

Kathy MacKinnon (1948–2023)

By Madhu Rao, Stephen Woodley & Nigel Dudley

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Determined and generous champion of protected-areas science and policy

Kathy MacKinnon's professional life fell into three distinct and very different phases: field biologist and writer based in Indonesia; chief biodiversity specialist for the World Bank in Washington, DC; and, in 'retirement', as an active and hands-on chair of the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA). To all she brought a passionate interest in the natural world, a trenchant defence of protected areas as critical tools for the survival of life and a rare openness and generosity of spirit. Kathy did this at a time when there were vanishingly few women ecologists, and fewer still who combined working in remote and sometimes dangerous places with raising children (she had three sons). There is a photograph in her house in Cambridge of a young Kathy holding an orphan orangutan in one arm and her son James in the other.

Kathy started her career with a doctorate at the University of Oxford. She studied the ecology of the introduced North American grey squirrel in the UK, including investigating competition with native red squirrels, and was one of the first people to assess why the grey squirrel has been able to take over so successfully. This sparked a lifelong interest in invasive species.

However, her marriage to ecologist John MacKinnon resulted in a move away from British conservation and fourteen years of residence in Indonesia, with her life and work based in isolated protected areas in Sumatra, Borneo and Sulawesi, Banjarmasin in Kalimantan and later in Bogor, near Jakarta. There Kathy had advisory various roles, including for the Environmental and Management Development in Indonesia project, the WWF Indonesia Programme and consultancies. She wrote a string of books, which varied from the academic – such as the Oxford University Press standard work, *Ecology of Kalimantan* – to more popular books such as *Alam Asli Indonesia*, which celebrated the country's wealth of nature and was aimed at a readership in Indonesia. She and John worked increasingly far afield, including early studies of the status of



conservation in both the Indo-Malayan realm and Africa. They were co-authors of the IUCN's *Managing Protected Areas in the Tropics*, which remained a must-have book for managers of protected areas for many years.

With her sons grown, in 1994 she made a move that caught many friends and colleagues by surprise: relocating to Washington and the World Bank. At the time the World Bank scarcely had an environmental policy, although Robert Goodland – as the bank's first ecologist – had tried to highlight instances of ecosystem damage from its investments. In collaboration with conservationist Tony Whitten (whose family had been close personal friends in Indonesia), Kathy spearheaded the development of safeguarding policies, and travelled constantly to test ideas out in the field. She highlighted issues such as the

importance of management effectiveness and the role of protected areas in providing a range of ecosystem services, including climate mitigation. While at the World Bank, she championed an initiative to translate over 100 nature field guides into local languages to make them more accessible to aspiring nature lovers and the next generation of conservation biologists.

Retirement from the World Bank in 2010 brought another move, back to her long-term base in Haddenham in Cambridgeshire and a house with a long, mainly wild garden where on any night several mammal species could be recorded by her camera trap. There, she threw herself into the work of the IUCN WCPA, one of six volunteer commissions. She was first deputy chair, then chair and, finally, until the day of her death, a driving force behind defining

and promoting 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs) – a new designation of area-based conservation under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. OECMs are a concept with huge potential for advancing conservation but also multiple risks of 'greenwashing' by governments that are anxious to meet ambitious global conservation targets without taking concrete steps. Providing clear guidance and helping governments to think through the options was a more than full-time job and Kathy had many more field visits still planned at the time of her unexpected death on 18 March 2023.

In between, she contributed to a steady stream of papers in academic literature and kept up a barrage of consultancy and voluntary activities. This included repeated visits to Laos as part of a team advising on a biodiversity offset project from a dam development, advising the WWF on its safeguarding policies towards Indigenous peoples and local communities, and as a member of the board of Botanic Gardens International, supervisory committee of Wetlands International and trustee of

the UNEP World Conservation Monitoring Centre, amongst others.

Kathy was a personal force in the conservation world, touching lives all over the world with her warmth, inclusion and encouragement of others. You always felt special to Kathy and she was especially effective in helping young professionals to become engaged.

Beyond conservation, Kathy was devoted to her family and hugely proud of her sons and seven grandchildren. She was refreshingly unstuffy, up first for birdwatching, hamming it up as a fortune teller at World Bank parties, welcoming young and old with a hug and carrying the same yellow and pink haversack to anything from field trips to ministerial meetings. She died very much with her boots on. The best way we can honour Kathy's legacy is to carry on with the good work that she started.

Additional information

As former chair of the IUCN WCPA, Kathy supported M.R. through her generous mentorship and advice, in her untiring efforts to uphold the core values of the IUCN WCPA. Kathy supported

N.D.'s work on ecosystem services while at the World Bank and they worked closely in the IUCN WCPA, often travelling together. Kathy and S.W. worked on many IUCN WCPA projects, and co-authored books and papers. He ran her chair's election campaign, and always enjoyed her friendship, advice and opinions.

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Published online: 25 May 2023

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests