

**Ecosystem Health for Sustainable
Development? Mainstreaming Biodiversity
Conservation in Environmental Law and
Governance**

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Ecosystem Health for Sustainable Development: Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation in Environmental Law and Governance

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Abstract

This paper discusses approaches towards nurturing healthy ecosystems for Sustainable Development. The paper notes that healthy ecosystems are integral in the quest for Sustainable Development by supporting biodiversity. It examines the benefits of healthy ecosystems for biodiversity conservation. Despite their role in supporting biodiversity, the paper observes that terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems are facing mounting threats from human-induced activities. It notes that these activities are fuelling the loss of biodiversity with severe consequences for people and planet. In light of the foregoing, the paper argues that nurturing healthy ecosystems is key for biodiversity conservation and Sustainable Development. It discusses how biodiversity conservation can be mainstreamed in environmental law and governance towards fostering ecosystem health for Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

The *Convention on Biological Diversity*¹ defines an ecosystem as a dynamic complex of plant, animal and micro-organism communities and their non-living environment interacting as a functional unit². Further, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), an ecosystem is a community of organisms and their physical environment interacting as an ecological unit³. It has been observed that the key

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¹ Convention on Biological Diversity, 5 June 1992 (1760 U.N.T.S. 69)

² Ibid, article 2

³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Ecosystem.' Available at <https://leap.unep.org/en/knowledge/glossary/ecosystem> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

identifying feature of an ecosystem is that it comprises a system with interactions between its living elements and their environment⁴.

An ecosystem may be natural or artificial, land-based or water-based⁵. It is comprised of a biotic community including plants, animals and other living organisms⁶. Some of the key ecosystems include *freshwater ecosystems* such as rivers and lakes⁷; *terrestrial ecosystems* including forests, grasslands, deserts, and mountain ecosystems⁸; and *marine ecosystems* including coral reefs, estuaries and mangroves⁹.

It has been observed that ecosystems are crucial life-support systems on Earth connecting every species and resource in a complex balance¹⁰. Healthy ecosystems provide critical services including clean air, fresh water, food, energy and natural medicines thus supporting human health and well-being¹¹. Ecosystems also support biodiversity, regulate the climate, protect humanity from natural disasters, and support recreational activities¹². Healthy ecosystems therefore play a key role in sustaining life on Earth including through supporting biodiversity.

⁴ Ecosystems., Available at <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/EcosystemAssessmentConcepts/tabid/98/Default.aspx#:~:text=The%20most%20widely%20used%20definition,since%20all%20its%20elements%20interact> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

⁵ Balasubramanian. A., 'Ecosystem and its Components' Available at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/314213426_ECOSYSTEM_AND_ITS_COMPONENTS (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Hitt. N et al., 'Freshwater Ecosystems and Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.amnh.org/content/download/141379/2285479/file/freshwater-ecosystems-and-biodiversity.pdf> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

⁸ East African Community., 'Terrestrial Ecosystems' Available at <https://www.eac.int/environment/terrestrial-ecosystems> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Supporting sound ecosystem management' Available at <https://www.unep.org/regions/africa/regional-initiatives/supporting-sound-ecosystem-management> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

¹⁰ Ecosystem: Definition, Components, and Structure., Available at <https://greenly.earth/en-us/blog/ecology-news/ecosystem-definition-components-and-structure> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

¹¹ World Health Organization., 'Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/biodiversity> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

¹² Ecosystems: Securing a Healthy Future., Available at <https://www.green.earth/ecosystems> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

Despite their vital importance for people and planet, it has been observed that ecosystems all over the world are facing mounting threats from human activities including deforestation, pollution, agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, urbanisation and overfishing¹³. These activities undermine the availability and quality of ecosystem services with negative consequences for people and planet¹⁴. Fostering ecosystem health is therefore paramount in the pursuit of Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses approaches towards nurturing healthy ecosystems for Sustainable Development. The paper notes that healthy ecosystems are integral in the quest for Sustainable Development by supporting biodiversity. It examines the benefits of healthy ecosystems for biodiversity conservation. Despite their role in supporting biodiversity, the paper observes that terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems are facing mounting threats from human-induced activities. It notes that these activities are fuelling the loss of biodiversity with severe consequences for people and planet. In light of the foregoing, the paper argues that nurturing healthy ecosystems is key for biodiversity conservation and Sustainable Development. It discusses how biodiversity conservation can be mainstreamed in environmental law and governance towards fostering ecosystem health for Sustainable Development.

