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RECEIVED 30 May 2024
ACCEPTED 06 June 2024
PUBLISHED 18 June 2024

CITATION
Fitzsimons JA, Stolton S and Rafa M (2024)
Editorial: Advances in privately
protected areas.
Front. Conserv. Sci. 5:1441046.
doi: 10.3389/fcosc.2024.1441046

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Editorial: Advances in privately protected areas

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KEYWORDS

conservation covenants, conservancies, OECMs, privately protected areas, private land conservation, protected areas

Editorial on the Research Topic

Advances in privately protected areas

Background

As the world faces a biodiversity crisis, the protection of important natural areas and areas that are priorities for ecological restoration is becoming increasingly important. Under Target 3 the Convention on Biological Diversity's Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework parties have agreed to the protection of at least 30% of terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecosystems by 2030 (CBD, 2022) (the 30x30 target). Privately protected areas (PPAs) are often under-recognised, despite their significant contributions to biodiversity conservation (Stolton et al., 2014; Bingham et al., 2017; Mitchell et al., 2018a). These areas, which meet the IUCN definition of a protected area (Dudley, 2008) and are under private governance, have a diverse range of ownership, governance and protection models and involve a wide range of people and organisations (Figure 1). This includes governance by individuals and groups of individuals; non-governmental organisations; corporations; for-profit owners such as ecotourism companies; research entities such as universities and field stations; or religious entities. As a result, they experience a set of challenges and opportunities that are often distinct from those faced by government protected areas (Mitchell et al., 2018a; Fitzsimons et al., 2024a).

Despite the proven importance of PPAs in increasing the extent, representativeness and connectivity of protected area networks in many regions (e.g. Archibald et al., 2020; Kareiva et al., 2021; Palfrey et al., 2022), these mechanisms have received less research attention than other forms of protected areas. The goal of this Research Topic is to increase the knowledge of aspects of PPA networks or programs at regional or national scales to ensure more effective establishment, management, financing and protection. This is important not only for existing networks and programs but to inform future growth in these networks.

This Research Topic sought to advance our understanding of PPAs at a system-wide scale. Key topics called for included:

- 1) Ecological contribution of PPAs to representation of ecosystem types or species in protected area networks, connectivity and corridors, climate refugia, and provision of ecosystem services;



FIGURE 1

Privately protected areas under a variety of governance types: (A) a conservation covenant in Tasmania, Australia, (B) a private wildlife sanctuary purchased with Australian Government and philanthropic funding, Queensland, Australia, (C) a private land preserve Oregon, USA (photos James Fitzsimons), (D) Pednavounder in Cornwall, England is owned by the UK non-profit the National Trust (photo: Equilibrium Research).

- 2) Legal and governance arrangements;
- 3) Key factors encouraging or inhibiting PPA establishment;
- 4) Landholder perceptions; and
- 5) Interactions with other protected area categories and with 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs).

Inventory on location and growth in privately protected area estates still essential

A number of papers focused on PPA inventory. At a global level [Lewis et al.](#) focused on the contribution of PPAs to the 30x30 target and builds on past inventories of PPAs in the World Database on Protected Areas and their contribution to global targets ([Bingham et al., 2017, 2021](#)). Many countries recognise the importance of PPAs to Target 3 (e.g. [Fitzsimons et al., 2023](#)). [Lewis et al.](#) rightly highlight that other elements of Target 3 (e.g. location, effectiveness) are equally as important as the 30% coverage aspect of this target and explore aspects of coverage, connectivity and ecological representation. They also explore how privately governed OECMs contribute to Target 3 in countries where they have been identified, and show how privately protected and conserved areas play a

significant role in some countries' efforts to meet Target 3 (a theme also picked up by [Kopsieker and Disselhoff](#)). Finally, acknowledging that PPAs are under-reported, they call for scaling up efforts for their recognition and documentation.

Building on past discussions and inventories of PPAs in Kenya (e.g. [Carter et al., 2008](#); [Olivier, 2014](#)), [Bashir and Wanyonyi](#) provide an updated discussion on the progress and challenges of wildlife conservancy establishment in that country. As of 2023, there were 230 wildlife conservancies in Kenya totalling 9.04 million ha and comprising 16% of Kenya's total land mass. To contribute to the global target of protecting 30% of lands, freshwaters and oceans by 2030, the Kenyan Government considers the expansion of the number and area of wildlife conservancies as an important mechanism to contribute to these targets. The authors also explore some of the definitional and delineation challenges that remain in classifying PPAs and OECMs (see also [Mitchell et al., 2018b](#); [Fitzsimons et al., 2024b](#)).

[Kopsieker and Disselhoff](#) examine the potential of PPAs and OECMs to contribute to the aspirations of meeting the 30x30 target in the European Union, and in Germany in particular. They identify legal hurdles for the designation and recognition of PPAs in Germany but estimate that close to one million hectares of land could be classified instead as OECMs and outline potentially qualifying sites.

