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IUCN World Conservation Congress Highlights: Saturday, 11 October 2025

At a time when global multilateralism is struggling to drive the transformative change required for the conservation of nature, the need for rigorous legal guidance has never been greater. The recent advisory opinion on climate change by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) confirmed states' legal obligations to protect the climate system and their liability for harm caused by their actions and omissions. The advisory opinion also affirmed science as the most reliable foundation for decision-making, a fact that elevates the work of experts gathered at the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) World Conservation Congress 2025.

High-level Dialogues

From Commitments to Change: Driving Transformative Action for the Ocean: This High-level Dialogue covered themes related to disruptive innovation and leadership for conservation and scaling up resilient conservation action.

Minna Epps, Director, Global Marine and Polar Programme, IUCN Secretariat, introduced the session, and Robert Ian Bonnicksen, Founder, SpeakUP Monday, moderated.

Solomon Pili Kaho'ohalahala (Uncle Sol), Chair of the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary Advisory Council, opened the session with a chant to "provision the ocean canoe with good intentions."

Sylvia Earle, Founder and Chair, Mission Blue, and IUCN President Razan Al Mubarak engaged in a fireside chat. Earle drew attention to the fact that marine protected areas in 115 countries are championed by local communities. Acknowledging that IUCN needs to "be more agile," Al Mubarak highlighted the need to strengthen ocean science, expand the ocean community, and engage local communities and subnational leadership.

In a keynote, El Hadji Abdourrahmane Diouf, Minister of Environment and Ecological Transition, Senegal, said the blue and green economies are inextricably linked and stressed that achieving ecological transitions in developing countries requires funding, strategic partnerships, awareness, and education. Via video, Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, Special Envoy of the French President for the UN Ocean Conference (UNOC3), referred to the Neptune Mission, launched at UNOC3, as an ocean monitoring coalition of parties to the High Seas Treaty who also support a precautionary pause or moratorium on deep sea mining.

Peter Thomson, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean, welcomed IUCN's adoption of a motion on ocean coral, and called on youth to mobilize to combat ocean acidification and coral bleaching.

In a panel discussion moderated by Loreley Picourt, Director General, Ocean and Climate Platform, Cynthia Barzuna, Deputy Director, World Resources Institute, launched the [Handbook on Sustainable Ocean Plans](#). Gloria Fluxà Thienemann, Grupo Iberostar, underlined the need for partnerships focused on co-



Sylvia Earle, Founder and Chair, Mission Blue, and Razan Al Mubarak, IUCN President



Peter Thomson, UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Ocean

benefits for the Ocean, coastal communities, and tourism. Chris Gorell Barnes, Founding Partner, Ocean 14 Capital, lamented the chronic underfunding of the Ocean despite it being a USD 3 trillion economy. He called for patient (long-term) funding to support green businesses and blended finance for small and medium-sized enterprises to drive impact outcomes.

Alexis Grosskopf, Director and Founder, African Hub for Ocean Impact, highlighted the role of blue entrepreneurship for the disruptive change the Ocean needs. Betsy Muthoni Njagi, Ministry of Mining, Blue Economy and Maritime Affairs, Kenya, reported that Kenya will host the [11th Our Ocean Conference](#), which will focus on marine protected areas, sustainable blue economy, local communities, and youth.

Kristina Gjerde, Senior High Seas Advisor, IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law (WCEL), introduced the [Ocean Stewardship Award](#) for early career ocean professionals and marine conservationists.

Via video, Nainoa Thompson, President, Polynesian Voyaging Society, closed the session, reiterating that community action and youth engagement are key to addressing threats to the Ocean.

One Health: The Only Healthy Future for People, Animals, and Ecosystems: This High-level Dialogue addressed the Congress's themes of reducing climate overshoot risks, and scaling up resilient conservation action. Ashley Lashley, Youth Advisor to the UN Secretary-General on Climate Change, moderated.



Paula Harrison, UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology

IUCN Director General Grethel Aguilar reiterated IUCN's support to the One Health approach through commitment, collaboration, and advocacy. She noted efforts to convene stakeholders and mobilize partnerships to strengthen dialogue and knowledge sharing and warned "if we destroy nature, we destroy our own survival." Tedros Ghebreyesus, Director-General, World Health Organization (WHO), joined via video to discuss how Nature-based Solutions (NbS) support the One Health approach, referencing the joint 2024 report by IUCN and WHO.

In her keynote address, Paula Harrison, UK Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, highlighted key messages emerging from the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) [Nexus Assessment](#) Report.

An expert panel then discussed ways to support the One Health approach. Hambarzum Matevosyan, Minister of Environment, Armenia, highlighted the implementation of the One Health approach in his country through the development of national health security and disease control strategies in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) and the EU.

