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Summary of the Global Youth Summit: 8 October 2025

“Young people are not mere observers – they are the drivers of action.” With the urgency of tackling biodiversity loss and environmental degradation leading to calls for “all hands on deck,” the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Global Youth Summit convened youth delegates to showcase the conservation actions they already lead, and discuss what is needed to unleash their full potential in doing so.

Convening for the second time, under the theme “Youth powering transformative conservation,” the [IUCN Global Youth Summit](#) provided an opportunity to assess progress made since its inaugural meeting in Marseille, France, in September 2021. Grethel Aguilar, IUCN Director General, called on young people to seize the opportunities within IUCN and at the [2025 World Conservation Congress](#) immediately following the Summit, from 9-15 October 2025. Delegates highlighted key achievements since 2021 as the elaboration and launch of the [IUCN Youth Strategy 2022-2030](#) and the [IUCN Youth Advisory Committee \(YAC\)](#), which steers the Strategy’s implementation.

Across the one-day event, delegates engaged in a series of panel discussions and one high-level segment on the role of youth in shaping global conservation action. More specifically, they addressed:

- IUCN achievements on youth empowerment;
- young people on the frontlines of nature conservation;
- personal stories and reflections on career paths by youth leaders;
- closing the financing gap between funders and youth; and
- bridging generations, with a focus on youth in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Panelists underscored that youth are “the architects of the future,” calling for strengthened intergenerational dialogue. Discussions also addressed: the realities that youth face on the ground when dealing with environmental issues; and the intricacies of how IUCN values the youth perspective and encourages young people’s participation and mainstreaming throughout the Union.

In addition, the Summit served as a platform for connection and collaboration, with young leaders sharing insights into their career paths. Among others, these speakers encouraged delegates to be persistent in pursuing their goals in the face of adversity, and highlighted opportunities including a centralized capacity-building and funding platform for young people in the Arab region.

A fireside chat on the financing gap pinpointed credibility and trust among key issues to be resolved to secure long-term funding, with many participants underlining that securing viable funding is a critical hurdle to youth conservation efforts. They highlighted: the value of incubator, mentoring, and young fellowship programmes; forging strong relationships with donors; and being willing to listen to find common ground and build bridges.

Panelists further shared lessons learned from youth empowerment initiatives in the UAE, highlighting the establishment of youth councils across government levels and sectors, including new ones on the environment and agriculture.

The Summit also invited delegates to provide insights on and contributions to shaping the next four years of work for implementing the IUCN Youth Strategy, through an interactive survey.

The Summit set the scene for the upcoming IUCN Congress, with many participants sharing that the one-day event had effectively contributed to building a community by providing a dedicated space to share experiences and connect across regions and generations.

The second IUCN Global Youth Summit took place in a hybrid format on 8 October 2025 in Abu Dhabi, UAE, bringing together around 250 participants.

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IUCN Global Youth Summit Report

Opening Ceremony

Following a traditional performance, Masters of Ceremony Mohsen Mohammed Al Sakkaf, Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, and Sara Pineda, Biologist and National Geographic Explorer, opened the IUCN Global Youth Summit, noting that youth are the change-makers that spark new ideas.

High-level Voices for Youth

Mohammed Saeed Al Nuaimi, Undersecretary, Ministry of Climate Change and Environment, UAE, commended the presence of youth at the Summit and called for their engagement. He emphasized that the challenges are known to all, but youth voices must be heard to help solve nature-related issues.

Khalid Mohammed Al Nuaimi, Director, Federal Youth Authority, UAE, called for energy, drive, and action. He described the Summit as a home for global dialogue, where youth stand at the heart of transformation. Al Nuaimi underscored that “sustainability is not an option but a shared human responsibility” and that youth are the architects of the future, further stressing the importance of partnerships between youth and decision makers.

Hany El-Shaer, Regional Director, IUCN Regional Office for West Asia (ROWA), described youth as the leaders of tomorrow and the driving force behind the solutions to climate change and biodiversity loss. He drew attention to the central role of youth within [IUCN’s 20-year vision](#) and [2026-2029 Programme](#).

Laila Mostafa Abdullatif, Director General, Emirates Nature-WWF, called for “stubborn optimism,” with the courage to see the truth of today’s challenges whilst embracing the possibility of change. She drew attention to connecting with nature and noted that youth can be the legacy custodians of nature.

IUCN Director General Grethel Aguilar commended the high attendance of young conservation leaders, noting “both the future and the present of conservation are in good hands.” She underscored the role of youth in shaping conservation action and called on young people to seize the opportunities within IUCN and at the Congress. Aguilar stressed the importance of intergenerational dialogue, and moving forward together, with conviction, creativity, and collaboration.



