

## **A Framework for addressing racial and related inequities in conservation**

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## **PREFACE**

In 2020, a global surge of activism linked to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement prompted scientists to stage an academic 'strike', drawing attention to the ethical responsibility of addressing systemic racism. This catalyzed debate in conservation, adding urgency to decades of scholarship on marginalisation. This paper reviews this literature and examines how exclusion in conservation persists across intersections of race, class, urban–rural divides, nationality, and power dynamics from local to global levels. We highlight how marginalisation and “othering” disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), especially in the Global South. Expansion of Protected Areas and the prioritisation of individual animal lives over human well-being can intensify such inequities. We propose a framework for more inclusive conservation: recognising and supporting human rights, ensuring local community agency, challenging entrenched norms in BIPOC engagement, and fostering educational opportunities led by and for BIPOC communities. Amid shifting global politics, including reduced U.S. federal support for social and conservation issues, this framework provides guidance to counter racism and exclusion. By rethinking conservation practice, it seeks to build long-lasting, equitable, and inclusive approaches that respect both people and nature.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The marginalisation of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and Local Communities (LCs) in conservation has received growing attention since the 1980s<sup>10,11</sup>, with a further resurgence of attention in conservation science, management and policy circles since the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020<sup>12</sup>. The Black Lives Matter protests drew attention in conservation as they took place soon after the Buzzfeed scandal of 2019 where it was alleged some WWF-funded conservation projects ignored human rights protections<sup>13</sup>. Marginalisation and racism in conservation, is a manifestation

of ‘othering’<sup>14</sup>. Othering is the process of treating individuals or groups as fundamentally different through the creation of ‘us’ vs ‘them’ social boundaries<sup>15,16</sup>. ‘Othering’ in conservation has primarily occurred against Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC)<sup>17</sup>, and is exacerbated in the Global South where governance systems and the rule of law and protection of both individual and collective rights are often weaker<sup>18</sup>.

Discussions and debates about the terminology around race and marginalisation are nuanced, varied, and often contentious<sup>17,19,20</sup> (see Box 1) leading to policy backlashes in some countries including the USA and New Zealand<sup>21</sup>. In this paper, we use the BIPOC framework and discuss its intersections with IP and LC (see Box 1), and other contextual factors such as levels of wealth, colonial history, country, and local elites to unpack the terminological complexity and provide insights into addressing racism and marginalisation in conservation. Race, or the US-dominated framing of the sole distinction of white versus Black (or white vs. BIPOC), is most often a simplistic classification that masks several axes of discrimination (See Box 1). Equally, the term ‘local’ as used in Local Communities, defined by the Cambridge dictionary as a *person who lives in the particular small area that you may be talking about*<sup>22</sup> is frequently used in conservation policy and research. While this stems in part from the term’s use in the Convention on Biological Diversity, it is notable that it is usually used to refer to non-white communities in low-income countries. ‘Local’, when juxtaposed with the term ‘global’ or ‘international’ has been critiqued as being part of a binary language set that communicates a ‘White gaze’ of development where racially polarised global inequalities and power differentials are implicit<sup>23,24</sup>. In this paper, we acknowledge the historic and current treatment of these terms and examine the manifestations in conservation through a framework that also encompasses race.

Conservation in its current form emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century during the European colonial era with the establishment of protected areas as a core component. Forced removals of

Indigenous Peoples and communities were widespread in the establishment of early protected areas and lands during the era of systemic racial oppression<sup>25</sup>. While conservation has evolved substantially to be more inclusive<sup>10</sup>, the path trajectories<sup>26</sup> of the racist European colonial past creates patterns of marginalisation and othering that inform the present<sup>27-29</sup>. For example, if not carefully governed and managed, the current drive of the global conservation community to expand conservation areas and conserve 30% of the world's land and sea area by 2030 (known as 30×30) risks echoing the marginalising and unjust practices of the past<sup>30,31</sup>. Another visible instance is of western-dominated campaigns, media and social media that imply that the lives of individual animals are more valuable than (typically) BIPOC peoples in the Global South who co-exist with wildlife, contributing to further marginalisation and injustice<sup>32-34</sup>.

That the history of conservation is steeped in marginalisation, injustice and racism cannot be denied<sup>35,36</sup>. Yet, there has been strong progress in policies and commitments to human rights in conservation<sup>e.g. 37,38</sup> and there is potential for continued positive change in practice towards greater inclusivity and justice. Our paper builds on the extensive body of work examining the social justice impacts of conservation across the fields of environmental philosophy, political ecology and economy, and environmental sociology. It contributes to the extensive literature<sup>39-42</sup> addressing marginalisation, and inequity in conservation through a synthesis and a call for action to policymakers and practitioners. Our paper concludes with a framework that proposes how to counter the marginalisation and injustices against mainly BIPOC in conservation through strengthening Rights, supporting and advocating for Agency, speaking out to Challenge marginalising practices and enhancing Education (RACE) (Figure 1).

