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CRITICALLY EVALUATING THE REAL-WORLD IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS: A CASE STUDY OF THE WORLD-WIDE FUND FOR NATURE (WWF)

~ *Kaanan Bhatia*

ABSTRACT

"NGOs are the conscience of the world." - Nelson Mandela, former President of South Africa

Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) have emerged as key players in addressing global environmental crises, focusing on biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, and sustainable resource management. The WorldWide Fund for Nature (WWF) is one of the most prominent ENGOS, operating in over 100 countries with diverse initiatives. This paper critically examines WWF's real-world impact, assessing its successes, challenges, and broader implications for conservation. Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations (ENGOS) have emerged as key players in addressing global environmental crises, focusing on biodiversity conservation, climate change mitigation, and sustainable resource management. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is one of the most prominent ENGOS, operating in over 100 countries with five million supporters worldwide and supporting around 3,000 conservation and environmental projects. This paper critically examines WWF's real-world impact, assessing its successes, challenges, and broader implications for conservation. This paper aims to provide a balanced evaluation of WWF's contributions to global environmental sustainability. This paper also talks about the fact how smaller ENGOS are making a greater impact in comparison to such a bigger organization like WWF in India. It also talks about the concept of tokenism in the field of environmental conservation.

KEYWORDS

Environmental sustainability, ENGO, Pollution, Climate change, Environment issues, Wildlife, Tokenism,

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the success and milestone of WWF's conservation and sustainability initiatives.

2. Have there been any instances of tokenism and what powerplay WWF has in a country like India?

INTRODUCTION

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are typically mission-driven advocacy or service organizations in the nonprofit sector. There are large and small NGOs operating around the world and organized for just about every imaginable purpose. The term – coming from United Nations (UN) jargon to delineate between government bodies and private organizations – is relatively modern. The primary objective of these organizations is public service. As per one estimate, there are more than 3.3 million NGOs in India.¹

Environmental NGOs typically take up causes related to the environment such as Climate Change, Air Pollution, Deforestation, Ozone Layer Depletion, Waste Management, Biodiversity and Land Use, Energy, Conservation, Environmental degradation, Land Degradation. Some of the Prominent examples of Environmental NGO working in India are Greenpeace India, Awaaz Foundation, Centre for Science and Environment, Goa Foundation, CERE India, WWF India and Winrock International India.² Smaller NGOs have also started coming up that are making a greater impact such as Indian youth climate network, Samarth in Uttar Pradesh, I.D.E.A.L Foundation in Uttarakhand etc.

India is the world's most populated country in the world, and is also one of the fastest emerging economies of the world. Large population base and high growth rate of the economy has created challenges and issues on the environmental front, particularly related to Air and water Pollution, deforestation and depletion of natural resources at a fast pace. India has to take immediate action to slow and reverse the environment degradation. India has to work on Environmental sustainability. As per the World Commission on Environment and Development, sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.³

For this purpose, the paper investigates whether and to what extent the environmental conservation NGOs like Greenpeace International, WWF International and IUCN International have been making an impact in a country like India and worldwide.

For the past sixty-odd years, the World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) has been working towards the preservation of endangered species, habitat, and ecosystems. The WWF was founded in the year 1961 at the headquarters of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in Morges, Switzerland, by a group of people, including Sir Julian Huxley,

¹ Harvard Law School, “Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs)” available at [Nongovernmental Organizations \(NGOs\) - Harvard Law School | Harvard Law School](#), accessed on 31 December 2025

² Ibid.

³ “World Commission on Environment and Development”, (1987)

Sir Peter Scott, and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. The group changed its name from the World Wildlife Fund to the World-Wide Fund for Nature in the late 1986 to accommodate its widened focus towards all environmental issues. The Canadian and US chapters have maintained the original name. Since its inception, the WWF has always made the preservation of tigers, elephants, rhino species, among others, which were being severely slaughtered due to poaching, habitat loss, and human conflict, a point of its agenda. The panda logo, designed by Sir Peter Scott, symbolizes hope to the world regarding the preservation of precious wildlife⁴.

EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND THE INTERNATIONAL EXPANSION OF WWF

In the early years after its formation, the national appeals were established in Great Britain, the U.S., and Switzerland to raise money for the cause of conservation. In the course of time, the national appeals were transformed into separate legal entities, known as the national organizations, which performed local actions in the field of conservation and provided expertise and financial support to projects at the international level. This marked the beginning of the global engagement of WWF in the area of conservation.

