

Protected Areas: How much is enough?

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Protected area coverage: a remarkable achievement?

Protected areas have long been the cornerstone of international conservation policy. The 2003 *United Nations List of Protected Areas* shows that in the last 40 years coverage has increased dramatically from 2.4 to 18.8 million km². At the same time, the continuing decline of biodiversity has been a cause for international concern culminating in the agreement of an international Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) at the 1992 'Earth Summit'. In the same year, the IUCN World Parks Congress (WPC) set a target for protected area coverage at 10 per cent of the world's surface area – a target that was endorsed by the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). The following year, at the 2003 IUCN World Parks Congress it was announced that total coverage had actually exceeded the 10 per cent target and was in fact closer to 12 per cent.

It is not often that internationally agreed targets are met, let alone exceeded, yet despite this remarkable achievement, there is still a drive to further increase protected area coverage:

- The fourth replenishment of the Global Environment Facility includes a target of increasing protected area coverage by 17 million hectares by November 2004.
- A *Joint NGO Statement* submitted by BirdLife International, Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF and the World Resources Institute to the Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice meeting of the CBD (SBSTTA-9) in November 2003 calls on the CBD to support the development of an expanded protected areas network.
- The Ramsar Strategic Plan 2003-2008

includes a goal to designate 250 million hectares and 2,500 Wetlands of International Importance by 2010.

- Outside of the traditional conservation community, Goal number 7 of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals – 'Ensure Environmental Sustainability' – includes protected area coverage as an indicator to measure progress.

If the future development of the protected areas system was narrowly focussed on the *quantity* of land area under protection and the *number* of protected areas created, it would have serious flaws: it would ignore the *quality* of the biodiversity contained within these areas, their *management and governance regimes* (how they are managed, by whom, and for what), the *land and resource rights of people* living in and around them, and *how their costs and benefits are spread among society*. Furthermore, such an approach would seem to indicate that increasing the number and coverage of protected areas is an end goal in itself, rather than seeing them as one of a number of tools that will help to achieve a broader goal of biodiversity conservation.

There are clearly urgent needs to increase conservation efforts, and this may well require greater protection in some ecosystems. Marine resources, for example, are suffering critical declines and yet only 1.7 million km² (or 0.5 per cent) of ocean area is protected. Similarly, enhanced protection is essential to ensure the survival of some key species and critical habitats. However, there is contradictory evidence as to the efficacy of simply increasing protected area coverage as a means to conserving biodiversity: despite the increased

KEY CHALLENGES:

- Ensuring that protected areas support the CBD means that they must not undermine national and local priorities. At the very least, protected areas should 'do no harm' to local people and wherever possible they should seek to 'do good'.
- The focus on the *quantity* of area protected needs to be balanced with increased attention towards *quality* – both of biodiversity and of governance.
- The focus on *endangered species*, or the level of species diversity, must be balanced with attention to components of biodiversity that are *valued by local people* – for food, medicine and so on.
- The concept of protected areas must be expanded to include conserved areas that build on local rights, knowledge and institutional structures. More broadly, the emphasis that has been placed on strict protection needs to be balanced with attention to achieving conservation across managed landscapes.



coverage over the last 40 years, biodiversity and other natural resources continue to be lost. Moreover, while many protected areas have generated significant socio-economic – as well as environmental – benefits, they have not been without their costs – a disproportionate amount of which have been borne at the local level, often due to lack of involvement of local people in decisions about protected area location and management. Designation of many protected areas has been associated with forced displacement and loss of access to natural resources for the people living in and around them, with little or no compensation. In these cases, protected areas have increased poverty, often amongst the poorest of the poor.

Protected areas: Expanding the concept not just the coverage

The overriding international imperative of the next two decades, articulated in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, is poverty reduction. The CBD recognises this in its preamble stating ‘economic and social development and poverty eradication are the first and overriding priorities of developing countries’. The CBD has also set another target (reinforced by the WSSD) – to significantly reduce the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010. Maximising the contribution of protected areas to both of these objectives raises a number of challenges:

1. Alternative types of protected area: Traditional forms of protected areas have been state-controlled, imposed structures based on 19th Century North American conservation ideology that suggested that people and nature should be kept separate. However, the recognition of the need to address local people’s needs in protected area planning and management is nothing new, having been highlighted in the 1981 World Conservation Strategy and re-emphasised at the third World Parks Congress in Bali in 1982.

The fifth World Parks Congress in 2003 supported calls by conservation agencies for increasing protected area coverage, but also noted that this increase might come from the formal acceptance of forms of protected areas with alternative governance structures as well as from traditional forms of protected area. This could lead to recognition of community-conserved areas, co-managed areas, private parks and indigenous reserves. WPC Recommendations elaborate on these alternatives as well as noting that ‘The degree to which protected areas meet conservation objectives, contribute to the well-being of society and achieve broad social, economic and environmental goals is closely related to the quality of their governance.’ (Recommendation 5.16).

2. Conservation not just protection: The term ‘protected area’ is a key stumbling block: the language of protectionism overriding the CBD focus on conservation. The term ‘protected’ conjures up images of fenced and guarded areas that are separated from human activity. Areas such as these are seen by some as the conservation ideal (and indeed the fact that these are listed in the IUCN system for classifying protected areas as Categories I

and II seems to emphasise their importance), yet much biodiversity occurs outside of strictly protected areas in productive landscapes that are managed in ways that promote conservation. These areas, including agricultural land, rangeland and so on, often fall outside of the IUCN system, but realising the 2010 target for biodiversity conservation implies a need to maintain the biodiversity value of these areas. More broadly, greater attention needs to be paid to mechanisms for delivering managed landscapes that link conservation with local livelihoods. Protected areas must be seen as one element within a broader conservation landscape that incorporates human use.

3. Attention to biodiversity values: The quality of management and governance discussed earlier must be complemented by an emphasis on the quality of the resources under protection. This implies, in some cases, de-listing (or changing the management categories) of protected areas of low conservation value where there are competing land use demands or opportunity costs. It also implies a need to consider the local value of biodiversity (for food, medicines, cultural value and environmental services) as well as ‘globally’ (or more accurately, Northern) valued endangered species when deciding on conservation priorities. Currently it is Northern priorities that drive the international agenda while local values remain poorly represented. In each case, the need for an area to be under strict protection in order to contribute to conservation objectives should be assessed against other potential land uses.

The future for protected areas

Protected areas have a critical role to play in conserving biodiversity and contributing to developing country priorities of local economic development and poverty reduction. However, conservation agencies can not afford to blindly strive to create more without addressing the issues confronting those that already exist – both in terms of their efficiency in conserving biodiversity and their negative consequences for resident and neighbouring communities.

Protected areas alone will not be sufficient to tackle biodiversity loss. Strict protection must be seen as a last resort rather than the ideal, as one strand of a bundle of strategies that deliver on biodiversity conservation within the broader context of sustainable development. There is huge untapped potential for increasing the amount of land under conservation – rather than protection. This may well have a greater impact on biodiversity than the creation of new protected areas, and would contribute more to the broader sustainable development agenda and achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. In some cases this may actually mean uncomfortable decisions such as decreasing the number of areas that are set aside for strict protection under the existing IUCN management categories to enhance benefits and hence incentives for local people to support conservation efforts.

While it is agreed that biodiversity conservation is critical, *how* that happens, *what* is conserved, and *for whom* requires a complex set of trade-offs that protected areas on their own can not achieve. ●

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