

## SPOTLIGHT

## Capacity Building and Connecting Practitioners Through the Global Mangrove Alliance

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## THE GLOBAL MANGROVE ALLIANCE

Mangrove forests are increasingly recognized as a natural bulwark against the impacts of climate change. They provide an array of ecosystem services, including coastal protection, fishery enhancement, and carbon storage. Yet, over one million hectares have been lost since 1990 (FAO, 2020). To reverse this decline, mangrove restoration and conservation are key.

In 2017, five nongovernmental organizations created the Global Mangrove Alliance (GMA; <https://www.mangrovealliance.org/>), a network focused on promoting, coordinating, and scaling mangrove conservation and restoration. In the beginning, the GMA operated through in-kind support, and later philanthropic funds were solicited to grow membership and global recognition. With now over 100 member organizations in more than 30 countries and 11 National Chapters (Figure 1), the GMA has become pivotal for successful mangrove conservation and restoration at a global scale. The Alliance established three science-based targets to achieve by 2030: (1) halt loss (reduce mangrove losses driven by anthropogenic actions), (2) restore half (restoration initiated in half of the restorable mangrove areas that have been lost since 1996), and (3) double protection (increase from 42% to 80% of remaining mangroves under formal protection).

Through capacity-building efforts, the GMA promotes best practices, addresses information gaps, avoids repeating past mistakes, and streamlines efforts to safeguard mangroves. This work culminates in the leadership of our National Chapters, where GMA members and local actors use the network and tools provided by the GMA, combined with local expertise and knowledge, to catalyze action on the ground, resulting in improved management, conservation, and restoration of mangroves.

## GMA NATIONAL CHAPTERS

National Chapters are established based on a GMA member's desire to collaborate with in-country actors or recognition by the Alliance of particular strategic value or circumstances, such as political opportunities, on-site impact, or national expertise. Requirements for becoming a National Chapter include existence of a GMA member organization to lead and willingness to adhere to collaborative agreement terms. Chapters can facilitate coordination and help connect the broader GMA goals to local context. They receive support from the wider GMA community, including access to a global expert network, tools, participation in global publications, and financing opportunities. With recent additional funding, the Alliance is working to provide seed funding to assist the organizational functions of chapters, and when available, to support chapter projects. A focus on chapters as the mechanism for scaling our capacity building and best practice efforts is attractive to funders and others interested in supporting evidence-backed projects. Eleven chapters are currently established, with three more expected by the end of 2024. Here, we highlight two of the largest, longest running chapters.

- **Mexico.** The Mexico Chapter is part of the Coastal-Marine Working Group of the Mexican Alliance for Ecosystem Restoration, which advances scientific, political, and local mangrove agendas. Achievements of the chapter's 21 local partner organizations and their collaborative efforts include legislation changes to incorporate the concept of "blue carbon" to mitigate carbon emissions, and mobilizing communities to have their mangrove efforts recognized through the "Declaration of Mangrove Guardian Communities."
- **Indonesia.** The Indonesia Chapter implements community-based mangrove protection and restoration while incorporating traditional knowledge, contributes to the drafting of national policy (e.g., for wetland management), and conducts training on GMA tools. The chapter received a competitive \$1 million USD award from the GMA for mangrove restoration and protection aligned with efforts to improve food security. In 2023, the chapter members participated in field training on community-based ecological mangrove restoration to kick-start their joint work (Figure 2).

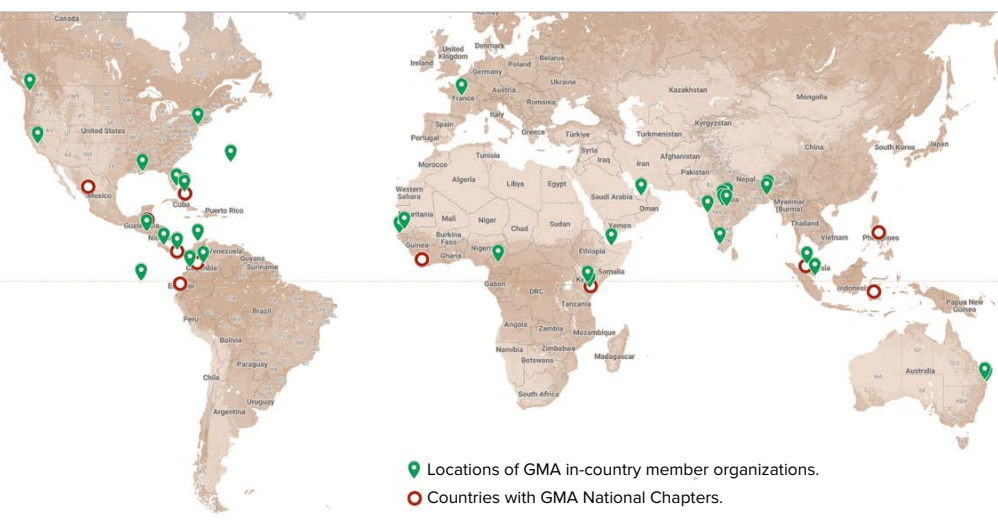


FIGURE 1. Global Mangrove Alliance (GMA) membership.