In the 1980s, WWF introduced associations that would enhance their presence, especially in places with strong economic power. Countries like Thailand, Ecuador, Argentina, and Nigeria formed associations to collaborate on environmental issues without altering their organizational policies. This era also witnessed the development of Programme Offices within countries that had WWF's large-scale projects, especially within Africa, Asia, and Latin America. These Programme Offices were responsible for regional conservation issues and policies, while some special offices were developed within Brussels and Washington, D.C. for political influence. In the 1990s, WWF's national groups and Programme Offices represented a shift within WWF due to increased globalization. At this point, there were 22 Programme Offices spread within different regions such as Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Additionally, there were ambassadors hired by WWF that represented WWF at high levels within key countries, although these people were sometimes focused solely on projects within the field. The method of cooperation within WWF was advanced through involvement of local people within project development, improving success within conservation.

Today, WWF's network is among the most geographically and culturally diverse in the conservation world. With over 1,500 staff at international headquarters and national organizations, and another 800+ working in programme offices and projects, WWF manages a conservation program worth over 70 million Swiss Francs annually. The organization's supporter base has grown from nearly 1 million in the 1980s to over 5.8 million today. Volunteers and grants continue to play a crucial role in supporting WWF's global conservation efforts.

⁴ WWF, "History", available at <https://www.worldwildlife.org/about/history> accessed on 31 Dec 2025

CONSERVATION EFFORTS

Conventional organizational activity of WWF targets six major goals, including the preservation of animals, protection of the forests, protection of the oceans, protection of the water, protection of the climate, and the protection of food. The organizational approach to conservation relies on the use of science and incorporates the strategy of engaging different stakeholders, including local communities, the government, as well as corporations, to ensure sustainable results. WWF plays a major part in protecting the habitats of endangered animals, anti-poaching, and the use of legal instruments, such as the Convention on International Trade of Endangered Species (CITES).

WWF understands that forests and the oceans are not only habitat to millions of species, but they are also carbon sinks that reduce the effects of climate change. WWF aims to stop deforestation, encourage responsible forest management, and protect marine areas to ensure the impact of overfishing and pollution does not get worse. WWF campaigns like “New Deal for Nature and People” encourage governments to incorporate nature in the economy and plans for growth..⁵

WWF is a vocal voice advocating for immediate worldwide response efforts on climate change. In efforts such as Earth Hour, where people switch off all non-essential light bulbs to create awareness on consumption, WWF has showcased its capability to create worldwide response efforts. WWF also campaigns for appropriate low-carbon technologies.

KEY MILESTONES IN CONSERVATION (1961-2023)

WWF began operations in the year 1961, concentrating on species conservation, including that of the bald eagle and red wolf, and involvement in the likes of the Charles Darwin Foundation within the Galapagos. WWF employed its first scientist in 1973 and contributed significantly to the formation of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) that same year. This decade saw WWF shift its interests to conserving habitats and the formation of TRAFFIC to oversee wildlife trading. WWF initiated debt-for-nature swap collaborations, using national debt for conservation purposes. This decade saw intensified conservation ventures by WWF throughout Africa and Asia, leading to the formation of vital national parks and the conservation of species such as the mountain gorilla. Successful campaigns by WWF achieved the establishment of the Monarch Butterfly Reserve in Mexico and prohibited the ivory trade under CITES in 1989.

WWF merged with The Conservation Foundation in 1990 and began the Enterprise for the Americas Initiative in 1991. WWF continued with advocacy campaigns and founded TRAFFIC's African regional offices, established conservation trust funds, and accomplished large-scale debt-for-nature swaps, such as the \$19 million swap in the Philippines.⁶ WWF and conservationists continued with the advancement of protected ecosystems, such as the

⁵ Sustainability Times, “WWF: A global force for wildlife and environmental conservation”, 2024

⁶ WWF, “History”, available at <https://www.worldwildlife.org/about/history> accessed on 31 Dec 2025

preservation of the Brazilian rainforest and the Galapagos sea sanctuary. WWF's success expanded across the globe, as evident with the Forest Stewardship certification of 44 million acres of land within the Forest Stewardship Council in the year 2000. The establishment of the Amazon Region Protected Areas (ARPA) program began within WWF's objectives of tripling the protected area of the Amazon by 2002. WWF continued with sustainability campaigns on a global perspective, such as collaborations with Walmart and Coca-Cola, and conservation campaigns on Borneo and Southeastern Asia. Earth Hour had become a global activity by the year 2007.

