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Decolonizing Conservation and the Importance of Nature-Based Approaches, Not Solutions: Learning From Indigenous and Local Conservation Systems in India to Achieve the Global Biodiversity Agenda

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ABSTRACT

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) manage large areas of the world's remaining biodiversity and are essential to achieving global conservation goals. Yet their recognition and representation in global environmental governance remain uneven. Despite decades of stewardship, IPLCs—particularly in South Asia—face systemic underrepresentation driven by epistemic and structural injustices. In India, this is compounded by the absence of formal recognition of "Indigenous Peoples," with the administrative category "Scheduled Tribes" misaligned with international definitions of indigeneity. Drawing on field-based engagement, lead author's insights, and analysis of existing literature, we show how traditional governance systems offer culturally embedded, inclusive approaches that extend beyond the technocratic framing of Nature-based Solutions. We argue that mismatches in terminology contribute to recognition injustice, limiting IPLCs' participation in governance and access to conservation finance. Beyond calls to decolonize conservation discourse, we emphasize the need for reparative justice to redress historical exclusion, restore land rights, and support IPLC-led conservation. We call for policy frameworks to recognize IPLCs governance systems, ensure direct access to conservation finance, and embed culturally grounded Nature-based Approaches (NbA) in biodiversity planning as essential for just and transformative change as envisioned in the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and IPBES.

1 | Introduction

Nature-based Solutions (NbS) have gained increasing traction in global policy frameworks to address environmental challenges by working with natural processes. However, we adopt a critical lens toward the concept. Scholars have noted that NbS, despite its promise, is often framed in apolitical terms—placing the responsibility for environmental repair on ecosystems themselves, while failing to address the structural drivers of degradation (Melanidis and Hagerman 2022; O'Sullivan et al. 2020). This can lead to a simplified nature–people dichotomy (Welden et al. 2021), where nature is tasked with solving problems caused by human systems, and communities—especially Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs)—are positioned as external to these solutions. In contrast, we argue that IPLCs have long been central to ecological stewardship, and their cultural, spiritual, and place-

