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Subnational Protected Areas

Tolo River Basin and Southern Coastal Zone, Colombia. Photo: J.A. Soriano/Conserva Aves

Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) established the goal of effectively conserving and managing 30 percent of lands, waters, and seas by 2030 (“30x30”, or [Target 3](#)). This series of Audubon briefs features practical, action-oriented options for reaching the 30x30 target through a variety of approaches that deliver benefits for biodiversity, communities, and the climate.

Subnational Protected Areas

Protected areas are perhaps the archetypical conservation tool. Many of these areas are designated at the national level. Less recognized, but no less important, are subnational protected areas. These areas may be declared or otherwise recognized by a state, province, department, or municipality, or a similar jurisdiction within the national context, and managed to achieve conservation objectives. Subnational^[AR1] protected areas^[AR2] complement Indigenous-led protected areas (see [Policy Brief 1](#)), national-level protected areas, and private protected areas, and in many countries conform part of the national protected areas system.

Opportunity

The creation of subnational protected areas can expand the percentage of national territory protected and effectively managed, while diversifying the responsibility for management of these areas to authorities beyond the national government.

Subnational protected areas are an opportunity to protect the territories that sustain biodiversity and people, while empowering local governments and communities to lead conservation efforts. The designation of subnational protected areas is often extremely effective in creating a sense of ownership and pride amongst local communities, as locally-cherished places are officially recognized. Subnational protected areas are also frequently more accessible to local populations, helping to strengthen the connection between people and nature. As with national protected areas, management capacity and financing can be challenges. The effectiveness of any protected area depends in part on the human and financial resources available to design, manage^[SB1],^[ES2] and monitor an area, and to enforce relevant restrictions on access and use. Effectiveness also benefits greatly from comprehensive and collaborative land use planning that includes relevant stakeholders. Initiatives like Conserva Aves (see below) help support this capacity for subnational protected areas.



Least Terns at
Honeymoon
Island State Park.
Photo credit:
Celine Haeberly

Case Studies

[Honeymoon Island State Park, United States](#)

Honeymoon Island State Park, in the U.S. state of Florida, protects a pristine stretch of sand, vegetation, and both salt and fresh water. This convergence of ecosystems is not only attractive to visitors, but serves as habitat for species including migratory songbirds, wading birds, eagles, osprey, dolphins, manatees, and a diversity of fish. It is also a critical home for seabirds and shorebirds like Least Terns, Black Simmers, and American Oystercatchers, which have suffered from habitat loss as human development and recreational activity expand. Honeymoon Island is managed for both conservation and recreation, with restrictions placed on allowable activities, and on areas open to visitors. For more than twenty years park staff have partnered with Audubon to create nesting refuges and employ bird stewards to protect nesting birds from disturbance. Honeymoon Island State Park is an example of how a subnational protected area in a well-populated region can serve both local species, and local communities.

[Tolo River Basin and Southern Coastal Zone, Colombia](#)

In northwestern Colombia, Afro-descendent communities came together more than two decades ago to collectively manage their communal lands for conservation. In 2002 the Community Council of Black Communities of the Tolo River Basin and Southern Coastal Zone (COCOMASUR) was formed to manage nearly 40,500 hectares of forests, mountains, wetlands and coasts for conservation and climate mitigation. COCOMASUR created three protected areas to safeguard the birds and sea turtles found within the communities' lands. Recognizing a critical gap between these three protected areas, in 2025 the Conserva Aves program (see below) helped finance the official recognition of the remaining 5,000 hectares as an "other effective conservation measure" (OECM), ensuring continued ecological connectivity across the entirety of COCOMASUR lands, and continued protection for the area's biodiversity. Today, tourism is creating new opportunities for local livelihoods while

reinforcing long-term conservation led by the communities themselves.

[Chone Conservation and Sustainable Use Area, Ecuador](#)

In 2025, the municipality of Chone, on Ecuador's Pacific coast, approved a new Conservation and Sustainable Use Area (ACUS, for its acronym in Spanish). Spanning 238,800 hectares -an area three times the size of New York City- the protected area strengthens the conservation and management of the La Segua wetland, a Ramsar Site and Key Biodiversity Area (KBA). The wetland provides critical water supply services to nearby municipalities while serving as important habitat for biodiversity. More than 150 bird species depend on the area's wetlands and forests, including migratory shorebirds of hemispheric importance. Other threatened species, such as the Critically Endangered brown-headed spider monkey, also call this landscape home.



nine Latin American countries, encompassing at least 3 million hectares—an area equivalent to the size of Belgium. Led by American Bird Conservancy, Audubon, BirdLife International, Birds Canada, and the Latin American and Caribbean Network of Environmental Funds (RedLAC), Conserva Aves supports the conservation of Key Biodiversity Areas and climate refuges by working with regional, municipal, Indigenous, ethnic, and community governments and private entities to create and strengthen protected areas. With a focus not only on the creation of protected areas, but also the design and implementation of management and monitoring plans and financing strategies, Conserva Aves is a crucial ally for the participating countries in their quest to effectively protect 30 percent of their lands and waters by 2030.

Previous policy briefs: We invite you to read the [previous policy briefs on Indigenous-led protected areas and conservation on working lands.](#)

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[Supporting Framework: Conserva Aves](#)

Conserva Aves is a hemispheric initiative working to protect territories across Latin America by supporting the creation, strengthening and long-term management of subnational protected and conserved areas. The initiative aims to support the protection, expansion, and consolidation of more than 100 subnational areas across

Clockwise from right: Black-bellied whistling duck in the Chonte ACUS. Photo: Bomaco; Conserva Aves-supported training for forest monitors who track the rich birdlife. Photo: J.A. Soriano/ Conserva Aves