IUCN’s mission is to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable. IUCN has a long history of working with Indigenous Peoples and fully acknowledges that they hold and manage a significant part of the Earth’s most biodiverse regions and play a vital role in conserving lands, seas and resources. IUCN also recognises that Indigenous Peoples cultivate strong economic, cultural and spiritual relationships with their natural environments, have developed, and often maintain traditional management practices and indigenous knowledge that contribute to biodiversity conservation and to the sustainable use of natural resources.

This report provides a summary of some selected, ongoing activities of IUCN as they relate to Indigenous Peoples. We hope the information will provide useful contributions to the OHCHR report on the realisation of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.

IUCN Membership and Governance

IUCN is composed of three pillars: IUCN Members, the IUCN Secretariat, and IUCN Commissions. IUCN’s Members include States, Government Agencies, Affiliates (with no voting rights), International Civil Society Organisations, National Civil Society Organisations, and Indigenous Peoples’ Organisations. The IUCN Secretariat is the Union’s executive component and includes global thematic programmes, regional programmes, and several corporate units. IUCN’s six Commissions are large bodies of volunteer experts who implement parts of the IUCN Programme in their respective fields of expertise: Species; Protected Areas; Environmental Law; Ecosystem Management; Education and Communication; and Environmental, Economic and Social Policy.

IUCN convenes a global assembly of Members every four years at the IUCN World Conservation Congress. One of the most notable outcomes of the 2016 IUCN Congress was a landmark decision by the IUCN Members’ Assembly to create a new category of membership for Indigenous Peoples’ Organisations (IPOs). This decision opened the opportunity to strengthen the presence and role of IPOs in IUCN. IUCN had never before altered the structure of its Membership; it did so for the first time specifically to better include Indigenous Peoples’ representative institutions, which now have a clear and distinct identity with their particular features recognised. This major change has strengthened the presence, voice and roles of Indigenous Peoples in IUCN, amplifying their views in the internal policy making of IUCN and the general life of the institution.

Up to now, twenty-three regional and national Indigenous Peoples Organisations have joined IUCN as IPO Members. (The list of IPO Members is available and maintained on the IUCN website at https://www.iucn.org/about/members/iucn-members). IUCN believes that this fundamental change in the governance structure of the institution can become an example of the ways in which international organisations can better integrate Indigenous Peoples in their institutional architecture and at all decision-making levels.

Members’ Assemblies also elect representatives to the IUCN Council, which serves as the principle governing body of IUCN in between assembly sessions. IUCN’s Council has long recognised the need for participation of indigenous leaders in IUCN’s governance, and indigenous leaders have been appointed as members of the IUCN Council for more than 20 years. In 2020, IUCN IPO and other supporting Members prepared a resolution for the formal election of an IPO representative to the IUCN Council. This resolution has been submitted for the upcoming Members’ Assembly in September 2021; its adoption will enhance the full and effective participation of indigenous leaders at the highest level of IUCN’s governance.
In 2020-2021, IUCN is also facilitating the organisation of a *World Summit of Indigenous Peoples and Nature* (IP Summit) at the upcoming IUCN Congress in September 2021. This Summit aims to unite the voices of Indigenous Peoples from around the world to raise awareness that enhanced measures are required to protect the rights of Indigenous Peoples and their roles as stewards of nature. At this time, IUCN IPO Members are engaged in a virtual planning process to design the summit and draft key outcomes. The Summit will highlight the contributions of Indigenous Peoples to the conservation of nature; biodiversity and climate change and identify priorities for supportive actions by other stakeholders such as States, conservation organisations, development agencies and the private sector.

**IUCN Policies and Institutionalisation**

A broad and coherent body of institutional policies guide and support IUCN’s work on indigenous issues. IUCN policies are primarily contained in the Resolutions and Recommendations that are formally adopted every four years at the Members’ Assembly, based on voting by the Members and following well-established democratic, parliamentary decision-making rules. IUCN policies are mandatory for IUCN’s Secretariat and IUCN’s Commissions, as implementing branches of the IUCN Programme.

Among resolutions pertaining to indigenous issues that have been adopted by IUCN Members and thus integrated into IUCN’s overall mandate, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) was endorsed by IUCN in 2008 through Resolution 4.052 “Implementing the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.” Mainstreaming of UNDRIP in the IUCN Programme was reinforced in 2012 by Resolution WCC- 2012-Res-097 “Implementation of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” which requires that the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are observed throughout IUCN’s work.