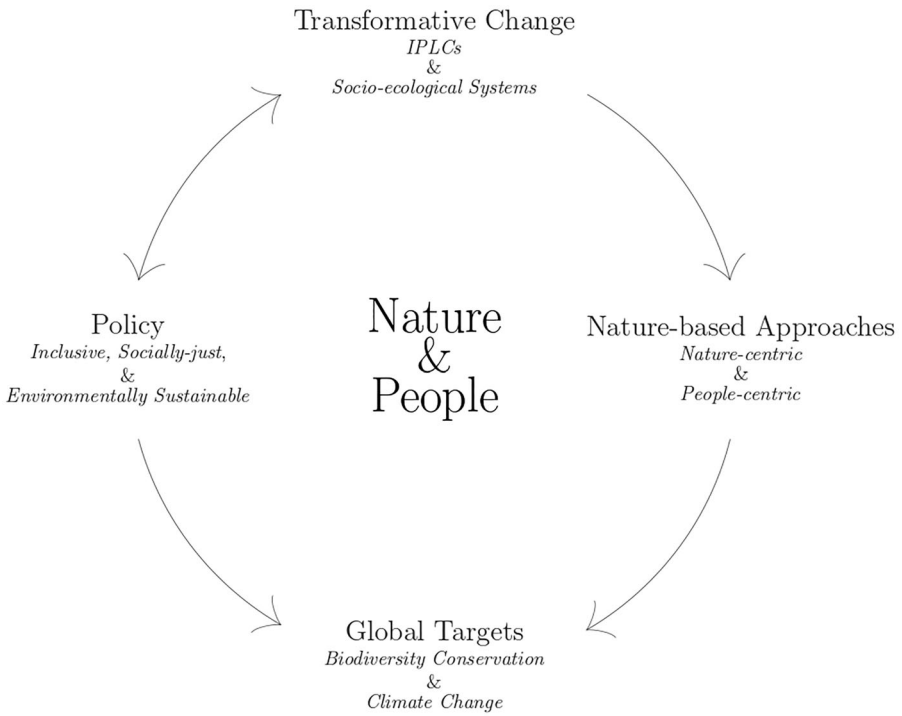

FIGURE 1 | Integrating Nature and People for Transformative Change. This figure illustrates the interconnected relationship between nature and people within socioecological systems. Local communities, through traditional and place-based knowledge, practice holistic, community-led conservation that contributes to global biodiversity targets. Achieving these targets requires inclusive, socially just, and environmentally sustainable policies that both guide top-down governance and support bottom-up IPLC-led efforts (Figure 2). This interaction fosters transformative change, as envisioned by Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), through equitable, participatory, and culturally grounded approaches. While this paper focuses on conservation, this framework is equally relevant to other global challenges, including climate change.

based practices offer deeply embedded, relational approaches that should inform any sustainability intervention in their region (Figure 1), as well as informing wider conservation policies and strategies.

To situate this critique within wider global policy debates, it is necessary to consider how biodiversity governance frameworks conceptualize transformative change. The IPBES Transformative Change Assessment Report (O'Brien et al. 2025) and the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022) call for transformative change—understood as fundamental and systemic shifts in human–nature relationships, governance systems, values, and economic structures—to address the underlying drivers of biodiversity loss and enable more just and sustainable futures. Central to this transformation is the recognition that IPLCs manage, use, and protect large portions of the world's remaining biodiversity through systems rooted in traditional knowledge, spiritual values, and relational ontologies (Brondízio et al. 2019).

1.1 | Moving From Nature-Based Solutions to Nature-Based Approaches to Achieve Sustainable and Just Conservation and Transformative Change: Insights From India

In this paper, we use the term Nature-based Approaches (NbA) to describe culturally grounded, community-led conservation practices. NbA builds on—but moves beyond—the more technocratic framing of NbS by recognizing that people are an integral part of ecosystems and that sustainable conservation must be co-created with the communities who have long stewarded their landscapes. This framing better aligns with IPLCs governance systems and with the transformative, justice-oriented change envisioned by global biodiversity frameworks.

To clarify how NbA diverges from mainstream NbS framings, we provide a concise comparison (Table 1). This comparison anchors the conceptual foundation of our critique of NbS and highlights why IPLC-led governance systems must be recognized as central to achieving transformative change.

Even as global frameworks increasingly acknowledge IPLCs as "partners" and "rights-holders," a stark imbalance remains in whose knowledge and practices are amplified within global conservation science and policy arenas, where Indigenous and local knowledge systems continue to be underrepresented or unevenly integrated (Tengö et al. 2017). In South Asia, recognition can be hindered by legal and political nuances. India, for example, does not officially recognize any group as "Indigenous." Instead, it uses the term "Scheduled Tribes"—a designation rooted in colonial and constitutional history that lacks alignment with international definitions of indigeneity. This classification not only influences recognition but also shapes access to land, rights, and representation. As Lund (2011) notes, categories of political subjectivity—such as ethnicity and patriotism as well as

TABLE 1 | Summary of Key Contrasts Between NbS and NbA. This table outlines the conceptual, epistemic, strengths, limitations, and governance-based differences between NbS—As framed in global policy discourse—And NbA as articulated through Indigenous and local governance systems. NbA emphasizes relational, culturally grounded, and justice-oriented pathways that challenge the technocratic and often apolitical framing of NbS.

