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## Merely designating an area as protected not enough, says Princeton study; here is why

It is as important to protect the areas already protected as it is to create new protected areas, say researchers

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Published: Tuesday 06 June 2023



📷 A young langur at Bandhavgarh National Park, Madhya Pradesh, India. Photo for representation only. Source: iStock

Merely designating protected areas without proper implementation and monitoring is not enough for biodiversity conservation, researchers warned in a new report.

In a study published in the journal *Science Advances* June 2, 2023, scientists from the University of Princeton said that by enhancing the protection of existing protected areas, and by expanding the existing park networks across just 1 per cent of the planet's land area, the essential habitats of 1,191 animal species that are especially at risk of extinction can be protected.

Protecting 30 per cent of land and water by 2030 in order to protect biodiversity is one of the most touted and ambitious targets of the [Global Biodiversity Framework](#). Under the Target 3 of this Framework, countries have to ensure that “at least 30 per cent of terrestrial, inland water, and of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functions and services, are effectively conserved and managed”.

But the fact remains that nations have not done a very good job of protecting biodiversity, despite the existence of protected areas so far. Multiple studies published since the 15th Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity in December 2022 point this out.

The Princeton study is the most recent in this assessment and reported that about 70 per cent of the roughly 5,000 species that the researchers analysed either have no apparent representation in protected areas; occur in protected areas that have been

downgraded, downsized or removed from protection; or would be especially vulnerable to extinction from future land-use change.

“Our study pinpoints where new parks can be created, but also where to restore and reinforce existing parks in order to boost wildlife conservation,” said Yiwen Zeng, lead author of the study.

“Designating parks on paper is not enough; they need to be in the right places, with the right management, and they need to last,” said Rebecca Senior, a co-author of the report.

This “parks on paper” issue affects marine reserves too. In March 2023, researchers at the University of British Columbia’s Sea Around Us initiative released a Paper Park Index, which helped them identify 55 marine protected areas (MPA) that are protected on paper only and fail to protect biodiversity.

“Due to the growing number of MPAs and the expansion of unrealistic and idealistic conservation targets, we believe that more transparent information on the actual protection that they provide to marine ecosystems is necessary,” said Veronica Relano, lead author of the [article published in \*Marine Policy\*](#) online March 23, 2023.

“The PPI exposes the disconnect between official protection status on paper and the perception of fishing intensity reported by different local stakeholders for the 184 marine protected areas we assessed,” the authors said.

Of the 184 MPAs in this study that have an International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) management category or a

scientific framework for categorising MPAs, 27 per cent are likely 'paper parks', they say.

Earlier, researchers observed an ongoing decline in insects and spiders in protected areas over the past 30 years. Their study, published in the journal [\*Biological Conservation\*](#), suggested protected areas are just as susceptible to the wider declines in biodiversity occurring across the country. The authors found that though protected areas were richer in species than unprotected areas of the country, both areas suffered similar rates of decline in native insects and spiders over the past 30 years.

The declines found in the study equate to the loss of more than three species per decade for protected areas and less than two species per decade for unprotected areas.

These issues indicate that the world needs to pull up their socks quickly. To support future work on protected areas, on June 12 the CBD secretariat is bringing together experts to develop a global partnership to support the achievement of Target 3.

The global partnership will work with the World Commission on Protected Areas of IUCN, using lessons from Global Partnership on Aichi Target 11 and the Friends of the Programme of Work on Protected Areas partnership.

The group, consisting of 74 experts do not include anyone from India. According to the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, some 5.28 per cent of the country's area is [protected as national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, conservation reserves or community reserves.](#)

However, according to government sources, India has already achieved about 27 per cent of the area under conservation with inclusion of forests. The rest is likely to be met through biodiversity heritage sites and Other Effective Conservation Measures.

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