

DownToEarth

From restoring forests to river basins, seven conservation initiatives across continents recognised by UN

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The United Nations named seven initiatives from across Africa, Latin America, the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia as the intergovernmental organisation's World Restoration Flagships, a press statement received on February 13, 2024, said.

The projects revolve around revival and preservation of ecosystems at the tipping point of outright degradation caused by wildfires, drought, deforestation and pollution.

Together, they are expected to restore about 40 million hectares and create around 500,000 jobs, it added.

The award conferred by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN makes the initiatives eligible for technical and financial support from the organisation.

The winning initiatives were announced ahead of the 6th session of the UN Environment Assembly, which is the world's highest-level decision-making body for matters related to the environment. It will take place from February 26-March 1, 2024 at the UNEP headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya.

The awards serve as a part of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, led by the two agencies. The campaign aims to prevent, halt and reverse the degradation of ecosystems on every continent and in every ocean.

The awards track notable initiatives that provide support to global commitments in order to restore one billion hectares – an area larger than China, according to the official statement made by the UN.

"These initiatives show how we can make peace with nature, put local communities at the heart of restoration efforts and still create new jobs. Now is the time we must double down and accelerate restoration initiatives. This, while we continue to face a triple planetary crisis of climate change, nature and biodiversity loss, and pollution and waste," said Inger Andersen, executive-director of UNEP, in the statement.

Here's a look at the projects that were honoured:

The Restoring Mediterranean Forests Initiative involves the countries of Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and Türkiye. It consists of a novel approach said to have protected and restored natural habitats and vulnerable ecosystems. It is also said to have led to around two million hectares of forests restored across the region since 2017. "Along with this, over eight million hectares are planned for restoration by 2030."

The Living Indus initiative received approval from the Pakistan parliament in the wake of the devastating 2022 climate change-induced floods. Its official launch took place at the 27th Conference of Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change in [Sharm el-Sheikh](#). The initiative aims to restore 25 million hectares of the river basin by 2030, encompassing 30 per cent of Pakistan's surface area through the implementation of 25 high-impact interventions for policymakers, practitioners and civil society. It designates the Indus River as a living entity with rights — a measure taken to protect rivers elsewhere as well. It involves Australia, Bangladesh, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, India, New Zealand, Peru and Sri Lanka.

The Acción Andina social movement led by Peruvian conservation non-profit ECOAN aims to protect and restore a forest area of one million hectares. About 25,000 people from remote Andean communities are engaged in the process to restore 5,000 hectares and protect more than 11,000 hectares of Andean forests.

“They are expected to benefit from the initiative by 2030 in various ways—from access to medicine, solar panels, and clean-burning clay stoves, to improved grazing management, sustainable agriculture, microbusiness, and ecotourism management of Indigenous cultures. It also works to secure land titles for local communities, protecting the forest from future mining, timber exploitation and other drivers of degradation,” the UN agencies noted in the statement.

The Sri Lanka Mangrove Regeneration initiative is a science-driven programme co-led by local communities. It focuses on the restoration of natural balance in the ecosystem. Since its launch in 2015, efforts have led to 500 hectares of restored mangroves, according to the UN statement. “Some 10,000 hectares are slated for restoration by 2030, with 5,000 households to benefit and more than 4,000 new jobs to be created.”

The Terai Arc Landscape initiative aimed to restore the forests of critical corridors of the Terai Arc Landscape in collaboration with local communities working as citizen scientists, community-based anti-poaching units, forest guards, among others. Measures like the restoration of 66,800 hectares of Nepal’s forests, among others, were said to improve the livelihoods of about 500,000 households in the country, the UN bodies observed.

“It also supported the tiger population in the landscape shared by India and Nepal, which increased today to 1,174. This figure is more than double of what was its lowest number when the programme launched in 2001. Development is expected to continue as almost 3,50,000 hectares will be restored by 2030.”

Regreening Africa’s agriculture is expected to benefit over 6,00,000 households. As per the statement, it continues to increase carbon storage, boost crop and grass yields, make soil more resilient (by preventing floods) and treat it with fixed nitrogen that acts as a natural fertiliser.

Growing forests in Africa’s drylands initiative aims to expand from 41,000 restored hectares today to 229,000 hectares by 2030. With the involvement of African farmers, tens of millions of trees are planted under the project every year, the intergovernmental bodies noted. “Its visions also support many more through 230,000 jobs created.”

“Ecosystem restoration is a long-term solution in the fight to eradicate poverty, hunger and malnutrition, as we face population growth and increased need for foods and ecosystem goods and services,” FAO director-general QU Dongyu wrote in the statement.

The flagships were announced by Goodwill Ambassadors or Advocates of the UN and UNEP, many of whom are noted personalities from the world of entertainment, through video messages on UN’s official social media channels.

“These restoration initiatives are like the exciting answers to the big questions our connection to the natural world raises – just like the best movies do,” were the lines of Jason Momoa, actor and UNEP Advocate for Life Below Water.

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