



POST
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FROM FIELDS TO FORESTS: SPORTS' ROLE IN BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION



Track race in Massai Kenya ©Thierry Marsilhac

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Sports can raise awareness about how people and nature are intricately linked, and they can increase participation in working towards sustainability and biodiversity conservation that provide local to global benefits. Sports events are opportunities for the sports and conservation communities to work together towards the same objectives.



“SPORTS HAVE THE UNIQUE POWER TO UNITE PEOPLE AND INSPIRE ACTION. BY INTEGRATING BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION INTO SPORTS EVENTS AND FACILITIES, WE CAN CREATE A LASTING LEGACY THAT BENEFITS BOTH NATURE AND FUTURE GENERATIONS OF ATHLETES AND FANS. OUR GOAL IS TO MOTIVATE AND SUPPORT THE SPORTS COMMUNITY IN BECOMING ACTIVE STEWARDS OF THE ENVIRONMENT.”

Meredith McCurdy, Programme Leader Sports for Nature, IUCN.

Nature and the essential services it provides are crucial for sports to thrive: athletes need clean air to breathe and healthy environments to play in; similarly, sports equipments, facilities and fan hospitality depend on natural resources.¹ Environmental quality indeed goes hand-in-hand with sporting excellence. A United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) paper entitled Sports for Nature: Setting a baseline – Handbook² has identified poor air quality, pollution of waterways and oceans, and extreme heat as the top three concerns voiced by sports representatives about nature impacts on sport.

Nature provides a location for many sport activities, and biodiversity is crucial for ecosystems to provide the environmental conditions needed for them. Environmental quality can also affect fans' experience when they attend and watch sports events. A healthy natural environment provides many benefits for sports. Natural landscapes and vegetation are an integral part of the look and feel of sports venues and enhance the spectator experience. Vegetation also provides shade and shelter; reduces glare, dust and erosion; filters noise and airborne pollutants; and reduces urban heat-island effects. Clean rivers, lakes and oceans allow water sports to take place without health risks. Furthermore, sports venues with a good mix of natural habitats are less vulnerable to pest species, and a healthy environment can reduce risks to human and wildlife health, lower management costs, and potentially increase sponsorship revenues.



Cyclist Training
©Darya Skorokhod on Unsplash

1. BRIDGING NATURE AND SPORT

How do sports affect biodiversity?

Sports venues, facilities and events can have a negative impact on biodiversity. They can lead to changes in land use, introduce invasive species, generate pollution and exacerbate the effects of climate change. Large-scale sports events with thousands of athletes, spectators and the media can lead to significant noise and light pollution; increased (while perhaps temporary) pressure on natural resources; and the production of a large amount of solid waste, residues and many other environmental contaminants. This is all truer when the event takes place in natural areas.

However, the greatest impact on biodiversity and ecosystem services is linked to the siting of new sports venues. Whenever a new venue is built, changes can include land-use, alteration of habitats, loss of trees and other vegetation, and increased disturbance to wild animals that affects their breeding and feeding patterns as well as chances of survival. Impacts on natural drainage systems, changes in soil conditions, fragmentation of habitats, and noise or light pollution are perhaps less obvious but can be equally detrimental to biodiversity.

Sports are part of the solution

To limit their impact and leave a positive legacy, the organisers of sports events **must minimise their environmental footprint**.³ They can also engage conservation NGOs to raise awareness among spectators and athletes about environmental and biodiversity protection, especially through meetings with spectators or even by organising entertaining activities on biodiversity or biodiversity alongside sport events.

Governments, the private sector and NGOs are all working toward sustainable development and conservation. This is increasingly the case of sports organisations, whose conservation interventions can benefit from public-private partnerships, support from sponsors, and good media coverage.

Importantly, **through its fans, sports have a huge potential to produce change**. The 2019 Sports Around the World Report by Global Web Index⁴ surveyed 575,000 internet users and found that 83 per cent of people aged 16-64 watch at least one sport on TV⁵. Footage of the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games reached over three billion people⁶.

Sports events can help raise awareness about how people and nature are intricately linked, and they can increase participation in working towards sustainability and biodiversity conservation that provide local to global benefits. In addition, a commitment to leaving a positive biodiversity legacy in the area affected by a new sports venue can be attractive to local communities wanting improvement in the quality of their natural environment.

