

2.3 “Why” – the underlying reasons of different protected areas

2.3.1 Protected areas by IUCN category

The International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) system for categorising protected area management offers a framework for describing, classifying, and comparing protected sites worldwide. Although the system is useful for the planning, establishment, and management stages of protected areas, information on management category is currently only available for 20 % of African protected areas.

Protected areas vary in terms of designation, management, governance and outcomes, both within and between countries¹⁻³. In an attempt to create a common understanding of protected areas, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) developed a system for categorising protected areas based on their management objectives. This comprehensive framework describes, classifies, and compares protected areas worldwide. It includes six management categories¹⁻³:

- Ia. Strict nature reserves
- Ib. Wilderness areas
- II. National parks
- III. Natural monuments or features
- IV. Habitat/species management areas
- V. Protected landscapes or seascapes
- VI. Protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources.

In 1994, the IUCN published a comprehensive guide to applying protected area management categories⁴, which was revised and updated in 2008⁵, and complemented with supplementary guidelines for application to marine and coastal protected areas².

To apply this category system, a site needs to meet the IUCN definition of a protected area. It is implicit that areas meeting this definition have a common set of objectives, which should apply to all six categories of protected area. These management categories should then be assigned based on the primary management objective(s) of the protected area, which must apply to at least 75 % of the site.



Importantly, categories do not imply a hierarchy of quality, importance, or naturalness. For example, one should not assume that a category II protected area is more effectively managed or has better conservation performance than a category IV area.

Protected areas are governed by a variety of actors (see also Topic 2.4.1). Management categories can be used alongside the typology of governance types developed by IUCN, which classify protected areas based on who holds authority and responsibility for decisions within the protected areas. The IUCN defines four governance types, any of which can be combined with any management objective: A. Governance by government; B. Shared governance; C. Private governance; and D. Governance by indigenous peoples and local communities^{1,2,5}.

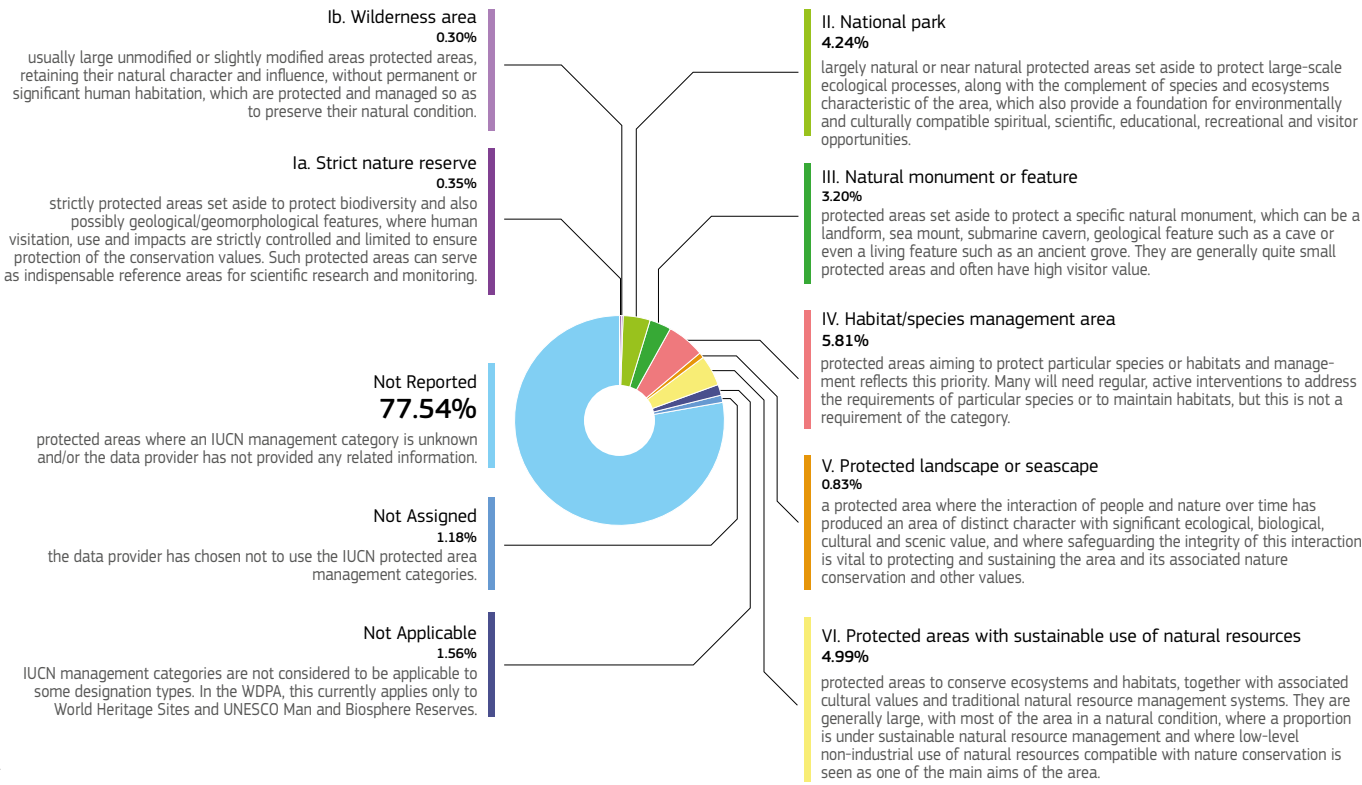
Governance type	A. Governance by government			B. Shared governance			C. Private governance			D. Governance by indigenous peoples and local communities	
Management category	Federal or national ministry or agency	Sub-national ministry or agency	Government-delegated management	Transboundary management	Collaborative management	Joint management	Individual land-owners	Non-profit organisations	For-profit organisations	Indigenous peoples	Local communities
Ia. Strict nature reserve	1.9	-	0.3	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Ib. Wilderness area	1.5	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
II. National park	15.8	1.0	0.9	0.1	0.8	0.5	0.1	0.3	-	0.4	0.3
III. Natural monument or feature	5.4	-	-	-	0.0	-	-	-	-	-	12.0
IV. Habitat/species management area	27.1	1.3	0.9	0.1	0.3	0.1	0.2	0.2	-	-	0.1
V. Protected landscape or seascape	1.7	-	0.1	-	0.3	0.1	0.1	-	-	-	0.3
VI. Protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources	16.4	2.7	1.7	-	2.6	1.1	-	-	-	0.1	1.3

