

Our Future

Empowering Youth-Led Global Biodiversity Movements

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Center for
Earth Ethics

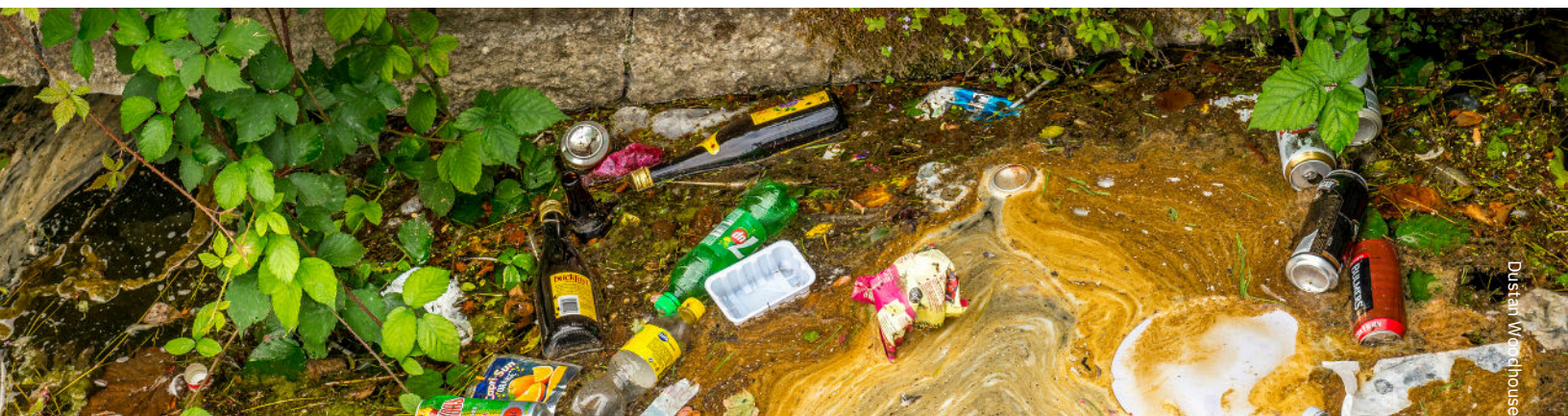


UNITED RELIGIONS
INITIATIVE

Background

Biodiversity loss injures us all. In all regions of the planet, the collapse in biodiversity, within a species or an ecosystem, is undermining our resilience. Since 1970, mammal, bird, reptile, amphibian and fish species have suffered a 69% average decline¹—making evident the bleak future that awaits if we continue down our current course of wholesale planetary destruction. To take action to combat global biodiversity loss, the 15th United Nations Biodiversity Conference (CBD COP) adopted the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF),² which established 23 targets to guide national policies to prevent and reverse biodiversity loss.

In 2022, as part of the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration's Action Plan,³ the Center for Earth Ethics (CEE) convened consultations in the United States, India, Kenya, the Philippines and Jordan to learn about how different groups of people were collaborating to restore harmed ecosystems and hurting communities. To spark more grassroots conversations about ecosystem restoration, CEE and the United Religions Initiative (URI) partnered to create, “Values, Culture and Spirituality: Ecosystems Restoration Conversation Guide”—a guidebook for faith-based groups to use together and with their expanded communities.⁴ The guidebook includes case studies and offers a five-step approach for collaborative ecosystem restoration work that centers values, culture and spirituality.



Dustin Woodhouse

Introduction

In addition to reversing land degradation and slowing biodiversity loss, ecosystem restoration can revive local traditions and deepen our bonds with land, water and other species. This is especially true when the restoration efforts are guided by the values, culture and spirituality (VCS) of the people living in the community. A strengthened connection with Earth and with one another supports unique and thriving localities. In thinking about a specific ecosystem that has been harmed or degraded, a VCS-centered assessment begins with these questions:

What do we value? Relationships. Acts of restoration help us to see, appreciate and mend relationships needed to help a system thrive.

Who are we culturally? Our culture includes our language, our food, our songs and the land we call home. Globalization pulls us away from these things in ways that can be isolating or disconnecting. Restoration calls us back to our roots.

