



**International Year
of Cooperatives**

Cooperatives Build
a Better World



Committee for
the promotion
and advancement
of cooperatives



International
Cooperative
Alliance

Building a Better World Together: Cooperative Contributions to the SDGs

**Conserve and sustainably
use the oceans, seas,
and marine resources**

**Protect, restore, and
promote sustainable use
of terrestrial ecosystems**





BIODIVERSITY AND SUSTAINABILITY: FOUNDATIONS FOR OUR FUTURE

Marine and terrestrial ecosystems form the foundation of life on Earth, essential to regulating the climate, preserving biodiversity, and supporting human well-being. Oceans help stabilize temperatures and absorb carbon, while also sustaining livelihoods and food systems. On land, forests, wetlands, and other ecosystems nurture diverse species and underpin water cycles and local economies. However, these natural systems face mounting threats, from climate change and pollution to deforestation and unsustainable exploitation. The impacts fall heaviest on small-scale producers, Indigenous Peoples, and rural communities whose identities and survival are deeply linked with nature. Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 14 (*Life Below Water*), which aims to conserve and sustainably use the oceans, and Goal 15 (*Life on Land*), focused on protecting forests, halting biodiversity loss, and restoring degraded ecosystems, will require urgent, coordinated efforts to safeguard the environment while fostering equity, resilience, and inclusive growth.

THE COOPERATIVE DIFFERENCE IN THE WORLD OF WORK

Cooperatives offer a proven model for locally led environmental action. As democratic, member-owned enterprises, they organize collective solutions to manage natural resources, adapt to climate impacts, and restore ecosystems. Their participatory structures ensure stewardship is both equitable and rooted in local knowledge.

In marine environments, cooperatives play a critical role in supporting environmental stewardship and sustainable livelihoods through small-scale fisheries (SSF) and similar networks. By improving fishing and post-harvest practices, managing local aquatic resources, and restoring habitats, SSF cooperatives help conserve biodiversity and strengthen community resilience.¹ Women-led cooperatives in Nepal exemplify this by pioneering climate-smart aquaculture and ecological enterprises, boosting income and empowerment while easing pressure on ecosystems.² In Mexico, the Cooperative Society for Fishery Production–United Fishers of San Felipe has combined ecological restoration and local knowledge to rebuild marine ecosystems and sustain livelihoods. By creating artificial reefs to combat illegal fishing and restore habitat loss, they have increased lobster stocks, improved fishery productivity, and contributed to more secure employment.³ Similarly, in Turkey's Gökova Bay, fishery cooperatives lead participatory resource management, including community-led patrols and training local fishers (both men and women) as marine rangers.⁴ Such efforts enhance compliance with conservation rules and reduce harmful practices.

On land, agricultural and forestry cooperatives engage in climate-smart practices and reforestation. In Vietnam, smallholders now use forest inventories and soil maps to manage forests sustainably, securing FSC group certification for over 1,800 hectares.⁵ In Tanzania, over 14,000 hectares are now managed under customary land rights, combining restoration with income generation through tree nurseries and market centers.⁶ In India, Safe Harvest (formed out of a cooperative) has pioneered a new “pesticide-free” product category, linking 100,000 smallholder farms to urban markets. By promoting non-pesticide management (NPM) agriculture, it protects soil and water quality while ensuring food safety and farmer livelihoods. With sales reaching USD 3.5 million in 2019–2020, it demonstrates the market potential of nature-positive farming models.⁷

Across sectors, cooperatives are driving environmental justice and innovation. They empower those often excluded from governance, and realign economic incentives with conservation by equitably sharing benefits and embedding traditional values into resource management. Many also safeguard intangible cultural heritage linked to biodiversity, such as Morocco's argan practices and Korea's Jeju haenyeo women divers.⁸ Community-supported agriculture and fisheries reconnect producers and consumers, while education campaigns shape public behavior in favor of biodiversity. They are harnessing digital tools to improve traceability, promote sustainable consumption, and advocate for nature-positive policies. Cooperatives are not only conserving nature, they are transforming the very systems that put it at risk.