The IUCN definition of a protected area

The six protected area management categories are relevant in the context of the definition of a protected area as:

“A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values”⁶.

As of 2023, only one out of five African protected areas in the World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA)⁷ reported an IUCN management category. Although recommended, reporting this information to the WDPA is not mandatory for data providers⁸. Some countries, like Mozambique and Ghana, have reported management categories for over 97 % of their protected areas. Others, like South Africa or Comoros, have not done so. It should be emphasised, however, that the lack of this information does not diminish the significance of protected areas, nor does it suggest inadequate management⁸.



IUCN management categories in African protected areas.

Assigning IUCN management categories to protected areas is voluntary and reporting this information to the WDPA is not mandatory. There is no information on management category for the majority of the African protected areas. For 77.54% of the sites this information is simply unknown and/or the data provider has not shared the information when reporting to the WDPA. In some cases (1.18% of the areas), the data provider chose not to apply the IUCN categories. Source: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2024). Protected Planet: The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA). [On-line]. [February/2024]. Cambridge, UK: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN. Available at: www.protectedplanet.net

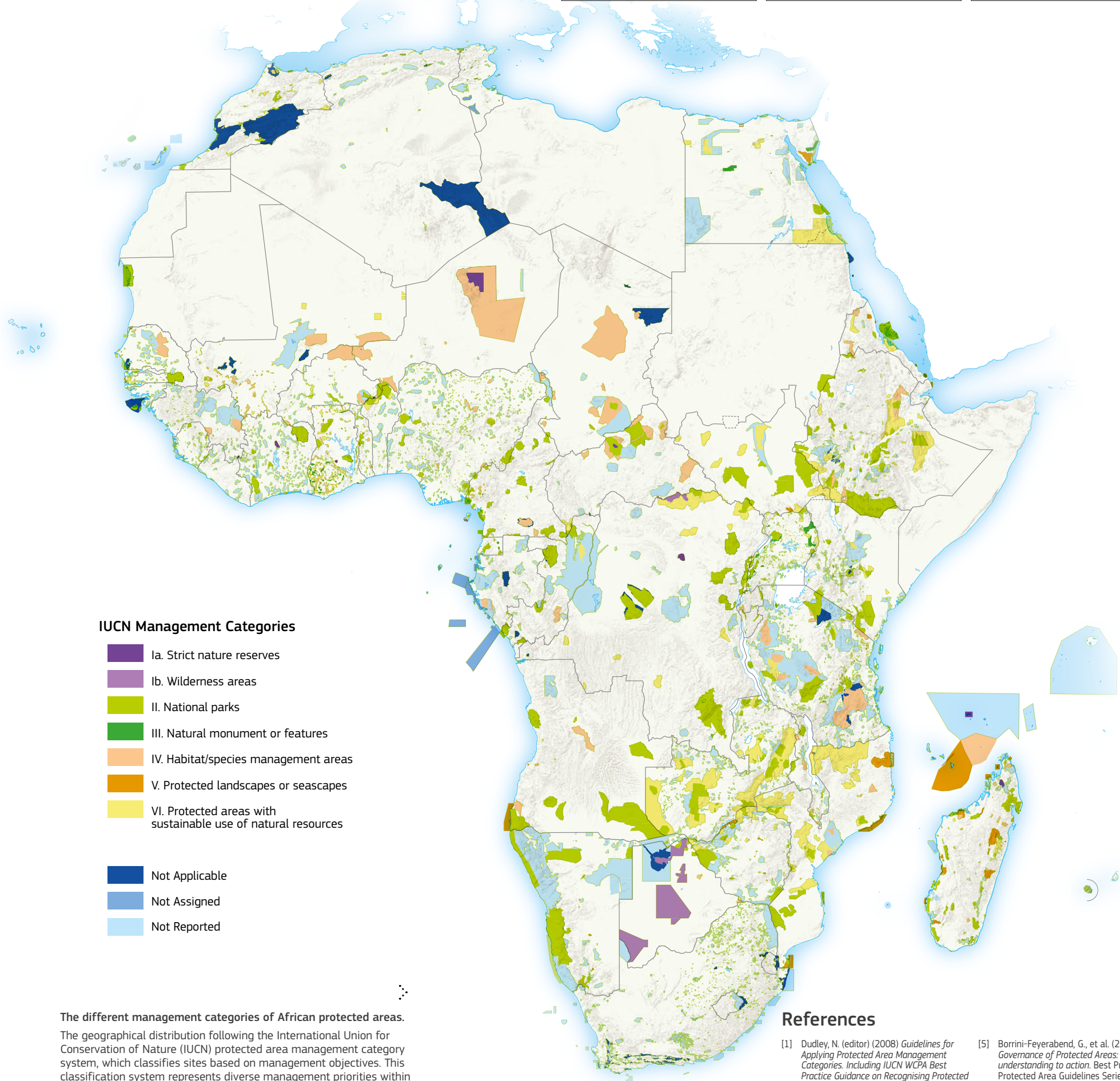
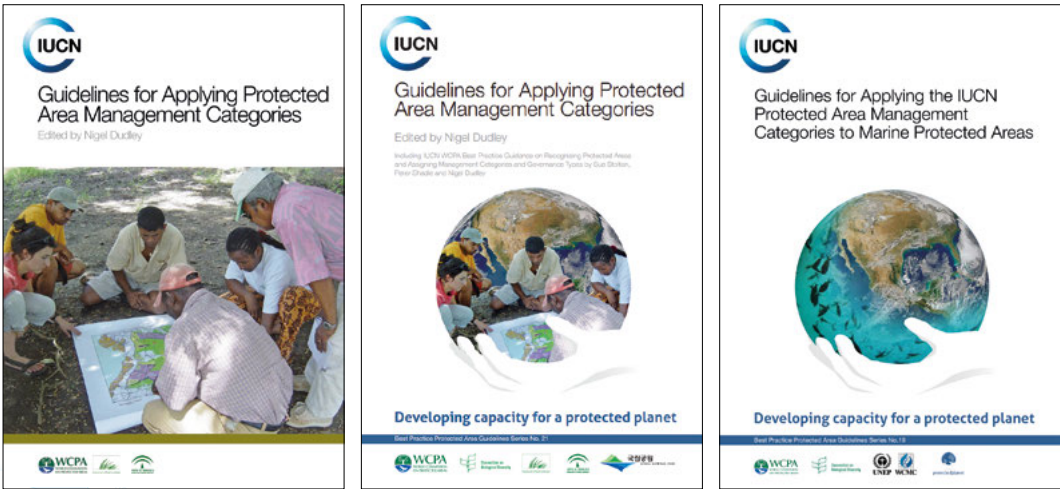
The IUCN protected area management category and governance types in African protected areas.

This matrix presents a classification system for protected areas that includes both management category and governance type. It is an instrument to categorise the combinations of management category and governance type within a country's protected area network. The numbers shown here refer to the percentage of African protected areas that report on both management category and governance type. Source: Borini-Feyerabend, G., et al. (2013). Governance of Protected Areas: From understanding to action. Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 20, Gland, Switzerland: IUCN.

