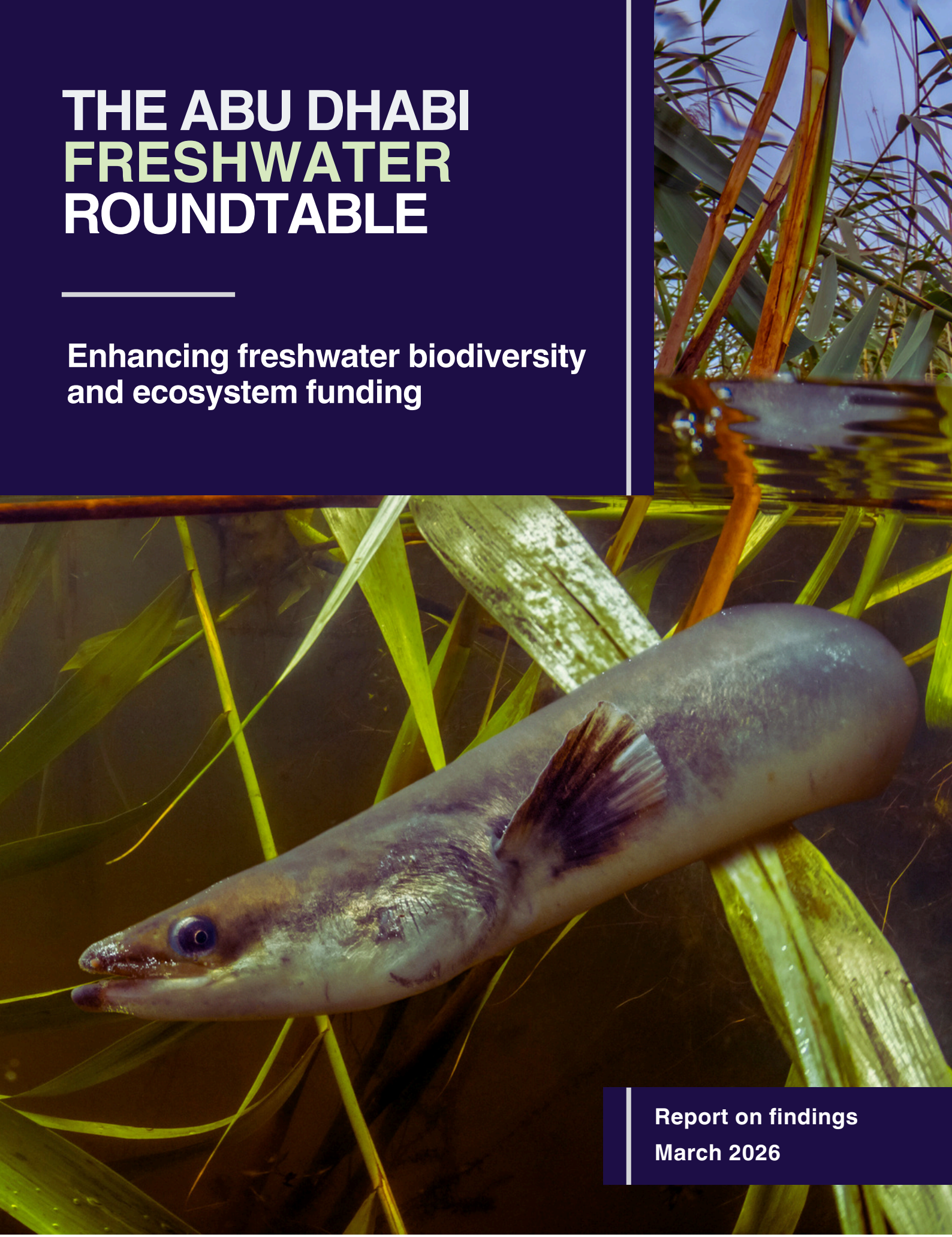
THE ABU DHABI FRESHWATER ROUNDTABLE

Enhancing freshwater biodiversity and ecosystem funding



Report on findings

March 2026

Wetlands International

National Geographic

Synchronicity Earth

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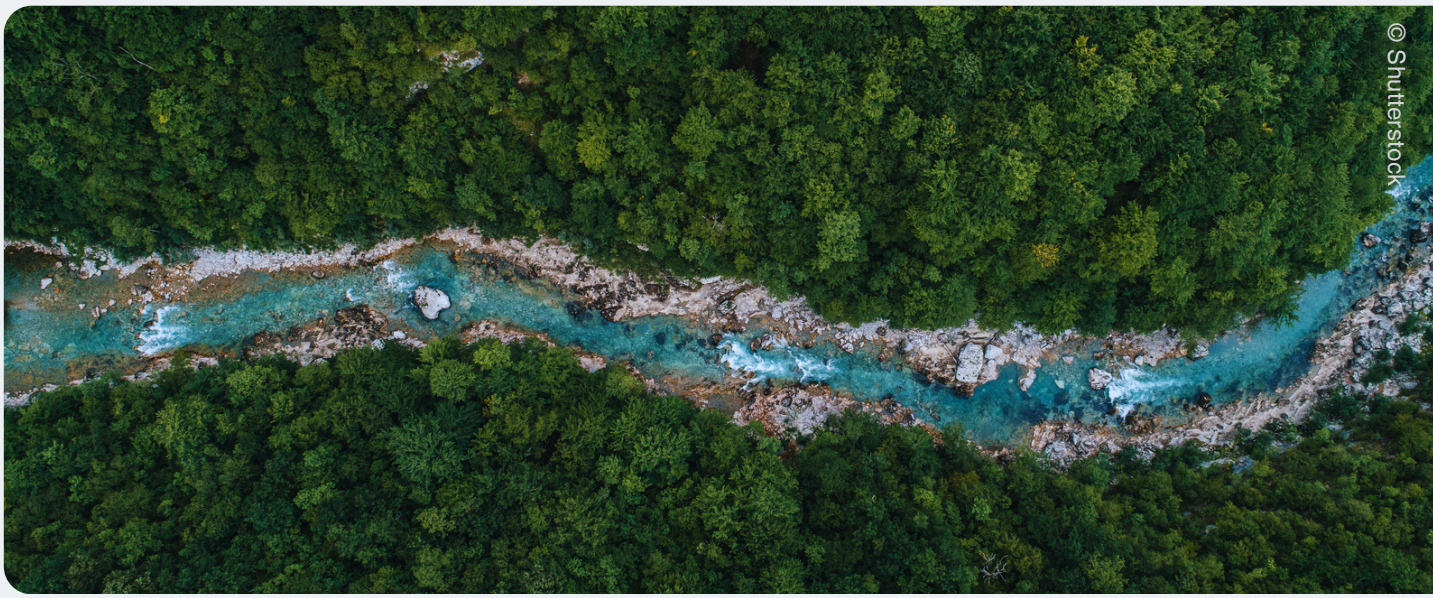
Executive Summary



Freshwater ecosystems, rivers, lakes, wetlands, and floodplains, are among the most biodiverse and most threatened ecosystems on Earth.

