When we think of nature in 2014, chances are that protected areas come to mind: Amazonian rainforests teeming with wildlife, the sweeping plains of the Serengeti, or an Alpine lake surrounded by glaciers. But the world’s protected areas are at a crossroads, and next month, when the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) convenes its once-in-a-decade World Parks Congress in Sydney, Australia, nations will discuss how to address the challenges in protecting ecosystems across the world for the benefit of humanity.

The good news is that the total number of protected sites has doubled since the last World Parks Congress in Durban, South Africa, in 2003. Today, there are more than 200,000 such areas, covering around 15% of land and 3% of the oceans, in national parks, marine reserves, World Heritage sites, and indigenous and community conserved areas. Since Durban, nearly 200 nations agreed at the 2010 Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) on new global targets to achieve protection for at least 17% of terrestrial and 10% of marine environments by the year 2020.

Protected areas remain the single most effective tool to conserve biodiversity, which is why recent reports are sobering. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species reveals that all completely assessed species face severe risk of extinction, ranging from 13% of birds to 63% of cycads. The World Wide Fund for Nature’s Living Planet Report confirmed a 52% drop in the global populations of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish between 1970 and 2010, whereas the CBD’s Global Biodiversity Outlook 4 report concluded that international efforts to prevent wildlife and habitat loss will fail to meet the overall 2020 targets. There has been some progress toward protecting ecosystems on land, but we are not on track for oceans, despite the recent establishment of large marine protected areas in the Pacific Ocean and elsewhere. Another analysis indicates that the scale of policy and management response is far from commensurate with the magnitude of the challenge.*

Against this backdrop, what can we expect to emerge from the Sydney World Parks Congress? Species occurring sparsely in protected areas are sliding toward extinction twice as fast as those that are well protected. Therefore, countries must draw a line on activities that damage or degrade protected areas and must include important biodiversity areas in newly established protective areas. The congress will address the most egregious detrimental activities, including illegal logging and mining, but will also consider the delicate balancing act between conservation and development needs. Here, the scientific community can serve to fill the gaps in our current knowledge to better guide policy.

The congress will also examine the importance of long-term vision and accountability in ecosystem management.† Countries must adopt the principle of nonregression in environmental law, which requires that norms already adopted by states shall not be revised if the result weakens protections. Downgrading and even removing the official status of protected regions—as seen in both high- and low-income countries—threaten the ability of societies to address climate change, food and energy security needs, and sustainability.

The Sydney congress is a platform for government, business, indigenous and civil society leaders, and more than 4000 delegates from 168 countries to figure out how to get back on track toward the 2020 goals. The congress should also inspire a new generation of protected-area custodians. Societies must better understand how protected areas yield substantial benefits for people. These areas reduce the impact of disasters by providing natural coastal defenses, supply food and fresh water, improve physical and mental health, and provide jobs and livelihoods to millions of people around the world. Wise investments in the future of our planet require conserving our greatest natural assets: protected areas.

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Planet at the crossroads
Julia Marton-Lefèvre

Science 346 (6209), 525.
DOI: 10.1126/science.1261787