How are we honoring spiritual wisdom? Ecosystem restoration moves us beyond our individual needs and toward a deeper connection with the land, water, and all that grows and lives in a place. Spiritual practice reinforces the importance of waiting, listening, asking permission and honoring the gifts of all participants.

This report focuses on grassroots restoration projects that reflect many of the “guiding principles,”⁵ that support an approach that is value-centered, spiritually rooted and culturally collaborative. The projects engage the 23 targets established in the GBF. Specifically, Target 22 emphasizes the need for participative decision-making, access to information and the inclusion of future generations. This report, therefore, features youth-led efforts to reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss, and provide recommendations for what young people will need to be even more successful in further implementation of the GBF.



Why Youth?

With the GBF highlighting contributions from youth, faith-based groups, Indigenous peoples and local communities, it is imperative to explore where and how youth are participating in or leading restoration efforts.

The Pact of the Future, adopted at the UN's 2024 Summit of the Future, reaffirmed the ambition to tackle major world challenges, including climate change, sustainable development, peace and security, and global governance. The Pact includes a Global Digital Compact and a Declaration on Future Generations, which is the first of its kind, committing to take future generations into account during policy discussions and decision-making. It outlines guiding principles, commitments and actions, noting the fundamentals of "a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment where humanity lives in harmony with nature, must be created and maintained by urgently addressing the causes and adverse impacts of climate change and scaling up collective action to promote environmental protection."⁶

Youth have the right to be full participants on all levels of decision-making, from global to the local. And future generations must be taken into account. In some places, this is already happening: in 2015, the Welsh government created a Commissioner for Future Generations and implemented the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, which aims to secure the interests and well-being of present and future generations.⁷ In August 2023, the UN's Committee on the Rights of the Child declared that nations have a legal duty to protect children from environmental degradation and outlined childrens' right to hold governments accountable.⁸ Youth are pushing for systemic change while adapting to the ecosystemic changes happening now in their homes. As youth groups turn to lawsuits to champion their right to a healthy environment and get governments to take their cause more seriously, such as the historic case in Montana (USA),⁹ older generations must support them.

Individuals 30 years and younger who have used the guidebook ("Values, Culture and Spirituality: Ecosystems Restoration Conversation Guide") to initiate local conversations and restoration projects were surveyed about their experiences. The following content highlights the findings, current restoration initiatives, and policy recommendations in an effort to expand youth-led projects and further empower them as agents for local restoration efforts.



Youth-Led Restoration Projects & Survey Findings

The UN defines “youth” as individuals between the ages of 15 and 24¹⁰ for statistical purposes. However, this definition can vary depending on country, region and culture. For example, the African Union Charter refers to individuals between the ages of 15 and 35. For the purposes of this report, youth are individuals 30 and younger. Respondents were asked to host a group consultation or conduct several one-to-one interviews with local and diverse stakeholders about ecosystem restoration within their community. Consultations were held throughout the world, with many taking place in the Latin America and Caribbean region: Venezuela (22%), Brazil (22%), Guatemala (11%), Panama (11%), India (6%), Tanzania (6%), Argentina (6%), Ecuador (6%), Honduras (6%), Mexico (6%).

Within these youth-led consultation groups, most participants fell into the category of 25 to 44 years of age (83.3%). The next biggest demographic was 15 to 24 (55.6%), followed by 45 to 64 (33.3%), and 65+ (11.1%). Spirituality and religious identity reported showed that many groups had Christian (72%) and Indigenous participants (27.8%). Agnostic and interreligious participants were also represented (22.2% and 16.7% respectively). Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic, and Jewish faiths were less well represented in the conversations (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam at 11.1% each; and Judaism at 5.6%).

In addition to demographic questions, groups were asked to discuss a range of questions, including their definition of ecosystem restoration, what kinds of ecosystems they were trying to restore, what factors they perceived as leading to ecosystem degradation, and what types of support would be helpful for the success of their project.

What is Ecosystem Restoration?

