

Extract from:

# BUILDING ON NATURE

**Area-based conservation  
as a key tool for  
delivering SDGs**



# SDG 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions



## Summary for policy makers

SDG 16 aims to address the above challenges in multiple ways, several of which are explicitly linked to effective area-based conservation. It strives to reduce all forms of violence and related death rates across the world (Target 16.1), including significantly reducing illicit financial and arms flows and combating all forms of organised crime (Target 16.4) such as those linked to illegal wildlife trade. To underpin this, SDG 16 strives to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making and effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels of governance (Targets 16.6, 16.7 and 16.A).

Protected and conserved areas can support peaceful and inclusive societies by helping to maintain environmental stability and human security. This applies to situations both during and after conflict. In an ideal situation, sustainable management of the natural environment and resources can help to prevent conflicts flaring up in the first place, with protected and conserved areas as key tools, functioning as a safety net for resource supply and providing a framework for good governance and security. Economic opportunities provided by effective area-based conservation regimes (e.g. wildlife tourism) can also play a key role in providing alternatives to illegal trade in wildlife and other natural resources. In general, many protected areas with effective management are areas of good governance, control and law enforcement in areas otherwise subject to conflict and insecurity.

**Conflict prevention:** By maintaining the ecosystem functions and related benefits (e.g. food, fuel, water, natural medicines), area-based conservation can help to minimise risks of conflicts during periods of unrest and/or resource scarcity.

**Conflict mitigation and resolution:** Area-based conservation can also be part of conflict mitigation strategies, with protected and conserved areas contributing to basic human wellbeing (e.g. sources for livelihood) and with protected area frameworks and structures helping to retain a certain level of governance and cooperation in conflict areas.

**Post-conflict rebuilding:** In the aftermath of conflict, protected areas can help to increase social cohesion and bring back economic opportunities to communities and provide governance structures for the sustainable use of land and resources into the future. For example, the concept of Peace Parks has proven an effective means to support transboundary peace-building in post-conflict situations.

## What is the challenge?

The Global Peace Index, responsible for assessing trends in global peacefulness for over a decade, shows that global peacefulness – captured through the number and severity of ongoing conflicts, extent of societal safety and security, and militarisation – has deteriorated by 3.5 per cent since 2008.<sup>1</sup> These conflicts together with an increase in criminality are directly undermining many SDGs around the world.<sup>2</sup>

Further to the above, the effects of climate change pose a major challenge to peacefulness in the coming decade,<sup>3</sup> creating a vicious circle within the 2030 Sustainability Agenda. Climate change and resource scarcity ranked as the highest global risks by the World Economic Forum in 2019,<sup>4</sup> with climate change indirectly increasing the likelihood of violent conflict through its impacts on resource availability, livelihood security and migration. In 2017, over 60 per cent of total global displacements were estimated to be due to climate-related disasters.<sup>5</sup>

Looking into the future, the 2019 Global Peace Index cites that 41 per cent of people (400 million) living in areas with high or very high exposure to climate hazards reside in countries with low levels of peacefulness. Furthermore, eight of the 25 least peaceful countries have 10 per cent or more of their population in high climate hazard areas, amounting to over 100 million people at risk.<sup>1</sup> Regionally, sub-Saharan Africa has the weakest coping capacity for climate hazards while the Middle East and North Africa have the highest water-related risk levels, with over 90 per cent of river catchments at medium to extremely high risk of water stress.

Serious civil unrests and armed conflicts are usually bad news for nature.<sup>6</sup> The rule of law collapses, providing opportunities for illegal use of natural resources, both by criminal gangs and by impoverished or displaced people who are faced with few other options for subsistence.<sup>7</sup> For example, the Rwanda genocide sent thousands of people walking through protected areas to reach safety across

national borders, killing animals for food and clearing trees along the way.<sup>8</sup> Conflict situations also divert resources away from conservation efforts, most extremely in countries where nature conservation relies on the involvement of armed forces. For example, the Maoist insurgency in Nepal meant that troops guarding rhinos and tigers were moved to other duties, leading to a spike in poaching.<sup>9</sup>

Long-term conflict can also lead to depressing development and emptying areas of people, thus halting land use change as, for example, in large areas of the Colombian Amazon.<sup>10</sup> However, if not carefully addressed, in these situations environmental damage can rapidly escalate post-conflict when access to land is regained.<sup>11</sup> While nature commonly finds itself at the receiving end of – or sometimes as a driver for – disputes and conflicts, the natural environment and good governance of natural resources and ecosystems can play an important role in peacebuilding and preventing conflicts.<sup>12, 13</sup>

SDG 16 aims to address the above challenges in multiple ways, several of which explicitly linked to effective area-based conservation. It strives to reduce all forms of violence and related death rates across the world (Target 16.1), including significantly reducing illicit financial and arms flows and combating all forms of organised crime (Target 16.4) such as those linked to illegal wildlife trade. To underpin this, SDG 16 strives to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making and effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels of governance (Targets 16.6, 16.7 and 16.A).

