



# Fauna & Flora

Saving Nature Together

## Understanding conservation impact

Our approach



## Introduction

Fauna & Flora's purpose is to protect the diversity of life on earth, for the survival of the planet and its people.

As an organisation, we hold ourselves to account against this purpose and we care deeply about our impact. Both within our individual projects<sup>1</sup> and as an organisation, we strive to answer the question: is our work driving positive change for nature?

We must challenge ourselves, because biodiversity is in crisis. Around the world, species and habitats are facing unprecedented pressure from a wide array of threats including climate change, habitat loss and degradation, unsustainable resource use and poaching - all of which are urgent and difficult to solve. What's more, the resources available to tackle such issues are limited, so it is vital that we focus time and funds on activities that really work.

## Saving nature, together

Fauna & Flora has always worked on the premise that solutions to conservation problems ultimately lie in the hands of in-country actors including conservation organisations, local communities and government agencies. In line with our local focus, we have developed a novel approach to understanding impact that is intentionally bottom-up, respectful of those we work with, and mindful of the unique complexities that the conservation sector faces in measuring success.

**Front cover:** By 2023, the saiga population in the Ustyurt plateau had grown to almost 40,000 individuals - up from only 1,900 in 2016. Fauna & Flora's long-term work with partner Association for the Conservation of Biodiversity of Kazakhstan to reduce threats to saiga played an instrumental part in this success story.

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“Both within our individual projects and as an organisation we strive to answer the question: is our work driving positive change for nature?”

Putting conservation impact at the centre of all we do is therefore critical. It allows us to assess whether what we're doing is working, and ensures that we can flex, adapt and learn quickly from both success and failure. It also gives us, and our supporters, assurance that we are delivering on our organisational aims.

This document provides a summary of our approach and why we choose to work in this way.

To learn more about our conservation impact, visit our website: [fauna-flora.org/conservation-impact](https://fauna-flora.org/conservation-impact)

## What is impact in conservation?

Conservation impact is not simply about the activities we undertake - it is about the *changes* that happen because of our activities. At a fundamental level, the units for understanding conservation impact are species and habitats: are species surviving and thriving? Are we maintaining the diversity of species we would expect in the places we work? Has the extent, quality and diversity of habitats been maintained or recovered? Do our sites continue to deliver ecosystem services for the planet and people?

Given our commitment to locally led conservation, we also seek to understand how people contribute to conservation solutions, how they benefit from them, and if they are negatively impacted by them.

But understanding impact is complex and challenging. Globally there's been much discussion about how conservation impact and biodiversity change

can and should be measured, and we have actively engaged in and contributed to these debates over the last three decades.

These engagements, together with our own knowledge and experience, have shaped our approach to conservation impact, which is underpinned by key considerations and core principles (see pages 4-5).



## Key considerations in understanding impact

The main considerations that have informed our approach are:

### Time

Biodiversity recovery does not happen overnight, and the timescales in which we expect to see change happen differ between species, places and approaches. These changes are seldom straightforward; they sometimes take decades to be realised, and more often than not require long-term commitment.

For example, some species have slow reproductive cycles, which means it can take decades to see a population-level response to our conservation interventions.

### Partnership

Collaboration is at the heart of our organisation and everything we do. Our projects are developed in genuine partnership with local organisations who we see as critical in sustaining conservation work and impact in the long term. We work alongside core partners, supporting their journeys to independently deliver conservation, manage grants, work with local stakeholders and monitor impact.

Therefore, rather than imposing top-down metrics, KPIs and specific methods or tools that primarily serve our own organisational purposes, we advocate for monitoring approaches that generate evidence that is useful and relevant to local partners and project teams, allowing them to understand what is working, what is not, and to manage and adapt their work accordingly.

### Complexity

Every project at Fauna & Flora is different - there is no 'one size fits all' in conservation. However, a common thread throughout all of our projects is that the challenges they are tackling are complex and often change over time. In fact, most projects are working to address numerous threats, so multiple strategies are therefore needed to address these. Our approach to understanding conservation impact respects this complexity.

