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Genetic engineering challenged at nature conservation Congress

Civil society calls for global moratorium on gene drives organisms and fights for potentially affected communities to be able to shape the technology's future.

Marseille, FRANCE — On Friday, 10.09.2021, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN)'s World Congress voted on a controversial motion questioning the use of genetic engineering in nature conservation. The IUCN members approved this landmark motion, which paves the way for a global dialogue on the future of new forms of this engineering, called synthetic biology, including gene drive organisms. Gene drives are a new form of genetic engineering, which is designed to exterminate or genetically modify entire wild species.

“Gene drives have the capacity to wipe out or alter species forever, and to significantly disrupt or modify the ecosystems on which humanity and biodiversity depend for their survival,” says **Dr. Ricarda Steinbrecher**, scientific advisor to IUCN member ProNatura. *“Any release of gene drive organisms holds the threat to trigger ecological domino effects with unforeseeable negative consequences.”*

Due to travel restrictions from COVID-19 and lack of access to vaccinations, many members of the Global South were not able to participate at IUCN Congress. *“This is particularly scandalous given that it is Burkina Faso's environment and residents who are at risk of becoming guinea pigs for first ever field trials with this dangerous gene drive technology. Civil society groups in Burkina denounce the use of gene drives for public health or nature conservation. We have our own Indigenous approaches to these things and do not support gene drives in our country”* says **Ali de Goamma Tapsoba**, president of Burkina Faso based NGO Terre a Vie.

By passing important amendments to [Resolution 075](#), international conservation representatives recognized that there exist major data and knowledge gaps as well as unsolved ethical, social, cultural and ecological issues around the technologies developed to genetically engineer wild species. Resolution 075 stipulates that these uncertainties necessitate the application of the precautionary principle and must be taken into consideration by any position the IUCN may decide to take on the topic. In this regard IUCN members also agreed to prioritize the perspectives, knowledge and rights of Indigenous people's and local communities in their deliberations on these technologies during the coming 3 years.

Mareike Imken, co-ordinator of the European Stop Gene Drives campaign welcomes the IUCN's commitment to the precautionary principle and its intention to foster increased understanding and debate among its members around the use of genetic engineering technologies for nature conservation purposes. *“A broad and inclusive IUCN discussion process will be crucial to raise*

awareness among IUCN members that the tampering with natural evolutionary rules in the application of gene drive technology will bring about a new dimension of intervening with – and irreversibly changing - the natural world that IUCN itself means to preserve.”

The contentious negotiations around this resolution were divided between civil society groups calling for the IUCN to not endorse environmental releases of synthetic biology applications, and pro-gene drive proponents who advocated for synthetic biology, including gene drives, to be accepted as a tool for nature conservation. One of the gene drive proponents, IUCN member Island Conservation, advocates to use gene drives to eradicate invasive mice on islands.

“Gene drive developers plan the genetic forcing of pesticide resistant weeds in order to be sensitive to pesticides again. This, together with reports of DARPA’s funding of gene drive research, indicate that both corporate agriculture and military interests in synthetic biology and gene drives are the main interests driving the technology. Conservation proposals are, in fact, acting as Trojan horses”, says **Dr. Joann Sy** from the French NGO POLLINIS fighting for conservation of pollinators and insects.

“Community groups and researchers need resources to help the IUCN deliver what the resolution demands - the full participation of local people in the evaluation of this potentially extreme terminator technology” says **Dr. Tom Wakeford**, Europe Director of ETC Group, a think-tank who have worked extensively criticising gene drives.

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