

## LETTER

# Conservation and human rights: The public commitments of international conservation organizations

Nicholas Ford-Learner<sup>1</sup> | Jane Addison<sup>1</sup> | Patrick Smallhorn-West<sup>1,2,3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland, Australia

<sup>2</sup>Wildlife Conservation Society, New York City, New York, USA

<sup>3</sup>WorldFish, Penang, Malaysia

## Correspondence

Nicholas Ford-Learner, James Cook University, 1 James Cook Drive, Townsville, Queensland, 4811, Australia.  
 Email: [nicholas.fordlearner@myjcu.edu.au](mailto:nicholas.fordlearner@myjcu.edu.au)

## Funding information

Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers; Wildlife Conservation Society; College of Science and Engineering, James Cook University

## Abstract

To ensure the protection of both people and nature, conservation practitioners have a responsibility to integrate human rights considerations into their conservation policies and practices. Here, we (i) develop a human rights-based scoring framework for international conservation organization (NGO) policy commitments and (ii) use this to conduct a gap analysis of policy commitments for nine NGOs, which collectively contribute approximately \$1.86 billion USD annually to the global conservation budget. While progress has been made, critical gaps remain in commitments to certain rights and recognizing local groups' rights and knowledge, particularly around social development and decent work, recognition equity, and commitments to implement human rights-based approach principles. Given the influence of these organizations in global public discourse, more comprehensive public commitments to human rights will likely increase compliance with international law, drive organizational change, and help rebuild trust with vulnerable communities.

## KEYWORDS

development, policy commitments, rights-holders, social safeguards

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Actions aimed at conserving and managing natural resources are inextricably linked with the rights and livelihoods of people (Smallhorn-West et al., 2023). While conservation interventions can promote fundamental human rights, they can also negatively impact communities if not carried out with respect to their livelihoods, values, and well-being (Allison et al., 2012; Newing & Perram, 2019; Springer et al., 2011). Some areas of the conservation sector retain a legacy of protectionism, colonialism, and fortress conservation, including rights violations such as physical displacement, arbitrary detention, intimidation, coercion, and violence (e.g., Cross, 2016; Ndoinyo, 2021).

Such conflicts with human rights both undermine conservation efforts and increase vulnerability among impacted communities (Ratner et al., 2014).

A human rights-based approach (HRBA) to conservation seeks to ensure that policies and management do not violate human rights and actively support them (Human Rights in Biodiversity Working Group, n.d). HRBAs encompass both substantive rights, which include well-being aspects like health and education, and procedural rights, focusing on equitable inclusion and participation (Springer et al., 2011). In its current form, an HRBA has only been recently applied to conservation and hence the degree to which organizations align with these principles remains unclear.

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International conservation organizations (hereafter NGOs) have significant influence in shaping national and global political discourse and can therefore act as substantial allies for human rights issues, leveraging their power, resources, and relationships to challenge norms within the conservation sector (Singleton et al., 2017). There is a growing demand for these organizations to incorporate HRBA principles into their programs, shifting rhetoric from “fortress conservation” to consider socioeconomic aspects of natural resource use (Bennett et al., 2017).

While state governments are the primary duty bearers for enabling rights-holders to claim their rights, there is an increasing consensus among conservation NGOs that they share a responsibility as duty bearers to uphold human rights principles (e.g., Conservation Initiative on Human Rights) (Campese, 2009). Key obligations of duty bearers under international law are to respect, protect, and fulfill people’s rights (Campese, 2009). Some large conservation organizations have publicly recognized (e.g., Conservation Initiative on Human Rights [CIHR]) their legal obligations to respect human rights as a minimum standard and ethical obligations to protect and fulfill human rights (Smallhorn-West et al., 2023). However, despite potential progress, a recent review found that many conservation NGOs have not explicitly or extensively committed to supporting basic HRBA principles in their policy (Singleton et al., 2017).

This study evaluated the extent to which publicly available policy commitments of international conservation NGOs support human rights. The assessment involved two parts: (i) developing an HRBA framework by which to score human rights policy commitments and (ii) conducting a gap analysis of the publicly available policy commitments for nine NGOs.

At the outset, we acknowledge the potential gap between public commitments and actions. Nevertheless, we argue that public-facing commitments to human rights, integrated in conservation policies, are a key initial indicator of organizational change. Hence, these policies can provide an impetus for effectively implementing HRBA principles in conservation projects, rebuilding trust with communities, and challenging societal norms.

## 2 | METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 | Part 1: Development of an HRBA framework

The initial step in designing an HRBA framework consisted of compiling key international human rights instruments. We selected the following documents on the basis that they (i) clarify internationally accepted human rights standards, (ii) are pertinent to the human rights obliga-

tions of the conservation sector, and (iii) have a particular focus on the rights of people in positions of vulnerability and marginalization:

- FAO environmental and Social Management Guidelines (2015).
- FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (2015).
- FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forest in the Context of National Food Security (2012).
- FAO Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security (2005).
- The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies (2003).
- UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous peoples (2007).
- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (2018).

While these documents themselves may not be legally binding, they are based on various human rights instruments that are (e.g., International Covenant in Civil and Political Rights, 1966a; International Covenant in Social, Economic and Cultural Rights, 1966b). We selected these human rights instruments as they provide actionable recommendations and best practice guidance specifically applicable to conservation NGOs policies. For example, the FAO documents provide guidance on managing environmental and social aspects of conservation projects through a human rights lens, while the UN declarations recognize the rights of marginalized groups often affected by conservation initiatives. We consider these seven instruments to be sufficient to inform an HRBA framework of principles. While other instruments may also effectively inform our understanding of an HRBA to conservation (e.g., Convention on Biological Diversity and Rio Declaration on Environment and Development), the inclusion of any additional human rights instruments would be redundant given the broad overlap international human rights treaties and policies.

