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HUMAN-CENTRED CONSERVATION



Key insights from the Human-Centred Conservation Pavilion

at the 2025 IUCN World Conservation Congress

Executive Summary

The 2025 IUCN World Conservation Congress took place at a moment of growing tension within global conservation. While ambition around biodiversity targets continues to rise, a widening gap is emerging between global policy debates and the lived realities of people who coexist with wildlife and manage biodiverse landscapes every day. In many international forums, conservation is increasingly shaped by simplified narratives that struggle to accommodate rights, governance, sustainable use, and social complexity.

It was within this context that the Human-Centred Conservation Pavilion was convened.

The Pavilion was developed through a partnership between Jamma Conservation & Communities, the Wild Sheep Foundation, and Conservation Visions, bringing together organisations with deep experience across community-led conservation, wildlife governance, and sustainable use. Hosted during the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi, the Pavilion created a dedicated space for grounded, evidence-informed dialogue on what conservation looks like when people are recognised not as external pressures on nature, but as central actors within social-ecological systems.

Across five thematic days, the Pavilion brought together Indigenous leaders, local community representatives, practitioners, researchers, policy advisors, and conservation organisations from six continents. Rather than promoting a single solution or model, discussions focused on identifying patterns, tensions, and conditions that shape conservation outcomes across regions. Themes included food systems and climate adaptation, human-wildlife coexistence, resource rights, wild economies, and landscape-scale governance.



Dr Johannes Refisch, UNEP (left) and Jacobo Artée, Sierra El Álamo (right) during a panel discussion, 'Can Wild Economies Fund Conservation?'



Dr Sonali Gosh, Kaziranga National Park during panel discussion, *'Balancing Risk and Wellbeing: Can we live with wildlife and still prosper?'*

Despite vast differences in ecological and political context, participants repeatedly surfaced the same underlying challenges: insecure rights, weak or externally imposed governance, narrow economic models, and policies shaped far from the landscapes they affect.

From these conversations, a set of clear insights emerged:

- Conservation is most durable when rights are secure and governance is seen as legitimate.
- Technical interventions fail without trust.
- Benefit-sharing is insufficient without power-sharing.
- Lived experience and multiple knowledge systems are essential to effective design.
- Sustainable use and diversified wild economies underpin resilience.
- Policies driven by distant value systems risk undermining both communities and biodiversity.

This report distils these insights and outlines emerging opportunities for the wider conservation community. It is intended for policymakers, funders, researchers, and practitioners seeking approaches that reflect real-world complexity and deliver conservation outcomes that are legitimate, just, and effective.

Human-Centred Conservation is not presented here as a fixed blueprint. Rather, it is offered as a framework for thinking and acting differently, one that places rights, governance, and lived realities at the centre of conservation decision-making in a rapidly changing world.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	2
1. Introduction	5
2. Scope and Structure of the Pavilion	6
3. Key Insights	8
4. Emerging Opportunities for the Wider Conservation Community	15
5. Conclusion	17

1. Introduction

Global conservation is operating in a period of heightened ambition and increasing scrutiny. International commitments such as the Global Biodiversity Framework signal a strong desire to halt biodiversity loss and restore ecosystems at scale. Yet across many regions, a widening gap persists between global conservation policy and the realities experienced by people living in and around biodiverse landscapes.

This gap is not simply technical. It is political, social, and ethical. Decisions made in distant policy arenas shape land use, livelihoods, food systems, safety, and wellbeing, often without sufficient engagement with those most directly affected. At the same time, conservation debates in the Global North are increasingly shaped by simplified or emotive narratives that leave little room for complexity, trade-offs, or context.

The IUCN World Conservation Congress remains one of the few global forums where these tensions can be surfaced and examined. It brings governments, civil society, researchers, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities into the same arena, creating space not only for alignment, but also for honest reflection on what is and is not working in practice.