Dimensions	NbS	NbA
Core orientation	Defined as "actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore ecosystems to address societal challenges" (Cohen-Shacham et al. 2016)	Rooted in long-standing Indigenous and local governance systems, emphasizes relational, culturally embedded stewardship (K. P. Whyte 2018)
Underlying assumptions	Nature framed as a tool to "solve" environmental problems risks technocratic framing (O'Sullivan et al. 2020)	People and nature co-produce ecosystems; socialecological relations are inseparable (Berkes 2012; Davidson-Hunt and Berkes 2003)
Political framing	Frequently presented as apolitical or "win–win," glossing over structural inequalities (Melanidis and Hagerman 2022)	Explicitly foregrounds histories of dispossession, colonialism, and territorial justice (K. Whyte 2020)
Knowledge systems	Scientific knowledge is often privileged; Indigenous knowledge is included instrumentally (Welden et al. 2021)	Emphasizes knowledge pluralism and epistemic justice (Schlosberg and Carruthers 2010; Tengö et al. 2017)
Governance mode	Often implemented through top-down projects led by states, NGOs, and donors	Grounded in customary law, communal governance, and bottom-up accountability
Strengths	Provides a widely recognized policy tool; bridges ecology and development (Seddon et al. 2020)	Centers justice, relationality, stewardship, and cultural continuity aligns with transformative change (O'Brien et al. 2025)
Limitations	Risks depoliticization, greenwashing, displacement, and erasure of IPLCs governance (Melanidis and Hagerman 2022)	Less mainstream in global frameworks; requires legal, territorial, and epistemic recognition (Reid et al. 2021)

wealth and physical mobility—determine how populations can engage with political institutions, position themselves relative to policy frameworks, and claim rights to settlement and land. This divergence has profound implications for IPLCs' participation in global processes and access to biodiversity conservation funding.

India—a megadiverse country, characterized by high species richness and endemism, supporting nearly 18% of the global population on just 2.4% of the world's land—accounts for approximately 2% of global forest cover (Bawa et al. 2021). With over 80.9 million ha of forests and more than 700 tribal groups, India's IPLCs have developed unique, context-specific governance systems that reflect deep ecological knowledge. However, these communities remain underrepresented in global conservation forums and in emerging biodiversity finance mechanisms aimed at supporting IPLC-led conservation, which often remain difficult to access in many South Asian contexts.

2 | From Recognition to Reparative Justice in Conservation

Recent calls for reparative justice are grounded in a broader critique of extractive and exclusionary research models that have historically marginalized IPLCs. A global framework co-developed by scientists across 36 countries argues that science alone is not enough—conservation must be participatory, ethical, and rooted in reciprocity (Newing et al. 2024). Rather than treating IPLCs as data collectors or passive beneficiaries, the framework urges their inclusion as equal partners in defining research questions (Figure 2), interpreting results, and co-authoring publications (Priyadarshini 2025). Participatory approaches such as community mapping, oral histories, and co-designed surveys foster ownership and build long-term trust.

Conservationist Achili Mihu, from the Idu Mishmi community in Arunachal Pradesh, India, and also a co-author in this paper, voices the need for such transformation: "Our forests are part of who we are. Researchers often arrive with their own assumptions and fail to understand our connection to the land. Conservation must start with understanding rather than imposition." (Priyadarshini 2025). These insights highlight that conservation must prioritize relationships—between people and nature, and between scientists and communities—founded on mutual respect and shared governance, rather than unintentionally reinforcing a divide between people and nature (Welden et al. 2021).

The call for reparative justice goes beyond symbolic inclusion. It addresses historical and structural injustices that have dispossessed IPLCs of their territory, lands, voices, and governance rights. Reparative justice demands not just participation, but the redistribution of decision-making power and material resources. In India, this includes ensuring land tenure security under the Forest Rights Act (2006), strengthening customary governance

