

NATIONAL BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLAN - INDIA

PRIORITISATION OF ACTIONS WITHIN BIODIVERSITY STRATEGY AND ACTION PLANS

A Note for Executing Agencies¹

In the process of preparing action plans at various levels (substate, state, and ecoregional) and on various themes, and finally at the national level, one of the tasks is to prioritise the actions. This note provides some *preliminary* guidelines on how to do such prioritisation.

Prioritization of elements of biological diversity that conservation effort should go into has been carried out in various parts of the world, recognising that resources and time may not be sufficient to conserve all biodiversity. The prioritization exercises acknowledge that identifying a certain element of biodiversity as worthy of /requiring conservation effort before another element is a *statement of value, and thus a subjective decision*. Thus while prioritising, it should be recognised at the outset that prioritisation of actions is subject to four serious limitations or difficulties:

1. Differences in perception of the value of biodiversity elements, e.g. between local communities and outside 'experts', or even different sections within a local community; and
2. The overall lack of sufficient data and information that could help ascertain the value or current status of biodiversity elements;
3. The lack of comparable data across species, ecosystems, and other elements;
4. Professional or other biases that may colour the results.

There are also somewhat difficult issues to resolve, e.g. an ecosystem that is 'poor' in biodiversity may be considered a low priority for the country as a whole, but may be high on the priority of a local community as it derives its sustenance from this ecosystem. The scale at which prioritisation is being done, and the unit within which prioritization is carried out is therefore also important.

Prioritisation also has to be done of actions relevant to other aspects of biodiversity: human use, access, equity, sharing of benefits, and so on. Thus it is not only the biological and ecological parameters that have to be considered in prioritisation, but also the social, political, cultural, economic, and ethical.

In all these, prioritisation is inevitably a subjective exercise, and a statement of the values and criteria used must precede the list of prioritised actions. For instance, the NBSAP exercise takes as its two bottom lines, against which all proposed actions have to be judged, the ecological security of the area being considered, and the livelihood security of people dependent on biodiversity (we will come back to this later on in this note). Even within this, certain values may be given precedence over others, e.g. the ethical right to life of a threatened species may over-

¹ This note has been developed by Ashish Kothari and Bansuri Taneja, based partly on an unpublished ms, 'Towards a Biodiversity Conservation Prioritisation Methodology', by Shekhar Singh and Arpan Sharma, which is a product of the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritisation Project carried out by a number of NGOs and experts in India, under the sponsorship of the Biodiversity Support Programme/USAID.

ride all other values in a situation where a choice has to be made on whether to conserve it or not.

The Biodiversity Conservation Prioritisation Project

Some lessons in Prioritization can be gleaned from the experience of the Biodiversity Conservation Prioritisation Project (BCPP) in India. The BCPP was a multi-sectoral exercise carried out over two years (1995-1997) by a number of NGOs and scientific agencies, coordinated by World Wide Fund for Nature - India, and funded under the Biodiversity Support Programme sponsored by USAID. The BCPP attempted to prioritize **sites, species and strategies** for biodiversity conservation in India. One of its central aims was to help develop a methodology for prioritisation in the Indian context. *Several criteria were listed /identified as aids to the prioritisation process, which could be grouped into a) biological values, b) socio-economic values, and c) conservation feasibility.* Using these criteria would facilitate the choice of sites, species or strategies that were not only high in biological diversity but also might be practicable to conserve.

The BCPP exercise highlighted the following aspects:

For Sites:

(i) While at a national level it would be ideal to prioritise sites based on biogeographical categories, so that representative areas for each biogeographic category can be conserved, necessary expertise at this level may not be available. Therefore it was considered more feasible to prioritise at the level of ecosystems, e.g. to prioritise which freshwater wetlands in India needed urgent conservation attention, and so on. **An important realisation was that this could perhaps best be done at the level of states.**

(ii) Prioritisation would have to be done on the basis of **values**. BCPP considered that the best way to do this is iterative, so that the site within each ecosystem type which had the maximum species diversity would be highest priority, and then the site that added most new species to this is second highest priority, and so on.

