

KUNMING COP15: MAPPING LINKAGES BETWEEN BIODIVERSITY AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Dr Saurabh Thakur

Keywords: Climate Change, Biodiversity, UN Negotiations, COP, Marine Biodiversity

The birth of the current climate change regime was a product of a series of events that unfolded with the end of the Cold War and the simultaneous rise of the era of globalisation. On the heels of an evolving understanding of the threat of anthropogenic climate change and a persistent grassroots movement that raised the banners of Sustainable Development and ecological justice, countries came together at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 to chart a new path towards tackling the environmental issues. The signing of the Rio Conventions – the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), was a landmark step towards the development of a collective approach, which was based on principles of “Equity” and the “Precautionary Principle”.¹

While the UNFCCC has since managed to carve a significant space in the mainstream political discourse, most visibly through its annual iterative meetings known as the Conference of Parties (COP), which entered its 26th year this year, the other two conventions have had to struggle for similar space. The recently held COP26 meeting garnered world’s attention and is being seen as a critical watershed moment in the history of the regime in its post-Paris phase of negotiations. The recent months also saw another important event unfolding — the first part of the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15).² This meeting, and its second phase, which is to be held in Kunming, China, in 2022, will be critical for a number of reasons, among them the adoption of a Post 2020 global biodiversity target that has been delayed due to the ongoing COVID19 pandemic. Next year (2022), the parties to the Convention will also meet in Côte d’Ivoire for a different COP15 meeting, addressing the third Convention, namely, the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD).³

¹ Per Sandin, “Dimensions of the precautionary principle” *Human and Ecological Risk Assessment: An International Journal* 5, no. 5 (1999): 889-907.

² “COP15, COP26: why two COPs?” *United Nations* (2021) <https://unric.org/en/cop15-cop26-why-two-cops-2/>

³ “UNCCD COP15” *IISD SDG Knowledge Hub* (2021), <https://sdg.iisd.org/events/unccd-cop-15/>

Earlier this year, in his address at the build-up event to Kunming COP15, the UN Secretary-General emphasised the importance of biodiversity targets for a sustainable planet, stating that:

“A healthy planet is critical for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. Yet biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented and alarming rate, and the pressures are intensifying. We have failed to meet any of our internationally agreed biodiversity targets. One million species are at risk of extinction. Ecosystems are disappearing before our eyes. Deserts are spreading. Wetlands are being lost. Every year, we lose 10 million hectares of forests. Oceans are overfished and choking with plastic waste. The carbon dioxide they absorb is acidifying the seas. Coral reefs are bleaching and dying. We are depleting resources faster than nature can replenish them.”⁴

Given the wickedly entangled nature of the climate change challenge and its deep interconnections with biodiversity and sustainable development goals as enshrined in the 1992 Convention, it is important for countries to start addressing the biodiversity question with an equal amount of urgency and concern.

The ‘Other’ COP: The United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity

The “Convention on Biological Diversity” was opened for signatures at the Earth Summit 1992 and came into force in 1993. It was further expanded with the addition of two supplementary agreements, namely, the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in 2000, and the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing, 2010. The CBD has evolved as an institution in the years that have elapsed since its inception, with the formation, in 2001, of a “Joint Liaison Group” between the secretariats of the three conventions. This step is aimed at enhancing coordination and cooperation. The linkage between climate change and biodiversity has been a key point of discussion within the convention. The “Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group” (AHTEG) on biodiversity and climate change met several times between 2002-2005 to discuss the issue, and the first round-table, which was held in 2007, was aimed at building knowledge regarding this complex interlinkage.

The “Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity” was a critical milestone in the history of CBD. It saw the adoption of 20 biodiversity targets, also known as the “Aichi Biodiversity targets” (See Figure 1), which were expected to provide a roadmap for the protection of diverse land based and marine biodiversity resources. The recently published global outlook report by the UN has drawn an alarming picture, highlighting the fact that only six out of twenty targets have been fulfilled, that too, only partially. The 14 remaining targets have been entirely missed by the 200 signatories.⁵ One of key reasons for this dismal performance is the persistence of harmful subsidies in key sectors like fossil fuels, fisheries, and agriculture. Globally, fish stocks are on the verge of collapse due to the deleterious effects of

