

To: Ms. Chantal Marjinissen  
Ms. Francesca Di Mauro  
Mr. Filippo Saracco,  
Ms. Carla Montesi

Cc: Ms. Michele Rivasi  
Ms. Sirpa Pietikainen  
Mr. Stefan Leiner  
Mr. Humberto Delgado

London / Moreton-in-Marsh  
25 September 2020

**RE: Concerns over the EU's planned *NaturAfrica* initiative**

Dear Chantal Marjinissen, Francesca Di Mauro and Filippo Saracco,

We are writing to you to express our concerns regarding *NaturAfrica*, the proposed new flagship programme for biodiversity protection in Africa referenced within the European Green Deal and the EU Biodiversity Strategy for 2030.

We welcome the EU's recognition of the risk that rampant biodiversity loss in Africa poses, and its efforts to address the drivers of deforestation that consumption in the EU is partly responsible for. However, we believe the draft *NaturAfrica* concept note<sup>1</sup> is problematic on many levels. We fear that as it stands, the programme risks further entrenching a flawed and unsustainable conservation model that has led to serious human rights abuses and dispossession of some of the world's most vulnerable people while doing little for ecosystems in Africa.

Whilst aware this is still a concept note, we are particularly concerned by some of the assumptions made in the document, an apparent lack of learning from previous EU-funding interventions in the region and also by what is absent from the text. Specifically:

- There is **no recognition of past problems and conservation-related abuses in Africa** linked to the creation, expansion and management of protected areas. This absence is all the more notable given the planned review into the human rights impacts of EU-funded protected areas in the Congo Basin and the pending results of the independent review into allegations of human rights abuses in a range of protected areas managed by WWF, several of which involve EU funding.

---

<sup>1</sup> Draft dated 18.10.19 and revised May 2020

- It rests on the theory of change that expansion of protected areas will result in improved conservation outcomes and enable economic and other benefits across landscapes. This fails to take into consideration the significant human rights risks it carries and mounting scientific evidence that **investing in secure tenure and community-based sustainable use and conservation delivers better conservation outcomes**.
- Given the regional coverage of protected areas already (14 percent of land in Africa, less than half of which is managed effectively<sup>2</sup>), available ‘free’ lands not already owned and managed by people (often on a customary basis) are scarce<sup>3</sup>. In such a context, **expansion of the protected area estate will necessarily impoverish and displace people**<sup>4</sup>, a ‘trade-off’ that is not mentioned in the concept note as it stands.
- While the concept mentions “people-centred landscape approaches” and the integration of biodiversity protection with local economic development, **there is no clear promotion of proven rights-based approaches to conservation**. Provisions on land and resource rights, Free Prior and Informed Consent and fundamental human rights are critically lacking.
- To our knowledge, **international and local civil society organisations working with communities on the frontline of nature conservation in Africa have not been consulted** about the initiative. Information on the planned programme is vague and not publicly available, with no opportunity for public scrutiny.
- The concept says it can build on the Natura 2000 experience in the EU itself, implying without a credible basis that the same approach could be transposed to Africa.
- The concept relies on a **patchy analysis of the root causes of biodiversity loss** in pilot areas and makes several seemingly unsubstantiated claims. Implying that “population” is largely to blame risks further scapegoating some of the world’s most vulnerable people.
- The **analysis of the drivers of biodiversity loss also largely ignores poverty** – indeed it omits evidence that strictly protected areas have led to the impoverishment and marginalisation of local communities and can therefore be part of the problem<sup>5</sup>.
- There is no justification for the claim that these areas could “contribute to the stability of the African continent”. Indeed, our experience shows rather the opposite, as **top-down conservation restrictions and heavy-handed enforcement have often led to conflict**. Hailing Virunga as a successful example of stabilisation and security is concerning given the number of human rights issues that have arisen there and research pointing to the fact that conservation enforcement has indeed aggravated violent conflict in the area<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.protectedplanet.net/target-11-dashboard>

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, <https://cbca.mappingforrights.org/>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, possible risks of increasing strictly protected areas in the Congo Basin [https://www.mappingforrights.org/MFR-resources/mapstory/cbddrive/300 million at risk from cbd drive](https://www.mappingforrights.org/MFR-resources/mapstory/cbddrive/300%20million%20at%20risk%20from%20cbd%20drive)

<sup>5</sup> Pyhälä, A., Osuna Orozco, A. and Counsell, S. (2016) *Protected areas and people in the Congo Basin: failing both people and biodiversity*: <https://www.rainforestfoundationuk.org/media.ashx/protected-areas-in-the-congo-basin-failing-both-people-and-diversity-english.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> See Judith Verweijen & Esther Marjinen (2017), “Why fighting fire with fire in DRC’s Virunga Park isn’t helping conservation”, *The Conversation*:

- There seems to be **no justification for how the six pilot landscapes have been selected.**

With all this in mind, we believe that in its current form NaturAfrica risks entrenching past failures and expanding rights-abusing ‘fortress’ conservation measures across vast areas of the continent.

As evidence mounts that strictly protected areas, including those funded by the EU, have led to serious human rights abuses, and that securing land rights and devolving management power to local communities leads to more equitable and sustainable conservation, the time is ripe for a radical rethink of how conservation is done in Africa.

The EU should seize this moment by promoting and securing approaches that protect the rights of and empower those best placed to protect the world’s resources. This is all the more pressing as the world is looking to secure effective, meaningful and concrete ways to address the biodiversity and climate crises that we face.

As conservation strategies and protected area targets are debated at the national, regional and global levels this year, including as part of the proposed post-2020 global biodiversity framework, the EU has a significant opportunity to leverage its position within the UN Convention on Biological Diversity negotiations to ensure that any conservation targets do not come at the expense of some of the world’s most vulnerable. In line with the EU’s stated commitment to advancing the rights of indigenous peoples, we would welcome EU support for increasing the legal recognition of indigenous territories and customary land tenure regimes within the global biodiversity framework<sup>7</sup>.

We remain open to discussing these matters with you in further detail.

Sincerely,



Joe Eisen  
Executive Director, Rainforest Foundation UK



Helen Tugendhat  
Environmental Governance Coordinator, Forest Peoples Programme

---

<https://theconversation.com/why-fighting-fire-with-fire-in-drcs-virunga-park-isnt-helping-conservation-72295>;  
Esther Marijnen (2017) The ‘green militarisation’ of development aid: the European Commission and the Virunga National Park, DR Congo, Third World Quarterly, 38:7, 1566-1582, DOI: [10.1080/01436597.2017.1282815](https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1282815); and Claude Kinyunyi (2020), “Use of Environmental Protection as A Means of Violating the Human Rights of Indigenous Peoples”, International UN Watch: <https://www.intunwatch.com/news/details/172/use-of-environmental-protection-as-a-means-of-violating-the-human-rights-of-indigenous-peoples>

<sup>7</sup> See, Statement by the International Indigenous Forum on Biodiversity to the Special SBSTTA24 and SBI3 sessions, September 2020, available on request.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Castellino". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'C'.

Joshua Castellino

Executive Director and Professor of Law, Minority Rights Group International