The Human-Centred Conservation Pavilion was established in response to this moment through a partnership between Jamma Conservation and Communities, the Wild Sheep Foundation, and Conservation Visions. Drawing on their collective experience across regions and conservation systems, the partners convened the Pavilion as a space for grounded dialogue on conservation as it is lived and governed on the ground.

The Pavilion did not seek to promote a single policy position or programme. Instead, it approached conservation as a social-ecological process shaped by rights, governance systems, cultural values, research evidence, and everyday risk, rather than as an abstract set of targets or technical interventions.

Across five days, the Pavilion explored five interconnected themes: food systems and climate adaptation; health and human-wildlife coexistence; resource rights; wild economies; and landscape and jurisdictional approaches. These themes reflect areas where conservation decisions have the most direct consequences for people and where global policy often struggles to engage with complexity.

Contributors shared case studies, research, and lived experience from across continents. While contexts varied widely, discussions revealed strikingly similar dynamics shaping conservation outcomes. Where people hold secure rights and meaningful decision-making authority, conservation gains legitimacy and endurance. Where governance is weak, imposed, or disconnected from local realities, trust erodes and outcomes falter.

This report synthesises the key insights that emerged from these conversations and identifies opportunities for how Human-Centred Conservation can inform future policy, funding, research, and practice. It offers grounded perspectives that complement high-level commitments with the realities of lived landscapes

2. Scope and Structure of the Pavilion

The Human-Centred Conservation Pavilion was intentionally designed as a space for depth rather than scale. Across five thematic days, it convened community leaders, researchers, practitioners, policy advisors, and conservation organisations from six continents.

The Pavilion programme comprised 27 sessions delivered across five days, using a mix of case study presentations, research-based deep dives, interviews, panel discussions, a film screening, and evening networking events. These formats enabled contributors to present evidence, share lived experience, and explore practical and policy-relevant questions through open discussion.

The programme was organised around five interconnected themes:

- Food systems and climate adaptation
- Health and human–wildlife coexistence
- Resource rights and governance
- Wild economies and sustainable use
- Landscape and jurisdictional approaches

Structuring the programme in this way allowed participants to engage with recurring challenges from multiple entry points. Despite regional differences, discussions consistently revealed shared, structural dynamics shaping conservation outcomes across contexts.

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Meet Auntie
Fatima....

...and Auntie
Elsie



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Dr Lessah Mandoloma, Oxford University
presenting 'Farming, Food, and the Future:
Navigating Trade-offs in Malawi'

3. Key Insights

Across the five thematic days of the Pavilion, a set of deeper patterns and shared messages began to emerge – themes that cut across regions, sectors, and perspectives. These cross-cutting insights reveal the foundations of Human-Centred Conservation and highlight what matters most when conservation is viewed through the lenses of rights, governance, lived experience, resilience, and policy legitimacy. Together, they offer a distilled understanding of the principles and conditions that make conservation credible, just, and effective.

THEME 1 – Rights, Governance and Legitimacy

Rights determine legitimacy, legitimacy determines outcomes.

Where communities hold secure rights to land, wildlife, and governance, conservation efforts gain stability, accountability, and long-term commitment. When rights are symbolic, conditional, or externally controlled, conservation becomes fragile and often contested. Speakers from Kazakhstan to Namibia showed that rights are not an add-on to conservation, they are the basis on which meaningful stewardship stands.

Governance shapes everything from coexistence to wildlife economies.

Even well-designed interventions fail when governance systems lack trust, clarity, or community legitimacy. Coexistence tools, benefit-sharing systems, early-warning mechanisms, and financial innovations work only when they sit within governance structures that people respect. Without that foundation, interventions become technical insertions rather than part of a functioning social-ecological system.

Power-sharing is essential, benefit-sharing is insufficient.

Benefit-sharing still implies that external actors hold power and decide what is shared, how, and with whom. Power-sharing, by contrast, recognises communities as co-governors with decision-making authority. Across regions, it became clear that conservation succeeds not when communities receive benefits, but when they define rules, allocate responsibilities, and shape outcomes.

