Permission to Destroy

Friends of the Earth International

How biodiversity commitments fail on the ground

10/2026



mobilise
resist
transform

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Our vision is of a peaceful and sustainable world based on societies living in harmony with nature. We envision a society of interdependent people living in dignity, wholeness and fulfilment in which equity, and human and peoples' rights, are realised. This will be a society built upon peoples' sovereignty and participation. It will be founded on social, economic, gender and environmental justice and be free from all forms of domination and exploitation, such as neoliberalism, corporate globalisation, neo-colonialism and militarism.

We believe that our children's future will be better because of what we do.

Cover picture: Digger at work in the Vjosa-Narta protected area, in Albania, in 2020 © Ermelinda Mahmutaj

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Five case studies: conflicting realities, repeating patterns of biodiversity destruction and actions needed

The five case studies from countries across the globe that Friends of the Earth presents in this report show that communities fighting destructive projects experience a common reality: the gap between biodiversity commitments and biodiversity outcomes is a gap that governments permit.

The Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) was not approved in a vacuum. In each country, biodiversity policies were already in place, alongside many other factors at play. National-level policy and development plans were already in motion prior to 196 countries' adoption of the GBF in 2022, and they remain so ahead of its full implementation. These policies and plans keep shaping realities, and while countries develop their updated National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans, other realities intrude.

In every case study in these pages, biodiversity has been harmed, territories affected and human rights undermined. In every instance, this has happened with government authorisation – a concession, a lease, a licence, a zoning change, a tourism or mining permit – for economic activity incompatible with the biodiversity objectives that the same country has pledged to pursue. Governments are implementing legal frameworks, such as the mitigation hierarchy, to justify their approval of damaging projects that would otherwise be rejected.

While biodiversity protection needs many different actions, probably the most important of all is to ensure that it is not undermined by large-scale projects. Indeed, implementing the GBF is, in practice, mainly a question of what permissions governments give to what kinds of economic interests. This is arguably the central question underlying the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and it is one almost nobody talks about.

Conflicting realities: commercial investment, local interests and biodiversity protection

Each case study involves significant investment or commercial interest: a luxury tourism resort in a coastal protected landscape in Albania; large-scale tourism and real-estate development in Costa Rica; a foreign-operated gold mine in Indonesia; a carbon sequestration and plantation project in Mozambique; and an agribusiness venture in the Philippines. While these investments often arrive from abroad, the decision that unlocks access for them is taken at home. And the costs are borne locally – by communities and ecosystems – while financial returns accrue elsewhere.

National decisions are an important factor in how biodiversity gets conserved. Transparency and inclusiveness – especially for Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IPLCs) – are essential to assure justice and ecosystem integrity and to fight corruption. However, the

pressure to open up territories rarely comes from the government alone. The prevailing international financial and legal architecture pushes countries to accept investments that are incompatible with biodiversity. Indeed, the current global system facilitates enormous financial flows to extractive industries that result in biodiversity destruction. Countries, particularly in the Global South, depend on revenues from such industries for their financial stability.

Meanwhile, international courts and tribunals that specialise in protecting large-scale foreign investment will rarely reverse a permission or encourage the strengthening of domestic biodiversity legislation. At the same time, global regulation of harmful economic activity is in retreat, biodiversity finance is dwindling, and proponents of biodiversity markets claim them as the solution, although these markets worsen the crisis.

The continued attention to " mainstreaming … biodiversity within and across sectors" as a workstream within the CBD has so far produced only exchanges of experiences and voluntary measures, many of them little more than greenwashing.

The above conflicting realities are not visible enough in the Global Review.[1] The review has so far measured activity rather than real impacts. It treats the existence of policy measures as evidence of progress, without checking whether these measures actually advance the CBD's objectives. Unfortunately, in the meantime, decisions are made in favour of narrow and short-term economic interests rather than protecting the rights of people and nature long term.

Repeating patterns of biodiversity destruction

Protection on paper is not protection in practice

Albania's Vjosa-Narta and Costa Rica's Gandoca-Manzanillo both hold recognised protected status but, in practice, are weakly defended and open to development. Vjosa-Narta carries international recognition as an Important Bird Area, yet since 2026 bulldozers and heavy machinery have been operating inside it, preparing for high-end hotel infrastructure.

In Indonesia, the Batang Toru ecosystem, home to the critically endangered Tapanuli orangutan, has not been protected in a way that matches its vulnerability. The ecosystem sustaining endangered orangutans is not a protected area, as it contains a long-standing mining concession.

In Mozambique, Miombo Woodlands are open, mixed ecosystems of trees, grasslands and savanna. They are nonetheless being 'restored' into what are claimed to be forests but are in fact almost entirely eucalyptus plantations: ecologically not forests at all and planted where forest should not stand.

Protection is being withdrawn at source by legislation

The case of Albania shows that a protected area can be opened by rewriting the rules that govern it. The 2024 amendments to Albania's Law on Protected Areas changed the definitions, zoning and management of protected areas and explicitly permitted "tourism of excellence".

1 CBD, "What you need to know about the first draft global report of progress under the KMGBF", June 2026, www.cbd.int/article/2026-06-16-how-the-world-measures-progress-for-nature.

Fragmented spatial planning favours investors

Overlapping and contradictory planning regimes appear in nearly every case: conflicting pronouncements between local and national authorities, an ecosystem protected by one instrument and opened by another, boundaries and jurisdictions left unclear.

In Costa Rica, contradictions between levels of government have given economic interests room to manoeuvre while communities have lost ground.

In Indonesia, a zoned conservation approach has left vast ecologically important areas unprotected and allowed the mine to operate within a legally designated area.

In the Philippines, where a plantation sits inside the ancestral territory of Indigenous communities, amid tenure arrangements issued to non-Indigenous parties, overlapping plans make it impossible to say which rules apply to which areas.

Ambiguity in spatial planning systematically benefits whoever has the resources to exploit it.

Restoration and offsetting claims do not survive a reality check with ecology or justice

In Indonesia, offsetting has been based on the claim that there is a projected biodiversity loss that will be prevented. This turns continued destruction into the baseline. On the basis of this premise, the company claims "net gain" and "nature positive" outcomes. The idea is that destruction in one place can be balanced by protection or restoration elsewhere. As is often the case, IPLCs' already well-stewarded territories are targeted as the "elsewhere" to be protected.

In Mozambique, a company investing in eucalyptus plantations presents this activity as restoration with carbon capture and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. The reality is different, and it drives biodiversity loss, as forests are not a collection of trees, and certainly not a collection of the wrong trees in the wrong place.

In the Philippines, the case for the GAAVI project rests on carbon sequestration, agroforestry, and environmental, social and governance (ESG) credentials treated as proxies for restoration. However, storing carbon inside a commercial production system does not restore ecological integrity, function or connectivity.

Greenwashing supplies the justification

In almost every case, claimed environmental credentials have been the basis for granting and defending project authorisation as compatible with biodiversity commitments. PTAR in Indonesia presents a gold mine as compatible with conservation, to the extent of claiming that, without the mine, biodiversity would suffer. Florestal do Norte in Mozambique claims that eucalyptus plantations are restoration, backed by Verra, Climate, Community & Biodiversity and FSC certification. GAAVI in the Philippines portrays a banana plantation as agroforestry, carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation, with ESG credentials standing in for ecological outcomes.

Certification, ESG ratings and nature-positive pledges are not independent verification of what a project does to an ecosystem; they are artefacts of the same commercial model. These schemes are self-designed, accredited and marketed by the same actors whose business models depend on continued extraction, which means the label certifies the process, not the outcome. This matters for GBF implementation, because governments and financiers increasingly read these instruments as evidence that authorisation is safe. The framework's own vocabulary gets absorbed into the permits that defeat it.

Communities that do the protection work are portrayed as the problem

In Costa Rica, local people were accused of degrading biodiversity while being the ones defending it, through monitoring, denunciation and local organising. In Indonesia, conservation funding entered a customary territory without any free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) process and without community members being told the money was likely connected to the mining company's offset obligations. In Mozambique, communities faced displacement, opacity and a loss of agency over their own territories. In the Philippines, Indigenous Peoples were excluded from planning decisions over their ancestral domains, despite national law requiring FPIC. In several cases, communities' human rights were severely under threat through criminalisation, threats and legal proceedings aimed at those defending their territories.[2]

The state does not always act in the public interest

Several of these cases involve questionable interpretations of the public interest and/or conflicts of interest.

In Albania, concerns over offshore-linked corporate structures, anonymous beneficial owners and long-standing property title disputes sit alongside a project promoted directly by the head of government, defended on the grounds that Albania should not be a country where investors are met with hostility.