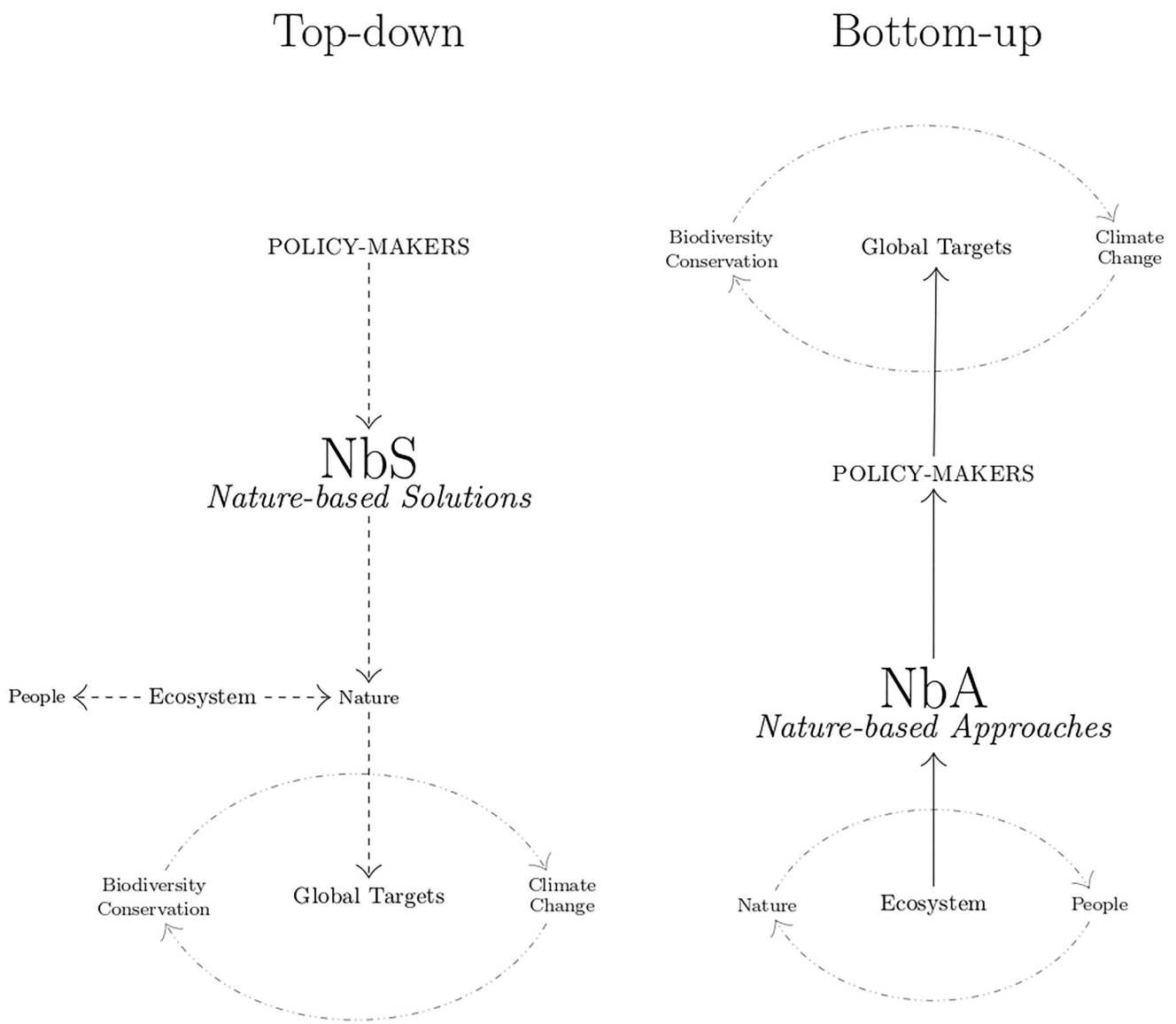

FIGURE 2 | Contrasting top-down and bottom-up approaches in global environmental governance.
The left panel illustrates a top-down model where decision-makers prescribe NbS, often conceptualizing nature and people as separate entities, leading to fragmented pathways toward biodiversity and climate targets. In contrast, the right panel presents a bottom-up approach grounded in nature-centric and people-centric NbA, recognizing the interdependence of people and nature. By integrating both through inclusive, culturally embedded strategies, this model supports decision-making that is more likely to achieve socially just and environmentally sustainable outcomes. While this paper focuses on conservation, it acknowledges that biodiversity loss and climate change are inherently interconnected, and these frameworks are equally applicable to advancing other global sustainability targets.

systems, and avoiding the reduction of Indigenous knowledge to technical inputs within externally driven conservation frameworks.

