



# 2025-2030 Strategy

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# Statement from ACES Director

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2024 was the year that we as a global community first breached the 1.5 degree increase in global temperature rise – the threshold which world leaders committed to keeping temperatures below, almost 10 years ago. While only long-term trends in temperature will demonstrate the true state of climate change, this initial breach should be heard as an urgent warning that we are far from on track to achieve our global commitment. It is more evident than ever that climate change is having very real human and economic consequences.

Coastal communities around the world have, for some time, been feeling the effects of a changing climate. Unpredictable rains, increasingly intense storms and coastal erosion are just some of the ways in which those who live on the coast are experiencing the impacts of a global rise in air and sea temperatures. Yet those who are most vulnerable to climate change are often those who have the least influence at the global political table.

Climate justice – which recognises the reality that climate change is not felt fairly and proportionately by everyone, and that climate action must address this – must be central to mitigation and adaptation strategies and activities. It adds a human, ethical and political element to climate action, moving questions of what to do and how beyond just science.

Nature-based solutions are just one way of tackling the climate crisis in a way that can embed climate justice. They are by no means a silver bullet, but when designed with social and moral integrity and are evidence-led, they can contribute not only to climate mitigation and adaptation but also to community

development, capacity building and empowerment. They can bring benefits that extend far beyond climate; enhancing biodiversity, building local livelihoods and delivering diverse environmental services and benefits. High-quality nature-based solutions require pragmatic thinking, commitment to systemic change, and meaningful partnership with the people and communities who live in and alongside nature.

Coastal ecosystems including mangrove forests and seagrass meadows hold a special place in nature and climate action. They are carbon capturing superheroes, trapping and storing huge volumes of carbon. They are the first line of defence for the coast as it is subject to increasingly strong and frequent storms and sea level rise. They are a safe haven for wildlife to flourish, including the fish that many coastal people rely on. They are beautiful, vibrant, productive habitats with inherent and invaluable worth to the planet – ecosystems that cannot be lost.

Our commitment, as practitioners, is to continue to develop and facilitate coastal nature-based solutions to the climate and ecological crises. We embed climate justice in all that we do, recognising the inherent place of people in nature and its conservation. Our world-leading projects, Mikoko Pamoja and Vanga Blue Forest, based in Kenya are community-led and owned enabling sustainable and successful conservation of important mangrove forests and enabling community development through carbon credit sales.

We believe that through pragmatic, collaborative and constructive partnerships, we can develop and deliver initiatives that put people at the heart of conservation, for the benefit of the climate, biodiversity and people.



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# Introduction

The Association for Coastal Ecosystem Services (ACES) is a Scottish-based charity that coordinates and supports community-based groups to protect and restore coastal ecosystems, in particular the 'blue carbon ecosystems' of mangrove forests and seagrass meadows. This has included two of the world's most prominent blue carbon projects, **Mikoko Pamoja** and **Vanga Blue Forest**, a new mangrove restoration project under development in The Gambia, and recent pioneering work to include seagrass meadows in nature-based financing frameworks.

ACES has been established for 12 years, and in that time has grown from a volunteer-led organisation to one with paid employees and contracted staff, led by a Board of Trustees. This growth has allowed us to expand our work and our impact, exploring and developing opportunities in new markets and new geographies. It has enhanced our capacity and resilience as an organisation and is evidence that there is increasing demand for our services amongst the communities with whom we work and endeavour to support.

Our projects currently certified and under development utilise carbon and biodiversity financing frameworks. Recent changes in the carbon market, as well as the emerging biodiversity credits market, will require us to adapt our ways of working within these landscapes; responding to evolving standards, increasing regulation in the countries where our projects exist, and a changing market for carbon credits and an emerging market for biodiversity credits. Alongside this, after a decade of working with coastal community groups, this is a pertinent time to reflect on how we work, with who, and our reasons for doing what we do as an organisation.



Together, the challenges to which we must adapt and our reflections on our work so far inform our strategy from 2025-2030. We are proud of our position as a leading developer and practitioner in the blue carbon landscape and recognise that new challenges, driven by political and market pressures, require a change in how we work in order to maintain our position and reputation.

This strategy was developed by the ACES Board and staff. It details reflections on who we are, what we do and how we work as an organisation, and our core values and motivations for doing this. It details an ambition for the organisation for the next 5 years; where ACES will be in 2030, and how we will get there.