⁴ Secretary-General's Remarks to Webinar entitled, "COP15: Road to Kunming, Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth" *United Nations*, 21 May (2021) <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2021-05-21/secretary-generals-remarks-webinar-entitled-cop15-road-kunming-building-shared-future-for-all-life-earth-delivered>

⁵ Adam Vaughan, “Massive failure! The world has missed all its biodiversity targets” *New Scientist* (2020) <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2254460-massive-failure-the-world-has-missed-all-its-biodiversity-targets/>

climate change and overfishing.⁶ Since the end of the second World War, the unchecked expansion of industrial fishing and IUU fishing activities have depleted fish stocks, endangering both marine biodiversity and food security for millions. In China alone, the world's largest seafood producer, fuel subsidies made up 94 per cent of the \$6.4 billion that the country provides to its fleets.⁷



Mapping Linkages: A Review

The complex interconnections between climate change and biodiversity loss have been the subject of several key studies and reports in recent years. Among them, the “*Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C*” of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is the most significant indictment of the desultory nature of the efforts of States towards the achievement of objectives set in the Paris Agreement. The report notes, “by 2100, global sea level rise would be 10 cm lower with global warming of 1.5°C compared with 2°C. The likelihood of an Arctic Ocean free of sea ice in summer would be once per century with global warming of 1.5°C, compared with at least once per decade with

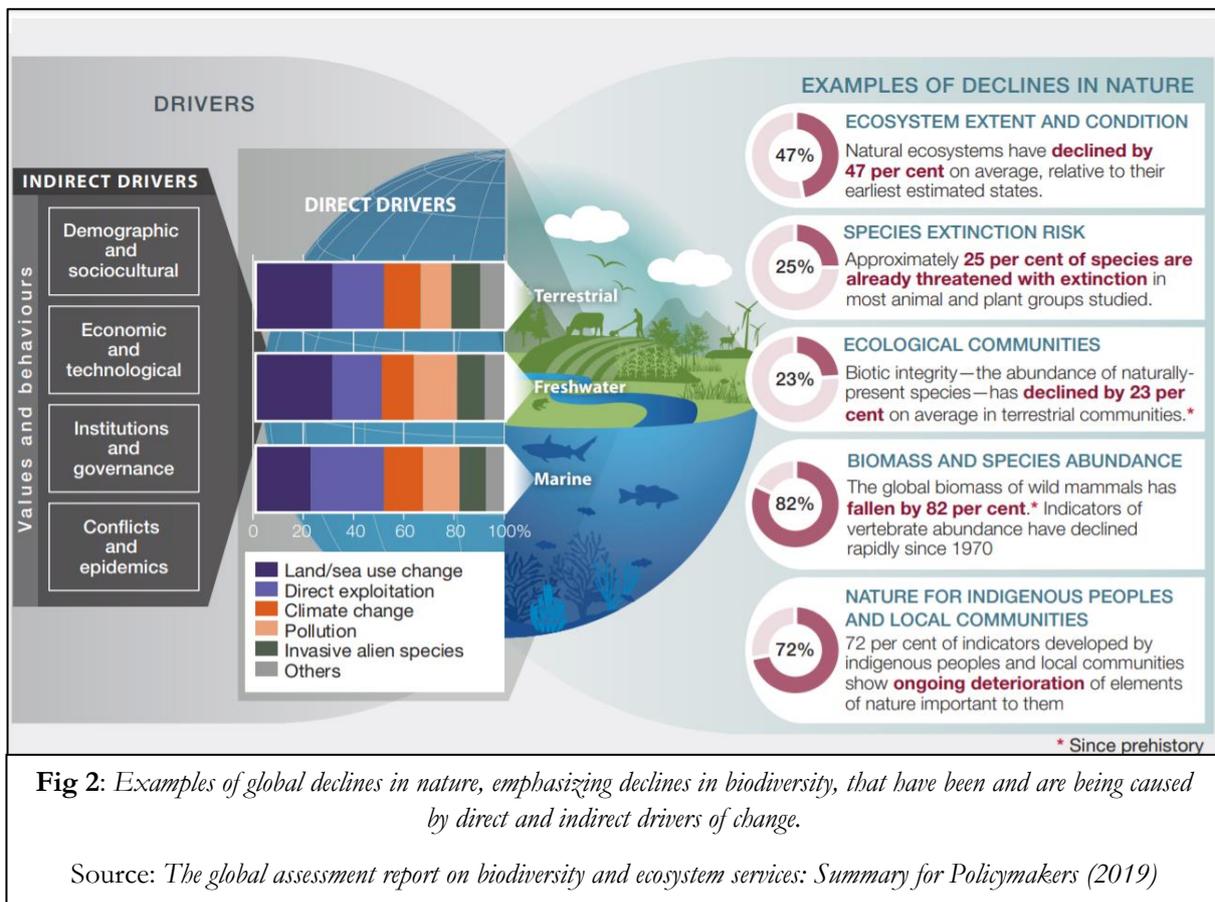
⁶ “A perfect storm: Climate change and overfishing” *The New Humanitarian* 19 September (2016)

