CEPF Ecosystem Profiling Lessons Learned Workshop

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Background

On 5 and 6 November 2018, BirdLife International and the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) co-hosted a workshop at the David Attenborough Building in Cambridge, United Kingdom. The workshop was attended by 16 people, representing five Key Biodiversity Area (KBA) partner organizations (BirdLife International, CEPF, Conservation International, Global Wildlife Conservation and International Union for Conservation of Nature) plus the KBA Secretariat. The purpose of the workshop was to capture lessons learned from the previous three ecosystem profiling processes (in the Caribbean Islands, Mediterranean Basin and Mountains of Central Asia biodiversity hotspots), which were the first ones to apply the Global Standard for the Identification of KBAs (IUCN 2016). To this end, at least two people who had worked on KBA identification as part of each of these profiling processes attended the meeting, sharing their experiences of the application of the new standard in different contexts.

The suggestion to hold the workshop was made at the KBA Partnership Meeting in Austin, Texas, in April 2018. The intention was to learn from real-life examples about challenges encountered when applying the KBA Standard, to help plan for more efficient processes in the future.

Findings

After listening to introductory presentations from the three profiling exercises, the participants set about identifying the main challenges encountered with KBA identification, when conducted as part of ecosystem profiling. Some of the identified challenges were considered general to any KBA identification exercise; others were thought to arise from the specific time, resource and methodological constraints imposed by an ecosystem profiling exercise. **Time and resource constraints** were considered to be significant challenges, with the new KBA methodology requiring significantly more time to implement than had been allowed for.

Various methodological challenges were identified, including with regard to **boundary delineation** (e.g., incorporating data on multiple taxa sometimes led to KBAs much larger than a single management unit), **data quality and availability** (e.g., none of the teams were able to apply the A2, C and E criteria), and **KBA thresholds and criteria** (e.g., the complexity of some criteria meant that they could not be applied within the time available for the exercise). In the latter case, the participants accepted that there would be no immediate opportunity to revisit the KBA thresholds and criteria.

Methodological challenges were compounded by a lack of appropriate **tools and training** for the profiling team. The World Database of KBAs was not available to the profiling teams when they began their work, offline templates for KBA documentation were only developed during the exercises, and technical guidance was limited, especially in languages other than English. A need for technical guidelines and training materials was identified, but it was also recognized that these require considerable investment, which has proven difficult to fundraise for.

Other challenges related to the KBA identification process rather than technical aspects of the methodology. Building **national ownership** was considered essential if the results of the KBA identification process were to be used to guide conservation efforts and the integration of biodiversity into policy and planning processes for sustainable development. Participants recognized, however, that this takes time, and there is a trade-off between looking at KBAs as a process and KBAs as a product.

The profiling teams also reported that they had been unclear about the **governance** of the KBA process, especially with the confirmation of KBAs and their entry into the world database. They noted, however, that things had become clearer with the appointment of the KBA Secretariat.

Ensuring **end-user relevance** was also identified as a challenge, with participants noting that many people are willing to contribute voluntarily to KBA identification, but their goodwill can be exhausted if there is a perception of duplication of effort or if there is a long time lag between when they participate in a KBA identification exercise and when they see the results reflected on the world database.

Finally, participants identified a number of challenges related to **CEPF and KBA global processes**. For example, ecosystem profiling exercises follow biogeographic (hotspot) boundaries, which often do not follow national boundaries, meaning that some countries are only partly covered. Also, because ecosystem profiling processes are used to set priorities for CEPF funding, there could be cases when KBA identification or, at least, boundary definition is influenced by considerations of future funding opportunities. Moreover, participants recognized that the full process to identify KBAs, go through the confirmation process and enter the data onto the world database takes longer than typically allowed for in an ecosystem profiling process, and that the latter steps are not necessarily budgeted for.

Recommendations

After spending the first day of the workshop sharing lessons on the three recent exercises and discussing the main challenges they encountered, the participants spent the second day formulating solutions to the identified problems. Some of these recommended solutions, such as the World Database of KBAs or the network of regional focal points, are already under development, and not much time was spent discussing them. Participants concentrated instead on finding ways to improve KBA identification within the context of ecosystem profiling processes. Recommendations fell into two broad categories: incremental improvements to the current model, and new models for ecosystem profiling.