Although they cover less than 1% of the planet's surface, they support at least 10% of all known species and over half of the world's fish species. They are also foundational to climate resilience, food security, public health, and economic prosperity. Peatlands store more carbon than any other terrestrial ecosystem, while healthy wetlands and floodplains buffer floods and droughts, reducing climate risks for people and nature alike.

Freshwater ecosystems underpin one-third of global food production and sustain over 60 million livelihoods through inland fisheries. Their annual economic value derived from freshwater ecosystem services is estimated at US$58 trillion – equivalent to 60% of global GDP.

Freshwater species populations have crashed by 85% on average since 1970. At the same time, freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity are in crisis, disappearing faster than their marine and terrestrial counterparts. 37% of the world's long rivers no longer flow freely, 65% of the world's remaining wetlands are under moderate to high levels of threat, and a quarter of freshwater species are at risk of extinction.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Despite this extraordinary ecological, social, and economic importance, freshwater conservation remains severely underfunded.

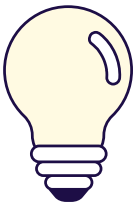
Available regional estimates suggest freshwater receives only 1–3.2% of conservation finance in some philanthropic and research funding streams, and water represented the smallest allocation (10.9%) in the Global Environment Facility's eighth replenishment cycle. While global data are incomplete, the pattern is clear: freshwater biodiversity and ecosystems are chronically underinvested relative to their importance and vulnerability.

To address this gap, funders and practitioners convened a roundtable at the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi in October 2025, co-hosted by the National Geographic Society, Synchronicity Earth, and Wetlands International.

Joining under Chatham House rules, participants explored barriers to funding freshwater conservation, identified opportunities for greater impact, and discussed pathways to improve access, equity, and outcomes.

This report synthesises those insights. Four systemic challenges emerged.

Systemic challenges



1) Donors face strategic fragmentation and uncertainty.

Freshwater intersects with agriculture, energy, infrastructure, climate, and biodiversity, leading to blurred mandates and assumptions that it is already covered by other portfolios or is primarily a government responsibility. The absence of shared definitions, priorities, and translational pathways from science to action further discourages investment.

2) Freshwater suffers from low visibility and weak narratives.

It lacks the emotional resonance of forests or oceans, is often framed as an engineering issue, and is rarely associated with hopeful success stories or cultural identity. The life within freshwater ecosystems, and the life-providing characteristic of these systems, is too often overlooked.

3) Existing funding structures are poorly suited to freshwater conservation.

By nature, freshwater work is interdisciplinary, long-term, and governance-oriented. Indigenous Peoples and local communities face disproportionate barriers to accessing funds, while short funding cycles and complex grant processes limit durable impact.

4) Gaps in data, shared metrics, and impact communication undermine donor confidence.

Scientific knowledge is not consistently translated into policy or practice, and community knowledge systems are often excluded from formal evaluation frameworks.

"Show freshwater as a solution, not a problem, by demonstrating how it solves climate, food, health, and equity challenges. Funders want to feel they're solving multiple crises with one investment."

- Roundtable particpant

Alongside these barriers, participants identified powerful opportunities. A coordinated global freshwater donor initiative could align strategies, pool resources, clarify priorities, and strengthen advocacy.

Stronger narratives, linking freshwater to climate resilience, livelihoods, health, culture, and economic value, could unlock new donor interest, especially through flagship species, restoration success stories, and creative storytelling.

More flexible and accessible funding pathways, including regranting and small-grants programs, could improve equity and effectiveness.

Finally, shared indicators, participatory monitoring tools, and transparent impact metrics could strengthen evidence, learning, and accountability.

The roundtable produced six core recommendations:

1. **Treat freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity as a distinct funding priority, recognising their distinct pressures, priorities, and their required targeted interventions.**
2. **Position freshwater conservation as a solution for climate adaptation and human wellbeing.**
3. **Increase funding for Indigenous Peoples and local leadership through simplified, trust-based, long-term partnerships.**
4. **Invest in stronger narratives, communications, and public awareness.**
5. **Support flexible funding mechanisms, including regranting and small-grants programs.**
6. **Foster donor collaboration and strengthen governance, policy, and advocacy.**

Freshwater ecosystems are indispensable to biodiversity, climate resilience, and human prosperity, yet they remain marginal in global philanthropy. By closing narrative, structural, and data gaps, and by collaborating across funding strategies, the philanthropic community can catalyse high-impact, cost-effective action.

With coordinated leadership, inclusive funding models, and compelling storytelling, freshwater conservation can become a cornerstone of a nature-positive, climate-resilient future in which rivers, lakes, and wetlands thrive alongside the communities that depend on them.

If you are interested in joining follow-up discussions and actions arising from this roundtable, please reach out to Félix Feider (felix@synchronicityearth.org).

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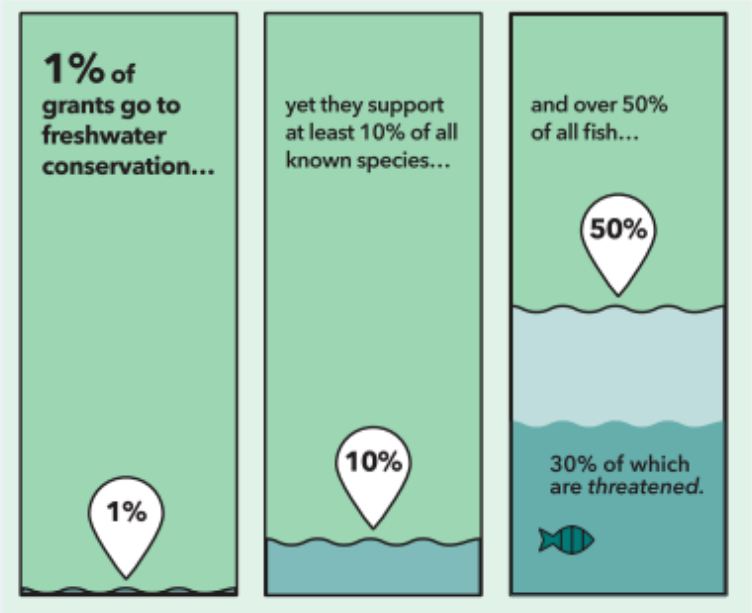
Introduction

Water is more than just a resource, it is a living thread that connects all ecosystems, economies, and communities.