Ecosystem restoration is defined by the United Nations Environment

Programme (UNEP) as, “the process of halting and reversing degradation, resulting in improved ecosystem services and recovered biodiversity.”¹¹ For UNEP, ecosystem restoration “encompasses a wide continuum of practices, depending on local conditions and societal choice.” To appreciate diverging understandings across localities and cultures, respondents described what ecosystem restoration means to them within their contexts:

- “Ecosystem restoration to our group means regenerating degraded lands using biodiversity, indigenous farming practices, and spiritual connection. We aim to improve soil health, conserve water, and increase climate resilience. Our project strives to enhance food security, empower local communities through eco-friendly livelihoods, and strengthen ties between people and nature.” (Sandeep)
- “The connection with nature and all the beings that inhabit it” (Bruno)
- “For us the restoration of ecosystems is nothing more than giving life back to beings that have no voice, the damage we do and restoring it but improving it. A good habitat for animals that have lost it, a more breathable environment.” (Laurys)

Survey Findings—What work is being done?

The following three graphs plot restoration initiatives underway, the community's understanding of what has caused the degradation, and the kinds of support or interventions needed to restore the ecosystems and strengthen the communities.

Figure 1. Which ecosystems are being restored?

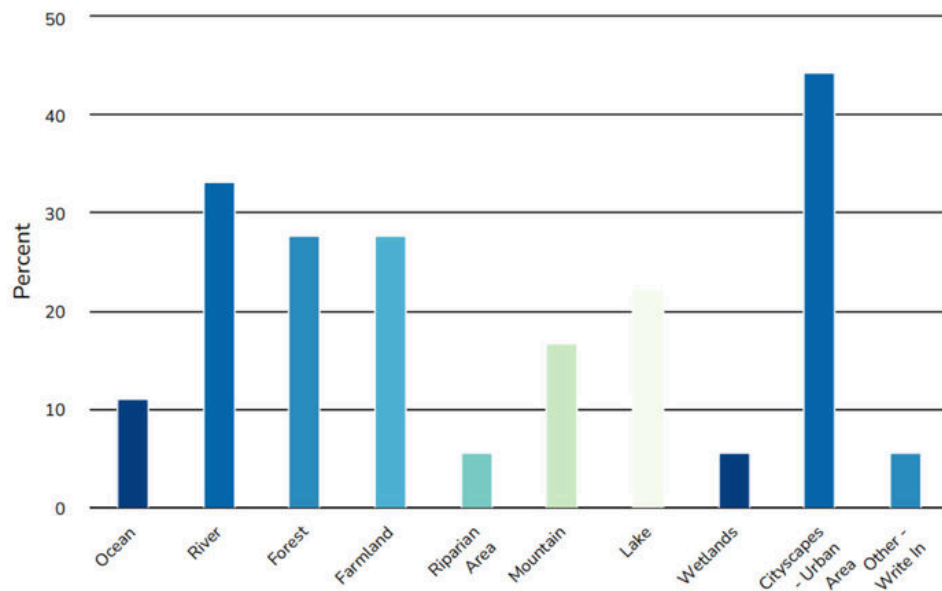
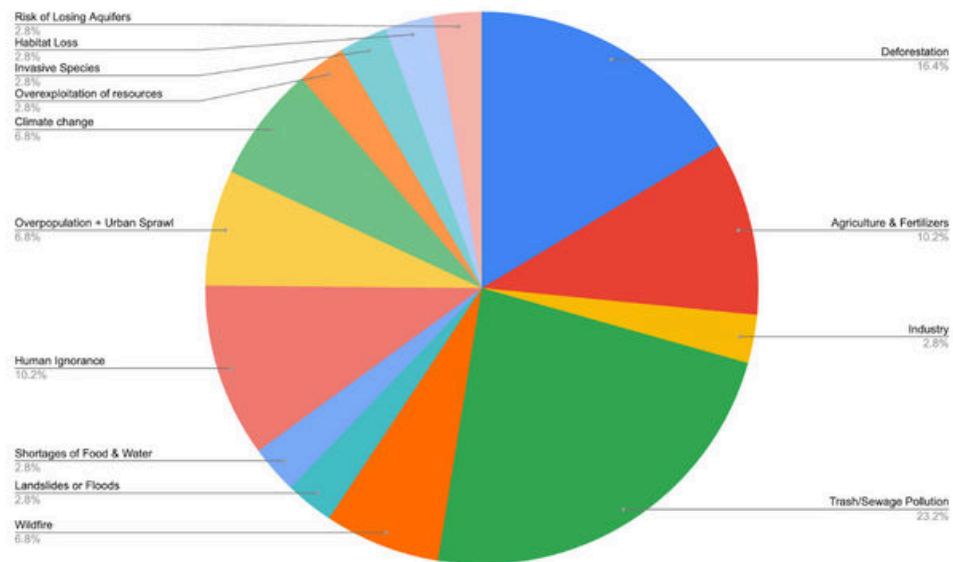
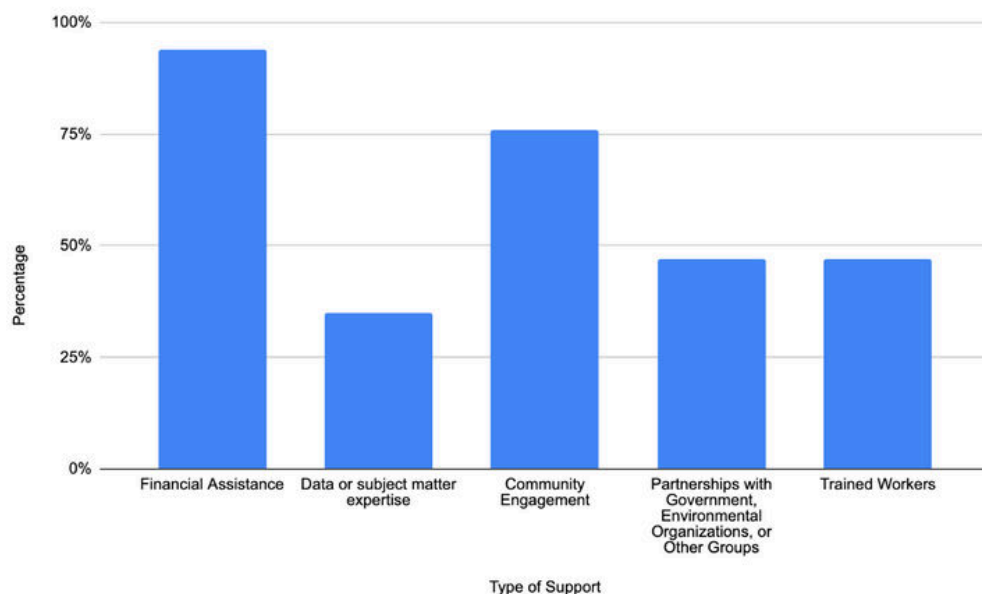


