



Rights-based Conservation

Executive Summary

South America concentrates exceptional ecological and cultural wealth, with forests, mountains, wetlands, and seas that sustain more than 40% of global biodiversity and large carbon reserves essential for climate stability. The region is also home to more than 20 million Indigenous people, belonging to 650 peoples who speak 542 languages. In the Amazon, Indigenous territories cover around 35% of the biome, where 2.7 million people from more than 350 peoples live, and store about 58% of forest carbon. These territories, thanks to their governance systems and traditional practices, consistently show lower deforestation rates, higher carbon capture, and better conservation outcomes than other lands. However, rights-based conservation faces threats that go beyond deforestation or extractive industries. They include land dispossession, weak legal protection, and high levels of violence. Between 2012 and 2024, at least 1,049 environmental defenders were killed in South America, making it one of the most dangerous regions in the world for those who protect nature. In the face of these threats, there are various international instruments for the protection of the rights of environmental defenders, such as the Escazú Agreement (2018), which emerges as a unique opportunity as the first binding regional environmental treaty in Latin America and the Caribbean that guarantees the protection of those who defend human and environmental rights, offering a framework to move forward towards Rights-Based Approach.

Program Targets

Equity and justice for sound environmental governance has been enhanced in every aspect of scaling up the conservation of land, freshwater and oceans across South America.

- Enhancing governance systems to achieve effective and equitable conservation outcomes.
- Recognising, respecting and promoting the rights, agency and stewardship of Indigenous peoples and local communities, including environmental defenders.
- Measures to secure the safe, equitable and meaningful participation and leadership of women and youth, and other marginalised groups, and to ensure the full protection of environmental human rights defenders
- Promoting gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in conservation.
- Fostering culture and youth engagement.

Geographical Opportunities

- ♣ Amazon Basin
- ♣ Andes Mountains
- ♣ Chocó Bioregion
- ♣ Gran Chaco
- ♣ Guyana Shield
- ♣ Southwest Atlantic & Southeast Pacific Coastlines

Investment Opportunities

The IUCN's Rights-Based Approach (RBA) is a framework for conservation that integrates human rights, particularly the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs), with biodiversity protection to achieve conservation with justice and equitable outcomes. By ensuring respect for human rights, promoting procedural justice through participation and accountability, and contributing to human wellbeing alongside ecological health, the RBA aims to prevent negative impacts on people and ensure that conservation benefits all. Regional opportunities under a RBA include:

1. Environmental Governance and Human Rights

- Strengthen governance mechanisms at multiple levels across strategic landscapes and seascapes. This includes enhancing institutional capacities, promoting participatory policy design, fostering multi-level cooperation and inter-institutional coordination, and facilitating dialogue to improve public participation and implement effective governance frameworks for landscape management.
- Support the implementation of the Escazú Agreement, as well as other human rights frameworks and regional instruments, by promoting compliance and the development of supporting mechanisms.
- Promote the protection of environmental human rights defenders, ensuring their recognition, safety, and access to justice.

2. Social Inclusion, Gender, and Youth

- Promote women's leadership in governance, communication, advocacy, conservation, and landscape management by addressing structural barriers, valuing diverse knowledge systems, and creating safe spaces for participation.
- Promote intergenerational and inclusive governance by recognizing the shared roles of youth and elders, fostering knowledge exchange, and institutionalizing youth participation. Apply intersectional approaches that address how overlapping identities—such as gender, age, and ethnicity—shape exclusion, ensuring conservation and governance efforts advance equity, social inclusion, and community resilience.

3. Participatory Monitoring and Local Knowledge

- Support participatory monitoring systems that integrate local knowledge, traditional practices, and accessible technologies to empower Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities (IPLCs), and Afro-descendant groups in defence of their territories. Support the generation of community-based data for territorial management and conservation, strengthening governance structures and political advocacy.

4. Bioeconomy and People

- Promote a sustainable and resilient bioeconomy through rights-based models that prioritize environmental sustainability, social justice, gender equity, and fair trade for Indigenous Peoples and local communities. Strengthen sustainable value chains connected to ecosystem services and biodiversity, offering viable economic alternatives to unsustainable livelihoods.

5. Communication and Advocacy

- Strengthen communication abilities of local organizations as complementary strategies for defence of IPLCs territories and rights, , and to increase the visibility of community experiences.
- Develop and consolidate strategies to improve local access to information and implement national and regional campaigns to boost outreach and policy influence.

Why Partner with IUCN?

- Over 75 years of global conservation leadership.
- Trusted network: states, NGOs, Indigenous organizations, academia.
- Evidence-based and rights-focused approach.
- Strong regional presence and impact measurement systems
- Science-based international policy work strengthening multilevel dialogues with practical solutions.

South America is rising. Join us in advancing bold action for people and nature.

Contact

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