Financial reparations must go beyond market-based environmental finance mechanisms, which are often implicated in processes of green grabbing (Fairhead et al. 2012). Such approaches can reproduce extractive dynamics under the guise of sustainability and conservation initiatives, reinforcing existing power imbalances rather than addressing them. Instead, IPLC-led conservation should be funded directly, with decision-making grounded in the values and priorities of the communities themselves, while also being aware of intra-community structures and dynamics, including internal power asymmetries and differentiated access to resources (Blaikie 2006; Pasgaard and Nielsen 2016).

A recent report by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) revealed that funds from the Global Environment Facility (GEF)—one of the largest international sources for biodiversity finance—are not reaching the Indigenous communities and women who are closest to and most invested in protecting nature (Chauhan 2025). Despite GEF's stated target of directing 25%–30% of its funding to local actors, the majority of IPLCs receive only indirect benefits, with decisions often made by intermediaries such as large NGOs, development banks, or government agencies (Sorsby et al. 2025). Community voices,

especially those of women, are often excluded from the design and implementation of projects. While the GEF Small Grants Program has shown relative success in directly reaching IPLCs, its small-scale and bureaucratic limitations hinder broader impact. These findings underscore the urgency of reforming global funding mechanisms to be more transparent, locally accessible, and gender-responsive. These structural dynamics are not only theoretical; they shape everyday experiences of IPLCs whose governance systems, cultural obligations, and land relationships continue to be overlooked in policy and financing mechanisms.

The following case studies play a crucial role in grounding broader arguments of how Indigenous and local systems offer enduring, culturally embedded conservation practices that challenge the technocratic model of NbS, particularly mainstream, top-down implementations of NbS.

3 | Case Studies From Northern India: Diverse Cultures, Shared Ecological Ethics, and NbA

This section draws on sustained field-based research and long-term engagement with IPLCs across northern India, complemented by critical analysis of existing scholarship and global conservation discourse. Through case studies, we examine the diversity of community-led conservation practices in the region and illustrate how they embody culturally grounded NbA. To demonstrate how NbA is embedded in lived practices, we draw on four case studies selected for their geographic spread, cultural diversity, and long-standing histories of community-led conservation. The selection reflects the lead authors' ongoing research collaborations and field-based engagements, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. While direct consultation with IPLC collaborators was not feasible within the timeframe of this perspective, the analysis is grounded in peer-reviewed literature, gray literature (including policy and NGO reports), and published ethnographic and oral history accounts documenting community knowledge and practices. Our perspective is informed by the lead author's positionality as a conservation researcher working at the intersection of biodiversity, climate change, and socioecological systems in northern India. The selected case studies are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather illustrative of the plurality of relational governance systems across India. Importantly, this perspective is further enriched by Indigenous insights contributed by co-author Achili Mihu, whose lived experience and community-grounded knowledge strengthen the interpretation of the case studies.

This perspective is further shaped by a persistent structural gap in global conservation and climate governance, where South Asian contexts remain underrepresented in discussions on Indigenous stewardship, NbS, and biodiversity policy. This underrepresentation has material consequences, influencing whose knowledge is recognized, which governance systems are legitimized, and how conservation and climate finance are allocated. By foregrounding case studies from India, this paper seeks to highlight these asymmetries and advance a more inclusive, reparative conservation framing—one that recognizes, supports, and invests in diverse, place-based systems of stewardship that have long sustained both people and biodiversity. As discussed earlier, the categorization of Indigenous Peoples in India under the umbrella term "Scheduled Tribes" risks flattening the rich heterogeneity of ecological knowledge systems and cultural traditions. These diversities—shaped by geography, spiritual beliefs, and customary governance—are illustrated in Figure 3.

