



STRATEGY OF THE UNITED NATIONS DECADE ON ECOSYSTEM RESTORATION

Policy Update

April 2020

In early 2020, the UN released the first draft of their Strategy of the [United Nations Decade on Ecosystem Restoration](#) (2021 – 2030) (“Strategy”). SER was one of more than 50 organizations that participated in interviews to help develop the first draft of the Strategy; we also provided written input from our [Second Global Forum on Ecosystem Restoration](#) in September 2019. The draft Strategy does an excellent job of outlining core objectives, the theory of change, and key approaches to achieve the objectives of the Decade.

SER strongly supports how the Strategy frames the overall vision for the UN Decade in the context of a global increase in the area of healthy ecosystems over the next ten years. Moving from the current status quo of net degradation to a status quo of net improvement would be an extraordinary outcome of the on-the-ground implementation of the UN Decade. We appreciate that the Strategy references the SER International Principles and Standards for the Practice of Ecological Restoration and specifically incorporates the Restorative Continuum in several places. We also agree with how the draft strategy promotes ecosystem restoration as a driver of global economic growth, especially by building a global culture that will encourage restoration initiatives to continue to grow even after the UN Decade has ended. Finally, the draft strategy also elevates the importance of including diverse funding and engagement, as well as monitoring of the social, economic, and environmental benefits that stem from restoration.

At this early phase, we recommend the following suggestions to strengthen the overall Strategy:

1. UN Decade funded projects should explicitly promote the restoration of native ecosystems, as well clearly articulating the need for a net gain in healthy ecosystems worldwide.
2. The theory of change should include discussion of the long-term nature of restoration as compared to the short-term nature of most restoration funding and investment, as either a barrier or a cross-cutting theme.
3. Implementation of the UN Decade should include and acknowledge that the flagship value of many thousands of small restoration projects are at least equally important as large ecosystem scale projects.
4. The Strategy should include discussion of the need to avoid creating perverse incentives or promoting the potential rebranding of “business as usual” activities as restoration – truly restorative activities should be recognized and celebrated.
5. Plans for outreach, communications, and engagement could clarify that they will serve key marginalized constituents, such as women and indigenous communities.

1. A net gain in healthy, native ecosystems

The Strategy recommends ecosystem restoration as a tool both to increase the area of healthy ecosystems and to prevent the continued loss and degradation of said ecosystems. The language, however, does not distinguish or specifically call for this to be a net gain in the area of healthy ecosystems. We know that restoration already is increasing the area of healthy ecosystems where it is being implemented. But we are still, globally, in a position of net ecological loss as degrading activities continue to outpace restorative activities. The UN Decade should focus on achieving a net gain in the overall area of healthy ecosystems globally, which can only be achieved through a combination of reduced degradation with increased conservation and restoration.

In addition, when considering this net gain, SER recommends a focus on native ecosystems because of their unique value. Native ecosystem restoration may not be possible everywhere, but it is important to prioritize these ecosystems wherever possible. Recognition of the value of native ecosystem restoration will help raise the bar in all restoration planning associated with the UN Decade. While all restorative activities should continue to be celebrated, a focus on restoring native ecosystems should result in the greatest benefits to ecological health, biodiversity, and ecosystem services.

2. Long time periods for restoration benefits

Ecosystem restoration is often plagued by two related issues: it can take many years for the full benefits of restoration to become apparent, and achieving these benefits often requires long-term investment in monitoring and adaptive management. Currently, most funding for restoration is limited to planning and implementation and ultimately fails to support the long-term work needed to reap the benefits. The Strategy could be improved by more strongly promoting the importance of a shift away from short-term gains on investment towards an understanding of the individual, financial, and policy gains associated with long-term restoration investment.

3. Many small restoration projects are needed

The Strategy suggests a possible criterion that flagship projects be greater than one million hectares. Many of the best existing restoration programs are significantly smaller than that size – in some cases, the physical distribution of the ecosystem (e.g., coral reefs or globally imperiled ecosystems) would be enough to prevent a program from meeting the suggested size criteria. Focusing on extremely large projects as the key type of flagship may also unintentionally send a message to local level stakeholders that they are not valued as part of the UN Decade. This could take focus away from local restoration projects that are exemplary, have developed cutting edge technology, or created innovative methods of engaging local communities in restoration. Fostering the global changes and restoration culture the UN Decade calls for will require promotion and recognition not just of very large projects, but also of the creative approaches to local restoration projects that are being successfully implemented despite often very limited

resources. The final Strategy should recognize the different benefits that arise from projects at every scale.

4. Ecosystem restoration needs to be truly restorative

SER applauds the consistent use of the concept of the restorative continuum throughout the Strategy and recognizes the importance of celebrating all restorative activities. However, in some instances, activities that are not at all restorative may be branded as restoration. It is important for the Strategy to carefully articulate what will be recognized as restoration when assessing the overall impact of the UN Decade. Financial investment programs and monitoring efforts should not support, accommodate, or count projects that inaccurately present themselves as restoration (such as afforestation of tropical grasslands), that create perverse incentives, or that cause collateral ecological damage.

The lack of an agreed-upon definition of ecosystem restoration is also problematic but will hopefully be rectified soon. In the meantime, the definition of ecological restoration (a subset of ecosystem restoration) as “the process of assisting the recovery of a ecosystem that has been degraded, damaged, or destroyed”^{1,2} can help guide the types of projects, actions, and engagement the Strategy is hoping to undertake to change social norms and behaviors.

5. Clarify outreach and communications plans to serve key marginalized constituents

The Strategy, as well as the accompanying Communications Strategy, address a broad diversity of issues, but they do not fully recognize the importance of serving traditionally marginalized populations, especially women and indigenous communities, who have long driven so many local restoration activities. The Communications Strategy in particular includes an activity set targeted specifically at youth, and the consultations to develop the overall strategy also featured a series of dedicated meetings with young people. A similar emphasis on engaging women and indigenous communities would also be valuable. It would also be helpful to identify other underserved or marginalized communities to understand what specific strategies could be developed to increase their engagement.

For more details, see SER’s [full response](#) to the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration’s call for comments on the draft Strategy.

¹ The Society for Ecological Restoration International Science and Policy Working Group. 2004. *The SER International Primer on Ecological Restoration*. www.ser.org & Tucson: Society for Ecological Restoration International.

² Gann GD, McDonald T, Wader B, Aronson J, Nelson CR, Johnson J, Hallett JG, Eisenberg E, Guariguata MR, Liu J, Hua F, Echeverria C, Gonzalez E, Shaw N, Decler K, and Dixon K. 2019. International principles and standards for the practice of ecological restoration. Second edition. *Restoration Ecology* 27: S1-S46.