## PROGRESS

The GMA strives for collaboration rather than duplication. Through our thematic working groups, members stay informed about initiatives and goals and collaborate to produce resources and tools, such as the Global Mangrove Watch mapping platform (<https://globalmangrovetracking.org/>), the *Mangrove Restoration Tracking Tool*



**FIGURE 2.** (above) Members of the GMA Indonesia Chapter gathered in October 2023 to participate in best practices restoration training. © *Mangrove Action Project* (right) The GMA Mexico Chapter lead Pilar Jacobo and oyster farm cooperative president Pedro Alfonso Lopez Gonzalez discuss operations in mangroves. © *Jason Houston/WWF-US*

(Gatt et al., 2024), and *Best Practice Guidelines for Mangrove Restoration* (Beeston et al., 2023), as well as key reports such as *The State of the World's Mangroves* (Leal and Spalding, 2024).

Our collective impact is showing, as GMW data indicate overall declines in mangrove loss. Our members work in more than 30 countries that cumulatively host over 74% of the world's mangrove cover. Most recent Alliance stocktaking indicates that members have collectively restored 36,000 hectares and have ongoing projects that could restore an additional 202,000 hectares. However, area targets are just one metric for success—the GMA is currently developing a robust methodology for measuring impacts against its high-level goals.

Notably, the GMA's accomplishments led to its recognition as a key partner for establishing the Mangrove Breakthrough, a global call to action to catalyze mangrove conservation, which has adopted the GMA's goals and has leveraged support from 27 governments.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- **Great Program Management is Key.** Establishing a network at the global level takes immense time, dedication, and collaboration. Despite plenty of goodwill and in-kind support, we did not truly gain momentum until we installed full capacity for Alliance management with a program manager. A third-party contractor proved catalytic in managing growth and guiding strategic direction. We avoided risk exposure in the early days, as we gauged interest and ability for uptake, but that approach slowed our operations, growth, and ultimately progress toward our goals.
- **Collaboration Sustained Through Trust.** The Alliance emphasizes collaboration among interested parties to achieve ambitious goals. While consensus isn't always possible, fostering healthy relationships through good intentions has been crucial for the GMA's success. We have learned the importance of building trust, primarily through transparency and by acting on behalf of the collective goal rather than one's own organization, while maintaining the ability to hold each other accountable to that collective goal. The GMA, as a non-legal entity, operates under a memorandum of understanding, which, despite administrative challenges, allows us to be nimble, flexible, and creative in problem-solving.
- **Fundraising: Find the Right Levers.** Our initial focus on capacity building provided the stepping stones for scaling impact and establishing a global network. Yet, our fundraising challenges made it apparent that funders preferred supporting implementation with tangible results rather than the operational and capacity-building functions of an alliance. To gain traction on translating our efforts into action on the ground, we should have better communicated the link between operations, capacity building, and implementation, giving them equal weight in fundraising efforts.

- **Member Engagement: Have Something to Offer.** Listening to, including, and supporting members and partners on the ground in places where we work is essential—and our chapters are pivotal in elevating their voices. To respect their time, we offer real benefits such as co-developed, usable tools and funding to implement these approaches, and we maintain consistent engagement to act as a conduit for expressing needs and priorities at higher levels.

## THE ROAD TO 2030

The GMA's initial objective was to establish a movement around mangroves built on collaborative efforts, knowledge exchange, and partnership to create more value than any one organization could do alone. With growing opportunities, the GMA's current priority is to accelerate action. We are actively identifying and supporting member mangrove projects that are most impactful for achieving our 2030 goals. We provide support based on members' needs, which may include financial support for restoration training and project implementation, technical support, data, or policy framework development. We look for opportunities to address global needs while tailoring approaches to local contexts so that global solutions also meet local needs. The GMA is a successful example of partners setting aside their institutional pressures to work together and cultivate a "One GMA" culture where everyone is aligned and comes with the best intentions to save mangroves at a global scale. This goal has been the foundation of this partnership.

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