Guidelines for applying the IUCN protected area management category system.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has developed guidelines for applying protected area management categories, including to marine protected areas. Sources:

- Left, IUCN and WCMC. (1994) Guidelines for Protected Area Management Categories. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland; Centre, Dudley, N. (editor) (2008) Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories, Including IUCN WCPA Best Practice Guidance on Recognising Protected Areas and Assigning Management Categories and Governance Types. Best Practice Protected Area Guidelines Series No. 21, IUCN, Gland, Switzerland;
- Right, Day, J., et al. (eds.) (2019) Guidelines for applying the IUCN protected area management categories to marine protected areas. Second edition. IUCN, Gland, Switzerland.



IUCN Management Categories

- Ia. Strict nature reserves
- Ib. Wilderness areas
- II. National parks
- III. Natural monument or features
- IV. Habitat/species management areas
- V. Protected landscapes or seascapes
- VI. Protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources
- Not Applicable
- Not Assigned
- Not Reported

The different management categories of African protected areas.

The geographical distribution following the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) protected area management category system, which classifies sites based on management objectives. This classification system represents diverse management priorities within the global network of protected areas.

Source: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2024). Protected Planet: The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA). [On-line]. [February/2024]. Cambridge, UK: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN. Available at: www.protectedplanet.net

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2.3.2 Protected areas and World Heritage Sites

The World Heritage Convention is a significant global conservation instrument. Although the 52 natural/mixed World Heritage Sites in Africa acknowledge the significance of the continent's biodiversity, the region is under-represented on the World Heritage List. Moreover, the conservation outlook classifies over half of the sites either under 'significant concern' or 'critical' threat categories.

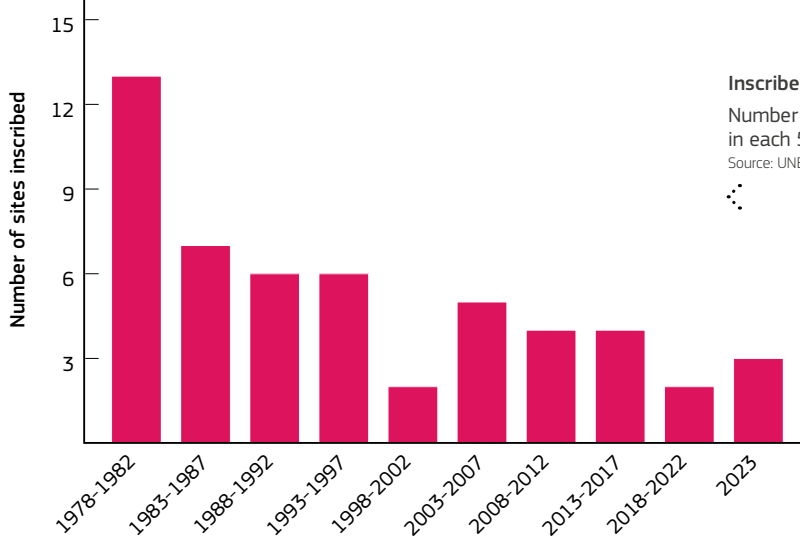
The World Heritage Convention, established in 1972, encourages global collaboration in conserving the planet's significant and most valuable natural and cultural heritage by maintaining a list of sites recognised for their 'Outstanding Universal Value'. Sites inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List attain an international recognition that contributes not only to their long-term conservation, but also to optimising their contributions to sustainable development. Of these, World Heritage Sites inscribed as 'natural' or 'mixed' (natural/cultural) are recognised for their unique biological or geological importance, or natural beauty^{1,2}.

As of 2023, the World Heritage List included 52 natural/mixed sites in Africa, across 32 countries³. Over the first 45 years (1978-2023) of Africa's World Heritage network, the rate of new inscriptions has decreased and the continent is currently slightly under-represented on the World Heritage List. As of 2023, African natural and mixed sites account for 19.6% of the world's 266 most outstanding protected natural areas.

Africa's World Heritage network covers a total area of more than 520 000 km², approximately two times the size of Guinea or the United Kingdom. Sites in the region are significantly larger than those located in other parts of the world, with over half of the African World Heritage terrestrial sites (59.2%) larger than 2 000 km². Importantly, sites in Africa support a distinctive array of species from the continent's exceptional megafauna. In fact, sites in the region tend to be listed primarily for their outstanding biodiversity values. Different biomes are represented in Africa's natural sites, with savannas, forests, mountains and freshwater environments being those most represented, with two thirds of Africa's sites found in these four biomes. Coastal/marine, desert and geological sites are relatively under-represented⁴.

