



Human Rights Ombudsman
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**Input by the Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Slovenia
to the Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights**

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The **Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Slovenia (the Ombudsman)** welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the forthcoming **thematic report on the interlinkages between nature conservation and cultural rights**.

The Ombudsman is a constitutional and independent institution mandated to protect and promote human rights in Slovenia. It holds A-status accreditation in accordance with the Paris Principles. Its mandate encompasses monitoring, conducting research, providing opinions and recommendations to public authorities, raising awareness, promoting human rights education, and examining individual complaints concerning alleged violations of human rights or fundamental freedoms by state or local authorities or public institutions.

This submission provides general information, observations and insights derived from the Ombudsman's monitoring, research and casework concerning the enjoyment of cultural rights and their interlinkages with environmental protection and nature conservation in Slovenia.

GENERAL

1. What are the main beliefs, practices, myths, stories, sports and ways of life in your country or territory, that foster the conservation of nature and the peaceful interaction between humans and nature?

In Slovenia, cultural identity is deeply shaped by coexistence with natural landscapes. Mountaineering and alpinism are not only sports but expressions of respect for nature and communal solidarity, promoting principles of minimal impact and responsibility in the mountains. Beekeeping, a centuries-old practice rooted in ecological balance, symbolises harmony between humans and ecosystems; Slovenia's initiative for the proclamation of World Bee Day reflects this heritage.

Rural traditions such as haymaking, grape harvesting, forest work, and community celebrations tied to natural cycles sustain intergenerational respect for land and biodiversity. Folklore and mythology, including figures like Zeleni Jurij (Green George), embody the renewal of nature, while customs around springs and wells express reverence for purity and life. Along the Adriatic coast, traditional fishing, salt harvesting, and maritime customs foster a culture of coexistence with the sea and its ecosystems.

The constitutional recognition of water as a public good further affirms this deeply rooted cultural value.

2. In your country or territory, are there natural elements, resources or spaces that people are strongly tied to and wish to preserve as part of their heritage and are meaningful to their identities and ways of life? Please provide examples.

Slovenians maintain strong cultural and emotional ties to natural elements such as rivers, forests, mountains and coastal areas, which form an integral part of national and local heritage. Distinct landscapes—from alpine peaks and karst plateaus to rivers, lakes and the Adriatic coast—constitute spaces of identity and belonging. Mount Triglav, the Soča and Mura rivers, Lake Bled, the Postojna and Škocjan caves, and the Sečovlje salt pans are among the most emblematic sites symbolising purity, resilience and harmony between people and nature.

Forests cover nearly 58 per cent of Slovenia's territory, making it one of Europe's most forested countries. The mosaic of vineyards, meadows and pastures defines traditional cultural landscapes where livelihoods have long been aligned with natural processes. Protected areas such as Triglav National Park and UNESCO World Heritage properties—including the Škocjan Caves, the Ljubljansko barje pile dwellings, the ancient beech forests of Kočevsko and Snežnik, and Plečnik's works in Ljubljana—illustrate the inseparability of natural and cultural heritage. The Ombudsman has observed that the protection of these landscapes is often invoked by individuals and communities in the context of the constitutional right to a healthy living environment.

3. In your experience, what are the main beliefs and practices that impede nature conservation? What would be the most important cultural shifts needed to better protect natural resources and biodiversity?

The Ombudsman has not identified specific cultural beliefs or traditions that impede conservation. However, consistent findings from monitoring and casework indicate that challenges to biodiversity and environmental protection in Slovenia primarily result from weak implementation of legislation, inadequate supervision and limited opportunities for meaningful public participation in environmental and spatial-planning procedures.

To strengthen both environmental protection and the enjoyment of related human rights, the Ombudsman has recommended improving transparency, accountability and early consultation with affected communities. Such measures would encourage a cultural and institutional shift towards greater public responsibility, participatory decision-making and respect for the cultural attachment of people to their natural environment.

CONSERVATION PROJECTS, MEASURES AND POLICIES

4. Please identify and share examples of conservation projects and measures that have involved traditional and/or local knowledges, languages, ways of life and practices in their elaboration and implementation. Provide information on how the use of these resources positively or negatively influenced outcomes of the project.

