Aligning climate and nature with justice: five priorities for COP30

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NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS INITIATIVE

In brief

From Belém to the world: climate, nature, and justice rise or fall together. COP30 is the moment to move from promises to practice—so that what countries pledge and fund actually protects ecosystems and the people who care for and depend upon them. Seeing nature only as a carbon store leads to failure: it deepens inequality, damages biodiversity, and distracts from ending fossil fuels. Instead, governments should invest in community-led action, recognise the many ways people value nature, and make fairness and accountability the foundation of every plan and partnership.

Recommendations — at a glance

Join up the global goals

Bring climate, biodiversity, and land agendas into one shared plan, so that national commitments work together, not against each other.

Support community leadership

Direct funding and decision-making power to Indigenous Peoples and local communities who are already caring for ecosystems and restoring lands.

Track what really matters

Measure not just carbon and species, but also people's relationships with nature: trust, care, and fairness in how land and benefits are shared.

Build shared decision-making

Ensure affected communities have a real say —through co-governance boards, participation in monitoring, and fair access to the gains of nature action.

Keep nature finance open and fair

Make sure all nature and carbon markets are transparent, share benefits equitably, and include strong safeguards and grievance systems.

Biodiversity loss and climate change are intertwined symptoms of the same unsustainable and unjust systems: extractive economies, inequitable governance and broken relationships between people and the rest of the living world [1,2]. Many countries have declared the importance of nature in their climate plans. Now, with international climate negotiations taking place in one of the most biodiverse regions on Earth [3] as the 30th Conference of the Parties to the UNFCCC convenes in Belém, Brazil, Parties have a concrete opportunity to align climate and nature policy.

The importance of integrated ("synergistic") approaches to climate and nature is now recognised across major intergovernmental assessments and UN decisions. The task at COP30 is to move from normative agreement to institutional alignment and effective implementation, ensuring that the principles of equity and integrity are reflected in national commitments, financial architectures and monitoring frameworks.

Avoid counterproductive approaches

Limiting warming to 1.5 ˚C is increasingly challenging and requires global net-zero CO_2 around mid-century [4]. But treating ecosystems primarily as carbon sinks can entrench inequities and harm biodiversity [1]. Carbon-focused planting in naturally open biomes (savannas, grasslands, peatlands) degrades native biodiversity and ecosystem services [5]. Market-led carbon and conservation schemes can also enable green grabbing, displacing local rights and livelihoods [6]. And over-reliance on land-based removals diverts attention from the work needed to rapidly phase out fossil fuels, including by decreasing demand [4].

Targets can also misfire. For instance, the global push for 30×30 (to protect 30 per cent of land and ocean by 2030) risks being a numbers game that treats conservation as separate from lived-in landscapes. And biodiversity offsetting schemes that aim to compensate for destruction in one place with habitat restoration elsewhere raise serious questions about ecological equivalence, cultural loss and long-term accountability [7].

Remote sensing and AI can improve transparency, but when used as substitutes rather than complements to locally led monitoring and governance, they risk bypassing community stewardship [8].

Moreover, land-based mitigation projects often take place in areas experiencing conflict. Ignoring these underlying dynamics can serve to exacerbate them. In Brazil, meeting climate targets primarily depends on halting deforestation and restoring native vegetation [9]. Yet in the Yanomami Territory, gold demand has fuelled illicit, often violent mining, with documented mercury exposure, disease and insecurity; despite federal actions since 2023, criminal networks persist [10]. Safeguarding Indigenous rights and confronting extractive political economies are therefore preconditions for credible and just climate–nature action.

Embrace a holistic view

Synergy cannot just take place on the surface. It is the relationship between humans and the rest of the living world that needs to be transformed: recognising people as part of nature, understanding nature as dynamic living systems, and nurturing reciprocal and respectful relations [1].

