

Voices in Biodiversity Governance: Enhancing Participation and Ensuring Rights for Indigenous Peoples and Vulnerable Communities

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
1.0 Introduction	3
2.0 Role of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Biodiversity Governance.....	5
3.0 Enhancing Participation and Ensuring Rights for Indigenous Peoples and Vulnerable Communities for Sound Biodiversity Governance	8

4.0 Conclusion	10
References	12

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Abstract

This paper discusses how biodiversity governance can be strengthened globally by enhancing participation and ensuring rights for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities. The paper notes that indigenous peoples and local communities are key stewards of the planet's biodiversity. It observes that indigenous peoples and local communities have utilised unique knowledge systems and practices that emphasize harmony with nature to ensure sound biodiversity conservation for many centuries. Despite their crucial role in biodiversity governance, the paper notes that the

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voices of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities is yet to be fully harnessed undermining biodiversity conservation efforts globally. Consequently, it argues that strengthening the participation and upholding the rights of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities is crucial for sound biodiversity conservation. It examines how this ideal can be realised towards Sustainable Development.

1.0 Introduction

Sound biodiversity governance is vital in the pursuit of Sustainable Development. It has been observed that biodiversity is essential for people and planet. For instance, biodiversity provides and supports vital resources including food, air, water, and energy which are necessary for sustaining life on the planet¹. Biodiversity has been identified as the foundation of most of our industries and livelihoods². It also helps regulate climate through carbon storage and regulating rainfall³. Further, it has been pointed out that biodiversity also filters air and water and mitigates the impact of natural disasters such as landslides and coastal storms⁴.

Biodiversity therefore plays a crucial role in supporting human and ecosystem health. It has been correctly noted that biodiversity provides ecosystem goods and services essential to human, animal and ecosystem's health and well-being⁵. Further, it has been observed that healthy communities rely on well-functioning ecosystems and their rich biodiversity⁶. Such ecosystems provide clean air, fresh water, medicines and ensure food security⁷. They also limit disease and stabilize the climate⁸. The United Nations observes that biodiversity forms the web of life that human beings depend on for vital resources and services including food, water, medicine, a stable climate and economic growth

¹ Buttke, D., Allen, D., & Higgins, C., 'Benefits of Biodiversity to Human Health and Well-being' Available at https://www.nps.gov/articles/parksciencev31-n1_buttke_et al-htm.htm (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Biodiversity: our solutions are in nature' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/biodiversity-our-solutions-are-nature> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity., 'Biodiversity and Health' Available at <https://www.cbd.int/health> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

⁶ World Health Organization., 'Biodiversity and Health' Available at Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/biodiversity-and-health#:~:text=Biodiversity%20loss%20can%20have%20significant,cause%20or%20exacerbate%20political%20conflict> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

among others⁹. It is estimated that over half of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is dependent on nature¹⁰.

Despite its fundamental importance for people and planet, the world's biodiversity is facing mounting threats. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) points out that species are now disappearing hundreds, or even thousands, of times faster than the natural background rate of extinction with ecosystems also being damaged and degraded globally¹¹. It is estimated that nearly 1 million species worldwide face the risk of extinction¹². Global biodiversity loss is largely driven by human activities including unsustainable urban development, agricultural expansion into habitats and ecosystems, pollution, deforestation, land degradation, over extraction of resources, and human-induced climate change¹³. The loss of biodiversity hinders progress towards Sustainable Development by affecting human health, livelihoods, economic development and environmental sustainability¹⁴. Ensuring sound biodiversity conservation is therefore a key global agenda towards Sustainable Development.

This paper discusses how biodiversity governance can be strengthened globally by enhancing participation and ensuring rights for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities. The paper notes that indigenous peoples and local communities are key stewards of the planet's biodiversity. It observes that indigenous peoples and local communities have utilised unique knowledge systems and practices that emphasize harmony with nature to ensure sound biodiversity conservation for many centuries. Despite their crucial role in biodiversity governance, the paper notes that the voices of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities is yet to be fully harnessed undermining biodiversity conservation efforts globally. Consequently, it argues that strengthening the participation and upholding the rights of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities is crucial for sound biodiversity conservation. It examines how this ideal can be realised towards Sustainable Development.

