News
EarthBeat



Caroline Kiiru (right), biodiversity and climate change campaign manager for Laudato Si' Movement, presents a petition signed by 231,000 Catholics to Elizabeth Mrema, executive secretary of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity. (Grove Harris)



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Time is running out to create a world in greater harmony with nature, a multifaith coalition stressed to the United Nations top biodiversity official in a meeting here at COP15, where nations are negotiating a global deal to reverse decades of ecosystem destruction.

Along with lending moral urgency to the ongoing talks, including through a petition signed by 231,000 Catholics, the Faiths at COP15 coalition also committed to mobilize their communities to implement whatever agreement is achieved.

"We're here. Faith groups are here. We mean business," said Kamran Shezad, a Muslim member of the U.N. multifaith advisory council who attended the meeting.

Roughly 20 representatives of faith-based organizations took part in the meeting Dec. 12 with Elizabeth Mrema, executive secretary of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity, which oversees international biodiversity meetings like COP15. The negotiations in Montreal Dec. 7-19 revolve around the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, a once-a-decade deal that lays out a blueprint for worldwide conservation efforts through 2030 and beyond.




A set of cards display six priorities the Faiths at COP15 coalition have outlined for negotiations of a global conservation deal at the United Nations biodiversity conference in Montreal. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

In the discussion, the religious leaders shared their six key priorities for the framework. Included within them are calls for a rights-based approach that respects and empowers Indigenous communities, consideration of biodiversity alongside other issues like climate change and pollution, and ultimately greater ambition from nations to set a course to a nature-positive world where by 2030 biodiversity loss is halted and rebounding.

According to participants, Mrema replied that each of Faith at COP15's general themes are currently reflected in the framework document, a text filled with bracketed phrases and words indicating issues where negotiations remain unresolved. The coalition, along with other civil society observers, are watching

closely which words remain and which might be dropped or watered down.

"The really key point will be whether each of these elements can remain ambitious," said Alexandra Goossens-Ishii, policy lead for the Faiths at COP15 coalition and program coordinator for climate and environment advocacy for Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist organization.

**Related:** Multifaith community mobilizes to preserve creation ahead of COP15 biodiversity summit

During the meeting, Caroline Kiiru of the Laudato Si' Movement presented to Mrema the Healthy Planet Healthy People Petition organized by the network of 900-plus Catholic organizations. The petition, signed by 231,000 people and 430 Catholic organizations, calls for global leaders to address biodiversity loss and climate change in tandem, and endorses calls to boost the proposal to conserve at least 30% of lands and marine areas by 2030 to at least 50%.

"We are pushing for no more biodiversity loss," said Kiiru, biodiversity and climate change campaign manager for Laudato Si' Movement, not just for restoring ecosystems and saving species but also as a critical component to addressing climate change.

"We are living in a time where the climate crisis cannot go unanswered. We need to start seeing the implementation processes starting to take shape," she said.

Faith leaders who spoke to EarthBeat described the meeting as "uplifting," and said that Mrema, who spoke of her own faith, was supportive of religious organizations becoming more engaged on biodiversity. Asked at one point what she wants from them, the executive secretary replied a lot, especially in putting the final COP15 agreement into action.



Roughly 20 representatives of faith-based organizations meet with Elizabeth Mrema (center), executive secretary of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity on Dec. 12 during COP15. (Courtesy of Faiths at COP15/Wesley Cocozello)

"She said that we have a huge role to play," said Gopal Patel, co-founder of the Hindu environmental group Bhumi Global and coordinator of the Faiths at COP15 coalition. "Because we don't just have the wisdom, the traditions but also the grassroots engagement. She said if a sheikh or an imam or priest stands up, people listen to them. And so we have to use that power to mobilize people at the grassroots."

The meeting with the biodiversity executive secretary followed another with the executive director for U.N. Habitat, Maimunah Mohd Sharif, where they discussed the role of faith communities in creating more sustainable cities.

Shezad, director of the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences, said that both meetings, as well as the U.N. Environment Program's Faith for Earth Initiative, signal a greater willingness within the U.N. and the faith community to work together, especially on environmental matters.