Freshwater ecosystems are among the most biodiverse and most threatened ecosystems on the planet. They cover less than 1% of the Earth's surface, yet support at least 10% of all known species, including over half of the world's fish species.[1] Healthy freshwater ecosystems are also critical for climate change mitigation and adaptation.[2] Peatlands are the world's largest terrestrial carbon store. Connected floodplains and healthy wetlands can buffer against floods and droughts and thereby reduce the impact of climate change on nature and people alike.[3]

Freshwater ecosystems provide people globally with food and water security and are foundational for public health and a water-resilient future.[4] Densely populated and agriculturally rich deltas also rely on the flow of water, nutrients and sediments. A third of the world's food production is dependent on healthy freshwater ecosystems,[5] and inland fisheries represents over 12% of global fisheries catches,[6] supporting over 60 million livelihoods globally.[7] The annual estimate of economic value of water and freshwater ecosystems, and their ecosystem services, is US $58 trillion - equivalent to 60% of global GDP.[8]

At the same time, freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity are in crisis, disappearing faster than their marine and terrestrial counterparts.[9] 37% of the world's rivers over 1,000km no longer flow freely,[10] 35% of wetland area has been lost since 1970,[11] 65% of the world's remaining wetlands are under moderate to high levels of threat,[12] and a quarter of freshwater species are at risk of extinction.[13]



Despite this crisis, and their critical importance for biodiversity, climate resilience, economies, and human livelihoods, freshwater conservation receives a disproportionately small share of philanthropic funding.

Estimates from regional studies suggest freshwater receives only a small proportion of conservation finance (roughly 1 to 3.2% in some analyses of European philanthropic and research funding).[14,15] Most conservation funds go to large vertebrates at the expense of neglected species, such as freshwater gastropods representing 30% of recently documented extinctions.[16] At 10.9%, water represented the smallest allocation in the 8th replenishment cycle of the Global Environment Facility in 2022.[17] There is however no single, globally comprehensive estimate, so these figures should be interpreted as an indication of underinvestment rather than definitive global statistics.

To address this critical and urgent gap, during the IUCN World Conservation Congress in Abu Dhabi, October 2025, funders and practitioners convened a roundtable to discuss the obstacles limiting funding for freshwater biodiversity and ecosystems, explore opportunities for greater impact, and identify solutions to improve access, equity, and outcomes.

Key Barriers and Opportunities

1 Donor collaboration and strategy alignment

Barriers

Freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity conservation faces strategic alignment challenges across the philanthropic landscape.

Funding environments are complicated by cross-sector governance structures in which freshwater ecosystems intersect with energy, agriculture, infrastructure, and biodiversity. Donors frequently struggle to determine where philanthropic action is most appropriate, particularly when deciding whether to address underlying pressures such as agricultural pollution or to focus on direct conservation such as revised policy and restoration action.

This uncertainty is amplified by common assumptions that freshwater ecosystem and biodiversity issues are already covered through terrestrial conservation, climate, forest, or WASH portfolios, or that they fall primarily under governmental responsibility due to water infrastructure, hydropower, and regulation. As a result, freshwater is often deprioritised as a distinct field, limiting coordinated strategies and investment.

Additionally, a lack of shared definitions, classifications, and priority-setting frameworks obscures funder decision-making. Even when robust scientific evidence exists, translational gaps between research, policy, and implementation impede clarity around where donors can most effectively intervene.

Collectively, these dynamics create donor hesitation, fragment philanthropic engagement, and reduce the strategic coherence required for local to global-scale outcomes.

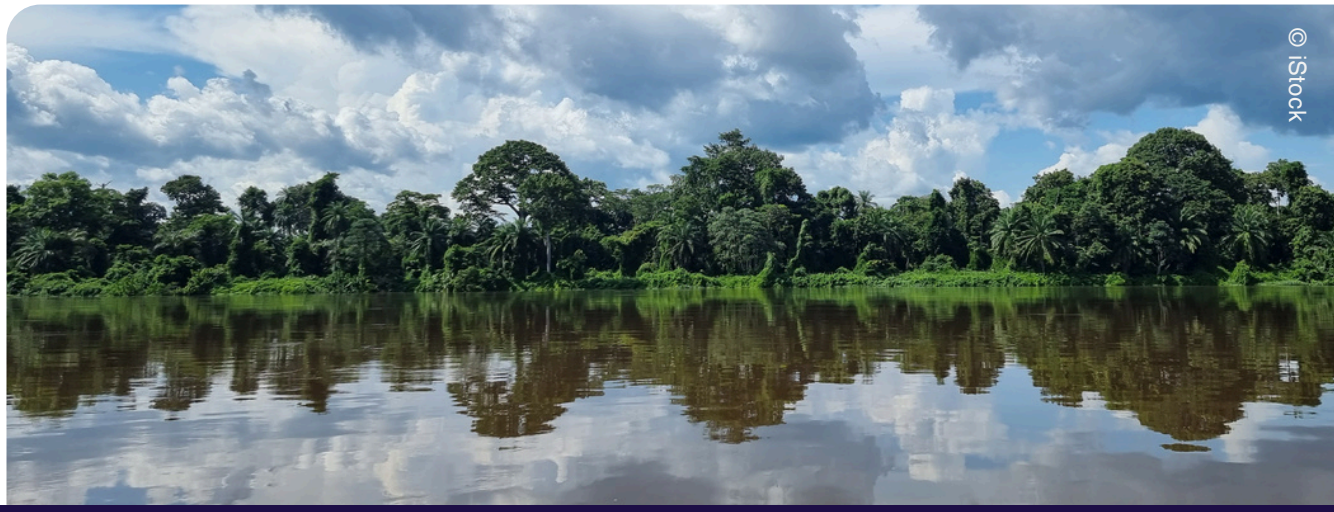
Opportunities

The idea of creating a coordinated global donor initiative for freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity emerged as one of the most significant opportunities identified during the roundtable.

Participants envisioned a collaboration where funders could pool resources, align priorities, and jointly focus on overcoming common challenges as well as focus work in areas of high ecological and social value. Some funders expressed early interest in contributing to such a collective.

A collaboration of this kind could provide a hub for strategy development, evidence sharing, and joint advocacy. It could also create shared rationales and communication tools that help simplify complex freshwater issues for philanthropy. Equally, a shared platform would give donors a clearer sense of which are the highest priority basins for action, where to direct action within these basins, and which strategies are most cost-effective.