Proven alternatives exist, many rooted in Indigenous practices. In the Amazon, Indigenous-led socio-bioeconomies—for example, Brazil-nut cooperatives in Mato Grosso (e.g., COOPAVAM) and community-run açaí value chains in Pará—valorise biodiversity, culture and resilience while sustaining forest cover and diversified incomes [11]. Elsewhere, community-led restoration (e.g. of mangroves in Colombia) improves outcomes for biodiversity and livelihoods [12]; while nature-positive urban design, such as Mexico City's Biosocial Laboratory and São Paulo's Green and Healthy Environments Programmes, helps reduce urban heat while enhancing biodiversity and access. These initiatives embrace complexity: rather than rely on single carbon metrics, they honour ecosystems' multifunctionality and diverse values, including biocultural, spiritual and relational dimensions [1].

They are also more efficient. The IPBES Nexus Assessment—an intergovernmental synthesis of evidence on how biodiversity, water, food, health and climate interact—estimates that siloed action imposes hidden global costs of US$10–25 trillion per year, whereas integrated responses avoid costly trade-offs.

Why justice is central

Crucially, justice is key to moving beyond narrowly instrumental approaches. Projects perform better when they embed procedural justice (meaningful participation; Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) as per United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), distributional justice (fair benefit-sharing), and recognitional justice (acknowledging and redressing deep-rooted inequities in knowledge, culture and power) across design, monitoring, and benefits. Respecting Indigenous land rights reduces deforestation under high pressure and supports long-term ecosystem integrity [13,14]; community-forestry institutions can jointly improve conservation and poverty outcomes when communities share decision power and dividends [15]. These arrangements work because they align incentives, knowledge and stewardship with local authority and accountability [1].

Five priorities for COP30

At COP30, leaders must support these alternatives. Practical mechanisms are needed for all levels of government and the whole of society to act jointly, as well as accountability systems to guard against perverse outcomes.

1. Create coherence

Align targets, planning and reporting across climate, biodiversity and land degradation instruments (NDCs, NBSAPs, LDN) at all levels of government. Request the Joint Liaison Group (JLG)—the formal coordination mechanism among the UNFCCC, CBD and UNCCD Secretariats—to deliver by 2026 a joint work programme with aligned guidance and a common reporting spine embedding high-integrity ecosystems across strategies.

2. Measure what matters

Complement carbon and species indicators with relational metrics that capture how societies connect with, care for, and govern nature, so that progress is not reduced to tonnes and hectares. The proposed Nature Relationship Index (NRI) offers a practical starting point, spanning access and connection, care and responsible use, and institutional safeguarding (tenure, FPIC, accountability). Governments could pilot the NRI in their 2026 Global Biodiversity Framework progress reports, testing how relational metrics can strengthen and complement existing biophysical indicators.

3. Ensure transparency and equity in nature markets

Require ex-ante distributional impact assessments, public benefit-sharing terms, open registries linking claims to places and people, and independent grievance mechanisms; prevent double-counting across conventions; and track who gains and who loses. National regulators and multilateral banks can implement these requirements using existing tools such as the IUCN Global NbS Standard and OECD nature-finance tracking.

4. Back community-led pathways with FPIC and secure tenure

Direct finance to Indigenous- and local-community-led bioeconomies, protection and restoration of high-integrity ecosystems, just food and energy transitions, and nature-positive urban design, ensuring FPIC and secure tenure as gating criteria. Evidence from the Amazon and beyond shows robust gains when rights are recognised and communities co-govern [11-14].

5. Mandate rights-based governance and co-decision

Move beyond advisory roles by establishing co-decision boards for project design, monitoring and benefit-sharing; tie finance to participation, stewardship and benefit benchmarks; and enable community monitoring. Models exist: community forestry in Nepal has delivered measurable conservation and poverty benefits when communities share formal authority and dividends [15].

These steps place communities and ecosystems at the centre of climate action, making climate–nature integration both effective and equitable.

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