

IUCN WCPA Technical Note Series No. 4 NATURE-BASED COVID-19 RECOVERY: INVESTING IN PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS FOR PLANETARY HEALTH

This Technical Note summarizes published research urging a pandemic economic recovery which places protected and conserved areas at the centre of this nature-positive policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the world in a short time, with devastating impacts on lives, livelihoods, and conservation efforts. The overlapping trajectories of biodiversity loss, climate change, and unsustainable development further deepen the crisis.

Protected and conserved areas (PCAs) are proven, cost-effective solutions to reduce land-use change, the primary driver of zoonotic disease emergence (Ferreira et al. 2021). In addition, PCAs safeguard biodiversity and ecosystem services, and can help to mitigate climate change, and advance sustainable development, while reducing the risk of future pandemics.

Economic prosperity at the international, national, and local levels depends on healthy ecosystems. As governments and private institutions prepare to invest trillions of dollars in pandemic recovery, there is now a once-in-a-generation opportunity to address the global crisis by supporting the natural systems that sustain all life on Earth. Hence, **support for protected and conserved areas as part of pandemic recovery is urgently needed.**

The following key principles should guide a nature-positive recovery:

1. **Support the role of existing and new PCAs in COVID recovery strategies:** Fund programmes that simultaneously protect and restore natural ecosystems, provide jobs, and bolster biodiversity protection and climate adaptation (e.g. PCA management; sustainable tourism; ecological restoration; green and blue infrastructure).
2. **Support effective and equitable PCAs:** Increase funding to promote inclusive and diverse governance, strengthen management, and leverage diverse and sustainable funding mechanisms.
3. **Avoid all rollbacks:** Ensure progress by avoiding the rollback or weakening of budgets or regulations that affect PCAs, including measures that secure the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities who traditionally govern and conserve lands and waters.

KEY MESSAGE

Support for protected and conserved areas as part of COVID-19 recovery is a smart investment in the economy and public health that will also help to address the climate and biodiversity crises.

PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS: NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS TO THE WORLD'S GREATEST CHALLENGES

Protected areas are clearly defined geographical spaces, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values (Dudley, 2008).

Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) are geographically defined areas other than protected areas, which are governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the *in situ* conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values (CBD, 2018).

The term “protected and conserved areas” refers to area-based conservation systems recognized as protected areas or OECMs. Protected areas and OECMs include diverse governance systems, including governance by governments, private entities, Indigenous and/or local communities, or shared governance.

WHY INVEST IN PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS NOW?

Half of the world's GDP (US \$44 trillion) [depends on nature and its services](#). Yet funding for environmental protection is woefully insufficient; the '[biodiversity financing gap](#)' is estimated at around US\$ 700 billion. This financing gap has been made worse by the COVID-19 crisis, particularly through collapses in [nature-based tourism revenues](#), and [rollbacks to conservation budgets and regulations](#).

Countries will need to create or re-establish jobs quickly during and after the pandemic, and PCAs are well-positioned institutions to channel such investments. The World Economic Forum [estimates](#) that it will take US\$ 140 billion to protect 30 per cent of the planet, a fraction of the [more than US\\$ 17.2 trillion](#) that has been pledged for COVID relief to date. [Recent reports](#) highlight the significant economic benefits of protecting nature, and underscore that investment in biodiversity conservation is an urgent priority.

Public health and the economy depend on healthy ecosystems. To prevent future pandemics, governments need to address the destruction of nature, including deforestation and high-risk wildlife trade. Land-use change is the main driver of the emergence of zoonotic diseases. PCAs can effectively [limit land-use change](#) and habitat loss. Investments in PCAs can achieve multiple goals cost-effectively, including [biodiversity protection](#), [climate change mitigation](#), improvements to [physical and mental health](#), and local [economic development](#).

Prevention is better than reaction. It would have been far [more cost effective](#) to prevent the current pandemic through nature-based approaches than to deal with its impacts. Without decisive actions to protect nature, emergence of the next pandemic is only a matter of time. The threat of new pandemics now joins climate change and biodiversity loss as an existential peril. Investing in PCAs will help to avoid and respond to these threats.

RECOMMENDATIONS: KEY PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE A NATURE-POSITIVE RECOVERY THAT SUPPORTS PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS

1. *Support the role of existing and new PCAs in COVID recovery strategies*

- **Establish and expand PCAs** toward meeting global pledges (e.g. 30x30).
- **Strengthen PCA governance and management** to ensure effective and equitable conservation.
- **Seek synergies and provide multiple benefits** by directing funding towards programmes that provide jobs and bolster PCAs simultaneously.