Grethel Aguilar, IUCN Director General



Laila Mostafa Abdullatif, Director General, Emirates Nature-WWF

Delegates then watched a video showcasing youth delegates from across the world who introduced their environmental work and their objectives for the future.

Why Are We Here?

Moderated by Faria Tarus, IUCN YAC and IUCN Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office, this session highlighted progress made since the first Global Youth Summit, which was held in a hybrid format in Marseille, France, in 2021.

Diana Garlytska, Chair, IUCN YAC, noted the IUCN Youth Strategy 2022-2030 and the IUCN YAC as key achievements over the last quadrennium, and that they follow a “whole-of-Union approach.” She noted that YAC members represent Indigenous organizations as well as all seven IUCN Commissions and the IUCN Secretariat. Garlytska underscored the strengths of this complexity and diversity, before highlighting that mainstreaming youth throughout the Union is the YAC’s central mission, whereby “youth are in every project, initiative, and programme of IUCN.”

Answering questions from participants, Aguilar emphasized the importance of the YAC as a space to convene and create a force, before underlining that beyond their age, the strengths of YAC members and contributors lie in their knowledge, wisdom, and fresh perspectives. Garlytska and Aguilar urged participants to hold onto hope in the face of multiple social and environmental crises, conflicts, and wars, before underlining that this will be “the generation that does things right.” Regarding a question on the role of philanthropy, Aguilar noted its essential role in unlocking resources with speed and flexibility.

Youth on the Frontlines of Nature Conservation

Panel session moderators Georges Habib, IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP), and Fatima El-Aaraby, CEESP Regional Focal Point for Africa, invited panelists to showcase their actions to shape a sustainable future, and asked youth participants whether they felt they were already leading conservation action.

Razan Al Mubarak, IUCN President, expanded on the need to involve youth in shaping policies, but stressed the importance of drawing on all levels of society, not just youth. She cautioned against paying lip service to youth and urged putting young



Ahmad Hameed, IUCN CEESP

people at the center of decision making. She described how the boards of various UAE government entities have youth representatives to ensure their perspectives are considered.

Ahmad Hameed, IUCN CEESP, stressed that many young people feel the system is not built for them, and described how CEESP “brings them to the main table.” He noted barriers, such as access to funding and inequalities in different regions, and called for a level playing field. Al Mubarak concurred and stressed that finance should reach young people to enable both meeting participation and field project support.

Jessica Grefa, Piatúa Resiste, described her organization’s efforts to protect the Piatúa River, in the Ecuadorian Amazon, from threats posed by a hydroelectric project. She outlined the cultural context and youth-led efforts that recognize the sacred status of the river and surrounding biodiversity. Grefa drew attention to the linkages between scientific studies and traditional knowledge, and underscored the threats arising from governmental views on exploiting nature in Ecuador.

Humaira Agibo Badrú, BIOFUND, described her conservation journey, which began at the grassroots level in Mozambique. She noted two challenges that young people face when trying to influence conservation strategies: lack of access to decision makers and limited resources.

In closing, Al Mubarak recapped that youth need equitable access to financial resources, capacity building, training, and information, as well as recognition and visibility. She underscored the importance of intergenerational collaboration, combining experience with energy, enthusiasm, and new ways of thinking.

Voices that Lead

In this session, young leaders shared personal stories to inspire action, recalled turning points, and reflected on challenges along their career paths.

Noura Omar Al Naqbi, Emirates Global Aluminium, conveyed her story as a chemical engineering graduate, noting she grappled with the doubts and fears of those close to her as she took on a practical role in a male-dominated field. She emphasized that she persisted and gained a fulfilling role in the environment department of her company. Al Naqbi stressed that “you are the hero of your own story.”

Saed Hanani, Founder and CEO, Foras Khadra, recalled the beauty and challenges of growing up in a Palestinian village surrounded by illegal settlements, and lamented having to suspend a successful initiative due to the Israeli occupation. Hanani then described the 28th session of the Conference of the Parties (COP 28) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) held in Dubai, UAE, as the turning point that led to the creation of Foras Khadra, a platform to assemble and accelerate opportunities for Arab youth. This, he said, directly led to on-the-ground youth-led projects across the Arab region.

Muneeb Al Shammari, Founder, We Plant and Protect, noted that although he studied economics and finance, his love for nature led him to work on nature restoration and combating environmental deterioration. As key to the initiative’s success, he highlighted receiving support from banks and collaborating with the environmental authority in Kuwait.