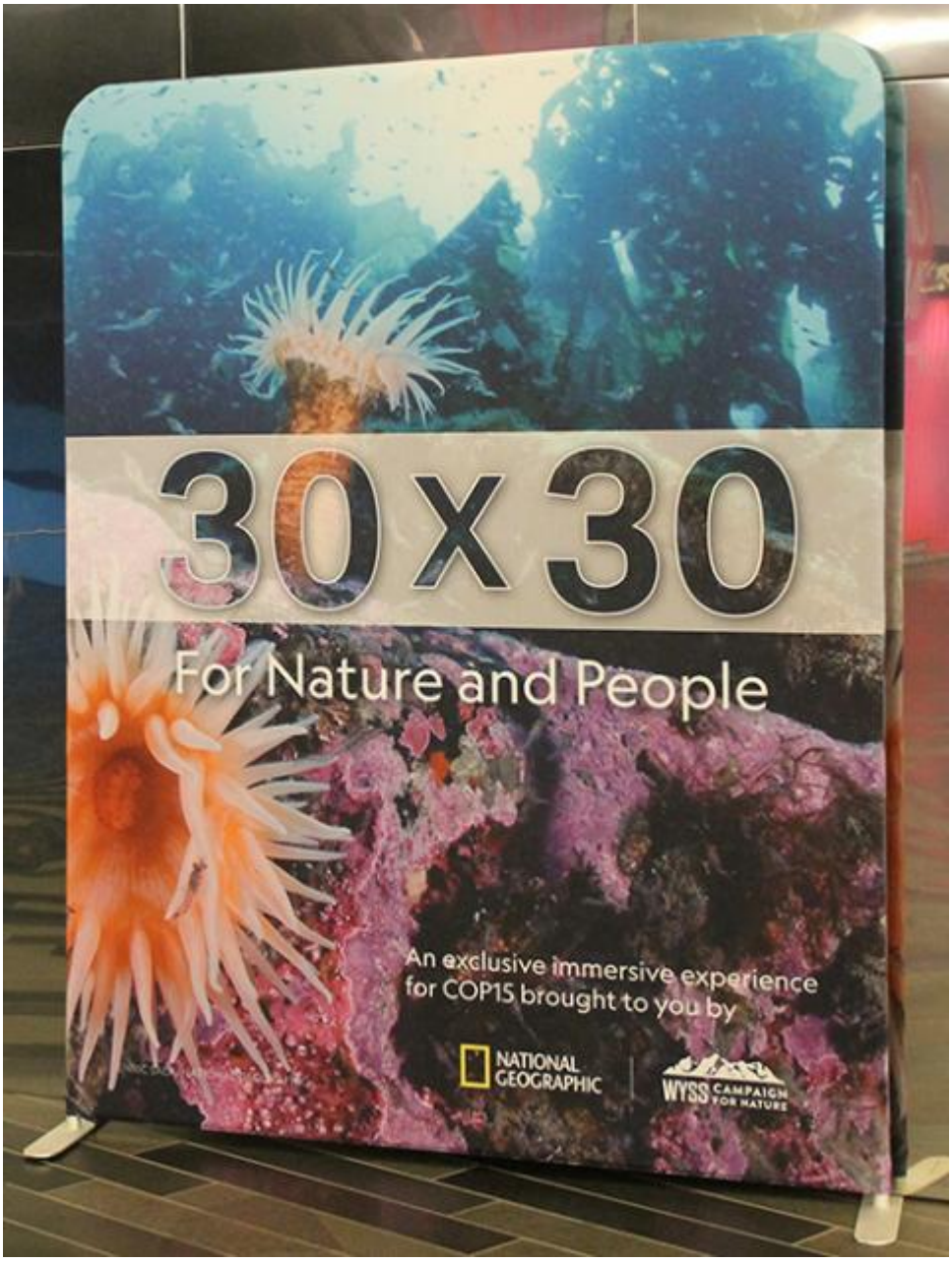



People take a break at the faith pavilion Dec. 11 at the COP15 United Nations biodiversity conference in Montreal. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

"You're seeing faith is now starting to play a role formally, and it's going to be taken seriously. So it's exciting. Also a lot more work," he said.

As the faith coalition sought to build bridges in the U.N., delegates for nearly 200 countries continued to work toward a deal on the biodiversity framework. Environmental ministers are expected to begin a high-level segment on Thursday to resolve the remaining major issues to reach a final agreement.

Observers say that two main blocks in the talks are ambition — how lofty conservation targets will be set — and implementation — what level of resources, particularly financing, will be committed to deliver on them.




Nations are considering a proposal to conserve 30% of lands and marine areas by 2030 as part of a global biodiversity framework under negotiations at COP15 in Montreal. (NCR photo/Brian Roewe)

Some key points remain: committing to conserve at least 30% of lands and oceans by 2030; addressing drivers of biodiversity loss, such as through goals to reduce the environmental footprints of production and consumption by as much as half by 2030; and targets related to species extinction reduction, nature-based solutions and monitoring progress.

How the details in each area are settled matters, said Goossens-Ishii. For instance, environmental activists have pushed for the 30% target to include important biodiverse areas and the creation of ecological corridors rather than a patchwork of protected spaces.

"I think the quality of the biodiversity protection and restoration is as equally important as the percentage," she said.

Goossens-Ishii told EarthBeat that faith groups will continue to push for human rights included throughout the document and recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples and local communities, including their free, prior and informed consent in decision-making on their lands. Indigenous communities have expressed concerns that establishments of protected areas under the 30x30 target could displace them from their ancestral lands.

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Speaking with reporters Dec. 13, Mrema expressed optimism that talks were progressing, brackets in the document were reducing and the conference will conclude with an agreement in hand as scheduled on Dec. 19.

Marco Lambertini, director general of World Wide Fund For Nature, a leading international conservation organization, said in a press conference that COP15 represents "the opportunity to set clarity and ambition on nature" just as the Paris agreement's 1.5-degree Celsius temperature limit did on climate change.

"I cannot underscore enough the importance of this week," Lambertini said. "This week could be truly a historic moment for nature and for our future."

**Related:** Religion has more than a moral role to play in protecting creation, faith groups say at COP15
This story appears in the **COP15 Montreal** feature series. View the full series.
A version of this story appeared in the **Dec 23, 2022 - Jan 5, 2023** print issue under the headline: At COP15, multifaith coalition delivers priorities to UN biodiversity chief.