We imported the UN documents into the qualitative data software NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2018) and coded the content of each document to create a set of 18 themes (Table 1). These HRBA principles identified from the initial analysis underwent further clarification and refinement through a comprehensive review of documents and literature exploring the role of conservation organizations in advocating and implementing HRBA principles (see Bennett et al., 2017; Boyd & Keene 2021; Campese et al., 2009; One Ocean Hub, 2022; Singleton et al., 2017;

**TABLE 1** Explanation of HRBA (human rights-based approach) principles and relevance to conservation NGOs (international conservation organizations).

### **Core HRBA commitments**

**Human rights**—Conservation NGOs can have impacts on virtually the entire spectrum of internationally recognized human rights. As such, policy commitments should make explicit use of the words human rights and with respect to international standards (Makagon et al., 2014; Newing & Perram, 2019; United Nations, 2011, 2015).

**Non-discrimination**—Conservation interventions may have disproportionate impacts on people in vulnerable situations, and some rights-holders may have less power to affect decision-making processes than others. Hence, conservation NGOs must have policies on non-discrimination that consider any barriers for marginalized groups or individuals to access decision-making processes (Singleton et al., 2017).

**Indigenous peoples rights**—Indigenous peoples have historically been isolated from conversations regarding the governance and management of natural resources. It is hence essential that Indigenous peoples' rights, values, and culture are recognized and respected in the context of conservation actions in policy commitments. (Reyes-Garcia et al., 2022).

**Gender equality**—The relationship between gender equality and sustainable natural resource use is positive and self-reinforcing (Lawless 2021). Therefore, it is important for policy commitments to address the need for equal opportunities and participation of women and men in decision-making processes and mainstream gender equality (Ogra, 2012).

**Tenure rights**—Conservation interventions have historically been associated with infringing on the legitimate tenure rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities (Cross, 2016; Luoma, 2022). Subsequently, it is vital that conservation NGO policies recognize and respect all legitimate forms of tenure, including customary rights to natural resources, and commit to avoiding the displacement of local communities or modifying their access to resources (Vanclay, 2017).

**Social and economic development**—While development is not always the primary mandate for conservation, it is important to recognize that when local communities lack access to basic standards of living, they are rarely in a position to effectively conserve natural resources (Allison, 2012). Thus, there needs to be a policy indicating that the NGO will address the socioeconomic conditions of communities within the scope of their conservation programs, including issues such as education, health services, financial services, social protection, and public infrastructure.

**Right to decent work**—Poor working conditions, including abusive working hours, human trafficking, child labor, and forced labor negatively impact the capacity of rights-holders to claim their rights and effectively manage natural resources (One Ocean Hub, 2022). Conservation NGOs should commit to not benefiting from or being complicit in the use of forced labor or unfair working conditions as a bottom line. Additionally, they should promote the right to decent work within the scope of their conservation programs (Singleton et al., 2017).

**Equitable distribution**—Conservation interventions are likely to impact stakeholders (including differential rights-holders) in different ways (Springer, 2011). Thus, policies must indicate that the costs and benefits of conservation will be distributed so that outcomes can be considered acceptable to all parties (Bennet et al., 2017).

**Climate justice**—People in vulnerable situations are often more exposed to the risks of climate change due to factors including geography, poverty, and minority status. Thus, it is a practical and ethical prerogative for NGOs to adopt a human rights lens to support effective and equitable solutions to climate change impacts (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2015). It is essential that climate change policies explicitly commit to the meaningful inclusion and participation of people in positions of vulnerability within climate-related decision-making processes.

### **Procedural HRBA commitments**

**Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)**—FPIC is a key safeguard in relation to conservation activities, such as the establishment of protected areas and is a right of Indigenous peoples recognized in UNDRIP (Springer et al., 2011). Policy commitments should emphasize active, meaningful, free, informed, and ongoing consent of rights-holders in the decision-making processes of matters relating to conservation interventions. Policy commitments should also outline the process through which the NGO intends to conduct FPIC (Boyd & Keene, 2021).

**Participation and community engagement**—Active participation in decision-making processes and the inclusion of all diverse groups in governance and management of natural resources is essential (Bennet et al., 2017). NGOs need to indicate clear processes in their policy commitments for identifying and engaging all rights-holders in decision-making and action-taking (Singleton et al., 2017).

**Recognition**—Participation in conservation projects may still not be equitable or address unequal power dynamics without recognition of the rights and values of Indigenous peoples and local communities (Martin et al., 2016; Saif et al., 2022). NGOs should ensure that all knowledge, culture, traditions, and practices of local people are recognized and, where appropriate, incorporated into local governance and decision-making processes (Bennett et al., 2017).

**Access to justice**—Where rights are not respected or have been violated, rights-holders need accessible, fair, and effective processes for communities to voice concerns over potential threats to their rights and, where needed, for these concerns to be acted upon (Boyd & Keene 2021). Conservation NGOs should have grievance and redress policies indicating how the NGO will resolve any issues that may arise from conservation-related activities (United Nations, 2011).

**Transparency**—A key component of a fair and just HRBA to conservation is for project information to be shared with rights-holders transparently (Boyd & Keene, 2021). Conservation NGOs should commit to establishing open communication with rights-holders and ensuring that project information is provided in an accessible understandable, useful, and timely manner (Bennett et al., 2017).

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

**Practical HRBA commitments**

**Human rights impact assessment**—It is important for conservation NGOs to be aware of how their projects may be at risk of impacting human rights, and to what extent (Smallhorn-West et al., 2023). Human rights impact assessments (HRIA) measure the effects that conservation activities have on rights-holders and should be conducted as part of project planning and implementation processes. Information on how organizations will implement its commitment to human rights, including through HRIAs, need to be embedded within policy.