3.1 | Van Panchayats of Uttarakhand: Community Forest Governance

Unique to the Indian Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, Van Panchayats (forest councils) represent one of the oldest community-led forest governance systems in South Asia (Bisht et al. 2021). Formally established during the colonial era in response to widespread forest alienation, these village-level institutions today manage over 12,000 panchayats covering ~400,000 ha, approximately 20% of the state's forest area. Rooted in customary practices, Van Panchayats operate through participatory norms that regulate access to firewood, fodder, and grazing. Women, as primary forest users, play key informal roles in shaping management rules based on seasonal rhythms and intergenerational ecological knowledge (Agarwal 2009).

Despite their documented contributions to forest regeneration and local conflict resolution, Van Panchayats remain only partially integrated within formal forest governance frameworks, including the National Forest Policy and more recent mechanisms such as Joint Forest Management, where decision-making authority is often retained by state forest departments. As a result, their role is frequently constrained to implementation rather than recognized as autonomous governance.

For many Van Panchayat members, forest stewardship is not framed as "resource management" but as an inherited collective responsibility. Evidence from long-term studies of Van Panchayat forests indicates improvements in forest condition, biomass regeneration, and local conflict mediation outcomes (Somanathan et al. 2009), highlighting how these systems sustain both ecological integrity and community governance over time. The long-term resilience of these coupled social–ecological systems underscore the importance of culturally rooted, community-governed conservation models that operate outside dominant technocratic paradigms.

3.2 | Bishnoi of Rajasthan: Religious Ethics as a Conservation Imperative

Founded in the 15th century by Guru Jambheshwar in the arid landscapes of Rajasthan, the Bishnoi community practices an eco-centric worldview grounded in 29 principles (bis = 20, noi = 9) that emphasize compassion toward all living beings and sustainable living (Jain 2024; Reichert 2015). The Bishnoi are best known for their steadfast protection of blackbuck antelopes (*Antilope cervicapra*), khejri trees (*Prosopis cineraria*), and birds, even at the cost of their lives as seen in the historic Khejarli Massacre of 1730, where 363 Bishnoi sacrificed themselves to protect trees. Their non-violent ethos extends to contemporary environmental activism, often intervening against poaching and deforestation. The Bishnoi's practices demonstrate how religious

FIGURE 3 | Indigenous Peoples and Local Conservation Practices in Northern India. This map highlights the geographic distribution of two Indigenous communities—the Bishnoi of Rajasthan and the Idu Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh—and two community-based practices—the Van Panchayats of Uttarakhand and Sacred Groves of Meghalaya. Together, they reflect diverse, place-based conservation traditions that support biodiversity and cultural resilience.

ethics can sustain biodiversity even in harsh desert ecosystems. Yet, despite popular recognition, they remain insufficiently represented in academic debates on IPLCs or global sustainability discussions—revealing ongoing gaps in whose conservation models are acknowledged and legitimized. Bishnoi ethics reflect a lived worldview where caring for wildlife is inseparable from caring for community well-being.

3.3 | Idu Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh: Kinship With the Tiger and the Forest

The Idu Mishmi, an Indigenous group from Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, embody a worldview where humans, forests, and wildlife—especially tigers—are kin (Aiyadurai 2016; Gupta et al. 2024). As documented in *Tigers Are Our Brothers* by Ambika Aiyadurai (2016), tigers are not merely animals but spiritual

relatives of the Idu Mishmi. Taboos strictly prohibit hunting tigers or disturbing their habitat. Forest use is governed through intricate customary laws, with clan elders mediating human-wildlife interactions and enforcing hunting restrictions based on cultural values rather than state directives. These norms are not simply regulatory mechanisms but expressions of deep ancestral obligations to the land and its beings. Such practices have contributed to ecological stability in the region for generations. However, state-led conservation interventions—such as proposals for tiger reserves—often conflict with Idu worldviews, leading to mistrust and resistance. The Idu Mishmi case demonstrates that Indigenous ontologies are not only spiritually rich but also effective, place-based systems of environmental governance that challenge dominant technocratic conservation models, including mainstream NbS frameworks.