Figure 2. What Perceived Factors Led to Ecosystem Degradation?



Survey Findings—What support is needed?

Figure 3. What type of support is needed for your work?



Recommendations for Improved Outcomes:

The survey data reinforce that young people, full of ambition and passion, are working diligently to make changes in their communities. Three interventions are essential to increase local participation and achievement of GBF targets:

1

STRENGTHENING A VCS-CENTERED APPROACH

2

EXPANDING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

3

MEETING THE FINANCIAL GAP

10 Guiding Principles on Values, Culture and Spirituality

1. Creating a Flourishing World
2. Uplift Stories, Narrative, and History
3. Practice Humility
4. Find Ways to Be Inclusive
5. Restore Relationship
6. Honor Grief and Pain
7. Acknowledge Sacredness and Worldview
8. Integrate Rituals & Traditions
9. Develop Inner Restoration
10. Encourage Celebration and Gratitude

From “Roots for Change: Using Values, Culture and Spirituality to Restore Ecosystems” (2024)

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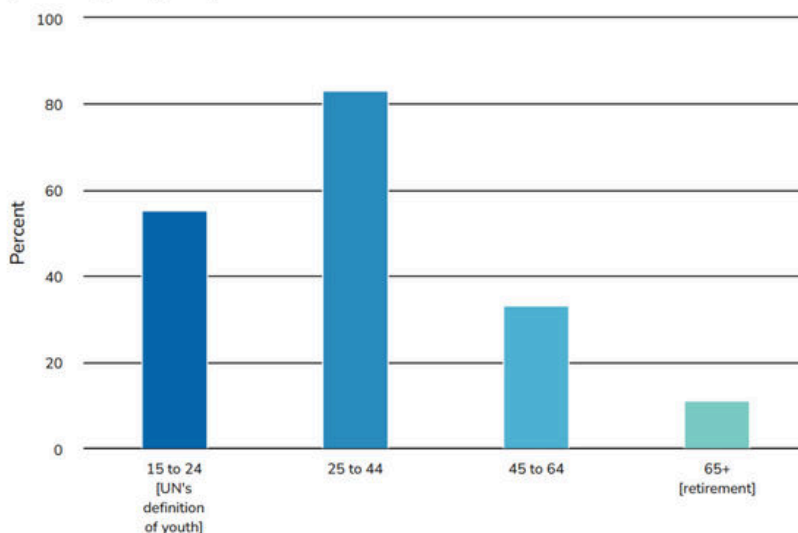
Strengthening a VCS-Centered Approach

Encourage Intergenerational Work

Although engaging other youth was an important theme in the survey responses, there was strong acknowledgement that older generations must be involved too. A guiding principle in a VCS-centered approach is to “uplift stories, narrative and history.” When asked who should be involved in future discussions one participant said, “Elders...have been in our community the longest and know what is best for it.” In one interview between a young leader and community elder, the elder focused the conversation by asking “What values do we most want to pass on to future generations?” and “What ancestral traditions and customs related to nature can we recover and revitalize in our community?”

Generally speaking, when people care for the environment early in their lives, they tend to continue environmentally positive behaviors in adulthood.¹² Young changemakers can also bring a sense of urgency and optimism. When this energy is combined with the cultural connections and historic experiences of older generations, the community is able to learn from itself in ways that honor both innovation and the wisdom of time. Intergenerational collaboration and mentorship programs are needed to bring culturally comprehensive and scientifically responsive GBF applications to communities.

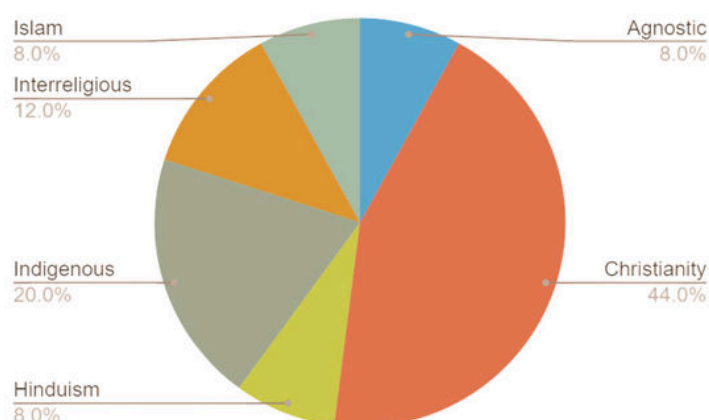
Figure 4. Ages of participants in the conversation



A Shift in Lifestyles to Live in Harmony with Nature

When asked what they perceive to be the main factors causing ecosystem degradation where they live, the majority of participants answered trash and sewage, deforestation or other human-caused events. (See Figure 2.) Extractive practices woven into the global economy have intensified our disconnection with nature. “Restore Relationships” is another guiding principle in a VCS approach. When we share a felt connection with one another and the lands, waters and creatures around us, we work to stop the harms of extraction and disposability. Community faith-based groups can play a critical role in the reconnection process through rituals, community celebrations and education that awaken our sacred and reciprocal relationship with nature. Feeling this personal kinship is important for all of us, especially for the youngest members of a community, whose brains and behaviors are actively being shaped through bonds with people and nature.

Figure 5. What faith, spiritual and non-religious specific groups are represented by respondents?