Whilst playing field recordings of a bird species extinct since the 1980s and of an endangered mountain tapir, Vania Tejada Gómez, Co-Founder, Nodo Conservation, shared her career path as a biologist dedicated to conserving mountain tapirs in Peru. She highlighted grassroots organizations working concurrently to restore ecological connectivity and improve the livelihoods of local communities.

Sheherazade, Co-Executive Director, PROGRES, spoke on her passion for the outdoors that led her to remote regions of Indonesia working as an ecologist. She underlined the impact of hunting on flying foxes, a large bat species. She highlighted that her research, typecasting her as the “crazy girl studying bats” in local communities, ultimately piqued their interest and cooperation, leading to a significant reduction in hunting in the Indonesian archipelago and a recovery in the bat population.

Tewende Emmanuel Sawadogo, Global Youth Biodiversity Network, shared his journey of becoming engaged for the environment from a young age, before studying journalism at university. He emphasized that although he did not pursue environmental studies, he mobilized local communities in Burkina Faso to defend nature, such as through a tree planting initiative to re-green schools.



Vania Tejada Gómez, Co-Founder, Nodo Conservation

Financing Youth-led Conservation: Bridging the Gap Between Youth and Funders

Moderator Sylvia Gan, Youth Climate Justice Fund, invited panelists to provide insight on how to improve financial support for young people in conservation.

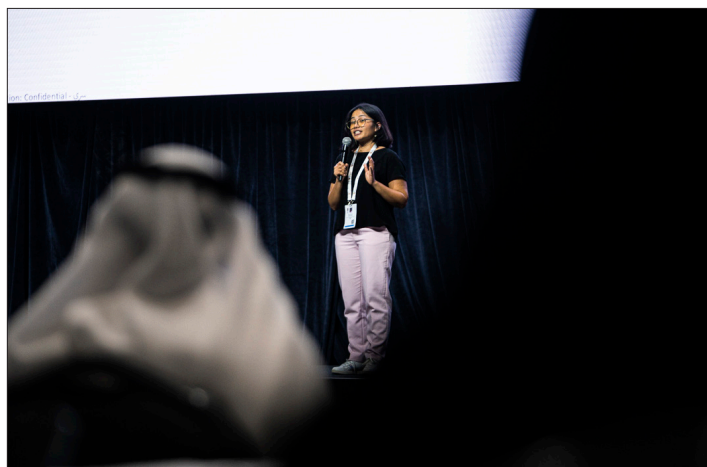
Sheherazade listed two challenges: building credibility as a person and as an organization to be trusted using funding; and securing funding and long-term support to cover operational costs. Presenting a financial institution's perspective, Zahra AlSuwaidi, Emirates NBD, concurred that credibility is a key hurdle faced by youth groups.

Swetha Stotra Bhashyam, Synchronicity Earth, noted that 83% of youth organizations lack adequate funding and 35% have no funding at all, consequently relying solely on volunteers. She underscored the need to directly channel funds to young people, highlighting a mismatch between funders' priorities and the focus of youth projects.

Aisha AlZarooni, Emirates NBD, drew attention to capacity building and longer-term partnerships, noting funders focus on short-term outcomes when the onus should be on longer-term sustainable impacts. Uxue Urteaga, Global Environment Facility (GEF), discussed how to systematically integrate youth perspective into projects, including by creating safe spaces for dialogue between national level leaders and youth before incorporating their ideas into GEF projects.

Discussions addressed why youth are not seen as trustworthy and credible by donors when they are celebrated as the "architects of the future." They debated the importance of: strengthening trust between donors and young funding applicants; incubator, mentoring, and youth fellowship programmes; and building credibility so individuals and organizations can reach their full potential. Panelists underlined that all projects can fail, not just youth-led ones.

On specific skills, panelists called for: strengthening national capacity to reduce brain drain; exploring alternative funding sources such as fundraising within local communities; shifting advocacy techniques used with governments to donors; and building strong donor relationships. Regarding trust-based relationships, they stressed willingness to listen, the value of long-term projects, finding common ground, and building bridges.



Sheherazade, Co-Executive Director, PROGRES

Bridging Generations: Empowering Youth Conservation Leaders in the UAE

The Summit's final panel spotlighted conservation leaders in the UAE. Moderator Arwa Diab, Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, invited panelists, consisting of "young people reaching out and experienced people reaching back," to provide insight on innovative solutions to conservation problems.

