

White Paper: Sport, an Unexpected Lever to Protect, Restore and Promote Biodiversity

How policymakers, NGOs, and sport organisations can harness it to make a difference.

STAKEHOLDER FOREWORD



Julien PIERRE, Founder of Play for Nature and Fair Play for Planet:

“As a former professional athlete, I’ve always believed in sport’s unifying and transformative power. Today, in the face of climate and biodiversity crises, that belief takes on a new dimension. Sport, far beyond performance, can be a powerful driver of awareness, civic engagement, and collective inspiration. Through Play for Nature, Fair Play for Planet, and in collaboration with partners such as IUCN, AFD, and Expertise France, we’ve seen firsthand how sport can spark ecological responsibility and have a real impact on territories. This white paper follows the publication of the FROM FIELDS TO FORESTS: SPORTS’ ROLE IN BIODIVERSITY PROTECTION fact sheet and advocacy activities presented in Cali during COP16 Biodiversity in October 2024. It is both a call to action and a roadmap. It shows how, when driven by intention and supported by committed actors, sport can significantly contribute to the protection of life. I invite conservation stakeholders, sports organizations, policymakers, and donors to join us in building a future where sport becomes a driving force for biodiversity preservation and ecosystem resilience and robustness.”



Rémy Rioux, CEO of French Development Agency (AFD):

“Since 2019, AFD Group has worked to make sport an accelerator of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We are proud to support, for the first time, an initiative linking sport and biodiversity. This white paper, led by Play for Nature, opens a promising path: it demonstrates that sport can raise awareness, educate, and mobilize mass audiences in favor of protecting life.”



Stewart Maginnis, Deputy Director General, International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN):

“Sport and nature are deeply intertwined. Sport has a vital role to play in protecting the natural world it relies on. That’s the mission behind the Sports for Nature Initiative: to provide a clear action plan to help sports organisations take meaningful steps for biodiversity. This initiative, born of a partnership between the International Olympic Committee, IUCN, the UN Environment Programme, the Convention on Biological Diversity Secretariat, and Dona Bertarelli Philanthropy, is based on one central principle: cross-sector collaboration between sport and conservation. This white paper is a product of such collaboration bringing conservation into sport and sport into conservation.”



1. INTRODUCTION - A Hidden Lever: What if Sport were Nature's unexpected ally?

At first glance, sport and conservation may seem to belong to entirely different worlds—one driven by performance, competition and entertainment, and mainly sport improves physical health. The other devoted to the protection of life and the preservation of ecosystems. Yet these two realms are deeply interconnected. We sometimes forget that sport is a powerful vehicle for inclusion and social cohesion, with considerable repercussions on education, mental health, and even the economy.

Sport depends on natural spaces—mountains, forests, rivers, oceans—and brings together millions of athletes and spectators around universal values such as respect, solidarity, and pushing one's limits. For many of us, playing a sport is also what connects us most directly to nature and the natural world around us.

In this sense, sport represents a powerful yet still underused lever to raise awareness, mobilise communities, and inspire behavioural change in the face of the ecological crisis.

The planet is facing an unprecedented biodiversity crisis. According to the IUCN Red List, more than 40,000 species are currently threatened with extinction. Habitat destruction, overexploitation, pollution and climate change are weakening ecosystems—and with them, the essential services they provide: clean air, drinking water, food security, and climate regulation.

In this urgent context, protecting life on Earth can no longer rest solely on scientists or governments. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), adopted in 2022, calls for collective action to halt biodiversity loss. Every sector of society is urged to contribute—including sport.

Exploring the potential of sport as an ally for nature opens the door to a new kind of collective movement—an emerging solution that brings together passion, civic engagement, and biodiversity protection.

Play for Nature at the Maasai Olympics in Kenya.



2. How to Act Now: Sport and Biodiversity, a shared destiny

Sport as a Driver of Civic Engagement

Many sports rely directly on healthy ecosystems: alpine skiing, surfing, hiking, rowing, rock climbing. When the snow melts too quickly, when waves become rare, or when forests disappear, entire playgrounds vanish.

In turn, athletes, volunteers, and fans can become the strongest advocates for their ecosystems. Through events, volunteering, fundraising or awareness campaigns, sport creates tangible opportunities for people to take environmental action—locally and globally.

The Virtuous Link Between Sport, Emotion, and Nature

Sport carries powerful collective emotions. It unites crowds, conveys values, and creates a sense of belonging. This emotional force can serve as a powerful tool for reconnecting people with the natural world. By practising sport in nature, telling new stories, and highlighting the beauty of the planet, sport can help millions of people rediscover the urgency of protecting what surrounds us.