Biocultural governance strengthens community-defined stewardship.

Biocultural protocols, customary rules, and locally defined governance systems articulate cultural values and responsibilities that do not always appear in statutory processes. These systems guide access, use, and engagement, offering a robust and culturally rooted basis for governance. When external institutions work through them, legitimacy and clarity improve dramatically.

Landscape and jurisdictional approaches work when authority remains local.

Landscape-scale conservation is often framed as ecological connectivity, but it also reorders authority. When local governance structures remain central, jurisdictional

approaches strengthen stewardship. When authority shifts upward or outward, landscapes become contested and conservation loses its social anchor.

Implementation is the real frontier for rights.

Several presenters noted that rights on paper rarely translate into rights in practice without institutional support, enforcement, and political backing. Implementation, not recognition alone, separates symbolic systems from functional ones.

THEME 2 – People, Knowledge and Lived Experience

Lived experience reveals realities global frameworks often miss.

People who live with wildlife every day understand risks, movement patterns, seasonality, and the nuances of coexistence in ways no model or policy can capture. Their insights are essential for designing interventions that work. When global frameworks ignore these realities, strategies become unrealistic or socially brittle.

Women and youth hold distinct roles in coexistence and stewardship.

Women are the primary managers of key resources for rural households – including food production, water, fuelwood – placing them at many of the interfaces where human-wildlife conflict occurs. Youth often respond to wildlife incidents, herd livestock, or provide early-warning signals. Their experiences shape both risk and resilience. Including these voices enriches understanding and strengthens governance.

Multiple knowledge systems reveal different dimensions of landscapes.

Scientific data, pastoral knowledge, tracking expertise, traditional ecological knowledge, and community monitoring each illuminate different layers of complexity. When combined, they provide a fuller picture for decision-making. When one dominates, blind spots emerge.

Food systems are cultural, political, and spiritual, not just nutritional.

Presentations from Southern Africa, Cambodia, and Sonora showed that food choices cannot be separated from identity, sovereignty, and dignity. Food is how people sustain culture, express belonging, and maintain social systems. Recognising these layers is essential for shaping viable food-security and climate-adaptation strategies.

Coexistence is a daily negotiation of safety, trust, and dignity.

From Mozambique to Tanzania to Texas, coexistence is more than conflict mitigation. It includes psychological burdens, social responsibilities, and emotional labour. Understanding coexistence means understanding wellbeing.

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It Sav, presenting a case study 'Sustainable Use of Malva Nut Species by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in OTung Community Protected Area'



THEME 3 – Sustainable Use, Wild Economies and Resilience

Wild economies must be diverse to be resilient, fair, and sustainable.

Tourism alone is too volatile to support rural communities. A resilient wildlife economy blends sustainable use, cultural economies, non-timber forest products, conservation permits, artisanal enterprises, and wild food systems. This diversity spreads risk and strengthens agency, allowing communities to adapt when markets shift.

Use creates value, and value drives stewardship.

Case studies from North America and Southern Africa illustrated that regulated use creates incentives for investment in habitats, monitoring, and long-term species recovery. When wildlife contributes meaningfully to livelihoods, communities defend and sustain it.

Wild foods are frontline climate-adaptation strategies.

Wild foods require no irrigation, chemicals, or land conversion, making them extraordinarily climate resilient. They also support biodiversity-positive land use, as landscapes managed for wild harvesting maintain native species, natural vegetation, and ecological processes rather than replacing them with monocultures. Beyond their ecological value, they also carry cultural significance and nutritional value. Presenters showed how wild foods help stabilise households during climate shocks, and why policy must protect access to them as part of both climate adaptation and biodiversity stewardship.

Sustainable use strengthens ecological and social resilience.

Sustainable use supports livelihoods, buffers shocks, maintains cultural systems and, critically, provides food. Access to wild foods and sustainably harvested resources reduces vulnerability during climate extremes, market disruptions, or crop failures. At the ecological level, sustainable use can reduce pressure on landscapes and build support for habitat protection. At the social level, it broadens the range of food and livelihood options available to households, strengthening resilience, autonomy, and the capacity to adapt in the face of uncertainty.