In the first category, participants recommended not to rely too heavily on workshops but, instead, to **sub-contract teams of national experts** to lead KBA identification in each country. It was

suggested that these teams could form the basis of National KBA Coordination Groups (NCGs) to guide the long-term definition of a single, coherent list of KBAs in each country. Considering the additional time needed for KBA identification, documentation and confirmation under the global standard, participants recommended that there was a need to **explain the expected outcomes and processes better**, in order to manage stakeholders' expectations about that point that could be reached by the end of the profiling process. Related to this, participants recommended the **establishment of clear and realistic timelines, phases and deadlines** and to budget time and resources for "hidden" tasks, such as consulting with existing stakeholders to resolve boundary overlaps and confirming that KBAs meet the necessary thresholds and documentation requirements.

With specific reference to the terms of reference for the profiling teams, participants identified a need to **standardize the format and content for ecosystem profiles and provide a detailed template to streamline the process**. It was noted that there is a need to balance standardization with flexibility, given the wide range of different contexts in which ecosystem profiles are being developed. Participants also recommended **defining the scope of work** for each ecosystem profiling process in a way that kept expectations of the profiling team consistent with the time and resources available.

A specific recommendation was to include a scoping phase at the start of each exercise, during which key stakeholders (including the KBA Secretariat) could be engaged in developing a realistic plan for KBA identification, limited to specific taxa, geographies and/or realms (i.e., terrestrial, freshwater, marine). In this regard, participants felt that it was easier to restrict the region of analysis to the available resources, and then expand to new geographies later, than to limit the number of taxa and then add others later. For instance, KBA identification could be limited to countries eligible for CEPF support, with existing KBA inventories being used for other countries and territories.

A related recommendation was to **agree on a balance of work for the profiling team between KBA identification and other elements**. In the three recent profiling exercises, costs for KBA identification were combined with costs for other activities, meaning that it was difficult to calculate the actual costs of KBA identification. This was compounded by the fact that each profiling team "subsidized" the process by putting in a large number of hours as "in-kind" contributions. It was agreed that the teams would estimate the actual costs of KBA identification to inform planning for future exercises.

The final two recommendations for enhancements to the current model were to **establish flexible teams and bring in external experts as needed**, to address bottlenecks, and to **plan for at least two rounds of consultation with local experts**: One after an initial list of KBAs has been identified through desk review, and the other to verify and fine-tune the list of KBAs.

In the second category, participants suggested several possible departures from the current model for ecosystem profiling. Some suggested **starting work on KBA identification in advance of the profiling**, although it was recognized that there is not usually much of a gap between a hotspot being identified for investment and the launch of the ecosystem profiling process. In this light, it was felt that it might be more helpful to **extend the KBA identification process beyond the profiling**

period, recognizing the fact that there are additional steps necessary to confirm KBA identifications and incorporate information into the world database, and that there are real costs associated with these steps. It was also noted that a long time lag between the completion of an ecosystem profile and the incorporation of confirmed KBAs into the world database would not be acceptable to many of the stakeholders involved. To this end, it was agreed that the peer-review process should be time limited, with KBAs proceeding automatically to the confirmation stage in the absence of objection.

A number of more radical solutions were proposed by participants, including to **de-couple KBA identification and ecosystem profiling**, or to **base each profile on the existing KBA inventory only**. These solutions were considered to have significant shortcomings, such as that, because existing KBA inventories tend to be biased towards certain taxa, using them would result in a missed opportunity to incorporate other taxonomic groups, especially plants, which are the basis for defining hotspots.

Finally, some participants recommended focusing more on the process of KBA identification than the product of a list of confirmed KBAs, by **investing in NCGs as well as profiling**. There was general agreement that this was not a question of doing either one or the other but, rather, there was a need to identify KBAs in ways that encouraged the emergence of NCGs that could take local ownership of the KBA program and ensure longer-term impact.