In Mozambique, the company now seeking restoration permits is led by the former head of its failed predecessor, who is also the former senior public official responsible for the entire sector. The recycling of elites between public office and private concessions is often a way of excluding communities while a narrow set of actors keep control over land-use decisions.

Impunity is the default

Where the law is broken, it is rarely the financialised project that stops. In Albania, the corruption agency is investigating while the Prime Minister continues to defend the investment. Costa Rica's Constitutional Chamber ordered the identified areas of forest and wetland to be protected; six years later, it declared its own ruling unfulfilled. In Mozambique, the financial failure of the previous plantation company left abandoned plantations and unresolved land questions rather than reparation.

Enforcement failure is not an accident of capacity; it is where the cost of the deal lands.

Actions needed to defend human rights and protect biodiversity

Judge restoration by ecology, not by hectares

Restoration should be assessed on ecological integrity, biodiversity recovery and the wellbeing of the communities that depend on those landscapes, not on trees planted. Finance should go to locally led initiatives and agroecological approaches, and protect existing ecosystems rather than underwrite large-scale plantations. Restoration in one place should never be an excuse for destruction elsewhere.

Place human rights at the centre, not in tension with conservation

Genuine participation means FPIC, with communities able to reject, modify or propose alternatives. Spatial planning implies stopping

2 Friends of the Earth International (2026), *Biodiversity and Human Rights – Exposing corporate power, strengthening people's struggles*, May, www.foei.org/publication/biodiversity-and-human-rights.

developments from undermining the very ecosystems that conservation is meant to protect. IPLCs should have a central role in this spatial planning.

Build protection against "green" land grabbing

Projects that invoke biodiversity or climate commitments to justify land grabbing or monoculture expansion must face real scrutiny. IPLCs must be given enhanced protection when addressing conflicts of interest with private companies. Biodiversity projects should be judged not by the environmental claims attached to them, but by whether they actually protect and restore biodiversity and ecological integrity, reduce pressures on nature, and respect the rights and governance systems of the people whose territories are affected.

Apply non-regression to implementation, not just to targets

Civil society has said from the outset that no GBF target should be regressive.[3] The same must hold for national legislation and its implementation.

Set and strengthen minimum environmental protection standards

Transform the CBD's "mainstreaming" workstream into one that sets minimum standards for environmental protection, applicable in all countries, and constituting a higher legal hierarchy than the trade and investment rules that currently undermine biodiversity.

These standards cannot be met solely at project level and should be applied at system level. Each of the authorisations described in this report's case studies was assessed on its own terms, and each was found acceptable by the body that granted it. Taken together, however, they reveal a systematic transfer of control over biodiversity-rich landscapes to commercial interests, undertaken with the formal machinery of conservation remaining intact – and, in several cases, actively redesigned to make the transfer work.

If implementation of the GBF is to mean anything, it needs to address the way governments give investors permissions that drive biodiversity loss. And for this to happen, the economic and legal systems that push countries to give these permissions also need to be addressed.

3 See e.g. CBD Alliance (2021), "Letter of Concern about Regression in the draft post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework", May, https://cbd-alliance.org/sites/default/files/documents/Letter%20of%20concern%20SBSTTA%2024%20SBI%203.pdf.



Heavy machinery operating in the heart of Vjosa-Narta, in Albania, in 2020

© Ermelinda Mahmutaj

Vjosa–Narta, Albania: When protected areas become investment frontiers

01

A protected landscape under pressure

Located on Albania's Adriatic coast, the Vjosa-Narta Protected Landscape encompasses a diverse mosaic of lagoons, wetlands, salt marshes, dunes, coastal forests and other habitats associated with the Vjosa River and its delta. Pishë Poro-Nartë forms the core of the protected landscape, with the Narta Lagoon at its centre. The lagoon is one of Albania's most important sites for waterbirds and is recognised internationally as an Important Bird Area (IBA), a Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) and a candidate Emerald Network site under the Bern Convention.[4]

In addition to its importance for waterbirds – including the greater flamingo and the Dalmatian pelican – the ecological significance of Vjosa-Narta extends well beyond birdlife. The wider landscape provides habitat for loggerhead sea turtles and the critically endangered Mediterranean monk seal, while its wetlands are also home to the Albanian water frog – an endangered and sub-endemic species whose populations are declining as its wetland habitats are degraded. Within the protected landscape, 18 habitat types have been identified according to the European Union's Natura 2000 habitat classification, six of which are listed as priority habitats requiring specific conservation measures.

The significance of this biodiversity extends beyond Albania. Vjosa-Narta is a crucial stopover site for migratory birds moving between Europe and Africa and is one of the most important wetland areas of the Adriatic Flyway. The landscape's interconnected lagoons, salt marshes, dunes and coastal forests provide a network of habitats for migratory, breeding and wintering species. More than 2,300 species depend on the wider Vjosa-Narta landscape, including more than 70 species classified as endangered.

However, the ecological integrity of this landscape is now under pressure from a major tourism development. Since early May 2026, bulldozers and other heavy machinery have been operating in Pishë Poro–Nartë, with roads cut through coastal pine forest and previously undisturbed habitats, and gravel deposited on ancient sand dunes designated as natural monuments under Albanian law. A field assessment by Albanian and international scientists in June 2026 documented damage to dune systems, impacts on loggerhead turtle nesting sites, habitat fragmentation and disturbance to birds, while also warning that intervention in the channel could alter the natural exchange of water between the lagoon and the sea.

The proposed resort also raises questions about the longer-term pressures that large-scale tourism could place on the landscape. With plans for around 10,000 rooms and associated facilities, its development and operation could place additional pressure on local infrastructure and natural resources, while the resulting impacts on water, energy use, traffic and disturbance have yet to be fully assessed.

Satellite imagery obtained by Agence France-Presse showed that, over a 25-day period in May, a road had been cleared, an area of forest deforested and a bridge constructed across the channel linking Narta Lagoon to the sea. Taken together, the documented interventions and the speed at which they have occurred point to a landscape already undergoing significant physical change.

Beyond its ecological value, Pishë Poro-Nartë is also a lived-in and used landscape for local communities and the many people who visit

4 Emerald sites refer to Areas of Special Conservation Interest (ASCIs) established across Europe under the Council of Europe Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats (Bern Convention). Within the European Union, these sites are fully represented by the existing Natura 2000 network of protected nature areas, serving to safeguard vulnerable wild species and natural habitats.

the area. Local livelihoods are connected to agriculture, fishing, pastoralism and other uses of natural resources. Its beaches and coastal areas are also used for recreation and tourism and remain important public spaces. Under Albanian law, beaches are public property administered by local government authorities. The changes already taking place therefore threaten not only the ecological integrity of the area, but also a landscape that people have long used and depended on.

The tourism development

At the centre of the controversy is a proposed luxury resort to be developed by Zvërnec South Adriatic Development in Pishë Poro–Nartë. The project – owned through a Qatar-based corporate structure, promoted by the Albanian government as a major tourism investment and strongly backed by Prime Minister Edi Rama – has been widely linked in international media to Jared Kushner, Ivanka Trump's husband. It forms part of a broader luxury tourism development strategy in Albania that also includes a proposed resort on Sazan Island.



Limopuo lagoon, a natural monument in Vjosa-Narta

© Ermelinda Mahmutaj

The controversy is closely connected to changes made to Albania's protected-area legislation in 2024. The amendments introduced changes to the definitions, zoning and management of protected areas, broadened the range of activities and infrastructure that can be permitted, and explicitly opened the way for high-end "tourism of excellence", including five-star accommodation and related facilities.

> **"Article 33**
> **Activities permitted in protected areas**
> **The following activities are permitted in protected areas:**
> **(...)**
> **2. Activities carried out in excellence accommodation structures, rated five stars or higher, in the field of tourism, and any other supporting activity/infrastructure or activity/ infrastructure serving them, regardless of whether this is specified in the decision of the Council of Ministers establishing the protected area."**
>
> *Republic of Albania, Law No. 21/2024, "On some additions and amendments to Law No. 81/2017 'On Protected Areas'", 22 February 2024, Article 14, amending Article 33, point 2*

The central issue, therefore, is not only whether protected areas should be open to this kind of development in the first place, but also whether permitting "tourism of excellence" risks turning spaces that have historically been publicly accessible into exclusive destinations primarily

> **"Protected areas cannot be altered in institutional silence and without public accountability."**
>
> *Albanian civil society organisations, "Request for the Review of Government Policies on Protected Areas in Albania", June 2026*

accessible to those who can afford them. These areas have long been used by local communities and the wider public for recreation, tourism and traditional livelihoods while retaining significant ecological value, demonstrating that public access and conservation can coexist. The concern is that transferring control of these spaces to private interests could instead weaken existing protections and restrict public access, raising broader questions of social justice.