The Ombudsman does not implement or evaluate conservation projects. In Slovenia, UNESCO biosphere reserves (such as the Julian Alps, the Karst, Kozjansko & Obsotelje,

and the Mura River)¹ integrate traditional land-use practices and community knowledge into management. These approaches connect conservation with local livelihoods and cultural heritage. While the Ombudsman has not assessed their outcomes, it emphasises that respect for local knowledge, languages and ways of life strengthens participation, supports biodiversity and promotes the realisation of cultural rights.

5. Please identify and share examples of conservation projects and measures that have failed, or that have met challenges because they did not respect the values and priorities of the people affected by them or did not align with their aspirations for development.

The Ombudsman does not assess the success or failure of conservation projects. However, through its monitoring of environmental governance, the Ombudsman has noted that certain projects and spatial-planning measures have encountered opposition when affected communities were not adequately included in consultation and decision-making processes.

Such challenges have arisen particularly where nature protection objectives were perceived to conflict with local development, housing or livelihood interests. The Ombudsman therefore emphasises that early, transparent and inclusive participation of local residents is essential to prevent disputes and to ensure both environmental protection and respect for human rights.

6. Please identify and share examples of measures taken to ensure respect, protection, promotion, and fulfilment of human rights in the context of the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework's goals and targets, as well as Section C. These could be the implementation of human rights impact assessments or the establishment of participation and consultation mechanisms with local and concerned populations. Please specify what impacts these measures have had on the implementation of the GBF.

The Ombudsman has noted that public participation in environmental and spatial-planning procedures often remains formalistic, with communities having limited influence on decisions affecting biodiversity and natural resources. Consultations are frequently reduced to written submissions, with insufficient access to relevant information and inadequate reasoning by authorities.

To strengthen the integration of human rights into environmental governance, the Ombudsman has promoted timely and transparent consultation processes, more accessible environmental impact assessments, and active cooperation with local communities and civil society. These actions have improved procedural safeguards and increased awareness among authorities that biodiversity and development policies must be implemented in a balanced and participatory manner consistent with human rights standards.

7. Have you identified any human rights challenges related to biodiversity loss and/or measures adopted in the context of the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework? Please identify and share examples of conservation projects and measures that have implied

¹ Slovenian Tourist Board, Invaluable UNESCO's World Heritage Treasures in Slovenia, available at: <https://www.slovenia.info/en/places-to-go/attractions/unesco-world-heritage>
www.varuh-rs.si

restrictions to cultural rights, and explain the legitimacy such restrictions and under which provisions of international law?

The Ombudsman has identified concrete challenges arising from environmental degradation, biodiversity loss and insufficient protection of natural resources that undermine the enjoyment of the constitutional right to a healthy environment and to safe drinking water (Articles 72 and 70a of the Constitution). Although not formally framed as implementation of the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF), these findings align with its objectives to protect biodiversity while ensuring human well-being. They are based on complaints and own-initiative inquiries documented in the Ombudsman’s Annual Reports 2022–2024.

In particular, the Ombudsman examined the C0 wastewater channel project near Ljubljana, identifying risks to groundwater and drinking water safety, weak application of the precautionary principle, insufficient transparency and lack of adequate public participation. The Ombudsman also addressed the lack of access to safe drinking water in Roma settlements in south-eastern Slovenia, where inadequate infrastructure and environmental burdens pose serious human rights concerns, including hazardous living conditions in the Roma settlement of Smrekec (Grosuplje municipality). Further cases related to environmental noise and spatial developments near major transport routes revealed systemic shortcomings in environmental governance.

While the Ombudsman has not documented conservation projects that unlawfully restrict cultural rights, certain protective measures, such as those in water-protection or conservation zones, may limit traditional land use. Such restrictions are legitimate only if lawful, necessary and proportionate, pursuing a legitimate environmental aim and consistent with international human rights law, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Articles 11 and 15) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Articles 25 and 27).