## **MAIN**

### **Race and marginalisation in conservation**

The modern conservation movement emerged in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century during the European colonial era<sup>43</sup>. During this period, Indigenous inhabitants were routinely portrayed as nomadic, uncivilised and wasteful, providing convenient rationalisations for their extermination (or exclusion) and the take-over of their territories by European-origin settlers<sup>44-47</sup>. The removal and displacement of native peoples and as well as human tragedies that accompanied land grabbing and labour accumulation for colonial plantation agriculture were widespread and significant<sup>47,48</sup>. Such practices were widely implemented in the European-colonised tropics and combined with colonial commodity expansion and labour exploitation to fuel the transitions to industrialisation or other European-led projects in many colonies, including in India<sup>47</sup>, and Africa<sup>49</sup>.

In India, the British colonial administration, aided by already existing power hierarchies, instituted exploitative and unsuitable public works projects (e.g. perennial irrigation, railways)<sup>50,51</sup> and imposed frameworks of forestry, plantation development and conservation that displaced local communities to create reserves in which wildlife was hunted for sport<sup>52</sup>. Racial superiority was often explicitly articulated as the justification for excluding local use and cultural practices<sup>53</sup>.

The early modern conservation movement implemented racist forced removals and oppressive policies for the creation of protected areas and land for wildlife that echoed those of the colonial extractive period<sup>8,54-57</sup>. Preservationist practices helped create and perpetuate a false notion of a 'pristine' wilderness without human occupation which casts local people as enemies, rather than custodians, of nature<sup>58,59</sup>. This preservationist framing is inconsistent with many long-standing cultural practices of BIPOC and fails to recognise the value of human-environment relationships in shared spaces<sup>60,61</sup>. IPLCs can be – and often already are – very effective stewards of nature, especially if adequately supported<sup>62-64</sup>.

In line with growing awareness of human rights, many conservation actors now decry the “fortress conservation” carried out during earlier phases of conservation<sup>65</sup>. Yet it remains the case

that new protected and conserved areas are frequently proposed on the customary lands and territories of indigenous peoples and local communities, whose rights are often inadequately protected under national law<sup>61</sup>. In addition, there is a significant legacy of injustice related to existing protected and conserved areas that were created through evicting or restricting the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities – many of whom still claim these lands and continue to suffer negative consequences – that remains largely unaddressed.

In today's world, Target 3 of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework adopted by the conference of the parties (COP 15)<sup>66</sup> to the Convention on Biological Diversity aims to conserve 30% of the world's land and sea area by 2030 (known as 30×30). This encompasses a wide range of Protected and Conserved Areas potentially including Indigenous and Traditional Territories, community conservancies and private land. 30×30 offers potential options to countries to move away from a top-down practice of state-run protected areas and recognise a more pluralistic notion of conservation, as practiced and understood by IPs and LCs in accordance with their own customs and traditional knowledge through for example recognised Indigenous Peoples and Community Conserved Territories and Areas (ICCAs). In practice, however, many countries have no mechanism for recognising Indigenous and Traditional Territories and may well default to the typical approach of state-led conservation to meet this target. Even if Indigenous and Traditional Territories are recognised, they may be under pressure to demonstrate (to the satisfaction of western science) that effective conservation outcomes are being achieved<sup>30</sup>. There are concerns that in the drive to implement and achieve 30×30 that human rights and social considerations will not be adequately addressed<sup>31,32</sup> and that there won't be sufficient plurality in the western-dominated conceptualisations and measurements of effectiveness<sup>67</sup>. Moreover, non-inclusionary tactics that often function to keep local people out of conservation areas, echoing the racist forced removals of the past, may be used<sup>68</sup>.

