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# Grasslands, Savannahs, and Rangelands: A Call for Integrated Action Under the Rio Conventions

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**The critical contribution of grasslands, savannahs and rangelands to biodiversity, climate and food security, should be more prominently recognised by parties of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in their efforts to streamline actions across the Rio Conventions.**

#### **Key recommendations:**

- 1. Recognise the need to protect, manage and restore grassland and savannah in discussions on drought, food and water security, to help achieve the UNCCD's Land Degradation Neutrality target.**
- 2. Support the proposed UNCCD Rangelands Flagship Initiative, with links to the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026 and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration.**
- 3. Create a knowledge platform for sustainable grassland management, with a focus on integrated conservation planning to balance social, environmental and economic benefits.**
- 4. Develop case studies on successful restoration strategies for grassland and savannah, including restoration of wildlife populations, to stabilise ecosystems and enhance ecosystem services.**
- 5. Support policy actions and participatory approaches to address root causes of grassland and savannah degradation and to promote the concept of grassland quality as an indicator of management success.**
- 6. Encourage governments to include grassland and savannah management in their National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) and their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs).**
- 7. Mandate the UNCCD, in collaboration with partners in IYRP, to prioritise mobilising public and private investments in grassland and savannah, including innovation in private investment for restoration.**

# Grasslands, Savannahs, and Rangelands: A Call for Integrated Action Under the Rio Conventions

The conservation of grasslands and savannahs deserves prioritisation by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, being central to its mission and many of its key programmes.

The UNCCD began with a focus on desertification and arid lands. In the last 30 years, this remit has expanded, due to a greater understanding of the process of desertification<sup>i,ii</sup> and increasing recognition that land degradation involves much more than just desert formation.

The Convention now presents itself as a “*global voice for land*” with a particular focus on Sustainable Development Goal 15: “**Life on Land**: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”. Its work progresses through a range of flagship initiatives along with the Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) target and the newly-launched Business4Land programme.<sup>iii</sup>

Grassland and savannah ecosystems fit directly into both the original and current aims of the UNCCD. They are the ecosystems most likely to undergo desertification in the expanding area of drylands,<sup>iv</sup> therefore directly addressing the UNCCD’s central objective. They are prone to degradation,<sup>v</sup> thus being a priority for the LDN target.<sup>vi</sup> This link is recognised by the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026 (IYRP).<sup>vii</sup> The biome is intimately bound with food production and food and water security, so that significant progress on LDN will rely on support from the private sector including the food industry,<sup>viii</sup> fitting neatly into the new UNCCD Business4Land initiative. Finally, grassland and savannah get less attention from other conventions than forests, wetlands or oceans, despite their huge significance. This can create perverse incentives; for instance in Brazil the voluntary Amazon Soy Moratorium increased pressure on Cerrado savannah.<sup>ix</sup> A triple and coherent approach of protection, sustainable management and restoration of degraded grasslands and savannahs is urgently required, with the emphasis on conserving what is there, as restoration seldom gets back everything that has been lost.<sup>x</sup> The UNCCD could provide the coordinating body to help achieve this critical objective.

## Action for UNCCD COP-16:

Recognise the need to protect, manage and restore grassland and savannah in discussions on drought, food systems and water security.

Support the proposed UNCCD Rangelands Flagship Initiative, with links to the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026 and the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, to protect, manage and restore grasslands and thus help achieve Land Degradation Neutrality.

## A key need is to build information. Although much has been learned about the benefits from and threats to grassland and savannah there are still significant knowledge gaps, particularly about restoration.

Grasslands and savannahs are classic multifunctional ecosystems, providing a wide range of ecosystem services or nature-based solutions. Healthy grasslands reduce soil erosion, dust storms and desertification,<sup>xi</sup> and protect against flooding.<sup>xii</sup> They protect surface and groundwater sources, aiding water security,<sup>xiii</sup> support food security through livestock production, wild foods and conservation of crop pollinators,<sup>xiv</sup> and maintain recreational,<sup>xv</sup> cultural and aesthetic benefits.<sup>xvi,xvii</sup> They also play a major role in sequestering carbon,<sup>xviii</sup> with around 90% of the carbon<sup>xix</sup> stored below ground in roots and soil organic carbon.<sup>xx</sup> Their huge extent (over half the global terrestrial surface)<sup>xxi</sup> means their carbon stocks are vast;<sup>xxii</sup> recent figures for grasslands suggest they store 25-35% of terrestrial carbon.<sup>xxiii,xxiv</sup> Whilst grasslands store less carbon per area than forests, their underground stocks are considered safer in areas of high fire or future logging risks.<sup>xxv</sup> Biodiverse grasslands and savannahs also appear to have greater resilience to environmental change.<sup>xxvi,xxvii</sup> Furthermore, it is not only the vegetation that is important, animal grazers and browsers, their predators and animals that disturb the soil are critical in maintaining healthy grasslands and their ecosystem services.<sup>xxviii</sup> Even subtle changes are important, the presence of predatory spiders in some grasslands can alter grasshopper eating patterns in ways that affect plant growth, increasing carbon retention by up to 40%.<sup>xxix</sup>