In 2011, WWF's "Year of the Tiger" campaign was set out to double the number of tigers by 2022. In 2013, WWF achieved a significant triumph when Thailand committed to halting its ivory business. In 2016, WWF announced an increase in the number of wild tigers. This was a first in a century. WWF continued its efforts on climate, working on projects such as Project Gigaton and also expanded habitats for animals such as bison and rhino. In 2020, WWF partnered with Rosebud Sioux Tribe in an effort to expand the largest Native-owned bison herd. They were able to stop the development of the disputed Pebble Mine in Alaska. In 2021, WWF's Forests Forward program was established. This was an initiative that focused on forest sustainability. In 2023, they were able to celebrate a 74% increase in global tiger populations since 2010. They continued efforts towards protecting forests, wildlife, and oceans. They established the "Nature-Based Solutions Origination Platform." This was a move that aimed to mobilize investments in nature-based solutions.

WWF launches a "Oceans Futures" platform. This will act as an early warning system that will prevent conflict, food insecurity, or even geopolitical tension over ocean resources by 2030..⁷

IMPACT WWF HAS MADE IN INDIA

WWF India has done significant work through several projects that focus on conservation, community participation, and sustainable development. Some of the key projects include:

WWF India played an important role in the initiation of Project Tiger back in the 1970s, which targeted the rapidly declining number of tigers in India. This project has since undergone changes and now incorporates the concept of conserved habitats beyond protected sites to guarantee the sustainability of the tiger and its habitats.⁸

The Living Ganga Programme is concerned with the sustainably managed water resources as a target area in the Ganga River region. The project requires teaming up with community members and departments related to developing a strategy that balances nature with human needs to sustain the biodiversity of the river.⁹

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ John Vidal, "WWF International accused of 'selling its soul' to corporations", The Guardian (2014) available at <https://theecologist.org/2014/oct/14/wwf-international-accused-selling-its-soul-corporations>

⁹ Ibid

Since 1996, Project SERVE (Save the Environment and Regenerate Vital Employment) has been working in the Darjeeling Himalayan region, focusing on re-forestation, livelihood development, and environmental education. They involve local people in activities such as tree-planting, habitat improvement, etc., making them feel that the natural resources belong to them. Other projects undertaken by this organization are Red Panda Conservation in Sikkim, Human-Wildlife Conflict Mitigation, etc. WWF India partners with different stakeholders, including government departments, local NGOs, etc., to make a difference in matters of environment policy formulation and renewable energy development.¹⁰ Its Living Ganga Programme is one such example that involves water resource management alongside community development based on sustainability measures.

IS WWF ACTUALLY WORKING ACCORDING TO ITS MISSION AND PRINCIPLES?¹¹

Despite its many achievements, WWF has faced criticism and controversy. Some have accused the organization of compromising with corporations, such as in partnerships with large multinational companies that are responsible for environmental degradation. Additionally, WWF has been criticized for its involvement in projects that may negatively affect indigenous communities, though it has responded by reaffirming its commitment to working more closely with local populations.¹²

Not only this but WWF International, the world's largest conservation group, has been accused of "selling its soul" by forging alliances with powerful businesses which destroy nature and use the WWF brand to "greenwash" their operations, according to "PandaLeaks – The Dark Side of the WWF", the controversial book by award-winning German journalist and filmmaker Wilfried Huismann. Global corporations such as Coca-Cola, Shell, Monsanto, HSBC, Cargill, BP, Alcoa and Marine Harvest have all benefited from the group's green image only to carry on their businesses as usual.¹³

The book claims that WWF receives millions of dollars of support annually, from corporations where a real conflict of interest seems to exist. Equally troubling is the accusation that WWF has been associated with the creation of more than 14 million "conservation refugees" in Africa alone. Huismann argues that by setting up "round tables" of industrialists on strategic commodities such as palm oil, timber, sugar, soy, biofuels and cocoa, WWF International has become a political power that is too close to industry and in danger of becoming reliant on corporate money.¹⁴

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ PEFC, "WWF at risk? WWF accused of being used for greenwashing", (2014) available at [WWF at risk? WWF accused of being used for greenwashing - PEFC - Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification](#) accessed on 31 December 2025.

