

PERSPECTIVE

Realizing “30 × 30” in India: The potential, the challenges, and the way forward

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Abstract

Of the goals and targets specified by the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, Target 3, often referred to as “30 × 30,” has garnered widespread attention globally. In this paper, we critique India’s potential to meet this target. We find that with its vast network of ecosystems that are under some form of protection and through the recognition of other effective area-based conservation measures sites, India has the potential to meet the quantitative target of conserving and managing at least 30% of its area by 2030. However, the qualitative attributes of the target might be more difficult to realize owing to several challenges, such as inadequate landscape connectivity, insufficient representation of habitats in the current protected area model, and the exacerbation of socio-economic vulnerabilities of resource-dependent communities. To achieve strategic, inclusive, and equitable conservation, we suggest a four-pronged approach involving landscape-level biodiversity conservation, socially just and collaborative safeguarding of biodiversity, and relevant policy (re)formulation, informed and underlain by long-term research and impact monitoring. Although we focus on India, the issues we discuss are of broader relevance, especially for countries across the Global South that are also likely to be significantly impacted by the implementation of the target.

KEYWORDS

biodiversity, conservation and human well-being, COP, global biodiversity framework, land sharing, land sparing, protected area

1 | INTRODUCTION

In December 2022, at the United Nations Biodiversity Conference (COP 15), 188 countries ratified the landmark Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) under the aegis of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), 1992. Of the 4 goals and 23 action-oriented tar-

gets that the framework specifies, Target 3 has garnered widespread attention, both from academics and practitioners. Often referred to as “30 × 30,” the target essentially requires countries to conserve at least 30% of their terrestrial, inland water, coastal, and marine areas by 2030, making it the most ambitious internationally stipulated undertaking toward land and ocean conservation (CBD,

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2022). Several stakeholders have voiced unequivocal support for it, despite many countries having failed to achieve previous global targets such as Aichi Target 11, which called for the conservation of at least 17% of terrestrial and inland water and 10% of coastal and marine areas (Failler et al., 2020). Although there is some evidence to support that 30%–70% of the earth needs to be protected to meet global sustainability targets (Woodley et al., 2019), academics have criticized the arbitrary threshold and timeline. For instance, Failler et al. (2019) argued that such a move embodies a “one size fits all” approach that does not give due consideration to national contexts and capabilities. Moreover, targets based on area coverage tend to overlook the quality of conservation and the underlying patterns and processes leading to biodiversity loss (Visconti et al., 2019).

Many countries in the Global South are characterized as low-to-middle-income economies and support relatively high human population densities, which makes reconciling socioeconomic development and biodiversity conservation a significant challenge. India, for instance, is the largest lower middle-income nation and the fastest growing major economy (International Monetary Fund, 2023). One of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world, India is also home to ~18% of the global population (MOEFCC & UNDP, 2018) and has committed to the goals and targets of the GBF laying emphasis on “common but differentiated responsibilities” between the Global North and South (Perinchery, 2022). In this commentary, we examine India’s potential to meet Target 3 and discuss the main challenges and the potential way ahead.

2 | WHAT DOES TARGET 3 MEAN FOR INDIA?

The quantitative aspect of Target 3 requires national governments “to ensure and enable that by 2030 at least 30 percent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed through ecologically representative, well-connected and equitably governed systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures...and integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean...” (CBD/COP/DEC/15/4 Page 9).

India has some of the most robust forest and biodiversity governance frameworks in Asia. This includes laws and regulations for wildlife conservation, forest management, environment protection, and biodiversity governance (Table 1). In total, 28% of India’s geographical area is protected under the purview of one (or more) of these

regulatory frameworks (Table 1), which includes the protected area (PA) network under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (WLPA), the forest lands classified under the Indian Forest Act, 1927 (IFA), and the Biodiversity Heritage Sites declared under the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 (BDA). The recognition of “ecologically sensitive areas,” wetlands, and coastal zones under rules notified within the Environment Protection Act (1986) further increases the area under formal protection.

Additionally, India actively embraces novel models of conservation. For example, in 2022, the Aravalli Biodiversity Park (c. 1.6 sq. km), located on the outskirts of New Delhi, was formally declared as India’s first “Other Effective area-based Conservation Measures” (OECM) site. An OECM is defined as “a geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic, and other locally relevant values” (CBD/COP/DEC/14/8 Page 1). With over 25 potential OECM sites and a vast network of biosphere reserves, India may be further able to expand the area under formal or informal protection to meet the minimum target of 30% specified by the GBF.

