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**IUCN World Conservation Congress Highlights:
Thursday, 9 October 2025**

The opening session of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE), set a powerful tone for the week-long meeting as world leaders, experts, and others reflected on the Congress’s theme “Revitalizing global governance for nature and people.”

Kickstarting the Forum, Exhibition, and Member’s Assembly, the first day of the Congress also featured speaker pitches, online podcasts, training and capacity building sessions, and the first sitting of the Member’s Assembly.

Congress Opening

In the presence of HRH Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Surangel Whipps Jr., President of Palau, opened the Congress by sharing the concept of “*bul*,” a moratorium adopted by village chiefs to allow nature to renew itself, highlighting its representation of adaptability, restraint, and respect for nature that are essential to balance nature conservation and the well-being of people.

Princess Lalla Hasnaa, Morocco, underlined, among others, the role of youth in ensuring the equitable and inclusive use of artificial intelligence tools to design solutions to environmental challenges.

In her keynote address, Amna bint Abdullah Al Dahak, Minister of Climate Change and Environment, UAE, stressed that our responsibility to the environment “is not a choice, but an ethical commitment.” Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, President,



Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, President, IUCN

IUCN, noted that multilateralism is under strain, but also recognized an emerging spirit of cooperation that acknowledges the inseparability of people and nature, and referred to this Congress as “an opportunity to turn understanding into unity and unity into action.”

IUCN high-level opening dialogue: Moderator Grethel Aguilar, Director General, IUCN, characterized the IUCN as an “unstoppable force for change” and emphasized trust in science and traditional wisdom as key to addressing the challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, and growing polarization.

IUCN Patron of Nature Sylvia Earle channeled the words of the late primatologist Jane Goodall, reminding participants that humans are the only species with the capacity and responsibility



Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, President of the UAE



Sylvia Earle, IUCN Patron of Nature

to shape millennia to come, underscoring that “the decisions that will be made in the next five years will be terminal.”

In a pre-recorded video message, HRH Prince William of Wales stressed that “protecting nature is not the task of the few but a responsibility for us all.” He urged inclusion of Indigenous and youth perspectives in nature conservation. An Emirati youth representative, Sarah Al Mheiri, recited a poem centering on the interconnectedness of humans with nature.

Thematic Plenaries

The day’s thematic plenaries and sessions were structured around the Congress’s five interlinked themes: scaling up resilient conservation action; reducing climate overshoot risks; delivering on equity; transitioning to nature-positive economies and societies; and disruptive innovation and leadership for conservation.

Shaping resilience, scaling impact: This session, moderated by Nick Salafsky, Foundations of Success, examined practical approaches for scaling conservation. Rob Walton, Founder, Rob Walton Foundation, discussed the Africa Keystone Partnership project, which seeks to safeguard 162 vital ecosystems by 2035. He also mentioned the need for stable and long-term funding.

Soo Kiang Bey, Vice Chairman, RGE Pte. Ltd., shared the company’s “production-protection approach” as a commitment to conserve one hectare of forest for every hectare of plantation. Aziz Abdulkhakov, Minister of Ecology, Environmental Protection and Climate Change, Uzbekistan, highlighted the Yashil Makon (Green Nation) Nationwide Initiative that aims to plant 200 million trees annually.

Masego Madzwamuse, Environment Programme Director, Oak Foundation, reflected on the “inherently political questions” related to funding decisions, such as how funding can shift power to deliver lasting change.

Cristina Chaminade, Unearthodox, explained three forms of scaling: “scaling out” (increasing geographical spread, increasing number of people, and connecting different initiatives); “scaling up” (influencing policy); and “scaling deep” (cultural shifts and changing narratives).

Arundhati Jagadish, Scientist, Nature Conservation Foundation, noted that to design initiatives to scale, one should consider the relative advantage of the innovation, the characteristics of the adopters, and the context in which they are found.



Nick Salafsky, Executive Director, Foundations of Success

To scale ambition, Moderator Salafsky, proposed understanding the actors, behaviours, and enabling conditions and barriers, instead of starting with a project to scale, which can impose a fundamental bias.

“Everything, everywhere, all at once:” Addressing the risks of climate overshoot: This thematic plenary addressed the risks posed by worsening climate change and solutions available to address these risks.

Moderator Becky Anderson, CNN Abu Dhabi, recalled that a 43% cut in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 will be necessary to achieve the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C. She stressed that “this is not a moral crusade; this is about finding solutions that are fair, fast, and grounded in science and justice.” In a keynote speech, Mukhtar Babayev, President of the 29th Conference of the Parties (COP 29) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Azerbaijan, highlighted, among others, the Baku to Belém Roadmap launched at the UNFCCC COP 29 in Baku to scale up climate finance for developing nations to at least USD 1.3 trillion per year by 2035.