Khalid Mohammed Al Nuaimi outlined several ways that governments can catalyze youthful energy into action, including through: capacity building, noting that actions and projects must be sustainable in nature and duration; fostering enabling environments, by creating space for partnerships across sectors and interests; and planning and allocating resources. He pointed to over 200 UAE youth councils established across local and federal government branches and the private sector, and called for more multi-stakeholder coordination.

Amal Abdulrahim, Assistant Undersecretary for the Support Services Sector, and Chief Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Innovation Officer, Ministry of Climate Change and Environment, UAE, underlined the need for tailored capacity-building efforts to effectively empower the range of youth stakeholders. Citing AI as an example, she highlighted approaches to accompany new users in the uptake of AI, and stressed the importance of continuous learning.

Sheikha Aousha bint Mohammed bin Khalifa bin Hamdan Al Nahyan, Young Inventor and International Greenwich Olympiad Winner, underscored that endangered sea turtles are at further risk due to the extensive response time by rescue centers in her region. Highlighting her competition-winning development of an AI-assisted drone to patrol coastlines, locate struggling turtles, and gather coordinates to then expedite rescue centers' interventions, she indicated possibilities for the further application of her model.

Khuloud Al Nuwais, Chief Sustainability Officer, Emirates Foundation, and Secretary-General, Ne'ma National Steering Committee, reported on the Emirates Foundation's youth engagement work. She also mentioned a collaboration between Ne'ma and the Japanese International Cooperation Center to trial food waste diaries for school students. She said this initiative increased students' social responsibility by creating "food waste champions" who started dialogues on food waste among peers and at home.



Amal Abdulrahim, Assistant Undersecretary for the Support Services Sector, and Chief AI and Innovation Officer, Ministry of Climate Change and Environment, UAE

Youth Contributions to the Congress

In an interactive session, IUCN YAC members Samira Ben Ali and Diana Garlytska led participants in a survey to gather insight, hopes, and comments to shape the future of the YAC over the next four years, including priorities for continuing to implement the IUCN Youth Strategy.

Closing Remarks

In noting that the one-day event had provided a platform to share experiences and effectively built a community looking ahead to the IUCN World Conservation Congress and further down the line, Sarai Gomez, IUCN South America, closed the Summit at 5:00 pm.

Upcoming Meetings

IUCN World Conservation Congress: Held once every four years, the World Conservation Congress brings together several thousand leaders and decision makers representing government, civil society, Indigenous Peoples, business, and academia, with the goal of conserving the environment and harnessing the solutions nature offers to global challenges. **dates:** 9-15 October 2025 **location:** Abu Dhabi, UAE **www:** iucncongress2025.org

CBD SBSTTA 27: The 27th meeting of the CBD Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical, and Technological Advice will address matters of relevance to the implementation of the Convention and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. **dates:** 20-24 October 2025 **location:** Panama City, Panama **www:** cbd.int/meetings/SBSTTA-27

CBD SB8(j) 1: Held back-to-back with SBSTTA 27, the first meeting of the Convention's new Subsidiary Body on Article 8(j) will address matters related to Indigenous Peoples and local communities. **dates:** 27-30 October 2025 **location:** Panama City, Panama **www:** cbd.int/meetings/SB8J-01

CITES CoP 20: The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) CoP convenes every two to three years to review implementation of the Convention, review progress in the conservation of species

included in the Convention's Appendices, and consider proposals to amend the lists of species in Appendices I and II. **dates:** 24 November - 5 December 2025 **location:** Samarkand, Uzbekistan **www:** cites.org/eng/cop/20

IPBES 12: This meeting will focus on several key topics, including the methodological assessment of the impact and dependence of business on nature, and the continued development of a second global assessment on biodiversity and ecosystem services. **dates:** 3-8 February 2026 **location:** Manchester, UK **www:** ipbes.net/events/ipbes-12-plenary

CMS COP15: The 15th meeting of the COP to the Convention on the Conservation of Migratory Species of Wild Animals (CMS COP15) will convene to review implementation of the Convention. **dates:** 23-29 March 2026 **location:** Campo Grande, Brazil **www:** cms.int/cop15docs

IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas Congress 2027: The 7th IUCN World Protected and Conserved Areas will set the agenda for protected areas globally. It takes place approximately once every ten years. **dates:** tbc **location:** tbc **www:** iucn.org

For additional upcoming events, see sdg.iisd.org

Glossary

CEESP	Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy
COP	Conference of the Parties
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources
ROWA	IUCN Regional Office for West Asia
UAE	United Arab Emirates
YAC	Youth Advisory Committee



Group photo at the end of the Summit