Challenges arise when it comes to achieving the qualitative attributes of Target 3. First, even though India’s PA network has been invaluable in safeguarding the country’s unique biodiversity, it is far from being *ecologically representative*. This is because historically, the PA approach has centered around ecological flagship or umbrella species, favoring charismatic fauna, meant to act as conservation ambassadors. The disproportionate focus on such species draws attention away from other relevant metrics. For instance, Target 3 calls for the protection of *areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services*. Yet, a recent study showed that the current PA network in India includes only 15% of the top priority conservation sites that represent critical natural habitats, provide crucial ecosystem services, and contain a diversity of threatened species (Srivathsa et al., 2023). The network also does not represent *well-connected...systems* and are often not *integrated into wider landscapes, seascapes and the ocean*, as Target 3 suggests.

Additionally, unlike other Global South countries such as Brazil and China, where PAs are demarcated in areas with low human densities, in India, millions of people live in the immediate vicinity of PAs in a mosaic of different land uses that may impede habitat connectivity and limits species dispersal, thereby impacting the long-term viability of wildlife populations (Ghosh-Harihar et al., 2019; Pimm et al., 2018). Additionally, PAs demarcated in a mosaic of

TABLE 1 Area under formal protection in India (categories include community forest areas).

| Category of protection | Area in sq. km | Percentage of total area under protection | Percentage of total geographic area |
|---|-----------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Protected Areas under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 | 173, 630 | 18.87 | 5.28 |
| Forests under the Indian Forests Act, 1927 | 601, 658 | 65.37 | 18.30 |
| Wetlands, Eco-Sensitive Areas and Coastal Regulatory Zones under the Environment Protection Act, 1986 | 143, 889 | 15.63 | 4.38 |
| Biodiversity Heritage Sites under the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 | 1170 | 0.13 | 0.04 |
| Total | 920, 347 | 100 | 28 |

Source: MOEFCC and UNDP (2018).

other land uses are often exclusionary and detrimental to human well-being (Ghosh-Harihar et al., 2019).

Target 3, however, does not envision an exclusionary PA model but rather lays emphasis on "...recognizing indigenous and traditional territories, where applicable...while ensuring that any sustainable use, where appropriate in such areas, is fully consistent with conservation outcomes, recognizing and respecting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities, including over their traditional territories." India strongly advocated for community participation in forest management in the National Forest Policy of 1988, followed by the implementation of the Joint Forest Management program. Many of India's legal frameworks, including the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act (2006), WLPA, and BDA, also support participatory management by local communities.

Despite such safeguards, the demarcation and designation of any PA run the risk of being informed by undemocratic and inequitable neo-colonial ideologies, influenced by an imbalance of power between the state and local communities. This is evidenced by instances of forced displacement of forest-dependent communities and pursuant violence in the past. For example, in Jharkhand, insufficient information, confusion over legal rights, and misinterpretation of laws have frequently led to conflicts between local communities and the state bureaucracy (Vasan, 2005). Because the GBF is not a legally binding agreement (United Nations Environment Programme Finance Initiative, 2023), there is no guarantee that such power asymmetries will not continue to operate in a bid to reach the "catchy" figure of 30 × 30 (Lo & Jang, 2022).

The same issue holds true for OECMs as well (Lo & Jang, 2022). The present definition of OECM emphasizes the protection of geographies rather than societies, which can further marginalize indigenous peoples and local communities (Silva, 2022). Moreover, the

declaration of sites as OECMs is a completely voluntary process and does not entail any financial or legal implications, making them vulnerable to future diversions for nonconservation purposes (Tatpati, 2023). This lack of legal safeguards can also result in further conflicts.

3 | HOW CAN INDIA RECONCILE THE QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ASPECTS OF 30 x 30?

We believe that achieving Target 3, both quantitatively and qualitatively, would necessitate an integrated and inclusive approach. To this end, we describe four key dimensions that can aid the effective implementation of Target 3 (Figure 1).