⁹ United Nations Biodiversity., 'Biodiversity - our strongest natural defense against climate change' Available at <https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/climate-issues/biodiversity> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ United Nations Environment Programme., 'UNEP and Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.unep.org/unep-and-biodiversity> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

¹² Ibid

¹³ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Tackling Ecosystem Degradation & Pollution' Available at <https://www.unep.org/topics/ocean-seas-and-coasts/ecosystem-degradation-pollution> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

¹⁴ Ibid

2.0 Role of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in Biodiversity Governance

Indigenous peoples and local communities are key stewards of the planet's biodiversity. It has been observed that for many centuries, indigenous peoples and local communities have been successful guardians of the world's biodiversity through their innovation, knowledge and practices¹⁵. Despite comprising just over 6 percent of the global population, indigenous peoples and local communities are custodians of more than a third of the planet's most important biodiversity hotspots¹⁶. Further, it has been observed that lands occupied and managed by indigenous peoples and local communities are in better ecological conditions comprising of vibrant ecosystems and biodiversity when compared to those managed by non-indigenous populations¹⁷.

UNEP identifies indigenous peoples and local communities as the unsung heroes of biodiversity conservation¹⁸. It observes that areas managed by indigenous peoples comprise the oldest form of biodiversity conservation, and in most cases, the most effective¹⁹. For instance, many areas inhabited by indigenous peoples and local communities coincide with some of the world's remaining major concentrations of biodiversity including some of the planet's largest tropical forests such as the Amazon in South America²⁰. Further, it has been observed that the correlation between areas occupied by indigenous peoples and local communities and sound biodiversity conservation is notable in montane areas rich in biodiversity, such as the Andes in South America and Himalayas in Asia²¹. Consequently, it has been pointed out that indigenous peoples and local communities are custodians of some of the most pristine ecosystems on

¹⁵ United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre., 'Championing Indigenous Peoples' Stewardship of Biodiversity' Available at <https://www.unep-wcmc.org/en/news/championing-indigenous-peoples-stewardship-of-biodiversity> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ 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 24/02/2026)

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ World Bank Group., 'The Role of Indigenous Peoples in Biodiversity Conservation: The Natural but Often Forgotten Partners' Available at <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/995271468177530126/pdf/443000WP0BOX321onservati0n01PUBLIC1.pdf> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

²¹ Ibid

Earth²². These areas contain more species and see lower rates of ecosystem degradation and biodiversity loss when compared to other territories²³.

Indigenous peoples and local communities have been successful stewards of biodiversity for many centuries largely due to their indigenous knowledge systems and practices which emphasize harmony with nature. It has been observed that indigenous peoples and local communities all over the world are custodians of unique and valuable knowledge systems and practices that emphasize harmony between people and planet²⁴. These practices have a minimal impact on the environment and are highly adaptive to ecological changes, fostering healthy and resilient ecosystems and are therefore an effective solution towards tackling biodiversity loss and climate change among other environmental threats²⁵.

In particular, it has been observed that indigenous peoples and local communities have developed Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) which has enabled them to ensure sound biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management²⁶. TEK has been identified as experiential knowledge developed by indigenous peoples and local communities over millennia based on their close and intimate relationship with nature²⁷. It has been observed that TEK provides key insights and deep understanding about the interaction of plants, animals and people within their ecosystems thus bolstering biodiversity conservation efforts²⁸. For many centuries, indigenous peoples and local communities have utilised TEK to ensure sound biodiversity governance through practices such as sustainable agriculture and land management through agroforestry, crop rotation and

²² World Resources Institute., 'Protecting Biodiversity Hinges on Securing Indigenous and Community Land Rights' Available at <https://www.wri.org/insights/indigenous-and-local-community-land-rights-protect-biodiversity> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

²³ Ibid

²⁴ United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous knowledge is crucial in the fight against climate change - here's why' Available at <https://climatepromise.undp.org/news-and-stories/indigenous-knowledge-crucial-fight-against-climate-change-heres-why> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Bixcul. B., 'Indigenous Peoples, Biodiversity, and the Responsibilities of Financial Institutions' Available at <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/news/indigenous-peoples-biodiversity-and-responsibilities-financial-institutions> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Sinthumule. N., 'Traditional ecological knowledge and its role in biodiversity conservation: a systematic review' Available at <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/environmental-science/articles/10.3389/fenvs.2023.1164900/full> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

use of climate-resilient crops²⁹; sustainable water management³⁰; medicinal use of native plants³¹; management of invasive species³²; and sound conservation of ecosystems including forests and fresh water resources³³.