**Capacity building**—A key aspect of an HRBA to conservation is to strengthen the capacity of rights-holders to claim their rights and of duty bearers to fulfill their obligations. Conservation NGOs are instrumental in this process as they can develop strategies to build these capacities. Policy commitments should outline how the organization plans to support rights-holders in claiming their rights and duty bearers in meeting their responsibilities (United Nations, 2015; Smallhorn-West et al., 2023).

**Monitoring and evaluation**—Regular monitoring and evaluation are essential for understand human rights impacts of programs and tracking the effectiveness of measures aimed at mitigating human rights concerns (Smallhorn-West et al., 2023; Tauli, 2022). It is useful for organizations to set out how they will implement monitoring and evaluation of human rights in policy commitments to enhance transparency and accountability.

**Partnerships**—It is becoming increasingly evident that conservation NGOs have a responsibility to advocate for human rights issues in engagements with partners due to the influence they have in shaping national and global political discourse (Singleton et al., 2017). Policy commitments should outline the organizations expectations of other parties linked to their operations (United Nations, 2011).

Smallhorn-West et al., 2023; Springer, 2011; United Nations, 2015).

The next step was to develop categorical scores that could be used to establish how frequently and extensively each HRBA principle was mentioned in the policy documents (Table 2). The scoring system comprised three categories for each HRBA principle: (i) no commitment to the specified HRBA principle, (ii) some commitment to HRBA principle, and (iii) explicit/extensive commitment to HRBA principle.

While we acknowledge the qualitative nature of these categorizations, we refined descriptions of these categories based on previous studies that developed similar categorical scoring frameworks and indicator systems to advance socially equitable conservation policies and programs, including Zafra-Calvo et al. (2017), Bennett et al. (2020), and Singleton et al. (2017). Additionally, The United Nations' *Guide for business: How to develop a human rights policy* (2015) provided guidance on the key components of explicit/extensive commitments to human rights in policy.

We acknowledge that there is no panacea for implementing an HRBA framework to evaluate conservation NGO policies and there are different ways to categorize HRBA concepts. For example, the broad qualities of human rights, often referred to as human rights principles, are both explicitly and implicitly mentioned in the scoring criteria. These include universality and inalienability; indivisibility; interdependence and interrelatedness; equality and non-discrimination; participation and inclusion; and accountability and the rule of law. For some (e.g., non-discrimination), we included them as specific principles, while others were considered more holistic and implicitly covered by others (e.g., universality).

Furthermore, many of these HRBA principles and concepts are overlapping, with some broad principles likely

to include others within them or be cross-cutting. For example, “human rights and dignity” and “Indigenous peoples rights” are cross cutting concepts that also include most, if not all, of the other rights listed. We included “human rights and dignity” as a specific scoring category because conservation NGOs can have impact on virtually the entire spectrum of internationally recognized human rights. As such, policy commitments should make explicit use of human rights language and with respect to international standards. Additionally, Indigenous peoples have been historically left out of conversations regarding governance of their natural resources and should consequently be directly mentioned in policy commitments. Policy commitments may be tailored to the primary aims of each NGO; however, commitments to core rights and equitable processes (see Table 1) are fundamental for transformative change for all organizations.

## 2.2 | Part 2: Gap analysis of policy commitments

In this study, we assessed the human rights commitments of the following nine NGOs as case studies: Blue Ventures (BV), Conservation International (CI), Environmental Defence Fund (EDF), Fauna and Flora International (FFI), Oceana, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Rare, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). While our selection of NGOs was largely opportunistic due to access to contacts through author connections, it nevertheless represents a major component of global conservation organizations collectively contributing approximately \$1.86 billion USD annually to the global conservation budget. This significant group comprises organizations that vary in size, age, funding, and focus

**TABLE 2** HRBA (human rights-based approach) framework for assessing publicly available policies.

| HRBA principles              | Scoring categories  | Reference documents  |
|------------------------------|---|--|
| <b>Core HRBA commitments</b> |   |  |
| Human rights                 | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No commitment to human rights as stipulated by international human rights standards.  | SSF guidelines<br>Tenure guidelines<br>Right to food Guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP<br>FESM<br>The common understanding. |
|                              | <input type="checkbox"/><br>Mention of human rights as stipulated by international human rights standards, but not explicit or extensive.   |  |
|                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Explicit commitment to human rights as stipulated by international human rights standards.   |  |
| Non-discrimination           | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No reference to non-discrimination.   | SSF guidelines<br>Tenure guidelines<br>Right to food guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP<br>FESM<br>The common understanding. |
|                              | <input type="checkbox"/><br>Reference to non-discrimination but not extensive, or no reference to the organization's expectations of personnel, business partners, and other relevant parties.  |  |
|                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Explicit guidance for conservation actors on how to engage in inclusive, non-discriminatory practices for all relevant groups.   |  |
| Indigenous peoples rights    | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No mention of Indigenous peoples rights and values.   | SSF guidelines<br>Tenure guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP<br>FESM  |
|                              | <input type="checkbox"/><br>Some recognition of Indigenous peoples rights and values.   |  |
|                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Extensive recognition of Indigenous peoples rights including discussion of core principles such as the right to self-determination, Free, Prior, and Informed Consent and respect for Indigenous knowledge, culture, and tradition.  |  |
| Gender equality              | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No commitment to promoting gender equality.   | SSF guidelines<br>Tenure guidelines<br>Right to food guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP<br>FESM                              |
|                              | <input type="checkbox"/><br>Mention of gender equality but no clear requirement of the organization.  |  |
|                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Extensive discussion of gender equality including respect of traditional and customary gender norms and explicit organizational requirements.  |  |
| Tenure rights                | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No recognition of tenure rights.  | SSF guidelines<br>Tenure guidelines<br>Right to food guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP<br>FESM                              |
|                              | <input type="checkbox"/><br>Recognition of tenure rights but no stipulations concerning the organization expectations of staff or information on how the NGO will implement its commitment.   |  |
|                              | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Recognition of all legitimate forms of tenure rights and a strong commitment to avoiding displacement and access to resources. Stipulations concerning the organizations expectations of staff and information on how the NGO will respect tenure rights and avoid displacement. |  |

