

Multilateralism and Global Cooperation for Biodiversity Conservation: Taking Collective Legal and Policy Action to Protect Endangered Species

Kariuki Muigua

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Kariuki Muigua*

Abstract

This paper critically examines the role of multilateralism and global cooperation in biodiversity conservation. The paper argues that biodiversity loss is a major problem for the global community with many species facing the risk of extinction. It further notes that biodiversity loss is a problem that transcends national borders. Consequently, the paper argues that biodiversity conservation is a collective endeavour that requires the involvement of all nations and all stakeholders. The paper discusses how multilateralism and global cooperation can be harnessed towards protecting endangered species for sound biodiversity conservation and Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Biodiversity conservation is a crucial global agenda in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. Biodiversity refers to the variability among living organisms from all sources including, inter alia, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; including diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems¹. It has been argued that biodiversity describes the richness and variety of life on Earth². It comprises not only the world's species with their unique evolutionary histories, but also genetic variability within and among populations of species and the distribution of species across local habitats, ecosystems, landscapes, and

* PhD in Law (Nrb), FCI Arb (Chartered Arbitrator), OGW, LL. B (Hons) Nrb, LL.M (Environmental Law) Nrb; Dip. In Law (KSL); FCPS (K); Dip. in Arbitration (UK); MKIM; Mediator; Consultant: Lead expert EIA/EA NEMA; BSI ISO/IEC 27001:2005 ISMS Lead Auditor/ Implementer; ESG Consultant; Advocate of the High Court of Kenya; Professor of Environmental Law and Conflict Management at the University of Nairobi, Faculty of Law; Member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) [November, 2025].

¹ Convention on Biological Diversity, 5 June 1992 (1760 U.N.T.S. 69)., Article 2

² Biodiversity Definition., Available at <https://byjus.com/biology/biodiversity/> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

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whole continents or oceans³. Biodiversity can therefore be organized at three levels: the genetic, species, and ecosystem levels⁴.

Biodiversity underpins life on Earth and is a key element in almost all Sustainable Development efforts. According to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), biodiversity forms the web of life, of which humans are integral and upon which people and the planet depend on for their health and well-being⁵. It is estimated that over half the world's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is moderately or highly dependent on nature, which also provides other crucial services including medicine and social benefits⁶. Biodiversity provides all the ecosystem functions and services that sustain life on the planet including food, clean air, clean water and medicines⁷. From pollination of crops by bees, to the natural filtration of water by wetlands, to the crucial carbon capture performed by vast forests and the ocean, biodiversity is key to the endurance and adaptability of humanity and ecosystems⁸.

Achieving Sustainable Development is therefore heavily dependent on rich biodiversity and healthy ecosystems. However, it has been observed that species are now disappearing hundreds, or even thousands, of times faster than the natural background

³ What is Biodiversity?., Available at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK224405/> (Accessed on 05/07/2025)

⁴ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization., 'Biodiversity' Available at <https://whc.unesco.org/en/glossary/193> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UNEP and Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.unep.org/unep-and-biodiversity#:~:text=Biological%20diversity%20is%20the%20variety,of%20human%20influence%20as%20Owell> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

⁶ Ibid

⁷ World Wildlife Fund., 'What is Biodiversity?' Available at <https://www.worldwildlife.org/pages/what-is-biodiversity#:~:text=Biodiversity%20is%20all%20the%20different,maintain%20balance%20and%20support%20life> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

⁸ Smith. M., 'Biodiversity as the Foundation of Healthy Communities' Available at <https://edenthiving.org/biodiversity-as-the-foundation-of-healthy-communities/> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

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rate of extinction⁹. It is estimated that nearly one million species including plants and animals face extinction unless all of society works to reduce the drivers of biodiversity loss¹⁰. Human activities including agricultural expansion into habitats, land-use changes, deforestation, degradation of ecosystems, pollution and direct exploitation of species are driving global biodiversity loss¹¹. In addition, climate change is also fuelling biodiversity loss by altering marine, terrestrial, and freshwater ecosystems all over the world¹². Global biodiversity loss threatens Sustainable Development since it affects complex interactions in nature that sustain life on the planet¹³. Consequently, biodiversity conservation is a necessary and fundamental global ideal in the quest for Sustainable Development.