## **Prioritising animals over (BIPOC) people**

The intrusion of racial prejudice into political thought and action is a complex product of the racialised social identities of those engaging in politics, particularly as defined through group position<sup>69</sup>. Underlying racial prejudice is the dehumanisation of individuals through a rejection to acknowledge a shared humanity with people from a perceived outgroup<sup>70,71</sup>. While dehumanisation was once thought to occur only in extreme events, it is now understood to be a common everyday occurrence, present in many societies<sup>71,72</sup>. In the case of animal rights advocates, for example, opinions on conservation actions are often widely held and, crucially, defined in opposition (and sometimes, political subjugation) to other social groups such as ranchers, farmers, or hunters<sup>73</sup>. Conservation campaigns and initiatives, particularly through campaigns aimed at the Western public, often value wild animals over BIPOC<sup>74,75</sup>. Moreover, discussions and presentations of conflict between humans and wildlife are frequently polarising<sup>32,34</sup>. Such framings and discussions in media and social media have real world consequences. When marginalised people in the Global South, most of whom are BIPOC, are impacted or even killed by wildlife, there is typically little or no media attention – particularly when compared to the attention given to wild animals that are killed by people (sometimes in retaliation for loss of human life)<sup>32,76,77</sup>.

Framings in the media, social media and by celebrities, that implicitly value animal lives over human lives can lead to racially oriented responses in the name of conservation. For example, in June 2020, Ugandan poachers killed a mountain gorilla named Rafiki ("friend" in Kiswahili), ostensibly in self-defence (their bushmeat target being small antelope and rodents, not gorilla). Strongly contrasting the contemporaneous BLM protests that raged across the globe in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, there were widespread public calls (particularly from Northern/Western actors on social media) for the Black Ugandans involved to be tortured, brutally

killed or at the very least denied due judicial process<sup>78</sup>. Heightened support for violence against Black suspects is often perpetuated by implicit associations linking Black people with apes<sup>79</sup>. The Ugandan poachers in this case may therefore be perceived by some as less than human and deserving of less rights than the mountain gorilla that they killed.

The consequences also manifest within countries of the Global South where there are income inequalities and divides between urban and rural peoples. For example, in India in 2018, intense public and media outrage erupted over the killing of 'Avni', the tigress, with widespread concern expressed over the fate of her two 10-month-old cubs<sup>80</sup>. Notably, little mention was made of the number, names or ages of the children left parentless following Avni's killing of at least 13 rural villagers. Instead, protestors in Mumbai demanded 'justice' for the tigress and her cubs, chanting 'Avni's kids, nation's kids', with some attendees dismissing the human death toll as a 'farce'. This example illustrates how urban/rural divisions within a country can shape abusive rhetoric towards BIPOC occupying conservation landscapes just as the Global North/South division between countries does<sup>32</sup>.

The killing of 'Cecil' the lion in Zimbabwe in 2015 provides an example of the power of animal rights lobby groups over the needs of IPLCs that bear the costs of living with lions<sup>33</sup>. The killing of 'Cecil' the Lion caused great global outrage<sup>81</sup>, especially in the west, and powerful animal-rights lobbying groups leveraged the incident to mount strong campaigns to stop trophy hunting<sup>82</sup>, overpowering the rights of local communities to choose how to manage their natural resources or manage human-wildlife conflicts in their own domains<sup>33,83</sup>. In striking contrast to the global attention paid to 'Cecil', according to the police and media reports<sup>84</sup> more Zimbabweans had been killed by wild animals than by COVID-19 from January-June 2020 — including a baby killed by lions after she fell from her mother's back — with very little media or public interest.

## **The rights of nature**

The emergence of the concept of the rights of nature is another area where there is both potential for creating a more pluralistic vision of conservation, as well as risks of perpetuating or reinforcing the dominant power model. Many Indigenous peoples have been strong supporters of attributing to rights of nature, which is seen as more aligned with their own ontologies and worldviews<sup>85</sup> which see humans as a key part of nature, place value on relationships, sometimes considered kinship relationships with the non-human. However, many in the rights of nature movement are based in the global north, and some seek to impose a framework in which the rights of nature are the superior normative framework, taking precedence over human rights. If this prevails, it will mean that in principle the rights of nature could be used to justify the violation of human rights, including of IPs and LCs. Since rights of nature will likely be instrumentalised through existing dominant legal and decision-making institutions, the rights of nature taking precedence over the rights of humans is a threat especially in the global south<sup>86</sup>. The critical question will be “who decides” – if the rights of nature allow for more decentralised, plural values and decision-making around nature to prevail, the movement could be positive for BIPOC<sup>85</sup>. However, the risk of the rights of nature movement is that it becomes another mechanism that can be used to dispossess BIPOC of their ways and means of life in the name of nature.

## **Improving conservation and human rights**

The BLM movement brought widespread attention to injustice and racism in society. The attention provided an opportunity to address these complex and nuanced issues across sectors, including in conservation. We recognise that while conservation is steeped in injustice and racism, there is also great potential for positive change. Here, we outline four key steps (Rights, Agency,

Challenge and Education; RACE) (Figure 1) to help conservationists build more inclusive and just conservation models.