(Continues)



TABLE 2 (Continued)

|                                    |   |  |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| Social and economic development    | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No commitment to addressing socioeconomic conditions of communities.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Some commitment to addressing the socioeconomic conditions of vulnerable and marginalized communities within the scope of their conservation programs.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Extensive commitment to addressing the socioeconomic conditions of communities within the scope of their conservation programs, including information on how the NGO will implement its commitments. | SSF guidelines<br>Right to food guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP         |
| Right to decent work               | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No mention of rights to decent work.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Some commitment to promoting decent work and safe labor conditions.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Explicit commitment to promoting safe and decent work within the scope of their program and not using or benefitting from the use of forced labor, child labor, or engaging in any forms of human trafficking.  | SSF guidelines<br>Right to food guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP<br>FESM |
| Equitable distribution             | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No commitment to equitable distribution of conservation benefits and costs.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Commitment to equitable distribution, but not clear how distribution of benefits are fair and just.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Commitment to equitable distribution of the conservation benefits and costs, including an explanation of how this would be fair for all parties involved.  | SSF guidelines<br>Right to food guidelines<br>UNDROP                   |
| Climate justice                    | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No HRBA to climate change adaptation.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Recognition that climate change has a significant impact on people in positions of vulnerability and marginalization.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Clear HRBA to promoting climate change adaptation and mitigation in local and vulnerable communities.  | SSF guidelines<br>Tenure guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>FESM                  |
| <b>Procedural HRBA commitments</b> |   |  |
| Access to justice                  | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No policy documents or mechanisms that provide access to justice.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Commitment that the NGO will provide access to justice but no explanation of how this will be applied in practice.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Strong commitment to providing access to justice that is accessible to all, including the most vulnerable and details on how grievance/redress mechanism is applied in practice.  | Tenure guidelines<br>Right to food guidelines<br>UNDROP<br>UNDRIP      |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) | <p><input type="checkbox"/> No mention of acquiring FPIC from Indigenous peoples and local communities for conservation activities.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Mention of acquiring FPIC from Indigenous peoples and local communities for conservation activities, but FPIC process is unclear.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to FPIC from Indigenous peoples and local communities that is active, meaningful, and is conducted throughout the duration of the conservation project.</p>  | SSF guidelines, Tenure guidelines, Right to food guidelines UNDRIP The common understanding. |
| Participation and community engagement   | <p><input type="checkbox"/> No commitment to participation and inclusion of rights-holders in decision-making processes.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to participation and inclusion of rights-holders in decision-making processes, but not clear how.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to ensuring participation of all relevant rights-holders in decision-making processing and action-taking and outline of how this will be applied in practice.</p>  | SSF guidelines Tenure guidelines Right to food guidelines UNDRIP The common understanding.   |
| Recognition                              | <p><input type="checkbox"/> No recognition of the rights, values, knowledge, culture, and practices of Indigenous peoples and local communities.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Recognition of the rights, values, knowledge, culture, and practices of Indigenous peoples and local communities, but not clear whether they are incorporated into conservation plans and strategies.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Recognition of the rights, values, knowledge, culture, and practices of Indigenous peoples and local communities and, where appropriate, incorporated into local governance and sustainable development processes.</p> | SSF guidelines Tenure guidelines, Right to food guidelines UNDRIP The common understanding.  |
| Transparency                             | <p><input type="checkbox"/> No commitment to transparency.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to transparency in documents but not explicit or extensive.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Explicit outline of how NGO will be transparent by providing timely access to information in appropriate forms on their procedures and decisions.</p>   | SSF guidelines Tenure guidelines Right to food guidelines UNDRIP                             |
| <b>Practical HRBA commitments</b>        |  |  |
| Human rights impacts assessments         | <p><input type="checkbox"/> No commitment to conducting human rights impacts assessments.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Commitment to social impact assessment, but no reference to human rights frameworks.</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Commitment to conducting human rights impact assessments.</p>  | The common understanding.  |

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

|                           |   |   |
|---------------------------|---|---|
| Capacity building         | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No commitment to capacity building.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Commitment to capacity building but not the capacity of rights-holders to claim their rights and of duty bearers to fulfill their obligations.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Commitment to capacity building of rights-holders to claim their rights and duty bearers to fulfill their obligations.                      | SSF guidelines<br>The common understanding. |
| Monitoring and evaluation | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No commitment to monitoring and evaluation of human rights impacts and mitigation measures.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Commitment to social monitoring and evaluation but no reference to human rights framework.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Commitment to monitoring and evaluation of human rights impacts and mitigation measures.  | SSF guidelines<br>The common understanding. |
| Partnerships              | <input type="checkbox"/><br>No information available on expectations of partners to adhere to human rights standards.<br><input type="checkbox"/><br>Commitments outlining expectation of partners linked to their operations but not in relation to human rights standards.<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/><br>Commitments outlining expectation of partners linked to their operations specific to human rights standards. | The common understanding                    |

Note: Shaded squares represent the extent to which the principle is mentioned in the policy documents. "Policy" in this table is referring to publicly available documents as it is recognized that these NGOs may have internal policy addressing human rights and safeguarding concerns. FESM = FAO environmental and Social Management Guidelines; SSF guidelines = FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication; Right to food guidelines = FAO Voluntary Guidelines to Support the Progressive Realization of the Right to Adequate Food in the Context of National Food Security; Tenure guidelines = FAO Voluntary Guidelines on the Tenure of Land, Fisheries, and Forest in the Context of National Food Security; The common understanding = The Human Rights Based Approach to Development Cooperation Towards a Common Understanding Among UN Agencies; UNDRIP = UN Declaration rights of Indigenous peoples; UNDROP = United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas.