According to the IUCN World Heritage Outlook 3 report⁵ published in 2020, over half of the sites (27 out of 48 sites) are either causing 'significant concern' (15 sites) or in 'critical' condition (12 sites). Moreover, the assessment found protection and management of 34 of the sites to be of some concern or of serious concern, whilst 14 sites are effectively protected and managed. Hunting, fires, invasive alien species, and logging were the main threats contributing to the relatively poor conservation status of sites in Africa. The remaining four sites not included in the report were added to the List in 2021 (one site) and 2023 (three sites).

A site inscribed on the World Heritage List can also be inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger if it is threatened by serious and specific dangers. This mechanism not only highlights threats to a site's World Heritage values, but also encourages corrective action⁶. The African continent has 11 natural sites on the List of World Heritage in Danger, more than any other region, accounting for 68.8% of the total 16 natural sites on this list. An effective management response to address the threats can remove a site from the Danger List, but this is uncommon across the African sites, either because of resource shortages or because of the severity and scale of the issues⁴.



Inscribed World Heritage Sites in Africa.
Number of African natural/mixed World Heritage Sites inscribed in each 5-year period from 1978 to 2022, and in 2023.
Source: UNESCO (2023a). World Heritage List. Available at: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/>



Simien National Park, Ethiopia.
Inscribed in 1978, Ethiopia's Simien Mountains National Park became Africa's first natural World Heritage Site. Characterised by spectacular mountains, the site is home to a high number of Ethiopia's highland endemic species, several of which are threatened.
Source: Damien Halleux Radermecker, on Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 2.0.



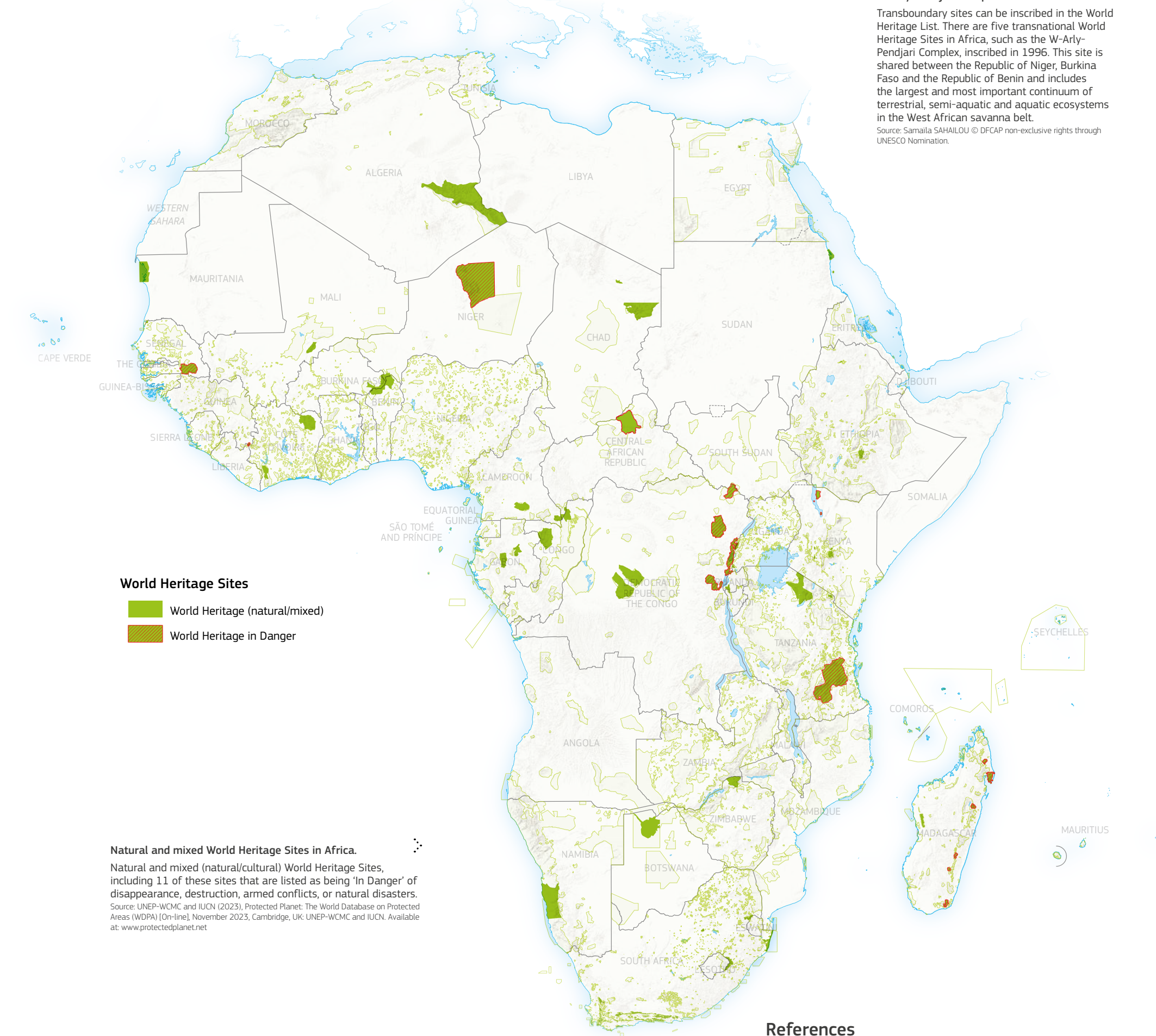
Virunga National Park, Democratic Republic of the Congo.
The park has been inscribed on the List of World Heritage in Danger since 1994. Africa's oldest national park is threatened by several dangers, including armed conflicts, poaching and oil exploration.
Source: Flörschen on Wikimedia Commons CC BY 2.0.