For sports to be able to inspire action, take on ambitious goals and become true champions of nature, they need support from and connections to the nature conservation community, which can come in to address knowledge gaps. As stated by UNEP, many sports representatives 'were unclear on what role their

organisations might play in protecting [nature] and what tools were available to them' and 'while interest is high, practical knowledge among sports managers is low, and much remains unknown about biodiversity loss and pollution'⁷.

2. OPPORTUNITIES FOR GLOBAL IMPACT

By taking action for nature, the sports community can significantly contribute to achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and its 2030 Agenda, which recognises sports as 'an important enabler of sustainable development'⁸.

It can also support The Biodiversity Plan⁹ to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030. By committing to help safeguard nature, sports can make a difference by inspiring the broader community to act.

Sports events and their associated facilities can engage in a variety of activities and initiatives to promote and support biodiversity conservation:

- + Enhance natural habitats in urban environments by:
 - restoring degraded sites
 - connecting fragmented habitats
 - building 'green' rooftops and living walls
 - installing man-made habitats for wildlife
 - increasing the diversity of plant species
 - incorporating vegetation that provides habitat and benefits to local fauna and flora
- + Increase protected areas through on- or off-site protection of natural features
- + Generate funds and increase awareness for protected area management by staging low-impact sports events, such as running or mountain biking
- + Raise public awareness:
 - by adopting biodiversity elements as mascots or as part of an event's logo-
 - by creating public exhibits and educational programmes
 - through sports commentators and high-pro file athletes
- + Increase available knowledge and data by sharing biodiversity inventories and baseline information that may be required as part of venue development, and generate biodiversity benefits through projects designed to offset the carbon footprint of a venue or event
- + Use sports facilities, such as stadiums, as places conducive to protecting biodiversity (for example, by introducing nest boxes, late mowing, and educational gardens)

As resource shortages cause worldwide changes in land use and movements of peoples, climate change is expected to exacerbate tensions. Sports can use their global reach to set an example and help reduce these tensions while promoting peace. They can play a significant role in fighting global warming and biodiversity loss.

Amateur sports play a pedagogical and awareness-raising role, especially for young people, thanks to their local rooting. They provide young people with several possibilities: to be direct actors by practising those amateur sports, to share knowledge, and to

1 IUCN (2018). Sport and Biodiversity. Gland, Switzerland: IUCN. viii+24pp. <https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/documents/2018-001-En.pdf>

2 <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/sports-nature-setting-baseline-handbook#:~:text=To%20set%20a%20baseline%20for,games%20for%20a%20greener%20future>

3 See Expertise on #11 – Biodiversity footprint: a key instrument in the transition to a green economy

4 Sports Around the World, insight report 2019

5 UNEP, Sports for Nature: Setting a baseline – Handbook, p. 17.

6 IOC. Olympic Games Tokyo 2020 watched by more than 3 billion people. <https://olympics.com/ioc/news/olympic-games-tokyo-2020-watched-by-more-than-3-billion-people>

7 UNEP, Sports for Nature: Setting a baseline – Handbook, p. 7.

8 UN 2030 Agenda for sustainable development, declaration 37.

9 <https://www.cbd.int/gbf>



Race track field ©Markus Spiske - Unsplash

perhaps be in contact with the biodiversity conservation community.

Several conservation actors are using sports as a vehicle for peace, development and environmental protection:

+ The **Maasai Olympics**¹⁰, supported by the **Big Life Foundation**, are a great example of how to use sports to raise awareness on biodiversity conservation. In partnership with Maasai warriors and with the blessing of Maasai ‘cultural fathers’, an event based on local skills was created to replace the traditional hunting of lions with high-jumping, races and javelin throwing. This event is both a festive moment to bring people together and a time of awareness-raising through biodiversity conservation meetings. Eighty-eight per cent of Maasai warriors stated that participating in the Maasai Olympics has made them abandon lion hunting. As a reward for protecting lions, the NGO has created a compensation fund to help prevent lion hunting and is giving cows and bulls to winners.