This paper critically examines the role of multilateralism and global cooperation in biodiversity conservation. The paper argues that biodiversity loss is a major problem for the global community with many species facing the risk of extinction. It further notes that biodiversity loss is a problem that transcends national borders. Consequently, the paper argues that biodiversity conservation is a collective endeavour that requires the involvement of all nations and all stakeholders. The paper discusses how multilateralism and global cooperation can be harnessed towards protecting endangered species for sound biodiversity conservation and Sustainable Development.

⁹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UNEP and Biodiversity' Op Cit

¹⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UNEP Nature Fund' Available at <https://www.unep.org/about-un-environment-programme/funding-and-partnerships/planetary-funds/unep-nature-fund#:~:text=Around%20one%20million%20species%20face,Enhance%20nature%20conservation%20and%20restoration> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Habitat and Species Loss' Available at <https://www.unep.org/gef/focal-areas/biodiversity/our-work/habitat-and-species-loss#:~:text=Addressing%20the%20drivers%20of%20habitat,science%2Dbased%20and%20scalable%20approaches>: (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹² United Nations., 'Biodiversity - our strongest natural defense against climate change' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/biodiversity#:~:text=Climate%20change%20has%20altered%20marine,and%20livelihoods%20provided%20by%20nature>. (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UNEP and Biodiversity' Op Cit

2.0 The Need to Protect Endangered Species

The ongoing global loss of biodiversity has made some plant and animal species to become endangered. An endangered species refers to an animal or plant that is considered to be at risk of extinction¹⁴. Further, the term endangered species can also be used to describe those plants and animals that have become so rare that they are in danger of becoming extinct¹⁵. It has also been argued that by being classified as 'endangered', it means that a species is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range¹⁶. Species are usually classified as endangered when their populations have declined to such a degree that they are likely to disappear entirely from their natural habitats if appropriate conservation measures are not urgently implemented¹⁷.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) is a body responsible for classifying species as endangered or critically endangered based on several factors including population size, habitat loss, and geographic range¹⁸. IUCN maintains a *Red List of Threatened Species*¹⁹ which has evolved to become the world's most comprehensive information source on the global extinction risk status of animal, fungus and plant species. According to IUCN, more than 48,600 species are threatened with extinction with many of them being critically endangered²⁰. It is estimated that over 8,400 species are

¹⁴ National Wildlife Federation., 'Endangered Species' Available at <https://www.nwf.org/Educational-Resources/Wildlife-Guide/Understanding-Conservation/Endangered-Species> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹⁵ United States Environmental Protection Agency., 'What are Endangered and Threatened Species?' Available at <https://www.epa.gov/endangered-species/learn-more-about-threatened-and-endangered-species> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹⁶ What are the differences between endangered, threatened, imperiled, and at-risk species?., Available at <https://www.usgs.gov/faqs/what-are-differences-between-endangered-threatened-imperiled-and-risk-species> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹⁷ Saving Endangered Species., Available at <https://www.green.earth/endangered-species> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹⁸ International Union for Conservation of Nature., 'The IUCN Red List of threatened Species' Available at <https://www.iucnredlist.org/> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

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critically endangered, and many thousands more are endangered or vulnerable²¹. According to UNEP, 1 million of the planet's estimated 8 million species of plants and animals are threatened with extinction²².

Thousands of species have become threatened and endangered primarily due to human activities. For instance, human activities including habitat destruction, over-exploitation of natural resources, and pollution have led to the decline of many species²³. Human activities in particular agriculture, infrastructure development, housing and industry reduce the habitats of native species leaving little room for species grow, live and reproduce thus making many species endangered²⁴. It has been argued that agriculture alone is responsible for more than 85 per cent of the species at risk of extinction largely due to habitat destruction²⁵. As the human population continues to grow and urbanise, more species are becoming endangered since natural habitats are being destroyed and fragmented to pave way for human activities including agriculture, urban development, housing, industry and infrastructure development²⁶. This results in the loss of food, shelter, and breeding sites for many species resulting in their decline²⁷.