Abbreviation: NGO, international conservation organization.

of conservation (i.e., a focus on terrestrial and/or marine conservation) (Table 3). Following an initial policy search, we conducted one-on-one meetings with all organizations except for TNC. This gave us the opportunity to identify any missed policy commitments in our analysis and to inform these organizations of our findings. Following these meetings, we presented our findings to an NGO community of practice meeting where all organizations were present.

To conduct the gap analysis, we first carried out a comprehensive search of each NGO's website for publicly available human rights and social safeguarding policy commitments. We defined a policy commitment in this study broadly in line with the following standards outlined in the UN guiding principles on business and human rights:

- Is it publicly available and communicated internally and externally to all personnel, business partners and other relevant parties?
- Is it informed by relevant internal and/or external expertise?
- Has it been approved at the most senior level of the business enterprise?

An initial search of the websites found 37 policy commitments across all NGOs. We then met with representatives from each NGO to ensure that we had not missed any relevant documents and to establish which publicly available documents or commitments on their website had been through an extensive review and approval process. Representatives from BV, EDF, and Rare directed us to a further seven documents that we had missed. In total, we assessed



TABLE 3 Basic information of the nine conservation NGOs (international conservation organizations) selected (see Supporting Information Appendix B for fully referenced table.).

| Primary aim   | Year founded | Headquarters location | Total expenditure for 2021 | Member of the CIHR | Number of countries within which NGO works |
|---|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|--|
| <b>Blue Ventures (BV)</b><br>Support coastal fishers in remote and rural communities to rebuild fisheries and restore ocean life through community-led conservation efforts.  | 2003         | Bristol               | 7.2 million USD            | No                 | 14   |
| <b>Conservation International (CI)</b><br>Protect and restore nature for climate, double ocean protection, and promote conservation-based economies through innovations in science, partnerships, and fieldwork.          | 1987         | Arlington Virginia    | 159.4 million USD          | Yes                | 29   |
| <b>Environmental Defense Fund (EDF)</b><br>Create practical solutions and policy changes to meet the challenges that threaten the environment, guided by science, economics, and advocacy.                                | 1967         | New York              | 230.6 million USD          | No                 | Approximately 30                           |
| <b>Fauna and Flora (FFI)</b><br>Protect and restore habitats, save species from extinction, and develop sustainable livelihoods through practical conservation projects and partnership-led conservation.                 | 1903         | Cambridge             | 27.1 million USD           | Yes                | Approximately 40                           |
| <b>Oceana</b><br>Protect and restore the world's oceans on a global scale through policy victories.   | 2001         | Washington, DC        | 39.6 million USD           | No                 | 13   |
| <b>Rare</b><br>Inspire communities and empower local leaders to adopt sustainable behaviors, so people and nature thrive.   | 1973         | Arlington Virginia    | 29.03 million USD          | No                 | 10   |
| <b>The Nature Conservancy (TNC)</b><br>Protect and restore critical lands and waters around the world, guided by science, collaboration, and innovative solutions.  | 1951         | Arlington Virginia    | 902.95 million USD         | Yes                | 79   |
| <b>Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)</b><br>Conserve earth's wildlife and wild places through science, conservation action, education, and inspiring people to value nature.  | 1895         | New York              | 329.9 million USD          | Yes                | Approximately 50                           |
| <b>World Wildlife Fund (WWF)</b><br>Protect and restore biodiversity, promote sustainable use of natural resources, and reduce pollution and waste, through partnerships, science-based initiatives, and global advocacy. | 1961         | Gland, Switzerland    | 354.6 million USD          | Yes                | Approximately 100                          |

44 documents across all nine NGOs (BV = four documents; CI = three documents; EDF = two documents; FFI = nine documents; Oceana = no documents found; Rare = three documents; TNC = three documents; WCS = five documents; and WWF = 15 documents). We did not consider the number of policy documents to be reflective of the strength of commitment. The majority of these documents were standalone pdfs; however, some organizations such as BV and EDF had policy commitments integrated into website text, strategic plans, or codes of conduct. In these instances, text was only included if it very clearly represented policy. The documents for each NGO were then imported into NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2018) and the 18 HRBA principles previously identified became the themes to which the content of each document was then coded.

The final step of the policy analysis was to score the alignment of each NGOs' human rights commitments in their policies based off the categorical scoring framework. Based on the output of the coded content, we categorically scored each NGO according to whether their policy commitments included extensive/explicit, some, or no reference to each of the 18 HRBA principles.