2.0 Ecosystems and Biodiversity Conservation: Promises and Pitfalls

Ecosystems play an important role in supporting biodiversity. For example, terrestrial ecosystems such as forests are among the most important ecosystems on the planet supporting most of its biodiversity. It has been observed that forests harbour and provide habitats for most of the Earth's terrestrial biodiversity including plant and tree species, mammals, amphibians and birds¹⁵. Forests have been identified as biodiversity hotspots comprising not only trees but also many plants, animals and microorganisms and their

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ United Nation's Environment Programme., 'Earth's Biodiversity depends on the World's Forests' Available at <https://www.unep-wcmc.org/en/news/earths-biodiversity-depends-on-the-worlds-forests> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

associated genetic diversity¹⁶. Due to their crucial role as biodiversity hotspots, it has been argued that the conservation of global biodiversity is intrinsically dependent on the way in which we interact with and use forests¹⁷. In addition, other terrestrial ecosystems such as mountains provide scattered but diverse range of habitats in which numerous plants and animals can be found¹⁸. It has been pointed out that mountain ecosystems are vital in supporting terrestrial biodiversity, especially in the tropics, where they host nearly half of the global biodiversity hotspots¹⁹.

Freshwater ecosystems including rivers, lakes and wetlands also play an important role in biodiversity conservation. It has been observed that these ecosystems provide unique habitat for many plants and animals, including one third of all vertebrate species on the planet²⁰. Despite covering less than 1 percent of the planet's surface, freshwater ecosystems are reservoirs for biodiversity supporting many animal species and aquatic plants²¹.

In addition, coastal/marine ecosystems such as coral reefs, mangrove forests, seagrass beds and estuaries are biodiversity hotspots²². It is estimated that the ocean constitutes

¹⁶ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Forest Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/doc/meetings/cop/cop-09/media/cop9-press-kit-forest-en.pdf> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

¹⁷ United Nation's Environment Programme., 'Earth's Biodiversity depends on the World's Forests' Op Cit

¹⁸ Mountain ecosystem., Available at <https://www.britannica.com/science/mountain-ecosystem> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

¹⁹ International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development., 'Mountains matter for Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.icimod.org/mountains-matter-for-biodiversity/> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

²⁰ United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration., 'Freshwater' Available at <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/types-ecosystem-restoration/fresh-water#:~:text=These%20ecosystems%20range%20from%20mangroves,To%20learn%20more>: (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

²¹ Spotlight on freshwater aquatic ecosystems., Available at <https://www.e-biom.com/spotlight-on-freshwater-aquatic-ecosystems?lang=en#:~:text=Freshwater%20aquatic%20ecosystems%20are%20complex,degraded%20ecosystems%20in%20the%20world>. (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

²² Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Oceans Contain a Wealth of Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/article/biodiversityforwater-1#:~:text=Deep%2Dseabed%20habitats%20host%20between,sustainable%20fishery%20and%20mariculture%20management>. (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

over 90 per cent of the habitable space on the planet and contains nearly 250,000 known species, with many more remaining to be discovered²³. Healthy marine ecosystems are essential for life on Earth and play a key role in planetary wellbeing²⁴. It has been observed that these ecosystems are one of the greatest sources of biodiversity and food, they regulate the climate, and are a major carbon sink²⁵.

Healthy ecosystems therefore play an important role in biodiversity conservation. By supporting biodiversity, terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems sustain life on Earth including through ensuring the availability of ecosystem services such as clean air, water, food, energy, medicines and climate regulation²⁶. However, the health of these ecosystems is being threatened by several factors. For example, human activities such as agricultural expansion, urbanisation and infrastructure development are causing deforestation and forest degradation with severe consequences for people and planet²⁷. These challenges fuel biodiversity loss due to destruction of habitats undermining the availability and quality of ecosystem services²⁸. In addition, it has been observed that freshwater ecosystems are facing mounting threats due to pollution from chemicals, plastics and sewage as well as over-fishing and over-extraction of water to irrigate crops, generate power and supply industry and homes²⁹. Wetlands all the world are also being degraded and drained to support agriculture among other activities³⁰. These threats are contributing to biodiversity loss in freshwater ecosystems. For example, it is estimated

²³ United Nations., 'Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystems Underpin a Healthy Planet and Social Well-Being' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/marine-biodiversity-and-ecosystems-underpin-healthy-planet-and-social-well-being> (05/01/2026)