**Rights: Recognising human rights as a bedrock of sustainable conservation**

The importance of human rights in conservation has been the focus of increasing policy discussions and scholarship over recent decades. A plethora of legal instruments to enshrine human rights and to protect the rights of IPs and IPLCs more broadly now exist (see Table 1). While countries are the primary duty-bearers under international human rights law, private conservation organisations and funders also have responsibilities as secondary duty-bearers to respect human rights in their activities<sup>87,88</sup>. However, conservation NGOs are often key implementers of conservation programmes and thus also critical in upholding responsibilities towards human rights. A set of “Core Human Rights Principles for Private Conservation Organizations and Funders” has recently been published<sup>88</sup>. Major international conservation NGOs also have individual policies aimed at protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in their work<sup>37,38,89</sup>. Affirmed by our author team’s own experience in the field, these efforts have improved more inclusive and socially just conservation practices in recent decades, although there are still significant gaps between policy and practice.

At a national level, examples of improved recognition of IP and LC rights include a Mozambican Law of 1997 which provides for individuals, families, and communities to acquire land use rights certified by the state. While potentially still not fully compatible with international human rights law (in particular in relation to ownership), this law advances tenurial security for communities and families<sup>90</sup>. Similarly, in Namibia, the Nature Conservation Amendment Act of 1996<sup>91</sup> enables the relevant ministry to register a conservancy, which grants ownership of huntable game rights to local communities. Many national courts have also upheld claims to recognise IPs’

or LCs' title to customary lands, although often these rulings have faced significant challenges in implementation<sup>91</sup>.

Indeed, major shortcomings remain in supporting and protecting the rights of marginalised BIPOC populations- IPs and LCs – in conservation<sup>11,92,93</sup>. These shortcomings stem from a number of factors. First, there is limited progress in full legal recognition of IPs and LCs rights, in particular to lands, territories and resources, to free, prior and informed consent, and to self-determination, in many national jurisdictions<sup>94,95</sup>. Many IPs and LCs have limited jurisdiction over the lands they occupy and, thus, are not able to set policies or have full control over these lands<sup>96</sup>. Second, contemporary power differentials and weaknesses in governance and the rule of law often stem from trajectories established during the European colonial era. As a result, national legal protections, even where national legal protections exist, are frequently not enforced or applied<sup>33,74,97</sup>. For example, India's landmark legislation, the Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006, requires the state to legally recognise the historical injustices suffered by scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers and reinstate resource use and occupational rights of such communities<sup>98</sup>. However, a 10-year review following the FRA's promulgation shows weak implementation, with only 3% of its potential area realised<sup>99</sup>. Similarly, a 2012 study<sup>100</sup> examining the implementation of Free, Prior and Informed consent from 2003-2011 through the Philippines' National Commission on Indigenous Peoples government agency indicates a failure in terms of both process and outcome, whereby consent was manipulated, and the agreements were deemed "culturally inappropriate, weakly operationalised, and poorly realised."

A further complicating factor that undermines the protection and support of the rights of IPLCs is the complexity of applying rights-based approaches to conservation<sup>101</sup>. While “fortress conservation” is nominally a thing of the past, many conservation actions continue to jeopardise local people's access to resources critical for their survival. While there is a strong commitment to

rights in principle, when conflicting interests appear in practice, conservation actors often default to prioritising nature over human rights, adopting top-down, exclusionary approaches to conservation activities, and privileging knowledge from western science over local and traditional knowledge and priorities<sup>85</sup>. Moreover, in many post-colonial settings, the determination of which groups qualify for which rights remain contested<sup>102</sup>. The increasing discussions on the rights of nature intersect with these challenges, creating a framework that, if used inappropriately, could potentially justify the violation of human rights for conservation<sup>103</sup>. Extensive research and work in partnerships led by IPs and LCs, in a variety of settings, are needed to navigate this complexity and provide a clearer practical roadmap for conserving nature whilst respecting and advancing human rights.

There are a number of ways in which conservation policymakers, practitioners and scholars can address these factors. First, conservation practitioners on the ground need to do much more to understand human rights, and what their implementation requires in practice. Second, the support to IPLCs in securing their legal protection and recognition of their rights needs to be further strengthened, especially in settings where these groups are highly marginalised. Conservationists can strengthen local people's rights by actively engaging in co-development of conservation projects, promoting and enabling locally led or co-managed conservation, supporting IPs and LCs to advocate for themselves to national and international governing bodies, speaking out about violations of human rights in conservation contexts, and rallying international support for IPLC's' rights<sup>104</sup>. Third, there is a need for recognition that there will sometimes be conflicts between the rights of IPs and LCs and the objectives and desires of the conservation community<sup>33,105,106</sup>. Over the past 15 years there have been many advances in dealing with conflicts in conservation, including differences in cultural values, knowledge types and implications for conservation practice<sup>105-109</sup>. Importantly, international human rights law sets out a framework for assessing and

prioritising competing rights and interests<sup>110</sup>. Using this legal framework will enable the conservation sector to better manage complex trade-offs and conflicts in a more socially just, inclusive, and rights-oriented way.

