

SSC Action Plan Evaluation

Executive Summary

The Species Survival Commission has been publishing Action Plans under the auspices of IUCN since 1986 and now more than 60 plans have been published in what is now a well-established series. There are, however, questions about the amount of real conservation action that they stimulate and so SSC has commissioned an evaluation of some aspects of its Action Plan Programme. Phase 1 assessed the type of actions that were recommended in 42 Action Plans. The most significant conclusions were that 1) there was little consistency between plans in the way that recommendations were developed and presented; 2) there was a broad division between general recommendations and specific actions; and 3) research of one form or another comprised a large proportion of the recommendations.

Phase 2 assessed the implementation of recommendations in six plans, four (equids, lagomorphs, otters and crocodiles) of which were complete assessments of the status of all priority projects identified in the Action Plans. A further response (cetaceans) provided information on the status of 50 of 56 priority projects and that on a sixth plan (canids) was only partially completed. The four complete responses reported on the progress of 284 recommendations, 18% of which were considered complete, 50% ongoing and 32% not started. A lack of resources (funds and/or personnel) was the reason that nearly half had not been started and political sensitivity accounted for a further 17%. Using the artificial categorisation of actions adopted in Phase 1, nearly 70% of implemented actions were classified as either research or ecological management.

This report presents Phase 3, in which five of the action plans included in Phase 2 were evaluated with respect to: Specialist Group planning and process; SSC Secretariat management; product quality and distribution; and implementation of priority projects. It is recognised that the plans evaluated were a self-selecting groups plans that have been produced by exceptionally motivated and active Specialist Groups and should be considered as a selection of the most actively pursued plans, rather than a representative sample.

Specialist Group planning and process: When Action Planning started, the perceived need was to remedy a lack of biological information on species and their conservation in the public domain. In the intervening years, however, there has been a large increase in availability of conservation-related information, and in particular biological information, and a shift in type of information being requested from purely biological to more applied knowledge. The detailed rationale behind the compilation of plans varies between Specialist Groups because of differing perceptions of the target audiences (i.e. who will act on the recommendations). This materially affects the content of the plans. In addition, the voluntary nature of the groups means that there is a trade-off between

compiling plans quickly and being inclusive. At least some groups appear committed to the process as 2nd editions have been published or being prepared. More prescriptive guidelines on the identification of priorities would enhance their effectiveness: i.e. what kind of recommendations can be made and what is the specific target audience?

Management by SSC Secretariat: The increase in the number of plans being dealt with by the Secretariat has increased dramatically in the last 10 years. This has led to a problem in processing them effectively and finding funds for their publication. The current process seems unsustainable, especially as SSC Programme Officers are required for other activities and the reliance on interns is high. Clearer guidance on how Action Plans should be compiled may help address some of these issues by providing significant guidance as to what is needed and what will be used by IUCN.

Product quality and distribution: Action Plans are only useful if they are credible. Credibility is built on confidence in the information provided and ability to access that information. Broadly speaking Action Plans are acknowledged as being sound sources of biological content. In contrast, however, the distribution of the plans is weak; both in terms of the limited list of target audiences and in terms of determining whom the key people are in each organisation/agency. Therefore, there seems little that needs amending on the product quality as far as the biological information is concerned, although some audiences perceive that other sorts of information should be included (e.g. policy, legislation, local community issues). The distribution strategy for Action Plans should receive much more attention.

Implementation of action plan priorities: Action Plans are intended to focus attention on urgently needed action and then enhance the probability that this action takes place. The effectiveness of Action Plan implementation is very variable. The case studies made here appear particularly successful and the Specialist Groups have pursued the recommendations actively. Outside the Specialist Groups uptake is uneven, with little promotion within IUCN and to external audiences. This may be partly due to differing perceptions of what they are versus what they should be. However, there is no doubt that some agencies outside IUCN find them very useful indeed and this demonstrates their potential effectiveness. Implementation of Action Plan priorities will remain patchy without several changes.

Conclusions

- 1) There has been a considerable amount of activity in pursuit of Action Plan recommendations, and this has involved individuals from government research and management agencies, universities and non-governmental organisations.
- 2) The plans are seen as valuable resources by stakeholders as diverse as multilateral environmental agreements (CITES and International Whaling Commission), non-governmental organisations (Wildlife Conservation Society, WWF-US and the People's Trust for Endangered Species) and other parts of IUCN (Protected Areas Programme).

It is difficult to say the degree to which conservation actions have taken place solely because of the publication of the Action Plans, and to some extent this question is not the correct one. The correct question would be "Do Action Plans play an important role in the conservation process?" The results of this evaluation would indicate that the answer is yes.

Recommendations for the future

There are three options facing the SSC with regards to the future of Action Planning, namely 1) continuing the current process; 2) stopping publication; and 3) adapting the current process. However, the first two are really not viable alternatives. Continuing with the current process does not appear feasible, partly because of SSC Secretariat resource constraints, but also because it is clear that a single document cannot satisfy all of the conservation information needs of all target audiences. If SSC were to stop publishing taxon-based Action Plans it may result in reduced conservation action. The combination of an Action Plan, an active Specialist Group and the IUCN and SSC 'seal of approval' are a strong force for conservation.

Therefore, SSC should adapt the current Action Planning Programme by addressing the issues identified in this evaluation:

- Identification of, and collaboration with, target audiences. SSC needs a clearer idea of exactly who the target audiences are so that the recommendations can be framed appropriately and to ensure that the plans reach those most able to act. This evaluation has identified some audiences that believe strongly in the SSC Action Plans and it would seem desirable to build partnerships with them. This may help provide additional resources, and would bring greater clarity to the products being produced by providing input to identify practical ways to address priorities such as land use management and local community work at various levels. Implementation would not be left to voluntary Specialist Groups alone.
- Guidance on Action Plan development and content, in particular for recommendations. To date, there has been little guidance provided to the Specialist Groups on how recommendations should be developed, and whilst the Secretariat has always hoped that these would not be limited to biological recommendations, there was no clarity in how these wider recommendations could be developed realistically. The key elements to include in guidelines would be related to clarity and comprehensiveness of recommendations; and a clear support strategy for the implementation of the recommendations. There are currently available models of 'Conservation Management Guides' (e.g., UK Biodiversity Action Plan) to which SSC could refer for examples.