Giving indigenous peoples and local communities a voice in decision-making processes is therefore vital in ensuring sound biodiversity governance for Sustainable Development. However, the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities in biodiversity governance is undermined by several challenges. It has been observed that indigenous peoples and local communities comprise some of the most marginalised and vulnerable populations who are often sidelined in national policies including biodiversity conservation efforts³⁴. Further, violation of the rights of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities, in particular indigenous land rights, undermine their role in biodiversity governance³⁵. It has been observed that due to unsecure land rights, indigenous peoples worldwide often face eviction from the ancestral lands they have inhabited for generations in order to support the extraction of natural resources, agricultural activities and infrastructure projects among other activities³⁶. This situation undermines sound biodiversity conservation since it prevents indigenous peoples and local communities from practicing their TEK while also leading to ecosystem degradation³⁷.

Indigenous peoples and local communities are also disproportionately impacted by global biodiversity loss which affects their rights and well-being. For instance, it has been observed that due to their subsistence economies and spiritual connection to lands and territories, indigenous peoples and local communities suffer adversely from biodiversity loss and environmental degradation worsening their vulnerability and undermining their lives, livelihoods, and cultural and spiritual well-being³⁸.

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous peoples and their communities' Available at <https://www.unep.org/civil-society-engagement/major-groups-modalities/major-group-categories/indigenous-peoples-and> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

³¹ Ibid

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ World Resources Institute., 'Protecting Biodiversity Hinges on Securing Indigenous and Community Land Rights' Op Cit

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Available at <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/indigenous-peoples-and-nature-they-protect> (Accessed on 24/02/2026)

³⁷ Ibid

³⁸ Ibid

In light of these challenges, there is need to foster the participation of indigenous peoples and local communities in biodiversity governance including through upholding their rights in order to reduce their vulnerability to biodiversity loss while also fostering sustainable outcomes.

3.0 Enhancing Participation and Ensuring Rights for Indigenous Peoples and Vulnerable Communities for Sound Biodiversity Governance

Indigenous peoples and local communities are key stakeholders who can bolster biodiversity conservation efforts. The knowledge and traditional practices of indigenous peoples and local communities are rooted in a deep understanding of and respect for the environment and ecological systems and promote sustainable use of natural resources towards Sustainable Development³⁹. Consequently, indigenous peoples and local communities have been identified as crucial agents of change, whose livelihood practices, traditional knowledge and ways of life are fundamental for sound environmental governance, protecting biodiversity, combating climate change and realizing the ambitious vision of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development⁴⁰. In particular, harnessing TEK can ensure sound biodiversity governance since this knowledge system emphasizes balance between humans and the natural world⁴¹.

It is therefore imperative to enhance the participation of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities in biodiversity governance. According to UNEP, the contribution of indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities is essential in designing and implementing effective solutions for biodiversity and ecosystems⁴². It notes that the knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples and local communities can contribute to sound biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management⁴³. It is therefore imperative to put indigenous peoples and local communities at the heart of decision-making processes on biodiversity governance. It has been observed that there is need to strengthen the representation, participation and engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities in conservation and the sustainable use of biodiversity at all levels in

³⁹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous Knowledge is Crucial in the Fight against Climate Change - here's why' Op Cit

⁴⁰ International Labour Organization., 'Sustainable Development Goals: Indigenous Peoples in Focus' Available at https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_503715.pdf (Accessed on 25/02/2026)

⁴¹ United Nations Development Programme., 'Indigenous Knowledge is Crucial in the Fight against Climate Change - here's why' Op Cit

⁴² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁴³ Ibid

order to ensure sound biodiversity governance⁴⁴. For example, by involving indigenous peoples and local communities in the development and implementation of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs), it is possible to ensure that their voices are taken into account for sustainable outcomes⁴⁵.