3.1 | Landscape-level conservation planning

Strategic conservation needs to move from a species-centric approach to area-based management, aspiring to connect diverse ecosystems. Failing this, India will continue to host numerous fragmented, charismatic megafauna-rich areas with isolated populations of wildlife that are highly threatened by anthropogenic activities. One possible way of integrating PAs within larger landscapes is to recognize the importance of biodiversity outside their purview, for example, within agroecosystems and community-conserved areas that often act as corridors. For instance, studies have revealed high bird and small mammal abundances in plantations adjacent to forests in the Western Ghats (Caudill et al., 2014; Raman, 2006). Similarly, Asian elephants have been found to use plantations and agricultural lands, thereby underscoring the

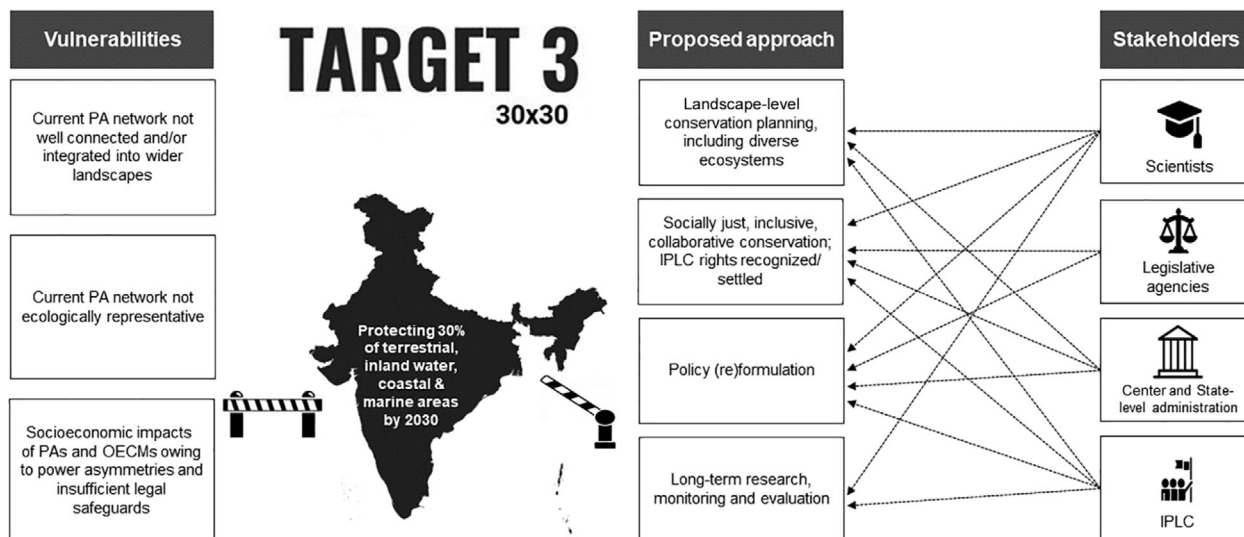


FIGURE 1 We identify key vulnerabilities, four potential solutions, and stakeholders who are/can be involved with the implementation of 30 × 30. IPLC stands for indigenous peoples and local communities.

importance of incorporating such habitats into conservation planning (Krishnan et al., 2019; Kumar et al., 2018).

Another critical step in engaging with landscape-level conservation is to recognize the ecological significance of diverse ecosystems and drawing attention toward their conservation. Historically, certain ecosystems have received greater legal protection in India in contrast to others. For example, given that forests and wetlands were subject to colonial extraction, these ecosystems have also been preferentially earmarked for protection. In contrast, open habitats, found extensively across India, often continue to be categorized as “wastelands” (Department of Land Resources, 2019). Such seemingly unproductive habitats are targeted for restoration activities involving indiscriminate planting of trees or utilized for renewable energy production (Watve et al., 2021). These open habitats must instead be recognized as functional ecosystems that are crucial for the survival of many species, including several threatened taxa such as the Indian gray wolf (*Canis lupus*) and the Bengal florican (*Houbaropsis bengalensis*) as well as understudied groups like amphibians.

3.2 | Socially just and equitable conservation

Target 3 is unique insofar as it recognizes and promotes protection across a range of governance models, including ecosystem stewardship by local communities. However, the challenge would be to ensure that the expansion of formal protection does not come at the cost of unreasonable access restrictions or undemocratic changes in the

management regime. It is also important to assess who among the Indians will end up bearing the cost and the repercussions of enhanced protection (e.g., increase in wildlife populations that leads to negative interactions, livelihood impacts of access restrictions, forced eviction). With the Earth Commission project on safe and just “Earth system boundaries” acknowledging the need for global distributive justice and systemic transformations to ensure planetary stability (Rammelt et al., 2022), approaching Target 3 from a social justice lens becomes even more imminent.