It is difficult or impossible in many places to represent all values in a single site: cattle ranching, tourism and the protection of sacred or cultural values need dedicated spaces. Responsible management takes a landscape approach, using a mosaic (“protect-manage-restore”). Integrated conservation planning is therefore needed,<sup>xxx</sup> including drawing on pastoralists’ traditional knowledge,<sup>xxxi</sup> as highlighted in Target 1 of the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. The Global Environment Facility recognises this: “*LDN will only be achieved through concerted and coordinated efforts to integrate LDN objectives with land-use planning and land management, underpinned by sound understanding of the human-environment system and effective governance mechanisms.*”<sup>xxxii</sup>

Management needs to take into account past disturbances and to address many threats, including changes in fire frequency and intensity from human actions and climate change;<sup>xxxiii</sup> types and intensity of grazing;<sup>xxxiv</sup> introduction of non-native grasses,<sup>xxxv</sup> which can also increase fire risk;<sup>xxxvi</sup> landscape fragmentation,<sup>xxxvii</sup> pesticides and fertilisers;<sup>xxxviii</sup> invasive plant and animal species;<sup>xxxix</sup> and air pollution.<sup>xl</sup> Ranching and pastoralism covers 26% of ice-free land, with an additional 33% of arable land used for livestock fodder.<sup>xli,xlii</sup> Native grasslands are currently being destroyed to grow soy,<sup>xliii</sup> oil palm,<sup>xliv</sup> cotton,<sup>xlv</sup> wood pulp<sup>xlvi</sup> and biofuels.<sup>xlvii</sup> Major afforestation of grasslands is being promoted through REDD+ programmes in an effort to increase carbon sequestration, destroying native grasslands,<sup>xlviii</sup> while the process of planting trees can itself lead to important carbon losses.<sup>xlix</sup> Some pressures are difficult to address, held in place by a mixture of economic, policy and cultural drivers.<sup>l</sup> Climate change is exacerbating many impacts. Understanding and addressing these “wicked” (i.e., intractable) problems is the underlying challenge for reducing degradation and desertification in the biome.

Globally, estimates suggest that as much as 49% of the total grassland,<sup>li,lii</sup> and about half of the natural grassland area, has been degraded to some extent.<sup>liii</sup> The international community has pledged to restore one billion hectares of degraded land by 2030.<sup>liv</sup> Much of this will necessarily be grassland, creating an enormous challenge for ranchers, peasant farmers and pastoralists.

## Action for UNCCD COP-16:

Signatory states to coordinate on knowledge building for sustainable management of grassland and savannah, including through the development of a multistakeholder knowledge platform, with a focus on development and implementation of integrated planning and traditional ecological knowledge to balance a wide range of social, environmental and economic benefits.

Request the UNCCD Secretariat to work with partners to collect and consolidate advice and case studies on successful restoration strategies for grassland and savannah, including restoration of wildlife populations, to stabilise ecosystems, recover native biodiversity and enhance a full range of ecosystem services.

## Progress will not happen easily or in isolation. Collaboration is essential and a new policy-advocacy framework is needed to make sure that time and resources are used efficiently.

Grasslands and savannahs need a stronger voice in global policy. In the absence of a dedicated instrument of their own, we argue that the UNCCD can provide a powerful substitute. But to do so it will also need to be working closely with other partners. And in this regard, grasslands and savannahs are already – implicitly and explicitly – featured in several other international treaties and agreements. Ensuring synergies and coherence between these efforts is important, both to avoid wasting time and resources and to encourage governments that efforts at grassland conservation will help support many other international commitments as well. The table below shows some of the opportunities.