## How can effective area-based conservation help?

Protected and conserved areas have a role to play in building peacefulness and cooperation, by supporting livelihood security and wellbeing before conflict breaks out, and by actions both during conflict and in the process of rebuilding trust and institutions following a serious outbreak

1 South Sudan, Iraq, Libya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, North Korea, Nigeria and Mexico.

of unrest. In general, effective area-based conservation inherently involves a certain degree of conflict management, including management of expectations and consensus building among diverse stakeholders. The tools commonly employed in the context of conservation (e.g. stakeholder engagement, collaborative consensus building and benefit-sharing schemes) are applicable both in achieving long-term conservation but also for maintaining and creating peaceful and prosperous societies.

**Conflict prevention:** By maintaining the ecosystem functions and related benefits, area-based conservation can help to reduce resource scarcity, increase human security and minimise related risks of conflicts. Protected areas are also sometimes the cause of conflict with local communities. Here we focus on the positive benefits, whilst acknowledging that disbenefits can also arise. Conservation areas contribute directly to food and water security, disaster risk reduction and by providing safe places to exercise and relax,<sup>14</sup> thus helping to reinforce domestic security. For example, in Djibouti, the Day Forest Reserve protects one of the last areas of native forest in the country and is of prime importance to biodiversity, but it also provides a source of food for local people during periods of drought.<sup>15</sup> In Cambodia, Tonle Sap lake, a biosphere reserve provides 60 per cent of the country's freshwater fish catch, providing vital food to local people.<sup>16</sup> Natural disaster risk reduction can help to mitigate the impacts of – and support recovery from – natural hazards, preventing them becoming full-blown natural disasters with long-lasting impacts.<sup>17</sup> For example, research shows that coral reefs can dissipate wave energy by 97 per cent, protecting coastal communities from storms and tsunamis,<sup>18</sup> while mangroves protect inland rice crops from cyclone damage.<sup>19</sup> Finally, and on the more fundamental level, the world's protected area system plays a significant role in climate mitigation through its carbon storage and sequestration functions.<sup>20</sup>

### **Conflict mitigation and resolution:**

Protected areas can also be part of conflict mitigation strategies, underpinning access to resources and providing frameworks and structures to maintain a certain level of

governance in conflict areas. Effective area-based conservation regimes can also play a key role in both regulating and providing alternatives to illegal trade in wildlife and other natural resources, this way also limiting financial flows that are known to feed back into conflict situations.

In situations of conflict within or between countries, protected area staff are often some of the few government employees to remain in disputed areas. In these cases, they can find themselves in the position of unofficial go-betweens, occupying a grey area between a militarised state and rebel forces, and negotiating even at times when the state is not negotiating officially. This has happened many times during the long-running conflicts in Colombia for instance. Such cooperation occurs in international conflicts as well; gorilla experts in Ugandan and Congolese protected areas continued collaborating whatever the relations between the two countries. Sometimes protected area governance structures can also play a more active role in addressing conflict, by maintaining law and security in areas where other government institutions are failing.<sup>21</sup>

There is often considerable overlap between insurgence and poaching and rangers address both, for example in Zakouma National Park in Chad,<sup>22</sup> and Garamba National Park in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>23</sup> Such issues affect non-state protected areas as well. For example, one of the key motivations for local people to form the conservancies of northern Kenya has been to improve security and reduce cattle theft.<sup>24</sup>

The security crisis in the Central African Republic has seen a dozen armed groups and multiple local militias usurp control of most of the country.<sup>25</sup> The Chinko Wildlife Refuge, a 50-year public-private partnership involving the Central African Republic's Environment Ministry and the African Parks network with support from USAID and the Walton Family Foundation, is bringing some security to 1.8 million hectares of otherwise lawless territory.<sup>26</sup> Chinko is the largest employer in the region, providing jobs for some 400 local people, and additionally funds dozens of nurses and teachers. In 2017, 380 Internally Displaced People, mainly women

and children, fled to Chinko seeking sanctuary from civil unrest and were protected by the rangers.<sup>27</sup> While the situation is not ideal, i.e. conservationists are not trained at either security or humanitarian aid, in practice it is far from rare.

