

Nature positive and 30x30 – just soundbites or the foundations of a Cop15 deal?

The Secret Negotiator

As participants arrive in Montreal to negotiate this decade's targets for protecting biodiversity, two themes are getting the lion's share of attention



Fallen trees covered in moss and fungi in the Białowieża forest, eastern Poland. This ancient woodland is rich in biodiversity. Photograph: Wojtek Radwański/AFP/Getty Images

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After more than two years of delays, Cop15, the once-in-decade global biodiversity summit, is about to begin. More than 10,000 participants from across the planet will start arriving in Montreal at the weekend to negotiate crucial goals for protecting biodiversity.

There has been a coordinated push behind some targets, namely from a group of countries that want to protect 30% of land and sea for nature (30x30) by the

end of the decade. The idea of “nature positive” is another theme being promoted in the pre-Cop15 rhetoric from NGOs and governments.

I view both as an effort for biodiversity to find a north star, akin to the 1.5C target in the Paris agreement that masks a devilishly complicated legal text.

EO Wilson’s argument that for the good of humanity **half the surface of the Earth should be set aside for nature** is compelling, and 30x30 could be a step in the right direction – but we must be sure it covers the right areas. Expanding protected areas in deserts and degraded lands with few species will have little impact on the nature crisis.

Much of the remaining variety of life on our planet is found in smaller ecosystem fragments such as forest patches and mangroves along tropical coastlines, many of which are under huge pressure from agriculture. These are the areas that humanity must resolve to protect if we are to stop the decline. The agreement must recognise the ecological difference between a beautiful old growth forest, such as the Białowieża forest in Poland and Belarus, and a plantation of Canadian sitka spruce in Wales. The former has massive value for nature, the latter does not.

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Many governments still fail to recognise the difference, and if the protected area target does not commit countries to conserving rare and fragile ecosystems while also upholding human rights, the 30x30 target will be nothing more than a soundbite. Equally important is to ensure funding is available for the effective management of existing and new protected areas. The rights of Indigenous peoples must be respected, or 30x30 could turn into one of the biggest corporate land grabs ever.

I am more sympathetic to the idea of nature positive and a big group of businesses is **pushing for mandatory nature disclosures** to be included in the final agreement at Cop15 – something that could have a real impact if we get it right.

We must learn the lessons of problems with carbon offsetting standards and so-called nature-based solutions. Companies cannot be allowed to destroy ecosystems with a high biodiversity value in wetlands and the tropics and theoretically compensate for the damage they have caused in areas with a much smaller nature value.

Substance, along with money, as I have written before, will be key to a successful final agreement in Montreal. It will be even more important for effective implementation afterwards.

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I have been heartened by the coordination between China and Canada in arranging the summit and hope this continues. Canada has long been an active participant in the UN biodiversity process and could play an important role in resolving outstanding issues in the closing days.

But this is still China's meeting – they hold the presidency of a major international environmental agreement for the first time, hosted part one of Cop15 in Kunming in 2021, and set the theme of Ecological Civilisation: Building a Shared Future for All Life on Earth. Now it's up to them – and all of us – to make Cop15 a success.