(iii) Other than biological values, there would of course also be social, cultural, and other values, especially as assigned by local communities. The difficulty mentioned above, regarding the respective values assigned by a community vis-à-vis outside people, is likely to crop up here, and needs to be discussed widely for a resolution to be reached. **It should perhaps also be recognised that in many situations no resolution may be possible, and that whether a state level or other agency assigns greater resources to a site it considers higher priority may therefore be somewhat arbitrary and even considered unfair.**

For Species:

Conventionally, two or three major criteria have been used to assign conservation priorities to species: the degree of threat, endemism, and rarity. These would continue to be critical factors in assigning priorities. In the BCPP exercise, three methods were used to prioritise species: (i) the CAMP method in which as many experts as possible came together to assign priorities; (ii) ranking of species on the basis of quantitative (and therefore verifiable and transparent) values;

and (iii) ranking based on available literature and studies. Each methodology had its weaknesses and strengths, which are given in the Singh and Sharma note (see footnote 1). **Prioritisation of species at the level of states, ecoregions, and substate sites, and finally at the level of the country, will need to take into account these different methods and their respective strengths.**

For Strategies:

BCPP recognised that prioritisation involves not only **where** to conserve and **what** to conserve, but also **how** to conserve. This involved assessing policies, laws, programmes that aimed to conserve, but also ways in which local communities used strategies to conserve. Considerable attention was given to building up biodiversity registers with the help of local communities.

One of the problems acknowledged by the BCPP coordinators, was that the match between prioritisation of sites and species on the one hand, and strategies on the other, was missing or weak. In other words, strategies were often developed at sites that had not been prioritised by the groups working on sites.

BCPP also did reviews of laws and policies, gender issues, education and awareness, and economic issues. It was recognised that strategies highlighted at the macro-level need to be complemented by and draw from strategies identified at the local level.

Prioritisation in the NBSAP Process

The NBSAP process of prioritisation differs somewhat from that of the BCPP, in that the attempt here is to prioritise actions. Actions for biodiversity conservation in the country identified in the NBSAP can be site-based (e.g. fencing to reduce human-wildlife conflict), or independent of geographical base (e.g. need for certain legal provisions, capacity building in a certain field of study).

Prioritizing **actions at each geographical level** (substate, state, ecoregion, nation) could mean:

1. Choosing the sites and species, at each geographical level, that should get high priority for conservation action.
2. Choosing the actions that should get priority for these prioritized sites or species within the geographical area being considered.
3. Choosing the priority actions relevant for *all* sites/species (and not just the prioritised sites/species) within the area being considered.

Prioritising **actions at each thematic level** could mean:

1. Choosing the subthemes within each theme (e.g. forest workers' rights within the theme of Livelihoods and Biodiversity; or adivasi women's health care traditions within the theme of Health and Biodiversity) that should get high priority for action.
2. Choosing the actions relevant to these subthemes, that should get priority.
3. Choosing actions relevant to all subthemes within the theme, that should get high priority.

Such prioritisation would be done on **the basis of the following criteria:**

1. The time frame of the action: how urgent is it, is it needed immediately, or can it be over a longer term?
2. The resources to be put into the action: what kind of institutional, financial, and other resources should be put into it, which ones should get priority in such allocations?
3. The feasibility of the action: how viable and practical is it to take this action, based on political, social, ecological, and financial contexts?

Since an explicit statement of values and criteria lie at the base of any prioritisation exercise, it must be kept in mind that the **foundation for prioritization** in the NBSAP would be:

- a) safeguarding the **ecological security** of the country or of the area for which the action plan is being made.
- b) protecting the interests of biodiversity-dependent **livelihoods**, especially of disprivileged sections of society.

These two interests are often at cross-purposes with other interests, such as industrial or urban exploitation of resources. In such situations they must get priority in the action plans.

In some cases these two interests may be at cross purposes *with each other*, and if it is not possible to reconcile them, the principle that has been used to prioritise amongst them, should be clearly stated.

Learning from BCPP in NBSAP

NBSAP can build on the BCPP experience in the following manner:

1. Some sites prioritized under BCPP could be taken up for more detailed action planning processes under NBSAP. A list and map of BCPP's prioritised sites are being sent to executing agencies of state and ecoregions, and where there is an overlap, to the substate site nodal agencies. This information can be provided to any other agency on request.
2. Species prioritized under BCPP can be considered in detail by the relevant Thematic Working Groups of the NBSAP. This information is being sent to the relevant coordinators.
3. The macro-strategies prepared under the BCPP can be considered by the relevant Thematic Working Groups of the NBSAP. This information is being sent to the relevant coordinators.

Coordination amongst the Executing Agencies

For the entire process of the NBSAP, including the process of prioritisation, it is important to encourage and facilitate regular communication amongst all the executing agencies. In particular, such interaction between the micro-level and macro-level action planning process is important: between the substate and state agencies, the substate/state and ecoregional agencies, between the state and national thematic agencies, and so on. Such interaction will be possible through:

- Regular exchange of information, minutes, reports amongst the agencies;

- Participation in each others' meetings, e.g. one nominee of the state steering committee to attend the meetings of the relevant substate committee, and vice versa;
- The attendance of one TPCG member in the relevant meetings, and the interaction of each executing agency with a nominated TPCG member.

In the context of this paper, such interaction would be very helpful in coordinating the prioritisation of actions, and avoiding conflicting or contradictory recommendations, as also providing a link between actions identified at the macro- and micro-levels.