¹⁴ The Guardian, " WWF International accused of 'selling its soul' to corporations" (2019) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2014/oct/04/wwf-international-selling-its-soul-corporations> accessed on December 2025

"Pandaleaks is the book of a discredited German television documentary that disregarded most of the basic norms and standards of journalism. It is not factual and does not present a representative picture of WWF," said a spokesman. "In India, there were forced relocations, but WWF-India always opposed these and worked on seeing that forest peoples who entered voluntary relocation agreements didn't get deprived of legal rights or cheated." WWF said.

WWF's conservation philosophy has changed considerably in 50 years, but until recently it was widely thought that people and wildlife could not live together, which led to the group being accused of complicity in evictions of indigenous peoples from Indian and African forests.

Recently in 2021, The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) were accused of human rights abuses. Indigenous people and villagers had been shot, beaten unconscious, sexually assaulted, and whipped by armed guards in parks in places like Nepal and Cameroon. Following an internal investigation prompted by human rights abuse reports, the WWF has vowed to "do more". Though the panel said there was no evidence the WWF staff directed or took part in any of these alleged abuses, but those accused of abuses were employed by local governments and not by the conservation group and the report criticized the WWF's response to allegations of abuses, particularly in terms of how it worked with local governments and how it handled complaints.¹⁵

2 SMALLER ENVIRONMENTAL NGOS MAKING A GREATER IMPACT IN INDIA

1) The Indian Youth Climate Network (IYCN)

It was formed back in 2007 after realizing that Indian youth had no representation during the UNFCCC COP meeting held in Bali. It was ironic that India had one of the largest youth populations and yet had no voice during key climate talks. The Indian Youth Climate Network, or IYCN for short, came into existence in 2008 as an alliance of young people and groups taking immediate action on climate change. Its inaugural initiatives included a youth climate summit and a public survey in Delhi.¹⁶ That same year, IYCN sent its first youth delegation to COP14 in Poland. Since then, over 80 members have actively participated in global climate policy deliberations. IYCN's aim is to empower the youth to address the issue of climate change at various levels and to ensure the inclusion of the Indian youth perspective into the international discourse on climate. The network focuses on the area of climate justice and adaptation in South Asia because this is one of the most vulnerable regions to the effects of climate change.

2) I.D.E.A.L Foundation

The Inclusive Development for Environment and Learning Foundation, known as the IDEAL Foundation, adopts holistic method of creating a sustainable society by partnering with the

¹⁵ BBC, "WWF human rights abuses", 2021

communities, the youth, and specialists in the field. Through research, training, capacity building, and traditional field engineering, the organization tackles climate change and promotes awareness in a collective and inclusive manner. The organization's aim for the future is to create a society in which a resilient and environment-conscious way of living becomes a norm, securing environmental sustainability for the next generation. The IDEAL Foundation strongly promotes a balanced approach to environmental sustainability and social and economic growth for the future of humanity and the environment. IDEAL Foundation, aims for environmental sustainability in the Himalayas, specifically through its Green Himalayas Initiative. This project emphasizes waste management, local conservation, and community education. Key achievements include reducing over 10,000 kg of waste, planting 5,000 trees, and conducting 20 educational workshops. These efforts aim to preserve the region's natural beauty while empowering local communities to actively engage in environmental stewardship.

WAY FORWARD FOR WWF & OTHER ENGOS

All these raise concerns about whether the WWF is working on its principles or not. As an author of this paper, I do agree they have been making a serious impact all around the world but there have been severe instances that WWF in some countries have become a symbol of tokenism.

Having a talk from one of my sources, who have worked on ground level with WWF as well as other smaller organizations like Indian Youth climate network, I.D.E.A.L Foundation of Uttarakhand, they said that “ WWF’s operations in certain regions, like Uttarakhand, have been criticized for establishing a monopoly over climate-related initiatives. By offering expensive trips to board directors, the organization allegedly secured control over entire departments, including decision-making processes. This resulted in a certain bias in favor of the WWF agenda. Moreover, the presence of the WWF in the Indian context can, to a certain extent, be perceived as a conduit for leveraging finance from other countries, rather than making a meaningful impact on the ground. Despite the growing youth engagement in the mitigation of climate change, there are organizations such as the UN and CANSA that are finding it difficult to function in such environments”