### **Agency: Empowering IPLCs and respecting their decision-making**

Long-term success and sustainability and socially just conservation requires that IPs and LCs have agency<sup>111</sup>. Agency is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as the ‘*ability to take action or choose what action to take.*’ Possessing agency includes having the capability, in the form of education and material resources, as well as the autonomy, to choose which actions to take<sup>112</sup>. Agency also links closely to the respect for rights – it is central to a rights-based approach and is also clearly connected to certain rights such as the right to self-determination. However, due to power differentials, historical and present-day marginalisation, IPs and LCs, especially in the Global South, often have limited agency in conservation efforts<sup>113</sup>.

A recognition justice approach emphasises the respect and appreciation of different groups’ identities, cultures and experiences<sup>114,115</sup>. Recognition justice provides an opportunity to advance a pluralistic, bottom up, people-centred agenda that supports the conservation sector in overcoming the difficulties it faces in incorporating the perspectives of BIPOC, IPs and LCs into mainstream practice<sup>114,115</sup>. A recognition justice lens aligns with the RACE framework's call to understand the critical importance of respecting and valuing BIPOC cultures, conservation practices and knowledge in conservation policy and practice. For example, in relation to cultural knowledge systems, Articles 8j<sup>116</sup> and 10c<sup>117</sup> of the Convention of Biodiversity (CBD) demand that Parties to the Convention protect Indigenous Peoples and local communities' knowledge, practices, and lifestyles as they relate to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Nevertheless, Parties to the Convention have in the past persisted in adopting policies that are incompatible with

the ethics that drive IPLC stewardship of nature – e.g. the commodification of nature<sup>114,115</sup>. The decision at CBD COP16 in 2024 to establish a Permanent Subsidiary Body on Article 8j<sup>116</sup> will significantly strengthen IPLC voices, giving them an official role in decision-making going forward and formally recognising the value of their knowledge.

The principles of recognition justice also support the respect for Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK)<sup>118,119</sup>. Conservation organisations must facilitate influence, leadership and autonomous decision-making by IPLCs and support community-led conservation or co-management. For example, as a result of a 1974 US court decision that ordered the Northwest Indian Fisheries Commission in the USA to be given equal management of the salmon population, the population has steadily grown, habitats are being recovered, and other marine and land-based flora and fauna have benefited<sup>120</sup>. There is a growing and concerted push towards community-led conservation and co-management<sup>121–124</sup>, but such efforts must be scaled up and mainstreamed, engaging the public and highlighting their complexity and nuance. Local decision-making should be privileged where it clashes with the views of external stakeholders.

The agency of marginalised IPLCs can be supported through recognising and strengthening and working in partnership with IPLC-led initiatives. For example, through support from local and international organisations, the San and Khoi people successfully negotiated with the South African Rooibos industry in one of the world's first industry-wide benefit-sharing agreements<sup>125</sup>. These communities are now receiving benefits from the Rooibos industry for using their traditional knowledge. Another opportunity for supporting IPLCs is through for example, the recently formed pan-African Alliance for Indigenous People and Local Communities for Conservation in Africa (AICA) which emerged following the first African Protected Areas Congress in 2022. AICA “harnesses and amplifies the collective voice of Africa’s IPLCs and prioritizes their engagement in all policy arenas relevant to their land and land-based resources, territories and conservation”<sup>126</sup>.

### **Challenge: Speaking out when BIPOC rights are undermined by conservation**

The persistence of challenges in addressing marginalisation within conservation, despite more than three decades of concerted efforts, underscores the deeply institutionalised and systemic nature of these issues<sup>10</sup>. The challenges are complex and nuanced and are legacies and path trajectories of the extractive nature of the European colonial era and typically stem from two interacting structural factors. First, the imbalances of power due to wealth differences and international structures of flows of finance and resources<sup>26</sup>. Second, due to the concentration of global wealth in Western countries, publicly and privately funded conservation programs are incentivised to meet the needs of the donor governments and individuals, rather than communities on the ground<sup>127</sup>. These factors contribute to the demonstrated failures of the REDD+ program due to structural and auditing pressures from donor countries<sup>128,129</sup>.