**Post-conflict rebuilding:** In the aftermath of conflict, protected and conserved areas can help to bring back economic opportunities to people who may have lost everything. In consequence, protected areas and OECMs can be used as “safe spaces” for development with existing examples around the world from former Yugoslavia to the Congo Basin. The Norwegian aid agency Norad funded a three-year project to increase cooperation between protected area managers across the new national borders of the former Yugoslavia.<sup>28</sup> The use of REDD+ projects in community forests adjacent to protected areas is seen as a way of helping to rebuild peace in the fragile political situation existing in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>29</sup>

Rwanda had a catastrophic civil war in 1994, with the deaths of a million people. The country is small and crowded, with most land used for agriculture, yet the government has prioritised its national park system to attract high-paying foreign tourists. Gorilla tourism virtually disappeared from 1994–98, but has boomed since; by 2008, there were 20,000 visits to protected areas of which 17,000 were for gorilla viewing,<sup>30</sup> and growth has continued. Tourism earned Rwanda US\$400 million in 2016<sup>31</sup> and US\$438 million in 2017,<sup>32</sup> making it the largest earner of foreign exchange, with gorilla permits costing US\$1,500 each. However, research suggests that economic benefits have not substantially trickled down to the local communities and tensions (including poaching) remain,<sup>33</sup> highlighting the need to embed conservation within wider social goals.

Any institution involved in management of protected and conserved areas needs to adopt human rights-based approaches in order to avoid human rights violations “in the name of nature”. Lastly, and more subtly, bringing actors together through nature conservation can be an important part of nation-building in itself.<sup>34</sup> For example, in places where the military get directly involved in management,

protected areas provide an opportunity to build a different role for army and navy personnel and a different relationship with civil society. Such links carry risks – in the past the army has been closely involved in large-scale poaching in places such as Madagascar and Thailand for instance and militarisation of conservation can increase domestic conflict.<sup>35</sup> But if well-managed it can provide positive role models in other places, bringing new actors into an understanding of conservation. The role of the navy in protecting marine reserves in Colombia would be one such example. By providing a peaceful, positive example of cooperation, well-planned and managed protected areas can thus both prevent and help the recovery from armed conflict within nations.

## Tools that support SDG 16

Since area-based conservation often inherently involves managing tensions between different approaches to land use and reconciling views of diverse stakeholders, it follows that conflict management and consensus building among diverse stakeholders are at the centre of conservation work. Tools such as stakeholder engagement, collaborative consensus building, benefit-sharing schemes and a range of approaches to the resolution of human–wildlife conflict are essential not only for achieving long-term conservation but also for creating peaceful and prosperous societies. Conservation organisations have certainly not always been successful in addressing conflict. But successes and failures have both provided lessons and there are opportunities to use these skills in a broader context.

All types of effective area-based conservation with a good governance structure and engagement with local stakeholders can contribute to the implementation of SDG 16. As this chapter shows, existing examples of such contributions range from state-managed protected areas to conservation areas managed directly by local communities. As with SDGs 10 and 5, conservation areas based in cultural landscapes or around the principle of sustainable use (e.g. IUCN protected area categories V and VI) might be amongst the most suitable to provide



a holistic, multi-use management regime yielding the most effective outcomes. In any case, it is important to underline that area-based conservation can only be an element in the broader strategic approach to maintaining peacefulness or resolving conflict situations in an area. However, there are specific types of protected areas, OECMs and other area-based management approaches that can help:

- **Peace parks:** Are those parks established specifically with the aim of helping peacebuilding after a period of national or international insecurity and conflict and are transboundary protected areas stretching across a national or regional border. The philosophy of Peace Parks is that working to protect natural habitat and species can be a non-confrontational set of actions that can provide a bridge between communities that may have been in conflict, mutually suspicious, or separated. Peace Parks can celebrate peace and help promote peace following conflict. The first recognised Peace Park was designated between Canada and the United States, the Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, designated as a celebration of the

long peace between the two countries. Other parks aim to build peace, such as the Cordillera del Condor between Ecuador and Peru, established after the brief border conflict of 1995.

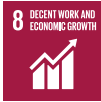
- **Demilitarised zones (DMZ):** DMZs seem unlikely conservation sites, but they are often amongst the most highly protected places on the planet and many have high biodiversity values in consequence. The DMZ between Kuwait and Iraq for example, in place since the first Gulf War, contains some of the healthiest dryland ecosystems in Kuwait, with very limited grazing and a gradually restoring vegetation ecology. Similarly, rich habitats are found in DMZ between North and South Korea, with a proposed Peace Park looking towards an easing of tensions between these two countries.<sup>36</sup> Future recognition of DMZs as protected areas or OECMs is one way to both help secure the sites and provide them with a wider purpose than simply military defence.

