

# **IUCN Congress - Marseille: A victory for civil society, Indigenous peoples, and scientists towards protecting half the planet by 2030**

Joint closing statement from COICA, IPACC  
and Avaaz on the 2020 IUCN Congress



## **People managed to lead for change and set the right ambition despite hampered participation**

Despite the restrictions imposed by Covid-19 and the lack of momentum in governments to address the ecological crisis, Indigenous knowledge set the tone for civil society to push for greater ambition and inclusivity for biodiversity and people. These processes cannot be elitists anymore, and the solutions have to be designed from the bottom up. The only leaders that can truly keep us safe, who will ensure the survival of our planet and our children are the ones who listen, listen to science, listen to Indigenous peoples, listen to women and marginalized communities, and listen to our youth. There's nothing more bold in leadership than listening.

## Context

There were key issues at stake at the 2020 IUCN Congress, with some more obvious than others. It was the biggest environmental summit since the Covid-19 crisis started, and its outcomes must be evaluated on two dimensions.

**A reality check on governments' ambition to "build back better"**. Then, in its attempt to reboot the global momentum on biodiversity, the IUCN Congress was expected to set the tone for the remainder of the road to CBD COP15, which is now taking place in two parts, one virtual opening segment in October (7-11), and one in April next year (Kunming, China). After more than a year of discussions and commitments to "build back better" after the pandemic, this was a moment to take the actual temperature of how far governments were willing to push ambition for biodiversity. Unlike United Nations multilateral processes where decisions are adopted by consensus (which almost invariably leads to a watering down of ambition), the IUCN motions are voted upon, which makes the IUCN a place where we can raise the bar on ambition to the level where it should be.

**A crash-test for conducting international relations in pandemic times.** Firstly, at a time when the world is still struggling with the pandemic, the Congress was a crash test for the reboot of large-scale international negotiations on environmental affairs. The Covid-19 crisis has exacerbated inequalities, including access to vaccination, and the *de facto* economic segregation that usually prevents a good share of developing countries from fully participating in negotiations. This is all the more true for Indigenous peoples and local communities, who are central actors for the conservation of biodiversity but still very poorly represented in international gatherings. Having poor participation and representation in international processes will undermine their relevance and legitimacy, and forcing events to take place despite insufficient diversity will harm trust between protagonists and *vis-à-vis* international institutions themselves.

**We went to Marseille with high expectations. Our joint assessment of the Congress is the following:**

## Outcomes

### An exclusive party. The IUCN Congress set a worrying precedent for international processes in the current context

Months before the Congress, members alarmed the IUCN leadership that sanitary and traveling conditions would prevent delegates from many countries from attending. A motion to switch to online voting was drafted and submitted to a vote on Wednesday 8 September. As reported by *Le Monde*, there was a strong push against the motion by several countries, including France, the host country, who vocally opposed the motion during contact groups. The motion obtained the majority of votes from NGOs and indigenous peoples' organisations, but there was a tie (56 for, 56 against) on the side of government members. And a tie leads to rejecting a motion at the IUCN.

This happened just a day after 1,500 NGOs asked for [postponing climate COP26](#), due to lack of plans to ensure safe and inclusive participation. What we are seeing is a growing disconnect between the concrete reality of people on the ground and (high income) host countries who fail to acknowledge the utter inequalities that our world is still ridden with and that maintaining inclusivity and trust in such international process is key for maintaining their long term relevance and usefulness. And this is way more important than the individual publicity they want to get by hosting big events. Of course, their argument is that such moments are key to keep momentum and try to raise ambition. But we must be very careful: we will need these processes to stay on track for many years and decades to come, and they should not be damaged by short term views. If we have to wait for meetings to happen in the right conditions, so be it. Collective ambition can be upheld by concrete actions on implementation, by different forms of inclusive online en-

agements, by smaller in person summits in different regions if need be. What the IUCN has shown is that we urgently need a serious and open conversation about this.

### Indigenous peoples were everywhere in speeches but barely given the stage

The opening ceremony was painful to watch. In the statements of French officials and European leaders on stage, Indigenous peoples kept being mentioned as key actors in biodiversity conservation, but none of their leaders had been invited to take the floor and actually speak in their own voice. It really echoed what had just happened days earlier during the biodiversity "PreCOP" organised by Colombia on Indigenous land, when it took hours for an Indigenous leader to be given the floor - and while still being invisibilized in the official agenda. We had hoped that the [public outcry](#) that this generated would serve as a lesson, but the same mistake was repeated at the IUCN Congress. A parallel event, the "IUCN World Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nature", was organized *prior* to the actual Congress, and with no significant effort to have an actually inclusive participation of Indigenous peoples: in order to participate to the summit (even virtually) you had to pay the expensive registration fees to the Congress, thus creating the very inequality that the Indigenous peoples organizations IUCN Members were trying to avoid.

