

Protecting biodiversity for The Long Run, a holistic approach?

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Faced with the current biodiversity and climate crises, privately protected areas, which play a pivotal role in biodiversity conservation, can improve the resilience of the conservation sector. The private sector brings complementary strengths and skills, in addition to financial resources, to NGO and government conservation efforts. United in their holistic approach, framed by the 4 C's (conservation, community, culture, and commerce), the members of The Long Run work to conserve biodiversity in perpetuity.

Despite a long tradition of private conservation efforts going back centuries, (Stolton et al., 2014) distrust has characterised the relationship between the private sector, government, and NGOs. Thankfully, in the face of the current biodiversity and climate crises, this is changing.

Protected areas play a pivotal role for biodiversity conservation, and privately protected areas can strengthen the resilience of the conservation sector (Lemenager et al., 2014), to help achieve global biodiversity targets. Indeed, beyond financial resources, the private sector brings complementary strengths and skills - such as efficiency, effectiveness, risk-taking, innovation, flexibility, and sustainable financing - to NGO and government conservation efforts. This is essential especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, when it is likely that national parks, many of which are not effectively implemented, are going to struggle to find adequate resources to continue operating sustainably. Under normal circumstances, an average of only 2% of income generated in national parks is reinvested in park management (Balmford et al., 2015).

From a business perspective, investing in natural capital (ecosystems and biodiversity) and social capital (shared values and understanding) has never been this crucial. Not only will there be no thriving business without functioning ecosystems and a healthy society, but also short-term exploitative land use and strategies based solely on profit are no longer acceptable. Increasingly, consumers demand responsible business practices and accountability.

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This is certainly the case for tourism, where 76% of consumers say that they will be more concerned about sustainability now than before COVID-19 (Euromonitor International, July 2020) when travelling. Being at the forefront of change and being actively involved in conservation and social development is not only the right thing to do, but also presents a market advantage. Members of The Long Run are leading examples of the mutually beneficial interaction between the private sector and biodiversity, of how nature, people, and business can work together for a more sustainable future.

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THE LONG RUN: WITH A SHIFT IN ATTITUDE, BUSINESS CAN BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

Jochen Zeitz (visionary entrepreneur, founder of the Zeitz Foundation and The Long Run) endorses the belief that mitigating negative impacts is not enough and that we have to strive for positive impacts. Founded 10 years ago, The Long Run, then a programme of the Zeitz Foundation and now an independent UK-based charity, hosted by Preferred by Nature (NEPCon), brings together a global community of like-minded people dedicated to protecting biodiversity via commercial business.

Members are tourism businesses that own, manage and influence areas of nature, and other professionals, organisations and businesses that support the core membership in its mission. They are united in their holistic approach, framed by the 4 C's of conservation, community, culture, and commerce. Each member recognises the need to balance these four elements to conserve biodiversity in perpetuity.

Collaboration is paramount for sustainable change to be achieved at scale. To this end, The Long Run supports its members and provides a platform for exchanging knowledge, sharing experiences and innovating together. It also promotes the work of its community to inspire others to do the same. Members' sustainability journeys are benchmarked by The Long Run GER® standard - recognised by the Global Sustainable Travel Council - which celebrates sustainability performance and helps differentiate the members' businesses in the marketplace. The Long Run members continually take stock, reflect, and push boundaries to expand their positive impacts, both on biodiversity and people, whilst seeking to maintain healthy profits.

With this ethos, 40 property members and affiliates together help protect 23 million acres of biodiversity, home to 416 threatened species. Through their impacts on livelihoods and protection of ecosystems, they positively touch the lives of 750,000 people. In 2019, they invested approximately 15 million USD directly in conservation and livelihood development.

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HOW TO ENCOURAGE THE PRIVATE SECTOR TO GET INVOLVED?

The Long Run members span five continents and diverse ecosystems, from deserts to coral reefs, from the tropics to the poles, and thus provide a huge breadth of insights into the motivations and challenges facing the private sector involved in biodiversity conservation.

Motivations for members to protect biodiversity vary and are rooted in business, conservation, and a sense of responsibility. In terms of business imperative, healthy ecosystems and biodiversity directly underpin the nature-based tourism sector. The quality of the product – the guest experience – depends on it. Where there is insufficient investment by governments in biodiversity, business could step in. Operating responsibly is not only the right thing to do, but also reduces costs, drives positive impacts, demonstrates credibility, and becomes a unique selling point. Another motivation is bringing resilience to conservation. Where donor models have failed, the private sector can provide an effective alternative. By diversifying income generation, and reducing donor dependence, a business approach increases the resilience of biodiversity conservation initiatives. Another motivation is passion and responsibility. Much of the members' engagement stems from passion and the deep connection they feel for nature. This interest is compounded by a sense of responsibility toward future generations, and making the world a better place, thence a long-term view of land stewardship.

TACKLING CHALLENGES

Conservation and development go hand in hand. Members believe that demonstrating that conservation and other sustainable land uses are economically competitive (i.e., agroforestry, tourism, and responsible agriculture) is the only way for a broader spectrum of stakeholders to become engaged. However, as private actors, there are many challenges to engaging in conservation, particularly the accompanying costs and increasing risks. Among the challenges are existing trends – population growth, unsustainable practices, and short-term views –, which put further pressure on natural areas; political instability in some areas; and the failure by many governments to strategically prioritise biodiversity, environmental health and sustainability. These lead to siloed approaches (insufficient knowledge and resource sharing), inadequate policy and legislative frameworks, which in turn undermine efforts by creating disincentives for the private sector to get involved.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder collaborative approach. For many, it is essential that private conservation efforts are further recognised, and that the private sector is engaged as a partner. This would help break up silos and inform the design of policies that support national conservation objectives, encouraging investment in biodiversity. There are many examples of tested, effective incentive systems (IUCN PPA best practice Guidelines, 2018). In South Africa and Brazil, for example, privately protected areas can be gazetted and formalised, gaining similar protection status to national parks.

Financial sustainability is also paramount to ensuring conservation efforts in the long term. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of diversifying income streams and revealed new opportunities. Most members believe that the development of well-designed biodiversity and carbon-offset schemes could become an additional and broader income source, providing incentives to engage in biodiversity conservation. This would increase the resilience of the business model and aid recognition of the value of the service provided.

The impact of the private sector can be significant, despite existing challenges. With passion, persistence, collaborative efforts, and good business sense, some of The Long Run members have secured 10,000 to 100,000 ha of fynbos, desert, rainforest and wetlands, some of which are the last bastion for endangered species, such as the East African black rhino. They demonstrate what is possible when adopting a 4C philosophy and invite others to follow suit to collectively drive change in practices and policy toward a healthier and more sustainable planet.

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