The Popular and Media Power of Sport

Sport is one of the most powerful social phenomena of our time. A universal language, it transcends borders, cultures, and generations. Its events draw billions of viewers and ignite a unique collective enthusiasm. Through its icons and its stories, sport shapes the public imagination and has a lasting influence on behaviours. When used wisely, it offers a unmatched platform to bring biodiversity protection into the mainstream—into daily life—amplified by the voices of figures who inspire us all.

Transforming the Stories and Rituals of Sport

Throughout history, sport has accompanied major social shifts—towards inclusion, equality, and solidarity. Today, it can help transform habits and rituals to better align with environmental imperatives. Admittedly, sport also has an environmental footprint: energy-intensive infrastructure, international travel, waste generated by major events. But far from being a limitation, this reality positions sport as a key actor in imagining and pioneering more sustainable practices.

Encouraging Sustainable Behaviour Through Sport

To fully unlock its potential, environmental responsibility must be embedded into sports governance, funding, partnerships, and programmes. Collaboration between the worlds of sport, science, NGOs, and donors is essential. Sport can become a powerful lever for biodiversity protection. And conversely, the conservation community should embrace sport as an emerging solution to engage new and wider audiences. By understanding the power of sport and integrating it into their strategies, nature conservation actors can not only support sports organisations in caring for their environment—they can also deepen their own impact, and connect with hearts and minds that might otherwise remain out of reach.

3. Pioneering Initiatives That Are Leading the Way

Sport stands at a crossroads. Its practices and major events place measurable pressure on the environment—through international travel, energy consumption, and waste generation. Yet at the same time, it generates a unique collective energy, with the power to raise awareness and mobilize action on a massive scale.

This contrast makes sport a strategic field for action. Where it contributes to environmental challenges, it can also become part of the solution—by reducing its footprint, supporting grassroots conservation projects, and helping to shift the behaviours of millions of athletes and fans.

And the first steps have already been taken. From environmental certification schemes to educational programmes and partnerships between sports organisations and conservation actors, pioneering initiatives are already paving the way. They show that sport can go beyond its traditional boundaries and become an active ally in the fight for biodiversity.

Fair Play For Planet: An Eco-Responsible Label to Transform Sport



Founded in 2020 by former rugby international Julien Pierre, the Fair Play For Planet (FPFP) label is a pioneering environmental certification tailored for the sports sector. It aims to embed sustainability at the core of institutions, organizations, and sports events.

Its mission: engage sports stakeholders in their educational and exemplary roles, through a universal tool that helps structure, measure, and showcase their overall eco-responsible approach.

Its vision: make sport a major driver of ecological transition by making the adoption of more sustainable practices accessible and recognized for all.

The FPFP framework includes specific thematic categories and quantifiable and measurable criteria, aligned with the 17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. It allows for rigorous evaluation and continuous improvement in key areas such as energy efficiency, waste management, sustainable mobility, sustainable food, and stakeholder involvement.

By fostering this integration, public policy can amplify sport's positive environmental impact by:

- Including sport in national and local biodiversity strategies and sustainable development
- Supporting local sport-nature initiatives
- Create financing mechanisms dedicated to innovative efforts that integrate sport, conservation, and ecological transition.

This universal tool for those involved in the world of sport enables all disciplines at all levels to engage in a process of improvement, including federations, clubs, events, and sports venues.

This label, which is well known in France and is starting to spread to other European countries, helps the FPFP community get recognized as change agents by their stakeholders (public, private, supporters, volunteers, etc.). The FPFP label helps them find new private partners who are committed to ecological transition, get public funding, and keep their volunteers coming back.

Companies incorporate the FPPF label into their CSR or climate strategy through their sports sponsorship. This allows them to activate their partnerships thanks to the services provided by Fair Play For Planet, differentiating themselves from their competitors and/or gaining new market share while meeting their CSRD obligations.

Sports for Nature: An International Framework to Unite Sports Organizations



Sports for Nature is a joint initiative of the International Union for Conservation of Nature, International Olympic Committee, United Nations Environment Programme, Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and Dona Bertarelli Philanthropy. It aims to deliver transformative action for nature across sports by 2030 and beyond, enabling sports to champion nature and contribute to its protection and restoration.