These concerns have been strongly expressed by a broad coalition of civil society organisations. In a June 2026 letter to Albania's Parliament signed by 96 organisations, the signatories argued that the concerns they had raised since the 2024 amendments were now materialising, with the changes creating space for developments that threaten the integrity of protected areas. They called for the repeal of the amended provisions and a suspension of new tourism and infrastructure investments in protected areas.

From development to confrontation

In late April and early May 2026, the dispute escalated when heavy machinery entered the Pishë Poro-Nartë area. Roads were opened and fencing was installed around parts of the site, restricting access to land and coastline that had traditionally been open to the public. The works began amid serious concerns over transparency and due process, with key information about the authorisations and environmental assessment not readily available to the public.

The arrival of the machinery and fencing transformed what had largely been a dispute over legislation and a proposed investment into a visible conflict on the ground. Residents and activists confronted private security personnel, and clashes were reported at the site. Images and videos circulated widely on social media, including footage of confrontations between protesters, security personnel and police.

These events triggered protests in the protected area and subsequently in Tirana, Albania's capital. Thousands of people took part in demonstrations in Tirana, with flamingos becoming a symbol of the movement. What began as an environmental campaign increasingly developed into a broader mobilisation around transparency, land rights, corruption and the government's relationship with powerful investors.

With relatively limited coverage in traditional media outlets, residents and activists relied heavily on social platforms to document events, share information and organise demonstrations. At the same time, the online debate became increasingly polarised, with misinformation and conspiracy narratives circulating alongside genuine documentation of the conflict.

Landownership and transparency

The development has also generated questions about the ownership of the land and the corporate structures behind the project. Media reports have raised concerns about offshore-linked companies, anonymous beneficial owners and long-standing disputes over property titles in the area. The controversial legal backgrounds of some of the people reportedly involved in the ownership of the land have equally contributed to raise concerns about the project.

In spite of all the media reporting, the Albanian Investment Development Agency (AIDA) stated that it has no official file, procedure or

communication directly involving Ivanka Trump, her representatives or related partners in connection with the investment. This has raised further questions about the precise structure of the investment and the actors involved.

The combination of a major foreign investment, disputed landownership, complex corporate structures and a protected ecosystem has therefore made transparency one of the central issues in the controversy.

The role of civil society

Environmental organisations and local residents have been the main force opposing the development. Their concerns extend beyond the individual resort and focus on the wider question of whether Albania's protected areas are genuinely protected when confronted with major investment projects.

The Environmental Centre for Development, Education and Networking (EDEN)/Friends of the Earth Albania has played a leading role in coordinating civil society efforts around the issue. It initiated the letter co-signed and submitted to the Albanian Parliament by 96 civil society organisations calling for the repeal of the 2024 amendments to the Law on Protected Areas, its alignment with EU standards, and a ban on permits for new tourism and infrastructure developments in protected areas until this process is completed.

> **"Vjosa-Narta is a case that Albanian civil society has had to fight against the destruction of protected areas, infringement of human rights and threats to the sustainable development of local communities living close to nature. It is not an isolated case but rather the case that made people say, 'This is the last straw!' It was not the first case, and according to our common investigations, it is unlikely to be the last under the existing Albanian legal framework for protected areas."**
>
> *Ermelinda Mahmutaj, EDEN/FoE Albania*

> **"46a. Expresses serious concern that the ongoing developments within the Vjosa-Narta protected area demonstrate the practical consequences of these legislative changes and the resulting risks to areas of recognised ecological value …"**
>
> *European Parliament, Resolution of 17 June 2026 on the 2025 Commission report on Albania, P10_TA(2026)0217, Amendment 46a*

This demand was subsequently reflected in the European Parliament's resolution of 17 June 2026 on Albania. This called for an immediate moratorium on new permitting procedures, construction works and development interventions within the country's protected areas until the incompatible provisions of the amended Law on Protected Areas are repealed and full compliance with EU nature protection standards is ensured. The resolution specifically referred to ongoing developments in Vjosa–Narta.

EDEN/FoE Albania has also taken the issue to several EU institutions and decision-makers, including through the EU–Albania Joint Consultative Committee, engagement with Commissioner Marta Kos and a dedicated meeting with officials from DG ENEST, the European Commission directorate-general responsible for Albania's EU accession process, and DG Environment. Through these efforts, the Vjosa-Narta case has become not only

a dispute over one investment, but part of a broader discussion about Albania's approach to protected areas, large-scale development and environmental safeguards in the context of its EU integration process.

Government and institutional response

The Albanian government has continued to defend the development, presenting it primarily through the lens of foreign investment and tourism development. Prime Minister Rama has rejected calls to stop the investment and argued that Albania should not become a country where investors are met with hostility.

At the same time, the case has attracted the attention of Albania's Special Prosecution Office against Corruption and Organised Crime (SPAK), which, according to media reports, opened an investigation into the controversial changes to the protected status of the area and related landownership issues.

When asked about the credibility of SPAK and the hopes Albanians have placed in the institution, Ermelinda Mahmutaj of EDEN/FoE Albania described SPAK as "potentially crucial for the future of Vjosa-Narta and for ensuring that protected areas in Albania are governed democratically and in line with principles of nature protection".

As for the political response, it has been unusual. Albania's main opposition Democratic Party has supported the investment rather than joining the protests. As a result, resistance has been driven primarily by residents, environmental organisations, civic activists and smaller political movements.

Why this case matters

The Vjosa-Narta case illustrates a fundamental problem in biodiversity governance: having protected areas and biodiversity legislation on paper does not necessarily mean that ecosystems are effectively protected in practice.

In this case, a landscape of recognised international biodiversity importance is simultaneously being promoted as a destination for large-scale tourism investment. Changes to the legal framework have created new possibilities for development, while local communities and environmental organisations argue that the changes undermine the purpose of protection.

The case also shows how biodiversity conflicts are rarely only about biodiversity. The dispute has become intertwined with issues of landownership, public access, transparency, foreign investment, political influence and the role of state institutions. The confrontation over Vjosa-Narta is therefore not simply a conflict between conservationists and a tourism developer. It is a broader dispute over who gets to decide how protected landscapes are used and whose interests those decisions serve.

For the implementation of the Global Biodiversity Framework, the case is particularly relevant because it provides an example of the potential gap between formal biodiversity commitments and their implementation when they conflict with asserted economic and political priorities. Albania has protected areas and has made commitments to biodiversity conservation, but the Vjosa-Narta case raises the question of whether these commitments can withstand pressure from major development projects.

The European Parliament's intervention and the mobilisation of Albanian civil society also demonstrate the importance of accountability beyond national policy commitments. The case is now being watched not only as a domestic environmental conflict, but as a test of Albania's ability to align its development model, protected area governance and biodiversity commitments with the standards it is expected to meet as an EU candidate country.

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Looting and destruction in the Gandoca Manzanillo refuge

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Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge, Costa Rica: Conservation, land rights and the limits of protected area status

02

Landscape, biodiversity and local communities

The Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge,[5] on Costa Rica's southern Caribbean coast, is a mixed protected area and Ramsar site.[6] Forests, wetlands, mangroves, lagoons, coral reefs and seagrass ecosystems coexist here with long-established communities and private properties. The area is recognised for its high biodiversity value and supports threatened species, including marine turtles, birds and mammals.

Gandoca-Manzanillo's ecosystems are closely connected, forming part of a wider ecological landscape linked to the Talamanca-Caribbean Biological Corridor and other conservation areas. This connectivity allows species to move between habitats and supports ecological processes across the land and coast. Protecting Gandoca-Manzanillo therefore involves not only conserving individual ecosystems or species, but also maintaining the wider ecological connections on which its biodiversity depends.

The wildlife refuge was established in the 1980s in a territory that was already inhabited, particularly by Afro-descendant and Indigenous populations. Arrangements established between 1984 and 1995 for them to continue living in the area placed restrictions on how these residents could use the land and its resources.

> "Transformative change is urgently needed to avoid collapse."
>
> *COECOCEIBA/Friends of the Earth Costa Rica*

Between 1996 and 2007, a form of community-based governance created mechanisms for local participation in decisions about the refuge's management, including discussions over access, resource use, permits and restrictions. However, the system established revealed problems. Residents faced restrictions on how they could use the area, which made it increasingly difficult for them to maintain their traditional livelihoods. While the system of governance introduced in 1996 was intended to involve local residents in decision-making alongside government authorities, decisions remained largely shaped by the latter.