²⁴ European Commission., 'EU Action Plan: Protecting and Restoring Marine Ecosystems for Sustainable and Resilient Fisheries' Available at <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=CELEX%3A52023DC0102> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ World Health Organization., 'Biodiversity' Op Cit

²⁷ International Union for Conservation of Nature., 'Deforestation and Forest Degradation' Available at <https://iucn.org/resources/issues-brief/deforestation-and-forest-degradation> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration., 'Freshwater' Op Cit

³⁰ Ibid

that one in three freshwater species are threatened with extinction³¹. In addition, human activities including excessive extraction of natural resources from the ocean through deep sea mining and drilling, marine pollution, destruction of marine/coastal ecosystems and habitats, rapid urbanization, and climate change are posing significant threats to marine biodiversity³². It has been argued that loss of marine biodiversity undermines the healthy functioning of the ocean and its ability to provide the services that we need to survive and thrive³³.

In light of the foregoing challenges, it is imperative to foster ecosystem health for Sustainable Development.

3.0 Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation into Environmental Law and Governance

Fostering healthy ecosystems is vital in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. It has been observed that healthy communities are sustained by well-functioning ecosystems, which provide critical services including clean air, fresh water, food, energy and natural medicines³⁴. Healthy ecosystems also support biodiversity, prevent diseases and stabilize the climate³⁵. Ensuring ecosystem health is therefore key for Sustainable Development. However, terrestrial, freshwater and marine/coastal ecosystems are being damaged and degraded all over the world due to human and environmental factors including pollution, deforestation, agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, land degradation and climate change³⁶. These activities fuel biodiversity loss with negative consequences for people and planet.

³¹ Ibid

³² United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'What is Ocean Biodiversity' Available at <https://oceanliteracy.unesco.org/ocean-biodiversity/> (Accessed on 05/01/2026)

³³ United Nations., 'Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystems Underpin a Healthy Planet and Social Well-Being' Op Cit

³⁴ World Health Organization., 'Biodiversity' Op Cit

³⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Ecosystem.' Op Cit

³⁶ International Union for Conservation of Nature., 'Deforestation and Forest Degradation' Op Cit

Ecosystem Health for Sustainable Development? Mainstreaming Biodiversity Conservation in Environmental Law and Governance

In order to foster ecosystem health for Sustainable Development, it is imperative to mainstream biodiversity conservation into environmental law and governance. It has been correctly noted that sound biodiversity conservation is key in ensuring healthy and functioning ecosystems thus ensuring a continuous supply of ecosystem services such as food, water, clean air and medicines³⁷. Since biodiversity underpins all ecosystems and their services, mainstreaming biodiversity conservation in environmental law and governance can foster ecosystem health for Sustainable Development³⁸.

Biodiversity conservation is a key agenda globally. For example, the *Convention on Biological Diversity*³⁹ aims to foster the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources⁴⁰. In addition, the *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)*⁴¹ was adopted towards strengthening efforts to conserve biodiversity worldwide for Sustainable Development. It aims to halt and reverse biodiversity loss and ensure sustainable use of biodiversity towards meeting the objectives of the Convention on Biological Diversity and enhancing the role of biodiversity in Sustainable Development⁴². Further, the United Nations *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*⁴³ recognises the role of biodiversity conservation in ensuring ecosystem health for sustainability. Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 15 under the Agenda seeks to *inter*

³⁷ United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'Biodiversity Underpins all Ecosystems and their Services' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/enviroatlas/enviroatlas-benefit-category-biodiversity-conservation> (Accessed on 06/01/2026)

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Convention on Biological Diversity, Op Cit

⁴⁰ Ibid, article 1

⁴¹ Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Decision Adopted by the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity: 15/4. Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/doc/decisions/cop-15/cop-15-dec-04-en.pdf> (Accessed on 06/01/2026)

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ United Nations General Assembly., 'Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.' 21 October 2015, A/RES/70/1., Available at <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (Accessed on 06/01/2026)

alia conserve and halt the loss of biodiversity for Sustainable Development⁴⁴. It urges countries to take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats and ecosystems, halt the loss of biodiversity, and protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species⁴⁵.