We argue that conservation scientist and practitioners can take more actions to address challenges through supporting the voices of marginalised BIPOC communities and IPLCs in a number of ways. First, conservationists (white and BIPOC) need to acknowledge that we enjoy a privileged position. We enjoy access to resources, community, communication, prestige, and authority that many IPLCs living in our target landscapes do not<sup>17</sup>. Second, conservationists need to use our ability to innovate creative solutions to complex conservation and social challenges, including sometimes by giving up some of our power and privilege to make space for different visions and ideas – even ones we may not fully agree with. Indeed, supporting and enabling the people who live where conservation takes place is not only socially just, but is also the most effective way to achieve sustainable conservation outcomes<sup>130</sup>. We should aim for concrete, attainable goals, such as fostering conservation efforts that leave a community with more voice, more agency, more opportunities for change, and more ideas or solutions than when a conservation

initiative started. By working closely with local peoples to genuinely understand their needs, allowing them to take the lead, and building their solutions into our collective conservation projects, we can forge a foundation for change in conservation. Finally, we should recognise that as a white/elite/external party, sometimes the best thing to do is to step aside and hand your voice/power/stage over to IPLC or BIPOC.

### **Education: Raising awareness of our own historic & present roles in injustice**

'Conservation education' typically refers to the 'teaching' of locals by NGOs and external stakeholders, but far more important is the education of conservationists (particularly external conservationists and those who are not BIPOC) to understand historic and current racial dynamics in conservation, to understand human rights and rights-based approaches and what they mean in practice, and to be open to honest self-reflection about what personal and professional changes are needed<sup>131-134</sup>. In particular, providing white conservationists with knowledge of the ways that marginalisation and racism have destroyed IPLC traditional practices in relation to conservation is key. One important way to promote awareness of and reflection on racial dynamics and change would be to embed courses within university curricula that explicitly focus on historical and contemporary discrimination associated with conservation science and practice and build a better understanding of the practical elements of a human rights-based approach<sup>135</sup>. Training on recognising and addressing subconscious biases including racism<sup>134</sup> has the potential to counter the view of conservationists as the only or main holders of knowledge, distributing it as they see fit. If conservationists aim to build a better future with IPLCs as rightful leaders in conservation, it is critical to recognise that many abuses and underdevelopment suffered by BIPOC are rooted in exploitation and exacerbated by the impacts of national boundaries and other frameworks imposed on colonised regions by European colonial powers<sup>17,136,137</sup>. Doing this is not about

rehashing past wrongs or even setting past wrongs right but establishing a realistic and more socially just foundation for future action<sup>138,139</sup>.

Doing conservation differently should involve recognising and acknowledging conservation knowledge developed outside Western academic settings, such as Traditional Ecological Knowledge and others<sup>140,141</sup>. By building and expanding on the efforts to date to incorporate methodologies such as participatory action research (PAR), community-led participatory research, and indigenous methodologies, conservationists can improve their work<sup>131,142–144</sup>. For example, conservationists can reflect on their projects at multiple levels, with honest and culturally adapted cost/benefit appraisals of proposed work for both the organisation and the overall wellbeing of local communities<sup>132,145</sup>. Building strong community partnerships can be valuable, rebalancing the power dynamic by reflecting on what benefits conservationists can provide beyond the conservation project, such as providing access to advanced degrees or training community members to manage the conservation project on their own<sup>146</sup>. The Indigenous Peoples Speciality Groups of the Association of American Geographers issued a Declaration of Key Questions About Research Ethics with Indigenous Communities<sup>147</sup> that can provide a foundation for conservationists to ask themselves while reflecting on their projects. For example, some of the authors of this paper used the Declaration to reflect on their work with the Penan people in Borneo, which conservationists can also use to examine their conservation projects and research<sup>148</sup>.

## **OUTLOOK**

### **Towards equitable and inclusive conservation**

Conservation is critical in securing planetary and human health, reducing future pandemic risk, and delivering many of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals<sup>4</sup>. Progress towards just conservation is being made in countries like the Republic of Indonesia, where indigenous peoples

continue to uphold their identity, traditions, and customary rights – standing strong as stewards of their ancestral lands<sup>91</sup>, but it must be accelerated. The increased attention against racial discrimination, provides an opportunity for the conservation sector to address othering and marginalisation of BIPOC peoples globally including the Global South. In this paper we propose the adoption of our four-step RACE recommendations: engaging and supporting human rights, advocating for and making space for the agency of indigenous peoples and local communities, challenging the accepted norms of how we engage with BIPOC, and seeking out new educational opportunities for and from BIPOC communities. Recent changes of priority and reductions in funding for conservation, development and social efforts poses an additional challenge to achieving just and durable conservation. Our framework provides guidance on how these renewed challenges can be addressed.