### 3 | RESULTS

Our analysis reveals that most NGOs have made some public commitments to upholding HRBA principles, particularly those that are part of the Conservation Initiative on Human Rights (CIHR) (e.g., CI, FFI, TNC, WCS, and WWF) (Table 4). These organizations had explicit policies supporting human rights based on international standards. Most organizations also had comprehensive policy commitments to respecting tenure rights, including customary land rights, and avoiding displacement. However, there were gaps in commitments related to certain substantive rights, such as the right to social and economic development and decent work. WWF and BV stand out as the only organizations extensively committing to address the socioeconomic conditions of impacted communities. Similarly, CI was the only organization to explicitly reference access to decent work. Other NGOs prohibit any violations to labor rights in their policies but do not explicitly promote safe and decent work. For example, EDF's commitment to upholding the right to decent work with the communities with which they work was integrated in their code of conduct:

EDF and its employees will uphold human rights for workers, as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including, not using, or benefiting from the use of forced

labor or bonded, indentured servants, or involuntary prison labor, and not engaging in or benefiting from any form of human trafficking. (Environmental Defense Fund, 2022)

CI and WCS outlined strong commitments to an HRBA to climate justice including clear processes for climate change adaptation and mitigation in local and vulnerable communities. For example, CI addressed climate change risk in their Environmental and Social Management Framework:

CI acknowledges the threat that climate change impacts and risks pose to sustainable development and conservation and has integrated considerations for such potential adverse risks and impacts throughout the standards of the ESMF'... 'Project Teams should analyse physical, social, economic and environmental factors or processes which increase the susceptibility and vulnerability of relevant communities to potential climate change impacts and hazards—with a particular focus on marginalized and disadvantaged groups and individuals. (Conservation International, 2022, pp.94–95)

Most NGOs recognized procedural HRBA principles and the inclusion of Indigenous peoples and local communities in decision-making processes in their policy commitments as fundamental to achieving conservation goals. For example, CI had a policy on Free, Prior and Informed Consent and WWF and FFI had standards on stakeholder engagement. While most of the NGOs had FPIC policies, it was not always clear how non-discrimination would be addressed in participatory processes. For example, it was not evident in policy commitments how participation would promote the rights and voices of all vulnerable groups within communities, including those who may be excluded from decision-making (e.g., Kleiber et al., 2019).

Most organizations committed to being transparent in their engagement with Indigenous peoples and local communities and to provide access to justice. In addition, CI, FFI, Rare, TNC, WCS, and WWF all had grievance redress policies available that provide a mechanism for affected individuals or communities to raise grievances about the impacts of conservation activities. According to the criteria in this study, explicit commitments needed to provide clear processes for how these grievance and redress mechanisms would be made accessible to all marginalized and remote communities, such as communities without access to mail or email or without the necessary literacy skills (i.e., Wildlife Conservation Society, 2020).

**TABLE 4** Assessment of human rights commitments of nine international conservation organizations based on publicly available policy commitments.

|                                    | <i>BV</i> | <i>CI</i> | <i>EDF</i> | <i>FFI</i> | <i>Oceana</i> | <i>Rare</i> | <i>TNC</i> | <i>WCS</i> | <i>WWF</i> |
|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|------------|---------------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Core HRBA commitments</b>       |           |           |            |            |               |             |            |            |            |
| Human rights                       | ■         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Non-discrimination                 | □         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Indigenous peoples rights          | ■         | ■         | □          | ■          | □             | ■           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Gender equality                    | ■         | ■         | □          | ■          | □             | ■           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Tenure rights                      | ■         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | ■           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Social & economic development      | ■         | ■         | ■          | □          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Right to decent work               | □         | ■         | ■          | □          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Equitable distribution             | ■         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | □           | ■          | □          | ■          |
| Climate justice                    | □         | ■         | □          | □          | □             | ■           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| <b>Procedural HRBA commitments</b> |           |           |            |            |               |             |            |            |            |
| Free, prior and Informed Consent   | ■         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | ■           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Participation                      | ■         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | ■           | ■          | □          | ■          |
| Recognition                        | □         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | ■           | ■          | □          | ■          |
| Access to justice                  | ■         | ■         | □          | ■          | □             | ■           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Transparency                       | □         | ■         | ■          | ■          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| <b>Practical HRBA commitments</b>  |           |           |            |            |               |             |            |            |            |
| Human rights impacts assessment    | □         | ■         | □          | ■          | □             | □           | ■          | □          | ■          |
| Capacity building                  | □         | ■         | □          | ■          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Monitoring and evaluation          | □         | ■         | □          | ■          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |
| Partnerships                       | □         | ■         | ■          | □          | □             | □           | ■          | ■          | ■          |

*Note:* Column on the left represents dominant HRBA principles identified from seven UN documents. Shaded squares represent the extent to which each human rights theme is mentioned in the policy documents. White-shaded square = no commitment to HRBA principle, gray-shaded square = some commitment, black-shaded square = explicit/extensive commitment (see Supporting Information Appendix A for fully referenced table).

Abbreviations: BV, Blue Ventures; CI, Conservation International; EDF, Environmental Defense Fund; FFI, Fauna and Flora; HRBA, human rights-based approach; TNC, The Nature Conservancy; WCS, Wildlife Conservation Society; WWF, World Wildlife Fund.

While there was generally a clear emphasis on upholding Indigenous peoples’ rights and gender equality (e.g., standalone policies for WWF), commitments to Indigenous peoples’ rights did not always include equitable recognition of their values, local knowledge, or livelihoods. This was despite a strong focus on participation, community engagement, and equitable sharing of benefits and costs. It was also not clear in some organizations’ policies how cultural rights and norms could be recognized and incorporated into conservation practices.

Lastly, information on how the NGOs will implement their commitments was generally absent or not explicitly human rights related. For example, commitments to conducting rights assessments, providing capacity for rights claims, and monitoring rights impacts were generally lack-

ing. While commitments to assessing and monitoring social impacts were often made, they were not always in reference to human rights. Similarly, expectations of partners to respect human rights under their responsibility, as laid out in the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, were also minimal.

#### 4 | DISCUSSION

This analysis indicates that there are significant gaps in some conservation NGO human rights policy commitments, particularly concerning substantive rights like social and economic development and decent work, as well as recognizing the conservation values, knowledge, and

livelihoods of Indigenous peoples and local communities. There were also gaps in how policy commitments would be operationalized on the ground, such as through human rights-based assessments, monitoring of rights impacts, developing capacity for rights-holders to actualize their rights, and human rights due diligence of partners. The extent of commitment to HRBA principles may depend on a range of factors including the size and age of the NGO, the support of communities of practice and funding bodies, or instances of past human rights transgressions may be driving human rights policy development.