Promote Interfaith Cooperation

“Find ways to be inclusive” means genuinely engaging different perspectives. Genuine engagement deepens our collective understanding and reduces divisiveness and violence. Figure 5 identifies the religious traditions, spiritual practices and Indigenous lifeways of the survey participants. In each survey response, two or more of these identities were represented in the restoration effort underway. Interfaith cooperation is important among houses of worship and spiritual centers as well as between faith-based groups and civil society. Advocacy and inclusion will help restoration efforts at all levels, bringing greater awareness to all members of the community in varying states of awareness toward degradation, restoration and what is at stake. The movement to codify the UN-recognized right to a healthy environment¹³ and the rights of nature¹⁴ has grown, and will continue to spread globally, thanks to the cooperation and participation of spiritual leaders who add credibility and fuel our moral imagination.



2

Expanding Community Engagement

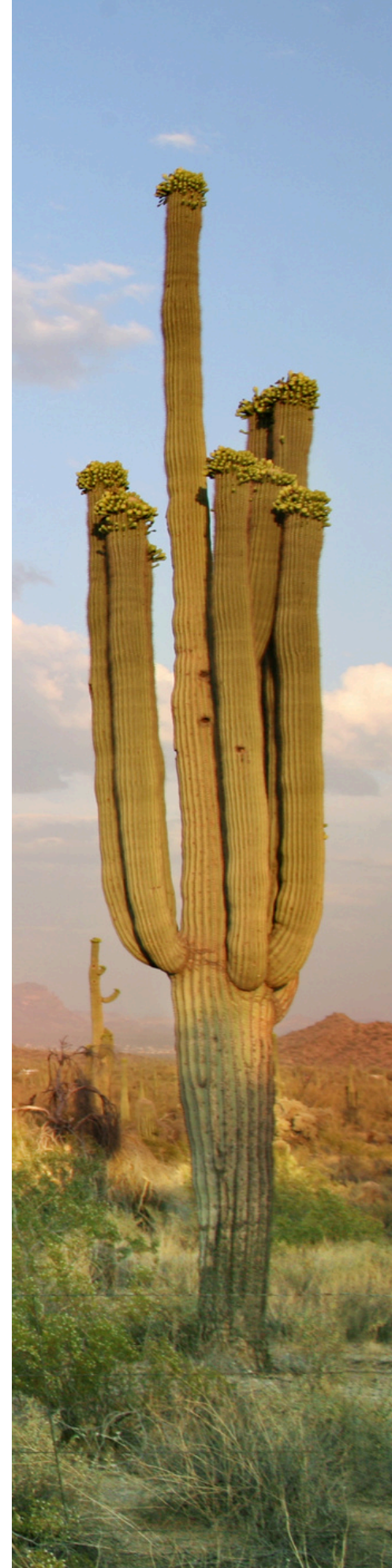
Form Hubs and Bioregions

After financial assistance, the highest rated categories for what would best support local ecosystem restoration projects were community engagement, partnerships and trained workers. (See Figure 3.) Ways to improve this may include establishing partnership hubs among NGOs, governments, academia and communities or bioregional networks. In the U.S., Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Technical Assistance Centers (EJTCTAC) remove barriers to accessibility for grant opportunities. These centers create communication channels, navigate bureaucratic systems and build capacity that communities have historically had trouble building, while still enabling them to lead and pursue their goals. In countries where funding is already available, centers like this are needed. And, in anticipation of resource mobilization decisions expected from COP16, community hubs like this could play an indispensable role in just, accessible GBF fund sharing and distribution.

Through a different lens, establishing or joining bioregional networks can also help community restoration efforts. Bioregions are areas defined by their ecological systems and characteristics as opposed to political boundaries. Bioregional collaboration can target unique ecological characteristics, local economic practices and technology transfer. Some bioregional networks are already at work throughout the globe.

Increase Awareness of Projects

Publicity and awareness are crucial for the success of youth-led ecosystem restoration projects because they amplify the impact of ongoing work and inspire broader community engagement. By raising awareness, these initiatives garner public support, attract funding and influence policy, creating a larger platform for young voices and more ambitious initiatives. Furthermore, better visibility increases public education about the importance of restoring ecosystems and can foster a sense of responsibility within communities. Publicity also connects youth efforts with like-minded groups and organizations to create opportunities for collaborating and scaling up projects.