²¹ The Global Environment Facility., 'An exploration of endangered wildlife and their ecosystems' Available at <https://www.thegef.org/newsroom/feature-stories/exploration-endangered-wildlife-and-their-ecosystems> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

²² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Species Conservation' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/nature-action/conservation-restoration-and-sustainable-use/species-conservation> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

²³ DGB Group., 'Why Should Endangered Species be Protected?' Available at <https://www.green.earth/blog/why-should-endangered-species-be-protected#:~:text=Protecting%20endangered%20species%20is%20crucial,valuable%20resources%20for%20human%20populations> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

²⁴ Endangered Species., Available at <https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/endangered-species/> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

²⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Five Drivers of the Nature Crisis' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/five-drivers-nature-crisis#:~:text=The%20Kunming%20Montreal%20Global%20Biodiversity%20Framework,-The%20planet%20is&text=One%20million%20species%20are%20threatened,reverse%20nature%20loss%20by%202030> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

²⁶ DGB Group., 'Why Should Endangered Species be Protected?'., Op Cit

²⁷ Ibid

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The ongoing loss of species threatens the attainment of Sustainable Development. It has been noted that some endangered species are the source of vital resources including food and medicine²⁸. Further, some endangered species provide essential ecosystem services such as pollination, seed dispersal, and regulating the population of other organisms in the food chain²⁹. The loss of species thus undermines the availability of vital ecosystem services and functions including food, medicine, pollination, seed dispersal and regulation of populations in ecosystems. When species are lost, the delicate balance in nature that is key in sustaining life on the planet is affected³⁰. This can threaten the stability of entire ecosystems and the health and vitality of many other species³¹. Consequently, it has been correctly noted that protecting endangered species is crucial in safeguarding the intricate balance of life on the planet therefore ensuring a healthier and more secure future for both humanity and nature³².

3.0 Taking Collective Legal and Policy Action to Protect Endangered Species

Protecting endangered species is a pertinent goal both globally and regionally towards ensuring sound biodiversity conservation. For example, the *Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)*³³ regulates international trade in roughly 5,800 species of animals and 35,000 species of plants to prevent overexploitation³⁴. CITES requires all contracting states to take appropriate measures to regulate trade in endangered species of wild fauna and flora including penalizing trade or possession of such species, and providing for the confiscation or return to the state of export of such species³⁵. It has been argued that CITES guides nations across the world

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ International Fund for Animal Welfare., 'Why Should we Protect Endangered Animals?' Available at <https://www.ifaw.org/international/journal/why-should-we-protect-endangered-animals> (Accessed on 14/11/2025)

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, March 3rd, 1973, 993 U.N.T.S. 243

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

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on how to protect endangered species by regulating and monitoring their trade³⁶. The Convention establishes a framework for countries to *cooperate* with each other to ensure that plant and animal species are not depleted by international trade³⁷.

In addition, the *Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals*³⁸ acknowledges the need for states to take action to avoid any migratory species becoming endangered. It urges states to conserve and, where feasible and appropriate, restore those habitats of the species which are of importance in removing the species from danger of extinction³⁹. It has been argued that this Convention is crucial in protecting endangered species since it recognizes that states must be the protectors of migratory species that live within or pass through their national jurisdictions and aims to conserve terrestrial, marine, and avian migratory species throughout their ranges⁴⁰.

Further, the *African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources*⁴¹ sets out the need to protect endangered species in Africa. The Convention requires African countries to identify species that are threatened or may become so, and provide them with appropriate protection⁴². It further requires states to identify the factors that are causing the depletion of animal and plant species which are threatened or which may become so, with a view to their elimination, and to accord a special protection to such species, whether terrestrial, freshwater or marine, and to the habitat necessary for their survival⁴³.

³⁶ International Fund for Animal Welfare., 'What is CITES?' Available at <https://www.ifaw.org/international/journal/what-cites> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals., Available at https://www.cms.int/sites/default/files/instrument/CMS-text.en_.PDF (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

³⁹ Ibid, article III (4)

⁴⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Fourteenth Meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS COP 14)' Available at <https://www.unep.org/events/conference/fourteenth-meeting-conference-parties-convention-conservation-migratory-species> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁴¹ African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources., Available at https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/41550-treaty-Charter_ConservationNature_NaturalResources.pdf (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ibid, article X

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Protecting endangered species is therefore a vital goal at both global and regional levels. Multilateralism and global cooperation are effective approaches towards attaining this goal. For example, biodiversity loss has been identified as one of the most significant global sustainability issues that affects all nations⁴⁴. It is fueled and worsened by numerous factors including land-use changes, deforestation, climate change, population growth, illegal trade in wildlife, pollution and introduction of invasive species in habitats most of which are transboundary in nature⁴⁵. Consequently, it has been argued that protecting biodiversity requires collaborative efforts involving all nations and all stakeholders for enhanced conservation and wider sustainability outcomes⁴⁶. Global cooperation is essential in protecting endangered species since biodiversity loss transcends national borders and requires collective action to address its complex and interconnected drivers⁴⁷.

