

# POCKETS OF HOPE, LINKING NATURE AND HUMANITY

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

In the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve | Photo Credit: M. SATHYAMOORTHY

Biodiversity is the living fabric of our planet. It underpins human well-being in the present and in the future, and its rapid decline threatens nature and people alike.

According to the [Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#) released in 2019 by the [Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services \(IPBES\)](#) at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, the main global drivers of biodiversity loss are climate change, invasive species, over-exploitation of natural resources, pollution and urbanisation.

Because of our collective excesses, the ecological carrying capacity of planet earth has largely been exceeded. This trend needs to be redressed, with cleaner air, high quality drinking water, and enough food and healthy habitats to ensure that ecosystem services continue to benefit humanity without critically affecting nature's balance. Whether we look at nature from an environmental, from a cultural or even from a religious point of view, it is our responsibility and clearly in our interest to respect the environment.

In fact, the possibilities exist, and all is not lost. In the last 50 years or so, much has been accomplished for the protection of nature, including the establishment of conservation areas, and a number of international conventions have been signed and ratified.

One of the best mechanisms that has been created is the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, created in 1971 by UNESCO. Biosphere reserves are places where humans live in harmony with nature, and where there is an effective combination of sustainable development and nature conservation. They represent pockets of hope and proof that we are not inexorably headed towards a doomsday ecological scenario, provided we take appropriate action.

In South Asia, over 30 biosphere reserves have been established. The first one was the Hurulu Biosphere Reserve in Sri Lanka, which was designated in 1977 and comprises 25,500 hectares within the tropical dry evergreen forest.

In India, the first biosphere reserve was designated by UNESCO in 2000 within the blue mountains of the Nilgiris. It stretches across the States of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala. The network has gone from strength to strength, and it now counts 12 sites, with Panna, in the State of Madhya Pradesh, as the latest inscription in 2020.

We need many more biosphere reserves and pockets of hope, and the region offers countless options.

South Asia has a very diverse set of ecosystems. To begin with, Bhutan, India and Nepal combined have thousands of glaciers, surrounded by lakes and alpine ecosystems.

The Khangchendzonga Biosphere Reserve, established in 2018, is a good model. It includes some of the highest ecosystems in the world, with elevations up to 8,586 metres. The reserve is home to orchids and rare plant species. At the same time, more than 35,000 people live there. Their main economic activities are crop production, animal husbandry, fishing, dairy products and poultry farming.

Bangladesh, India, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka all have extensive coastlines, with coral reefs and mangrove forests. These areas are exposed to extreme weather events (storms, floods, droughts), and sea-level rise.

The Maldives are recognised as the lowest-lying country in the world, with a mere elevation of 1.5 metres above the high tide mark. Together with UNESCO, the archipelago has embarked on a plan to establish pilot sites for the conservation and restoration of coastal ecosystems, and to enhance the population's knowledge on climate change adaptation. Separately, three biosphere reserves have already been created in the Maldives.

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves have all developed science-based management plans, where local solutions for sustainable human living and nature conservation are being tested and best practices applied. Issues of concern include biodiversity, clean energy, climate, environmental education, and water and waste management, supported by scientific research and monitoring. The aim is to detect changes and find solutions to increase climate resilience.

All biosphere reserves are internationally recognised sites on land, at the coast, or in the oceans. Governments alone decide which areas to nominate. Before approval by UNESCO, the sites are externally examined. If approved, they will be managed based on an agreed plan, reinforced by routine checks to ensure credibility, but all remain under the sovereignty of their national government.

Some of the countries in South Asia do not yet have any or enough biosphere reserves. In most if not all cases, the political will is certainly there but there is a lack of know-how and financial resources. Of course, more financial support from richer nations and from the private sector would be desirable for establishing biosphere reserves in these countries.

Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Nepal are on the priority list of UNESCO, because they do not yet have any biosphere reserves. Their governments are already working on their first nomination files. Our organisation also believes that it would be important to increase the number of biosphere reserves in India, the Maldives and Sri Lanka.

The point is that if these pockets of hope can expand, with at least one biosphere reserve per country, and with more and larger sites covering the terrestrial surface, including coastal areas with their offshore islands, it will give the realisation to millions of people that a better future is truly possible, one where we can truly live in harmony with nature.

On May 22 and on the occasion of the International Day for Biological Diversity, let us do what is right. Now is the time to act for biodiversity.

Eric Falt is the Director of the UNESCO New Delhi Office, which covers Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. UNESCO is a member of Team UN in India, together helping deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals

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