Forest Protected Areas

Basic knowledge

Welcome to the Forest Protected Areas Module, which is intended for forest managers and others who want to know more about the planning and management of forest protected areas and their purposes, benefits, governance, challenges, limitations and potential.

The module provides both basic and more detailed information on the planning and management of forest protected areas, links to tools to assist in addressing various facets of forest protected-area management, and case studies on the sustainable management of forest protected areas.

Although protected areas have existed for centuries in the form of, for example, game reserves, hunting grounds and sacred sites, the term “protected area” has been used in its current context only since the late nineteenth century. The first national park was created in the United States of America in the 1870s, and the modern protected-area concept spread worldwide in the twentieth century. The early protected areas had somewhat different objectives in different regions: in North America, the first protected areas were mainly about preserving scenery; in Africa, the concern was with game parks; and in Europe, the aim was to protect landscapes. The protected-area concept has continued to evolve as norms, attitudes and values have changed.

There are now many kinds of protected areas, which vary in their level of protection depending on national enabling laws. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines a protected area as: “a clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values”. This definition is recognized almost universally, and it has been adopted at both national and international levels. Forest protected areas are protected areas in which a significant portion of the area is forested.

Benefits and importance of forest protected areas

Initially, many conservation advocates considered people to constitute a threat to protected areas. Forest protected areas were primarily government initiatives owned and managed by national and subnational governments, maintained and managed by government staff, and funded by annual government allocations. It is now widely acknowledged, however, that, for millennia, indigenous peoples and local communities have played critical roles in conservation through their traditional sustainable resource-use practices and culture-based respect for nature. Such peoples and communities make diversified use of forest products and environmental services and provide exemplary cases of multipurpose SFM.

As this greater understanding of the role of indigenous peoples and local communities has emerged, concepts such as protected-area network design, governance, co-management, sustainable use, and sustainable finance and management effectiveness developed to reflect a more complex view of protected areas and a more accurate view of the environmental services that protected areas provide.

Well-managed forest protected areas generate many benefits for sustainable social and economic development. Forest protected areas play important landscape roles by providing habitat, shelter, food and genetic materials, acting as buffers against disasters, and delivering stable supplies of many goods and environmental services. They will also be crucial in helping species, people and countries adapt to climate change. Forest protected areas should remain free of unsustainable human intervention and thus continue to serve, over time, as a natural storehouse of forest genetic resources, goods and environmental services.

Forest protected areas contributes to SDGs:

In more depth

Planning and managing protected areas as a key component of SFM

While many early protected areas were established on an ad hoc basis, countries increasingly see value in designing systems or networks of protected areas that cover a country's full range of ecosystems and outstanding natural phenomena and involve transnational cooperation on the protection of ecosystems shared by countries. Planning for a protected-area system should identify the range of purposes of protected areas and aim to achieve these in a balanced way across the system. A protected-area system should include representative samples of ecological regions and natural landscapes, hotspots of biodiversity and rarity, and habitats for viable populations of rare, endangered and keystone species. A protected-area system plan should set out the means by which a workable national system of protected areas can be established.

A management plan for an individual protected area specifies the approach and goals to be achieved in that protected area. Planning is a critical element and, in some countries, also a legal requirement for guiding the appropriate management of protected areas.

The development of a protected-area management plan usually involves four steps:

1. the formulation of a clear, concise statement of objectives;
2. the development of action plans for achieving those objectives, including analyses of threats that could hinder the attainment of the objectives;
3. the systematic monitoring and measuring of performance and achievement; and
4. taking the actions necessary to achieve planned results.

The management objectives and standards to apply may be established in the legislative, policy, statutory or other requirements of the responsible institution. IUCN has defined six management categories to classify protected areas according to their management objectives, with the aim of providing international consistency in comparing protected areas. The categories imply "a gradation of human intervention, though in all cases these must be consistent with conservation and sustainability objectives". While each of the six protected-area categories has a different range of management options, all require a proper management planning process.

There is now consensus among policymakers and planners of protected areas that, in addition to conserving biological and cultural diversity, protected areas have important social and economic functions. Therefore, many protected areas have multiple objectives, and it is essential to take into account a variety of social needs, values and institutional structures, as well as the (potentially conflicting) opinions of all stakeholders. Such considerations can make the preparation of a management plan a complex and challenging task.

Until recently, management planning for protected areas was often done by technical planners without significant consultation with stakeholders or due consideration of their concerns. Given the wide variety of objectives that are now recognized as important for protected areas, and the frequent lack of consensus among stakeholders over these objectives, few people today consider that a purely technical planning approach is sufficient. Most national and subnational protected-area institutions recognize that the inclusion of all stakeholders – particularly indigenous peoples, local communities and traditional user groups – in the management planning process is essential if there is to be consensus on, and participation in, the implementation of the management plan.