Academic research on the history of conservation in Gandoca-Manzanillo corroborates the idea that conservation measures have placed significant restrictions on how local communities



Development pressures put the biodiverse ecosystems of Gandoca-Manzanillo at risk

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5 In Spanish: Refugio Nacional de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo (REGAMA).

6 A Ramsar site is a wetland designated as of international importance under the Convention on Wetlands (Ramsar Convention), which promotes such sites' conservation and wise use. The Gandoca-Manzanillo National Wildlife Refuge was designated as Ramsar Site No. 783 in 1995.

> **"These [changes to the refuge's regulations and zoning during the 1996–2007 period] resulted in very evident and rigid restrictions on the use of local nature, primarily associated with subsistence activities, while facilitating urban and ecotourism development."**
>
> *German Daniel Alvarado Luna, "Conservación comunitaria en el Refugio de Vida Silvestre Gandoca-Manzanillo entre 1984–2007", 2023*

could use the territory and its resources. These measures often treated traditional community activities – mainly small-scale subsistence practices, including agriculture, fishing, hunting and forestry, which formed part of established local ways of life long before the refuge was created – as pressures to be controlled rather than recognising them as part of the social and ecological landscape. At the same time, community organisations and local defenders have played an active role in monitoring and protecting the refuge, while challenging the idea that local communities and their traditional activities are inherently incompatible with conservation.

In 2014, a law changed the refuge's boundaries in an attempt to recognise the rights of local inhabitants. The changes removed areas of forest and wetlands from the protected area, prompting the Constitutional Chamber of Costa Rica's Supreme Court of Justice in 2019 to rule that forest could not lose protected status without adequate technical assessment and to order the authorities to identify and protect the affected areas.

However, the authorities did not complete this process within the set legal timeframe, and in 2024 the Constitutional Chamber declared that its ruling had not been complied with. The legal status of some forests and wetlands therefore remains unresolved, highlighting how decisions about boundaries and land use can have direct consequences for the protection of fragile ecosystems.

A protected area under pressure

As a diverse and highly connected ecosystem, Gandoca-Manzanillo is exposed to a range of pressures, many of which the refuge's own management plan identifies. They include extraction of timber and fauna, fishing and inadequate fishing practices, solid waste and climate change. No single threat is the principal cause of biodiversity loss across the whole refuge. Rather, different ecosystems face different pressures, while several of these pressures increasingly interact with one another.

Concerns relating to the identification of wetlands make the situation more complex. Differences between technical assessments and later administrative delimitations have created uncertainty about which areas continue to receive effective protection. The issue is significant because wetlands retain their environmental protection regardless of ownership, while their formal identification can have direct consequences for land use decisions.

The pressure on Gandoca-Manzanillo is not limited to uncertainty over its legal boundaries. Deforestation, hunting, sedimentation, pollution and the over-exploitation of natural resources are among the main threats to the region's ecosystems. Alongside these pressures, an increasingly significant issue is the transformation of the landscape through real-estate and infrastructure development.

One of the clearest recent examples of real-estate development affecting Gandoca-Manzanillo concerns properties associated with the corporate entity Playa Manzanillo SA in the Manzanillo area. The company

obtained permits authorising tree cutting for the properties, following an earlier application to clear trees for a proposed road. An internal road was subsequently opened, and in 2026 the Environmental Prosecutor's Office obtained precautionary measures suspending the authorisations relating to tree cutting and construction and ordering the road to be closed to protect the forest and allow natural regeneration. The case remains under investigation, but it demonstrates the direct pressure that development can place on forest habitat where environmental protection is contested.

The case is part of a wider pattern of pressure within the refuge. Across its coastal areas between Punta Uva, Playa Grande and Manzanillo, local organisations and residents have reported forest clearing, construction, movement of landfill, possible wetland disturbance, and continued efforts to sell and subdivide land. In April 2025, a field report documented construction materials, new structures and trucks entering properties along this corridor. While not every intervention has been established as unlawful, these reports indicate growing pressure and concern among local communities.

Other documented and reported areas of concern within the refuge include tree cutting, road opening and construction at Puket; construction, landfilling and possible disturbance of wetlands in the Playa Grande and Almendros y Corales sector; and an alleged unauthorised airstrip linked to possible tree cutting and wetland filling at Bonifé, in the southern part of the refuge near the Sixaola River.

The issue is therefore not a single development, but the cumulative effect of land use change across a connected coastal landscape: forest clearing, road construction, lot subdivision, possible wetland filling or drainage, and the broader expansion of residential development and tourism. This is especially significant because much of the refuge's mature forest and wetlands lies on private property. Private ownership is not itself a threat, but it makes effective enforcement of environmental restrictions particularly important.

A 2025 study by Programa Estado de la Nación (State of the Nation Programme), a Costa Rican research initiative focused on sustainable human development, linked these conflicts to "gaps in their application, institutional tensions and weaknesses in environmental control and enforcement". It also identified economic pressure to acquire land for tourism and real-estate development, rising land values and the unequal application of environmental rules as aspects of the problem.

> **"An 'enabling disorder': institutional weakness operates within a changing regulatory framework, sometimes intentionally confusing, that allows exceptions and favours particular interests."**
>
> *Programa Estado de la Nación, "¿Para qué hoteles sin monitos?", 2025*

Local actors report that communities may face greater restrictions than developers with more economic power and that tourism investment has contributed to changes in landownership and the social composition of the territory. Evidently, questions of landownership and who has the power to transform the territory are central to the current dispute.

The effects of these conflicts can extend beyond individual sites. Forests help retain sediments and protect downstream coastal and marine habitats, while wetlands, coral reefs and seagrass beds form part of an interconnected system. Deforestation and other habitat disturbance can increase sedimentation and affect habitats and

nursery areas for fish, turtles and other marine species. Research has also documented erosion and shoreline retreat in Gandoca, Manzanillo and Punta Uva, with implications for beach habitats and marine turtle nesting.

Together, these pressures affect a connected landscape in which changes on land can have consequences for freshwater and marine ecosystems. The challenge is therefore not only to maintain formal protected status, but to prevent the gradual degradation of the ecosystems it is intended to protect.

Governance, planning and institutional responsibilities

The Gandoca-Manzanillo refuge's management and planning instruments have also faced legal challenges. In 2025, the Constitutional Chamber declared the refuge's management plan and a 2023 directive on its boundaries unconstitutional, while temporarily maintaining the effects of the management plan to avoid a regulatory vacuum. The court did not rule on the merits of challenges to the coastal regulatory plan in that proceeding. In a separate decision that year, however, it ordered consultation with the Afro-descendant population on the Coastal Regulatory Plan for the Southern Caribbean, recognising the importance of their participation in decisions affecting their territory.

These developments reflect the continuing difficulty of reconciling the rights of long-established communities with environmental protection and territorial planning, including regarding economic interests. They also highlight the distinction between the rights of local residents and the interests of commercial actors who have acquired land or sought to develop properties in the area. These issues have become increasingly significant as real-estate development, tourism and other land-use pressures affect ecosystems within and around the refuge.

> **"The lack of clear rules on the part of the state and the contradictions between its institutions have ultimately favoured the advancement of commercial economic interests, while restricting local communities' ability to manage their territory and practise their traditional customs."**
>
> *Alejandra Porras, COECOCEIBA/FoE Costa Rica*

The different institutions involved in environmental protection, protected area management, land-use planning, coastal regulation, infrastructure and tourism do not always operate through fully aligned processes. This can create uncertainty over what can be permitted, where development can take place and which areas should receive protection.

The 2025 Programa Estado de la Nación analysis similarly identified the coexistence of private property and conservation regimes as a source of uncertainty and disputes over the application of environmental rules. It also pointed to cases where permits have been issued without adequate planning support and to differences in how regulations are applied to communities and larger developers.

These problems have practical consequences. Where boundaries, land-use rules or ecosystem delimitations remain contested, decisions about permits and development can continue while authorities and courts are still determining the appropriate legal and environmental framework. The result can be a widening gap between the formal protection of biodiversity and what happens on the ground, with local communities at the receiving end of developments and uncertainties.