Aldabra Atoll, Seychelles.
Located in the Indian Ocean, the Aldabra Atoll (Seychelles) was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1982. Because of its remoteness and inaccessibility, the area has remained largely undisturbed by humans. Aldabra is one of the world's largest raised coral atolls and contains one of the most important natural habitats for studying evolutionary and ecological processes.
Source: Simisa on Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0.



W-Arly-Pendjari Complex.
Transboundary sites can be inscribed in the World Heritage List. There are five transnational World Heritage Sites in Africa, such as the W-Arly-Pendjari Complex, inscribed in 1996. This site is shared between the Republic of Niger, Burkina Faso and the Republic of Benin and includes the largest and most important continuum of terrestrial, semi-aquatic and aquatic ecosystems in the West African savanna belt.
Source: Samaila SAHAILOU © DFCAP non-exclusive rights through UNESCO Nomination.



World Heritage Sites
World Heritage (natural/mixed)
World Heritage in Danger

Natural and mixed World Heritage Sites in Africa.
Natural and mixed (natural/cultural) World Heritage Sites, including 11 of these sites that are listed as being 'In Danger' of disappearance, destruction, armed conflicts, or natural disasters.
Source: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2023). Protected Planet: The World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA) [On-line], November 2023, Cambridge, UK: UNEP-WCMC and IUCN. Available at: www.protectedplanet.net

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2.3.3 Protected areas and RAMSAR wetlands

The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance recognises the need to conserve one of the most diverse and productive ecosystems in the world. Unfortunately, the condition of the world’s wetlands keeps declining due to human impact. Africa has 424 Ramsar Sites, but many have little or no protection from national governments and there are still considerable information gaps for these iconic wetlands.

Wetlands are among the most diverse and productive ecosystems in the world, upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for survival. However, these ecosystems are also one of the most threatened. Conserving such ecosystems was recognised formally as an international priority in 1971 with the adoption of the Convention on Wetlands of International Importance (the ‘Ramsar Convention’). The Convention entered into force in 1975 to halt the degradation and loss of wetlands and eradicate the knock-on impacts on both people and nature, particularly waterfowl. The Convention provides a framework for national action and international cooperation for the conservation and wise use of these ecosystems and their resources^{1,2}.

As one of the oldest multilateral environmental agreements, the Ramsar Convention reflected a shift in international conservation discussions from focusing solely on species preservation to prioritising the protection of specific ecosystems and sites. This made it one of the first modern treaties aimed at conserving natural resources globally¹⁻³.

Contracting Parties select wetland sites for inclusion in the List of Wetlands of International Importance (the ‘Ramsar List’). The broad definition of wetlands used by the Convention includes “all lakes and rivers, underground aquifers, swamps and marshes, wet grasslands, peatlands, oases, estuaries, deltas and tidal flats, mangroves and other coastal areas, coral reefs, and all human-made sites such as fish ponds, rice paddies, reservoirs and salt pans”⁴.

