Nature conservation at any price?

**By 2030, 30 per cent of the world's land and sea areas are to be protected.** **However, many species-rich regions are home to indigenous peoples who are now to make way for protected areas.** **UNESCO is playing an inglorious role in connection with these resettlements.**

Protecting biodiversity and combating climate change are at the top of the global community's agenda. In this context, the signing of the World Convention on Biological Diversity in Montreal in December 2022 was described as a milestone. The aim is to place at least 30 per cent of land and sea areas under protection by 2030 and to restore 30 per cent of nature that has already been destroyed. UNESCO, which celebrates "World Heritage Day" on 18 April, set itself the goal back in 1971 of protecting unique cultural and natural treasures from decay or destruction. There are currently 227 World Heritage Sites around the world, which are labelled as pure "nature".

So are we on the right track? It depends on who you ask. Many indigenous communities are critical of this concept of "nature conservation". For them, nature is not a space that should exist free of humans, but has been their habitat for centuries, which also has an important cultural, social and spiritual significance for them. At least a third of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites are located partly or entirely within the traditional territories of indigenous peoples.

**Indigenous peoples: guardians of biodiversity**

It is no coincidence that around 80 per cent of the world's biodiversity is found in regions where indigenous peoples live. Their protection and their function as guardians of their territories have enabled the high level of biodiversity to be preserved. However, despite this important protective function, they are often brutally displaced in the name of nature conservation. At many of these sites, human rights are being violated in plain sight, often with the complicity and sometimes even the support of UNESCO. Too often, these "natural" World Heritage sites are areas of conflict for indigenous peoples, whose important role in the conservation of these spaces is simply denied. They are beaten, raped, abused and even killed when they try to enter their ancestral lands. All this in the name of "conservation".

UNESCO plays an important role in the spread of this so-called fortress protection: in Africa, after the independence of the states, it has enforced the "saving" of nature through the creation of national parks and protected areas - often by excluding the local population. There are currently four UNESCO natural heritage sites in Tanzania that function according to this principle. The Ngorongoro Conservation Area, to which the Maasai were resettled after the Serengeti National Park was established in 1959, was founded with the aim of facilitating coexistence between the local population, the Maasai and tourism. However, the Tanzanian government is now claiming that it is no longer possible to protect nature there due to the growing population. The entire population is therefore to be "voluntarily" relocated from Ngrorongoro, which has also been welcomed by UNESCO.

**Tourists instead of Maasai?**

In fact, these relocations are taking place against the will of the majority of the Maasai population. Their removal is achieved by stopping health care and education, confiscating or poisoning their cattle herds and militarising the protected area. This approach cuts off around 100,000 Maasai living in the region from basic services and permanently and massively violates their human rights. There is no access to immunisations for children (there is currently a measles epidemic in the region), no HIV and tuberculosis medication. According to the government's latest plans, almost the entire traditional territory of the Maasai is to be converted into national parks, areas where big game hunting is permitted and wildlife corridors. One million people, mainly Maasai, would lose their traditional land as a result.

At the same time, tourism is being massively boosted: the number of tourists has increased massively in recent decades - from around 20,000 in 1979 to one million last season. Their presence in "tourist lodges" and with jeeps on photo safaris apparently has no negative impact on nature, while the traditional bomas (huts) of the Maasai and their animals have a reputation for destroying Ngorongoro.

**Protection of human rights**

On "World Heritage Day", a group of organisations from Tanzania, the USA and Europe, including Welthaus Graz, are calling on UNESCO to end its complicity in human rights violations. The specialised agency of the United Nations must remove sites from its list where human rights violations occur and listen to the indigenous peoples - the best guardians of nature. The group has also made this demand directly to UNESCO after it failed to speak to Maasai representatives, who have spoken out against the resettlement, or representatives of critical civil society during an official mission to Tanzania.