Innovation must be grounded in governance.

Emerging conservation finance tools such as credits, Payments for Ecosystem schemes, bio-circular markets, require rights, transparency, and equity. Without governance safeguards, they risk replicating extractive or exclusionary patterns.

THEME 4 – Coexistence, Risk and Human Wellbeing

Risk must be acknowledged honestly.

Responding to wildlife incursions, crop loss, livestock predation, and human safety threats is emotionally and financially stressful. When institutions minimise these risks, trust erodes and coexistence plans fail. Honest recognition of risk is foundational.

One Health succeeds only when rooted in local systems and leadership.

Disease dynamics, livestock movement, and human behaviour are context specific. One Health interventions only work when built from community knowledge, governance systems, and incentives – not inserted from the outside.

Compensation alone does not resolve conflict.

Compensation schemes rarely reflect the full cost of loss or the psychological strain of repeated wildlife incidents. And on their own, they do little to influence long-term attitudes toward coexistence. What fundamentally changes how people relate to wildlife is when the presence of wildlife also brings tangible benefits, such as food, income, cultural value, or community-level opportunities, alongside systems of fair governance, participation, and shared decision-making. When people see both the costs and the benefits of living with wildlife, coexistence becomes more realistic, more legitimate, and more durable.

Connectivity always has human consequences.

Wildlife corridors intersect with grazing routes, safety zones, farming areas, and cultural spaces. Designing connectivity without communities leads to conflict. Co-design ensures that ecological goals align with human wellbeing.

Wellbeing is a conservation outcome.

Safety, dignity, fairness, and psychological security and economic security shape how people relate to conservation. When households face persistent financial strain or uncertainty, whether from crop loss, livestock predation, or exclusion from wildlife benefits, conservation loses legitimacy. Recognising wellbeing in its full social, emotional, and economic dimensions is essential for any conservation approach that seeks to be fair, durable, and trusted.

THEME 5 – Policy, Narratives and Global Influence

Global value systems can distort conservation policy.

Emotion-driven or protectionist narratives from the Global North can overshadow evidence and lived experience. This influences motions, funding priorities, and global debates in ways that neither reflect realities on the ground nor acknowledge the successful conservation already happening in many regions. When global value systems drown out local evidence, policies risk being disconnected from the very conditions that make conservation effective, legitimate, and sustainable.

Policies shaped far away can undermine local resilience.

Restrictions or bans, however well-intentioned, may remove tools communities rely on for food security, income, or safety. This can destabilise ecosystems, weaken governance systems, and negatively impact conservation itself by removing the very incentives and capacities that support long-term stewardship.

Conservation must embrace complexity, not erase it.

Oversimplified narratives (“no hunting,” “tourism only,” “keep people out”) break down in real landscapes. Conservation requires engaging with the full complexity of social–ecological systems, including climate change, health, rights, food systems, governance, and cultural realities. Complexity is a feature of conservation, not a problem to be minimised. Effective solutions emerge when these interconnected dimensions are recognised and addressed together.

Historical injustices continue to shape conservation systems.

From land dispossession to exclusionary policies, colonial legacies remain embedded in law, governance, and institution. A rights-based approach must confront these histories directly.

Global policy must avoid exporting harm.

Decisions made far from the landscape can unintentionally cause ecological, economic, or social harm. Policy must be grounded in the realities of those who live with wildlife.

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THE PROBLEM

About **70%** of Mozambique's population depend on **agriculture** for their livelihood.

At the same time **elephants** outside the protected areas see farms as easy food.

Junior Alberto, Mozambique Wildlife Alliance, presenting
'Seconds to Save Coexistence: Mozambique's Elephant Shepherds'

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4. Emerging Opportunities for the Wider Conservation Community

The Pavilion generated momentum that extends well beyond the Congress. For external audiences, several clear opportunities emerged.