For a wetland to be designated it must satisfy one or more of nine criteria for identifying Wetlands of International Importance. These ‘Ramsar Sites’ are listed because of their ecological, botanical, zoological, limnological or hydrological importance. Wetlands included in the Ramsar List attain an international status because they are formally recognised for their significant value to individual countries and the planet as a whole⁴.

As of 2023, Africa has 424 Ramsar Sites across 51 countries and accounts for 17% of the total wetland sites inscribed in the Ramsar List globally. This African network covers a total area of more than 1110000km², comparable in size to the whole of Angola⁵. Because of the large cumulative area of individual wetlands, Africa accounts for 43% of the total area of Ramsar Sites globally, more than any other continent⁶.

Republic of the Congo, Chad, and Democratic Republic of the Congo account for 34% of the Ramsar coverage on the continent, with 138139km², 124051km² and 119066m² wetland coverage, respectively. Algeria presents the highest number of Ramsar Sites in Africa (50), followed by Tunisia (42) and Morocco (38). Together, these three countries host 30.6% of the total number of sites in Africa.



✦ Africa's first Ramsar Sites.
Barberspan Nature Reserve (top) and De Hoop Vlei (bottom) were the first African wetlands recorded in the Ramsar List. Both sites are located in South Africa and were added to the List in 1975. Whilst Barberspan is a permanent natural freshwater lake, De Hoop Vlei represents a coastal lake with seasonally fluctuating water levels.
Sources: Top, Mario_ruckh on flickr CC BY-NC-SA 2.0; bottom, Bernard DUPONT on flickr CC BY-SA 2.0.

✦ Multiple designations of Ramsar Sites.
Ramsar Sites can have other conservation statuses in addition to their Ramsar designations. This is the case of Ichkeul Ramsar Site (Tunisia), which is also a National Park, a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site. This lake and associated marshes, which represent an essential stopover for hundreds of thousands of wintering Palaearctic waterfowl, was registered in the Montreux Record in 1990 due to possible changes to its ecological character caused by dam construction on the rivers flowing into the site.
Source: Christian Manhart © UNESCO CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO.

✦ Ngiri-Tumba-Maindombe.
Covering 65696km², Ngiri-Tumba-Maindombe (Democratic Republic of the Congo) is the world's second largest Wetland Site of International Importance. Inscribed in the Ramsar List in 2008 and located at the heart of the Congo Basin, the site includes numerous rivers and nine lakes. The site is home to rich biodiversity and considerable natural resources that support communities in both the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the neighbouring Republic of the Congo.
Source: J. Claeys Boubaert on Wikimedia Commons CC BY-SA 3.0.

The Ramsar wetland type classification categorises wetlands into three major classes: (1) inland, (2) marine/coastal and (3) human-made wetlands. A single site can contain wetland types from from more than one of these categories⁴. According to the Ramsar Classification System, African sites are identified (completely or partially) as: 366 inland wetlands, 148 marine or coastal wetlands, and 138 human-made wetlands⁵.