Environmental defenders and community action

Environmental organisations and local defenders have played an important role in monitoring the situation at Gandoca-Manzanillo, documenting environmental impacts and bringing concerns to public authorities and the courts. Organisations including COECOCEIBA/FoE Costa Rica, the Association for the Development of Ecology (AEL), ATEC and the Southern Caribbean Natural Resources Monitoring Committee (COVIRENAS Caribe Sur), together with local activists and professionals, have participated in efforts to protect the refuge and its ecosystems.[7]

This work has not been without risks. In 2024, Jennifer Sandoval and Francisco Rodríguez, linked to ATEC, reported death threats in connection with their environmental defence work in the Southern Caribbean.

> **"The struggle to defend the territory is not just for ourselves; it is for something greater, for our common home, for the wellbeing of everyone."**
>
> *Francisco Rodríguez, environmental defender linked to the Talamanca Association for Ecotourism and Conservation (ATEC)*

The role of these actors is significant because many of the environmental disputes surrounding Gandoca-Manzanillo have involved community monitoring, access to information, public complaints and legal action. Local organisations have also been among those calling for clearer protection of forests and wetlands and for a moratorium on new permits while outstanding environmental and planning questions remain unresolved.

Although these conflicts have often been portrayed as between local communities on the one hand and conservation on the other, community organisations have often been directly involved in defending the refuge's ecosystems and challenging potentially harmful development and land-use changes.

Why is this relevant to the Global Biodiversity Framework?

Gandoca-Manzanillo highlights the gap that can exist between formal conservation status and effective biodiversity protection on the ground. The wildlife refuge is already recognised as a protected area and Ramsar site; yet forests, wetlands and connected coastal ecosystems remain vulnerable to development, land-use change and weaknesses or delays in implementation.

The case also shows that biodiversity conservation cannot be separated from the rights and participation of the people who have long inhabited and depended on such territories. The historical experience of community conservation, together with current disputes over land, planning and development, demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between the rights and livelihoods of long-established communities and later commercial interests seeking to acquire and transform land.

For the Global Biodiversity Framework, Gandoca-Manzanillo therefore raises broader questions about how designated protected areas are governed and defended in practice: whether ecosystems are effectively protected from incremental degradation; whether public authorities coordinate their decisions; whether environmental rules are enforced; and whether communities and environmental defenders have a meaningful voice in decisions affecting their territories.

7 The case study author held in-depth interviews with all the groups mentioned here.

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Aftermath of a flooding whose impact has been worsened by the mining activities in Batang Toru

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Martabe Gold Mine, Indonesia: The limits of biodiversity offsetting

03

The ecosystem

The Batang Toru ecosystem in North Sumatra is one of Indonesia's most important remaining forest landscapes and the only known habitat of the critically endangered Tapanuli orangutan (*Pongo tapanuliensis*). Fewer than 800 individual Tapanuli orangutans remain, distributed across three fragmented populations. Research on the species has documented a substantial historical decline in both range and population, identifying habitat loss and fragmentation among the main threats to its survival. Maintaining connectivity between the remaining populations is considered essential because further fragmentation can reduce dispersal opportunities and undermine population viability.

Batang Toru is also recognised for its wider biodiversity and ecological importance. The landscape provides habitat for numerous species and performs important watershed and other ecosystem functions. It has been recognised as a Key Biodiversity Area and an Alliance for Zero Extinction site.[8] These characteristics have led Indonesian environmental organisations, including the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia/WALHI)/Friends of the Earth Indonesia, to argue that the landscape should be a "no-go zone" for extractive activities.

The mining site

The Martabe Gold Mine has been operating in the Batang Toru landscape since 2012. In 2020, the operating company, PT Agincourt Resources (PTAR), announced plans to open a new pit and develop the necessary infrastructure to access at least 460,000 more ounces of gold at nearby Tor Ulu Ala. By the end of Martabe's operating life in 2034, the mine is expected to expand by roughly 250 hectares (617 acres). The project includes not just a new pit, but also a large tailings management facility.

As part of this expansion, another 48 hectares of mostly primary forest within the Key Biodiversity Area are due to be cleared. Additionally, a network of new access roads is planned, cutting through habitat critical to the survival of the orangutans. As around 90% of the mining concession is orangutang habitat, the expanded mining activities – assuming they go ahead as planned – will severely impact orangutan habitat and lives. Exploration activities are also affecting surrounding villages, whose inhabitants have voiced concern.

Government permission

During the 2000s, PTAR completed the process for environmental permissions and obtained government approval. The mining project benefited from a zoned conservation approach, which left vast areas unprotected. This allowed the mine to operate within a legally designated mining area. While the mine is subject to applicable environmental and other regulatory requirements, this does not inhibit mining activity.

After at least 1,200 people died in severe floods in November 2025, it was established that environmental damage had worsened the flooding. In February 2026, this led to the revocation of permission to operate of 28 companies linked to this environmental damage, among which was PTAR. Following disputes over the veracity of the link between the mine's operations, the environmental damage and the impact of the floods, and aware of the risks of international litigation, the Indonesian authorities restored the permits in April 2026. PTAR paid the equivalent of just under US$ 12 million as compensation for environmental damage, as well as restoration costs.

8 The Key Biodiversity Areas Partnership (www.keybiodiversityareas.org) and the Alliance for Zero Extinction (https://zeroextinction.org) are joint initiatives of international conservation organisations.

PTAR's environmental claims

PTAR presents the mine as compatible with biodiversity conservation, arguing that mining and the protection of the surrounding ecosystem can coexist through a combination of conservation initiatives and biodiversity offsetting. Company officials have even claimed that, without the mining activities, their conservation efforts would not happen, and the fate of the orangutans would be worse. They base these claims on the assumption of successful implementation of the mitigation hierarchy (see box). We closely examine below the problems involved in this.

PTAR developed its biodiversity strategy, consisting of several elements, according to the mitigation hierarchy:

- **Avoidance** includes early assessment of biodiversity risks and designing projects to avoid critical habitats through layout and timing adjustments. Based on pre-clearance surveys, development could be delayed or modified if orangutan activity is detected.
- **Minimisation** measures involve biodiversity assessments during the feasibility study and strict enforcement of the company's/authorities' "land access disturbance request" procedure. Other elements are pre-clearing walk-throughs, biodiversity training, policies preventing hunting and logging, habitat fragmentation avoidance and monitoring programmes.
- **Restoration** of areas that have been disturbed consists of gradually rehabilitating them with native species, to help these areas recover so they can again support local wildlife. The company claims it will continue monitoring and maintaining such areas until they are ecologically stable and resilient.
- **Offsets** are presented as the final step in PTAR's mitigation hierarchy, intended to address residual biodiversity impacts that remain after the other steps have been applied. The company worked with the Biodiversity Consultancy and other organisations to develop its offset, establishing two areas:
  - First, a refuge of approximately 2,000 hectares within the mining concession, as an actively managed biodiversity area. It is meant as a buffer and ecological corridor, to sustain the health and movement of local wildlife. The company is ambiguous about whether it considers this area an offset or not.
  - Second, a large-scale biodiversity offset project outside the mine's immediate operational area, of approximately 3,700 hectares.

The mitigation hierarchy

The mitigation hierarchy is a commonly used framework setting out a sequence for dealing with environmental harm: first, to avoid harm wherever possible; second, to minimise impacts that cannot be avoided; third, to remediate or restore damage at the site of impact; and only after these steps, to offset in order to address any residual impacts that remain.

While it is often presented as a protective framework, in practice the mitigation hierarchy is frequently used to justify destructive projects rather than stop them. When offsets or compensation are treated as substitutes for prevention, the result is to normalise ecological loss, conceal irreversible damage, and undermine the relationships of communities and peoples to their lands, territories and ecosystems.

Mitigation hierarchy: problems with avoidance, minimisation and restoration

WALHI/FoE Indonesia and Friends of the Earth International consider that mining should never have begun at Martabe and should not begin at the proposed new pit at Tor Ulu Ala – that would be true avoidance. PTAR applies the concept of avoidance only in as far as it does not make its mining objectives impossible. Many of the company's avoidance activities relate more to assessing biodiversity and options to possibly delay some activities to protect orangutans. But avoiding impacts is not about procedures or about delaying an action while an orangutan is nearby. It is about ensuring the animals' ecosystem is not disturbed at all. PTAR's proposed **minimisation** activities are also too procedural to have a meaningful impact.

Regarding **restoration**, the pace of ecological recovery has so far been far slower than the rate of destruction. In Batang Toru, this time lag is especially significant because the Tapanuli orangutan already lives in a highly restricted and fragmented habitat. Even where rehabilitation is undertaken, the years of disturbance in the meantime can critically affect the population.