8. What measures have been taken for the documentation and preservation of traditional knowledge associated with biodiversity, and for the recording and evaluation of the innovations, values and practices of Indigenous Peoples and local communities concerned by conservation efforts?

The Ombudsman has not specifically addressed the documentation or preservation of traditional knowledge related to biodiversity. Such activities fall within the mandate of cultural and environmental institutions. The Ombudsman monitors them only indirectly, through cases concerning environmental governance, cultural heritage and community participation, stressing the importance of including local knowledge and public access to information.

9. Please share information about any participatory approach that have been implemented in conservation projects, including measures to obtain free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous Peoples and local communities and to involve people in awareness raising, at the local and national levels. Please explain the impact of promoting the contributions of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, people of African descent and local minorities, women and girls, children and youth, and persons with disabilities, as active participants and partners in preserving biodiversity and enhancing nature conservation, restoration and sustainable use.

The Ombudsman has not dealt with conservation projects requiring free, prior and informed consent, as Slovenia has no populations recognised as Indigenous Peoples. However, it regularly reviews participation in environmental and spatial-planning

procedures, noting that consultations are often formalistic. The Ombudsman therefore emphasises transparent and inclusive processes and equal access to information for all groups, including minorities, women, youth and persons with disabilities.

10. Please identify and share examples of how intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations and donors have either advanced or impeded cultural rights in the context of conservation projects.

The Ombudsman has not identified cases in which intergovernmental organizations, NGOs or donors have advanced or impeded cultural rights in conservation projects in Slovenia. The Ombudsman stresses that all actors must ensure transparency, participation, non-discrimination and effective grievance mechanisms, and that funding should depend on meaningful community inclusion and respect for local knowledge and traditions.

11. Please identify and share examples of how cultural rights are accounted for and protected in the scope of carbon markets and carbon offsetting schemes designed to protect biodiversity.

The Ombudsman has not dealt with cases concerning cultural rights in carbon markets or biodiversity offsetting schemes. It recommends that any such initiatives include human rights impact assessments, early participation of local communities, public access to information and independent oversight, with any restrictions to cultural practices being lawful, necessary and proportionate.

12. Please provide any additional information, examples and recommendations you believe would be useful to support the conservation of nature and biodiversity while promoting the full and effective enjoyment of cultural rights.

The Ombudsman emphasises that protecting beekeeping and maintaining a healthy food chain are essential for the realisation of the constitutional rights to health and to a healthy environment (Articles 72 and 70a of the Constitution). Bees play a vital role in pollination, food production and the preservation of biodiversity, making their protection crucial for both environmental sustainability and cultural heritage.

In December 2024, the Ombudsman visited the Beekeeping Association of Slovenia (ČZS) and expressed strong support for its efforts to protect beekeeping as part of Slovenia's cultural and natural heritage. He warned that the growing prevalence of counterfeit food products threatens consumer health, undermines the integrity of the food chain and has devastating consequences for agriculture, the environment and biodiversity. The Ombudsman therefore urged the establishment of effective control mechanisms to prevent the spread of counterfeit products and called on the European Network of National Human Rights Institutions (ENNHRI) to promote coordinated international action to safeguard beekeeping and ensure fair competition.²

² Human Rights Ombudsman of the Republic of Slovenia (2024), "Ombudsman Svetina: Protecting beekeeping and a healthy food chain is essential for respecting the right to health and a healthy environment", 20 December 2024. Available at: <https://www.varuh-rs.si/en/news/public-information/the-ombudsman-emphasises-that-without-the-protection-of-beekeeping-and-the-preservation-of-a-healthy-food-chain-it-is-not-possible-to-respect-the-right-to-health-and-a-healthy-environment>

The Ombudsman recommends that states strengthen measures to protect pollinators, promote sustainable apiculture and agricultural practices, and raise public awareness of the cultural and ecological significance of pollinators. These efforts are consistent with Articles 12 and 15 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which guarantee the rights to the highest attainable standard of health and to participate in cultural life. Integrated action of this kind is vital for preserving biodiversity while fully respecting and promoting human and cultural rights.

The Ombudsman hopes that this submission will contribute usefully to the preparation of the Special Rapporteur's thematic report.