## Case study

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Co-benefit SDGs



**Sophie Harrison**  
(Northern Rangeland Trust).



# Collaboration for conservation delivering peace and improved regional security

Northern rangeland community conservation areas, Kenya



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*“With new businesses to grow, we’re too busy to fight, and we’ve got more to lose if we do.”*  
– a young warrior in the Northern rangelands –

**Sustainability challenge:** In the harsh environment of northern Kenya, pastoralist communities have long struggled with ethnic conflict, marginalisation, sparse government services and landscape-level insecurity, particularly elephant poaching and livestock theft. This has not only disrupted and destroyed lives, but hindered development too.

Kenya’s northern rangelands are home to about 10 semi-nomadic ethnic groups, almost all of whom have cultures, traditions and livelihoods deeply rooted in rearing, herding and marketing livestock. They share their rangelands with a diverse array of wildlife, including lion, giraffe, buffalo and elephant. Historically, illegal elephant poaching for ivory (for which there is mounting evidence to suggest links to terrorism funding) and large-scale livestock theft have run rampant, exacerbated by easy access to illegal firearms and a lack of law enforcement capacity to curb it.

Ethnic tensions and the often-associated stock theft in this landscape have complex and longstanding roots. At the same time, the traditional tribal governance structures best placed to navigate these issues have often struggled to adapt to a changing social and political climate.

**Conservation solution:** A grassroots community conservation movement is spreading in Kenya, helping to build effective, accountable and inclusive local institutions, which are nurturing more peaceful and more inclusive societies for sustainable development.

This new movement is starting to drive real and significant transformation in Kenya’s north, united by umbrella organisation the Northern Rangelands Trust (NRT). In the past ten years, the number of NRT-member community conservancy institutions has grown from 18 to 39. Collectively, they now manage over 4.4 million hectares of land, for the purposes of transforming lives, securing peace and conserving natural resources.



NRT receives core funding for community conservancies from USAID, The Nature Conservancy, DANIDA, the EU and many others.

Close to 800 community scouts, employed by community conservancies, now work alongside law enforcement to increase security for both wildlife and people, and elephant poaching for ivory has reduced by 96 per cent since 2012 as a result. Hundreds of young men previously caught up in frontline conflict and stock theft are turning to enterprise and entrepreneurship, funded by their conservancies. And 76 Peace Ambassadors across the landscape are helping to build a collective culture of dialogue and non-violent conflict resolution.

### **Key benefits to sustainability: Promoting inclusive societies for sustainable development**

Target 16.7 of SDG 16 aims to ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels, with one of the indicators being the “*proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive, by sex, age, disability and population group*”.

In Kenya, a community conservancy is defined as a community-based organisation created to support the management of community-owned land for the benefit of improving livelihoods. They are legally registered institutions, governed by a locally elected board and run by a local management team, which includes various sub-committees such as grazing, peace, finance and tourism.

Where multiple ethnic groups live in one conservancy area, the board must be ethnically representative. The inclusion of women on boards and management teams is a growing priority for conservancies, and although progress is slow (at present, 8 per cent of conservancy managers are women), conservancies are now receiving specialist support for gender mainstreaming and developing culturally appropriate solutions to ensure that all conservancy members and leadership – regardless of their gender – are able to fully participate in, and benefit from, natural resource conservation efforts and livelihood activities.

### **Inclusive governance – a story from Lower Tana Delta**

In 2013, violent tribal clashes between the Orma and the Pokomo tribes in Lower Tana, north-eastern Kenya, resulted in the death of approximately 1,000 people. This inspired the establishment of the Lower Tana Delta Conservancy, as a platform for inclusive dialogue and reconciliation.

Although the board of the Conservancy was supposed to be representative, just two members from the Orma community were listed, and never turned up to board meetings for fear of their lives. The Conservancy sought support from NRT’s peace team, made up of people who were familiar with the area and its socio-economic complexities. Two years of talks ensued, involving tribal elders, conservancy leadership, religious leaders, local government and law enforcement. In 2015, Lower Tana Delta held their first democratic elections, electing a 50/50 representative board.

Increasingly, community conservancies are providing the institutional entry point for donor and County Government livelihoods and development support. This is a game changer – for the first time, communities are democratically identifying and steering development projects to where they are needed most – rather than development projects being steered by donor agendas.

### **Building peace for a prosperous future**

The direct impact of conservancy-driven peace programmes is hard to quantify. Yet in a 2017 social survey conducted across NRT member conservancies, 74 per cent of respondents said they felt safer as a result of their conservancies, and 68 per cent said they felt security was improving. Peace forms the stable foundation for livelihoods development, wildlife conservation and land restoration programmes, for which there is certainly anecdotal evidence, and now growing quantified data.