Sound biodiversity conservation is therefore crucial for ecosystem health and Sustainable Development. Achieving this goal involves mainstreaming biodiversity conservation in environmental law and governance including through the adoption of National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs)⁴⁶. The Convention on Biological Diversity requires parties to develop, implement and report on NBSAPs and to mainstream the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity into relevant sectoral or cross-sectoral plans, programmes, and policies⁴⁷. It has been noted that NBSAPs reflect national strategies, plans, or programs for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity as aligned with measures set out in the Convention on Biological Diversity⁴⁸. NBSAPs therefore provide an effective way towards mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into environmental law and governance by identifying conservation priorities, strategies, plans and policies according to national needs and interests⁴⁹. It is therefore imperative for all countries to adopt and implement NBSAPs towards mainstreaming biodiversity conservation into environmental law and governance.

⁴⁴ Ibid

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity Secretariat., 'Guidance on Integrating Human Rights in National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs)' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/doc/nbsap/Integrating-human%20rights-in-NBSAPs.pdf> (Accessed on 06/01/2026)

⁴⁷ The Convention on Biological Diversity., Op Cit

⁴⁸ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Guidance on Integrating Human Rights in National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs)' Op Cit

⁴⁹ Ibid

In addition, there is need to implement effective biodiversity conservation strategies for ecosystem health. For example, by restoring terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems, it is possible to foster ecosystem health and sound biodiversity conservation for Sustainable Development⁵⁰. It has been observed that ecosystem restoration returns critical habitats and ecosystems to a healthy state, increases the amount of carbon sequestered therefore strengthening climate change mitigation while also strengthening biodiversity conservation efforts⁵¹. Ecosystem restoration is vital in biodiversity conservation since it reclaims habitats and ecosystem functions and recovers the ecological integrity of the lands and waters on which plants, animals and other living organisms depend⁵². It is therefore necessary to restore damaged and degraded ecosystems for ecosystem health and biodiversity conservation.

Involving multiple stakeholders in biodiversity conservation is also crucial towards fostering ecosystem health for Sustainable Development⁵³. For example, indigenous peoples, local communities and rural women have been identified as the unsung heroes of biodiversity conservation possessing indigenous and traditional knowledge that emphasizes harmony with nature⁵⁴. Harnessing their contribution can therefore aid in conserving critical ecosystems and threatened species for ecosystem health and biodiversity conservation⁵⁵. Further, the private sector can play a crucial role in fostering

⁵⁰ Center for Biological Diversity., 'Ecosystem Restoration' Available at https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/programs/public_lands/forests/ecosystem_restoration/# (Accessed on 06/01/2026)

⁵¹ World Economic Forum., 'What are Natural Climate Solutions?' Available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2021/09/what-are-natural-climate-solutions-ncs-alliance/#:~:text=NCS%20are%20actions%20that%20avoid,forest%20conservation%2C%20restoration%20and%20management> (Accessed on 06/01/2026)

⁵² Center for Biological Diversity., 'Ecosystem Restoration' Op Cit

⁵³ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Acting for biodiversity can take a diversity of forms' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/article/idb-2025-nudges#:~:text=Biodiversity%20conservation%20and%20restoration%20requires,the%20KMGBF%20and%20the%20SDGs> (Accessed on 06/01/2026)

⁵⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples: The unsung heroes of conservation' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-unsung-heroes-conservation> (Accessed on 06/01/2026))

⁵⁵ Ibid

ecosystem health including through unlocking biodiversity finance which can be channeled to restoration efforts and developing biodiversity-friendly business models that emphasize harmony with nature⁵⁶. Embracing the role of various stakeholders including indigenous peoples, local communities, women and the private sector can therefore strengthen biodiversity conservation efforts for Sustainable Development.

4.0 Conclusion

Ensuring ecosystem health is vital in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. Achieving this goal involves mainstreaming biodiversity conservation in environmental law and governance. This can be actualised through developing and implementing NBSAPs⁵⁷; restringing damaged and degraded ecosystems⁵⁸; and involving multiple stakeholders in biodiversity conservation efforts⁵⁹. Mainstreaming biodiversity conservation in environmental law and governance is necessary and practical towards fostering ecosystem health for Sustainable Development.

⁵⁶ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Acting for biodiversity can take a diversity of forms' Op Cit

⁵⁷ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity Secretariat., 'Guidance on Integrating Human Rights in National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs)' Op Cit

⁵⁸ Center for Biological Diversity., 'Ecosystem Restoration' Op Cit

⁵⁹ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Acting for biodiversity can take a diversity of forms' Op Cit

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