Although the projects initiated by WWF ensure localized biodiversity conservation success, the contribution to the biodiversity trend at the global level is minimal. WWF requires scaling its activities to the extent of biodiversity loss at the current level of the environment globally. Moreover, the absence of a standard measure for evaluating the conservation success of its projects hinders the assessment of the actual effect of the projects initiated by WWF. In light of the growing climate crisis and rates of species extinction, the mission of WWF is as important today as it ever has been. WWF is still adapting to a variety of challenging global issues including biodiversity, food security, and sustainable development. With its science-driven approach and strong global partnerships, WWF remains a beacon of hope in the fight to protect our planet’s fragile ecosystems.¹⁷

¹⁷ Berita Terkini, “WWF: A global force for wildlife and environmental conservation” CRU Indonesia (2024) available at <https://www.conflictresolutionunit.id/wwf-a-global-force-for-wildlife-and-environmental-conservation/> accessed on 31 December 2025

By addressing both immediate conservation needs and long-term environmental sustainability, WWF is not just protecting nature for today, but ensuring that future generations can thrive in a world where biodiversity and human well-being are intrinsically linked.¹⁸

Right from its inception as a small agency devoted to wildlife conservation, today the WWF has mushroomed into a global movement in favor of the conservation of nature in all its forms. With its comprehensive philosophy encompassing wildlife, natural ecosystems, and climate change, it is ensured that the WWF would always remain an important force in the field of environment and environment-related activities. With the entire world grappling with unprecedented environmental problems, the motive of the WWF in preserving life on Earth is as relevant as ever.

CONCLUSION

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is one of the most fundamental participants in global conservation initiatives and includes causes like the preservation of biodiversity, mitigation of global warming effects and reduction of devastating resource mismanagement. Since its founding back in 1961, the organization's scope of work has altered from strictly being devoted to the preservation of nature to being involved in more encompassing conservation efforts that have touched more than 100 nations globally. However, its major achievement includes the preservation of endangered species and shape-shifting global environmental policies through instruments like debt-for-nature swaps.

Despite such success stories, WWF has been receiving intense criticism as well. The charges of "greenwashing" and collaborating with firms that cause harm to the environment have led to criticism of its credibility. The accusations of human rights violations, especially those of evicting indigenous populations, have further tarnished its reputation. Such incidences point out the challenges of aligning large-scale conservation efforts with being ethical. WWF's efforts to address such accusations through investigations and a new pledge to human rights have been considered inadequate by certain critics.

Moreover, in countries like India, some smaller Environmental Non-Governmental Organizations, such as the Indian Youth Climate Network or the IDEAL Foundation, are on their way to becoming effective agents. The role of these groups, which are sometimes more in touch with reality, encompasses the use of innovative, grassroots responses to environmental problems. The inground impact of such groups, in the likes of plantings and waste management, highlights the greatest importance of grassroots support in conservation efforts. The effectiveness of this kind of body proves that, occasionally, localized efforts may be more effective than large-scale undertakings. The question of tokenism remains large on the horizon

¹⁸ Hina Dinoo, "WWF: A global force for wildlife and environmental conservation" Sustainability Times (2024) available at <https://www.sustainability-times.com/climate/wwf-a-global-force-for-wildlife-and-environmental-conservation/> accessed on 31 December 2025

of environmental conservation efforts. While token gestures, in the likes of empty rhetoric or token efforts, might come to hold great precedence, it is argued that groups, such as WWF, need to go behind the façade and become more accountable.

The future of WWF will be determined by the ability to bear these criticisms and redefine strategies. It can only build genuine equitable partnerships with smaller ENGOs, whereby access is gained to local expertise, and meanwhile, amplify its international voice. Transparency, ethical governance, and a focus on quantifiable outcomes at the center of operations are the ways forward. Moreover, the incorporation of the voices of the marginalized into decision-making will further strengthen its mission of sustainable development.

In conclusion, while the WWF continues to be a cornerstone of global conservation, its journey is also symbolic of the broader challenges facing large ENGOs regarding the need to balance high ambition on the environment with best ethical practices and local engagement. As the climate crisis worsens, organizations such as WWF will have to lead by example toward more inclusive, accountable, and effective entities. Only then can they ensure that their mission to preserve the planet really aligns with values of justice and sustainability, allowing both nature and humanity to thrive.