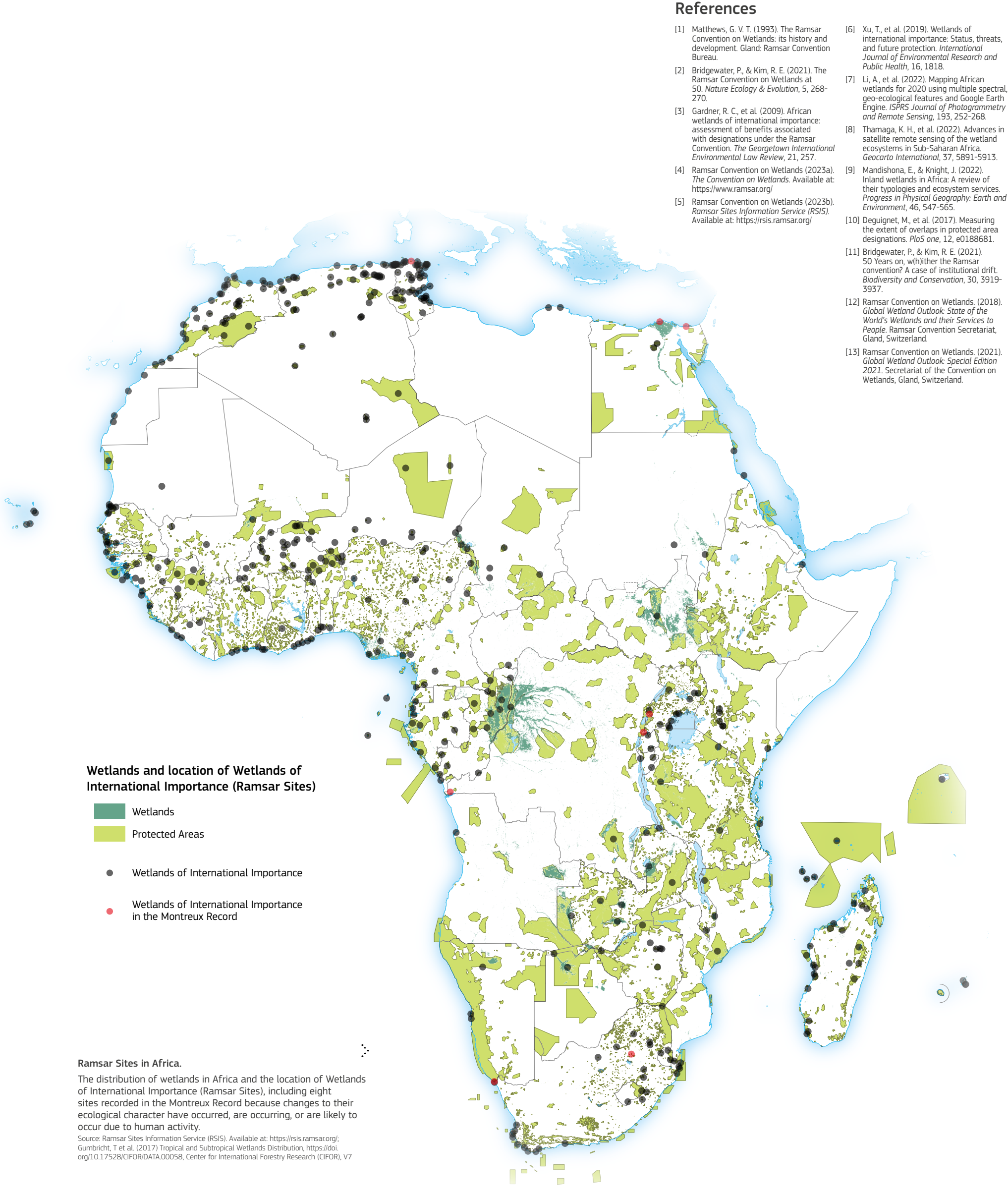
Nevertheless, there is still a lack of information for many African wetlands and the most comprehensive wetland inventory remains the Ramsar List⁷. However, Ramsar classification can sometimes overlook inconspicuous wetland types, in particular small wetlands (often not classified as protected areas under national legislation), which provide critical ecological services for local communities in the region. As a result, many wetlands do not fit the Ramsar classification scheme and are persistently overlooked by policy processes. This leads to wetland degradation and issues for national wetland conservation and management strategies^{8,9}.

Including a wetland in the Ramsar List implies that governments commit to take the necessary actions for preserving its ecological character. It is also important to note that the wise-use concept applies to all wetlands within a Party's territory, not just Ramsar Sites⁵. However, governments maintain their own discretion on the specific ways sites should be managed or monitored. Although the Convention includes measures to address threats to the ecological character of sites⁴, there is little sanction for poor site management or monitoring². In fact, resolutions adopted at the Ramsar Conference of Parties are not legally binding and the Ramsar Secretariat has no regulatory authority. The strength of the Ramsar Secretariat rests in its capacity to inform and influence^{2,3}.

A single wetland site can be covered by more than one designation. For example, a wetland can be a National Park that is also a Ramsar Site and a World Heritage Site. This happens when a site's values are acknowledged under different designations. International designations can also be a way for non-governmental protected areas — those governed by local communities, indigenous peoples, and private entities — to gain more formal recognition¹⁰.

Despite wetlands benefitting from the Ramsar Convention^{3,6}, the condition of the world’s wetlands has declined over the past five decades since the Convention was established¹¹⁻¹³. Many sites still have little or no protection from national governments^{12,13}. Particularly in Africa, nearly half (49%) of the Ramsar Sites lack management plans, 20% are in the process of preparing such plans, and only 31% currently have management plans⁶.

The most significant factors affecting African Ramsar Sites are biological resource use, natural system modification, agriculture and aquaculture, and pollution⁶. In 1990, the Convention created the Montreux Record to register non-performing sites where “changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring or are likely to occur”. The aim of this record is to support Parties to take the necessary steps to preserve and restore the recorded sites^{2,4}. As of 2023, five African countries have eight sites on the Montreux Record, most of which were listed before 1997 and remain on the record.



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