



Mongolia © Bayar Balgantsersen

Lasting Protection for Freshwater Ecosystems

Freshwater ecosystems, like rivers, lakes and wetlands, are all around us as we go about our daily lives. They sustain communities, drive economies, underpin entire food systems, shape landscapes and weather patterns, and—unbeknownst to most—contain a disproportionate share of the world’s biodiversity. **Yet these ecosystems are also some of the most threatened on Earth.**

Despite the universal importance of freshwater ecosystems, they have long been ignored and undervalued. Biodiversity loss in these systems is twice as steep as it is in terrestrial or marine systems—almost a third of all freshwater species are threatened with extinction. Globally monitored freshwater species populations have declined by 85% since 1970, and wetlands are disappearing three times faster than tropical forests. What’s more, only a third of the world’s rivers remain free flowing.

But there is hope. **Conserving freshwater ecosystems and their values now, and for generations to come, is possible.** At The Nature Conservancy (TNC), we are defining what lasting protection looks like for rivers, lakes and wetlands, and we are working with partners around the world to apply innovative protection solutions that will safeguard healthy freshwater ecosystems for people and nature.

Rivers, lakes and wetlands are dynamic and—importantly—connected systems with distinct needs, including natural water flows and water quality; intact aquatic, riparian and floodplain habitats; and viable native species populations. Bending the curve of freshwater biodiversity loss requires designing and implementing protection mechanisms that put these needs front and center. We call this **durable freshwater protection.**

Durable Freshwater Protection

Durable freshwater protection safeguards freshwater ecosystem integrity and associated biodiversity and social values over the long-term through legal and other effective means, sustainable funding, and social support.



Black alligator, Ecuador © Roberto Valdez/TNC Photo Contest 2023



Sockeye salmon, Little Wenatchee River, U.S. © Public Domain



Tana River, Kenya © Nick Hall

Our Durable Freshwater Protection Strategy

At the global level:

- Helped secure inclusion of freshwater ecosystems in the Global Biodiversity Framework's 30x30 goals, adopted by 196 nations.
- Developed tools to track and measure freshwater protection while advocating for their formal adoption.
- Working with IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas to provide guidance for countries to implement conservation actions.

At the national level:

- Supporting countries in setting ambitious freshwater protection goals, closing policy loopholes and inspiring public action.
- Using a science-based approach to ensure that protections are designed to meet the unique needs of dynamic, connected systems.
- Utilizing powerful strategies that unlock funds and conservation for large-scale protection, like the Nature Bonds Program and Project Finance for Permanence.

At the local level:

- Collaborating with community partners.
- Employing legal strategies and mechanisms like protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs).
- Prioritizing community values in project design and supporting community well-being and sustainability.

Our 2030 Goals



1M

Conserve 1 million kilometers of rivers and streams, enough to wrap around the world 25 times.



30M

Conserve 30 million hectares of lakes, deltas, floodplains and other wetlands.



10M

Ensure more than 10 million people directly benefit from healthy freshwater ecosystems.

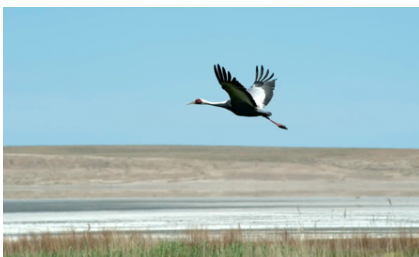
Europe's Last Free-Flowing Rivers

The Balkan Peninsula in southeast Europe is home to some of the last free-flowing rivers on the continent. But threats are putting these irreplaceable resources at risk. TNC is working with six regional partners across five countries as part of United for Rivers, an initiative that puts local communities at the heart of conservation efforts. The framework has already helped ensure the Mrežnica, Tounjčica and Bistrica Rivers stay healthy and thriving, in addition to earlier protections of the Krupa and Zeta Rivers that TNC supported with local partners.

Enduring Protection in Mongolia

TNC worked with the Government of Mongolia, the country's herder communities and other partners to develop Eternal Mongolia, an Enduring Earth Project Finance for Permanence initiative that has resulted in the largest land agreement in TNC's 70-year history.

Eternal Mongolia will mobilize \$198 million from public, private and domestic sources to protect an additional 14.4 million hectares of Mongolia's unique freshwater and terrestrial ecosystems; strengthen the management effectiveness of Mongolia's entire network of protected area systems; and extend sustainable, climate-resilient and community-managed practices to 34 million hectares outside protected areas, with benefits for local communities.



White-naped crane, Mongolia © Ted Wood

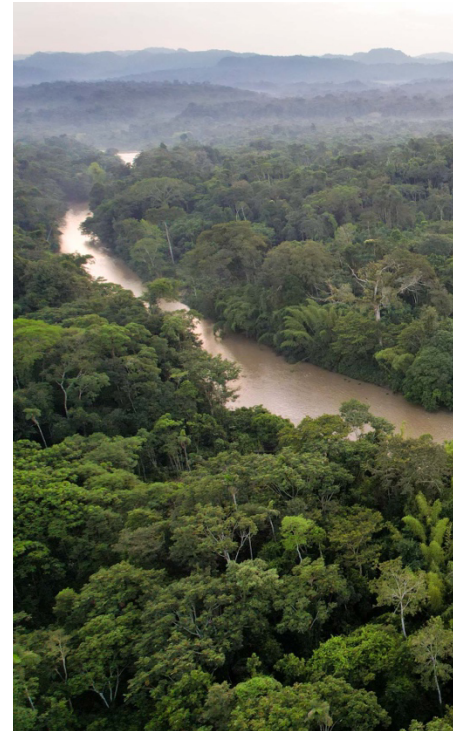


Krupa River, Southeast Europe © Chip Carroon

Indigenous Leadership in Ecuador

Over 60% of the Ecuadorian Amazon region is covered by the ancestral claims of Indigenous Peoples, many of whom rely directly on freshwater ecosystems for food, water, transportation, and cultural and spiritual value. TNC worked with 33 Waorani communities and 47 Kichwa communities to protect 371,380 hectares of land and water, encompassing the Nushiño, Curaray, and Villano rivers.

The 371,380-hectare area, which includes 1,860 kilometers of free-flowing river, is providing river connectivity for 200 species of fish that serve as the primary source of protein for local communities and protect freshwater ecosystems from threats like mining, oil spills and deforestation.



Curaray River, Ecuador © Juan Manuel Garcia



Cuito River, Angola © Roshni Lodhia

Scaling Our Efforts

With successful models to build upon, we are now focused on scaling efforts to conserve the world's most important rivers, lakes and wetlands before it's too late.

We are looking for partners who share our vision for protecting freshwater ecosystems.

If you would like to support this urgent and critically important work, we invite you to contact us:

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Our vision is to support the durable protection of representative, connected and biologically significant freshwater ecosystems around the world with measurable and meaningful impacts that both bend the curve of freshwater biodiversity loss and deliver value to local communities and beyond.



Egret among the islands of Ilha Grande National Park on the Parana River, Brazil © Scott Warrena