

UN Honors Three New World Restoration Flagships Led by Indigenous and Local Communities

The United Nations has recognized three new World Restoration Flagships in Australia, Canada, and South Africa for their pioneering work in ecosystem restoration rooted in Indigenous knowledge and local community action. The announcement comes ahead of the seventh session of the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-7), highlighting efforts that advance global agrifood systems, biodiversity protection and climate resilience.

Jointly presented by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) under the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021–2030), the flagship awards celebrate large-scale, science-driven and inclusive ecosystem restoration projects.

UNEP Executive Director Inger Andersen praised the collaborative nature of the initiatives, noting that the projects demonstrate how combining Indigenous knowledge with modern science can heal damaged landscapes “one hectare at a time.” FAO Director-General QU Dongyu emphasized that restoration driven by local communities is crucial for building resilient agrifood systems and protecting biodiversity.

Australia: Shellfish Reef Building Program

Once widespread, Australia’s oyster and mussel reefs have suffered massive declines due to overharvesting, pollution and habitat loss. To reverse this damage, The Nature Conservancy and the Australian Government launched the Reef Builder programme between 2021 and 2023, restoring shellfish reefs at

13 sites along the southern coast in partnership with local and Indigenous communities.

Australia's Environment and Water Minister Murray Watt said the recognition showcases the country's leadership in marine ecosystem recovery. The initiative has removed nearly 15 tonnes of nutrient pollution, boosted fish stocks, restored marine biodiversity and created over 425 jobs, generating around USD 10 million in economic activity. The long-term goal is to restore shellfish reefs across 30% of their former range by 2030.

Canada: Respectful Returns – Restoring Salmon Ecosystems

Salmon populations in Canada have faced severe decline, threatening local economies and the cultural and spiritual heritage of Indigenous communities. Since 2010, Parks Canada has worked with Indigenous Peoples and local groups to restore rivers and streams across seven national parks on both Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

The project has revitalized 65,000 hectares of land and 228 kilometers of waterways, created more than 100 jobs, and strengthened collaboration among 32 organizations and communities. At six of the seven sites, salmon numbers are already rising. Canada's Minister of Environment, Climate Change and Nature, Julie Dabrusin, said the flagship recognition reflects the power of Indigenous knowledge and science-driven cooperation in rebuilding ecosystems and repairing relationships with nature.

South Africa: Thicket Restoration Movement

South Africa's native subtropical thicket—one of the country's most diverse but overlooked ecosystems—is the focus of a nationwide restoration movement uniting over 60 initiatives across Eastern and Western Cape. With a target of restoring 800,000 hectares by 2030, the program strengthens soil resilience, stores carbon, and provides drought-time fodder

for livestock and wildlife.

The initiative is projected to create over 1,000 rural jobs, improving the livelihoods of nearly two million people. Reviving the thicket could sequester up to eight million tonnes of CO₂ annually, equivalent to offsetting emissions from around 20 gas-fired power plants. Restoration leader Luyanda Luthuli described the effort as an investment in future generations and ecological resilience.

Global Momentum for Restoration

These three projects join a growing portfolio of 27 existing World Restoration Flagships, which together have already restored over 18 million hectares across the globe. Plans are underway to expand this impact to more than 68 million hectares.

As UNEA-7 approaches, the UN underscored that restoring ecosystems is central to building resilience for both people and nature—ensuring a healthier, more sustainable future for all.