These resolutions have informed IUCN towards the formulation and adoption of its Environmental and Social Management System (ESMS) and associated Standards and requirements regarding work on indigenous issues. The ESMS, developed in 2014, provides a systematic procedure and operational tools for managing the environmental and social performance of projects implemented or supported by IUCN. A normative framework, the ESMS Policy Framework, which consists of eight ESMS principles and four ESMS standards, including a Standard on Indigenous Peoples, governs the ESMS. This Standard focuses on the potential impacts of any programme or project on Indigenous Peoples and ensures that affirmative action is taken to strengthen the capacity of Indigenous Peoples to defend their rights to, and interests in, lands and resources, participate in and benefit from development processes and promote their roles in conservation and sustainable resource management.

The Standard recognises UNDRIP as a key policy reference for all issues relevant to Indigenous Peoples. It requires projects to obtain free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) from indigenous groups for any intervention that takes place on their lands, waters, or territories; and may have negative economic, social, cultural or environmental impacts on their rights, resources or livelihoods; involves the use of their traditional knowledge; or promotes social or economic benefits from cultural heritage sites or resources to which they have legal (including customary) rights. The Standard defines specific requirements and steps to ensure that any proposed interventions are consistent with the ESMS Principle on FPIC. While the Standard on Indigenous Peoples is the most central standard for indigenous issues in the ESMS, there are two other standards (Standard on Involuntary Resettlement and Access Restrictions, and the Standard on Cultural Heritage) that may also be applied to address specific impact issues faced by Indigenous Peoples.

The ESMS Standards, including the Indigenous Peoples Standard, apply to all IUCN projects including actions of project implementing partners from government agencies and civil society organisations. As part of the ESMS, IUCN has established a project grievance mechanism to enable communities to raise complaints related to the implementation of its projects. It is based on effective, accessible and transparent procedures to receive and resolve complaints. The institution-wide Grievance Mechanism can be accessed through the IUCN website ([https://www.iucn.org/resources/project-management-tools/environmental-and-socialmanagement-system](https://www.iucn.org/resources/project-management-tools/environmental-and-socialmanagement-system)). In addition, IUCN projects that trigger the Standard on Indigenous Peoples are required to develop a project-level grievance mechanism to further ease access to conflict resolution and redress. In 2021, IUCN is developing updated Guidance Notes on the Indigenous Peoples Standard and on the Access Restrictions Standard, to be finalised and published later in the year.
Selected IUCN Programme highlights

Indigenous issues are integral to many projects and initiatives across IUCN’s thematic and regional work. The following selected highlights provide some examples of this work.

The IUCN Global Programme on Governance and Rights (GPGR) includes a dedicated program of work on Indigenous Peoples. In 2018, the GPGR and the IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy (CEESP) supported IUCN’s IPO Members to meet together to develop a self-determined strategy for advancing indigenous rights and issues in conservation and within IUCN. The priorities identified by these IPO Members focus particularly on leveraging IUCN’s convening power, knowledge generation, standard setting and policy engagement in regard to indigenous issues. Implementation of priority activities is underway, with ongoing support from GPGR and CEESP. Additionally, in 2019, IUCN strengthened its GPGR program staff by adding a professional indigenous staff person as Program Officer for Indigenous Peoples and Conservation, who is responsible for regularly engaging with the IPO Members to implement their self-determined strategy, advancing IUCN’s work on Indigenous issues and providing overall advice to IUCN on matters related to Indigenous Peoples.

Also in 2019, IUCN was selected as one of two Implementing Agencies to design the GEF Inclusive Conservation Initiative (ICI). The ICI is a $25 million global project focused on assisting Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) in their efforts to safeguard a significant fraction of Earth’s natural ecosystems by enabling organisations and communities on the ground to face the growing drivers of global environmental degradation. Over the course of 2020, a call for expressions of interest and a technical selection process identified nine priority geographies for investment. The full ICI project proposal will be completed and submitted in May 2021 for GEF CEO endorsement.

GPGR also houses specific work on governance issues as they relate to Indigenous Peoples. Part of this work focuses on the Natural Resource Governance Framework (NRGF), an IUCN initiative that provides a thorough, inclusive and credible approach to assessing and strengthening natural resource governance, at multiple levels and in multiple contexts. IUCN IPO Members contributed to the development of the NRGF, and indigenous rights and customary governance of lands and resources are integral to the Framework and its principles, including one focused on recognition and respect for tenure rights, with particular attention to the customary, collective rights of Indigenous Peoples. The NRGF has advanced from conceptualisation to application, including testing in an indigenous conservation area in Peru, the Amarakaeri communal reserve (an IUCN IPO Member), to demonstrate how to strengthen the consideration of governance and rights issues in the IUCN Green List Standard for protected and conserved areas. The next phase of the NRGF will be spearheaded through a community of practice, which will include IPOs drawn from IUCN membership and beyond, to share, engage and provide lessons and evidence on indigenous governance systems in different landscapes.

