

WILDHERITAGE

2023

Wild Heritage Highlights

OUR MISSION:

To protect primary forests, restore degraded forests and safeguard biocultural diversity.

Photo by D. A. DellaSala

INTRODUCTION

About Wild Heritage, a Project of Earth Island Institute

Wild Heritage, a project of the Earth Island Institute, works to secure protections for primary forests in US and international policy. We also support ecological restoration of degraded forests. We focus on primary forests because of the exceptional and irreplaceable benefits they provide, including supporting at least two thirds of Earth's terrestrial species and storing vast amounts of carbon, and as the homelands of Indigenous peoples. We are the only NGO whose mission is centered on primary forest protection globally.

Global Primary Forest Protection

For many years the assumption was that there just wasn't enough funding available to save the world's forests, but several factors are leading to a reassessment of this view. The first is a growing consensus to end destructive subsidies. Over a trillion dollars annually goes to subsidies for mining, drilling for oil and gas, logging, and industrial agriculture, leading to rampant habitat loss, extinctions, and massive CO₂ emissions. However, at the biodiversity summit last December in Montreal, Governments finally agreed to phase out and reallocate \$500 billion of these subsidies by 2030, a big step in the right direction. Another promising approach is to accelerate "debt for nature swaps" i.e. canceling developing country debt in exchange for forest protection. A third pathway is increasing climate change funding for primary forest protection and forest restoration. These are rapid, cost-effective climate solutions yet only a tiny fraction (about 3%) of climate funding currently goes to forests.

Our advocacy at the UN has been focused on this third pathway. Unlocking large-scale climate funding for primary forest protection and forest restoration will require close cooperation between the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) so we and our partners have been working at CBD and UNFCCC meetings to help ensure that the two conventions work synergistically on strategic and funding priorities (please see this [report](#), this [policy brief](#) and this [2020 publication](#)). We are happy to report that this idea is rapidly gaining momentum, [including at the recent climate COP in Dubai](#), where much of the language on synergies we have been promoting for so long was formally adopted. This is an exciting result and a major step forward in our work.

North America and Primary and Old Growth Forest Protection

The US and Canada have important primary forests mainly concentrated in the northern latitudes that have not been degraded by development. Our work in North America is focused on mapping those areas in support of climate-forest protection policies. In the U.S., where our policy efforts are most advanced, we are working towards federal rules that would protect >50 million acres of older forests from logging. In late breaking news, the Biden administration just made the very welcome announcement that it will develop conservation options for older forests by amending all 128 national forest plans in 2024, creating major opportunities for our science and advocacy work in the U.S. In Canada, we identified one of the most endangered rainforests in the world – inland BC rainforests – and determined that the fires this summer in Ontario and Quebec were the result of climate change interacting with heavily logged areas. In both countries, we have documented the incredible richness within older forests - even when they burn - for their full protection.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

GLOBAL PROGRAM

Primary Forests and the Global Environment Facility



As noted last year, Wild Heritage played a key role in working with the Global Environment Facility (GEF) to create a dedicated GEF funding window on primary forests. This funding window, called the Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Program, will distribute **\$300m over four years for primary forest protection projects around the world**. This was a huge breakthrough ([which we celebrated in Montreal at the biodiversity summit](#)) and has provided an immediate and much needed injection of funds to governments and NGOs for primary forest protection.

We have been in discussions with the GEF over the last year on how to build on this great result. What has emerged is a tremendously exciting two-year \$2.2m project involving the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Union for Conservation of Nature, Wild Heritage and Griffith University (Australia) on how to better integrate primary forests into international policy. We are in the final stages of project design and hope to be able to start work early next year. Wild Heritage and Griffith would get a third of the project funding, and even more importantly this project would put us in the middle of key UN forest policy discussions. There was a soft launch of this project in Dubai at the climate summit on December 8 featuring Juliette Biao, the Director of the UNFF, Garo Batmanian, General Director of the Brazilian Forestry Service, and Prof. Brendan Mackey (Griffith Univ.), one of our closest colleagues. This is an especially important project for us as discussions on how to protect the world's forests will take center stage over the next few years, first as the UNFF reviews the UN's forest policy framework in 2024, and then as the climate convention meets at COP 30 in Brazil's Amazon region in 2025.

Coalition Building

[PRIMARY FOREST ALLIANCE](#): Last December we launched the Primary Forest Alliance, a coalition calling for a global moratorium on industrial activity in primary forests. We signed up over 100 members after our launch in Montreal at the biodiversity summit, including the Sierra Club, Patagonia and [COICA](#), which is the largest Indigenous coalition in South America. The PFA has now grown to over 160 members, and we hope to break through 200 soon. This coalition has given us a much more robust team to work with when we advocate at UN meetings.



