

Celeste Connors, North America Regional Facilitator Half-year Activity Report, December 29, 2020

As one of our Regional Facilitators for North America I worked closely with the United Nations Environment Programme's North America Office (UNEP North America) to support preparations for the fifth session of the United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA-5). With MIT Solve, we hosted a series of six virtual consultation workshops on the theme of “*Strengthening Actions for Nature to Achieve the Sustainable Development Goals*”, convening over 400 North American stakeholders across the Major Groups to explore the topic of nature as a solution to the climate and biodiversity crises. In addition, as the Executive Director of Hawaii Green Growth (HGG) Local2030 Hub, a UN recognized Local2030 Hub that supports the Local2030 Initiative and the 2030 Agenda, we convened over 50 stakeholder meetings with public, private and civil society partners across Hawaii, US territories – Guam and Puerto Rico – and other island economies to support SDG implementation and a green economic recovery. In December 2020, HGG Local2030 Hub released the first statewide Voluntary Local Review (VLR) in the United States (attached), which features nature-based solutions to achieve the SDGs.

Summary of UNEP North America and MIT Solve Virtual Consultations

In partnership with the World Environment Center, and the United Nations Associations in Canada and the United States, MIT Solve and UNEP North America convened over 400 North American stakeholders across the Major Groups to explore the topic of nature as a solution to the climate and biodiversity crises. Building on the distributed consultation model implemented in preparation for UNEA-4, UNEP North America and its partners designed a regional consultative process to ensure broad and diverse stakeholder participation in UNEA-5, given the challenges and restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The North America Regional Facilitators played a key role in the design and implementation of the process. The six consultations were executed as follows:

- *20 May 2020: Youth consultation (United States), in partnership with United Nations Association of the United States of America, via their Global Engagement Online Series platform*
- *18 June 2020: Youth consultation (Canada), in partnership with the United Nations Association in Canada*
- *3 September 2020: Public sector consultation (Canada), in partnership with the United Nations Association in Canada*
- *24 September 2020: Private sector consultation (Canada), in partnership with the United Nations Association in Canada*
- *8 October 2020: “Apex” major groups consultation (United States and Canada), in partnership with MIT Solve*
- *14 October 2020: Private sector consultation (United States and Canada), in partnership with MIT Solve and the World Environment Center*

In each consultation, participants were asked to share examples of nature-based solutions and best practices in North America, reflecting on both successes and challenges, and to formulate key messages to policy makers about the enabling conditions needed to scale these best practices. In addition to highlighting strong North American examples of nature-based solutions

(Annex 1), discussions across the six consultations converged around the following common themes and key messages.

Both top-down and bottom-up approaches must work in tandem to achieve effective, long-term solutions to the climate and biodiversity crises. Participants called for clear commitments from government at all levels to a green recovery from COVID-19, including investment in nature-based solutions, renewable energy, and circular economy to address the climate and biodiversity crises. With leadership at the national level, governments can then set shared goals for a municipality or a region, which have broad jurisdictional agreement and support, but focus on smaller-scale, local projects as an implementation strategy. Participants emphasized the need to support, incentivize, and scale up solutions happening at the grassroots level, noting that impactful localized projects can draw on shared science and replicated approaches, while also being rooted in their unique social and ecological context.

In designing nature-based solutions, coordination with stakeholders at the local level, particularly with indigenous communities, is key. Given the abundance of nature-based solutions being implemented at the local level, and the intimate knowledge of sustainable land and resource management in indigenous communities, decision-makers should prioritize community and indigenous input on policies to support nature-based solutions. Participants suggested that the regular convening of local, tribal, state, and federal governments, nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and the private sector could help build trust and ease the process of planning and implementing actions for nature.

Cross-sector collaboration is required to implement and sustain nature-based solutions. Participants stressed that complex problems require complex solutions. The regular convening of diverse stakeholders could also foster the cross-sector collaboration and public-private partnerships needed to systemically tackle the climate and biodiversity crises. Participants highlighted the need for feedback loops between the research and policy community and between the policy community and the private sector, for example, to strengthen approaches to nature-based solutions. Through these partnerships, actors across sectors can lead by example, demonstrating the diverse benefits of nature-based solutions and inspiring further collaboration on actions for nature.

Empowering youth and communities through education can inspire the sustainable lifestyle transition and behavior change needed to achieve the SDGs. There was a universal call in each consultation, but most strongly in the youth-focused discussions, for Environment and Education Ministers to focus on empowering actions for nature through education. Participants suggested starting early – teaching science through a sustainability lens, and making it part of the year-round core curriculum and educational programming for students of all ages. There is strong demand from youth across North America for this kind of educational shift. Participants emphasized that implementing sustained environmental education can help overcome common entrenched viewpoints and misconceptions about environmental action, create shared value, and ultimately empower youth to become stewards of the environment in their communities.