+ To promote the reduction of human-wildlife conflicts, the NGO **COGEZOH**¹¹ in Niger created a new game that raises the players’ awareness about giraffes and enables them to experience what giraffes have to live through. The game is loosely based on football, which is widely known and played in the country. Each goal scored gives birth to a baby giraffe. During the game, the playing area is moved by the referees, who explain that the humans living in this newly designated area need land to cultivate and that giraffes can therefore no longer go there because they fear encountering humans, with the result that they can no longer find the food they need. A player who sets foot in that area is systematically either ‘chased away by farmers’ and immobilised for two minutes or ‘killed by poachers’ and leaves the game.

+ To raise awareness in local communities, the NGO **ABOYERD**¹² draws on local know-how and traditions. It organises tournaments of traditional sports dances as a vehicle for environmental education and mobilises as many people as possible for the conservation of pangolins in the villages around the Mbam Djerem Park in Cameroon.

“AS A FORMER INTERNATIONAL RUGBY PLAYER, I AM CONVINCED THAT SPORTS, THROUGH THEIR EXEMPLARY AND EDUCATIONAL ROLE, IS A POWERFUL VECTOR FOR CHANGING MENTALITIES AND BEHAVIOURS. THAT IS WHY I CREATED FAIR PLAY FOR PLANET, THE FIRST INDEPENDENT ECO-RESPONSIBLE LABEL FOR SPORTS ORGANISATIONS, AND FOUNDED PLAY FOR NATURE, A FOUNDATION THAT USES SPORTS AS A TOOL TO RAISE AWARENESS AMONG INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS OF THE NEED TO PROTECT BIODIVERSITY.”

Julien Pierre, President of Play for Nature & Fair Play for Planet.

3. PRACTICAL ACTIONS FOR ENGAGEMENT

The Biodiversity Plan sets out a ‘global vision of a world living in harmony with nature by 2050’¹³. Sports can help achieve each one of its targets¹⁴:

	Biodiversity Plan targets	Pathways for sports organisations to engage in implementation
1	Plan and manage all areas to reduce biodiversity loss	Integrate biodiversity-inclusive planning and management in the development and maintenance of sports facilities, ensuring minimal impact on areas of high biodiversity
2	Restore 30% of all degraded ecosystems	Support and participate in ecosystem restoration projects, particularly in areas around sports facilities and community sports grounds
3	Conserve 30% of land, waters and seas	Collaborate with conservation organisations to protect and manage areas important for biodiversity, and integrate sports facilities into these
4	Halt species extinction, protect genetic diversity, and manage human-wildlife conflicts	Implement measures to protect threatened species in and around sports venues and promote wildlife-friendly practices
5	Ensure sustainable, safe and legal harvesting and trade of wild species	Ensure all wildlife used in sports events (e.g. fishing tournaments) is harvested sustainably and legally, minimising ecological impacts
6	Reduce the introduction of invasive alien species by 50%	Prevent the introduction of invasive species that can occur via international sports events and maintain strict biosecurity protocols
7	Reduce pollution to levels that are not harmful to biodiversity	Adopt practices to minimise pollution from sports events and facilities, such as reducing plastic use and managing waste responsibly
8	Minimise the impacts of climate change on biodiversity	Reduce the carbon footprint of sports organisations through sustainable practices, and support climate resilience initiatives
9	Manage wild species sustainably to benefit people	Promote and participate in sustainable wildlife management practices that benefit local communities and biodiversity
10	Enhance biodiversity and sustainability in productive sectors	Support sustainable sourcing of food and materials used in sports facilities and events by giving priority to biodiversity-friendly practices
11	Restore, maintain and enhance nature’s contributions to people	Enhance natural spaces in and around sports venues to support ecosystem services like air and water regulation
12	Enhance green spaces and urban planning for human well-being and biodiversity	Develop and maintain green spaces within sports complexes to improve urban biodiversity and human well-being
13	Increase sharing of benefits from genetic resources, digital sequence information and traditional knowledge	Ensure fair sharing of benefits from the use of biodiversity-related resources and knowledge in sports
14	Integrate biodiversity in decision-making at every level	Incorporate biodiversity considerations in all strategic planning and operational decisions of sports organisations
15	Businesses assess, disclose and reduce biodiversity-related risks and negative	Regularly assess and disclose the biodiversity impacts of sports operations, and take steps to mitigate negative
16	Enable sustainable consumption choices to reduce waste and overconsumption	Encourage sustainable consumption choices among fans and participants, thereby reducing waste generated by sports events
17	Strengthen biosafety and distribute the benefits of biotechnology	Implement biosafety measures related to the use of biotechnology in sports, ensuring fair distribution of benefits.
18	Reduce harmful incentives, and scale up positive incentives	Support and advocate for policies that eliminate harmful incentives and promote biodiversity-friendly initiatives in sports
19	Mobilise funds from all sources	Contribute to biodiversity finance through sponsorships, partnerships, and by funding biodiversity projects
20	Strengthen capacity-building, technology transfer, and scientific and technical cooperation	Invest in capacity-building and technological solutions to enhance biodiversity conservation within sports organisations
21	Ensure that knowledge is available and accessible	Provide access to biodiversity information and education for sports staff, participants, and fans to guide sustainable actions
22	Ensure participation in decision-making and access to justice and information	Ensure inclusive and equitable participation in biodiversity-related decision-making within sports organisations
23	Ensure gender equality and a gender-responsive approach	Promote gender equality and a gender-responsive approach in all biodiversity actions undertaken by sports organisations