As part of the implementation of IUCN’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Policy, IUCN actively engages and supports Indigenous women’s groups, networks and convenings. For example, in Honduras, IUCN supported the inclusion of women members of the National Indigenous Lenca Organization of Honduras (ONILH) and the Table of Unity of the Lenca People of Honduras (MUPILH) in natural resource decision-making processes. Under the Regional Coastal Biodiversity Project in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, IUCN has supported women from the Indigenous Territorial Councils in the Honduran Mosquitia to participate in the formation of the Governance Committee of the Karataska Lagoon System, with two of them appointed to the coordinating board. Entrepreneurships led by Q’eqchi women have also been supported by the project’s small grant program.

IUCN prioritises special attention to gender-based violence as one of the most pervasive barriers restricting diverse people’s abilities to realise the full spectrum of their rights. This is particularly the case for Indigenous and other women environmental defenders who face intersecting forms of discrimination and violence that silences their voices, limits their participation in environmental decision-making and deeply affects their lives and livelihoods.

The IUCN Global Protected Areas Programme (GPAP) has worked for over two decades with IUCN Commissions and partners to publish and disseminate best practice guidelines on Indigenous Peoples and protected areas. In November 2017, the IUCN Green List Standard for Protected and Conserved Areas was approved by the IUCN Council. The IUCN Green List has the objective of encouraging protected areas to measure and improve performance through globally consistent criteria that benchmark good governance, sound design and planning, effective management, and successful conservation outcomes. A key element of the Green List Standard is the rights of Indigenous Peoples.
as framed by UNDRIP. Through the Green List Standard, IUCN promotes the mainstreaming of indigenous rights and roles in protected areas management.

Since 2017, IUCN has been collecting feedback from indigenous partners and members - worldwide, especially in Latin America and Asia-Pacific - on how the Standard deals with equity and rights issues in practice, which will feed into periodic revisions. The foundational component of the Standard is ‘good governance’, detailed in 16 indicators across criteria for ‘Legitimacy and voice’, ‘Transparency and Accountability’ and ‘Governance Vitality’. The accompanying guidance continues to highlight UNDRIP and related policies as well as IUCN resolutions. FPIC is a prominent element and requirement for the Green List where relevant.

The 2019 CAPLAC III event in Peru enabled dialogue with indigenous groups and representatives on the benefits of the GL Standard and programme to indigenous interests. The existing Green List programme increased after the event with commitment from several sites, especially from Communal Reserves in Peru, following the pioneering role of the Amarakaeri Communal Reserve (an IPO Member of IUCN).

Australia has also seen an exploration of the role of the Green List (GL) in promoting indigenous protected areas, and the example of Arakwal National Park – a co-managed but largely self-governing aboriginal territory in New South Wales – has been promoted and helped display the success of Indigenous Peoples in all elements of the Standard. In Vietnam, in 2020, IUCN received a voluntary commitment by Cuc Phuong National Park (Vietnam’s first, established in 1962 during the Vietnam War) to use the Green List to attempt to address legacy issues related to relocation of Indigenous Peoples in the early 1980s. A proposed ‘Whakatane Approach to Legacy and Equity’ is being developed and tested by IUCN with the local authorities, local civil society and community representatives.

Also in 2020, the Green List programme secured project funds to support Indigenous areas in the GL process to confront the challenges of COVID-19. IUCN is currently engaging with several groups in Latin America (Peru) and South East Asia (Vietnam), including the sites mentioned above, with targeted technical and financial support, channelled directly to Indigenous Peoples partners and their representatives in and around these areas.

Finally, in 2020, a ‘Green List development plan’ process began with global consultations on priority elements. The final version will include a dedicated, flagship programme on making the GL process work better for Indigenous Peoples, with a concerted effort to engage partners and supporters, channel funds and resources for the next 4-year IUCN cycle.

IUCN’s Forest Conservation Programme (FCP) has been supporting regional and international Indigenous Peoples alliances for the last six years. In 2020, the Forest Programme provided funding and technical support to the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (Alianza Mesoamericana de Pueblos y Bosques), to strengthen their Coordinating Body of the Mesoamerican Women Territorial Leaders. The Body promotes a balance between gender equality (SDG 5) and climate action (SDG 13). This focus is based on the fact that women are more vulnerable to climate change in addition to the fact that their representation within Mesoamerican territorial processes as well as their protection against the impacts of climate change are very limited. In addition to policy influencing, the Coordinating Body has set up a Fund for the Development of Women’s Entrepreneurial Capacities (FOMUJER) to promote value chains as a means to empower women economically, thereby improving political empowerment and participation in decision-making processes. Also, FCP has provided support to the Global Alliance of Territorial Leaders, which advocates for the respect of their rights and the inclusion of forest peoples in global negotiations on forests and climate change. The Alliance is composed of organisations at the regional level with territorial representation and, as a whole, protects an estimated 400 million hectares in 16 countries around the world. The Alliance is now representing the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (AMPB), the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) the Alliance of Indigenous Peoples of the Archipelago, Indonesia (AMAN), and the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin (COICA). The latter, an IUCN Member, is currently the host of the alliance. IUCN has supported their efforts to strengthen the governance of their alliance and prepare a policy influencing strategy supported by a strong communication campaign.