Linking community-led protection to global biodiversity objectives will be successful only if the engagement process is not only consultative but also collaborative, democratic, and empowering, and actively works toward decreasing existing power inequities. Only then would it even be possible to attempt landscape-level conservation using the approaches that we highlight here.

3.3 | Policy (re)formulation

Just as it is prudent to think about bringing new, ecologically representative sites under different forms of protection, it is equally important to ensure that the current expanse of biodiversity under protection is not compromised for commercial interests. India has seen several instances of PA downgrading, downsizing, and degazettement with a disregard for PA durability and effectiveness. In fact, Kroner et al. (2019) identified 20 such cases specifically related to infrastructure, mining, and industrialization. Such decisions are counterproductive to the 30 × 30 goal and best avoided.

Additionally, many extant legal frameworks relevant to 30 × 30 are characterized by the lack of clarity or policy inertia. For example, the OECM guidelines reflect aspirations to go beyond exclusionary PA models, but there is little clarity on their legal status (Alves-Pinto et al., 2021). As per the Compendium of OECMs in India released in 2022, the Government of India acknowledges that interpretation of the meaning and scope of OECMs still carries some ambiguity along with the absence of a mechanism for monitoring and reporting on the effectiveness of OECMs. Similarly, Reserve Forests declared under the IFA were meant to be used markedly for the purposes of production forestry as per the legislation, making their role as conservation instruments questionable (Tatpati, 2023). Whether India decides to expand the existing PA network or develop more OECM sites toward achieving 30 × 30, transparent legal frameworks regulating the management of these areas and the enjoyment of shared benefits, if any, should be decided upon collectively.

3.4 | Long-term research and impact evaluation

Conservation must be backed by scientific evidence, and every facet of the proposed approach needs to be guided by robust research—from selection of intervention sites to active engagement in planning and implementation, to informing policies. Further, it is essential to conduct monitoring and impact evaluation using standardized metrics at regular intervals to understand the efficacy of the interventions (Veríssimo et al., 2023). Presently, there seems to be a mismatch in the preconditions for declaring OECMs versus PAs. The former can be recognized only if they have a *proven* impact on biodiversity conservation, whereas it is sufficient for PAs to simply articulate the *goal* of conserving (Shanahan, 2021). Although India has a management effectiveness evaluation framework for national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, and tiger reserves (Mohan et al., 2021), the framework is considered to be top-down, and limited in scope. Designing a framework that is inclusive, evidence-based and scalable can enable stakeholders to assess extant and emerging threats, execute appropriate interventions, and thereafter, monitor their effectiveness.

4 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

Although global interventions have engaged with either area-based conservation or community-led stewardship, it is important to address all four facets of the suggested approach in unison, and not in a piecemeal manner. Inter- and transdisciplinary collaborations can address some of

the challenges that have been listed above, but these can only occur in a climate of political will and with a well-conceived, collaborative, evidence-based action plan that is properly executed, with scope for regular monitoring, evaluation, and adjustments, as necessary.

Biodiversity conservation is usually shaped by differing interests, views, and social influences of stakeholders relevant in these situations (Dickman, 2010). As most countries in the Global South are low-to-middle-income economies that are often characterized by disparate wealth distribution and, consequently, social inequity (Hickel et al., 2021), our recommendations are not only relevant for India but can also be adapted to similar issues across the Global South (Adams & Hutton, 2007). If governments in these countries embrace and implement the suggested approach—with region- and context-specific modifications depending on requirements, capacities, and values—we might just be able to secure 30% of the earth and enhance well-being for all, especially for marginalized peoples. In the end, we would like to echo Nietzsche's words, "Der Teufel steckt im Detail," or "The devil is in the details."

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Asmita Sengupta, Manan Bhan, Saloni Bhatia, and K. S. Seshadri conceived the paper; Asmita Sengupta wrote the first draft; Manan Bhan, Saloni Bhatia, Atul Joshi, Shyama Kuriakose, and K. S. Seshadri contributed substantially to revisions and editing.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

No new data was generated for this paper. Sources of data used for analysis have been duly acknowledged in the paper.

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