Photograph 1: Person surfing @Sam Wermut - Unsplash

Photograph 2: Section Paloise rugby club (Top 14) awarded Fair Play For Planet @Tondeuses Pattes

4. HOW CAN SPORTS ENGAGE IN BIODIVERSITY ACTIONS?

Sports have great potential to make a difference on biodiversity loss. One way to achieve this is by engaging with conservation leaders working in this field.

Sports for Nature (S4N) is a joint initiative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the International Olympic Committee (IOC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and Dona Bertarelli Philanthropy.¹⁵ S4N aims to deliver transformative action for nature across sports, by 2030 and beyond, by enabling sports to champion nature and contribute to its protection and restoration.

The S4N Framework¹⁶ calls on sports organisations of all types (federations, leagues, clubs and events), sizes and levels (local, national and international) to make measurable contributions to nature, and it asks them to work towards four principles and linked goals that will help them advance in their nature journey. These are:

Protect nature and avoid damage to natural habitats and species

Restore and regenerate nature wherever possible

Understand and reduce risks to nature in supply chains

Educate and inspire positive action for nature across and beyond sport

By joining the Sports for Nature initiative, sports organisations gain access to valuable resources and training, including personalised guidance and support. They can leverage the extensive networks of S4N partners to identify operational efficiencies and enhance brand value, attracting new partnerships and potential funding. Additionally, the initiative provides a platform for organisations to share knowledge, learn from each other, co-create solutions, and be part of a forward-thinking community.

Launched in November 2020, the Fair Play For Planet (FPFP)¹⁷ label is another avenue for engagement. FPFP is a first-of-its-kind eco-responsible label for clubs, venues and sports events, created in collaboration with specialists in sustainable development and environmental protection and with athletes from various disciplines. It was co-constructed with the French Agency for Ecological Transition (ADEME)¹⁸. Sports organisations applying for the label are audited based on a framework of 18 themes and more than 350

criteria covering three main areas:

- + environmental conservation (respect of nature, land management, venue experience and cleaning products)
- + eco-performance (transport, food, purchasing management, energy, water and waste management, digital management, carbon footprint)
- + societal role (governance, accessibility and territorial impact) and the application of quantifiable and measurable indicators.

At the multilateral level, the CBD¹⁹ 'recognises that biological diversity is about more than plants, animals and micro-organisms and their ecosystems – it is about people and our need for food security, medicines, fresh air and water, shelter, and a clean and healthy environment in which to live'.

Parties to the Convention are called upon to develop their National Biodiversity Strategy and Actions Plans (NBSAPs) to make biodiversity a central consideration across all sectors of their economies. Sports organisations can contribute to this endeavour by setting a positive example, making biodiversity central to their operations, and using their extensive reach to communicate the urgency of protecting biodiversity to a wide audience. The upcoming CBD COP16 represents a pivotal opportunity to advance global nature-protection efforts, not only through governmental actions but also by engaging non-state actors.



¹⁵ <https://sportsfornature.org/about-us/>
¹⁶ <https://sportsfornature.org/resource/sports-for-nature-framework/>
¹⁷ <https://fairplayforplanet.org/en>
¹⁸ In French: Agence de l'environnement et de la maîtrise de l'énergie
¹⁹ See What is the convention? (box) on <https://www.cbd.int/convention>

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