Restoration also has clear limits. Revegetation and technical rehabilitation may recover some features of disturbed land, but they cannot recreate the ecological conditions, functions and connectivity of the natural ecosystem that existed before the mining. These differences are particularly consequential for a species whose survival depends on the integrity of an ecosystem that is already fragmented.

The offsetting aspect has additional problems, which we discuss below.

Problems with the proposed biodiversity offset

A first problem with biodiversity offsets is that, even within the same broad ecosystem, **one area cannot straightforwardly compensate for the destruction of another.** It is near impossible to ensure that the offset site can provide the same habitat, ecological functions and species interactions as the area being lost. In the case of Batang Toru, the population of Tapanuli orangutans is already at a critically low level, and any further disturbance of their habitat can lead to this species' total extinction. Further disturbance may therefore carry disproportionate risks. The ecosystem also supports many other species and depends on delicate ecological relationships that cannot simply be recreated elsewhere.

> **"The offset scheme in Batang Toru functions as a 'licence to destroy', rather than as a legitimate conservation instrument."**
>
> *Rianda Purba, WALHI/FoE Indonesia*



Erosion damage in the primary forest in Batang Toru

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A second problem is, as is often the case, that this conservation-based offset relies on the assumption that the offset area would otherwise face future degradation or destruction, so that protecting it can be counted as a compensating gain. This logic has been widely contested. In a context of severe biodiversity stress, it is problematic to treat possible future destruction as a baseline against which new destruction can be justified.

Third, PTAR has not publicly disclosed the exact location of the proposed approximately 3,700 hectare offset area in the sources we have reviewed. Concerns have been raised that the area may overlap with territories of Indigenous communities, including the Huta Hopong community. If this concern is correct, it would be deeply problematic to assume that such communities represent a threat to their own territories, especially where they have long-standing cultural and stewardship relationships with the forest.

The fact that the company has not openly communicated about the offsetting site demonstrates a serious lack of transparency and undermines the capacity of environmental organisations to assess the likely outcomes of the proposed project.

The plight of the Huta Hopong community

The experience of the Huta Hopong Indigenous community provides an example of the social tensions that conservation initiatives like the one PTAR proposes can generate when they intersect with customary territories and systems of community governance. Huta Hopong is located within the wider Batang Toru landscape, and its customary territory covers approximately 690 hectares. The territory was mapped through a participatory process but was subsequently proposed by the authorities as a preservation area without the community having given full consent to the change.

In early 2026, conservation-related funding was introduced into the community, without any free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) process. Community members were not adequately informed that the funding was connected to PTAR and its biodiversity-offset obligations, or about the role of the intermediary organisation involved. The subsequent distribution of the funds became a source of conflict, with disagreements between the Indigenous leader and community elders over how the money should be divided, generating mistrust and tensions within the customary governance system.

According to WALHI/FoE Indonesia, in February 2026, community members were asked to provide identity documents for the disbursement of funds without necessarily having a clear understanding of the wider project or its purpose. When agreement over the allocation could not be reached, the dispute reportedly escalated to the point where the community leader preferred to end the cooperation rather than alter the proposed distribution.

Social and ecological incoherence of the Batang Toru offset

While the company claims that, without its presence, biodiversity in Batang Toru would be harmed, the reality is that the mining site is creating a huge ecological disturbance in the area. Before the mine started, both the mining site and the offset site were ecosystems in reasonable shape.

Now, however, the mining site is going through a long period of severe disturbance. Meanwhile, the probable offsetting site – which was almost certainly never under threat of destruction – is confronted with “conservation” projects that have already disturbed social cohesion in the area and jeopardise the Indigenous community’s capacity to continue traditional ways of caring for the territory.

Why is this relevant to the Global Biodiversity Framework?

The case of the Martabe Gold Mine and the Batang Toru ecosystem touches nearly every core dimension of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF): species conservation, spatial planning, the role of business, biodiversity finance and competing models of conservation. Yet across almost all these dimensions, the case appears to run against the GBF's spirit – and, in important respects, its implementation requirements. Even so, PTAR has secured the government approvals it needs to proceed. This says a great deal about the continuing failure to achieve the kind of whole-of-government coherence envisioned under Target 14.

The GBF mentions biodiversity offsets only once, under Target 19, as a possible financing mechanism and in the monitoring indicators under Target 18. In practice, however, offsets have become one of the most frequently proposed biodiversity measures and are gaining a lot of momentum. This makes it all the more urgent to study their implications for environmental integrity, socio-environmental justice and the broader political direction of biodiversity governance. This case shows that such outcomes are not guaranteed to be good.

> **"Indigenous communities in the Batang Toru landscape ought to receive support for their conservation efforts and assurance that their surrounding ecosystem remains well-preserved. Instead, they find their territory impacted by mining activities and their communities marginalised by unfair accusations claiming that they are the ones who will destroy their own land."**
>
> *Uli Siagan, WALHI/FoE Indonesia*

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Cut down territories in the district of Ribáuè, Mesa community

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Florestal do Norte, Mozambique: When "restoration" risks reproducing extractive plantation models

04

Context

The forestry company Florestal do Norte has set up a project, with the approval of the Mozambican government, to restore approximately 17,200 hectares of supposedly degraded land in northern Mozambique. Operating since 2025, the project combines native and non-native tree planting, assisted natural regeneration and agroforestry systems. The company presents its activities as part of a large-scale, long-term effort to restore degraded land and rehabilitate *miombo* biome landscapes.

The miombo biome is one of Africa's largest tropical dry forest ecosystems, extending across several countries in Central and Southern Africa. It supports a rich diversity of plant and animal species, regulates water cycles, protects soils and provides a wide range of ecosystem services on which rural communities depend.

These landscapes are often wrongly portrayed as degraded or under-utilised because they do not resemble dense tropical forests. In reality, they are functioning ecosystems that have evolved alongside traditional forms of community land management. They provide firewood, medicinal plants, wild fruits, construction materials and honey, as well as habitat for wildlife, while supporting the ecological processes that sustain local agriculture. In this context, the continued conversion of miombo woodland into large-scale eucalyptus plantations is one of the most immediate biodiversity concerns associated with Florestal do Norte.

The project is presented as both a climate and a development initiative. The company states that it aims to remove and store up to 4.5 million tonnes of CO_2 over its lifetime, while generating socioeconomic benefits for local communities and contributing to biodiversity restoration.

Designed around a 100-year crediting period, the company presents its approach as meeting national and international standards, including Verra's Verified Carbon Standard (VCS), Climate, Community & Biodiversity (CCB) Standards and Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification.

Given the recent history of large, problematic and abandoned tree plantations in the region involving a company called Green Resources, Florestal do Norte's arrival immediately raised concerns that the project represented not a fundamentally different initiative and approach, but a continuation of the same plantation model. The same wolf, just under a different guise.

Rapid research easily corroborated the suspicion. Florestal do Norte's Managing Director is in fact the former Country Managing Director of Green Resources. His previous position adds another layer to this connection: in the early 2000s he served as Mozambique's National Director of Lands and Forests – the senior government official responsible for the entire sector.

The phenomenon of individuals moving between key public governance positions and private-sector interests, taking advantage of privileged access, information, contacts and networks, is sometimes described in Mozambique as the "rotation" or "recycling" of political and economic elites. It illustrates perfectly how and why communities in Mozambique remain excluded while powerful actors maintain influence over land-use decisions.

The predecessor

It would be impossible to discuss Florestal do Norte without telling the story of Green Resources and of the process that led to the establishment of forest plantations in this region. Green Resources is a private Norwegian company founded in 1995 under the name Fjordgløtt. It focuses on forest development and wood processing in East Africa and manages operations across Mozambique, Tanzania and Uganda. Its project in Mozambique was presented to local communities as an opportunity to create employment, restore degraded landscapes and generate economic benefits.

> **"It was a process of land grabbing, and there is evidence to support that, because the entire process of land allocation was very poorly handled. It was a badly conducted process from the very beginning, and the documents we have today … clearly demonstrate this."**
>
> *Vanessa Cabanelas, Justiça Ambiental/ Friends of the Earth Mozambique*

Justiça Ambiental/FoE Mozambique (JA) first came across the project in about 2011. Between 2013 and 2014, JA conducted its first field visits to the affected areas, where it documented concerns regarding land access, community consultation, biodiversity impacts and the distribution of promised benefits.

In collaboration with other civil society organisations, JA commissioned a study, which was published in 2016.[9] The report concluded that the plantation model had failed to deliver the social and environmental benefits promised by the company. Instead, plantations expanded over areas traditionally used by communities for agriculture, gathering forest products and other livelihood activities, reducing access to land and natural resources. It also concluded that although consultation processes took place, communities often lacked the information and meaningful participation necessary to influence decisions affecting their territories.