This must not be acceptable anymore. Speeches mean really little if they are not followed by real representation and participation. Indigenous peoples and their leaders keep being treated as ornaments by heads of States and international organisations, and are not treated as the equal partners as it should be. We tried to facilitate a friendly meeting between leaders of COICA and the French President Emmanuel Ma-

cron, so they could hand him a petition and speak to him directly, leader to leader. On a rainy day, we embarked together on a small boat to follow, at a reasonable distance, the scientific boat on which he had embarked to visit a protected area near Marseille. Before we could even start the engine, we got jumped on by the French special forces and police, who detained and aggressively questioned us and the Indigenous leaders. This was just hours before the French President talked about the utmost importance of Indigenous peoples' leadership throughout the world.

For future meetings, drastic changes are needed. Indigenous leaders must be invited as equals, on stage or at the table, with other world leaders, so that they can speak in their own voices about the actual challenges they face on their lands, that are still being preyed upon despite speeches and promises. And so that they can show the world what true ambition and leadership for biodiversity and people actually means.

### **The Amazon is back on the map (again)**

Despite all these difficulties, Indigenous peoples from Amazonia managed to develop a proposal for an emergency motion calling to protect 80% of the Amazon by 2025 to avoid a tipping point of no return in which huge parts of the forest could become savannah. This was the first time many Indigenous organizations voted at the Member's Assembly! With a total of 56% support from states and government agencies (A members) and 95% from social and Indigenous organizations (B members), the motion was approved at the Marseille World Conservation Congress. A significant percentage (38%) of States have decided to abstain from the proposal to protect Amazonia.

The Amazon rainforest has resisted 500 years of destruction and pollution. Now scientists are listening to us and with the solidarity of civil society we're raising our voices to shape the right policies, policies that work for all peoples and the planet. We can't let the Amazon die. Without Amazon, there's no future. We're pleased that finally the international community is recognizing we need to protect 80% of the Amazon.

Within the IUCN, the voice of Indigenous peoples hasn't had enough support, and often we were not considered as being part of nature. But now the IUCN is walking a new path, in which we hope its members will follow through and will commit to the cause.

### **The need to protect half of the planet is finally recognized**

Today in Marseille, people and science were heard at the IUCN Congress; at least in part. Now, the conservation community is clear on the fact that the world needs to protect at least half of the planet, and that this can only be done with the leadership of Indigenous peoples and local communities. The international community must acknowledge that the science behind this target says that it has to be achieved by 2030, and allocate resources to make it happen. This would be a key component of a real "building back better", where economies work for the people and the planet.

But make no mistake, this result was achieved thanks to the strong determination of the many IUCN members from Indigenous peoples organisations and civil society who struggled to maintain the ambition of motion 101 while several governments were trying to water it down and get rid of the mention of "at least half of the planet" and replace it by a

mere 30%. And these actors partly won: the mention of "at least half" does not have a timeframe, while the science the motions relies on explicitly says that this has to be achieved by 2030 if we want to stop biodiversity loss and meaningfully contribute to achieving the 1.5°C goal of the Paris Agreement. They also managed to expel the mention of "half" altogether from the much watered down "Marseille Manifesto" on which they had the upper hand. Luckily, this manifesto has no binding force whatsoever, even within the IUCN. And the fight to win the 2030 timeframe from the 50% target will go on.

What happened today is historic: for the first time, the IUCN has heard the plight of Indigenous peoples who, making an enormous logistic effort, have come to this congress with proposals conceived from Indigenous territories. Today we were able to push through a long-delayed discussion, in an emergency context that forces us all to rethink our relationship with nature. Make no mistake: the protection of half the planet will only be done from the recognition and restitution of the territories and rights of Indigenous peoples. Today we celebrate, tomorrow we organize.

## Our concluding resolution

**Lamenting** that the voices of so many around the world could not be heard;

**Aware** of the importance of fully recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities everywhere;

**Deeply concerned** that harmful and perverse incentives would continue to redirect precious funding to support destructive industries;

**Recalling** that the latest scientific evidence says that we need to protect at least 50% of the Earth by 2030;

**Urging** everyone to offer widespread support to protecting 80% of the Amazon by 2025;

**Convinced** that people around the world are ready for more ambitious actions than their leaders dare undertake;

**Assured** that the more than 2,7 million citizens that joined this movement to support Indigenous communities and their knowledge in protecting biodiversity are a big part of these victories;

We will see you again, with hope and determination, and we will keep moving things forward together.

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**AVAAZ**