Recognition of international initiatives, like the 30x30 goal¹⁵, the GBF¹⁶ and UN World Restoration Flagships¹⁷ is an important driver of success as a way to visualize ambition and learn from other projects. None of the survey respondents knew all three aforementioned programs, yet almost all of them were familiar with at least one, and all believed that this sort of global focus was relevant for their group.

Community Education and Engagement

Comprehension of what the community as a whole envisions when pursuing ecosystem restoration sustains its longevity and success. While the survey responses suggest commonality about what ecosystem restoration means among those leading projects, the understanding among community members vary greatly. The VCS guiding principle “Acknowledge sacredness and worldview” encourages every community to consider how it has been shaped by time, what it “knows” and how it learns. When the “worldview” of a community has lost sight of what is most important and dear to them due to disconnection with nature, nature-rich forms of education become needed corrections. If social pressures about money, time and convenience have led to a lack of engagement or a breakdown of trust, genuine listening and repair work are needed.

When invited to reflect on how to mend damaged relationships, one young leader stressed the need to “work on releasing resentments and building a new foundation of trust.” Community consensus results from a shared understanding of what is causing the problem and how to collectively practice solutions. Education and engagement inform one another.

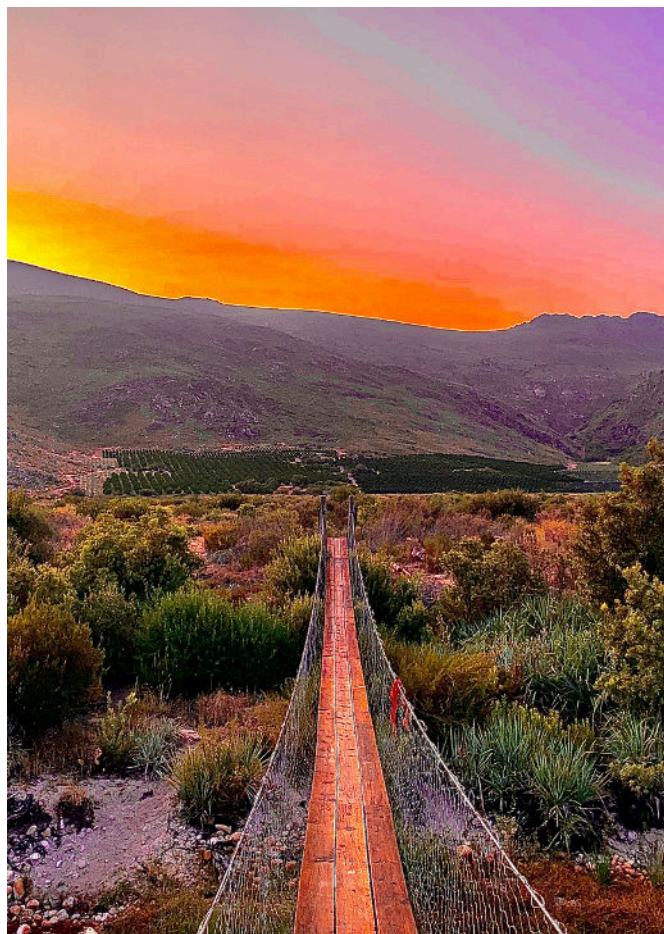


Establish Partnerships With Anchored Institutions

Despite reports of increasing investment into biodiversity efforts,¹⁸ the majority of respondents found lack of financial assistance to be a major challenge in their work. (See Figure 4.) As one respondent put it: “The downside of that is that restoring spaces presents several difficulties. One is the cost. Another challenge is getting people involved.” One way to address these challenges is by establishing school partnerships that fund community projects. Schools, especially universities and research institutions, can access government grants, endowment grants, private-sector donations and other sources. Additionally, educational institutions have strong connections to experts who can provide insight and technical assistance and students who can gain hands-on experience. By collaborating with local communities, schools can build a strong relationship with the community and enhance their networks.