> ***"Launch a global collaboration for freshwater, to pool resources, align priorities, and signal to markets that freshwater is a strategic investment, not an afterthought."***
>
> *- Roundtable particpant*



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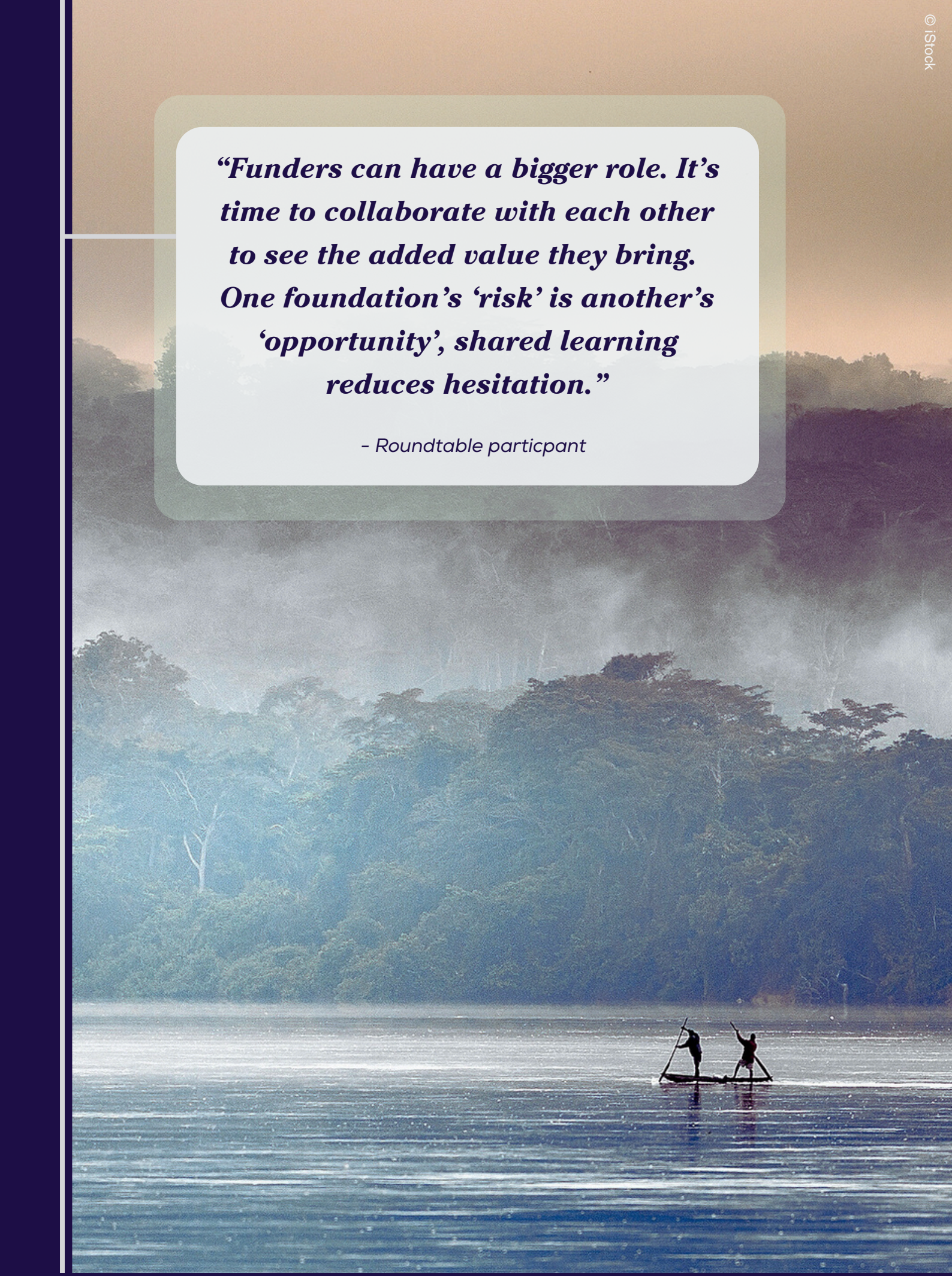
Because freshwater ecosystems intersect with forests, oceans, climate adaptation, food systems, public health, and human rights, a coordinated funder initiative could help donors more clearly connect freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity with their existing portfolios within these other themes.

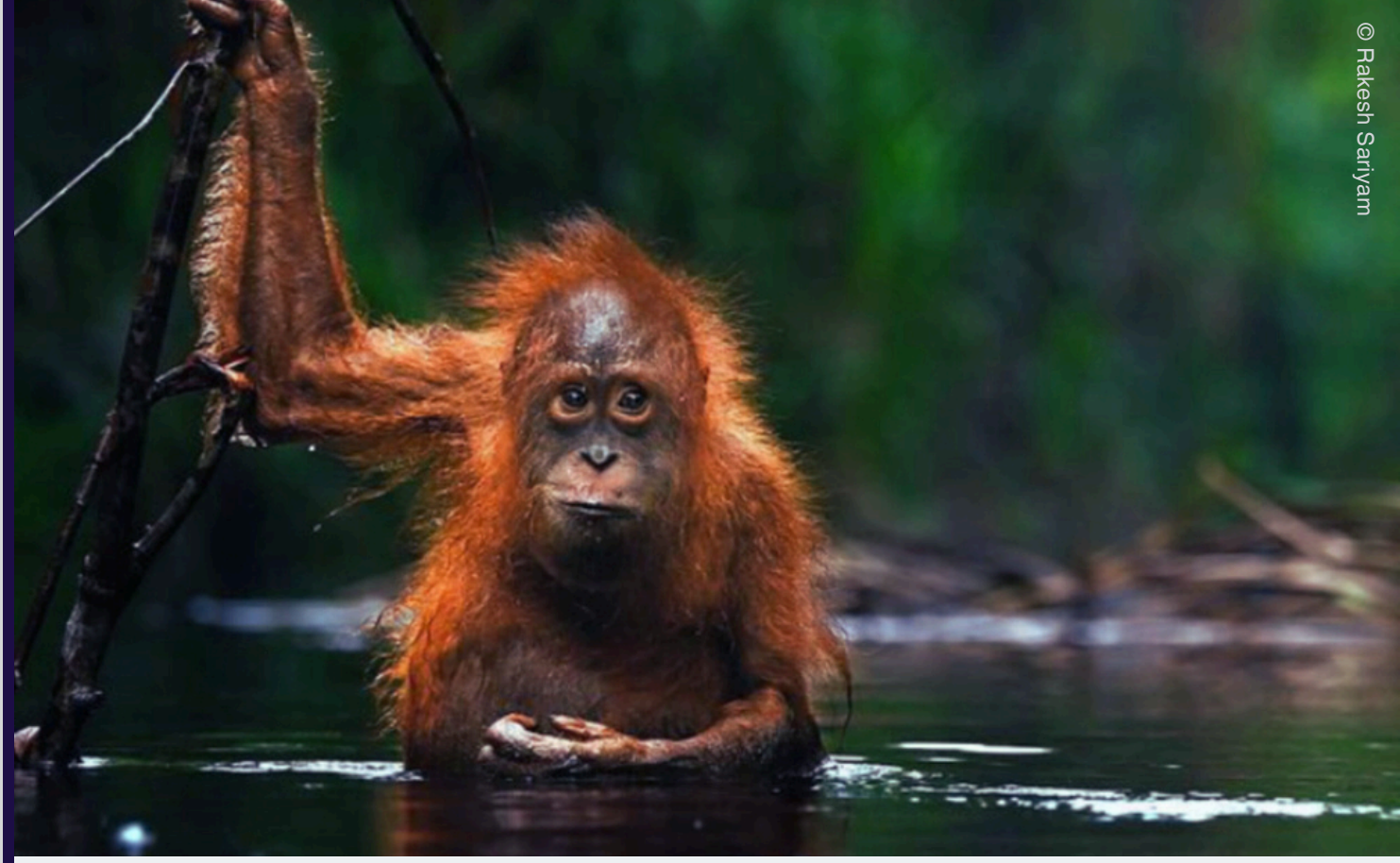
One existing example of this is the Freshwater Challenge, a country-led initiative to restore and protect rivers and wetlands worldwide, creates a timely opportunity for targeted donor support.

