

IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025 closes Global conservation community unites in the UAE to issue Call to Action for Nature



Razan Al Mubarak in a group photo with senior officials and Congress attendees

ABU DHABI (ALETHIHAD)

The IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025 concluded in Abu Dhabi, with more than 10,000 participants from 189 countries uniting behind a powerful "Call to Action for Nature". Delegates from governments, civil society, indigenous peoples, business, academia, and faith traditions agreed that the world stands at a critical juncture - with biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, and ecosystem collapse threatening the systems on which all life depends.

The congress underscored that, with just five years left to meet the 2030 targets under the Paris Agreement, Sustainable Development Goals, and Global Biodiversity Framework, immediate, bold action is required. From the UAE, the conservation community drew a line in the sand: accelerating ambition, scaling collective action, and aligning resources to secure a nature-positive, climate-resilient, and just future.

Dr. Amna bint Abdullah Al Dahak, Minister of Climate Change and Environment said: "By hosting the IUCN World Conservation Congress in the UAE, we have worked on bridging global ambition and tangible action for nature and people. We have also ensured all stakeholders including governments, civil society organisations, youth and indigenous peoples had a voice, so that practical solutions place nature and the environment at the centre of global development now and in the future. Today's Call to Action for Nature marks a new chapter in our efforts to restore the natural world. The congress' legacy will be defined by the actions we take together from now on, building a nature-positive future for all."

Dr. Al Dahak added: "The UAE's initiatives underscore our commitment to driving IUCN conversations into tangible outcomes. The Ministry of Climate Change and Environment's launch of the Arabic edition of the

'Global Standard for the Identification of Key Biodiversity Areas' will have a very significant impact in empowering researchers and specialists in Arab nations with the scientific tools needed to protect our region's shared natural heritage. Furthermore, the launch of the 'Building Climate Resilient Programme' by Emirates Nature-WWF with Asia-Pacific partners enhances our role in incubating cross-border solutions to shared challenges. These efforts highlight the UAE's role as a proactive partner in protecting nature and ensuring human prosperity, fostering collaboration and knowledge sharing to build a sustainable future for all."

Razan Al Mubarak, President of IUCN, said: "The congress in the UAE has shown that when governments, civil society, business, and Indigenous Peoples unite, we can chart a new course for humanity and nature. The call to action is not a closing statement - it is a beginning. Environmental stewardship is recognised not as a cost, but as the wisest investment in our collective future."

Dr. Shaikha Salem Al Dhaheri, Secretary-General of the Environment Agency - Abu Dhabi, said: "The success of the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025 stands as a proud moment for the UAE and for all those who believe in the power of collective action for nature. This congress has not only showcased the UAE's long-standing commitment to protecting biodiversity, but also reaffirmed that progress is possible when knowledge, innovation, and collaboration come together. For the UAE, the newly launched NatureX initiative and the official declaration that the Zayed Network of Protected Areas has added seven new protected areas in Abu Dhabi, increasing the percentage of protected areas in the Emirate from 15% to 20% of its total area, are transformational steps to keep us at the forefront of global conservation."

Speaking at the closing, IUCN Director General, Dr. Gretel Aguilar, said: "This con-

gress has been a testament to the power of collaboration, teamwork and commitment. From Abu Dhabi, we send a clear and united message. We are one union determined to turn the tide. Let us leave this congress with renewed hope and determination - to stand for life, to act for nature, and to build a future where people and planet thrive together."

The World Conservation Congress in the UAE calls upon the global community, with the leadership and support of IUCN, to catalyse powerful action in five key directions for the future of the planet and its peoples: reaffirming nature as the foundation of human and planetary well-being; strengthening multilateralism and the power of collective action; ensuring inclusive and equitable participation by the whole of society; advancing science, knowledge, and innovation for action; and scaling up and aligning resources for nature.

The congress adopted 148 motions on a wide range of critical issues to address and strengthen action on nature-based solutions.

It also adopted a new 20-year Strategic Vision, committing "to influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve the integrity and diversity of nature and ensure that any use of natural resources is both equitable and ecologically sustainable", by conserving biodiversity effectively; addressing the interconnectedness between biodiversity, water, food, health, and climate change to ensure nature continues to support all life on the planet; and advancing a more just and equitable society. Solutions lie in combatting biodiversity loss and the impacts of other change processes in a more integrated manner.

The Congress also witnessed the approval of a bold new IUCN Quadrennial Programme for 2026-2029 to continue to lead and influence the global environmental agenda, with actionable outputs and outcomes that will help guide every component of the Union to achieve measurable impact.