Some governments are already taking action. To-date, at least seven countries and the EU [have committed](#) to invest in PCAs through economic stimulus efforts in activities including: protected area management, sustainable tourism, habitat restoration, and green and blue infrastructure.

2. *Support effective and equitable PCAs and the rights of people who depend on them*

- **Focus on outcomes:** Increase and target investments to support priority areas of high value for biodiversity and ecosystem services, and support their effective management.
- **Support a range of actors** including diverse stewards and governance types of PCAs (e.g. territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities and privately protected areas). Ensure that rights are strengthened and upheld, and that costs and benefits are distributed equitably.
- **Encourage good governance** including principles of transparency, accountability, evidence- and rights-based approaches, in all decisions.
- **Recognize PCAs as health-promoting assets**, given their significant benefits for physical and mental health.
- **Find synergies:** Integrate support for PCAs into funding mechanisms that tackle climate change, disaster risk reduction, biodiversity, public health, and other national strategies.

The [IUCN Green List of Protected and Conserved Areas](#) Standard provides globally consistent criteria to assess PCA governance, design and planning, management effectiveness, and conservation outcomes, and can be used to encourage PCAs to measure, improve, and maintain their performance.

3. *Avoid all rollbacks: Ensure progress by avoiding the rollback or weakening of regulations and budgets for PCAs or the rights of IPLCs*

- **Do no harm:** Ensure that recovery efforts, including taxes, subsidies, and other fiscal tools, do not undermine PCAs regulations or IPLC rights, encourage fossil-fuel emissions, or exacerbate land-use change.
- **Provide ongoing and new support:** Maintain budgets, retain qualified managers, and prioritize the most important management actions.
- **Ensure transparency and accountability:** Use transparent decision making and continued tracking of economic recovery efforts and commitments, including rollbacks, to ensure the effectiveness of economic recovery plans.

HOW TO STRUCTURE AND CHANNEL SUPPORT FOR PROTECTED AND CONSERVED AREAS

The management of many PCAs has relied heavily on revenues from domestic and international tourism, yet the pandemic has shown how this high dependence on one source was unviable. In COVID recovery plans, PCAs **will need [sustainable finance with diversification and innovation](#)**. This could include direct public [investments in the salary](#) of the workforce and their activities, and [private investments](#) that compensate community conservancies that are paid back as tourism recovers. Innovative financing mechanisms, including [debt-for-nature swaps](#) and [green](#) and [blue bonds](#), could support conservation and help to solve the sovereign debt crisis simultaneously. Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries [subsidies](#)

that undermine biodiversity can also be reallocated to support PCAs. Additional finance mechanisms that can be used to support PCAs, from both domestic and international sources, and tailored to different environments and contexts, include: [biodiversity offsets](#), [payments for ecosystem services](#), nature linked [endowments](#), [natural infrastructure investments](#), [conservation trust funds](#), [carbon taxes](#), [reinsurance schemes](#), [certification schemes](#), [carbon credits](#), and [crowdfunding](#). For decisions related to financing models, working with those living within or near to PCAs can ensure that the most suitable and locally appropriate financial models are chosen.

Support for conservation in nature-based recovery is gaining momentum. Recent commitments signal increased momentum for nature protection. For instance, dozens of countries have signed the [Leaders' Pledge for Nature](#), which calls for protection of at least 30 per cent of land and of ocean by 2030 and commits to putting biodiversity, climate and the environment at the heart of COVID-19 recovery strategies. [Some countries](#), including Canada, Pakistan, and New Zealand have recently pledged significant investments in PCAs through COVID recovery efforts. The leaders of the G7 countries have signed the [Nature Compact](#) which will support new global targets to protect and conserve at least 30% of global land and of ocean by 2030, with a commitment to prioritize the inclusion of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in their design and decision-making. Upcoming negotiations towards the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the UNFCCC are key opportunities to increase ambition in support of PCAs.

Continued momentum toward ambitious nature-positive recovery and implementation is required to turn pledges into action. Resilient conservation areas require adequate support to ensure that they are effectively managed and equitably governed, and can realize their full potential. **There is now a once-in-a-generation opportunity to invest in PCAs – a public health and planetary imperative.**

LEARN MORE

[PARKS special issue on COVID-19 and Protected and Conserved Areas](#)

[COVID-19 and Protected and Conserved Areas Task Force Website](#)

[IUCN Nature-Based Recovery Issues Brief](#)

REFERENCES and FURTHER READING

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