4.1 Advancing Human-Centred Conservation as a Framework

There is growing appetite for Human-Centred Conservation as a coherent, rights-based framework that connects biodiversity outcomes with governance and justice.

Opportunities include developing shared guidance, comparative research, and practical criteria for implementation across contexts.

4.2 Informing Global Policy Processes

Insights from the Pavilion are directly relevant to ongoing and upcoming processes, including CBD implementation, CITES deliberations, IUCN Congresses, and regional policy forums. Human-Centred Conservation offers a grounded lens for translating global commitments into legitimate local action.

4.3 Strengthening Cross-Regional Learning

Participants expressed strong interest in structured exchanges between regions facing similar governance and coexistence challenges. Cross-regional learning on wildlife economies, tenure systems, and coexistence tools offers high potential value.

4.4 Building Evidence that Policy Can Use

There is demand for evidence that speaks to policymakers in clear, applied ways. This includes comparative case studies, governance analyses, and policy-relevant syntheses that move beyond advocacy and engage decision-makers on their own terms.

4.5 Creating Spaces for Honest Conservation Dialogue

Finally, the Pavilion demonstrated the value of spaces that allow complexity, disagreement, and lived experience to surface. Replicating this model in other global and regional forums could strengthen trust and improve the quality of conservation decision-making.



5. Conclusion

The Human-Centred Conservation Pavilion reinforced that conservation outcomes are shaped as much by rights, governance, and lived realities as by ecological ambition. Across regions, participants highlighted that conservation becomes durable and trusted when people hold meaningful decision-making authority, and fragile when governance is weak or disconnected from local contexts.

Discussions made clear that technical interventions alone are insufficient. Food systems, coexistence, wild economies, health, and landscape governance are central to how people relate to biodiversity and to whether conservation endures under social and environmental change. Simplified narratives and distant policy decisions risk undermining these dynamics rather than strengthening them.

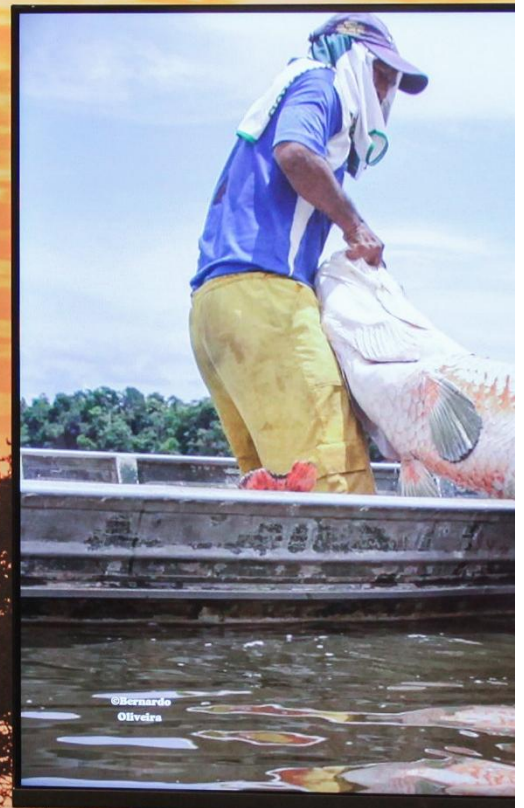
Human-Centred Conservation emerges not as a single model, but as a framing that helps align global ambition with local legitimacy. It offers a way to engage honestly with complexity, recognise rights as foundational, and design conservation approaches that reflect real lives rather than abstract ideals.

As global conservation shifts from commitment to implementation, the challenge is to ensure that policies and practices are grounded in evidence, lived experience, and governance systems people trust. The Pavilion demonstrated that when space is created for this kind of dialogue, more credible pathways forward become possible.

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Julian Santiago, Instituto Juruá, presents a case study,
Reviving the Waters: Pirarucu and the Amazon's Living Economy