By 2017, Green Resources was facing significant financial difficulties, as the scale of its expansion had ultimately proved too ambitious for the company to sustain. Many plantations were poorly managed or abandoned, creating uncertainty over the future of these areas and the communities living around them.

In 2019, the company informed the Mozambican government of its intention to return the vast majority of its concessions to the communities – approximately 240,000 hectares. With the support of USAID's Integrated Land and Resource Governance (ILRG) programme, a group of local NGOs were contracted to facilitate the process. According to JA, the process was marked by disagreements and a lack of consensus among communities regarding what should happen with the land. In some areas, communities expected the land to return to community control and become available again for traditional uses; in others, discussions focused on whether existing eucalyptus plantations should be maintained, managed or removed. The organisations in charge of the process promoted the creation of community associations, supposedly to manage the plantations, but these associations, often with limited membership, became themselves a source of concern regarding whether they genuinely represented broader community interests or were being used mainly to fabricate consensus and due representation.

The process became even more controversial when the government later stated that the land relinquished by Green Resources had reverted to the state rather than to the communities from whom it had previously been taken to make way for the plantations. This created uncertainty among communities over what would happen to the land and their ability to influence decisions concerning its future use. These concerns were later reinforced when part of the land previously held by Green Resources was allocated to Florestal do Norte. Rather than resolving questions about community rights and land access, the process left many communities without clarity regarding the status and future use of the territories they had traditionally relied on.

It was in this context that Florestal do Norte emerged.

9 LEXTERRA (2016) *The Progress of Forest Plantations on the Farmers' Territories in the Nacala Corridor: the case of Green Resources Moçambique.* Commissioned by Livaningo, Justiça Ambiental and União Nacional dos Camponeses (UNAC).

Relevance to the Global Biodiversity Framework

The Florestal do Norte case clearly shows some of the challenges of translating the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) into practice, particularly where biodiversity objectives intersect with land tenure, community rights and commercial forestry.

The Mozambican government faces persistent challenges in its capacity and willingness to effectively regulate and oversee large-scale private investments in land, forestry and biodiversity. The recent experience of large-scale plantation projects illustrates some of these broader institutional weaknesses, including shortcomings in community consultation, transparency, monitoring and enforcement. These challenges are, as previously explained, compounded by the state's exposure to conflicts of interest, political influence and the interests of private capital, which can weaken its ability to act independently in the public interest. While Florestal do Norte presents its activities as contributing to restoration and sustainable land management, on the ground important questions arise about whether projects labelled as 'restoration' are consistent with the intent of several GBF targets. The experience in Mozambique highlights a recurring concern: large-scale plantation projects are often established not on genuinely degraded land, but on productive land already used and managed by rural communities. Communities consistently report losing agricultural fields, fallow land and areas used for gathering forest products rather than abandoned or ecologically degraded land.

This suggests that, in practice, projects presented as ecosystem restoration may instead convert landscapes that already sustain both biodiversity and local livelihoods. Further, this raises broader questions about how "degraded land" is defined. Areas classified as degraded by governments or investors may continue to provide essential ecological functions and support traditional farming systems. In Mozambique, shifting cultivation, fallow areas and community-managed landscapes are part of long-established agricultural systems that maintain soil fertility and provide food security. Treating these areas as available for commercial plantations risks overlooking both their ecological value and their importance to local communities.

Against this backdrop, the situation described above speaks directly to GBF Target 22, which seeks to ensure the full, equitable, inclusive, effective and gender-responsive participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in biodiversity decision-making, while respecting their rights, cultures and traditional knowledge. In rural Mozambique, agriculture is overwhelmingly based on subsistence farming. Although households may sell part of their harvest, the primary purpose of cultivation is to feed families and sustain local livelihoods. Access to land is therefore not simply an economic asset but the foundation of food security, cultural identity and community resilience.

A further concern relates to the ecological implications of Florestal do Norte's planting model. Even though, unlike Green Resources, the company states that it will include native tree species alongside eucalyptus, this represents

> **"Restoring degraded areas is a very good thing, if it actually happens, if these are degraded areas where there is no production. But there is no interest in those areas; it is a utopia, because plantations have no interest in unproductive areas, as the cost of production in those areas is very high."**
>
> *René Machoco, Justiça Ambiental /FoE Mozambique*



Sapling plantation on cleared land in the district of Ribáuè, Mesa community

© Justiça Ambiental/ FoE Mozambique (JA)

a shift in how the project is presented rather than a fundamental change in the intervention itself. Large-scale tree plantations remain the dominant land-use model. The inclusion of native species may introduce greater diversity than a purely eucalyptus-based plantation, but this should not be equated with the restoration of a functioning native ecosystem.

In fact, replacing miombo woodland with commercial tree plantations can fundamentally alter these ecosystems. Although plantations increase the number of trees in a landscape, they simplify its ecological structure by replacing diverse native vegetation with a limited selection of planted species. This can reduce habitat diversity, affect soil characteristics, alter hydrological processes and diminish the ecological resilience associated with natural miombo ecosystems. This distinction is particularly relevant to GBF Target 2, which calls for the restoration of degraded ecosystems in ways that enhance biodiversity, ecosystem functions and ecological integrity. It also relates to Target 10, which calls for forestry areas to be managed sustainably in ways that maintain and enhance biodiversity and ecosystem functions.

Overall, the Florestal do Norte case demonstrates that achieving the objectives of the GBF requires more than increasing tree cover. Restoration initiatives must distinguish between genuinely degraded ecosystems and productive community landscapes, recognise customary land rights and ensure that local communities are active decision-makers rather than passive stakeholders in biodiversity governance. Otherwise, projects intended to contribute to global biodiversity goals risk undermining both biodiversity conservation and environmental justice.

Reflections

The experience of Florestal do Norte (and Green Resources before it) demonstrates the need for a fundamental shift in how restoration and biodiversity projects are designed and evaluated.

First, restoration policies must move away from measuring success primarily through hectares planted or numbers of trees established. Instead, restoration should be assessed according to ecological integrity, biodiversity recovery and benefits for communities that depend on those landscapes.

Second, all restoration and conservation initiatives must guarantee meaningful participation and free, prior and informed consent on the part of affected communities. Consultation processes should not simply inform communities about decisions already made but should allow communities to reject, modify or propose alternatives to projects affecting their territories.

Third, governments and international institutions implementing the GBF must put in place concrete and legally binding rules against projects that use biodiversity and climate commitments to justify land grabbing or monoculture expansion. Restoration finance should prioritise locally led initiatives, agroecological approaches and the protection of existing ecosystems rather than large-scale plantation models.

Fourth, stronger transparency and accountability mechanisms are required to address conflicts of interest between political actors and private companies. Biodiversity policies cannot succeed if governance systems allow powerful actors to benefit while communities bear the social and environmental costs.

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Local farmer walking down the contested land boundaries

© LRC/ FoE Philippines
J. Demigillo

Bukidnon, the Philippines: Green claims, contested territory

05

Landscape and biodiversity

Bukidnon, in Northern Mindanao, the Philippines, is characterised by forested mountain ranges, rolling grasslands, valleys and low plains. Multiple scientific studies of the region illustrate the biodiversity value of its remaining forest ecosystems, documenting exceptional biological richness and highlighting the importance of maintaining their ecological integrity and connectivity.

Although Bukidnon still retains important areas of natural forest, these have been fragmented and transformed over time by human activities. Logging, agricultural expansion, settlement and other forms of development have contributed to the loss and simplification of natural habitats and biodiversity.

The GAAVI plantation

A banana plantation operated by Green Arrow Agri-Ventures Inc. (GAAVI), an affiliate of the Kennemer Group,[10] in Sezukadang, Barangay New Visayas, Don Carlos municipality, Bukidnon, provides a concrete example of the pressures facing the territory and the communities who depend on it.

Kennemer presents its agricultural and climate activities through a nature-friendly image, emphasising agroforestry, crop diversification, forest restoration, carbon sequestration and biodiversity conservation. Yet this case illustrates the gap that can emerge between the language used to present an agricultural project as environmentally sustainable and the ecological impacts experienced on the ground.