During the ensuing panel discussion, Ralph Regenvanu, Minister for Climate Change Adaptation, Energy, Environment, Meteorology, Geo-Hazards and Disaster Management, Vanuatu, said the plenary’s title indicates the urgency of addressing the climate crisis from all fronts, and stressed fossil fuel phase-out as imperative. Seyni Nafu, Member, UN Secretary-General High-Level Advisory Group on Climate Action, urged enhanced adaptation action to protect those most vulnerable to climate risks.

Finn Ross, Founder, Ocean Balance, singled out carbon pricing as a crucial instrument to address climate overshoot and stressed the need for equitable governance frameworks to explore different geoengineering options. Puyr Tembé, Co-founder, Federação Estadual dos Povos Indígenas do Pará, called for enhanced financing for Indigenous actors, and recognition of Indigenous territories as a guarantee for Indigenous rights.

Commenting on the International Court of Justice’s 2025 Advisory Opinion on the obligations of states in respect of climate change, Minister Regenvanu outlined that the Opinion could drive national litigation and influence negotiation dynamics under the UNFCCC.

Ambassador Nafu called for enhanced consideration of adaptation action in finance flows and national planning efforts and, reflecting on the departure of prominent states from the



Ralph Regenvanu (center), Minister for Climate Change Adaptation, Energy, Environment, Meteorology, Geo-Hazards and Disaster Management, Vanuatu



Grethel Aguilar, Director-General, IUCN

UNFCCC, urged remaining parties to “pull together”, stating that “we do not have the luxury to stop in the face of current adversities.”

Driving equity, rethinking inclusive conservation: This thematic plenary focused on the importance of conservation and biodiversity to delivering equity. The session was opened by Whaiā Sonic, First Nations performer of Ngāti Kahungunu, Māori descent. Musonda Mumba, Secretary General, Convention on Wetlands, moderated.

In a keynote address, IUCN Director General Aguilar emphasized that “the path to a thriving planet must be built on equity.” She called for IUCN to unite under a triple transformation centered on rights, knowledge, and finance, emphasizing a rights-based approach that embraces the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples and local communities.

A panel discussion followed. Ilana Victorya Seid, Permanent Mission of Palau to the UN, discussed Palau’s whole-of-society approach to embed conservation into national legislation. Nigar Arpadarai, UN Climate Change High-Level Champion for COP 29, Azerbaijan, highlighted the impact of multilateral decision-making on society, alongside the importance of the private sector in delivering climate and conservation outcomes.

Joenia Batista de Carvalho, National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil, underscored the challenges for Indigenous Peoples to engage in policymaking as they are too busy fighting for basic rights.

Mahmoud Mohieldin, UN Special Envoy on Financing Sustainable Development, discussed the widening biodiversity finance gap, which requires a fourfold increase from the current target of USD 200 billion per year. He expressed dismay at the collapse of global funding, noting that actors addressing issues related to climate, biodiversity, and development are expected to do more with less.

Niila-Juhán Valkeapää, Youth Council of the Sámi Parliament in Finland, lamented that while “people want to hear from youth” they fall short of listening to and taking their concerns seriously. He emphasized the expertise and lived experience of Indigenous youth, calling for investing in and supporting their capacity for change.

Nature-Positive Future: Turning Pledges into Investments: This session was opened by Juha Siikamäki, Chief Economist, IUCN, and moderated by Achim Steiner, former UN Development Programme Administrator. In a keynote address,

Serge Wilmes, Minister of the Environment, Climate and Biodiversity, Luxembourg, noted the need for cooperation and harmony with nature.

Boipuso Wynter Mmolotsi, Minister of Environment and Tourism, Botswana, highlighted the need to boost the country’s ecotourism sector. He outlined investments in Botswana’s wildlife-based economy and the importance of benefits from conservation accruing to local communities.

Valerie Hickey, Global Director for Climate Change, World Bank, noted the Bank invests USD 5.5 billion annually on nature, and stated the need for more affordable and reliable funding for smallholders.

Yoko Watanabe, Director of Environment, Asian Development Bank, urged: incorporating nature’s value in national accounting systems; mainstreaming environmental and conservation aspects across sectors; and aligning the new finance architecture with investor appetite.

Anthony Goldner, Chief Executive Officer, Taskforce on Nature-related Financial Disclosures, lamented a current gap of USD 900 billion in nature financing but welcomed the shifting mindset towards linking nature with company risk and resilience.

Pradeep Kurukulasuriya, Executive Secretary, UN Capital Development Fund, labeled the current financial architecture outdated, and noted that the current asset management system does not serve local needs.