As governments commit to ambitious freshwater restoration goals, there is a growing need for partners to help turn commitments into action. Strategic funding can accelerate on-the-ground restoration and long-term protection of freshwater ecosystems.



"Funders can have a bigger role. It's time to collaborate with each other to see the added value they bring. One foundation's 'risk' is another's 'opportunity', shared learning reduces hesitation."

- Roundtable particpant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2 Communications and awareness

Barriers

A major barrier to increased investment in freshwater ecosystem and biodiversity is the sector's low visibility in public and donor narratives.

Freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity are often perceived to lack the emotional resonance and charismatic appeal associated with forests or oceans, with wetlands in particular suffering from unhelpful perceptions as muddy, unattractive, or overly technical.

Many freshwater issues are framed in scientific or infrastructure terms, reinforcing the misconception that they concern engineering rather than living ecosystems that support biodiversity, food systems, and cultural identity. Communication challenges are compounded by a broader erosion of people's cultural connections to rivers and wetlands, particularly in the 'Global North', reducing emotional engagement and philanthropic interest.

Existing narratives tend to emphasise scarcity, pollution, and conflict, while success stories of restoration, species recovery, sustainable inland fisheries, and community stewardship remain underutilised. There is significant untapped potential in using flagship freshwater species and in tailoring communication styles to different donor motivations, whether evidence-based, emotional, community-centered, or economic.

Historically, freshwater has also been underrepresented on global policy agendas, reinforcing a perception of secondary importance.

The first UN Water Conference in nearly 50 years took place in 2023, and momentum has been building since then and in the lead-up to the upcoming UN Water Conference in December 2026.

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Opportunities

A big opportunity is to find and communicate examples of clear and compelling links between freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity and climate resilience, forests, oceans, livelihoods, public health, and culture.

There have been many instances where conservation stories have been framed around the spectacular features of rivers in terms of their flows and size, or the size of large wetlands, and the diversity of species found within them, including charismatic mammals such as jaguars, or charismatic fishes such as sturgeon, or giant catfish.

Small but highly unusual ecosystems such as desert pools and hot springs, or subterranean caves, or small irrigated systems with highly threatened but culturally important species such as the axolotl, have similarly been used well to promote freshwater conservation messages.

Participants highlighted the potential of using climate and carbon narratives as an entry point for donors who may not initially view freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity as relevant to their interests.

> ***"Freshwater is not 'muddy and tricky', it's life. Rebuild cultural connection: show rivers as sacred, economic, and social lifelines, not just ecosystems."***
>
> *- Roundtable particpant*

"Many donors think in terms of 'land and sea', so link freshwater to forests and oceans.

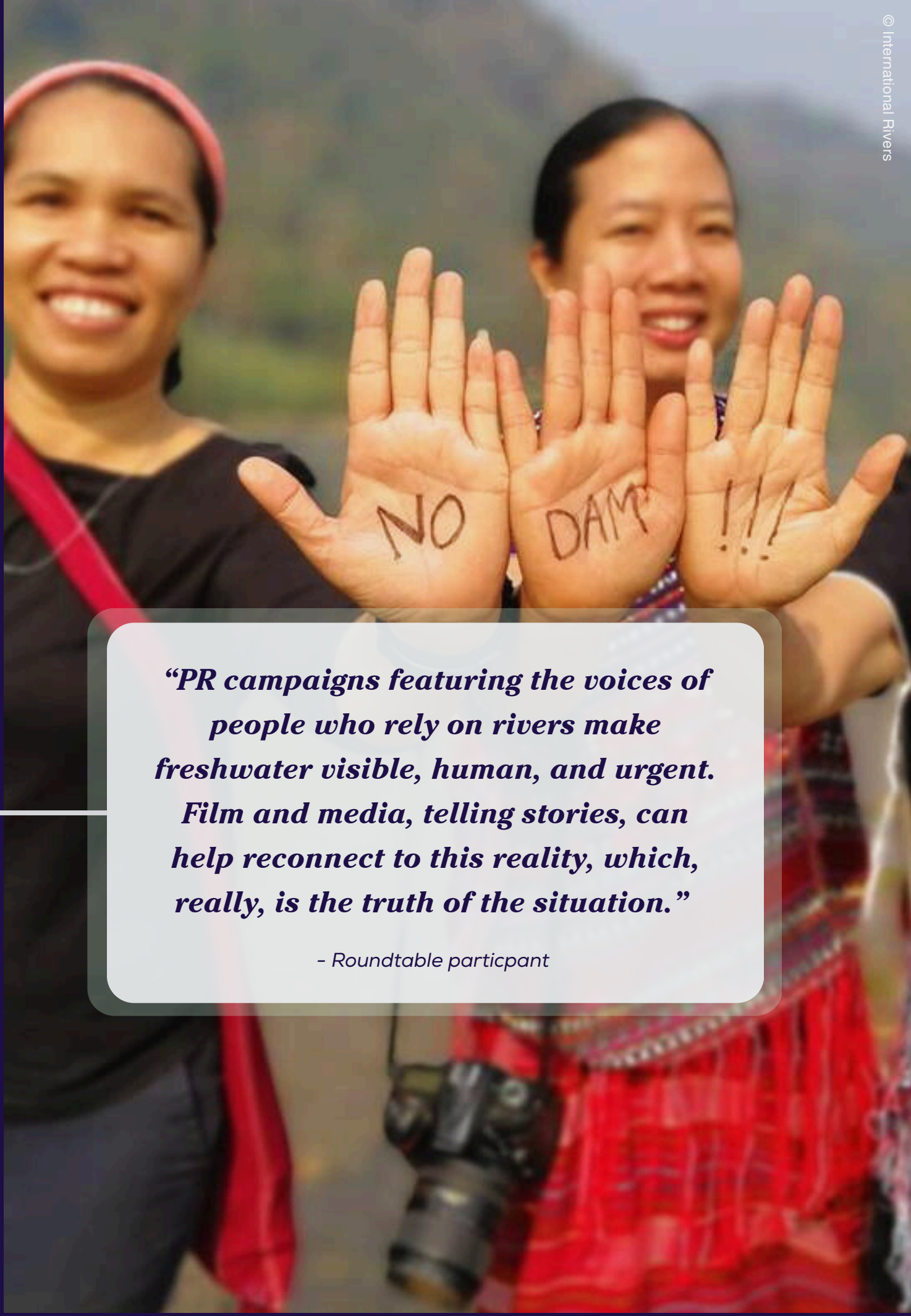
"Let's show how rivers connect ecosystems: no forest without water, no ocean without rivers."