## 4.1 | Policy gaps

### 4.1.1 | Social and economic development

The clearest gaps in conservation NGO human rights policy commitments pertain to substantive rights such as the right to social and economic development, including access to basic primary education, health services, and social protection. While we acknowledge that the mandate of most conservation organizations is not development, there are many instances where vulnerable communities face multiple dimensions of challenge beyond specific conservation issues, including crime, disease, and insecure resource access. (Smallhorn-West et al., 2023). In such cases, securing rights and addressing root causes of vulnerabilities may well be the best conservation investments, since once rights are secured people are then able to exercise and benefit from those rights, such as through implementing co-management programs (Allison et al., 2012).

### 4.1.2 | Decent work

International human rights legislation situates the right to decent work as a core human right (FAO, 2012, 2015; ILO, 1998). The results in the present study indicate a clear gap in explicit policy commitments for supporting the right to decent work of Indigenous peoples and local communities. The capacity for conservation organizations to promote decent working conditions for local communities, within the scope of their conservation programs, is becoming increasingly recognized (Lozano et al., 2022). NGOs have a responsibility to support strategies that prevent severe violations of labor rights (e.g., abusive working hours, human trafficking, child labor, and forced labor) (One Ocean Hub, 2022). While practical guidance on how to address decent work in conservation contexts is lacking (Teh et al., 2019), NGOs may be able to operationalize approaches to decent work more effectively, by first clarifying their commitments in policy. It is also important

that local communities have a voice in establishing mechanisms for protecting their right to decent work (Lout et al., 2022)

### 4.1.3 | Recognition

Most of the NGO policies assessed here lacked recognition of Indigenous peoples and local communities' goals and the integration of their traditions, institutions, and cultural practices in conservation interventions. This analysis found that few NGOs commit to considering the knowledge, values, and traditions of Indigenous peoples and local communities, including incorporating local knowledge into conservation strategies, where appropriate. Acknowledgement and representation of the rights, cultures, identities, values, and knowledge systems needs to be considered for stakeholder engagement to be effective (Schreckenberget al., 2016). Participation in decision-making process may be artificial without recognition and acceptance of legitimate rights and priorities of different actors (Schreckenberget al., 2016). Moreover, equitable sharing of the benefits acquired from conservation and sustainable resource management with local groups is not a straightforward process without recognition of their rights and values. For example, when the Likhayaletu Community in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa was displaced from protected areas, they were entitled to equitable resource benefits from the reserve (Cundill et al., 2017). However, they were more concerned with maintaining access to the protected area and recognition of their relational values and cultural attachment to the area (Cundill et al., 2017). Hence, conservation actors need to acknowledge the broader social and economic goals of Indigenous people and local communities to ensure that the benefits and burdens of conservation outcomes are distributed fairly (Bennet & Lemelin, 2014).

### 4.1.4 | Implementation commitments

For human rights policies to be implemented effectively, the links between the policies and actions of NGOs need to be well established. Policies that provide a template for action require conservation NGOs to explicitly lay out how the policy will be operationalized in organizational processes (United Nations, 2011). It was noted in this analysis that practical aspects of human rights commitments, including a commitment to conducting human rights-based impact assessments, building capacity for rights realization, monitoring of rights impacts, and stipulating expectations of partners, were limited for most NGOs. While some organizations committed to conducting social impact assessments (e.g., CI and FFI), few of

these NGOs indicated that they will assess and monitor the potential impacts of interventions on the human rights of rights-holders. In order for social risks to be properly addressed, human rights impacts need to be considered alongside social impacts (Esteves et al., 2017). These practical HRBA principles are key components of an HRBA (United Nations, 2003), and providing information on implementation processes in policy can serve to enhance accountability and offer guidance for decision-making processes. Additionally, policy commitments that stipulate the organization's human rights expectations of partners can be essential for holding other parties publicly accountable and strengthen the ability of the NGO to ensure that it is not culpable in human rights abuses by others (United Nations, 2012).

## 4.2 | Context for why policy commitments may be present or lacking

Follow-up conversations with each conservation NGO revealed some potential reasons for the lack of commitment to HRBA principles in policies for some organizations. For example, the development of human rights policies requires significant organizational effort and funding, which may be challenging for newer and smaller organizations. Nevertheless, organizations of all sizes are at risk of negative socioeconomic impacts, and the legal obligation to respect human rights applies equally to all (United Nations, 2015). In some cases, it was also argued that human rights policies are unnecessary due to (i) sufficient workplace culture, (ii) individual program (i.e., country program) responsibility, or (iii) the belief that good policies do not necessarily ensure good practice.

However, it is critical that conservation organizations are transparent and accountable in their approach to respecting human rights, and this requires issuing public-facing organizational commitments rather than trusting individual staff and programs to act in good faith. In addition, an organization may not realize its potential to impact human rights, without first identifying what human rights mean to the business. A policy can function as a template for identifying potential human rights impacts (United Nations, 2015).

Lastly, it was also noted in one instance that strong commitments to human rights could be the result of past digressions and not necessarily reflective of historical progress on these issues. For example, in response to an independent review examining allegations of human rights abuses by government rangers in areas where WWF works, WWF developed a framework in 2019 that included a set of 10 environmental and social safeguards standards (World Wildlife Fund, 2019). While the outcome of

increased policy output is ultimately positive, it is important that these commitments to human rights are then integrated and embedded throughout the organization.