Conservationists must work closely with IPLCs, local and national authorities, and other stakeholders to find solutions that address injustice and strengthen respect for human rights whilst accomplishing conservation goals. Decades of efforts towards these goals, demonstrates the diversity and depth of challenges faced. An adaptive and contextual approach, guided by principles such as those embedded in the RACE framework, is required. We must recognise and be aware of the complex, contextual and historical factors that affect injustice and marginalisation in different settings – particularly within the Global South, where the manifestations of these injustices, and the role of race, is frequently different from the Global North, even though the latter dominates the media and discourse.

In order to better accomplish these goals, conservation organisations should accelerate and strengthen their collective work through initiatives such as the Conservation Initiative on Human Rights (CIHR)<sup>149</sup>, which aims to (i) develop and maintain a common set of human rights principles in conservation; (ii) identify and test management practices for implementing and complying with

the principles; (iii) develop networks of support in implementing human rights principles and management practices, especially through shared learning among participating organisations, stakeholders and experts; (iv) promote the integration of human rights principles in conservation initiatives and share relevant experience relating to approaches and impacts; and (v) collective efforts in conservation in partnership with IPLC organisations to clearly consider, monitor and improve human rights in their conservation work. We must all closely examine, acknowledge, and combat injustice, marginalisation, othering, and racism globally in conservation.

Conservation operates in post-colonial landscapes where due to historical circumstances and current contexts violent forced displacements continue to occur for agricultural, mining and other developments, often driven by foreign powers with support from local elites. Conservation in such environments of weak rule of law, and governance and unrest are challenging. However, through being socially just, inclusive and following established standards and practices<sup>11</sup> conservation will be more effective and ensure more sustainable and longer lasting support into the long term. Unjust and/or abusive displacements of people such as those recently highlighted in Northern Tanzania<sup>150</sup> are inexcusable and undermine effective conservation in the longer term.

Conservation should be an exemplar of best practice on human rights, justice, and inclusion, including in regions marred by violence, injustice, and weak rule of law. Our paper provides some background and history for a deeper and nuanced understanding of the complexities behind unjust conservation practices that continue to this day. Ultimately though, the ideas and proposals in this paper are not new, and yet they merit repeating. Justice-centered solutions, such as community-based or rights-based approaches, have had mixed success. The historical legacy of conservation cannot be easily undone. These challenges are not limited to the conservation space but structural to contemporary society. The proposed RACE framework is to some a radical new platform and to others a way to preserve momentum for social change. A more inclusive, rights-

based, and just future for the conservation of biodiversity, and achieving the targets of the 2022 Global Biodiversity Framework, is indeed possible, and is one which we must all strive for.

## **ETHICS DECLARATIONS**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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## **AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

All authors conceived and designed the study, in particular, T.A., M.N.N, and L.R. provided early conceptual contributions. M.M.M. led the drafting of the manuscript. All authors edited the manuscript and M.M.M; D.B; S.A; J.G.B.R; A.D; D.H, N.L.H., K.S., M.D., and D.R. critically revised the manuscript.

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**Table 1: Examples of rights in conservation.** This table presents some examples of international and national policy instruments (right-hand column) and rights (left-hand column) that allow indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) to sustainably manage natural resources and participate in decision making

<b>RIGHT</b>	<b>DESCRIPTION</b>	<b>EXAMPLES</b>
<b>RIGHT TO LANDS, TERRITORIES AND RESOURCES</b>	IPLCs have the right to own, occupy, manage and use their lands, territories and resources. Where IPLCs have been unlawfully deprived of collective lands or resources, they also have a right to have those lands and/or resources returned to them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), arts 1, 27</li> <li>• International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), arts 1, 15</li> <li>• International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), art 5(v)(d)</li> <li>• United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), arts 25-30</li> <li>• United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP), art 17</li> <li>• Sarawak Land Code 1958, Chapter 81 (Malaysia)</li> <li>• Mozambican Law of 1997</li> </ul>
<b>RIGHT TO SELF-DETERMINATION</b>	All peoples, including Indigenous peoples as well as other peoples, have the right to self-determination. This includes the right to freely determine their political status and pursue their economic, social and cultural development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ICCPR (art 1)</li> <li>• ICESCR (art 1)</li> <li>• UNDRIP, arts 3 and 4</li> </ul>
<b>RIGHT TO CULTURE</b>	IPLCs have a right to practice, revitalize, develop and teach their cultures, collectively or individually.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ICCPR, art 27</li> <li>• ICESCR, art 15</li> <li>• UNDRIP arts 8, 11-16</li> </ul>