It is therefore imperative to foster multilateralism and global cooperation in order to effectively protect endangered species. Multilateralism refers to a state where different countries collaborate with the main aim of coming up with solutions for common problems facing them⁴⁸. It has been argued that multilateralism is based on collaboration between several countries to achieve common objectives, involving continuous negotiation and dialogue between member states of an international or regional organization with the aim of finding consensual solutions to global challenges⁴⁹. It plays an essential role in bringing countries together and establishing a common strategy with

⁴⁴ United Nations Climate Change., 'What is the Triple Planetary Crisis?' Available at <https://unfccc.int/news/what-is-the-triple-planetary-crisis> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁴⁵ White. R.M., 'Facilitating biodiversity conservation through partnerships to achieve transformative outcomes' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/cobi.14057> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁴⁶ Ibid

⁴⁷ European Environment Agency., 'Interview – International cooperation to strengthen biodiversity' Available at <https://www.eea.europa.eu/en/newsroom/editorial/interview-international-cooperation-to-strengthen-biodiversity> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁴⁸ Karlsson-Vinkhuyzen. S., & Dahl. A., 'Building Effective Multilateralism for the Environment' Available at https://iefworld.org/fl/Policybrief_KarlssonVinkhuyzen_Dahl.pdf (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁴⁹ Ibid

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one goal: safeguarding the planet⁵⁰. According to UNEP, addressing the triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and waste and pollution, as well as other global environmental challenges, requires efficient global and regional cooperation through environmental multilateralism⁵¹. In particular, it has been argued that multilateralism is an important tool towards ensuring sound biodiversity conservation including through international treaties and coordinated policies to protect nature⁵². Multilateralism can strengthen efforts towards protecting endangered species by ensuring international cooperation in tackling drivers of biodiversity loss such as the international trade in endangered species, pollution, land degradation, climate change and habitat destruction⁵³.

Global cooperation including through multilateralism is therefore crucial in protecting endangered species. By strengthening multilateralism and global cooperation, it is possible for states to implement collective legal and policy action towards addressing drivers of biodiversity loss. It has been correctly that actions or inactions in one nation or region can have adverse impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems elsewhere⁵⁴. Therefore, multilateralism and global cooperation are key in identifying threats to biodiversity and implementing common solutions towards protecting endangered species and biodiversity at large⁵⁵. Further, through international cooperation, it is possible to unlock biodiversity finance which is crucial in protecting endangered species including through

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'How Multilateral Environmental Agreements Can Help Mend the Planet' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/how-multilateral-environmental-agreements-can-help-mend-planet> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁵² Burgass. M.J., 'Three Key considerations for biodiversity conservation in multilateral agreements' Available at <https://conbio.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/conl.12764> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ European Environment Agency., 'Interview – International cooperation to strengthen biodiversity' Op Cit

⁵⁵ Ibid

habitat conservation and ecosystem restoration⁵⁶. Strengthening multilateralism and global cooperation is therefore necessary towards protecting endangered species.

4.0 Conclusion

The ongoing global biodiversity loss has made many plant and animal species to become endangered. This undermines sustainability due to loss of vital ecosystem services and functions. Protecting endangered species is therefore an urgent global priority in the quest towards Sustainable Development. Multilateralism and global cooperation are effective tools towards protecting endangered species including through international treaties, coordinated policies and collaborative efforts to tackle drivers of biodiversity loss⁵⁷. International cooperation can also enhance access to biodiversity finance which is crucial in protecting endangered species and their habitats⁵⁸. Strengthening multilateralism and global cooperation is therefore an effective and vital strategy that should be embraced towards taking collective legal and policy action to protect endangered species for sustainability.

⁵⁶ Thool. V., 'Biodiversity Loss under the Lens of Multilateralism: An Environmental Governance and International Law Perspective' Available at <https://brill.com/display/book/9789004516489/BP000021.xml?language=en&srsltid=AfmBOooBWjL5bGlxRvlgH8EMjt33SyBy5qTcZx5mmv-r8jyzTrcOazq4> (Accessed on 15/11/2025)

⁵⁷ Burgass. M.J., 'Three Key considerations for biodiversity conservation in multilateral agreements' Op Cit

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