# Our vision

Our vision is for a world in which coastal ecosystems are protected, healthy and productive.



Coastal communities are at the heart of their management and protection and benefit from the goods and services that these ecosystems deliver.



Nature-based solutions to the climate and biodiversity crises are recognised and supported at international, national and sub-national levels of policy and practice, and contribute to a systemic and holistic global effort to maintain a healthy climate and environment.



# Our purpose

## What do we do?

We are a **not-for-profit** organisation on a mission to **protect and restore endangered mangrove and seagrass ecosystems and support local development.**



We work with coastal communities to deliver **local solutions to global problems**. Our work is a drop in the ocean of climate change mitigation, but it demonstrates that nature conservation and restoration can work for people and development whilst delivering ecological and climate benefits.

Our projects are climate, biodiversity and development success stories; a proof of concept that these are not competing goals. We support coastal communities in **accessing finance for development** through market frameworks, grant funding, donations and philanthropic support. We have the expertise and reflective sophistication to **bridge science, markets, policy and communities** to create pragmatic solutions that maintain integrity within market landscapes.

We increase the impact of our work through **knowledge sharing**, communicating our journey and our learning through targeted platforms, publications and communications.

ACES provide project development and coordination services to community groups and partners to protect and restore coastal ecosystems. We work flexibly with people, groups and organisations, helping them to find solutions for financing conservation and restoration in a way that is sustainable, ethical and fair. ACES' role in projects can include securing financing, collaborative project design, project development, securing certification under carbon and nature financing frameworks, and ongoing project coordination. We work constructively with partners to find solutions that meet the unique needs and circumstances that each project brings. Our ethos is rooted in bottom-up management of natural ecosystems; we recognise that true community ownership is fundamental to climate and environmental justice, and this is reflected in the projects that we choose to develop and the people who we choose to work with.

Alongside our project work, ACES advocate for the role of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in coastal conservation. We communicate our knowledge and principles to inform fairer, more impactful carbon and nature markets that put community interests first in nature-based solutions. Recent examples of this include authorship of the High Quality Blue Carbon Practitioners Guide, the Best Practice Guidelines for Mangrove Restoration, and The Development of Blue Carbon Projects: a Guide for Communities.

# Our purpose

## What motivates us?

Coastal ecosystems are **beautiful and inherently important** resources to be protected. Mangrove forests and seagrass meadows are special ecosystems that enhance the lives of people and other species that live in, amongst and alongside them. Bridging the land and the sea, they give life to marine and terrestrial species, breathe oxygen into the oceans, act as sentries to protect our coasts, and are superheroes in the fight against climate change.

We know that these ecosystems are critical to the future of our planet, and of our lives on it. Carbon and biodiversity financing can be a sustainable financing mechanism for this protection, but the intrinsic value of coastal ecosystems far exceeds their monetary value in markets.



We believe in nature-based solutions to protecting these critical ecosystems. We embed **climate justice for coastal communities** in all that we do; our projects are designed by and for local people and are community owned and governed. We believe in finding solutions that demonstrate that climate action doesn't come at the expense of development.

Our work is based on **impactful partnerships** with collaborators and funders. We also work exclusively with partners who share our values and commitments. Our partnerships are formed on shared understanding of the critical nature of the climate and biodiversity crises, and commitment to meaningful and ambitious climate action.

# Our values



## Integrity

Our ethics and principles are embedded in all that we do and in the partnerships that we form. We believe in genuine and ambitious climate action and climate and environmental justice for those most impacted by climate change

## Respect

We work with mutual respect and care for one another, with constructive debate and discussion amongst the team and our partners to achieve our mission.

## Evidence-led

Our work is science-informed and pragmatic. We follow the evidence where it exists, but are bold in trialling new concepts where there is an absence of data but a compelling reason to do so, particularly where there is a clear benefit to the communities with whom we work.

## Collaborative

Our work relies on meaningful collaborations with communities and partners. Our expertise is complemented by Traditional Ecological Knowledge and the skills and knowledge of local and international partners.

## Pragmatism

We believe that the climate crisis needs solutions that are locally relevant, practical and achievable at the pace needed to tackle a rapidly changing climate. Our '3 P's' ethos states that paying for offsets comes after political and personal change in importance, but is an important, medium-term element of the transition to a low-carbon society.

# ACES in 2030

## Our objectives: 2025-2030

In 2025-2030 - the final half of the **UN Decade for Ecosystem Restoration** - we will continue to play to our strengths, expertise and experience, and continue to define and demonstrate best practices; this will mean prioritising quality and integrity over rapid growth. Our development is led by the demand for our partnership with more coastal communities to develop nature-based solutions; a landscape that continues to see increased growth as the importance of blue carbon ecosystems is increasingly understood and climate and biodiversity strategies embed the conservation and restoration of these habitats. ACES' unique position in this landscape is to be a high-integrity, non-profit project developer committed to community-led nature-based solutions.

We will widen the reach and the impact of our work with new projects and new types of projects, including considering other coastal ecosystems, new geographies and diverse funding mechanisms. We will develop into a larger organisation to expand, diversify and professionalise our work.

We will explore project financing beyond carbon; although this may not be a reality for our carbon-certified projects for some time, we will be considering how we can move beyond carbon financing in a sustainable way.

We will expand the way in which we communicate and share our experiences and advice to increase the impact of our work globally.



# ACES in 2030

## How we will get there

We need to fully understand, assess and adapt to changes in carbon and nature-based markets, and **make decisions with our ethics, integrity and values** as our core ethos. These changes mean evolving carbon and biodiversity standards, new legislation governing these markets at national levels, and additional financial pressures on income on credits.

These changes collectively necessitate adaptation in the market for our credits; our challenge in the coming years is to respond to this changing market without compromising on our core values and ethos on who we choose to partner with.

Our work to date has grown organically alongside the communities with whom we work and the opportunities available in previously emerging carbon markets. The above changes, combined with an increasing demand for community partnerships with ACES, result in a need to expand and formalise the ways that we work with community groups.

We will develop distinct services that we can offer that will help communities to develop and operate coastal ecosystem conservation and restoration initiatives. We will develop a suite of services that we can provide to community groups and clients and how we can make these services accessible to poorly-resourced groups.

These services will build on our existing experiences, formalising 'packages' of what we can offer and how these can be tailored to individual situations. These packages may include carbon or nature crediting frameworks, but we will explore alternative solutions based on the local context.



# ACES in 2030

## Financial sustainability

Our approach to our projects is to ensure that the **maximum value possible reaches the community groups** with whom we work. This means that while we work with a small number of small-scale projects, income from carbon or biodiversity credits is not used as a primary source of funding for our operations; instead, we seek to fund our work from alternative sources of income as a charity.

**We will seek partnerships for 2025-2030** that align our work and ethos with like-minded funding partners. We offer the opportunity to partner with a truly community-focused organisation dedicated to the ethical development of blue carbon and biodiversity conservation, and we see opportunities to partner with philanthropic organisations, corporations and grant funders to deliver community, environment and climate-centred benefits.

**We will also seek project-based funding** that will allow us to support community groups without charge; this may be for project development, conservation and restoration activities, or other deliverables that further coastal conservation worldwide. Over the 2025-2030 period, we aim to develop and certify enough projects, and at scale, that we can sustainably finance our work through the sale of carbon and biodiversity certificates without disadvantaging projects. Grant and core funding may still be sought to add value to our work and diversify our activities, but a scale of project development will have been reached to sustain ACES' certified projects-related work.



**We will expand the team of staff** and recruit additional Board members with targeted skills and experience needed to complement the existing expertise held by the team. As part of this, we will increase the number of core staff in order to enhance our capacity to expand and develop ACES as an organisation and build resilience so that we can continue to deliver sustainable, long-term support to the community groups who we work with. An initial expansion will increase the number of staff from three to between five and ten staff members, including contracting support in regions where our projects are based. We will actively seek new board members to complement those that already exist; skills including fundraising, financing and legal will be those prioritised in new members.

**We will actively seek new partnerships** with organisations with the aim of enhancing the extent and scope of our work. These partnerships will include those for collaboration, knowledge exchange and financing of our work. Partnerships will be formed on the basis of shared visions, ethos and objectives, and with the aim of achieving shared goals to benefit people, the climate and nature.

*ACES sprang from a unique blend of research expertise, technical know-how and charitable commitment to make the world better, for people and for nature. This has underpinned our success so far and will continue to inform all that we do. Our challenge now is to respond to the urgent and growing demands for our help whilst remaining true to our values. We are ready and eager to meet this challenge and our new strategy sets out how we will do that.*

Professor Mark Huxham FRSE, PFHEA, NTF  
ACES Convenor



# Association for Coastal Ecosystem Services