### Convention on Biological Diversity and the Global Biodiversity Framework<sup>iv</sup> - wide convergence of targets

**Target 1:** *Plan and manage all areas to reduce biodiversity loss*

**Target 2:** *Restore 30% of all ecosystems*

**Target 3:** *Conserve 30% of land, waters and sea*

**Target 8:** *Minimise the impacts of climate change on biodiversity and build resilience*

**Target 10:** *Enhance biodiversity and sustainability in agriculture, aquaculture, fisheries, and forestry*

**Target 11:** *Restore, maintain and enhance nature's contributions to people*

### UNFCCC and the Paris Climate Change Agreement

The UNFCCC Paris Agreement's goal is to **limit global warming** to well below 2, **preferably to 1.5 degrees Celsius**

### Convention on Migratory Species

The CMS COP-14 in February 2024 saw a new focus on connectivity for migratory birds and mammals, which implies extensive restoration work in grassland and savannahs (including removal of barriers such as fences).

## Sustainable Development Goals<sup>lvi</sup> – A lot of overlap, but particularly close links to SDG15

**15.3** By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world

**15.1** By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements

## The UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration

There is a general aim of “*Living in harmony with nature*”, which assumes 100% restoration by 2050.

The challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss need to be tackled simultaneously and many actions can contribute to both. One clear way to build on these synergies is to ensure that grasslands and savannahs are recognised in National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans for the CBD, currently under review in many countries, and in the Nationally Determined Contributions for the UNFCCC. Implementing improved management practices in grasslands is a key lever for Food Forward NDCs,<sup>lvii</sup> a guidance tool developed by WWF and partners to help countries strengthen their NDCs.

A key determinant of success or failure will be the extent to which existing users of this biome in its near-natural state, particularly pastoralists and ranchers, support moves towards sustainability and some of the constraints that these imply. This will not be easy because conservationists are often viewed with deep distrust by pastoralists and ranchers, particularly where conservation has been driven antagonistically, through lawsuits, boycotts and confrontation.<sup>lviii</sup> Pastoralists, ranchers, conservationists, Indigenous peoples, and local communities are all generally deeply invested in the land and water that they occupy or use. Building a common understanding is often the first step towards success.<sup>lix</sup>

## Action for UNCCD COP-16:

Support development of a portfolio of top-down policy actions and bottom-up participatory approaches to address the root causes of grassland and savannah degradation, including the many complex drivers of overgrazing, and to promote the concept of overall grassland quality (ecological, social and cultural) as an indicator of management success.

Encourage governments to include grassland and savannah management in their National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans (NBSAPs) for the CBD and their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for the UNFCCC.

**Funding remains a huge problem; governments are reluctant to commit the kinds of funds required for conservation success. New funding mechanisms may be needed for grasslands and savannahs.**

A range of funding mechanisms already exist, including various Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes, biodiversity credits, voluntary product certifications and others. All require a willingness on the part of users of these services to pay up and many remain controversial, hard to measure and susceptible

to economic downturns, changes in company policies and the like. The vast potential of carbon markets has hardly yet been tapped for forests, let alone grasslands where implementation may be even more difficult.

On the other hand, the well-resourced food industry that relies heavily on the ecosystem services provided by grasslands and savannahs could be involved more actively for potential private sector funding. Availability of funds should in theory not be a problem if the relevant stakeholders could be persuaded that halting grassland and savannah losses is in their own interests.

More substantially, there may be a need for multiple new funding mechanisms, perhaps linked to the IYRP 2026. A policy paper from the IYRP recommends increasing rangeland and pastoralist projects under the LDN Fund by 30% by 2026.<sup>lx</sup> However, the recent CBD 16<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties again failed to come to a conclusion on the issue of funding and the likelihood is that any new funding mechanism would suffer the same fate, particularly at a time of rising international tensions when governments are understandably distracted, and would be more likely to divert existing funds rather than garner new sources. On the other hand, repurposing some of the vast sums currently supporting unsustainable approaches to agriculture (“perverse subsidies”) could create large additional resources.<sup>lxi</sup>

### Action for UNCCD COP-16:

The UNCCD secretariat, in collaboration with partners in IYRP, should be mandated to give greater priority to mobilising public and private investments to deliver Land Degradation Neutrality in grassland and savannah, including innovation in private investment in restoration, perhaps linked to agreed management standards.<sup>1</sup>



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