- Roundtable participant

Similarly, positive case studies, such as dam removals, community-led river governance, sustainable inland fisheries, and wetland conservation and restoration, could help demonstrate that freshwater conservation produces rapid and cost-effective benefits. For some donors, economic arguments, including cost-benefit analysis, can be more persuasive than ecological narratives.

There is also a strong need to rebuild cultural connections to rivers, particularly in regions where these ties have been lost.

Participants suggested using flagship species such as river dolphins or sturgeon to strengthen emotional engagement, and emphasised the importance of involving film-makers, artists, community storytellers, and Indigenous communicators to create narratives that feel personal, hopeful, and culturally grounded.



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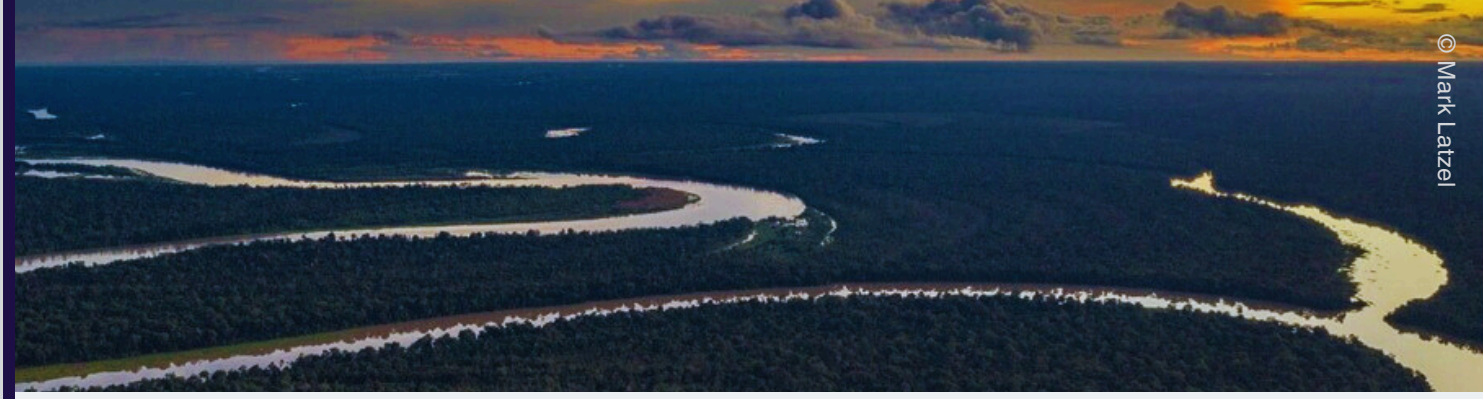
"PR campaigns featuring the voices of people who rely on rivers make freshwater visible, human, and urgent. Film and media, telling stories, can help reconnect to this reality, which, really, is the truth of the situation."

- Roundtable particpant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3 Improving funding access and structures

Barriers

The structures and processes that shape philanthropic funding access are perceived to not be best suited to the characteristics of freshwater ecosystem and biodiversity conservation. Freshwater initiatives are often interdisciplinary, governance-oriented, and long-term, involving multi-sector coordination and catchment-level planning.

These qualities do not fit neatly into conventional funding categories, which frequently favour more visible, site-based, or species-specific conservation activities. Traditional grantmaking systems reward large, internationally connected organisations capable of navigating complex applications, reporting requirements, and digital systems.

Indigenous Peoples and local communities, who are often the most directly connected to freshwater ecosystems, face disproportionate challenges due to limited legal recognition, administrative capacity, and organisational infrastructure. Funding commonly moves through intermediaries with significant overheads, reducing the resources reaching frontline actors and limiting equity and durable stewardship.

Short funding cycles, unclear application pathways, and low funder visibility further restrict participation, particularly for grassroots organisations that may not know where or how to access available grants.

Together, these structural barriers constrain inclusive engagement and undermine investment in long-term ecological and community outcomes.


