



Globally and nationally important sites as biodiversity offset opportunities

March 2013

Summary

Existing globally and nationally important sites for biodiversity conservation offer promising locations for offsetting residual business impacts on biodiversity.

There are business and ethical benefits of offsetting residual business impacts on biodiversity by investing in conservation or restoration of biodiversity elsewhere. A key challenge is to find suitable sites and appropriate activities for biodiversity offsets. Consideration of Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), an umbrella set of the world's most important sites for biodiversity, is essential. KBAs offer potential for major benefits for both biodiversity and business. A related set of sites – those identified important at the national level – also has potential.

1 Which sites have already been identified as important for biodiversity conservation?

Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) are a set of sites known to be of international importance for the conservation of biodiversity. KBAs are recognised as important by conservation stakeholders globally, but identified locally – at a national or regional level – by a broad set of stakeholders. Criteria for KBAs are broadly standardised globally (see box below). In other words, this is a bottom-up process guided by global criteria: there is broad stakeholder consensus but no centralised global body which coordinates identification of KBAs.

KBAs are identified because of the biodiversity that they contain, not because they are a certain type of site. KBAs thus include, for example, all Important Bird Areas and Important Plant Areas, but only some Ramsar sites and protected areas because some of these sites are identified for reasons other than global importance for biodiversity conservation. KBAs may be protected or unprotected; they may be on land, in the sea, or in freshwater areas. Identification of KBAs globally is incomplete owing to lack of funding.

KBA Criteria

- KBA criteria vary slightly among species and regions, but KBAs are generally identified based on the presence of at least one of the following:
- Significant numbers of globally threatened species (including even just one individual of Critically Endangered or Endangered species);
- Significant proportions (e.g. $\geq 5\%$) of the global population of a restricted-range species;
- Significant concentrations (e.g. $\geq 1\%$) of migratory or congregatory species;
- Important source populations (e.g. maintaining $\geq 1\%$ of the global population of a species);
- Globally significant examples of species assemblages or habitat types.
- A stakeholder-inclusive process for further consolidating criteria for identification of important sites is being led by IUCN.

2 Are pre-identified sites of biodiversity importance 'ready-made offsets'?

Key Biodiversity Areas and sites identified nationally as important for biodiversity conservation may be particularly suitable as biodiversity offsets but are not suitable as 'off the shelf' offsets: there is particular need for attention to their additionality and equivalence in any given situation.

Stakeholder support – reduced risks and costs

KBAs are generally recognised as important by conservation stakeholders, from local organisations involved in KBA identification to financial institutions, such as the International Finance Corporation (within Performance Standard 6, as Critical Habitat), World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank, and Equator Principles Financial Institutions. NBSAPs are national government plans for biodiversity conservation. Increasingly, KBAs are also recognised as important within national plans – for example, European Union member countries have a duty to protect all Important Bird Areas.

Conservation – through offsets – of sites that are already recognised as important by government and/or non-government stakeholders is likely to reduce risks for business. For example, fewer political obstacles are likely to be in place to implementing conservation management in these sites. Further, these important sites are already identified in many areas at no extra cost to business. Where not yet identified, there is likely to be opportunity for cost-sharing of identification of such sites with national and global stakeholders.

Data availability

Some credible data have already been collated for identification of most KBAs and sites identified nationally as important for biodiversity conservation.

Additionality

Additionality is a basic principle of offsets: to have a real effect, offsets must deliver conservation gains beyond those from activities already being implemented or planned by other parties. Some KBAs and sites identified nationally as important for biodiversity conservation (particularly those in NBSAPs) are already protected or clear plans exist for their protection: offsets at these sites might not be accepted as additional by some stakeholders. Nevertheless, many non-OECD governments cannot afford to adequately finance their protected areas systems, so offsets in these sites could deliver biodiversity gains. KBAs have been identified as global priorities for biodiversity, so investment in them could offer a large gain relative to biodiversity losses at operational sites. Regardless, less than half of KBAs globally are protected, so offsets in these (or other unprotected important sites) are likely to offer clear additionality.

Equivalence and trading up

Offsets are usually intended to produce gains in equivalent (the same kind of) biodiversity (e.g. a forest for a forest) as that impacted: this is known as 'like-for-like' offsetting and is the usual regulatory offset model. In some cases, known as 'trading up', it is possible to implement offsets for higher priority ecosystems or species. KBAs and sites identified nationally as important for biodiversity conservation may offer opportunities for both like-for-like and trading up types of offsets. The potential for trading up in voluntary situations, and in some regulatory systems, is high since these sites are generally likely to be more important for biodiversity conservation than sites impacted by development.

3 How can business identify sites of biodiversity importance suitable for offsets?

In countries or regions where sites of biodiversity importance have already been identified, individual developers can review these in order to identify whether they include sites which are equivalent and additional enough to have potential as offsets. This has proved an effective approach for developers in the Republic of Guinea, West Africa.

KBA identification is far from complete, in particular in marine and freshwater environments. Where sites of biodiversity importance have not yet, or only partially, been identified, developers may benefit from financing the completion of such inventories in order to identify appropriate biodiversity offsets at the landscape scale.

4 Further information

The only place to find maps of KBAs globally is the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT)¹. IUCN is leading efforts to develop the KBA concept². Further useful information can be found at UNEP-WCMC's BiodiversityAtoZ³ and the Birdlife Datazone⁴ (most KBAs identified to date are Important Bird Areas). NBSAPs can be found at the appropriate CBD site⁵.

¹ <https://www.ibatforbusiness.org>

² http://www.iucn.org/about/union/secretariat/offices/iucnmed/iucn_med_programme/species/key_biodiversity_areas

³ <http://www.biodiversitya-z.org>

⁴ <http://www.birdlife.org/datazone/site>

⁵ <http://www.cbd.int/nbsap>