	This includes e.g. practices relating to traditional livelihoods and use of lands and resources, religious practices, artistic practices and others.	UNDROP arts 15, 17, 25
<b>RIGHT TO PARTICIPATE</b>	IPLCs have the right to effective and meaningful participation in decision-making on matters that affect them. This includes decisions about the sustainable use, management and conservation of their lands and resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ICCPR and ICESCR, art 1</li> <li>• UNDRIP, art 18</li> <li>• UNDROP, arts 10, 14</li> </ul>
<b>RIGHT TO CONSULTATION AND TO FREE, PRIOR AND INFORMED CONSENT</b>	IPLCs also have the right to be consulted about activities or interventions which may affect them or their lands, territories and natural resources and. IPs and other peoples with collective rights also have a right to give or withhold their free, prior and informed consent to activities that may affect them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ICCPR and ICESCR, common art 1</li> <li>• UNDRIP, arts 10, 19, 28, 29, 32</li> <li>• UNDROP, art 2(3), 5(2), 13(6)</li> </ul> <p>Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment (Principle 15)</p>
<b>RIGHT TO SHARE EQUITABLY IN BENEFITS</b>	IPLCs have the right to receive equitable benefits derived from the use of their traditional lands and resources and have a right to compensation for any restrictions on their rights to use their lands or natural resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNDRIP arts 10, 20(2), 32(3)</li> <li>• UCBD Addis Ababa Principles, Principle 12</li> <li>• Framework Principles on Human Rights and the Environment (Principle 15)</li> </ul>

**Figure 1: The Rights, Agency, Challenge and Education (RACE) model for conservation.**

This highlights the need for foundational human rights (top left); ensuring Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) are empowered in decision-making (top right); that people speak out when others are disempowered by conservation (bottom left); and ensuring there is wider awareness of historic and current injustices in conservation (bottom right).

## Box 1: Terminology and Definitions

**Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC)** – This manuscript uses the BIPOC framework, because it is inclusive and highlights the different groups within the broader People of Colour (POC) label who are generally the most marginalised in the context of conservation. We acknowledge the limitations of this term which some argue divides communities of colour, may superficially centre marginalized groups, and may centre Black and Indigenous voices in situations where this is not appropriate. However, we consider it valuable in discussions about conservation because it can help to highlight the racial dimensions of the apparently race-neutral term “local communities”. We recognise that the BIPOC framing, as a manifestation of othering, needs to be interpreted with nuance and consider the wide variety of inequities and power disparities and how they manifest in different contexts.

**Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and Local Communities (LCs)** – This terminology, predating but now enshrined by the Convention on Biological Diversity. The term “IPs and Local Peoples” first appeared in conservation literature in the 1940s<sup>1</sup>, while LCs first appeared in the late 1980s. The term “IPs and Local Peoples” was originally used in discussions about North American and Oceanian communities and later applied to other areas<sup>2</sup>. While some equivalence may apply between IPs and LCs, there can also be contrasts in terms of common identity and interests, as well as collective legal rights across different countries. There are also places where the distinction between IPs and LCs is unclear or contested such as many parts of Africa<sup>4</sup>, and some IPs contest the conflation of IPs and LCs<sup>3</sup>. The term IPLC is, however, widely established in global conservation policy <sup>e.g.</sup><sup>4</sup>, and we use the term when referring to issues pertaining to both Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.

**Global South** – Africa, most parts of Latin America, and Asia, characterized by lower levels of economic development, and wealth compared to countries in the "Global North." Typically, synonymous with developing countries and encompasses a complex set of socio-economic, political and power relationships due to colonial histories and ensuing current global inequalities.

**Local elite** – In many parts of the world, conservation is spearheaded by local elite (often urban) groups who belong to the BIPOC community. The issues raised in this paper apply to conservation practiced by these BIPOC groups, if their practices continue or reinforce unequal, extractive and/or (neo)colonial power relationships<sup>5,6</sup>. The dominance of local elites interacts with the influence of foreign actors such as multi-national corporations, and influence how economic development and land-use decisions, including conservation, take place. Sometimes the actions of local (BIPOC) elite can negatively impact on rural communities. This may not align with, or even contradict, the predominant black-white framing that comes out of North America<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, the socio-economic disparities between urban and rural populations can influence their views and values regarding conservation<sup>8</sup>. Finally, local elites can capture the majority of benefits from conservation programs that are intended to be inclusive, equitable, and just<sup>9</sup>.