## 4.3 | Supportive frameworks and communities of practice

We recognize that various factors will influence the degrees of commitment reflected in human rights-related policies of NGOs. Information sharing forums and communities of practice, such as the CIHR, can present opportunities for organizations with established policies to share their insights, enabling those yet to develop such policies to avoid wasting scarce resources needlessly. In this analysis, the NGOs that have joined the CIHR framework (WCS, WWF, CI, FFI, and TNC) have more human rights related policy than the NGOs who are not involved in the initiative. This finding may indicate that when organizations act collectively and pool their resources, it reinforces shared goals and can incite effective change in industry standards (Prakash & Gugerty, 2010).

Supportive frameworks can also play a crucial role in encouraging the adoption of social policies in conservation. Conservation organizations are increasingly being mandated by funding bodies to develop social safeguards as a prerequisite for funding support. This requirement may explain the varying levels of commitment observed among different NGOs. For example, as Global Environment Facility (GEF) agencies, CI and WWF had to adopt Environmental and Social Management Frameworks to fully comply with GEF and their policies. Hence, funders can also play an important role in driving institutional change.

## 4.4 | Navigating the gap between policy and practice

We acknowledge that policy commitments do not necessarily equate to on-the-ground action. However, we argue that the rationale for reviewing publicly available policy documents is to gain an understanding of how human rights are generally presented by these organizations in the public sphere. For example, how would the general public or rights-holders be assured of the NGOs' sentiments toward human rights? It is argued here that public-facing and easily accessible public commitments to human rights, integrated in policy, is a key initial indicator of organizational change. Hence, these policies can provide a precedent for the implementation of HRBA principles in conservation projects on the ground as well as play a role in challenging political and social norms in public discourse.



We also recognize that, in practice, conservation organizations may not be held to account to respect human rights by the local laws of the jurisdictions within which they operate, and, as such, commitments to human rights may seem futile. However, although governments are responsible for making conservation organizations accountable for respecting human rights, as laid out in the UN guiding principles on business and human rights, these organizations still have a duty to respect human rights, even in instances where governments are unable to hold them to account. While we acknowledge that ultimately this duty lies with the governments, we still posit that NGOs are expected to uphold ethical standards and abide by international norms regarding human rights in their operation and activities (Newing & Perram, 2019). Also, given the influence of conservation NGOs in political discourse, they can hold governments and other actors themselves accountable for human rights violations by publicly advocating for human rights standards.

## 4.5 | Recommendations

We suggest four improvements that could be made to human rights policy commitments of conservation NGOs, ensuring that policy is embedded throughout the processes and procedures of the organization.

### 4.5.1 | Conservation NGOs need to develop social and human rights-related policies

It is an imperative that businesses and organizations, including conservation NGOs, develop human rights-related policies as it demonstrates that they understand their responsibility to respect human rights as a bottom line (United Nations, 2011). It is not sufficient for organizations to defer their position on human rights to country programs or to on-the-ground change, nor is positive workplace culture alone a substitute for a lack of policy.

### 4.5.2 | Human rights policies should be explicit and comprehensive

Human rights commitments should make explicit use of human rights language (United Nations, 2015). This should include references to the international human rights legal framework and the specific rights claims of rights-holders. Human rights also need to be comprehensively covered in policy commitments. This includes establishing a clear process for how human rights will be respected and promoted for all marginalized groups

including communities who do not have internet access, are nonliterate, or speak different languages (Bennett et al., 2017). This may also mean providing policies in languages that are accessible to the people with whom they work.

### 4.5.3 | Human rights policies should be publicly available

The provision of public-facing policy documents on human rights likely indicates that NGOs are prepared to build accountability and transparency into their approach to conservation (United Nations, 2011). To promote lasting social and political change in the conservation sector through an HRBA, conservation NGOs need to develop publicly available policy that rely on being held accountable by communities through participatory processes, rather than only being held accountable by donors, host governments, and other NGOs (Crosman et al., 2021; Ebrahim, 2003). Commitments integrated in public-facing policy makes it clear to stakeholders that the organization is undergoing institutional change (Crosman et al., 2021) and could be a significant indicator of progress in the conservation and human rights space.

### 4.5.4 | Human rights policies should be readily accessible

Policies should be easy for NGO stakeholders to access rather than buried somewhere on their website. While there can be arguments for integrating human rights commitments in codes of conduct, website text, and strategic plans, stand-alone policies have an advantage in external communication, as it is easier for interested stakeholders to access information they require (United Nations, 2015).

## 5 | CONCLUSION

NGOs have immense potential to exert political influence over corporations and governments and facilitate the implementation of an HRBA (Singleton et al., 2017). By realigning their approach with human rights standards, conservation NGOs are in the position to create an enabling environment for rights-holders to make claims for their rights. Commitments through publicly available policies provide greater accountability and transparency for stakeholders and the general public. We recognize that the integration of an HRBA into conservation practices will take time and resources, and will require national governments and other relevant partners to uphold their obligations. (Springer et al., 2011). Nevertheless,



publicly-facing policy commitments are an important step in the process of adopting a more equitable and just approach to conservation.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful to the NGO representatives who assisted in pointing us in the direction of policy resources we had missed and providing more context for why policies may have been absent. We would also like to thank our colleagues who provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this manuscript.

Open access publishing facilitated by James Cook University, as part of the Wiley - James Cook University agreement via the Council of Australian University Librarians.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Patrick Smallhorn-West is affiliated with Wildlife Conservation Society. The rest of the authors declare no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are within the article and its supporting information.

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

**How to cite this article:** Ford-Learner, N., Addison, J., & Smallhorn-West, P. (2024). Conservation and human rights: The public commitments of international conservation organizations. *Conservation Letters*, e13035. <https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.13035>