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Community conservancies enable a mutual and respectful forum for dialogue between different ethnic groups – NRT member conservancies focus their peace programmes on facilitating the engagement of community peace ambassadors, interfaith religious leaders, youth and women with county and national government agencies in addressing ethnic and natural-resource based conflicts. Over 8,000 people participated in peace meetings in 2019.

The cross-conservancy Peace Ambassadors initiative involves 76 men and women from selected member conservancies, who are supported to promote non-violent conflict resolution amongst their peers, provide information on planned livestock raids, and help coordinate return of stolen livestock in order to prevent retaliatory attacks.

The role of women in peace building is being enhanced overall with a greater emphasis on bringing women into peace dialogue and developing their strengths in building peace. Engagement of youth in peace is also critical and is being achieved through sports-for-peace events, widespread raising of awareness among youth and herders on the need for peace, and working with youth leaders from different ethnic groups to spearhead peace-building in their communities.

Enterprise has a part to play in peace building too. In 2019, 741 people accessed vocational training through their conservancies, and US\$284,000 was dispersed as business loans through conservancies for 803 entrepreneurs. With poverty one of the underlying drivers of conflict, community conservancies are finding that boosting sustainable, Indigenous economies is as valuable as any other direct peace-building intervention.

However, while progress is being made across much of the landscape, conflict and theft continues to occur in certain hotspots, exacerbated by resource conflict during increasing periods of drought. NRT and the conservancies work closely with the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS), Kenya Police, local government authorities and others to support a community-led approach to policing.

Target 16.4 of SDG 16 aims to significantly reduce illicit financial and arms flows and strengthen the recovery and return of stolen assets and combat all forms of organised crime by 2030. The evidence that NRT is contributing to this is compelling.

Each NRT member conservancy employs a team of uniformed scouts (there are 791 across the landscape) from the local communities, who play a vital role in monitoring endangered wildlife species, conducting anti-poaching patrols, raising conservation awareness in their local communities and acting as community wildlife ambassadors. Many conservancies are home to multiple ethnic groups, and all have equal representation in the scout teams – whose efforts have contributed to a 96 per cent reduction in elephant poaching for ivory since 2012.

Alongside conservancy scouts, NRT employs six mobile scout teams who operate on a regional level under the National Police Service and KWS, focusing primarily on anti-poaching and mitigating livestock theft, when called upon by the government. The mobile teams represent the ethnic diversity of the communities they serve, and this is one of their greatest strengths. Working to improve security for both wildlife and people, they are not only crippling the ability of criminal poaching syndicates (often thought to be linked to terrorist networks) to operate, but they are helping to take illegal firearms out of commission, and curb stock theft.

50 per cent of all livestock reported stolen in NRT member conservancies in 2019 were recovered and returned to their owners through collaboration between community conservancies, the mobile scout teams and government. This would have been unthinkable a few years ago and helped prevent a high number of retaliation attacks.

### **Building effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels**

Target 16.6 of SDG 16 aims to develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels, judged by the proportion of the population satisfied with their last experience of public services.



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Peace meeting in progress.

NRT has recognised that improved peace and security are only possible with strong institutions. To complement and strengthen traditional governance systems, NRT have invested in a bespoke Leadership and Management Programme, adapted from use in corporate companies to suit Indigenous institutions; some of which have a largely illiterate board. Since it launched in 2016, 450 people have taken part in the programme, which is proving transformational in building Indigenous capability for transparent, effective governance systems able to deal with a rapidly changing social, environmental and political landscape.

NRT member conservancies have increasingly strong partnerships with County Government, who are starting to see these grassroots institutions as effective entry points through which to deliver their public services and development mandates. There has been US\$1.6 million of County Government investment in conservancies since 2014, supporting infrastructure and equipment for conservancy management, and supplies and expertise for conservancy-built health clinics, for example. Policy support for community conservancies is increasing too, strengthening land tenure rights,

public support, and financial security for conservancies.

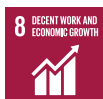
**Lessons learned and next steps:** In conclusion, an Indigenous and collaborative approach to conservation in northern Kenya is helping to deliver the targets of SDG 16 through effective, accountable and inclusive community conservation. It shows, however, that peace, justice and strong institutions are mutually inclusive of other sustainable development goals: poverty reduction, good education, growing enterprise, gender equality, improved wellbeing and better wildlife and habitat conservation, and that this holistic approach to new-era African conservation is the way to ensure impact is delivered in the right way, at the right time, by the right people.