3.4 | Sacred Groves of Meghalaya: Living Archives of Biodiversity

In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya, sacred groves (*Law Kyntang*) represent some of the most biodiverse and ecologically intact forest patches in the region (Choudhury et al. 2007; Groves 2024). These groves are traditionally protected through religious beliefs that prohibit extraction or disturbance—violating the sacred space is said to bring misfortune. Scientific studies have shown that sacred groves maintain higher species richness, endemic flora, and soil fertility compared to surrounding landscapes, making them vital microrefugia in an era of climate change and biodiversity loss. Managed through clan-level customary institutions, these groves reflect deep entanglements of ecology, identity, and spiritual values. Yet, despite their ecological and cultural importance, sacred groves remain marginal in formal forest conservation policy—frequently overshadowed by technocratic or state-led models of forest governance. Their example underscores that relational, place-based conservation systems—rooted in Indigenous governance and characteristic of NbA—are essential to global efforts to halt deforestation and biodiversity loss.

3.5 | Case Study Synthesis

Together, these four cases demonstrate how NbA manifest as culturally embedded, relational, and community-led practices that sustain biodiversity not through external interventions, but through lived worldviews of care, reciprocity, kinship, and collective responsibility. They highlight the plurality of biodiversity conservation pathways that remain largely invisible within mainstream NbS frameworks and technocratic, top-down conservation models and show why IPLCs governance systems must be central to any meaningful attempt at transformative, just, and place-based environmental action.

4 | Global Shifts and Missed Opportunities

In many Global South countries such as India, sustainable transformative changes are embedded within people's cultural, spiritual, and everyday practices. Local beliefs and social settings (Hathaway et al. 2017), economic incentives (Banerjee et al. 2013), and a long-standing cultural tolerance (Nijhawan and Mihu 2020) toward wildlife have enabled a sustainable coexistence in shared landscapes, even under conditions of poverty and population pressure. India's example, where tiger populations have increased by 30% between 2006 and 2018 in areas inhabited by over 60 million people, illustrates how biodiversity can flourish when conservation is rooted in values of respect, reciprocity, and shared care and commitments (Jhala et al. 2025). Recognizing and supporting these embedded practices is not just beneficial but essential for achieving global biodiversity conservation targets. True sustainable transformative change requires reparative justice and the decolonization of knowledge systems that otherwise continue to overlook or undervalue these traditions. International frameworks such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, including the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, and the IPBES Transformative Change Assessment must adapt to include and uplift these culturally grounded approaches, particularly in the Global South.

The Cali Biodiversity Conference (COP 16 in 2024) introduced the Cali IPLCs Fund, intended to provide direct financial support to Indigenous conservation efforts. Yet South Asian IPLCs, due to the region's fraught legal recognition of indigeneity, risk being bypassed. This highlights the need to broaden definitions and mechanisms to include culturally and ecologically significant communities whose sustainable governance systems remain unrecognized. Such global negotiations, while promising on paper, remain distant from the everyday realities of IPLCs, whose governance systems continue to operate without formal recognition or adequate support.

5 | Policy Recommendations

Drawing on the challenges outlined in preceding sections and grounded in the lived governance systems illustrated through the four case studies, we offer the following policy recommendations to advance socially just and environmentally sustainable conservation. These recommendations synthesize the principles of NbA, emphasizing relational governance, community self-determination, and reparative justice. Examples from existing global and national initiatives demonstrate that these approaches are both feasible and already emerging in practice.

5.1 | Recognize IPLC Governance Systems as Legitimate Conservation Authorities

Customary institutions—such as Van Panchayats, sacred grove committees, religious ethics of care, and biocultural hunting taboos—must be formally acknowledged within national and global conservation frameworks. Recognition must move beyond symbolic inclusion to ensure IPLCs are embedded in decision-making, monitoring, and rule-setting processes, reflecting their long-standing stewardship and ecological expertise. Examples of such recognition can be seen in community conserved areas (CCAs) in countries such as Namibia and the Philippines, where local governance institutions are formally integrated into national conservation strategies (Berkes 2009; Jonas et al. 2014).