- 1 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), *Environmental Stewardship by Small-Scale Fisheries* (Rome: FAO, 2021), Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/4ee8c378-85bf-425c-afd4-c52a575d280b/content>.
- 2 Ötlehti. (March 18, 2024). *Kalankasvatus edistää naisyrittäjyyttä Nepalissa*. Retrieved from <https://otlehti.fi/2024/03/18/kalankasvatus-edistaa-naisyrittajyytta-nepalissa/>.
- 3 Seijo, J.C., and M. Headley. "Punta Allen, Quintana Roo, Mexico: Community-Based Ecosystem Conservation – The Spiny Lobster Fishery." In *Communities, Conservation and Livelihoods*, edited by A. Charles. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN, and Halifax, Canada: Community Conservation Research Network, 2021. <https://www.communityconservation.net>.
- 4 Ünal, V. "Community-Based Marine Ranger Program in Akyaka, Akçapınar and Sarnıç-Akbük Fishery Cooperatives (Turkey)." In *Small-Scale Fisheries Stewardship*, Halifax: Community Conservation Research Network, 2022. Retrieved from <https://ssf-stewardship.net/project/akyakaakcapinar-and-sarnic-akbuk-fishery-cooperatives/>.
- 5 Food and Forest Development Finland (FFD). "Vietnam: combining of forestry with beekeeping and poultry provides several benefits," August 23, 2024. <https://www.ffd.fi/stories/vietnam-combining-of-forestry-with-beekeeping-and-poultry-provides-several-benefits-23-8-2024/>.
- 6 FFD. "From seedlings to sawdust: how farmers in Tanzania built a thriving timber yard business," March 5, 2025. <https://www.ffd.fi/stories/from-seedlings-to-sawdust-how-farmers-in-southern-tanzania-built-a-thriving-timber-yard-business-5-3-2025>
- 7 United Nations ESCAP. *Promoting Inclusive Business in Asia and the Pacific*. <https://www.unescap.org/projects/promoting-IB-in-AP>
- 8 UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. "Culture of Jeju Haenyeo (women divers)": <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/culture-of-jeju-haenyeo-women-divers-01068>; "Argan, practices and know-how concerning the argan tree": <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/argan-practices-and-know-how-concerning-the-argan-tree-00955>.

COOPERATIVES IN ACTION



Advancing Forest and River Conservation in Colombia

Since 2020, Colombia's National Teachers' House Cooperative, CANAPRO, has developed the Canapro Environmental project, a cooperative commitment to environmental conservation and protection. Its main focus is the conservation initiative of the Bitá River basin in the savannas of the Vichada department in Colombia. This initiative has involved planting more than 1,000 hectares of forest under the name "El Bosque que Camina" (The Walking Forest) and the conservation of 424 plant species, including native forest species such as cogollo and saladillo, wildlife species including bees, 254 fish species, 19 amphibian species, and 38 reptile species.



Morocco's Pioneering Model for a Sustainable Blue Economy

In Morocco's Marchica Lagoon, a cooperative of 74 artisanal fishers has transformed local livelihoods by shifting from traditional fishing to sustainable seaweed farming. Supported by the

Global Environment Facility, the Marchica Traditional Fishing Cooperative launched Africa's first red algae cultivation initiative in 2015, expanding from 1.5 to 11 hectares with annual yields reaching 57 tonnes. The project not only enhances biodiversity by purifying the lagoon's waters but also generates economic opportunities, especially for women and youth engaged throughout the production cycle. With growing demand in food, cosmetics, and pharmaceutical sectors, the cooperative connects local production to national value chains and is partnering with government actors to build new processing infrastructure and scale its impact.



Fijian Forest Cooperatives Linking Conservation with Community Prosperity

In northern Fiji, a group of nine Indigenous landowning clans (mataqali), along with a women's collective and youth group, formed what is now known as the [Drawa Block Forest Communities Cooperative](#) to protect 4,120 hectares of rainforest, including 1,723 hectares eligible for carbon offsets. By forgoing logging rights, the cooperative has focused on sustainable conservation activities such as rainforest honey production and verified carbon credit sales. By mid-2022, over 75,000 carbon credits had been sold, boosting household incomes by nearly 90 percent. To date, more than 132,000 credits have been issued, benefiting 120 Indigenous households. The cooperative has received both regional and international recognition, demonstrating how community stewardship can generate sustainable income while preserving biodiversity.

On the island of [Taveuni](#), [Tavoro Forest Park Co-operative Limited](#) manages the iconic Bouma Falls through a community-owned ecotourism venture. Formally registered in 2014, the cooperative operates with rotating responsibilities for trail maintenance and facility upkeep, ensuring that benefits are shared across village households. With investments from both government and members, the cooperative has upgraded visitor facilities, contributing to conservation and local employment. Its model of linking environmental protection with sustainable tourism earned it the title of Best Cooperative SME of the Year in 2024.



Regenerative Forestry and Nature-Based Solutions in Finland

Metsä Group, a forestry cooperative and member of the Pellervo Coop Center,⁹ is advancing regenerative forestry and land use to enhance both natural capital and economic value. Beyond timber, their forests deliver vital ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and clean water.

With pilot projects at 25 mill sites, Metsä is developing biodiversity-friendly models that integrate alternative land use in built environments and protect endangered species and culturally significant sites. In 2021, they launched a 10-year funding programme to support regionally impactful nature projects beyond commercial forests, focusing on wetland restoration, aquatic bird habitats, and pollinator ecosystems. In 2025, Metsä released a climate transition plan embedding regenerative forestry into their core operations to support climate mitigation and adaptation.