<https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2016/09/19/perfect-storm-climate-change-and-overfishing>

⁷ Tabitha Grace Mallory, “Fisheries subsidies in China: Quantitative and qualitative assessment of policy coherence and effectiveness” *Marine Policy* 68 (2016): 74-82.

2°C. Coral reefs would decline by 70-90 percent with global warming of 1.5°C, whereas virtually all (> 99 percent) would be lost with 2°C.⁸

The “Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services” (IPBES) has published its global assessment and highlights nature’s contribution to people through its biodiversity and ecosystem services and its accelerated decline in the recent decades. The report warns that current trajectories and goals are inadequate to meet the goals of sustainable development: “Except in scenarios that include transformative change, negative trends in nature, in ecosystem functions and in many of nature’s contributions to people are projected to continue to 2050 and beyond, due to the projected impacts of increasing land-/and sea-use change, exploitation of organisms and climate change.”⁹ The report makes a case for nature-based solutions as the most cost-effective strategy to meet the SDGs in cities and prescribes a coordinated mix of interventions, across stakeholders, on land, oceans, and freshwater to tackle the questions of sustainable fishers and marine biodiversity protection.

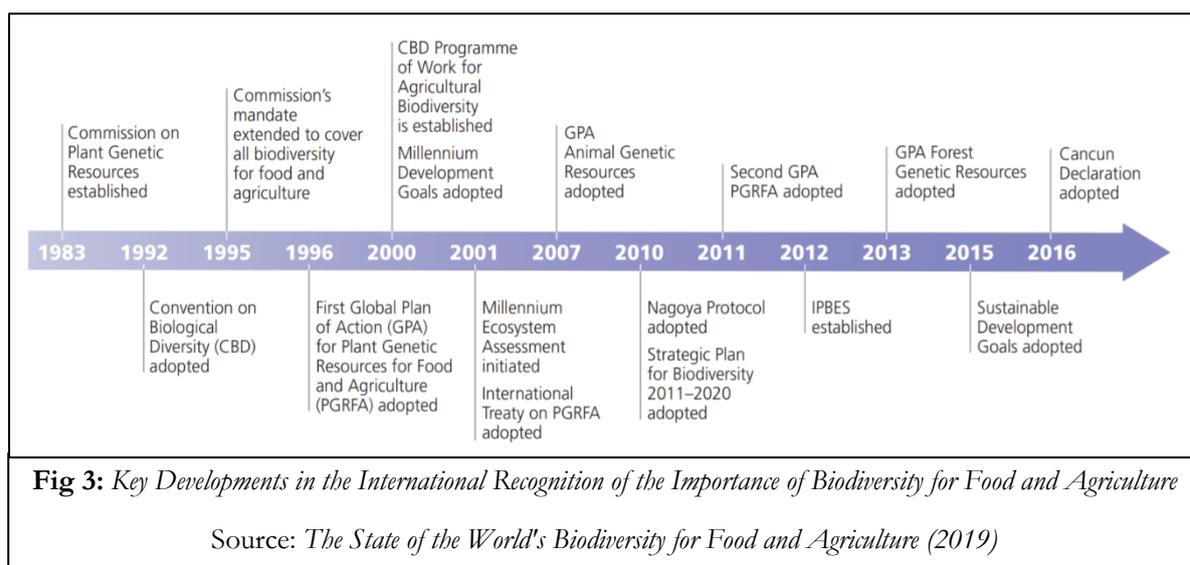


The Food and Agriculture organisation (FAO) published its report titled *The State of The World's Biodiversity the State of The World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture* and notes that small land-