The S4N Framework is the main pillar of the initiative. It calls on sports organisations to make measurable contributions to nature and asks them to work towards four principles that will help them advance their nature journey:

- Protect nature and avoid damage to natural habitats and species
- Restore and regenerate nature wherever possible
- Understand and reduce risks to nature in your supply chains
- Educate and inspire positive action for nature across and beyond sport

More than 100 sports organizations, across 30+ disciplines worldwide, have already joined the Framework. As signatories, they work, among other things:

- Mapping their relationship with nature and setting priorities
- Integrating biodiversity into their strategies and action plans
- Making events and venues levers for nature protection
- Collaborating with conservation NGOs on concrete projects or awareness campaigns
- Working with suppliers to reduce environmental impact
- Sharing best practices across peers
- Educating their audiences and training stakeholders on biodiversity issues

To support this transition, the Sports for Nature framework offers signatories tangible tools: individual guidance, educational materials, training, and a platform for sharing experiences. It also plays a bridging role between the sport and conservation sectors, fostering cross-cutting collaborations.

Any sports organisation—club, league, federation, Olympic committee, event organiser, or site Manager—can become a signatory, regardless of level or location, provided they commit to measurable contributions to nature.

If you represent a sport organisation, get in contact with the Sports for Nature team and explore the possibility to join the Framework.

Play for Nature is a French endowment fund committed to protecting endangered species. Founded in 2013 by Julien Pierre and Pascal Damois, President of the Auvergne Wildlife Park, it supports grassroots associations worldwide, with a core requirement: each action must have a concrete impact on ecosystems and local communities.

The fund's action is structured around three core programmes:

- Environmental education through fun, technology-based workshops
- Support for in situ conservation and scientific research
- Use sport as a lever for raising awareness and carrying out conservation actions.

Sport can be a powerful ally for NGOs, attracting diverse audiences, creating moments of gathering, and providing a neutral and unifying space—especially where social tensions make dialogue difficult. Sport-linked conservation can take several forms. Through Play for Nature-supported projects, three levels of action emerge

1. Passive Awareness Campaigns

At this level, sport is used as a platform to gather people while conveying conservation messages, such as slogans on team t-shirts or audio announcements during breaks. In 2024, Red Panda Network organized its first Red Panda Marathon in Taplejung, Nepal. This 48-kilometer trail reunited 51 runners, both women and men, and attracted hundreds of spectators on the occasion of International Red Panda Day. While athletes helped carry the message for red panda conservation, local communities listened to radio spots raising awareness about this endangered species and its fragile habitat.

The event also gave participants and spectators the opportunity to connect with the red panda's natural environment, showcasing its beauty and underscoring the importance of its preservation. By uniting people from various communities around a shared cause, the initiative served both conservation goals and regional development. It boosted the Taplejung region's visibility as a tourism destination, with local authorities expressing their commitment to implementing "a comprehensive plan to develop and promote Taplejung, with a focus on conserving and raising awareness for the red panda, while attracting both domestic and international tourists".

"Red Panda Marathon was more than a race - it was a movement. By blending athleticism with conservation, we inspired thousands to care for red pandas while promoting health, sports, and tourism in their native habitat. We are deeply grateful to Play for Nature for their generous support in making this vision a reality."

Red Panda Network

2. Active Awareness Campaigns

Here, sport becomes an educational tool, where the rules or the design of events convey an environmental message. In 2024, Sahara Conservation organized its first Koutous Games, featuring various sporting and educational activities. These included a football game with teams named after local wildlife species, a “trash run” whose objective is to collect as much litter as possible, and an orienteering run to identify local fauna and flora.

The 2025 edition will introduce a new game: Resource Collect, revisiting the traditional game “Steal the Bacon” rules. Each participant is assigned a number, and when called, they must race to capture a totem representing either a resource (like water, trees, or animals) or a threat (such as pollution or poaching). The goal is to be the fastest to collect resources while avoiding threats, highlighting the importance of healthy ecosystems and the dangers they face due to human activities. By adapting familiar games with conservation themes, participants can engage more deeply and attractively, learning through experience how nature works and how to better protect it.

"I would say that the support from Play for Nature during the first phase of activities was a great experience and a real opportunity in a setting where young people are always looking for engaging activities. The combination of sport and biodiversity helped solve many of the challenges I personally face in my professional life — particularly how to bring people together and raise awareness on a topic that doesn't directly relate to my usual work. But through this project, I was able to engage with people from different social backgrounds.

It opened up a subject we could talk about anywhere — in town, during ceremonies, or while visiting the ostrich breeding center. The launch of the new project is also a powerful and enriching experience. It is bringing back traditional customs and practices that the younger generations have never known.

In summary, sport and biodiversity is truly an excellent idea. It not only offers a new form of awareness-raising but also contributes to the long-term protection of the environment."