Also in Europe, [Halevy et al.](#) explore the potential for the extractive industry to contribute to the EU Green Deal's biodiversity objectives. They argue that well-managed quarries can

serve as vital habitats for endangered species, particularly near Natura 2000 sites. The paper introduces conservation easements as a financial incentive for quarry operators to invest in ecological restoration. These legal agreements limit specific land uses, making conservation a more financially predictable business venture. They provide a set of 12 selection criteria to help identify optimal quarry sites for such easements. These criteria consider various factors, from location and size to ecosystem services and stakeholder's attitudes. By aligning economic incentives with conservation goals, the paper offers a pragmatic blueprint to incorporate the extractive industry into Europe's biodiversity strategy.

Bezaury-Creel builds on his previous research on PPAs in Mexico (i.e. **Bezaury-Creel, 2014**). **Bezaury-Creel** reports that 546 land parcels within 27 states held valid certificates as PPAs or 'territories and areas conserved by Indigenous Peoples and local communities' (ICCAs), for a total of 718,526 ha as at mid-2023. PPAs in Mexico include 175,006 ha of private lands plus 9,860 ha of public property, which collectively represent a 44% increase from their 2012 coverage of 128,369 ha, while community lands or ICCAs comprise 486,082 ha in mid-2023.

Elton and Fitzsimons build on other Australian inventories and ecological characteristics of PPA networks at national and subnational levels (e.g. **Fitzsimons and Wescott, 2001**; **Fitzsimons, 2015**) and explore the PPA network (namely conservation covenants) in the state of New South Wales (NSW). They review changes in policy and practice for private land conservation in the state that has led to a marked acceleration in the establishment of PPAs since 2017. The historical average rate at which PPAs were being established in NSW under various schemes prior to the changes in 2017 was about 50 agreements and 12,000 ha per annum. New legislation, the establishment of the Biodiversity Conservation Trust, and increased NSW Government funding in 2017 saw the acceleration of the rate of establishment of PPAs to more than 100 agreements and 45,000 ha per annum, with many more PPAs now being established in higher priority bioregions. **Elton and Fitzsimons** suggest key changes that have strengthened the framework for establishing and managing PPAs in NSW include a guide for strategic investment; institutional arrangements that foster effective governance, trust and transparency; substantive NSW Government funding; an accumulating endowment fund model; in-perpetuity payments; and faster and more targeted delivery mechanisms.

Exploring policy and research options

Brugler also explores the legal and governance arrangements that are best placed to enable the continued growth of PPAs in Australia. Focusing on the state of Victoria, it was found that the conservation covenant regime has the legal foundations to enable adaptive governance and that conservation covenants are expected to continue to be important in maintaining and establishing new PPAs, with opportunities for covenants to similarly deliver ecosystem restoration and climate adaptation objectives. However, ongoing adequate public investment in the covenant regime and the ability to attract new landowners in high priority landscapes without better financial incentives are identified as key challenges.

Richardson et al. explored the potential and policy shifts needed to enable covenants in Australia to expand their value beyond Target 3. While covenants have typically focused on the protection of existing natural values (as opposed to restoration of degraded lands), **Richardson et al.** identify pathways for enabling conservation covenants to play an expanded role in the context of ecosystem restoration and climate adaptation. Restoration is a major need in Australia (e.g. **Armitage et al., 2021**) and covenants could play an important role in protecting this investment in the long-term.

Finally, **Fitzsimons and Mitchell** investigate research priorities for PPAs based on surveys of members of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas Specialist Group on Privately Protected Areas and Nature Stewardship. The paper complements the research by **Dudley et al. (2018)** who explored research priorities for protected areas more broadly and builds on that of **Palfrey et al. (2021)** who synthesised topics discussed in published research on PPAs to date. **Fitzsimons and Mitchell** found responses were higher on enabling factors and mechanisms specific to PPAs and somewhat fewer on ecological and social outcomes. They suggest results can be used to guide future research efforts that will be most meaningful to improve PPA take up, effectiveness and longevity, noting there is a need for researchers, practitioners, landowners and managers, and policymakers to collectively set the research agenda.

Concluding remarks

This Research Topic on Advances in Privately Protected Areas presents important new information on the growth and future potential of PPAs. This is critical in helping advance efforts to protect 30% of the Earth's lands, freshwaters and oceans by 2030. We hope that this Research Topic will stimulate further research into PPAs, their contribution towards national and global biodiversity targets and means of increasing uptake and sustained managed of biodiversity in the long term.

Author contributions

JF: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. SS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MR: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Acknowledgments

We thank the authors, editors and reviewers who contributed to this Research Topic, as well as the staff at Frontiers in Conservation Science for administrative and editorial support and Mario Diaz for a review of this Editorial.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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