Astrid Schomaker, Executive Secretary, Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), reflected on the tools the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) can provide to support the One Health approach. She discussed the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration, funding challenges, and the need for greater advocacy.

Pam McElwee, Rutgers University, noted that it is still "fairly rare" to see stakeholders in the health sector take an integrated approach to addressing human, animal, and environmental health. She praised the solutions offered by the IPBES Nexus Assessment, stating that an integrated, coordinated approach can lead to cross-sectoral benefits. Joênia Wapichana, President, National Foundation of Indigenous Peoples, emphasized that Indigenous Peoples have long been practicing a One Health approach, stressing the need to enable Indigenous Peoples to be decision-makers and global leaders.

High-level Events

Innovative Financing Mechanisms for Scaling Up Nature-based Solutions: This thematic session addressed the themes



Dong Wang, Deputy Director, NbS Innovation Centre, Peking University

of scaling up resilient conservation action and transitioning to nature-positive economies and societies. It brought together leaders from the public and private sectors to explore innovative financing models for NbS. The session was moderated by Melissa de Kock, Deputy Director, UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre.

Susanne Pedersen, Director, Center for Science and Knowledge, IUCN, lamented the gap between collective ambitions and the low, fragmented actions.

Marie Bjornson-Langen, French Development Agency (AFD), discussed the role development banks can play in mainstreaming NbS into public investment and policy frameworks.

Oliver Konz, Ministry for the Environment, Climate Action, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety, Germany, highlighted national efforts in Germany to create enabling conditions for large-scale investments in nature. Yoko Watanabe, Asian Development Bank (ADB), maintained optimism about the future of investing in NbS, highlighting progress that has been made.

After a video presentation commemorating the late Yu, who pioneered the sponge city concept that has been embedded in China's national policy, Dong Wang, NbS Innovation Centre, Peking University, shared examples of innovative NbS projects that use nature to help people and the planet.

The session continued with a panel discussion focusing on, among others, scaling NbS projects. Alvin Lopez, ADB, discussed the need to engage in upstream programs and project development to ensure sound investment. Claudine Blamey, Aviva, reflected on the need for due diligence to ensure projects minimize legal risks, align with land regulation policies, and support community consultation. Bjornson-Langen, AFD, discussed the importance of proof of concept in projects and de-risking investments. Eric Schoumsky, Société Générale, praised the value of the [IUCN Global Standard for NbS](#) as a tool to address risk, engage stakeholders, and develop economically valuable projects.

Selected Thematic Sessions

IUCN and International Courts: Climate Change Advisory Opinions: This thematic session, moderated by Ayman Cherkaoui, Deputy Chair, IUCN WCEL, addressed reducing climate overshoot risks and considered the three recent advisory opinions (AOs) on climate change issued by international courts.

IUCN Director General Aguilar celebrated the Union's close involvement in the development of the three AOs and noted they "change the conversation" by telling us that "climate action is not only a matter of policy and politics, but of law and justice".

Christina Voigt, Chair, WCEL, highlighted some of the core findings, including: the affirmation of the reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) as the best available science; the assertion that climate obligations stem from different sources of international law beyond climate treaties; and the need to act with "stringent due diligence" to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Cymie Paine, Chair, WCEL Ocean Law Specialist Group, outlined the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) AO on states' obligations to protect and preserve the marine environment. She discussed how this duty intersects with IUCN's work, citing the Great Blue Wall initiative as an example.

Claudia de Windt, CEO, Inter-American Institute on Justice and Sustainability, addressed the Inter-American Court of Human Rights AO, highlighting, among others, the Court's support for a human rights-centered approach to climate mitigation which includes monitoring and supervising the behavior of non-state actors, such as businesses.

Sandeep Sangupta, Global Policy Lead, IUCN Climate Change, shared his expectation that the three AOs will influence intergovernmental negotiations, including the upcoming climate conference in Belém, Brazil. He further called for "socializing" the AOs among different constituencies.

Francesco Sindico, Co-Chair, WCEL Climate Change Specialist Group, outlined various national-level lawsuits and judgements that referenced the ICJ AO. He underlined that "in a world where multilateralism is a bit shaky, rigorous lawyering is more needed than ever".

Marina Venâncio, Chair, WCEL Early Career Specialist Group, highlighted the role of youth in launching the advisory proceedings and underscored the AOs' contribution towards intergenerational equity in addressing long-term climate change impacts.

Youth Breaking Walls: Advancing Transboundary Conservation in Conflict-Affected Regions: This cross-cutting thematic session aligned with both disruptive innovation and leadership for conservation and transitioning to nature-positive economies and societies. Alen Amirkhanyan, Director, Acopian Center for the Environment, American University of Armenia, moderated.