⁸ “Summary for Policymakers of IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C approved by governments” IPCC (2019) <https://www.ipcc.ch/2018/10/08/summary-for-policymakers-of-ipcc-special-report-on-global-warming-of-1-5c-approved-by-governments/>

⁹ “Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services” *Summary for Policymakers, The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (2019)* https://ipbes.net/sites/default/files/202002/ipbes_global_assessment_report_summary_for_policymakers_en.pdf

holders and landless rural dwellers manage 75 per cent of the India's reported livestock resources and receive nearly half of their total income from these resources, species and ecosystems which are in sharp decline. The report highlights the importance of building knowledge about interaction of different variables of biodiversity, in particular micro-organisms and invertebrates, and of its roles in the supply of ecosystem services because, "While a range of drivers of change are having major negative impacts on biodiversity for food and agriculture and the ecosystem services it delivers, some provide opportunities to promote more sustainable management."¹⁰



In the run-up to COP15 in Kunming in 2022, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) has released its own strategy¹¹, which outlines the essential steps that need to be taken towards the adoption of post-2020 global biodiversity targets. This strategy prescribes a holistic view of sustainable development in which biodiversity is not a standalone issue. Rather, what it recommends is the mainstreaming of biodiversity into national development plans as a cross-cutting matter and strengthening of, "coherence, synergies and governance, legal frameworks and enforcement of the rule of law."¹²

Kunming COP15: Pitfalls & Possibilities

The Kunming COP15 meeting will be a critical point in the history of CBD negotiations for a number of reasons:

1. First Meeting Outcomes

The first session of the negotiations was conducted in a hybrid format in the month of October 2021, wherein world leaders came together to pave the path for the post-2020

¹⁰ "The State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture" *FAO* (2019)

<https://www.fao.org/3/CA3129EN/CA3129EN.pdf>

¹¹ Long-Term Strategic Directions to the 2050 Vision for Biodiversity, Approaches to Living in Harmony with Nature and Preparation for The Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, *Conference of The Parties to The Convention on Biological Diversity* (2018) <https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/0b54/1750/607267ea9109b52b750314a0/cop-14-09-en.pdf>

¹² "Towards the vision 2050 on biodiversity: living in harmony with nature" *UNEP* (2019)

<https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/towards-vision-2050-biodiversity-living-harmony-nature>

targets. Given the abject failure of States to achieve the Aichi targets, and the looming climate crisis, which is worsening each day, as made clear with the publication of the latest IPCC report, the meeting was a welcome step forward after two years of delay due to the COVID19 pandemic. The meeting resulted in the publication of the Kunming Declaration, a vision document that adheres to the “Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development” and the UNEP’s 2050 vision for biodiversity: “Living in Harmony with Nature”. The document acknowledges, *“with grave concern that the unprecedented and interrelated crises of biodiversity loss, climate change, land degradation and desertification, ocean degradation, and pollution, and increasing risks to human health and food security, pose an existential threat to our society, our culture, our prosperity and our planet.”*¹³

The declaration, therefore, is an open acknowledgement of the deeply entangled nature of post-pandemic recovery, which will require States to align their priorities, which are currently falling under the separate banners of the “UN Decade of Action for Sustainable Development”, the “UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration”, and the “UN Decade for Ocean Science for Sustainable Development”, and adopt a transformative path towards biodiversity conservation.¹⁴

2. 30 x 30 Target: An Ambitious Bet

While the first session was aimed at creating political ground, the upcoming meeting in 2022 will be the real test for countries as they deliberate a whole gamut of complex issues. Among them, the ‘30 x 30 Target’ has gained the most attention and even found mention in the “zero draft” of the CBD COP15. The “30 x 30 Target” aims at conserving 30 per cent of Earth’s landmass and seas by 2030. The IPBES report notes that about 15 per cent land and freshwater resources and 7 per cent of the sea areas are currently under protection — a dismal figure compared to the scale of the crisis. Yet, despite the catchiness of the “target”, there are important questions that need to be answered. *“First, 30% of what exactly? Of the world’s entire surface? Or must it be both 30% of the land and 30% of the ocean? Or would each country protect 30% of its territory? The draft as it stands is not clear, and the matter will need to be thrashed out over the negotiating table.”*¹⁵

3. Ocean Biodiversity: A Divided House

The COP26 negotiations have seen convergence on the goals related to ending deforestation, but the same cannot be said for the oceans. Currently, 61 per cent of the world ocean falls under the category of international waters and the Aichi targets were largely vague on the jurisdictional issues related Marine Protected Areas (MPAs). This

