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Forest fires: The missing discussion at the Global Review

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Devastating forest fires are occurring every year with more intensity and causing major biodiversity loss. They are intensified by climate change, with major corporate interests like the agrobusiness and palm oil sectors behind the land use changes that lead to intensified fires in wildfire-prone ecosystems. Between 2025 and 2026, most of the regions experienced increasing fires.

Most central African countries feature prominently in global burned-area estimates with fires occurring in savannas, grasslands and open woodlands, alongside forest burning. In Asia; India, Nepal and Indonesia witnessed massive fires that affected air quality, with smoke and fine-particle pollution extending across South East Asia. Half of the critically endangered orangutan's population is directly impacted by fires. In South America, Brazil and Bolivia suffered severe fire impacts including exceptional emissions in the Amazonian and Pantanal-Chiquitano regions.

Developed countries are also impacted. North America experienced extensive forest fires while the EU recorded its highest burned area since 2006. Portugal and Spain have been particularly affected since 2025. Australia was not spared by fires either. Prolonged, severe heatwaves and the cessation of Indigenous fire practices over generations combined with the Super El Niño event have led to huge uncontrollable bushfires across the country.

Discussions at the CBD can, and increasingly must, address forest fires:

- ➔ **Refining the Monitoring Framework:** As many targets still lack explicit operational metrics, there is an opportunity to include tools to track fire frequency, severity and resource allocation to fire prevention, mitigation and suppression
- ➔ **Leveraging synergies with the FAO:** By embedding the FAO's integrated fire management approach into na-

tional reporting, promoting access to specialized technical resources to build fire-resilient ecosystems.

- ➔ **Financing fire resilience:** Funding mechanisms, such as the Global Environment Facility (GEF), can explicitly prioritize "fire-smart" landscape management rather than treating fire fighting as an emergency response isolated from conservation funding.
- ➔ **Addressing forest fires prevention and management approaches in the biodiversity and climate discussions:** Including the update to the CBD Voluntary guidelines for the design and effective implementation of EbA & Eco-DRR.
- ➔ **In National Biodiversity Finance Plans (NBFPs):** Nations highly vulnerable to fires can structure domestic finance frameworks to channel funds to community-based volunteer fire brigades that can cover vital supplies like protective gear, field communications, portable oxygen, and logistical support.
- ➔ **Redirecting harmful subsidies:** To tackle target 18 and free up domestic funding, nations are tracking and repurposing harmful subsidies. Shifting financial support away from industrial monoculture plantations (which dry out landscapes) allows governments to reallocate public spending toward immediate, localized forest-defense resources.

Forest fires, once seasonal natural events, are now becoming anthropic recurrent phenomena, accelerating biodiversity loss across the globe. The CBD can, and must, address this issue by developing sharper monitoring indicators, leveraging synergies with the FAO, and including it in the biodiversity and climate discussions. Funding fire resilience, fire-smart landscapes and frontline fire brigades remains essential to both prevent and respond efficiently to this global challenge.

Two Empty Seats at COP17

Irina Kurilova (Northern Women)

COP17 is in full motion. Governments, international organizations, Indigenous Peoples, and civil society are discussing the future of global biodiversity policy. But two women who have worked to make the participation of Indigenous Peoples from Russia in international environmental processes possible are missing.

Daria Egereva and Natalia Leonhardt remain in detention in Russia since 17 December 2025. Their absence represents much more than two empty seats at the COP

Daria has helped Indigenous Peoples from Russia bring their voices to international climate and biodiversity negotiations. As a Co-Chair of the *International Indigenous Peoples Forum on Climate Change*, she contributed to coordinating Indigenous participation in the UN climate process, including at COP30, and has also been involved in processes under the CBD.

Natalia's work was often less visible, but no less important. She helped with the practical organization that enabled Indigenous rights defenders to travel, meet,

coordinate, and participate in international processes.

Participation does not happen by itself. Daria and Natalia were part of the infrastructure that turned the right to participate into the actual possibility of being heard.

That is why their absence at COP17 raises an uncomfortable question: What does “full and effective participation” of Indigenous Peoples mean when people who help make such participation possible are deprived of their freedom?

Delegates should remember that shrinking civic space and the criminalization of Indigenous leaders and human rights defenders directly undermine the very participation that international environmental agreements seek to promote.

This is not only about who is *inside* the conference centre. It is also about who has been prevented from being there. Protecting nature must also mean protecting the people who defend it.

**At least 1853 Environmental Defenders
were killed in the last decade.**

Leaders get killed,
while whole communities rise up
against extractivism,
plantations, megaprojects
and fortress conservation



From Recovery to Redesign

Synthetic Biology and the Future of Conservation

Joann Sy (Pollinis)

As Parties take up synthetic biology at COP17, a quiet shift is under way: synthetic biology is being reframed as a conservation tool. Yet the reframing itself is not on the table. The underlying question is rarely asked: is this the kind of conservation we want?

Conservation has traditionally rested on a simple idea: if we protect habitats and reduce the pressures on them, nature can recover. Its work has been to maintain the ecological and evolutionary processes that allow biodiversity to adapt and persist, and to direct effort and funding at the root causes of loss.

