

Rivers for Life: Turning the Tide on Freshwater Biodiversity Loss



ONLINE | 11 JUNE 2026

SYMPOSIUM SATELLITE EVENT #6
KEY MESSAGES

The International River Foundation

The International River Foundation (IRF) is the world's voice for rivers. For over twenty years, we have championed river resilience to create a legacy of healthy rivers that benefit ecosystems, communities and economies. Through the platform of people, ideas and impact, the IRF collaborates with global partners to help drive river restoration projects worldwide and accelerate action towards resilient rivers for future generations.

The Need to Turn the Tide

Freshwater ecosystems are the lifeblood of our planet.

10% of the world's species are found in rivers, lakes, and other freshwater ecosystems despite covering just 1% of Earth's surface. This freshwater biodiversity is foundational to river resilience and critical for food security, with 200 million people around the world depending on freshwater fisheries to support their livelihoods.

Yet despite this importance, freshwater ecosystems and the biodiversity they support remain undervalued and underfunded.

The result? An alarming 85% decline in freshwater species populations since 1970 - a far greater loss than in terrestrial and marine ecosystems.

Collective action is key to combating these alarming statistics.

Symposium Satellite Event #6

This event brought together diverse voices from around the world to share real-world solutions, innovations and actions to turn the tide on freshwater biodiversity loss.

The key takeaway? Freshwater biodiversity is foundational to healthy rivers, resilient communities and climate adaptation. While the challenges are significant, the examples shared from Africa, South America, North America

and Canada demonstrate that solutions exist. Success will depend on mobilising stronger partnerships, greater investment, Indigenous and community leadership, and coordinated action at the scale required to restore and sustain freshwater ecosystems for future generations.

In the words of Dr Henry Lickers, Haudenosaunee citizen of the Seneca Nation, Turtle Clan, "Lasting

freshwater conservation depends on relationships built on respect, equity and empowerment - not just science, policy and funding.

By combining Indigenous knowledge, shared responsibility and collaborative governance, we can create enduring partnerships that benefit both people and nature."

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SYMPOSIUM SATELLITE EVENT #6 KEY MESSAGES



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1. Freshwater biodiversity is one of the world's most urgent but overlooked environmental crises

Freshwater ecosystems support at least 10% of all species despite covering less than 1% of the Earth's surface, yet freshwater biodiversity continues to decline faster than terrestrial and marine biodiversity and remains underrepresented in conservation and water policy agendas.

2. Healthy rivers are fundamental to climate resilience, water security and human well-being

Rivers, wetlands and lakes are the connective tissue between land and sea, supporting livelihoods, food security, economies, cultural values and ecosystem resilience. Freshwater ecosystems must be placed at the centre of climate adaptation and resilience strategies.

3. Freshwater conservation remains significantly underfunded

Despite the scale of the challenge, freshwater ecosystems receive only a small proportion of global environmental funding. Mobilising greater investment and financing mechanisms is essential if restoration and conservation goals are to be achieved.

4. River restoration works and is delivering measurable outcomes

Examples from around the world (Victoria Lake in Kenya, Doce River in Brazil and Northwest American springs) demonstrate that restoration actions, including dam removals, wetland restoration, habitat rehabilitation and river connectivity initiatives, are delivering positive biodiversity, climate and community outcomes.

5. Protecting and restoring river connectivity is critical

Free-flowing rivers, connected floodplains, functioning wetlands and healthy migration pathways are essential for sustaining freshwater biodiversity, ecosystem processes and fisheries. Fragmentation remains one of the greatest threats to river health globally.

6. Long-term monitoring and strong science are essential for effective action

Case studies highlighted the importance of establishing baselines, investing in monitoring and using evidence-based approaches to understand ecosystem change, evaluate restoration success and inform management decisions.

7. Freshwater ecosystems can recover, but recovery requires deliberate intervention

Experiences from the Doce River Basin demonstrated that biodiversity recovery is not automatic. Active conservation, protection of refugia, restoration of connectivity and long-term stewardship are needed to support ecosystem resilience and recovery following major disturbances.

8. Collaboration across sectors, jurisdictions and borders is essential

Freshwater challenges transcend political boundaries and require coordinated action between governments, communities, researchers, NGOs, Indigenous groups, businesses and investors. Watershed-scale governance and partnership approaches were repeatedly identified as critical enablers of success.

9. Local communities, Indigenous Peoples and stewardship networks are central to success

Effective freshwater conservation depends on community leadership, Indigenous knowledge, local stewardship, participatory governance and shared responsibility. Lasting outcomes are achieved when people, nature and culture are considered together.

10. We need to move from awareness to action

The overarching call to action from the satellite event was clear: the global community must move beyond recognising the freshwater biodiversity crisis and accelerate coordinated, large-scale action, investment, innovation and policy implementation to restore and protect rivers, wetlands and freshwater ecosystems.