“ **Biodiversity recovery is seldom straight-forward - it sometimes takes decades to be realised, and more often than not requires long-term commitment.** ”

## Our principles and approach

Building on our cross-sector engagements, our experience and our key considerations, we have developed an approach that is built around four core principles:

- 1. Impact focused.** We want to document and ensure that what we do is working towards delivering real change.
- 2. Bottom-up.** We don't impose top-down metrics or monitoring techniques. Instead, we support project teams, partners and local stakeholders to design monitoring, evaluation and learning systems that can address the questions they need to answer, using methods that can be sustained in the long term.
- 3. Appropriately robust.** Our monitoring and analysis needs to be accurate enough to paint a true picture. But we understand the challenges that teams and partners face on the ground, so we aim to strike the right balance between accuracy and feasibility. We believe impact assessment should be proportionate to specific needs and burden of proof; for example, more focused and in-depth monitoring may be needed if we are testing a novel approach versus one that is tried and tested. We embrace a broad range of methods for monitoring and evaluation and we take an inclusive view of evidence that respects different ways of knowing - including local, experiential and western scientific knowledge.
- 4. Learning is prioritised.** We support teams and partners to share lessons learned internally across our network and more widely.

Given these core principles, we take a theory-based approach to designing our projects and to understanding the impact of our work. This means mapping out how we think change will happen in our projects (known as a Theory of Change) and then designing monitoring, evaluation and learning to test this Theory of Change and understand our progress. The advantages of using this approach are that:

- there is good evidence<sup>2</sup> that interim outcomes are a strong predictor of conservation success in the long term, so even if conservation impact takes a long time to realise, we can be confident that we are on the path to success or can adapt if we need to;
- projects and associated monitoring, evaluation and learning can be developed collaboratively with key project stakeholders, enabling us to be truly bottom-up and appropriately robust for any given context; and
- regular reflection on progress against a project's Theory of Change allows a project team or partner to learn and adapt in a timely manner, and they are supported to share this learning for the benefit of the wider conservation community.

# What does this mean in practice?

## Understanding impact in our projects

Each project at Fauna & Flora is supported to develop a unique Theory of Change focused on the overarching biodiversity outcome it is working towards; these are roughly focused around a ten-year timeframe. We design specific monitoring, evaluation and learning to focus on key changes that the project will drive or contribute to.

By taking a holistic approach to project design that is based on a Theory of Change, we can ensure that funding contributes towards the project's overall vision - even when that funding is for a shorter time period or only covers part of a project's work. It also means that our progress towards impact is measured consistently across all funds.

**“ We design monitoring, evaluation and learning to focus on key changes we want a project to achieve.**

Monitoring, evaluation and learning is implemented to test a project's progress against its Theory of Change. It is also fed into Fauna & Flora's annual reporting process, allowing us to assess our collective impact without requiring the imposition of additional top-down metrics.

In 2023, monitoring teams found more than 1,000 *Magnolia grandis* saplings growing wild in the forest – the result of a decade of work with partners to protect this critically endangered tree in Vietnam.

## Understanding our organisational impact

At an organisational level we use generalised Theory of Change models for common intervention types to understand where our projects are on their journeys towards impact; we call these impact chains. These impact chains were created and tested in collaboration with other conservation organisations<sup>3</sup> and describe the expected causal relationships between short-term outcomes, longer-term outcomes and eventual impact.

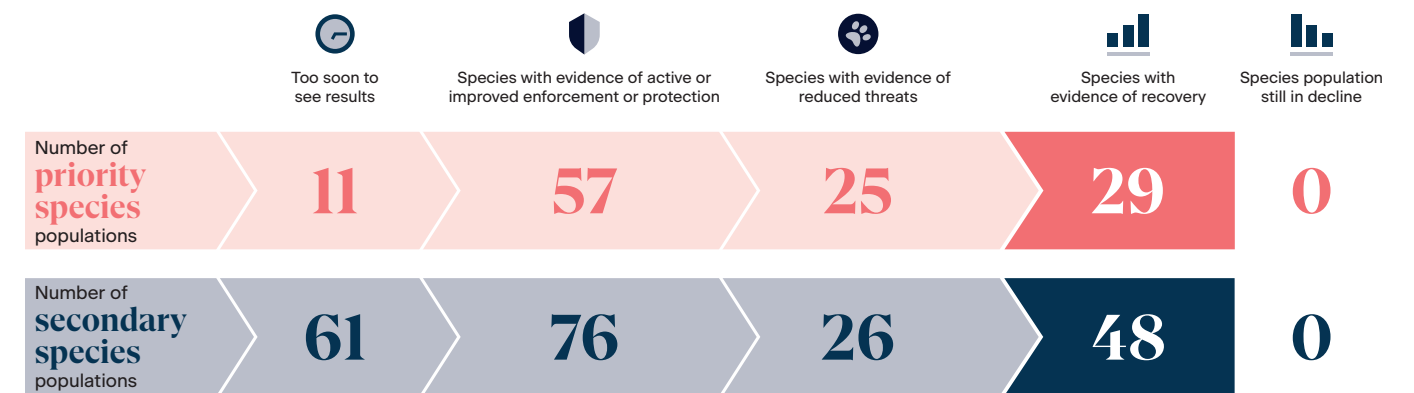
Each year, every Fauna & Flora project team has the opportunity to reflect on and document what they have done during the previous calendar year and to share their evidence for outcomes or changes observed (which could be a result of work undertaken at any point in the project's history).