Maimounatou Ibrahim Mamadou - Manager, Ostrich Breeding Sites – Sahara Conservation

3. Immersive and Participatory Conservation

The last level is the most immersive. While it can take many forms and serve various objectives, its primary aim is to directly involve people in conservation efforts. Programs that include clean-up campaigns or habitat restoration fall under this category of immersive and participatory action. But sport can also change behaviors and even save species/lives. In Kenya, Big Life Foundation has developed an innovative alternative to the traditional lion hunt, a rite of passage symbolizing bravery among young Maasai. Through the Maasai Olympics, warriors compete in sporting events that celebrate strength and endurance without harming wildlife. As Big Life Foundation explains, “Conservation education is paired with organized sports competitions based on traditional warrior skills. Today, warriors compete for medals and prizes instead of killing lions”. Winners are awarded livestock, a major economic resource, while families are compensated when lions attack their herds, reducing the incentive for retaliatory killings. These immersive initiatives show how sport can become a powerful tool for long-term conservation, offering not only awareness but direct action, cultural transformation, and tangible benefits for both people and biodiversity.

"The Maasai Olympics transform traditional warrior culture by replacing lion hunting with athletic competition, giving young Maasai men a path to honor and respect that protects, rather than threatens, wildlife. Since its founding, the Games have not only conserved lions and other species but have also inspired an entire community to see conservation and culture as inseparable."

Big Life Foundation



DISCOVER THE POST-2020 BIODIVERSITY FRAMEWORK PUBLICATION

In partnership with Fair Play For Planet, IUCN, Sports for Nature, Expertise France, and the AFD Group.

Transformative actions #51 – From fields to forests: Sports' Role in Biodiversity Protection

4. A Call to Action: Putting Sport at the Service of Biodiversity

Given the scale and urgency of the biodiversity crisis, isolated efforts are no longer enough. It's now essential to build bridges across sectors, foster cross-cutting collaborations, and pool resources and expertise to act together, concretely.

Sport, with its universal reach and presence in all layers of society, can become a powerful catalyst for cooperation. It can link institutions, civil society, and local communities around a shared goal: the protection of life.

To Public Decision-Makers and Institutions

- **Recognise sport's strategic value as a conservation lever.** Integrate it into biodiversity strategies and action plans, acknowledging its unique ability to engage diverse audiences and promote sustainable practices.
- **Support, accompany, and fund local initiatives** that use sport as a tool for environmental education and ecosystem restoration.

To Environmental NGOs and Conservation Actors

- **Forge partnerships** with the sports world to co-create programs combining ecological expertise with sport's mobilising force. Such collaborations can lead to innovative actions: biodiversity diagnostics at sports sites, joint awareness campaigns, and shared ecological restoration projects. By combining your strengths—scientific knowledge and popular reach—you amplify conservation messages and foster community engagement.

To Sports Organisations

- Your influence goes far beyond the playing field. By **integrating biodiversity protection and environmental footprint reduction in your activities**, events, and communication, you become inspiring role models for millions.
- **Go beyond regulatory compliance: become ambassadors for life**, aligning sporting excellence with environmental responsibility. The ambition? Make nature protection a universal sports value, alongside fair play and team spirit.

To Donors and Private Partners

- You play a crucial role in **financing the convergence of sport and biodiversity**. Invest in eco-responsible events and long-term programs aligned with environmental challenges and your Corporate Social Responsibility commitments.
- By supporting initiatives that unite sport and life protection, you **enhance your image as a responsible company and contribute to a high-impact collective movement**.

Conclusion – The Ball Is in Our Court

Biodiversity is collapsing, and with it the fragile balances our societies rely on. Yet amidst this crisis, powerful levers for action are emerging—sometimes from unexpected places.

Sport, a universal ritual and common language with extraordinary mobilizing power, can become a key player in the ecological transition. It can raise awareness, unite, inspire, and drive transformation.

The meeting of sport and biodiversity presents a unique opportunity: to tackle environmental challenges through collective action. By bringing all stakeholders together, we can harness sport's popularity to rebuild a deep connection with nature and spread sustainable practices widely.

Throughout this white paper, we've shown how and why sport can serve biodiversity—by raising awareness, creating nature experiences, uniting energies, and opening up spaces for dialogue and commitment.

This potential will only be realized if all actors take ownership of it: public institutions, sport organisations, NGOs, donors, companies. Everyone can play a role, at their own level, and contribute to a global movement.

Let's make sport a game changer—for nature.

#OneTeamForBiodiversity

Lead by



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Contributors