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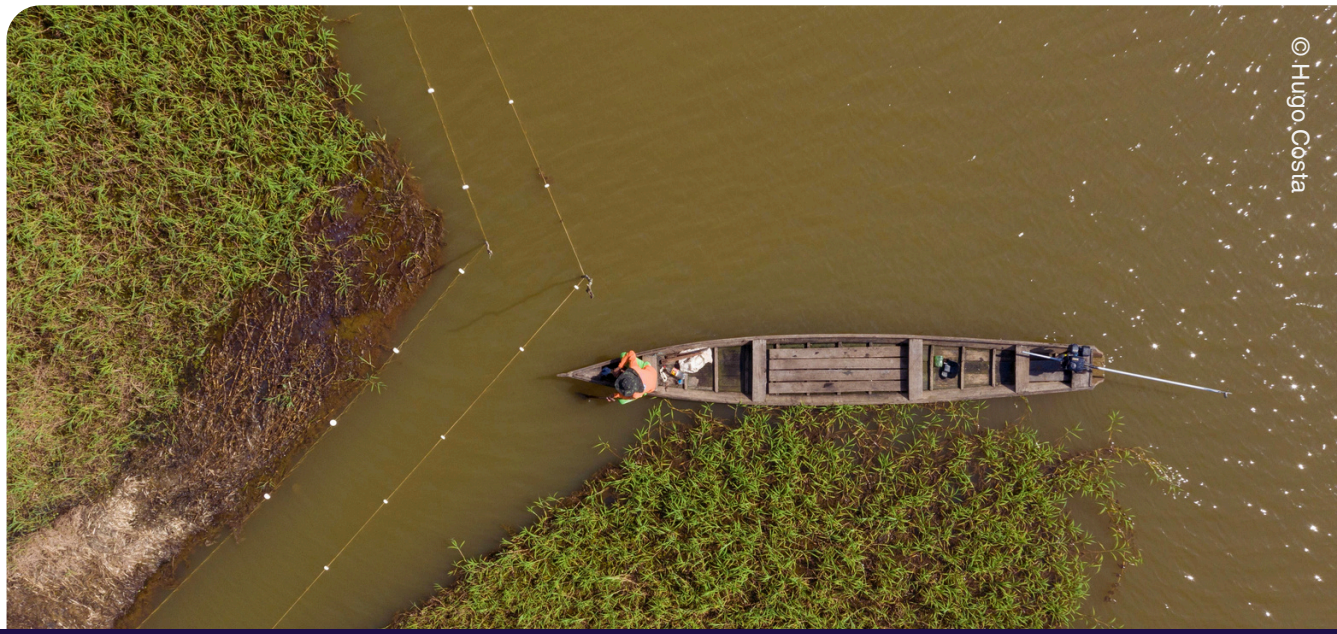
Opportunities

A major opportunity lies in creating more flexible and accessible funding pathways, including grants, from small to large, that are simple to apply for, open to individuals or small and nascent organisations.

Simplified application and reporting requirements, translated guidance, and mentorship could greatly improve access. Funding that covers core costs and is flexible is also able to align more seamlessly with locally-identified freshwater challenges and opportunities.

Regranting mechanisms were highlighted as a particularly promising model, because they allow large grants to be channeled to smaller organisations through trusted intermediary groups that avoid large overhead costs, and pass on the vast majority of funding and provide support beyond funding alone.

> ***"Funds that go directly to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, ensure money reaches those who steward rivers."***
>
> *- Roundtable particpant*



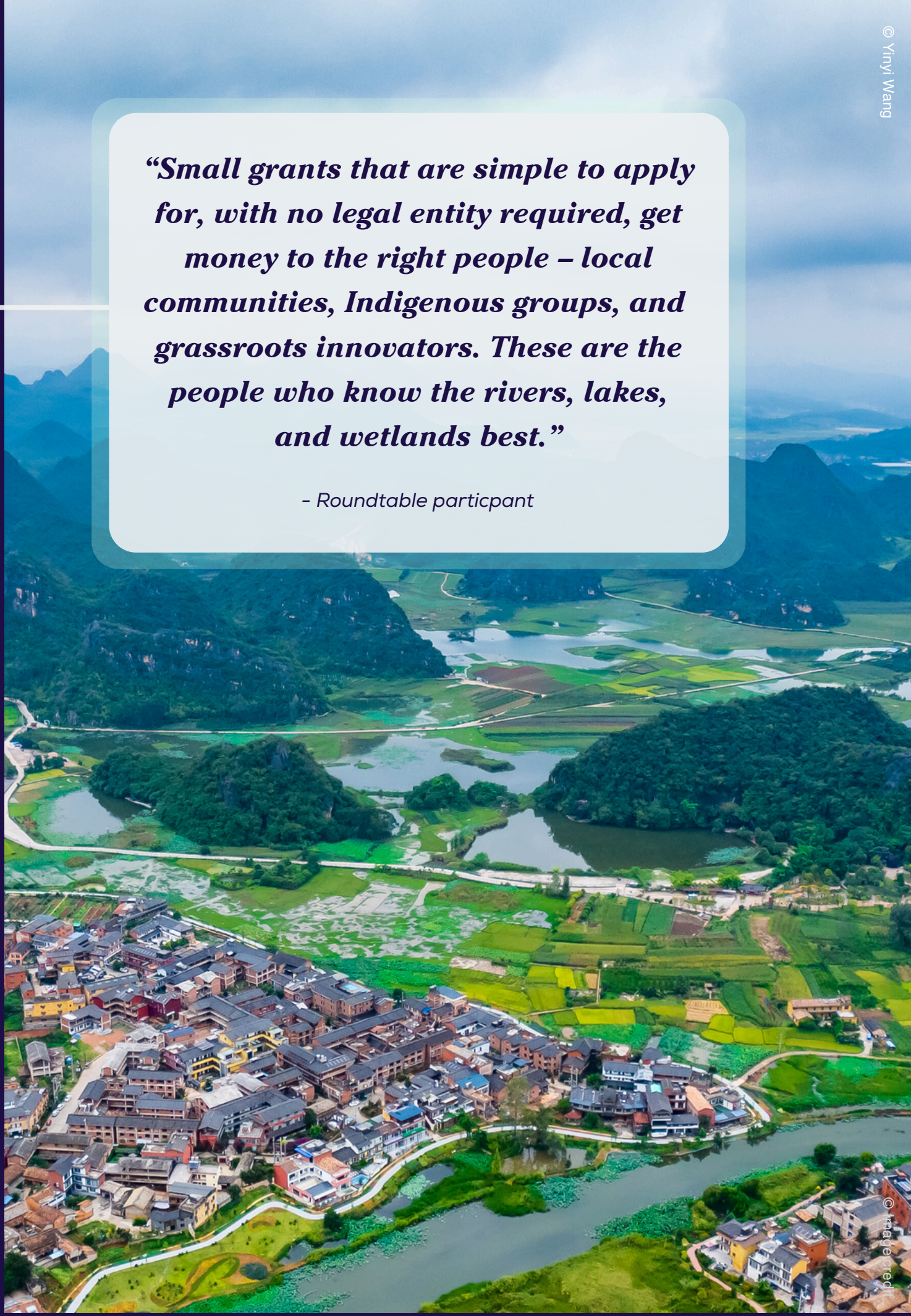
Combined with trust-based approaches, these mechanisms can help ensure funding reaches the right actors, reducing administrative burden for funders and grantee partners.

In addition, participants pointed to the value of providing legal support for groups seeking formal recognition, as many communities and organisations require legal status before they can receive funds.

There is also scope for alternative financing options such as payment for ecosystem services, corporate remediation schemes, and accountability mechanisms that require polluting companies to contribute to freshwater restoration.

Participants stressed that funders themselves need better understanding of their grantees, and that applicants need clearer information about which donors align with their priorities.