Innovation, data, and technology have an unprecedented role to play in designing and demonstrating the benefits of nature-based solutions. Participants noted that the climate, biodiversity, and COVID-19 crises are immense challenges, but also immense opportunities to jump-start innovation for nature. New technologies offer effective, efficient ways to implement

nature-based solutions and quantify their impact. Participants stressed that open-source data can bring credibility, accountability, and monitoring to nature-based solutions. Demonstrating impact through data sharing can, in turn, empower local projects to build on successful models and implement strategic nature-based solutions in their own unique contexts. Further, scaling up innovative methods and technologies provides a prime opportunity for cross-sector collaborations to strengthen nature.

The standardization of language and metrics around nature-based solutions is needed to define collective rules and impact. *Participants highlighted the discordant understanding of nature-based solutions across sectors and jurisdictions. At the outset, stakeholders would benefit from a common definition of nature-based solutions and additional clarification of their diverse co-benefits. In designing and implementing nature-based projects, participants suggested that permitting and reporting requirements must also be standardized, while allowing replication across diverse sites, supply chains, and local contexts. Following implementation, stakeholders would also benefit from standard requirements for the calculation and verification of project impact. Participants noted that making this kind of information available and standardizing processes for the implementation of nature-based solutions would be particularly beneficial in the finance sector, for investors who are interested in environmental impact, but are not experts in nature-based solutions or natural capital.*

Stakeholders must invest in nature, financing and de-risking nature-based solutions. *As participants noted in each consultation, local efforts to strengthen nature can be a key approach to reach larger sustainability goals, yet local nongovernmental organizations, community groups, and governments often have the least budget capacity to build knowledge. National or state-level government, philanthropic, and/or private funding can fill the gap in resources needed to enable clear goal-setting, adaptation, and implementation of nature-based projects. This support should be multi-year whenever possible, to allow for the time necessary to establish new approaches, measure project impacts, and identify best practices. Participants highlighted the possibility of instruments such as economic incentives, green bonds, biodiversity offsets, public procurement standards, and reinsurance mechanisms to encourage investment in nature, while demonstrating the cost-saving co-benefits of nature-based solutions.*

Private sector entities should rise to the challenge of integrating sustainability into core business values. *In consultations focused on engaging the private sector, participants noted that integrating sustainability and nature-based solutions throughout company objectives takes significant work and buy-in from leadership, but may be the only way to have durable impacts. Several participants discussed challenges around mismatched supply chain visibility and impact – that the sections of the supply chain with high impact are often several steps removed from public-facing brands or those making decisions on sustainability. Integrating nature-based solutions into core business approaches is needed to achieve long-term sustainability at all levels of the supply chain.*

Hawaii Green Growth Local2030 Hub and the Local2030 Islands Network

In addition to the above consultations, as a UN recognized Local2030 Hub, Hawaii Green Growth convened over 50 meetings in 2020 involving public, private and civil society stakeholders to accelerate local and indigenous solutions to achieve the SDGs that are globally relevant. The meetings were convened as follows:

United Nations High-Level Political Forum

- July 16, 2020 - Hawai'i & Pacific SDG Leadership

75th United Nations General Assembly

- September 24, 2020 - SDG Action Zone: Islands Supporting Islands: Catalyzing Partnerships for the Decade of Action to 2030
- September 29, 2020 - Uplifting Island Partnerships in Support of the Decade of Action

Hawaii Green Growth Local2030 Hub Convenings

Policy & Legislation Working Group Meetings

- January 7, 2020
- March 3, 2020
- April 7, 2020
- May 12, 2020
- June 2, 2020
- July 7, 2020
- October 6, 2020

Local-Global Next Generation Working Group Meetings

- January 22, 2020
- February 19, 2020
- March 27, 2020
- April 15, 2020
- May 26, 2020
- June 24, 2020
- July 21, 2020

Dashboard & Measures Working Group Meetings

- January 21, 2020
- March 17, 2020
- April 27, 2020
- June 3, 2020
- October 20, 2020

Sustainability Business Forum

- February 7, 2020
- February 11, 2020 - Sustainable Investing Summit with BlackRock
- April 30, 2020
- May 8, 2020 - SBF Talk Story Series: Alan Oshima
- June 9, 2020
- July 9, 2020
- July 22, 2020 - SBF Talk Story Series: Michelle Edkins
- September 24, 2020
- December 3, 2020 - SBF Talk Story Series: John De Fries

HGG Hub Annual Member Event

- October 27, 2020

Local2030 Islands Network

- April 23, 2020 - Tourism
- April 30, 2020 - Virtual Platform on COVID-19 at University of Guam Conference on Island Sustainability
- May 19, 2020 - Island Food Security
- May 28, 2020 - Economic Recovery & Resilience
- June 11, 2020 - Strengthening Island Resilience
- June 23, 2020 - Data Tools & Innovation
- July 23, 2020 - Island & Indigenous Youth
- August 26, 2020 - Nature-based Solutions & Coastal Community Food Security