Reassess Types of Finance Delivered

Financial incentives and flows are necessary levers for biodiversity work. They pay for labor, technical assistance, infrastructure and tools. Although biodiversity finance has been scaled up from US\$11.1 billion in 2021 to US\$15.4 billion in 2022,¹⁹ multilateral development banks have mostly dispensed concessional loans, which are granted at a rate less than the commercial rate and can discourage biodiversity work. More grants should be provided, particularly to youth groups, tribal nations and local communities to safeguard and restore nature. Private banks should look at their portfolios and assess whether they are taking on unnecessary financial risks from nature-harming activities. Another impediment to accessing financial incentives is the current funding structure. Money earmarked for restoration and conservation projects should be allocated among different groups, such as local communities, nonprofits and municipalities to ensure that people living in the restoration area are heard.



Environmentally harmful subsidies for the fossil fuel, agricultural, transportation, plastics and other sectors are at a minimum of US\$2.6 trillion annually.²⁰ GBF Target 18 is to “identify by 2025, and eliminate, phase out or reform incentives, including subsidies, harmful for biodiversity...reducing them by at least US\$500 billion per year by 2030.” Target 19 aims to “substantially and progressively increase the level of financial resources from all sources...to implement national biodiversity strategies and action plans, mobilizing at least US\$200 billion per year by 2030.” When comparing the two, it is evident that the amount of subsidies working against the planet’s well-being needs to be eliminated rapidly to advance biodiversity progress.



Place Youth in Positions of Financial Power

Placing young people in fundraising positions within philanthropies and non-profit organizations can play a pivotal role in bridging the financial gap. Excluding youth from representation in these organizations only amplifies the current imbalance of power of financial flows. Youth networks are powerful, and having a youth chapter or a youth chair within philanthropies or non-profits connects young people to the organizations that are restoring ecosystems or funding youth-led organizations. Organizations and coalitions can get overly familiar in their space and unintentionally exclude partners. Having a position or positions specific for young people can provide direct feedback on what levers need to be pulled, intersections between different sectors or projects, and where they see money needing to be disbursed. That way, they “have the tools, and above all the enthusiasm, to...put into action in the near future,” as one respondent said.

CONCLUSION

Ecosystem restoration is more than a response to environmental degradation; it is an opportunity to repair relationships with nature and with one another. Youth and local communities contribute profound voices to this effort. As evidenced by the analysis of survey responses, young people are working on ambitious projects to restore biodiversity in their communities. However, they cannot do this alone. It requires financial support, community engagement and an integration of values, culture and spirituality.

Facilitating a VCS-centered approach to ecosystem restoration requires an inclusive strategy that addresses both cultural and systemic barriers. By encouraging intergenerational and interfaith cooperation and by fostering a lifestyle shift toward harmony with nature, communities can strengthen their bonds with each other and the environment. Advancing community engagement through bioregional hubs and increasing awareness of restoration efforts is equally important. Lastly, addressing the financial gaps through partnerships, reassessing funding structures and placing youth in leadership roles will further empower communities to implement ecosystem restoration practices. These efforts, developed in collective values and cultural awareness, have the potential for fostering an equitable future.



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URI Cooperation Circles (CCs) pictured in this report: Bohol Goodwill Volunteers, Philippines; Strengthening Women's Economy & Entrepreneurship, Sri Lanka; FACIS, Nigeria, Smiles 4 Millions, India

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CREDITS

This report was created by the United Religions Initiative and the Center for Earth Ethics:

The **Center for Earth Ethics (CEE)** works at the intersection of values, ethics and ecology to confront the climate crisis. CEE works to change the dominant value system from one based on short-term material gain—no matter the pollution, depletion and inequity that result—to one based on the long-term health of the whole community of life. Through education, convening and advocacy, we engage individuals and communities to raise public consciousness as well as shifts in policy and culture.

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The **United Religions Initiative (URI)** is an international, interfaith organization supporting grassroots efforts to grow peace, justice and healing. Diverse groups, called Cooperation Circles (CCs), take up Earth restoration efforts, peace-building, and direct action to create safer, healthier, and more resilient communities. Using its broad network of CCs around the world, URI provides education, shares best practices, and promotes local interfaith action as integral to solving global and systemic problems. There are more than 1,000 CCs doing work in over 100 countries. URI is a non-profit and non-governmental organization with consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

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