Improved communication, relationship building, and more transparent funding pathways were all suggested as key solutions to longstanding access and equity challenges.



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"Small grants that are simple to apply for, with no legal entity required, get money to the right people – local communities, Indigenous groups, and grassroots innovators. These are the people who know the rivers, lakes, and wetlands best."

- Roundtable particpant

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4 Data, Evidence, and Impact Metrics

Barriers

Freshwater conservation is hampered by gaps in data, shared metrics, and impact communication – successes as well as failures. There is no widely adopted set of simple indicators suited to basin-scale monitoring, making it difficult for donors to compare outcomes, assess effectiveness, or build confidence in new initiatives.

Although scientific data often exists, it frequently fails to translate into policy or implementation due to institutional silos and a tendency toward data-heavy projects rather than action-oriented strategies.

Evidence of both successful interventions and failures remains poorly synthesised and disseminated, limiting learning and reducing proposal quality.

These challenges intersect with equity issues: many Indigenous Peoples and local communities express priorities through narrative, relational, or holistic knowledge systems that do not align with donor expectations for quantitative indicators, digital reporting, or formal evaluation frameworks. As a result, valuable knowledge remains under-recognised and underutilised.

Addressing these data and evidence gaps is central to increasing investment confidence, improving proposal design, and demonstrating the broader ecological, social, and economic value of freshwater systems.

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Opportunities

Participants identified the improvement of data, evidence, and impact metrics as a major opportunity to strengthen funding and accelerate action.

Many donors seek clarity, comparability, and confidence in their investments, yet the freshwater sector lacks shared indicators and tools for demonstrating impact. Developing accessible toolkits that outline proven interventions, priority actions, and lessons learned from past projects could reduce the hesitation that many donors feel when entering the freshwater space.

There is considerable potential to create standardised indicators for freshwater ecosystem health, governance improvements, biodiversity outcomes, and community benefits. Such metrics could help funders understand where progress is being made and allow them to compare proposals more easily. Participants also expressed the need for more open sharing of both successful and unsuccessful projects, noting that lessons from failure are rarely documented.

> ***"Data on failed and successful projects – shared openly – improves proposal quality and reduces donor risk. This kind of transparency builds trust."***
>
> *- Roundtable particpant*

© Jeremy Shelton

"Rights of nature laws unlock new funding pathways by recognising rivers as rights-holders, and as we strengthen accountability frameworks, these protections will become even more powerful."

- Roundtable particpant

Tools such as freshwater ecosystem health scorecards, participatory monitoring frameworks, and platforms that integrate scientific and community knowledge could help build a more complete picture of freshwater ecosystems.

Economic analysis, including cost-benefit frameworks and nature positive initiatives can further strengthen the case for freshwater conservation by illustrating its value in financial as well as ecological terms.

Data also plays an important role in communication, helping donors visualise impacts and see how their investments fit within wider catchment strategies.

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“Use cost-benefit analysis to prove freshwater conservation pays. Show funders that dam removals, wetland restoration, and flood prevention all deliver strong economic returns on ecological investment."

- Roundtable particpant

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Key recommendations

There is no one silver bullet to overcome underinvestment. Instead, roundtable participants highlighted a range of actions that funders and practitioners can take to increase awareness, attention, and funding for freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity. **The list below showcases a range of options that we urge you to consider incorporating into your funding strategies.**

Make Freshwater a Distinct Funding Priority

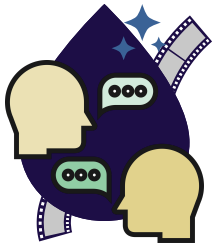
Fund freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity as a distinct priority, developing strategies that recognise the unique threats and needs of rivers, lakes, and wetlands. Treat these ecosystems as distinct systems with specific targeted interventions.

Position Freshwater as a Climate and Human Wellbeing Solution

Frame the conservation of freshwater ecosystems as essential for climate adaptation, public health, ecosystem resilience, and social justice, because they are. Highlight the role of freshwater in addressing climate challenges and improving human wellbeing. Integrating freshwater ecosystems and biodiversity elements in existing strategies is a win-win.

Increase Funding for Local and Indigenous Leadership

Direct more funding to grassroots organisations, Indigenous Peoples, and local communities. Simplify funding procedures, invest in capacity building, and commit to long-term, trust-based partnerships that empower local leadership in the freshwater sector.



Invest in Stronger Narratives, Communications, and Public Awareness

Support storytelling that highlights cultural connections, flagship species, community experiences, and successful conservation efforts. Fund media, film, and creative partnerships that engage broader audiences and raise awareness of freshwater issues and solutions.

Support Flexible Funding Mechanisms and Small-Grants Programs

Create regranting models and flexible multi-year funding streams that cover both project costs and core operational costs. Establish accessible small-grant programs that reduce administrative barriers for grantee partners and funders alike, and increase on-the-ground impact.

Foster Donor Collaboration and Strengthen Governance, Policy, and Advocacy Work

Develop a global freshwater donor network to align strategies, resources, and knowledge for greater collective impact. Support policy reform, legal recognition of rivers and wetlands, community water management, and cross-sector coordination for more effective governance.

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Conclusion

Freshwater ecosystems are essential for biodiversity, climate resilience, and human wellbeing, yet they remain overlooked in global philanthropy. The barriers to freshwater conservation funding are numerous, spanning awareness, narrative, governance, definitions, equity, access, and larger structural challenges within the funding system itself.

However, there are significant opportunities to elevate freshwater as a global conservation priority. With stronger storytelling, improved data and metrics, more inclusive funding mechanisms, and coordinated donor collaboration, freshwater conservation can deliver high-impact outcomes for people, nature, and climate.

By addressing the structural and narrative gaps identified during the roundtable, the philanthropic community has the potential to transform the global trajectory of freshwater ecosystems, and contribute to a world where rivers, lakes, and wetlands thrive in harmony with people. We call funders to collaborate, invest strategically, and elevate freshwater as a distinct priority, to help transform the future of rivers, lakes, and wetlands, now is the moment to act.

If you are interested in joining follow-up actions arising from this initial discussion, please reach out to Félix Feider (felix@synchronicityearth.org)

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Acknowledgements

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed their time, expertise, and insights to the Freshwater Funding Roundtable at the IUCN World Conservation Congress 2025.

We would like to extend particular thanks to the IUCN Species Survival Commission Freshwater Conservation Committee and SHOAL for their invaluable input and guidance in the lead-up to the freshwater roundtable discussion as well as for their contributions to the production of this outcomes report.

FCC Freshwater Conservation Committee

Part of IUCN SSC Species Survival Commission

Shoal

Artwork: Freshwater, Earth Series, Alice Shirley

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