AMAZONIA FOR LIFE: PROTECT 80 x 25: Wild Heritage continued to serve on the Amazonia for Life Steering



**AMAZONIA
FOR LIFE:
PROTECT
80% BY
2025**
AVERTING THE TIPPING POINT

Committee in partnership with [COICA](#), Stand.earth and others. Nearly 1,000 organizations have signed the Amazonia for Life declaration, which calls for protecting 80% of Amazonia (over 50% is already protected) to avoid reaching catastrophic tipping points where Amazonian forests begin to convert to dry, savanna ecosystems. Our initiative hit two big milestones this year. The first was recognition by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues at its 22nd session

in April in New York City. The second was an [endorsement by the Government of Colombia](#) at the recent Amazon Summit in Brazil in August. The CBD summit in Colombia next year, and the UNFCCC summit in Brazil in 2025 are critical gatherings for advancing this initiative's objective.

World Heritage

Working on World Heritage is strategic and extremely high leverage. There are only about 260 natural (and mixed nature/culture) sites out of hundreds of thousands of protected areas globally, but they are some of the most iconic sites on Earth (e.g. Yellowstone, the Serengeti and Virunga), they represent about 8% of the planet's protected areas (an area the size of India), support a staggering 20% of Earth's terrestrial species, and store huge amounts of carbon. Early next year we will publish a map showing the overlap between World Heritage, carbon, biodiversity and indigenous lands to help highlight the extraordinary potential of World Heritage around the world.

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge



Our work to nominate Okefenokee for World Heritage status reached a critical milestone when the Department of the Interior gave the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service the green light to go ahead with the nomination. As a result, Okefenokee will be the U.S. government's next World Heritage nomination, and the first natural site nominated by the U.S. in many years (recent nominations have all been cultural sites). Support for the nomination has been extremely strong: 10,000 people wrote in support of the nomination during the public comment

period, with no objections. The Department of the Interior wants the nomination document for submission by February 2025 and we are working with Okefenokee Adventures, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service to develop the file.

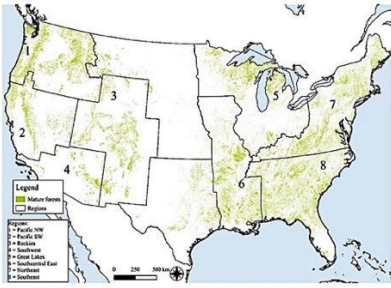
IUCN WCPA Vice Chair for World Heritage



As IUCN WCPA Vice Chair for World Heritage, our Executive Director Cyril Kormos attended the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas Steering Committee in Chunkarchak Gorge and Ala Archa National Park in Kyrgyzstan in June. He also traveled to Riyadh as part of IUCN's delegation to the [45th meeting of the World Heritage Committee](#), and then to Bonn to participate in IUCN's World Heritage Panel, which provides IUCN's official advice to UNESCO on natural World Heritage nominations.

NORTH AMERICA PROGRAM

Protecting Primary & Mature Old-Growth Forests (MOG) in the U.S.



The U.S is fifth in the world in primary forest acreage; however, most of those forests are on the Tongass National Forest in Alaska. The continental U.S. has few remaining primary forests in old growth condition and thus our work focuses on protecting both mature forests to help recover the ecosystem. This is why we led the science charge to get President Biden to issue an executive order in 2022 that initiated a federal process to map and conserve the nation’s mature and old growth forests (MOG) by 2023.

The eight regions on the U.S. map above represent the first ever [published](#) assessment of MOG forests in the continental U.S. Most of these are on federal lands, but only 24% are protected from logging (below 30 x 30 protection targets). The Biden administration just announced (December) that it will amend all 128 national forest plans for conservation options. We will need to redouble our efforts in 2024 to ensure a strong protection outcome as the administration develops the environmental impact assessment to amend forest plans.

PROTECTING THE TONGASS AND PACIFIC NORTHWEST FORESTS



The Tongass rainforest in Alaska contains the largest concentration of primary, old-growth forests in the nation, while also supporting 16% of all roadless areas on just 9% of the national forest system. Based on our [published](#) work, the Tongass stores ~ 20% of forest carbon on the entire national forest system, almost all of which is in old growth and roadless areas. While we hit our target in 2022 for reinstating protections for >9 million acres of roadless areas removed by Trump, the Tongass Land Management Plan will be revised in 2024 and we need

to ensure the region stays protected.