In 2020, IUCN launched the Global Standard for Nature-based Solutions, which brought together many voices from all around the world and different sectors to reflect on opportunities to deploy nature-based solutions to address, among others, three major issues: the climate emergency, the collapse of nature
and social inequities. IUCN IPO Members raised their voices towards the continuous progress of such a tool and responded positively to the invitation to be part of the journey. Dalee Sambo Dorough, Chair of the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and Ramiro Batzin, who is Maya Kaqchikel and also Regional Coordinator of the Integrated Management of Natural Resources with Indigenous Peoples of Central America CICA/Sotz’il, emphasised that Indigenous Peoples around the world have been stewards of nature for millennia.

As a final highlight, the IUCN World Heritage Programme advocates for strengthening the recognition and involvement of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in all processes of UNESCO’s World Heritage Convention. In its advisory role to the intergovernmental World Heritage Committee, IUCN ensures that all monitoring of existing World Heritage sites and evaluations of sites nominated for World Heritage listing take into account the role of Indigenous Peoples as rights-holders and stakeholders, in line with UNDRIP and the UNESCO policy on engaging with Indigenous Peoples. IUCN has supported the most recent update of the World Heritage Convention’s Operational Guidelines, which now recognises Indigenous Peoples in all stages of identifying, managing, protecting and presenting World Heritage. In the same vein, IUCN provides support to Convention reform processes as an opportunity to further consolidate recognition within the World Heritage Convention. IUCN has also welcomed the recent foundation of the International Indigenous Peoples Forum on World Heritage (IIPFWH). The IUCN World Heritage Programme is fully committed to working closely with this forum, and with Indigenous Peoples engaged in or affected by any aspect of the implementation of the World Heritage Convention, including the creation of new avenues for engagement through IUCN’s Nature Culture Initiative, and through supporting partnerships with IUCN’s Commissions and our IPO Members.

**Selected IUCN Commission highlights**

IUCN’s Commissions also have indigenous expert members who significantly contribute to IUCN’s work on indigenous issues. The IUCN Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy is particularly engaged on indigenous issues through groups such as the Theme on Governance, Equity and Rights (TGER) and the Specialist Group on Indigenous Peoples, Customary & Environmental Laws & Human Rights (SPICHE). Other Commission themes and specialist groups with indigenous participation include (but are not limited to) the CEESP Theme on Culture, Spirituality and Conservation and the WCPA Specialist Groups on Governance and on Cultural and Spiritual Values of Protected Areas.

In the last year, CEESP has been working on highlighting the contributions of indigenous traditional knowledge for conservation and natural resources. Ongoing studies focused in Nepal, Kenya and Guatemala are reviewing legal opportunities and challenges faced by indigenous communities for the recognition of their contributions and roles for sustainable management and conservation of the natural resources, biodiversity and ecosystem in their respective countries. These studies will be published as briefs in May 2021.

Additionally, in 2020, CEESP launched the #BuildBackBetter Dialogue series to generate dialogue and recommendations for the post-pandemic era. To date, CEESP has held six dialogues on topics ranging from spirituality to environmental change. Two keys dialogues in this series have been i.) *Indigenous Peoples, COVID-19 and Climate Change Dialogue* and ii.) *Environmental Human Rights Defenders in the Pandemic*. At least six more dialogues will be held prior to the IUCN WCC, to help create a roadmap for transformative change, equitable recovery and social justice and to address the climate crisis over the next four years.

In sum, although Indigenous Peoples comprise only 5% of the world’s population, they safeguard an estimated 80% of the planet’s biodiversity. In addition, more than 20% of the carbon stored above ground in the world’s forests is found on land managed by Indigenous Peoples. Their sophisticated knowledge of the natural world means that where Indigenous Peoples govern lands and resources, forests and biodiversity flourish, while their sustainable land use fights climate change and builds resilience to natural disasters. Therefore, IUCN is committed to supporting Indigenous Peoples to steward their lands, cultures and livelihoods as an urgent need and vital contribution to safeguarding the environment and tackling climate change in all regions of the world.