



**Society for Conservation Biology  
Statement on an  
Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity  
and Ecosystem Services- IPBES**

**June 4, 2010**

## **Society for Conservation Biology**

**The Society for Conservation Biology (SCB)** is a global professional society of over 10,000 natural and social scientists, lawyers, students, managers, and other conservation professionals. Our regional sections represent each continent on earth and the marine environment and those whose work involves biodiversity conservation in each area. SCB also has working groups and committees on a variety of issues ranging from Freshwater Ecosystems to the Social Sciences. SCB organizes and sponsors global and regional conferences; publishes peer-reviewed journals, such as *Conservation Biology*, popular publications including *Conservation* magazine; and conducts peer review for recovery plans for endangered species and for other government-sponsored conservation programs.

In 2007, SCB's Board of Governors chose the effective implementation of conservation treaties as one of its top five issue areas for its policy program.

IPBES is intended to serve as a support system for conservation treaties and related entities, providing independent, timely and effective conservation science and assessments of living natural resources (ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity) and the impact of policies and practices upon those resources and their resilience to changes in the environment and in climate.

For over twenty years, SCB has provided expert advice and analysis for governmental bodies and other decision-makers. We expect to be able to serve as a resource not only for treaty Secretariats, Parties, conferences and their committees, but also for the IPBES.



## *Why*

SCB recognizes that decision making needs to rest upon accurate and timely information and acknowledges that the science-policy interface of biodiversity and ecosystem services needs to be strengthened as well as the science-management interface. We share this view with many stakeholders, including a vast majority of the partners active within the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD) and other treaties. Some still argue that progress could be made by reforming existing mechanisms (like the scientific subsidiary bodies of the different environmental conventions). However, consensus has been emerging that a new independent mechanism should be established to support the many existing multinational environmental agreements (MEAs) that could benefit from the scientific advice and assessments such a body or network could provide. Such a flexible mechanism could respond not only to requests from MEAs but also from regional organizations and national governments as well as non-governmental organizations and the scientific community-at-large.

SCB supports the establishment of an IPBES and suggests there are two fundamental requirements: (a) the existing policy processes must be guided by best available knowledge; and (b) science in its widest sense must be a primary source of this knowledge. This includes a flexible system of periodic assessments of the status and trends of biodiversity, and of critical issues relating to efficient conservation, restoration and management of biodiversity and its components. The system should effectively respond to specific requests from a broad range of stakeholders. The SCB also feels that its network of conservation biology professionals – organized in regional sections and subject matter working groups or committees – can contribute to this mechanism.

## *Purpose/Tasks*

The IPBES should mediate efficient, timely and relevant transfer of best available knowledge, presented in a format relevant for decision making. This mechanism should include:

- Periodic reviews (global and sub-global assessments)
- Flexibility to address specific issues
- Horizon scanning

The primary task should be to synthesize available knowledge (performing systematic reviews) and provide this in a policy-relevant format; the objective is to support policy formulation and related implementation. IPBES would not generate new knowledge, but should provide analysis of major knowledge gaps and hence catalyze knowledge generation. Further, IPBES should provide capacity building in terms of ensuring active representation of all countries and regions in its activities. It should also help identify where capacity is needed to solve specific issues. However, IPBES should not function as a financing system for general capacity building.



## Organization

IPBES should be independent from established processes, although endorsed and recognized by an **intergovernmental plenary**. Independence from political filtering during the compilation and synthesis of knowledge is essential. Final summaries and conclusions might need to be “accepted” by an intergovernmental plenary by majority vote, but background reports should always be published and subject to a peer-review system. *IPBES might also consider using minority or concurring opinions while explaining how cost- and risk-benefit analysis and the precautionary principle might best be applied in a given situation.* The executive level should preferably be composed of a single **executive body** that includes representatives from governments and non-governmental organizations within the scientific community. All members of the executive body should be selected based on relevant expertise. Decisions should be taken by majority votes, with voting preferably limited to scientists. It is crucial that the voices of experts and scientists are closely integrated into the governance structure. SCB as a global scientific organization (learned society) would seek to be represented in the executive body.