9 Pellervo Cooperative Centre. [Pellervo.fi](https://pellervo.fi/). <https://pellervo.fi/>

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The degradation of marine and terrestrial ecosystems is continuing at an alarming rate, with over 30% of global fish stocks overexploited and 25% of the Earth's land surface degraded due to unsustainable land use.¹⁰ Communities that depend on these ecosystems, often Indigenous Peoples, women, and small-scale producers, are disproportionately affected, lacking secure tenure, reliable access to resources, and inclusion in decision-making. Furthermore, sustainability certification schemes which improve the market access and value, are often costly and complex, and climate-smart seeds or advisory services are often out of reach. As environmental challenges intensify, these vulnerabilities are deepening, underscoring the need for community-led models of resilience and restoration.

Cooperatives offer an inclusive and participatory approach in this context but often face systemic barriers that limit their reach and impact. Many are excluded from national strategies and lack legal recognition or rights, which are essential for managing land and marine ecosystems.¹¹ Access to tailored biodiversity or climate finance remains limited, especially in the Global South. Moreover, structural gender inequalities and the underrepresentation of youth and Indigenous voices in leadership roles hinder the transformative potential of cooperatives. Their contributions to conservation, restoration, and sustainable livelihoods are frequently overlooked in environmental policymaking and monitoring processes.

Despite these challenges, there is growing momentum to embed community-led, rights-based models into global environmental strategies. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration emphasize the need for locally rooted action.¹² This presents a significant opportunity to mainstream the cooperative model into global and national efforts. With targeted investments, enabling policies, and inclusive planning processes, cooperatives can accelerate progress on SDGs 14 and 15, fostering ecological regeneration while advancing social equity and economic empowerment.

10 UNCCD. (2022). *Global Land Outlook 2*. <https://www.unccd.int/resources/global-land-outlook>

11 ILO. (2022). *Cooperatives and the World of Work*. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/cooperatives/lang-en/index.htm>

12 United Nations. *UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030)*. <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>

CALL TO ACTION

Cooperatives are already advancing nature-based solutions, sustainable livelihoods, and inclusive governance, but their potential is constrained by legal, financial, and institutional barriers. The following recommendations outline concrete steps to unlock and scale their contributions to SDGs 14 and 15.



1. Secure tenure rights and legal recognition

Cooperatives should be granted clear legal status and secure access to land, forests, and marine resources to exercise their role as environmental stewards. Governments should develop and implement inclusive legal frameworks that protect cooperative structures and support their long-term engagement in natural resource governance.



2. Integrate cooperatives into environmental strategies

Cooperatives should be fully included in National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs),¹³ National Adaptation Plans, and ecosystem restoration initiatives. This will ensure that community-based models are reflected in national implementation of global strategies.



3. Expand access to green and patient finance

Tailored financial mechanisms should support cooperative-led conservation and restoration, particularly in the Global South. These include dedicated windows in climate adaptation funds, biodiversity finance, blended finance models, and social impact investments for nature-positive enterprises.



4. Promote inclusive leadership and governance

Specific support should be provided to empower women, youth, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalized groups within cooperatives. This includes training, leadership development, and resources to ensure inclusive decision-making and equitable benefit sharing.



5. Invest in capacity building and innovation

Cooperatives need strengthened access to training on sustainable resource management, value chains, digital tools, and ecological monitoring. Investments in cooperative-led research, knowledge platforms, and cross-cooperative learning can help amplify impact and drive innovation.



6. Strengthen cross-sector partnerships

Governments, UN bodies, research institutions, and NGOs should engage cooperatives as core implementation partners. Joint platforms should be established for policy dialogue, technical assistance, and collaborative programming that bridges environmental, economic, and social goals.

The 2025 International Year of Cooperatives highlights the vital role of cooperatives in protecting ecosystems, supporting livelihoods, and strengthening community resilience. To realize their full potential, cooperatives must be included in biodiversity policies, granted legal recognition, and supported through targeted financing and capacity-building. Embedding cooperative models in environmental strategies can help advance a just, inclusive, and nature-positive transformation that leaves no one behind.



13 Convention on Biological Diversity. *National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs)*. NBSAPs are the principal instruments for implementing the Convention at the national level, outlining how countries plan to meet their biodiversity commitments. <https://www.cbd.int/nbsap/>



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Under the theme “Cooperatives Build a Better World,” IYC 2025 raises awareness of how cooperatives drive progress across all 17 SDGs. With over one billion members worldwide, cooperatives are fostering economic inclusion, social equity, and environmental resilience.

Established in 1971, COPAC is a multi-stakeholder partnership supporting people-centered, self-sustaining cooperative enterprises. Its members include the ICA, UNDESA, ILO, FAO, UNRISD, and ITC.

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