

Science-based ecosystem restoration for the 2020s and beyond

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The Science Task Force for the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration 2021-2030 has released a think piece that maps out how we can sustain and restore the diverse and functioning ecosystems essential for human wellbeing and the preservation of biodiversity. The recommendations of the Science Task Force (STF), led by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and comprised of leading subject experts, are presented as specific actions to be undertaken by public and private stakeholders. These are to be aligned with ongoing efforts to scale up the prevention and reversal of ecosystem degradation globally.

“Science-based ecosystem restoration for the 2020s and beyond” begins by grasping the problem by the root: what does ecosystem restoration mean, and why have so many attempts been only partially successful? Crucially, what can individuals and groups achieve across sectors, and how can these initiatives coalesce into a long-term movement for ecosystem restoration beyond the UN Decade? The Science Task Force poses these fundamental questions to facilitate the understanding needed to generate public support and leadership from civil society and governments the world over.

According to the think piece, previous efforts have fallen short because they have lacked a holistic perspective with which to tackle the challenge of restoring ecosystems across landscapes, freshwater systems and seascapes. Change does not happen overnight. While positive impacts can be seen early on, restorative processes may take decades and call for an intergenerational compact. This requires multi-sector coalitions and integrated programmes at regional levels, including new institutional mechanisms equipped to draw on the best scientific knowledge available.

This does not mean that ecosystem restoration should be left to governments. On the contrary, individuals, communities, non-governmental organisations and the private sector all have a stake in the achievement of long-term restoration goals. However, enduring and meaningful partnerships can only thrive under suitable conditions of local norms and governance – such as secure tenure, property and use rights – and government incentivisation of restoration. Adaptive management and monitoring are key.

“We need to build a ‘restoration’ economy that creates jobs, enhances livelihoods and reduces the risks people face in their daily lives,” says Priya Shyamsundar, Chief Economist of The Nature Conservancy and member of the STF. “There are many public and private benefits that can be secured through the restoration of our lands, seas and rivers, but these can be unevenly distributed. Thus, we will need new institutions, policies and political agreements that recognize winners and losers and attend to trade-offs associated with restoration.”

Ultimately, restoration is a massive undertaking: there is a US\$300 billion shortfall in financing for infrastructure. Effective and long-term restoration will have to tap into its potential to address multiple global challenges through livelihood enhancement, job creation and business development. The think piece synthesises the messages underpinning a sustainable movement for ecosystem restoration:

- Restoration is a process that builds over a long period of time and opens up new opportunities for engagement, learning and innovation.
- Local communities must be empowered to lead restoration movements.
- Restoration requires fundamental shifts in economic and political institutions so that they pay attention to the long-term and varied benefits of functioning ecosystems.
- The ideals of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration – partnership, inclusiveness and joint coordinated action – need to be based on shared core principles, good practices and practical approaches to monitoring and evaluation.
- Ecosystem restoration actions create opportunities for multiple agents of change to work together.

“We must view degraded ecosystems as ‘underperforming assets’ awaiting our care and investment in order to thrive again,” emphasises Luc Gnacadja, STF Chair and Founder and President, Governance and Policies for Sustainable Development (Benin). “The think piece provides a science-based rationale for action and lasting success.”

“Science-based ecosystem restoration for the 2020s and beyond” will be launched at the IUCN World Conservation Congress on 7 September in Marseille, France. You don’t need to register or pay a fee to watch the [session live](#).