Late successional reserve, Rogue-Siskiyou National Forest

In 1993, President Clinton shifted the Pacific Northwest out of unsustainable logging and into ecosystem management and biodiversity conservation via the landmark Northwest Forest Plan (NWFP), a [global conservation](#) model that we have defended for nearly 3 decades. If those rates of logging had continued, all but remote and wilderness areas would have been logged. However, some 1-million MOG acres can still be logged. The NWFP will likely be revised in 2024. We have been attending NWFP sessions by the agency and will be publishing new NWFP assessments in advance. As a subset of our work in this region, we are

often called upon to help with the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument (OR/CA) that we played a key science role in establishing in 2000. The monument’s management plan is up for renewal in 2024.

ECOLOGICAL RESTORATION AND COMMUNITY FIRE RISK REDUCTION



Biodiverse, carbon rich complex early seral forest.

Fire is to dry forests as rain is to rainforests. While communities are understandably wary of climate-driven wildfires, concerns over wildfire have become a pretext for egregious and deeply polarizing logging projects in dry forests proposed by federal agencies. This issue will be a major factor in the pending revision of the NWFP and the federal MOG assessment as well as the rebuild of fire-damaged communities across the West and in Canada.

In 2023, we [exposed](#) misleading science backing large-scale logging on federal lands and [published](#) an alternative to logging that benefits ecosystems while redirecting fire prevention efforts to home hardening and defensible space. We helped several conservation groups in legal challenges of massive logging projects falsely proposed as fire risk reduction from the Pacific Northwest to Montana. At the request of conservation partners, we launched two pilot ecoregion conservation assessments (ECAs): the Mogollon Highlands (AZ/NM) and Eastern Cascades-Blue Mountains (OR). ECAs uniquely integrate forest protections with climate and wildfire planning which helps conservation groups advance protection proposals bogged down over fire concerns.



Mogollon Highlands, Sedona, AZ

The Mogollon Highlands in Arizona and New Mexico is a treasured scenic wonder. Its magnificent landscapes are rich in plants and wildlife that cross over from other regions, making it a “melting pot” of biodiversity. However, concerns over wildfires spilling over into towns have stalled forest protections. We published an article in the journal [Land](#) outlining an integrated management approach and summarized our findings as the [Mogollon Highlands Conservation Atlas](#). We are also planning a biodiversity summit with our partner the Natural History Institute and expanding ECAs into New Mexico and Colorado.



Umpqua National Forest, OR

For nearly 3 decades, big trees on the six national forests in Eastern Oregon’s Cascades and Blue Mountains were protected by the “Eastside Screens,” an administrative rule. At the end of the Trump administration those protections were lifted to allow logging. We stepped in to help the Eastside Forest Coalition with an important court victory that suspended the rollbacks while the Forest Service prepares an Environmental Impact Statement. This is the perfect time to add an ECA that integrates protections with restoration, community wildfire risk reduction, and climate change.

In anticipation of growing demands on ECAs for conservation groups trying to advance blocked forest protection proposals, we hired Dr. Andréa Kuchy, a wildfire, conservation scientist, and former fire fighter. We are now scheduling ECAs in NW Montana around a first-of-its kind proposed forest climate refuge, on the Santa Fe National Forest (NM), and along the world-class Siskiyou Crest (OR). We also played a key role in a legal win to overturn a

Forest Service logging project in NW Montana that would have destroyed thousands of acres of old growth in the proposed climate refuge. This set the stage for advancing the climate refuge proposal as an ECA in 2024.

PROTECTING PRIMARY FORESTS IN CANADA



In 2021-2022, we identified the inland BC rainforest as one of the world's most [endangered](#) rainforests with globally significant amounts of [carbon stored](#) in these ancient forests.

With the support of the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), we then turned our attention to Ontario and Quebec to help NRDC shift corporate wood purchase out of primary forests. Our project is incredibly timely given last summer's large wildfires sent massive smoke plumes down the eastern seaboard and turned skies orange. Working with our partners at Griffith University, we already have one peer-reviewed publication on the incredibly destructive rates of logging that set the stage for the massive fires. A second article is headed to *Science* magazine about how those fires aided extreme summer heat/dryness (climate change) and industrial logging. This ground-breaking finding will have major implications for why fires burn as hot as they are now. We are seeking support to replicate the approach in primary forests elsewhere in Canada.

TRACKING OUTCOMES

In 2023, our North America program published 8 major science papers; were quoted in dozens of media stories; published 5 op-eds that translate science to communications and policy; briefed dozens of decision makers on forest protection efforts; had our science show up in the federal agency MOG inventory; and played a strategic science role in stopping egregious logging projects.

***Thank you!* Conservation depends on a steady stream of advocacy, informed by science, and supported by financial resources from dedicated donors that allow us to do this incredibly important work. We are deeply grateful for your support!**

Cyril Kormos
Executive Director



Dr. Dominick A. DellaSala
Chief Scientist



Dr. Andréa Kuchy
Conservation Science Coordinator

