

Transboundary conservation emerges as an essential mechanism in tropical forests

A message from participants at the International Conference on Biodiversity Conservation in Transboundary Tropical Forests, convened in Quito, Ecuador

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Introduction

Ecosystems do not recognize political boundaries. The rise of potentially devastating global problems such as climate change, water shortages and biodiversity loss means that transboundary cooperation in landscape and ecosystem management has become imperative.

Nowhere is such cooperation more important than in tropical forest ecosystems: they contain, *inter alia*, a large proportion of the carbon stored in terrestrial ecosystems and an estimated 80% of the world's terrestrial species, and they provide essential ecosystem services.

Increasingly, nations in Latin America, Africa and Asia are working together to establish new transboundary conservation areas (TBCAs). There are now dozens of examples of transboundary conservation initiatives in tropical forests covering more than 50 million hectares.

The Cordillera del Condor transboundary conservation initiative between Ecuador and Peru, for example, has helped to improve relations between governments and local Indigenous communities and empowered the latter to strengthen their cultural identities, renew cross-border family ties and seek new livelihood opportunities. It has also greatly improved the management of the area's important ecosystems.

Transboundary conservation can act as a catalyst for new approaches to governance in border areas, addressing power imbalances between national and sub-national governments and local stakeholders. It can also increase peaceful cooperation in combating global and regional problems such as climate change, land degradation and biodiversity loss.

In addition, TBCAs in tropical forests can help to:

- ensure the supply of drinking water and other critical ecosystem services
- reunite related communities separated by political borders
- strengthen the capacity of stakeholders, particularly Indigenous Peoples and local communities
- control the illegal trade of forest products, including the smuggling of wildlife and timber
- resolve borderland political and cultural disputes
- provide opportunities for cross-border learning and information exchange and recognize the efforts of many Indigenous Peoples and local communities
- resolve conflicts between economic sectors
- reduce poverty and increase human wellbeing, especially in marginal areas far from markets and centres of economic development
- mitigate natural disasters and reduce risks to societies posed by extreme environmental events
- create synergies between management agencies across borders
- sustain species gene pools and provide vital health services to communities by sustaining habitats for medicinal plants.

The International Conference on Biodiversity Conservation in Transboundary Tropical Forests, held in Quito on 21–24 July 2010, reviewed some of the most significant TBCA initiatives in Latin America, Africa and Asia and canvassed the essential elements for their success. It produced a number of key lessons and recommendations, which are set out below.

Key lessons

Governance

There is no single approach to the governance of TBCAs, but power-sharing between different levels of governance should emphasize synergy, cooperation, consensus and the need for the empowerment of civil society and grassroots actors. TBCAs have catalysed innovations in the governance of natural resources, such as the emergence of local Indigenous governments.

There are five pillars of governance in TBCAs:

- *political will* – from national and sub-national governments.
- *a political vision* – to address transboundary issues of shared interest through the coordination of policies, institutions and management.
- *joint structures and synergies* – with clear mandates at national levels, inter-institutional coordination, and stakeholder participation mechanisms that include Indigenous communities and municipal authorities.
- *Strengthened capacities in government institutions and among stakeholder groups* – at the national, sub-national and local levels.
- *a mixture of financing mechanisms* – funding from national budgets, private, bilateral and multilateral donors, and the private sector, wherever feasible.

Harmonizing and aligning law-enforcement capacities between countries involved in TBCAs can improve the effectiveness of TBCAs in combating transboundary illegal activities such as poaching and wildlife smuggling. The stronger integration of communities across borders has been shown to be another catalyst for effective law enforcement.

Local participation

Well implemented, TBCA initiatives can greatly increase the participation of people – including Indigenous Peoples and local communities – living in or near TBCAs in the sustainable use and management of natural resources. They can help to reduce tension between the state and local people.

Local people must benefit from the development and management of TBCAs. Benefits may be economic, such as payments for protected environmental services; social, such as the re-connection of previously separated communities across borders; and environmental, such as the conservation of economically or culturally important biodiversity. The equitable sharing of costs and benefits from transboundary conservation is always essential.

Considerable progress has been made in the use of appropriate social and technological tools for TBCA management. Social tools include participatory processes to measure TBCA performance; dialogues between actors (e.g. state, civil society, the private sector and communities) at the level of conservation corridors or TBCAs; training appropriate to the needs of local stakeholders; agreement between actors in TBCAs; and harmonized development agendas on both sides of a political border.

Landscape planning

In general, TBCAs should not be nested in small areas but opened up across large transboundary landscapes and biodiversity corridors. 'Bigger is better' because large areas can ensure natural processes and ecosystem resilience, which in turn ensure forest carbon permanence and the flow of ecosystem services.

TBCAs can catalyse – and be catalysed by – landscape planning approaches, with benefits for biodiversity conservation, economic development and social cohesion. Such planning should be conducted on an inclusive and participatory basis.

Institutions

In many border areas there is not only a complex physical landscape but also a complexity of institutional responsibilities, both within and between countries. The challenge is to build institutional mechanisms that enable cooperation and generate synergies across both external and internal administrative boundaries. Numerous examples in all United Nations regions show that such institutional mechanisms benefit all those involved.

Financing

Public funds are insufficient to fully support TBCA programs; other mechanisms and sources are needed. Payments for forest ecosystem services, and other conservation incentives, are a great new opportunity to promote TBCA management.

Financial plans based on realistic needs assessments can be used by TBCA initiatives to identify gaps in funding and potential additional financial mechanisms. Such plans can be used as business plans for tapping various funding sources.

TBCA project funding can be used to develop and implement financial mechanisms that will help ensure a sustainable level of financing after project completion.