Several speakers highlighted the need for improved science-based, nature-related data and indicators, and transparent reporting to attract private financing, show return on investment and build common understanding.

Inclusive innovation and bold leadership: The disruption we seek: This event was moderated by Karimah Hudda, Founder, illumine.earth, who underscored that solutions targeting nature are not being implemented fast enough, calling for a step change in leadership and innovation.

Jacob Martin-Malus, Quebec Ministry of Environment, Canada, underlined the bottom-up approach used to craft Quebec’s nature plan as a response to the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework.

Daouda Sembene, CEO, AfriCatalyst, underlined the need for more private capital for nature conservation, and urged governments to create conducive environments for public and private investment.

Anne Deane, Founder and President, Freyja Foundation, highlighted her organization’s work in Patagonia Park, Argentina



Achim Steiner, former Administrator, UNDP

and supported involving all stakeholders, including private capital and philanthropies.

Paul Bunje, President, Conservation X Labs, shared experiences in empowering underfunded innovators, including projects on forest fires in North America and the conservation of North Atlantic right whales.

Lucy Waruingi, Executive Director, African Conservation Centre, addressed the co-development of solutions to land subdivisions, relating a case where common use zones were later recognized through legislation.

Ann Adeline Dumaliang, Co-Founder and Trustee, Masungi Georeserve, shared their success in cancelling quarry titles in the georeserve, and called for funding, acknowledgment, and rewards for those on the frontlines of conservation.

Selected Sessions and Events

Sustainable and Inclusive Blue Tourism: Experience-Sharing from the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Western Indian Ocean: Moderated by Lucia Prieto Fustes, Mediterranean and Ecosystems, IUCN Secretariat, the session highlighted IUCN's new guidelines for sustainability in tourism and visitor management in protected areas.

Rachel Clausing, Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation, underlined that tourism must become an ally and not a threat to ecosystems, highlighting the Foundation's work to address tourism's impacts in the Mediterranean. Via videoconferencing, Stéphanie Bouziges-Eschmann, French Facility for Global Environment, noted that the Facility has provided over EUR 500 million in the last two decades to support blue tourism in coastal areas.

The ensuing panel discussion was moderated by Thiago Beraldo Souza, Chair, IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic, and Social Policy 2021-2025, who highlighted the need to ground blue tourism in sound science and strong leadership.

Pointing to both the Nexus Assessment and the Transformative Change Assessment, David Obura, Chair of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), underscored the benefits of awareness creation and education in blue and ecotourism to improve and diversify coastal livelihoods.

Tiffany Marcelle, Project Coordinator, Caribbean Youth Environment Network, underscored the need for local

investments in eco-spaces to benefit coastal communities, and called for inclusive, participatory policies to protect blue spaces.

Victor Galvan, Director of Nature, Iberostar Group, highlighted sustainably sourced blue foods, waste reduction, "destination stewardship" through public-private partnerships, and marine ecosystem health.

Participants engaged in a world café session basing their discussions on two topics: opportunities for tourism to enhance community well-being and conservation of coastal and marine ecosystems; and practical actions to advance sustainable and inclusive blue tourism.

Closing the session, Arnau Teixidor Costa, Programme Coordinator, IUCN Med, underlined the importance of local community efforts in enhancing blue tourism.

ALL IN for One Health: Uniting Efforts to Protect People, Animals, and the Environment: This thematic session examined efforts to operationalize the One Health approach in conservation and biodiversity. The session was moderated by Brent Mitchell, Senior Vice President, Quebec-Labrador Foundation, who reflected on the evolution of One Health.

Sarah Olson, Director, Health Research, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas 2021-2025, previewed the MAP-ACT-CREATE One Health Toolkit, soon to be released by IUCN. The toolkit seeks to aid in the mapping and assessment of pathogens to support control measures of diseases, analyze and control transmission, and assess and enhance One Health capacities.

Paula Prist, Senior Programme Coordinator, IUCN, discussed integrating One Health into spatial planning to consider how altering landscapes affect human, animal, and environmental health. She noted the role of Indigenous territories in safeguarding human health and provided an overview of how a low amount of forest cover increases vector-borne diseases, while high levels of forest cover reduce this risk.

Pam McElwee, Professor, Rutgers University, outlined the IPBES Nexus Assessment on the interlinkages between biodiversity, water, food, and health in the context of climate change.

Kim Gruetzmacher, German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, highlighted the interlinkages between the Convention on Biological Diversity and World Health Organization. She noted, however, that these interlinkages go beyond One Health, and that One Health approaches are not necessarily biodiversity inclusive.



Lucia Prieto Fustes, Mediterranean and Ecosystems, IUCN Secretariat



Opening act of the IUCN World Conservation Congress