## Case study

16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



Co-benefit SDGs



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# Parks & Peace: Strengthening peace in Colombia through inclusive conservation

## Alto Fragua Indiwasi National Park and surrounding municipal protected areas, Colombia



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*‘When you work on biodiversity conservation, you work not only on restoring biodiversity, but also on rebuilding social fabric in the regions.... That is, exalting local leaderships, promoting political empowerment and the mobilization of women, strengthening local capacities, and negotiating and building a common vision of a territory. All these elements are at the centre of what we think is required to build peace’*

– Environmental NGO expert, Colombia, 2016 –

**Background:** Over a period of more than 50 years, Colombia suffered the western hemisphere’s longest-standing internal armed conflict producing a huge humanitarian toll: some 260,000 people were killed and more than six million were forcibly displaced.<sup>37</sup>

In this setting, Alto Fragua Indiwasi National Park was established on 25 February 2002, just four days after President Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) ended another round of unsuccessful peace negotiations with FARC, Colombia’s largest guerrilla group, which had taken place in a demilitarized zone in Caquetá and Meta. The park is in the southern piedmont of the Colombian Amazon in Caquetá, a region heavily affected by violent conflict for many years. It covers 74,555 hectares and is named after the headwaters of the Fragua River and the indigenous term Indiwasi (House of the Sun).

The park is in a region considered to be one of the world’s top biodiversity hotspots<sup>38</sup> due to the convergence of three of the earth’s centres of high diversity, that is, the biogeographic Chocó, the Andes and the Amazon. It also harbours sacred areas of unique cultural value for the Ingano indigenous people where medicinal plants such as yage (*Banisteriopsis* sp.) and yoco (*Paullinia yoco*) grow. In short, the creation of the park was the first attempt in Colombia to establish a protected area in indigenous ancestral lands with ‘biocultural’ conservation objectives.

The dynamics of the armed conflict in Caquetá and the national park are deeply interwoven with the region’s booming coca and drug trafficking economies dating back to the early 1980s, when coca crops were first introduced in Caquetá. As a result, significant numbers of impoverished farmers were attracted from other parts of Colombia to this remote agricultural frontier region. Harsh counter-drug measures implemented by the Colombian government (with US support) did little to stem the illegal cocaine industry in Caquetá and other southern and south-western regions of Colombia. Both illicit crops and government counter-drug strategies represent major threats to the conservation of the Alto Fragua Indiwasi National Park.<sup>39</sup>

**Sustainability challenge:** Access to land is one of the root causes of violence and conflict in Colombia. Specifically, land tenancy and use-related conflicts in and around protected areas represent a significant threat to biodiversity conservation. Around 30,000 small landless farmers live on, and occupy or use land in, 37 national parks (out of a total of 59). Caught up in a condition of vulnerability farmers engage in different types of economic activities, including illicit coca farming, that significantly contribute to deforestation inside national parks.

When the Alto Fragua Indiwasi Park was established, Caquetá was a main theatre of the Colombian armed conflict. For the Ingano

indigenous community and the National Park Team (NPT) the conflict posed serious challenges. Ingaño leaders were threatened by a host of armed actors (insurgents, paramilitaries and the state's military). This critical situation accelerated the loss of Ingaño traditional culture. Likewise, amid violent conflict the NPT saw their administrative capacity undermined. From the onset, management of the park was thus a high-risk activity. The presence of armed groups, especially FARC, limited the capacity of the team to access and work in certain areas in and around the park. Mobility restrictions and bans on public meetings imposed by paramilitaries, among other armed groups, also restrained the activities of NPT and the Ingaño community.

Illicit crops too became a big threat to park management.<sup>40</sup> By 2007, “almost all farmers in the southern slope of the national park cultivated coca” (Interview, NPT member, San José, 2016). In addition to the destruction of forests through deforestation and ecosystem fragmentation in and outside the park, the presence of illicit crops and its associated dynamics, that is, armed disputes for the control of drug-related activities in the area, aerial and manual government efforts to eradicate coca crops and peasant strikes, all but undermined the NPT's authority and power for managing the protected area. The park director had no control over complex issues related to illicit crop farming inside the protected area. The crops belonged to the farmers but were controlled and subsidised by non-state armed groups, such as FARC and paramilitaries, who provided supplies and bought the harvested coca leaves at the farm gate.

**Conservation solution:** A peace agreement with FARC was finally signed in 2016, over a decade after the establishment of the Alto Fragua Indiwasi National Park. However, many post-conflict challenges lie ahead in Colombia. Human rights, justice, democracy, development and security must be strengthened and reinstated without putting the country's mega biodiversity at risk. WWF supports the Government of Colombia in the quest for strengthening peacebuilding and conservation efforts by providing strategies aimed at involving local communities in conserving biodiversity through improving

their living conditions and promoting the peaceful resolution of land-related conflicts around national parks.

In Alto Fragua National Park, the promotion of conservation agreements with local farmers has been an effective strategy to strengthen protected area management while simultaneously providing solutions to resolve the historical occupation and use of protected area land by small farmers, this way supporting their livelihoods. This has been achieved through a conservation approach focused on creating inclusive institutions for biodiversity conservation.