Actual work within IPBES will be performed by different **Working Groups** (WGs). These should preferably be operated by independent scientific institutions. SCB believes institutions that have collaborated with scientific and professional societies (such as ours) in conferences and other endeavors will have demonstrated the extent of their capacity for constructive cooperation in this field. SCB will assist in mobilizing appropriate expertise for IPBES’ operations, in particular, its assessment component and the coordination of thematic reports. Finally, SCB expects to be active in the peer-review process (providing and coordinating reviews).

## Issues that need to be resolved

*Interpretation of “independence”.* While the importance of IPBES “independence” was agreed by consensus during the establishment process, what this independence means in practice is subject to various interpretations. The mechanisms of IPBES should be independent from those of established MEAs, and should also be independent from political influence in their scientific work and related governance.

SCB favors a system where IPBES has the mandate to interpret requests for assessments from a range of MEAs and other stakeholders, and based on that interpretation, choose methods to address and select relevant expertise. Further, all reports from IPBES should be evidence-based and subject to independent peer review by experts. In this regard, IPBES should consider the structure developed within the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). At the stage where a review of available knowledge is performed and synthesized, a strong scientific tradition has developed on how to ensure the relevance and reliability of the information. That process is being further reviewed now. Lessons learned from the IPCC’s successes – as well as their errors in either being overly cautious in presenting the overall message or not careful enough in presenting particular research results – should inform the basis for the work of IPBES.



SCB also recognizes the limitations of science and agrees that reports from IPBES should be policy relevant and not policy prescriptive. For example, scientists can present information to help provide more precise definitions for operative terms or subsections of treaties, but policy makers will ultimately make the choices. Depending on the final organization, IPBES might provide “conclusion reports” or “executive summaries” that can be accepted by an intergovernmental plenary<sup>1</sup>. This will result in reports that are more widely recognized and considered for policy formation, but a clear distinction should be made between the scientific reports and any policy interpretation subjected to approval by a multi-stakeholder plenary. Working groups responsible for the original reports should be allowed to comment on the final summary to provide feedback and ensure that the interpretations of their findings are accurate.

*Securing involvement of top-level research.* Procedures must ensure that officials and experts are selected on their personal qualifications, which are relevant to the requests/tasks. SCB recognizes and supports the fundamental value of the involvement of experts, scientists and researchers from different regions, which can help ensure that important regional perspectives on the issues are well reflected and integrated. However, regional balance should not dictate the choice of experts; the aim in all cases should be to concatenate, or link together so as to mutually enhance, the best available expertise and knowledge. Experts should be chosen through a transparent process based on this objective.

The scientific and academic community has its informal laws and traditions. These need to be respected and work within IPBES needs to contribute to peer-reviewed publications, and similarly, to ensure that its own publications are subject to peer review of the highest quality. This is guaranteed scientific quality, and such publications serve as one means of compensating the efforts of individual scientists. Again, this builds on the experience of IPCC, where making significant contributions is considered to be a solid academic achievement.

The development of IPBES should include strong involvement of relevant learned societies. This has not been done in the process so far and the involvement of science-at-large has not been adequately addressed. Learned societies constitute a major source of relevant competence and the societies represent networks of knowledge that can secure the involvement of qualified experts from all regions. The participation of the most qualified experts in the establishment of IPBES should be a top priority: the failure to address this issue may indeed risk the credibility of the process.

*Financing issues.* The structure, traditions and resources of the scientific societies do restrict the possibility for researchers to devote significant time to tasks beyond teaching and primary research - duties for which they are employed. SCB considers access to all potential knowledge-holders central to the success of IPBES. Thus, a financial mechanism must be established so that

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<sup>1</sup> Including minority or concurring reports could help policy makers to understand the range of scientific views and over time, the progression or evolution of those views and help them to adopt options that enable society to respond or adapt to outcomes that differ in type or pace from those predicted by the majority.



participation can be extended beyond those researchers based in financially strong organizations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This parallels SCB's final Recommendation to the Obama transition team for the incoming Obama Administration and the Congress, which was to reinstate the process of paying experts independent of government for information that would be useful in the administrative rulemaking process and that might not otherwise be available.