Synthetic biology starts from a different place. It treats the organism itself as the point of intervention. Instead of asking what is driving a population into decline, it asks how that population could be altered to survive or to stop causing harm. For Synthetic Biology, the answer lies in genomes and microbiomes rather than landscapes. Nature is no longer something to give space to recover, but something to be redesigned.

This shift rarely announces itself. It arrives in the language of solutions. The draft decision's Action Plan maps synthetic biology onto sixteen targets of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. Benefits are recognised before they are assessed, and the Framework, built to halt and reverse biodiversity loss, becomes a justification for engineering it.

The latest draft no longer refers to "applications for conservation use", after Parties disagreed over whether to examine them. The decision on a new Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group has been postponed until after a stocktake of the Convention's work on synthetic biology. Elsewhere, references to synthetic biology have been taken out of the draft decision on invasive alien species.

Yet removing the words does not remove the framing.

The debate was about *whether* to study conservation applications, not about what it means to treat them as conservation in the first place. Weighing "*potential positive and potential negative impacts*" assumes that redesigning nature is a legitimate conservation approach, and asks only whether it works. With the AHTEG postponed, there is now even less space to ask that question.

The implications are profound. When the aims of conservation are set by those who design the interven-

tion, decisions about what nature should *become* move away from ecosystems and the communities that live with them, and towards laboratories and those who fund them. Organisms released into the wild cannot be re-

called, so mistakes may not be correctable. The questions this raises concern uncertainty, irreversibility, cumulative effects, ethics and governance.

The precautionary approach, central to the Convention, exists for exactly this situation, yet even the words "the precautionary approach" were in bracketed. The language on assessment in the thematic action plan has also been weakened, even as horizon scanning and monitoring are mentioned. Anticipating new developments means little without the capacity to assess them. Some changes to the living world cannot be undone.

Synthetic biology's place in conservation should be an open question and debated openly, not a starting assumption written into procedure. What Parties decide in Yerevan will help determine whether conservation continues to work with the living world's capacity to renew itself, or sets out to redesign it.

Synthetic biology is being reframed
as a conservation tool.
Nature is no longer
something that needs space to recover,
but something to be redesigned

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When Financial Stability Depends on Biodiversity Destruction

Audrey Irvine-Broque & Jessica Dempsey

We need to address the elephant in the room: biodiversity targets necessitate governments to halt destruction, while the rules and norms of global economic governance often pressure governments to allow biodiversity destruction.

These problems are structural in the sense that they reproduce themselves through routine responses and technical practices, rather than only misguided decisions or lack of political will. But this doesn't mean they are apolitical - far from it. Some people benefit greatly from these rules, and accumulate increasing wealth, while others face the most extreme ends of the consequences, in which their territories and ways of life are continually rendered disposable. This system also exposes governments to these pressures unequally, meaning that some governments, particularly in the Global South, face stricter constraints than others to challenge these norms. Understanding both the routine, technical elements of this system and the power dimensions that keep it in place is critical for challenging a financial system predicated on extractivism.

How do the current rules of global economic governance hamper the implementation of the Convention?

First, they can incentivize **export-oriented economic strategies** that generate short-term benefits for some, but long-term ecological degradation and instability for many others. Many countries rely on commodity exports to earn foreign currency, which they need for importing medicine, machinery or technology, as well as for repaying external debts. When fiscal problems worsen - including due to external shocks or natural disasters - governments often turn to international financial institutions for emergency support, where they are frequently encouraged to lean deeper into these export sectors to help buy back stability. This can lead to a vicious cycle, in which managing debt crises in the short-term via unsustainable resource extraction further exposes governments to vulnerability in the future.

Second, **high debt burdens**, along with norms and institutions that reward fiscal consolidation, limit investment in biodiversity protection, restoration, and transition away from destructive sectors. Credit ratings often count proactive actions to protect ecosystems as a cost, with more severe financial consequences for poorer governments. Meanwhile, race-to-the-bottom taxation, tax avoidance by extractive sectors and tax havens drain government budgets further.

Third, both legal and market institutions can expose states to **financial penalties for implementing strong environmental policies**. If states signal moves away from harmful sectors, or institute stronger regulations, they can face financial penalization in the form of credit downgradings, capital flight, currency runs, or even lawsuits from international investors. All of this can dig governments into deeper financial holes, exacerbating the above problems. This can constrain policy pathways that would be otherwise aligned with the KMGBF and the Convention.

Recognizing that there are unequal dynamics does not let any government off the hook for environmental destruction, human rights violations or land dispossession that accompany resource decisions. Instead, it points to the collective responsibility to ensure that these international barriers are reformed. The power of domestic elites, industry lobbying, and regulatory capture can limit efforts to protect biodiversity and healthy environments. But these domestic factors also operate inside a wider international system that repeatedly narrows the space for ecologically-sound decision making.

The Convention can't unilaterally reform these rules. But it can more clearly name the contradiction between these norms and biodiversity conservation, and undertake an agenda of work to ensure that financial system transformation is aligned with biodiversity targets.

Read more in the report
"Elephants in the room"