Resolving issues associated with land tenancy and disputes over natural resource use in national parks in post-conflict settings requires an inclusive conservation approach that recognises the rights of local communities and defines their role in conservation; foment participation of communities in government planning; trains leaders in advocacy so they can effectively articulate and defend their rights, needs, and interests; and makes financial and non-financial benefits visible for all stakeholders, while guaranteeing a healthy flow of benefits to communities.

Alto Fragua is a good example of the implementation of the inclusive conservation approach. NPT has focused on developing partnerships with local NGOs, such as Tierra Viva, to be able to achieve conservation results during war and postconflict. Tierra Viva, a community-based conservation initiative in the municipality of Belén was



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## Case study

founded by locals in the 1990s to keep the municipality's rivers and parks clean. Soon the members realised that more effective watershed management resulted in improved quality of drinking water, thereby reducing the occurrence of common diseases like diarrhoea. With the support of Belén's mayor's office, they decided to declare several local protected areas in the municipality and its surroundings (Interview, member local NGO, Belén, 2016). By 2002, the year Alto Fragua Indiwasi was declared a National Park, the foundation administered nine municipal protected areas. Although most of these areas are not adjacent to the park (only one is in the buffer zone), this community-based conservation initiative has made significant contributions to enhancing conservation efforts at the landscape level, positioning Tierra Viva as an important partner.

One of the salient aspects of the Tierra Viva process has been that it is entirely led by members of the local community who stayed in the area throughout acute armed conflict. Successfully managing nine protected areas with NPT's technical support, Tierra Viva achieved that all relevant stakeholders, including paramilitaries, guerrillas, government armed forces and local communities, would recognise and respect its conservation mandate. Key to this has been involving members of local communities in programmes and working closely with public agencies in the region, such as the regional environmental authority, the environment attorney and the environment prosecutor. This enabled a degree of control over activities inside the protected areas, including illicit coca growing. Today *"there are no illicit crops grown in our protected areas"* (Interview, member local NGO, Belén, 2016).

The Tierra Viva initiative is a good example of how local conservation institutions can become more cohesive during war. Continuing with this initiative despite the difficulties posed by armed conflict and postconflict has been uplifting for members of the foundation and has given them a reason to live through hard times. In the words of one local stakeholder, *"preservation of local protected areas was our own way of defending life in the midst of war. We did it because we love this place and we did not*

*want to leave. Thus, we had to be brave to do whatever was needed"* (Interview, member local NGO, Belén, 2016). Until today, Tierra Viva has actively protected a total of 70,110 hectares in the municipality of Belén. This area represents 59 percent of the municipality's area and is almost equal to the area of the national park.

On top of the conservation results achieved by Tierra Viva, perhaps the main outcome of this initiative has been the empowerment of local communities during armed conflict. *"Tierra Viva made people aware of the importance of the environment. Today, we feel proud about our territory and its abundant natural resources. This initiative empowered our community and gave us reasons to defend our territory, reasons to stay, reasons to be creative and resist violence, reasons to build peace in this territory"* (Interview, member local NGO, Belén, 2016).

**Lessons learned:** During times of armed conflict and transition to peace, conservation approaches need to be adjusted to achieve conservation results without impacting negatively or worsening a very complex and polarized context. As the case of Alto Fragua Indiwasi shows, an inclusive conservation approach can actually contribute positively to different aspects of peacebuilding by rebuilding social fabric in the regions, exalting local leaderships, promoting political empowerment, strengthening local capacities, building a common vision of a territory and promoting the peaceful resolution of conflicts through dialogue.

**Next steps:** WWF and the government of Colombia will upscale this approach through the implementation of the "Parks & Peace" project, funded by the German Government, in six national parks, including Chiribiquete, the largest tropical rainforest national park in the world (4.2 million ha). This project will provide strong cases and lessons learned to influence policy debates at the national level regarding the sustainable use of biodiversity within protected areas, as well as the peaceful transformation of land-related conflicts in Colombia.

# Conservation, sustainable development and peace work in a war zone

The Salween Peace Park, Myanmar



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**Background:** Myanmar has suffered from decades of internal political and religious tension, first under the military dictatorship and continuing under a more civilian government. In particular sections of the Karen society, a local Indigenous group, have conducted a long-running insurgency, virtually since independence in 1948, aimed at establishing a separate state.<sup>41</sup> This has long been financed by logging,<sup>42</sup> as has the military,<sup>43</sup> and by opium production, which continues at a high level in the north of the country.

