



Indigenous and Community Conserved Areasindigenous and community conserved areas

Indigenous and community conserved areas (ICCAs) are natural and/or modified ecosystems containing significant biodiversity values, ecological services, and cultural values. ICCAs are voluntarily conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities (both sedentary and mobile), through customary laws or other effective means. This term has been used for convenience and incorporates a wide range of phrases used to denote such sites, including biocultural heritage sites, indigenous protected areas, and locally managed marine areas, among others. The term is not meant to show disrespect to the legitimate demands of many indigenous populations to be called "peoples" instead of "communities" and to recognize their homelands as "territories" instead of "areas." ICCAs are relatively new in conservation and environmental circles, having originated from work done on community-initiated conservation in India in the late 1990s (see the Khonoma Tragopan Sanctuary photo). But the sites and initiatives they denote are as old as human civilization itself and are in many ways the world's oldest protected areas. These include sacred sites protected from all or most human uses other than once-a-year rituals, watershed forests conserved with only minimal subsistence use, wildlife populations left strictly alone for ethical reasons, and indigenous and mobile peoples' territories managed to balance ecosystem protection and resource use.



Khonoma Tragopan Sanctuary, declared as a completely inviolate area by the Angami tribe of Nagaland, India

Source: Author.

Recognition of the reality and spread of ICCAs is recent—a result of a shift that took place in international conservation forums in the first few years of the new millennium. For over a century before this, it had been assumed that wildlife and biodiversity could best be conserved in designated protected areas managed by government bureaucracies, aided at best by scientists and conservation nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This has now given way to the realization that there are a variety of other actors who can be equally if not more capable—in particular, indigenous peoples and other traditional local communities (hereafter called communities).

The Diversity of ICCAS

Community conservation initiatives are extremely diverse and can be classified or analyzed from several points of view:

- Their coverage of different kinds of ecosystems and wildlife species (encompassing the full range found on Earth)
- The objectives and motivations behind their establishment (including ethical, cultural, economic, and political reasons)
- Their origins (autochthonous by communities or triggered by outsiders)
- The institutions governing them (as different as the communities themselves, ranging from entire villages to youth clubs and women's groups and specialized conservation groups)
- The various ecological and social impacts they have
- Their size (ranging from a tiny patch of forest or sea of less than 1 ha (hectare) to several million ha of rain forest, savanna, or mixed land uses).

ICCAs include the following geographies:

- Indigenous peoples' territories managed for sustainable use, cultural values, or explicit conservation objectives (e.g., many indigenous protected areas in the Amazon and Australia)
- Terrestrial or marine territories over which mobile or nomadic communities have traditionally roamed, managing the resources through customary regulations and practices (e.g., the territories of the Qashqai in Iran and the Borana in Ethiopia and Kenya, both containing substantial wetland and wildlife values)
- Sacred spaces, ranging from tiny forest groves and wetlands to entire landscapes and seascapes, often left completely or largely free from human use (e.g., thousands of sacred groves in India and several sacred crocodile ponds in Mali)
- Resource catchment areas, from which communities derive their livelihoods or key ecosystem benefits, managed such that these benefits are sustained over time (e.g., community forests in many African and South Asian countries)
- Nesting or roosting sites, or other critical habitats of wild animals, conserved for ethical or other reasons explicitly oriented toward protecting these animals (e.g., dozens of waterfowl nesting wetlands in Southern India)
- Community forests managed by towns (e.g., several in North America)
- Landscapes with mosaics of natural and agricultural ecosystems, managed by farming communities or mixed rural-urban communities (e.g., the Potato Park in the Andean highlands of Peru, the rice terrace regions of the Philippines, or the protected landscapes of Spain and many other European countries)

Though extremely diverse, ICCAs display three essential characteristics: (1) the community (or communities) is the most important decision maker, even though other actors may play a role; (2) the community has one or more crucial links to the area and its species: cultural, spiritual, ecological, economic, and political; and (3) whatever the objectives of management may be, conservation is being achieved in varying degrees.

The Significance of ICCAS

The international conservation community has started paying much more attention to ICCAs, for several important reasons:

- They conserve or have the potential to conserve an enormous part of the Earth's beleaguered biodiversity (see the Coron Island photo); indeed, though existing documentation is not adequate to judge their extent, they may cover an area as big as government-designated protected areas (which today amount to about 12% of the Earth's terrestrial surface).
- They help or can help in providing connectivity across large landscapes and seascapes, which is crucial for migration of wildlife, livestock, and people and for genetic exchange.
- They provide substantial environmental services, such as water and nutrition flows, soil protection, and others.
- They provide enormous survival and economic benefits and important lessons on how to link nature

conservation with livelihood security.

- They are “natural” sites for cultural sustenance, displaying the varying ways in which humans have lived with and within nature; a great many are sites of spiritual significance, and in the case of many indigenous and mobile peoples, the land itself is akin to the temples and churches of mainstream religions.
- They are often seamless landscapes of wild and agricultural or domesticated biodiversity, providing important ecological and cultural links between two crucial parts of human life that have in modern times become artificially compartmentalized and separated.



Coron Island, a biodiversity-rich coral island seascape managed under ancestral domain claim by the Tagbanwa indigenous people of the Philippines

Source: Author.

In many ways, ICCAs can become a crucial component of the human response to global climate change. They are effective ways of avoiding or mitigating climate impacts, by ensuring the continued protection of ecosystems. Equally valuable is their potential for adaptation, by providing corridors for ecosystem and species migration that will inevitably occur due to changing climatic conditions, and because their biological and cultural diversity contains the bases of resilience that communities everywhere will need.

ICCAs are not a panacea for all conservation and livelihood problems, nor should their growing profile imply that communities everywhere are conservation oriented. ICCAs have their own strengths, including locally adapted practices based on sophisticated knowledge, often strong institutions and customary law, and others. They also have their own weaknesses, including sometimes the neglect of species not considered important or local inequities that undermine the sustainability of the initiative. Increasingly, ICCAs face serious threats from inappropriate “development” and infrastructure activities such as mining, dams, and urbanization; the lack of tenurial security in countries where community rights and territories are not adequately recognized; the changing cultural norms, and other forces. These are greatly compounded by the lack of recognition of most ICCAs by state agencies and NGOs. Over the past few centuries of centralized rule and industrial exploitation of resources in such countries, their role has been seriously eroded.

Do ICCAS Have a Future?

If ICCAs are to remain or become a significant component of conservation and sustainability of human life, they need urgent recognition and support. Having understood this, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and the International Convention on Biological Diversity (through its Programme of Work on Protected Areas) have urged countries to consider ICCAs as crucial components of their conservation policies and practices. Some countries have started providing the legal and policy backing for this (with some, such as Australia and Colombia, having started several years ago), but most have a long way to go. Even where countries are beginning to recognize ICCAs, often it is done in top-down ways, with governments dictating to communities what kind of (rather homogeneous) management institutions should be established—a contradiction in terms!

Considerable innovation is needed in national and regional policies to support ICCAs, in particular to respect that they represent a crucial interface between ecological and cultural diversity and are at their core site specific, constantly evolving responses to the challenges and opportunities that communities find living with nature. Many need technical and financial support and social recognition; conversely, many may thrive under deliberate neglect since the most culturally sensitive communities may find even a bit of public exposure detrimental to their interests.

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Further Readings

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