Climate change

Climate change is a threat to ecosystem resilience, but the growing political will to address it is an opportunity for TBCAs. TBCAs have great potential for climate-change mitigation and adaptation using ecosystem-based approaches. By reducing deforestation, TBCAs can help reduce the rate and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

TBCAs can help guarantee carbon permanence. For example, their potentially very large areas help ensure that ecosystems have sufficient resilience to avoid tipping points (such as Amazon dieback). Strong local ownership of TBCAs, especially through innovative governance arrangements, helps ensure social stability.

Increasing connectivity is an important overall adaptation response to climate change, increasing ecosystem resilience and maintaining essential ecosystem services for communities in adjoining countries.

Monitoring and research

Monitoring is essential for effective TBCA management. Progress in monitoring is being made at the global, regional, national and local levels, thanks in part to the wide availability of new monitoring technologies.

TBCAs can assist in the generation of knowledge by improving the flow of data across borders and encouraging synergies in research, modelling, monitoring and assessment. In turn, this broadens the knowledge base for improved decision-making, policies and governance.

Research can help in the development of appropriate biological and social science methods for selecting, prioritizing and financing TBCAs.

Recommendations

All stakeholders should:

- support the draft decision on transboundary protected areas in SBSTTA recommendation XIV/2, which will be before the 10th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya, Japan, in October 2010. The draft decision

'Urges Parties to actively explore the potentially suitable areas for transboundary protected-area cooperation and by effective means to create an enabling environment for transboundary cooperation in regards to planning and management practices, connectivity as well as to development across national borders'.

- actively promote synergies between the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the UN Convention on Combating Desertification, at the national and international levels.
- where appropriate, invite armed forces to participate in dialogues on the development and management of TBCAs, with a view to encouraging them to defend the environmental and cultural values of TBCAs and to respect the landscape connectivity functions of military zones.
- showcase the value of biodiversity conservation in TBCAs in achieving developmental objectives (e.g. poverty alleviation and employment generation) and climate-change adaptation and mitigation in order to make an economic case for tapping funding from a variety of sources.
- strengthen intersectoral, participatory planning and management mechanisms for transboundary tropical forests and the articulation, harmonization and implementation of public policies towards them.
- increase the capacity of TBCAs to adapt to climate change by improving management; exchanging data; technology transfer; and the restoration of natural systems.
- work to convince policymakers and stakeholders of the powerful role that TBCAs can play in biodiversity conservation, transboundary cooperation, sustainable development and many other issues.
- promote TBCA champions to ensure the global recognition of the value of TBCAs and their role as models for the implementation of the CBD's Programme of Work on Protected Areas and as instruments for strengthening technical regional networks of protected areas.
- promote awareness and environmental education among all stakeholders, including local communities, in order to enhance understanding of government policies on forest and ecosystem management.
- pursue 'certification of origin' approaches for the forest goods and services produced in TBCAs as a means to add value to such products and to strengthen legal production, where appropriate, in TBCAs.
- Promote financing mechanisms that promote ecosystem-based approaches to climate-change mitigation and adaptation.

Governments should:

- establish TBCAs, especially, where appropriate, around shared watersheds and river basins.
- strengthen institutional capacity to implement collaborative TBCA efforts between governments.
- support research to acquire good scientific knowledge and to assess the tangible values of biodiversity, including in TBCAs.
- tap funding available in the GEF-5 replenishment in both the Biodiversity and Climate Change portfolios for the establishment of TBCAs.
- prioritize climate-change adaptation and mitigation funding around TBCAs, including ecosystem-based approaches.
- encourage private-sector participation in TBCA initiatives through REDD-plus and carbon offset schemes.
- recognize that communities can further the objectives of TBCAs if their knowledge and capacity are recognized and opportunity is given for them to be involved.
- promote regional cooperation, including south–south cooperation, through the exchange of relevant experiences in TBCAs and their dissemination at the political and technical levels.
- encourage cooperation with relevant international organizations in order to promote transparency over the allocation and management of international funds for TBCAs.
- ensure that the role of ecosystems and particularly TBCAs in climate-change adaptation and mitigation are effectively enabled in the global post-2012 climate-change regime.
- ensure that transboundary conservation is promoted in all the CBD's programmes of work.

- Create enabling institutional architecture for resolving TBCA-related conflicts and issues.

ITTO, the CBD other international organizations and donors should:

- Support, where appropriate, the establishment and effective management of TBCAs by providing financial, technical and policy support.
- Develop and encourage the use of minimum standards of transparency in TBCA projects.
- Organize a follow-up meeting in one of the countries of the Congo Basin in 2012 in order to further share experiences and to ensure that TBCAs are further promoted.

Academic institutions and think-tanks should:

- Promote development of repositories of knowledge, special research forces and understandable vocabulary for TBCAs.

About the conference

Under the distinguished Patronage of the Government of Ecuador, the International Conference on Biodiversity Conservation in Transboundary Tropical Forests took place in Quito on 21–24 July 2010. The conference was organized by the Ministry of Environment of Ecuador, the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, IUCN, Fundación Natura and Conservación Internacional-Ecuador.

The opening ceremony was presided over by H.E. Ms. Marcela Aguiñaga Vallejo, Minister of Environment of Ecuador, in the presence of Emmanuel Ze Meka, Executive Director of ITTO. About 100 participants, comprising experts from Latin America, Africa and Asia and the Pacific and representatives of the public sector, civil society and academic and research institutions, took part in the conference, which consisted of plenary sessions and working groups.

At the conclusion of the conference, delegates from African countries graciously invited ITTO and co-organizers to organize a follow-up meeting in one of the countries of the Congo Basin in 2012.