5.2 | Direct Funding to Community-led Conservation Initiatives

Conservation mechanisms should be designed to reach communities directly through long-term, flexible, and accessible funding pathways. Transparent, simplified processes that enable, for example, women-led groups, customary institutions, and local associations to access resources are essential to strengthen on-the-ground conservation already practiced daily by IPLCs.

5.3 | Protect Collective Land Tenure and Governance Autonomy

Secure land and territorial rights underpin sustainable governance. Policies should prioritize implementation of existing community tenure frameworks (e.g., India's Forest Rights Act, 2006); uphold Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC); and institutionalize IPLCs as co-designers and co-evaluators of conservation strategies—rather than being viewed as outsiders or problem creators in state-led conservation models. Ensuring territorial sovereignty is essential to both ecological and cultural resilience. Evidence from countries such as Brazil and Mexico shows that legally recognized IPLC-managed forests are associated with lower deforestation rates and more effective long-term conservation outcomes (Blackman and Veit 2018; Garnett et al. 2018).

5.4 | Embed Reciprocity, Equity, and Intra-Community Justice in Conservation Practice

Successful conservation must be evaluated not only through ecological outcomes but also through community well-being, gender inclusion, and equitable benefit sharing. Policymaking should explicitly consider intra-community dynamics—including power asymmetries, generational shifts, and differentiated access to resources—to promote governance systems that foster fair participation and uphold collective responsibility. Evidence such as community-managed forests in Mexico—particularly under ejido and comunidad systems—has shown that locally governed institutions can generate both conservation outcomes and livelihood benefits, while also highlighting the importance of addressing internal inequalities in decision-making and benefit distribution (Bray et al. 2003; Ellis and Porter-Bolland 2008).

5.5 | Center Culturally Grounded NbA in Sustainability Planning

NbA should guide conservation targets, monitoring indicators, and implementation pathways. Unlike technocratic NbS framings, NbA emphasizes cultural embeddedness, relational ethics, and the inseparability of people and nature. Policymakers should integrate these approaches into national biodiversity plans, climate adaptation strategies, and global frameworks such as the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework to achieve meaningful transformative change.

Together, these recommendations call for a shift from recognition to reparation—from inclusion in discourse to redistribution of power, resources, and authority. Supporting IPLCs' cultural, territorial, and governance rights is not only a matter of justice but also a necessary condition for achieving global biodiversity conservation goals.

6 | Conclusion: Toward a Plural, Reparative Conservation Future

Communities across Northern India have long sustained biodiversity through customary laws, spiritual values, cultural obligations, and relational modes of governance. For these communities, conservation practices are not external interventions or newly introduced "solutions" but enduring ways of life that bind people, land, and non-human beings into shared ethical and ecological relationships. The increase in tiger populations in human-dominated landscapes, maintained through cultural tolerance and everyday coexistence (Jhala et al. 2025), exemplifies how biodiversity can flourish when governance aligns with these relational worldviews.

Achieving transformative change therefore requires more than acknowledging IPLCs as partners—it demands reparative justice. This includes redistributing decision-making power, ensuring secure territorial rights, and designing financial pathways that enable communities to lead conservation rather than be positioned as peripheral implementers of externally defined targets. We highlight in this paper how meaningful change must center on culturally embedded NbA, which recognizes people and nature are deeply interconnected and emphasizes reciprocity, obligation, and care.

Our policy recommendations highlight how global biodiversity goals can only be fully met when IPLCs' governance systems are recognized as legitimate conservation authorities; when funding reaches communities directly; when customary tenure and autonomy are protected; and when equity and intra-community justice guide conservation implementation. These shifts are essential for operationalizing the transformative ambitions of frameworks such as the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework and the IPBES Transformative Change Assessment.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article, as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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