¹³ “Kunming Declaration: “Ecological Civilization: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth” *Declaration from the High-Level Segment of the UN Biodiversity Conference 2020 (Part 1)* (2021)

<https://www.cbd.int/doc/c/df35/4b94/5e86e1ee09bc8c7d4b35aaf0/kunmingdeclaration-en.pdf>

¹⁴ “Over 100 countries sign Kunming Declaration on biodiversity conservation” *DownToEarth*, 13 October (2021) <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/over-100-countries-sign-kunming-declaration-on-biodiversity-conservation-79685>

¹⁵ “Kunming COP15: big challenges remain after first session” *China Dialogue*, 19 October (2021) <https://chinadialogue.net/en/nature/kunming-cop15-big-challenges-remain-after-first-session/>

makes the 30 per cent conservation-target at Kunming particularly problematic as this will require States to protect 80 per cent of their domestic waters. The creation of MPAs on the high seas is another contentious topic that will require States to invest in new and innovative mechanisms. Following the 2012 Rio +20 Conference, the UNGA instituted a two-year Preparatory Committee Process (Resolution 72/249), which was assigned the task of developing an international legally binding instrument on marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction (BBNJ).¹⁶ BBNJ constitutes some of the rarest biodiversity resources on Earth, which provide critical ecosystem-services such as carbon storage. In 2017, the “Intergovernmental Conference on Marine Biodiversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction” was formally created to promote the idea of a BBNJ Treaty and bring the oceans to the core of the climate-change negotiations. Although the formal negotiations began in earnest in 2018, the BBNJ Treaty remains an unfulfilled project, mired in the questions of national sovereignty, the effectiveness of UNCLOS and, “*a broader philosophical divide: Developing nations insist that the high seas and their resources constitute “the common heritage of mankind,” whereas developed nations, including the U.S., tend to invoke the “freedom of the seas” and resist being bound by international obligations.*”¹⁷

4. The Question of Leadership

The question of leadership will also be an important topic of interest at the COP15. China’s role as the host means that expectations will generate interest, as has been the case with the COP26 negotiations, which President Jinping has chosen to skip, much to the consternation of the United States. COP15 will also be a battleground of ideas, with President Biden establishing a national goal that mirrors the ‘30 x 30 Target’, while China, which has remained hesitant on the question would be looking to promote its own idea of ‘ecological civilisation’ as the core idea at the negotiations. China is also promoting biodiversity targets outside of the CBD process, through bilateral initiatives and the proposal to build world’s largest national park system.¹⁸

Amidst all these different questions, CBD COP15 will be political hotspot in the coming months. While, it will be an ideological battleground for competing claims regarding conservation, fairness and equitable burden sharing, it is also an opportunity for countries to chart a transformative path towards biodiversity conservation.

About the Author: ¹ Dr. Saurabh Thakur is an Associate Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation, New Delhi, India. His research work sits at the intersection of climate governance, international politics and sustainability, looking specifically at climate security and blue economy discourses in the context of South Asia. Currently he holds the CDRI Fellowship (2021-22) at the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure, for

¹⁶ “Protecting 30% of the ocean is easier said than done” *China Dialogue*, May 13 (2021)

<https://chinadialogueocean.net/13850-protecting-30-of-ocean-easier-said-than-done-thirty-by-thirty/>

¹⁷ “Bringing the High Seas Biodiversity Treaty into Port” *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 8 (2021)

<https://www.cfr.org/article/bringing-high-seas-biodiversity-treaty-port>

See Also: Elizabeth M. De Santo, Elizabeth Mendenhall, Elizabeth Nyman, and Rachel Tiller. “Stuck in the middle with you (and not much time left): the third intergovernmental conference on biodiversity beyond national jurisdiction.” *Marine Policy* 117 (2020): 103957.

¹⁸ “COP15 in Kunming: A New Role for China in Global Conservation?” *Wilson Center*, 19 October (2021)
<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/cop15-kunming-new-role-china-global-conservation>

which he is working on the project, 'Incorporating Infrastructural Resilience in India's Port-led Development Model'. He also holds the VAdm KK Nayar Fellowship at the National Maritime Foundation wherein he is working on the climate resilience of India's coastal urban agglomerations.