By focusing on key changes, rather than organisational KPIs or metrics, evidence generated through locally appropriate project monitoring is used to understand where projects are on their individual journeys.

These chains and the underpinning evidence form the basis of our annual Conservation Impact Report. Each year, not only are we able to confidently describe the scale, breadth and depth of our work, we are also building important institutional memory and meeting the commitments we make as an organisation to demonstrate our progress against our charitable commitments.

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### Example of two impact chains from our 2023 Conservation Impact Report:



Together, the above impact chains give a snapshot of our species-based work across our portfolio in 2023.<sup>4</sup> They show how many of our 128 priority species populations and 278 secondary species populations are at each step on the pathway of change towards recovery. We also indicate where species populations have not responded to our interventions or showed signs of recovery.



## Understanding our long-term impact

Drawing on the data we collect through our annual reporting process, we conducted further analysis to understand the long-term cumulative impact of our work over several years. The figures below demonstrate our findings for species- and site focused projects in 2023.

Where species-focused projects have been operating for at least five years:



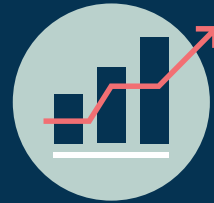
Management of primary species is actively progressing in

**over 95%**  
of projects<sup>5</sup>



Threats to primary species have reduced in

**over 65%**  
of projects



Primary species populations are recovering in

**over 45%**  
of projects

Where site-focused projects have been operating for at least five years:



Management of sites is actively progressing in

**nearly 95%**  
of projects<sup>5</sup>



Threats to sites and habitats have reduced in

**over 60%**  
of projects



Site-level biodiversity recovery is already evident in

**nearly 25%**  
of projects<sup>6</sup>







## Keeping it real

Conservation is a complex discipline that combines biological and social sciences as well as different value systems, and brings together people, places and species. In 1985 it was described by Michael Soulé as often being a ‘crisis discipline’ - characterised by the need to act before knowing all the facts, using a mixture of science, art and intuition, as well as information.

Our well-developed thinking, together with our systems and processes, allow us to find the right balance between being quick and agile, while also ensuring that we can understand our impact in an incredibly complex environment. Our approach also helps us mitigate for other factors such as

limited funding, short-term funding cycles and ever-changing contexts within which it can be challenging to achieve measurable change.

The reward for us is in hearing the stories of impact behind the numbers, and in seeing how these changes add up to real impact over the long term (see page 8).

One such insight was shared by our Cambodia team, where surveys conducted in 2023 at one of our longest-standing marine sites in the country, Koh Rong, show stabilisation and recovery of key indicators, including hard coral and seagrass cover, as well as an increase in overall fish abundance.

## References and notes

1. A project may encompass multiple sites and/or species and employ multiple conservation approaches. A project might be delivered by Fauna & Flora directly, or in collaboration with partners and other organisations. Project goals can range from the conservation of a site or a species to creating the enabling conditions needed to achieve conservation success (for example by changing the behaviour of a particular group to address a specific issue).
2. Evidence of short-term outcomes as a predictor of long-term conservation success: Kapos V, Balmford A, Aveling R, et al. Outcomes, not implementation, predict conservation success. *Oryx*. 2009;43(3):336-342. doi:10.1017/S0030605309990275
3. Collaboration with other conservation organisations to describe expected causal relationships between short-term outcomes, longer-term outcomes and impact. Kapos V, Balmford A, Aveling R, et al. Calibrating conservation: new tools for measuring success. *Society for Conservation Biology Conservation Letters*. 2008; 1(4):155-164. doi:10.1111/j.1755-263X.2008.00025.x
4. In our species-focused impact chains, six priority species populations and 67 secondary species populations are not included, as there was insufficient impact information available during 2023.
5. For both sites and species – where active management was not yet in place, this was due to a range of factors including: changes to project design/focus, changes in personnel, logistical and process challenges and stakeholder relationships.
6. Site-level biodiversity recovery takes longer to evidence, due to the complexity of threats within individual sites and the breadth of biodiversity monitoring undertaken.



[www.fauna-flora.org](http://www.fauna-flora.org)



# Learn more...

Read about our conservation impact by visiting  
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