Categories of protected-area management and their relationship with SFM

Different countries and regions have different ways of identifying and designating protected areas and, as a consequence, there are many different types of protected area. A range of international bodies and many national governments recognize the IUCN typology of protected areas as the global standard for defining protected areas, and some countries are incorporating it in their laws. The categories of the typology are:

- Category Ia Strict Nature Reserve: managed mainly for science;
- Category Ib Wilderness Area: managed mainly for wilderness protection;
- Category II National Park: managed mainly for ecosystem protection and recreation;
- Category III Natural Monument: managed mainly for the conservation of specific natural features;
- Category IV Habitat/Species Management Area: managed mainly for conservation through management intervention;
- Category V Protected Landscape/Seascape: managed mainly for landscape/seascape conservation and recreation; and
- Category VI Managed Resource Protected Area: managed mainly for the sustainable use of natural ecosystems.

SFM is compatible with the objectives of protected areas in several of these categories, particularly categories V and VI. In all categories, management activities should engage local communities and be consistent with the conservation of biodiversity.

Governance of forest protected areas for multiple objectives and diverse management arrangements

Good governance of protected areas is essential if management is to be effective and objectives achieved; it is often the key to preventing or managing social conflicts and generating and maintaining public support. In recent years, most protected-area and forest management institutions have acknowledged the importance of recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities and of sharing the relevant costs and benefits of protected areas.

This acknowledgement has led to the development of various governance models for the management of forest protected areas. Such models take into account the need to integrate protected areas in a larger conservation framework, the potential to increase management capacity through partnerships, and the designation, within landscapes, of a network of protected areas with differing management regimes and objectives. The Convention on Biological Diversity's Programme of Work on Protected Areas emphasizes that protected areas should be an essential component of conservation strategies and that they must be integrated into the wider landscape and into the concerns of society if they are to be successful in the long term.

A wide variety of rightsholders and stakeholders are involved in the management of protected areas, including forests, such as government agencies and ministries at various levels, elected and traditional authorities, indigenous peoples and local communities, businesses and corporations, private individuals and non-profit trusts, international bodies, professional organizations, religious and educational organizations, military authorities, and political officials and parties. The 2003 World Parks Congress identified four main protected-area governance types: governmental managed protected areas (state governance); co-managed protected areas (shared governance); private protected areas (private governance); and community conserved areas (community governance).

Experience has shown that the key factors in achieving well-managed protected areas are: trained staff; strong institutions; secure political support; a good legal framework and enforcement; the involvement of local communities in management planning and execution; coordination among managing organizations; comprehensive land-use plans; well-marked boundaries; and adequate funds.

Challenges of protected areas for the implementation of SFM

Forest protected areas face numerous challenges that threaten the achievement of their management objectives. Even if a management system is in place, forest protected areas may be threatened by wildlife poaching, illegal fishing, the illegal extraction of forest products such as timber, illegal deforestation, illegal mining, encroachment by settlers, over-use by tourists, and the development of infrastructure, such as roads and dams. Sometimes, local opposition to protected areas contributes to their degradation; in other cases, governments themselves have undermined protected areas by allowing extractive activities.

Many forest protected areas lack sustainable funding, effective management and the support and involvement of local and indigenous peoples and protected-area officials. In addition, there may be conflicting laws and rights over the tenure and use of, and access to, natural resources within protected areas. Maintaining a balance between conservation measures and customary use is a continuing challenge in many forest protected areas, and human activities such as poaching and fire may also have significant negative impacts on conservation objectives.

Emerging challenges and threats to forest protected areas include transboundary air pollution and climate change. In the face of rapid economic change and, in some cases, declining state revenues, governments are under increasing pressure to open up protected areas to extractive industries. Moreover, where the protected-area system is insufficiently developed, a lack of integration of land-use plans and landscape connectivity reduces the capacity of isolated protected areas to maintain sufficient good-quality habitat for certain species and to ensure their resilience in the face of climate change.

In 2005, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment indicated that, in the past 50 years, human activities have changed ecosystems more rapidly and extensively than at any comparable period in human history, with more than 60 percent of the world's ecosystems already degraded. These changes have generated many economic gains but at growing environmental cost, including biodiversity loss and land degradation, which in turn has resulted in economic, social and cultural damage. Communities that rely on the sustainable use of forests and other natural resources are particularly vulnerable to biodiversity and ecosystem degradation.

Nevertheless, forest protected areas remain an important part of global conservation efforts. Natural habitats make a significant contribution to climate-change mitigation by storing and sequestering carbon in vegetation and soils, and to adaptation by maintaining essential ecosystem services that help societies respond to, and cope with, climate change and other environmental challenges. Many protected areas could be justified on socioeconomic grounds alone, yet their multiple goods and environmental services are largely unrecognized in national accounting.

There is a need for greater investment in expanded and better-connected protected-area systems, under a wider range of governance and management regimes. Protected-area systems should be designed to counter the threat posed by climate change as well as by increased

demand for and changing patterns of resource use. A new agenda for protected areas requires the involvement of a broad spectrum of actors and rightsholders, and more attention to landscapes managed by indigenous peoples, local communities, private owners and other actors as part of protected-area systems. Greater attention is also needed on ways to integrate and mainstream protected areas into sustainable development, including by promoting “green” infrastructure as a strategic part of responses to climate change. SFM has an important role to play in meeting the future challenges facing protected areas.

Further detailed guidance and support to the establishment and management of protected areas may be found in the Tools and Cases of this module.

Further learning

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Credits

This module was developed with the kind collaboration of the following people and/or institutions:

Initiator(s): Kyren Thelen

Contributor(s): Hivy Ortiz - FAORLC