MBZ Species Conservation Fund brings grassroots voices, rare species to global conservation stage

ISIDORA CIRIC (ABU DHABI)

As the IUCN World Conservation Congress concluded in Abu Dhabi this week, the Mohamed Bin Zayed Species Conservation Fund used the global gathering to bring under-represented species and their advocates from the margins to the mainstream. With nearly 50 grant recipients on-site and a roster of sessions that tackled some of the most complex challenges in species conservation, its stand became a meeting point for scientists, donors, and community leaders who had travelled from as far as Panama, Nepal, and Guinea to share stories of rare rediscoveries and small victories that add up to something larger. Nicolas Heard, the Fund's Acting Director-General, said the team came with a set of clear priorities: engaging with all segments of the IUCN community and, through its sessions, creating a platform to open conversations about how philanthropy can better meet the realities of conservation on the ground. "As a philanthropic funding organisation, we are committed to maintaining our role as an enabler of species conservation in collaboration with other donors and grant recipients. Our focus is on ensuring that funding effectively reaches the hands of practitioners on the ground," he told Alethihad.



Nicolas Heard

Sharpening the Donor-Recipient Relationship

The Fund led three official sessions at the IUCN congress that sought to encourage donors and practitioners to view each other not as funders and applicants, but as equal partners.

Each probed a different angle of small-grants funding: how to bridge the gap between donor priorities and field needs; how to keep species funding visible amid climate-centric agendas; and how philanthropic models must adapt to new tools, constraints and expectations.

Heard, who moderated all three sessions, described the discussions as refreshingly honest and productive, and pointed out the importance of understanding the realities faced by both grant recipients and donors.

"The opportunity to hear directly from grant applicants and recipients allowed us to gain valuable insights into their concerns, priorities, and needs regarding donor support," he said.

"We made significant progress in exploring various approaches to emerging trends in conservation, such as utilising technology, the emergence of green solutions, innovative funding mechanisms, and promoting relationships between donors and recipients."

In addition to its sessions, the Fund hosted a photo exhibition that celebrated the stories behind its global network of over 3,000 supported projects across 174 countries. The display featured images of species brought back from the edge, from the Mindo harlequin toad to the Spiny Butterfly Ray in the Adriatic - each connected to a grant recipient.

In another highlight of the week, Reverse the Red announced the first-ever winners of its "Accelerator Award", in partnership with the Fund and Synchronicity Earth. Each of the nine selected projects received a \$15,000 grant to fast-track their 12-month species recovery plans, along with strategic, promotional, and network support.



Razan Al Mubarak in a group photo with the MBZF team (Photos courtesy of MBZF)

From the Field to the Floor

Beyond its sessions and exhibitions, the Fund's most visible presence came through the grant recipients it brought into the IUCN spotlight - scientists, researchers, and community organisers working in some of the world's most overlooked ecosystems.



Protecting Species in Central America

For marine scientist Rachel Graham, MBZ Fund support played a key role in advancing work on two critically endangered species - the great hammerhead shark in Belize and theargetooth sawfish in Panama.

"Receiving these grants meant my team and I could undertake the urgent work needed for these critically endangered species," she told Alethihad.

Her team combined fisher surveys with environmental DNA sampling, confirming a remote area in Panama's Darién region as a refuge for sawfish. Indigenous fishers trained through the project have since reported nine captures, all measured, sampled, tagged, and released.

In Belize, the research contributed to the 2020 national net ban, which has since allowed great hammerheads to reappear in local waters.

For scientists like Graham, the IUCN congress serves as "an absolutely key and critical venue" to highlight their stories and inspire hope for other conservationists.

"They not only contextualise discoveries made and successful approaches to conducting the work, but importantly, provide guidance and hope for other species conservation researchers."

Mapping the UAE's Rarest Owl

Closer to home, Sami Ullah Majeed and his team in Fujairah are working to secure the future of one of Arabia's rarest birds - the Omani owl. With new acoustic recorders and camera traps secured through the grant, his team confirmed new distribution sites of a species classified as Critically Endangered in the UAE.

"This grant gave me the means to amplify my efforts, and I can't express how much that means to me," he told Alethihad.

At the congress, he presented the findings during a session titled "Call to Capture - Documenting Owls of Wadi Wurayah", hosted by the UAE Pavilion. Majeed described the opportunity as a "full-circle" moment for a project that had gone from local fieldwork to the international stage.