In his opening remarks, Hambarzum Matevosyan, Minister of Environment, Armenia, highlighted nature as a "common language" for youth in conflict-affected areas.

Stefania Petrosillo, Chair, Transboundary Conservation Specialist Group, IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas, outlined concrete benefits arising from youth involvement in nature and peace. Elaine Hsiao, Kent State University School of Peace and Conflict Studies, commended the voice of youth as powerful but "silenced by the conditions of fear around them." Sona Kalantaryan, Foundation for the Preservation of Wildlife and Cultural Assets, said that conservation can be a "non-political" platform for peacebuilding as a shared aim connecting youth across borders.

Doug Weir, Director, Conflict and Environment Observatory, shared examples of free Earth observation tools available for



Christina Voigt, Chair, WCEL

youth to study conflict-linked habitat change. Dalal Alhindi, Ministry of Environment, Saudi Arabia, noted that while ecosystems face conflict, pressure, and change, they also provide opportunities for building peace through cooperation.

Speaker Pitch

Climate Change Adaptation in Practice: Lessons from Tropical Mountain Ecosystems: This speaker pitch showcased the Resilient Highland Project in Guatemala, which promotes the adoption of Ecosystem-based Adaptation. This session aligned with two of the Congress's themes: reducing climate overshoot risks; and transitioning to nature-positive economies and societies.

Otoniel Monterroso, IUCN, reported climate change impacts in Guatemala, including dry season droughts and higher erosion rates during rainy season. He noted the Project incorporates an intervention approach, restoring ecosystems services, identifying restoration opportunities, and promoting watershed management.

Orsibal Ramírez Cardona, IUCN, elaborated the Project's forest-land restoration initiatives, which involve communities in watershed management planning processes. He highlighted that successful watershed management and ecosystem restoration have contributed to improved water quality, increased groundwater recharge, and reduced surface runoff during extreme weather events.

The ensuing discussion touched upon, among others, appropriate choice of tree species for restoration purposes crop susceptibility to erosion, and social costs and incentives for watershed management.

Changemakers Pitch Event: Young social innovators presented sustainable ideas and solutions to address socio-environmental challenges while responding to queries from a jury and the audience. Erika Harms, Global Director of Sustainability, Grupo Iberostar, and Olivier Staehli, CEO and Co-Founder, Synature, served as the jury. Moderator Maria Fedorova, INSEAD Business School, highlighted the challenges social entrepreneurs face in scaling their innovations and accessing finance.

Becca Liu, Founder of HappyPower, presented a concept enabling communities to generate and store their own electricity

through human motion in children's modular playgrounds, currently capable of powering 500 households.

Youness Ouazri, Founder of Ecodome Maroc, shared his idea of earthen houses in rural Morocco, noting that these one- or two-storey buildings are quick and cost-effective to build and provide significant energy savings. He said that his company is working to franchise the building model, pointing to testing sites in Tunisia and Côte d'Ivoire.

Lamenting the annual use of 200 billion plastic plant pots, Elisa Harley, CEO and Founder, Enivo Pots, pitched biodegradable plant pots made from local plant pulp from New Zealand. She noted that her company is seeking to raise USD 10 million to build a sustainable pulp processing facility.

Oliver Dauert, Founder of Wildya, shared his vision of a "Y-Combinator for Nature," empowering ecopreneurs through increased traction, attention, and financing to scale nature-positive impact. It provides community bootcamps and one-to-one support, through which Wildya is seeking to infuse the "nature bubble" with selected capitalistic principles.

Shibani Padhy, Founder of Project Dolphin, shared her prototype of a mini submarine fitted with a waterproof camera and sensors to detect, map, and monitor plastic waste in inland water bodies, noting that it runs on artificial intelligence and machine learning technologies.

Hot Off the Press

Agricultural Support, Biodiversity and Trade: Examining Connections to Repurpose Harmful Incentives: Aligned with the Congress theme of transitioning to nature-positive economies and societies, this Learning Zone event launched the new [IUCN Report](#) uncovering linkages between agricultural support, biodiversity, and trade. Antonin Vergez, IUCN, summarized key conclusions of the study, including that agriculture occupies 37% of land and threatens 34% of IUCN Red List-assessed species. The study offers recommendations on how to reform and better align agricultural policies with respective GBF targets.

Matthieu Le Grix, AFD, welcomed the report as essential to incentivize agricultural and trade policy reforms. He highlighted the need to connect its recommendations with the global food security agenda, in addition to biodiversity goals.



Group photo at the end of the Changemakers Pitch Event



A picture from around the venue