Further, ensuring rights for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities is key in fostering sound biodiversity governance. For example, it has been observed that respecting and upholding the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) for indigenous peoples is vital towards effective biodiversity governance⁴⁶. FPIC has been described as a fundamental right of self-determination that ensures participation by all people with a particular focus on indigenous peoples and local communities in development projects in order to ensure that such projects are conducted in a sustainable manner taking into account their economic, social and cultural impact⁴⁷. It has been argued that FPIC focuses on obtaining consent from indigenous peoples for any activities undertaken on their lands⁴⁸. According to the United Nations, FPIC allows indigenous peoples to give or withhold consent to a project that may affect them or their territories⁴⁹. It has been observed that FPIC recognises that biodiversity conservation and sustainable natural resource use are inextricably linked to people's rights to secure their livelihoods and live in dignity⁵⁰. By fostering the right to FPIC, it is possible to promote sound biodiversity conservation including through consulting with indigenous peoples and local communities in order to ensure that activities taking place on their territories,

⁴⁴ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Championing Indigenous Peoples' Stewardship of Biodiversity' Op Cit

⁴⁵ 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 25/02/2026)

⁴⁶ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁴⁷ Owen, J.R. and Kemp, D., "Free Prior and Informed Consent', Social Complexity and the Mining Industry: Establishing A Knowledge Base," *Resources Policy*, Vol.41 (2014): 91-100

⁴⁸ What is Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC)?., Available at <https://www.ihrb.org/resources/what-is-free-prior-and-informed-consent-fpic> (Accessed on 25/02/2026)

⁴⁹ United Nations., 'Free Prior and Informed Consent – An Indigenous Peoples' right and a good practice for local communities – FAO' Available at <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/publications/2016/10/free-prior-and-informed-consent-an-indigenous-peoples-right-and-a-good-practice-for-local-communities-fao/> (Accessed on 25/02/2026)

⁵⁰ Free, Prior and Informed Consent: Lessons learned from REDD+ and other conservation strategies., Available at https://www.fauna-flora.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/FFI_2014_Free-Prior-and-Informed-Consent.pdf (Accessed on 25/02/2026)

including mining, resource extraction and infrastructure development, are conducted in a sustainable manner in order to minimize their negative impacts⁵¹.

Upholding the land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities is also necessary for sustainable biodiversity governance. It has been observed that recognising and protecting the land rights of indigenous peoples and local communities is vital in bolstering their role in environmental protection, biodiversity conservation and climate action through their TEK⁵². UNEP points out that when the rights of indigenous peoples are protected, especially their rights to land, territories and resources, their culture thrives and nature thrives⁵³. Upholding land rights for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities allows them to freely practice their traditional livelihoods without threats of eviction and displacement⁵⁴. Through this, it is possible to utilise and nurture TEK for sound biodiversity governance. Upholding land rights for indigenous peoples and local communities is therefore key towards strengthening biodiversity governance.

4.0 Conclusion

Indigenous peoples and local communities are vital custodians of the planet's biodiversity. However, they are often excluded from decision-making processes, face violation of their fundamental rights and experience extreme vulnerability due to biodiversity loss⁵⁵. Enhancing participation and ensuring rights for indigenous peoples and local communities is therefore key towards reducing their vulnerability while strengthening biodiversity governance. Achieving this goal involves strengthening the representation, participation and engagement of indigenous peoples and local communities in biodiversity governance at all levels⁵⁶; upholding the right to FPIC for indigenous peoples and local communities⁵⁷; and securing land rights for vulnerable

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

⁵³ Ibid

⁵⁴ Ibid

⁵⁵ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Championing Indigenous Peoples' Stewardship of Biodiversity' Op Cit

⁵⁶ Ibid

⁵⁷ United Nations Environment Programme., 'Indigenous Peoples and the nature they protect' Op Cit

Voices in Biodiversity Governance: Enhancing Participation and Ensuring Rights for Indigenous Peoples and Vulnerable Communities

communities including indigenous peoples in order to allow them to utilise TEK for sound biodiversity governance⁵⁸.

Enhancing participation and ensuring rights for indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities is therefore a practical and effective approach towards strengthening biodiversity governance for Sustainable Development.

⁵⁸ Ibid

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