tenure

By increasing the area of land IPLCs steward, we create a win-win for people and the planet, helping to right a historic injustice and bring stability to the biosphere.

Increase funding to IPLCs ten-fold

IPLCs steward nearly 40% of Earth's wild areas and 80% of its biodiversity. They should be fairly compensated for their contributions to the web of life.

Place IPLCs at the center of the Post-2020 Biodiversity Framework
Inclusion is not enough; we need fresh leadership representing alternative lifeways and cultures. IPLCs are key to effective biodiversity problem solving.

Formally recognize our broken and exploitative relationship with nature and commit to healing ourselves and the planet

Extinction and the climate crisis are interlinked symptoms of a far subtler problem emanating from the human spirit. Recognizing this reality is the first step to addressing the root of the ecological crisis.

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Conclusion

COP15 is in danger of a questionable legacy. Despite the rhetoric of ambition pervading COP15 discussions, if the substance of those very same discussions does not change, COP15 may very well be remembered as the Status Quo COP for no reason other than our own self-imposed limitations.

As we prepare to convene in Montreal, WILD reminds delegates that we now confront a decision between two categories of risk. We can only avoid one, but not both. This December national delegations and observers can boldly choose to risk their reputations, eschew political convention and embrace the scientific consensus. **WILD and our coalition of partners including Avaaz, OneEarth, and Grounded.org are working hard to mitigate this risk, bringing together hundreds of NGOs and celebrities to endorse 50x30 and encourage COP15 delegates to do the same.** Of course, taking such a risk will not be easy and will likely result in difficult conversations, and perhaps place some careers in jeopardy. Environmental ambition

is not, and never has been, an easy choice. The alternative though is far more dire. At no point in life's ancient history has wild nature been so fragmented and frayed. We are rapidly sailing over a precipice of planetary proportions, one that we have never crossed before, and one from which there is no guarantee we can climb back out. By choosing to avoid a risk to our professional reputations, we take on the far greater threat to our planetary life-support system: global biodiversity. We also place the legacy of the conservation movement on the wrong side of history.

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