His advice to other conservationists seeking funding is to focus on the plan and not get intimidated by the process.

"A small, well-executed project - especially one supported by a committed local institution - can create a global ripple effect when backed by the right partners," he said.

The next step for Majeed and his team is to expand monitoring and help develop a national conservation strategy for the species.



Image courtesy of Sami Majeed

Rediscovering the Spiny Butterfly Ray

For Bosnian researcher Emina Karalić, the MBZF grant marked her entry into conservation leadership. Her focus was the Spiny Butterfly Ray, a species that had not been recorded in the Adriatic Sea in over a century.

"Receiving the MBZ grant was a turning point for me," she told Alethihad.

Her project led to the documentation of 16 individuals, including several gravid females, and revealed that the region is an important habitat for the species' reproduction.

Beyond scientific findings, the grant allowed Karalić to engage local fish-

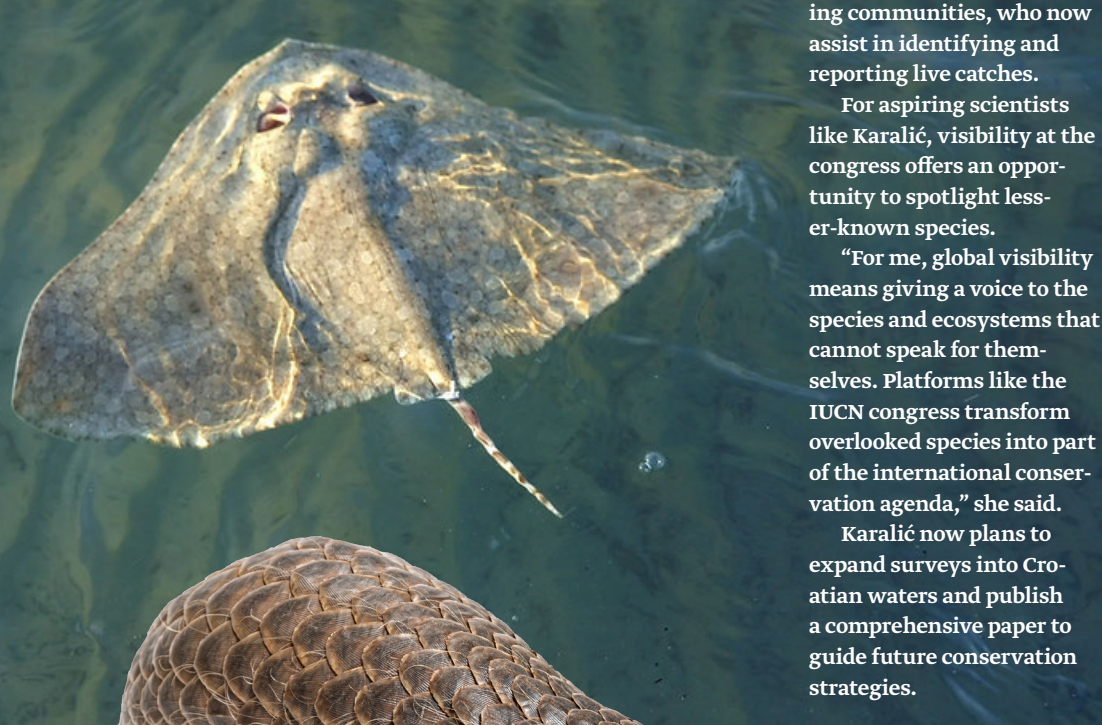


Photo courtesy of Emina Karalić

Pangolin Protection Through Local Action

Among the youngest grantees at the congress, Tulshi Suwali of Nepal used her MBZ grant to protect the endangered Chinese pangolin through community-led conservation.

"It was a moment of deep gratitude and validation to turn plans into actions for me, to receive a grant from the prestigious MBZ Fund," she told Alethihad.

The grant funded fieldwork, community training, and the extension of the "Pangolin Trail" ecotourism initiative, empowering women as "Pangolin Guardians" and involving school children in habitat protection.

"It connected us to a global network, opening multiple opportunities and doors for collaboration, learning, and exposure," she added.

Suwali said the congress experience, and encounters with leaders such as Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, second-term IUCN President, Managing Director of the MBZF, and Special Envoy of the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Nature, and Dr. Sylvia Earle, deepened her belief that small actions can drive major change.

The project's next goals are to expand monitoring across key habitats and empower more youth to take ownership of conservation.

'Our focus is on ensuring that funding effectively reaches the hands of practitioners on the ground'