The GAAVI plantation covers approximately 195 hectares within the larger ancestral territory of the Kirinteken-Ilentungen Menuvu community. The establishment of the plantation forms part of a longer history in which Indigenous territorial rights have been affected by state-issued land titles and other tenure arrangements granted to non-Indigenous parties. These overlapping and sometimes contradictory systems have enabled commercial interests to gain access to land within territories claimed by Indigenous communities, while leaving unresolved questions over who has authority over its use and management.[11]

> **"Our projects support land stewards, restore ecosystems, and deliver measurable benefits for climate, biodiversity, and communities."**
>
> *Keneco (formerly Kennemer Eco Solutions), "Restoring Nature with Purpose, Precision & Scale"*

The growth of commercial land use has also affected how people use and move through the territory. The expansion of the plantation has forced some residents out of their homes, rerouted traditional paths and disrupted daily routines, while also restricting access to land and affecting water sources. Some community members work on the plantation, creating further tensions within the community between dependence on agricultural employment and concerns about its impacts.

These concerns are compounded by the environmental impacts reported around the plantation. Intensive agrochemical use has been a major concern for local residents, who report pesticide spraying affecting surrounding crops, water sources, animals and people. Community

10 The Kennemer Group is an agricultural and climate-focused company founded in 2010 and headquartered in Singapore, with its main operational base in the Philippines. It operates across agriculture, agroforestry, finance and nature-based climate projects, including large-scale cacao and banana plantations and carbon projects. The group operates through companies including Kennemer Foods International and Keneco (formerly Kennemer Eco Solutions), and works with more than 20,000 smallholder farmers in the Philippines.

11 According to research by the Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center–Kasama sa Kalikasan (LRC-KSK)/FoE Philippines.

> **"At the core of the project is still the long-standing colonial approach to land development in the Philippines. Despite the attempts to make the project seem to subscribe to ESG[12] standards, it is still built on the dispossession of Indigenous territories."**
>
> *Leon Dulce, LRC-KSK/Friends of the Earth Philippines*

members also report that cacao and nitrogen-fixing plants they grow within the plantation area fail to survive the chemical spraying.

Residents have further reported impacts on livestock and surrounding vegetation, while the banana plantation has experienced disease outbreaks that the community says have led to increasingly frequent chemical applications. The plantation's own environmental compliance certificate identifies pesticide drift, soil erosion, siltation of nearby water bodies and potential impacts on water quality as environmental risks requiring mitigation, including buffer zones around creeks and rivers, monitoring of nearby water sources, and measures to control erosion and sedimentation. These concerns indicate that the environmental effects of production extend beyond the plantation itself, raising questions about its impacts on adjacent ecosystems and water bodies and the ecological relationships on which local communities depend.

In fact, GAAVI's 2022 environmental compliance certificate, issued by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources' (DENR) Environmental Management Bureau, explicitly prohibited aerial spraying and required measures to prevent pesticide drift beyond the plantation. The company currently uses agricultural drones for spraying, which may allow more targeted application than conventional aircraft but does not by itself eliminate the possibility of pesticides reaching areas beyond the intended application zone.

The 2022 DENR environmental compliance certificate also required GAAVI to obtain an appropriate zoning certification from the Don Carlos municipal government before implementing the project, indicating that local government land-use planning formed part of the regulatory process for the plantation.

This case provides strong evidence of why biodiversity cannot be separated from the way agricultural land is used and controlled. Ecological integrity depends not simply on the presence of vegetation, but also on the diversity and functioning of habitats, water systems and species, and on the ability of communities to maintain and restore the ecological relationships they have sustained for generations.



Polluted water streaming from GAAVI plantation

© LRC/ FoE Philippines J. Demigillo

12 ESG = Environmental, Social and Governance.

The Kirinteken-Ilentungen Menuvu community

The Kirinteken-Ilentungen Menuvu's relationship with their territory is shaped by customary knowledge, spiritual practices and an understanding of the environment as a living socio-ecological system. Forests, rivers, agricultural land and other elements of the territory are closely interconnected with cultural practices, subsistence, spirituality and community governance.

The conflict between the plantation and the Kirinteken-Ilentungen Menuvu is also a conflict between different understandings of what the forest is and what restoration means.

The community is undertaking its own "forest recovery" activities on disputed lands, planting trees, crops and other vegetation while reasserting community use and control over the territory. For the Kirinteken-Ilentungen Menuvu, restoration is simultaneously an ecological, cultural and political process: restoring vegetation, maintaining food production, protecting water sources and asserting Indigenous territorial rights. Indeed, restoration means recovering ecological relationships and restoring the forest as part of a living territory – one remembered by elders as a place where wildlife was abundant and people's lives were deeply intertwined with the surrounding biodiversity.

This difference in how the community and the company view and understand nature is particularly visible in relation to water. The community recognises sacred water sources within its territory as essential to biodiversity, subsistence agriculture, and cultural and spiritual practices. Yet residents report that chemical use associated with the plantation is affecting water sources and raising concerns about their safety for people and animals.

> **"The forest itself is an ally … a comrade in their struggle to defend the environment."**
>
> *Leon Dulce, LRC-KSK/FoE Philippines*

> **"Water is vital to sustaining biodiversity, the community's agriculture and subsistence, and many aspects of their culture, traditional practices and spirituality. But the agroforestry project is killing the water."**
>
> *– Leon Dulce, LRC-KSK/FoE Philippines*

From the community's perspective, the loss of ecological resilience is clearly linked to the conversion of diverse forest ecosystems into chemical-intensive monoculture plantations.

A different stewardship

In stark contrast to the Kirinteken-Ilentungen Menuvu's ancestral and traditional stewardship of the territory, Kennemer increasingly frames its agricultural activities through the language of agroforestry, forest restoration, crop diversification and climate action. Through its Mindanao Tree Planting Program for Our Climate and Communities (MinTrees), the company describes a climate-financed agroforestry programme for smallholders in Mindanao and claims more than 50,000 hectares of sustainable agricultural production. The programme generates carbon credits, and through its Mindanao Forests for People and Sustainable Livelihoods (MinFor) project, the company is developing a REDD+ project intended to generate further carbon credits. There is no evidence, however, that the GAAVI plantation is currently included in the project or that carbon credits are being claimed from the plantation.

The company presents these initiatives as complementary, with agroforestry, carbon storage

and environmental restoration forming part of a broader approach to agricultural production and climate action. But these outcomes are not necessarily equivalent. Agroforestry integrates trees into agricultural production systems, while carbon projects seek to turn the carbon stored in those systems into a measurable and potentially tradable environmental asset. Ecological restoration involves broader changes to biodiversity and ecosystem functioning.

The relevant question is therefore not simply how much carbon is stored or how many trees are planted, but what kind of landscape and production system they form part of, and whether the claimed environmental benefits correspond to genuine improvements in ecological conditions.

Why is this relevant to the Global Biodiversity Framework?

This case highlights a central challenge in implementing the Global Biodiversity Framework: environmental claims need to be considered alongside the ecological impacts of the production system itself. The GBF calls for the restoration of degraded ecosystems, the reduction of pollution and more sustainable agricultural practices. Kennemer's intensive agrochemical use and the simplification of its production system raise questions about whether increased vegetation, crop diversification or carbon storage necessarily translate into genuine biodiversity benefits.

The case demonstrates that biodiversity protection is inseparable from land use, territorial governance, and the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities. The overlapping tenure arrangements in Bukidnon illustrate the importance of spatial planning that respects Indigenous and traditional territories. Assuming the environmental compliance certificate's requirements were fulfilled, the zoning requirement also illustrates the role that spatial planning can play in implementing the GBF. Concerns raised by LRC-KSK/FoE Philippines about free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) highlight the need for Indigenous peoples and local communities' meaningful participation in decisions affecting their territories. These issues also underline the importance of traditional knowledge, access to information and justice, and the effective participation of the communities whose lives and livelihoods are deeply interconnected with the ecosystems concerned.

Ultimately, this case challenges the idea that carbon sequestration, agroforestry or ESG credentials can be treated as proxies for biodiversity restoration. Ecological recovery is inseparable from territorial rights, customary knowledge and community control. Restoration is about far more than simply planting trees or storing carbon; crucially, it involves restoring the ecological relationships, livelihoods and forms of governance that sustain the territory.

> **"Because the GAAVI plantation treats the forest as a commodity, all its environmental, social and governance practices are dictated by market forces, dictated by capital. And so it will always fall short of what communities expect a forest to be, because it will always err on the side of economic efficiency rather than life and spirituality."**
>
> *Leon Dulce, LRC-KSK/FoE Philippines*

The broader GBF lesson is therefore clear: biodiversity solutions should be judged not by the environmental claims attached to a project, but by whether they actually protect and restore biodiversity and ecological integrity, reduce pressures on nature, and respect the rights and governance systems of the people whose territories are affected.

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With thanks for the financial support of the following:

Co-funded by the European Union

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