Despite the long-term problems, the area has some of the richest biodiversity in Southeast Asia, yet this is under growing pressure and poorly surveyed. The first structured camera trap survey of the region found high numbers of mammal species,<sup>44</sup> and a field survey in part of the area found a large number of endangered mammal species, including the Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*), sun bear (*Helarctos malayanus*), eastern hoolock gibbon (*Hoolock leuconedys*), dhole (*Cuon alpinus*), Sunda pangolin (*Manis javanica*),

Chinese pangolin (*M. pentadactyla*) and great hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*), along with several previously unidentified plant and animal species.<sup>45</sup>

**Sustainability challenge:** Despite efforts to reform the timber industry,<sup>46</sup> widespread illegality continues,<sup>47</sup> and is facilitated by widespread corruption at high levels.<sup>48</sup> Hydroelectric projects upstream threaten the integrity of river systems, destroy forests<sup>49</sup> and also have the ability to create additional conflict as they are strongly opposed by local communities.<sup>50</sup> Throughout Myanmar, unsustainable fuelwood production degrades forest areas.<sup>51</sup> The Karen remain vulnerable, subject to repression and politically isolated. While some protected areas exist, they have long been hampered by lack of resources and capacity,<sup>52</sup> and recent assessments suggest that these challenges remain in many places. Local communities are wary of a government-declared protected area in the region, which they think will



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## Case study



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remove more of their rights, and prefer a self-declared and self-managed conserved area.<sup>53</sup>

**Conservation solution:** Local communities, supported by the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, have long advocated sustainable livelihoods linked to greater local control of land and water. Community forestry has been introduced,<sup>54</sup> along with implementation of fish conservation zones.

An endogenous proposal for a peace park in the region was developed over several years, based around the core aspirations of the Karen people: (i) peace and self-determination, (ii) environmental integrity, and (iii) cultural survival.<sup>55</sup> The park is aimed at maintaining forest cover, retaining water governance and also protecting biodiversity and cultural and sacred sites in the region. The Peace Park aims to secure important

areas of forest in a near-natural state, to provide wildlife conservation and help to mitigate and adapt to climate change,<sup>56</sup> and to provide sustainable management of the remainder to ensure a steady supply of goods and income, and manage water resources sustainably. The Peace Park is recognised as an ICCA – ICCAs are “territories or areas conserved by Indigenous peoples or local communities”, or just “territories for life”.

During 2016 and 2017, a Peace Park interim committee of community representatives and the proposers of the park held a series of meetings with over 5,000 local inhabitants in three townships and 26 village tracts. The principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) was critical to this process. Communities identified the impacts of the long-term conflict and discussed the governance structures needed to build an equitable and long-lasting peace. The



Salween Peace Park Charter emerged from these meetings and passed with the endorsement of 75.1 per cent of the voting-age population. The Charter was launched at the December 2018 event, and is now known locally as the Peace Park constitution.<sup>57</sup>

In December 2018, Indigenous people in the region came together to declare a 5,485 km<sup>2</sup> Salween Peace Park. The area is not empty; it includes 340 villages in 27 village tracts, 139 demarcated *kaw* (customary lands, covering 1,062 km<sup>2</sup>), 27 community forests (110 km<sup>2</sup>), four forest reserves (180 km<sup>2</sup>) and three wildlife sanctuaries (540 km<sup>2</sup>). Delineation of the zones has been coordinated with Karen government officials and the regional authority.<sup>58</sup> Active forest restoration is taking place, with an annual tree planting day and other initiatives.<sup>59</sup>

### Sustainability measures in place:

There is strong community support for the initiative, although broader political processes continue to put the area at risk. Since the beginning of 2020, and particularly during the general chaos of the pandemic, the Myanmar military has been very active in the region, villagers are reported to have been killed and hundreds have fled into the forest,<sup>60</sup> and the army has been felling trees within the Peace Park.<sup>61</sup>

**Lessons learned:** The agreement and establishment of the Peace Park was a major achievement in an area where conflict has been endemic for 70 years. Long-term engagement, a participatory and democratic approach and the willingness to take time to reach understanding demonstrate that progress is possible even in the most unpromising conditions.

**Next steps:** The fragility of the area is of deep concern, and the Myanmar military is still obviously intent on extending control through the area; self-declaration is important but does not secure the area if it is ignored by more powerful players. The villagers are caught in the middle of what must seem like an endless war that has already lasted beyond most of their lifetimes and shows no real signs of declining despite the peace process, which has clearly stalled. Other problems in Myanmar, including the huge upsurge of violence against the Rohingya and a military coup, have diverted attention both domestically and internationally. Greater recognition of the ICCA is important at international level, to maintain pressure on the government to honour the wishes of the local communities. The next few months and years are critical to the survival of the Peace Park and its values.

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