

Aligning the SDGs with global policies for biodiversity

Goal 15: “Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”

Summary

There are currently a plethora of global commitments and processes intended to promote conservation and ensure a sustainable environment. The SDGs – especially goal 15 on protection of the terrestrial environment, and goal 14 on the protection of oceans – need to avoid becoming just another set of biodiversity commitments to be met. The SDGs could play a major role to help chart the course for policies and action to fulfil these commitments and lead to genuine protection for our planet, if they sit amongst these other processes in a way that maximises alignment and impact.

The SDGs in a wider environmental context

The SDGs concerned with environmental protection enter a crowded arena: there are a range of global political commitments, known as Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) already in place. Some focus on endangered species or migratory species, while others focus on biological diversity or combatting desertification. While each one is unique they are all concerned with the deterioration of biodiversity, whether it is species, habitats or the processes that lead to degradation. Many UN member states have signed up to them, but how can the SDGs align with them to protect our terrestrial ecosystems, oceans, seas and marine resources?

In meeting goals 14 and 15 challenges of measurement, alignment and ambitious implementation need to be addressed:

- Accurate **measurement** of biodiversity helps countries to reach their targets. Whilst interaction between species and ecosystems is complex and variable, the wording of goal 15 and contributory targets do not make for easy measurement, leaving a key role for the indicators adopted at national, regional and global level.
- Global goals and targets on biodiversity should be **aligned** so that political, social and scientific efforts are most effectively directed to where they will have the biggest gain on our ability to look after the planet.
- **Implementation** of the goals with maximal efficacy is critical, given the alarming rate at which species are disappearing as the planet moves into the Sixth Great Extinction [1]. Mass extinction events occur when the Earth loses more than 75% of its species within a short geological time frame. Taking into account the current high extinction rates in comparison to the fossil record, the sixth mass extinction could occur in a few centuries if threats to species are not alleviated.

Key recommendations for states:

- **The importance of indicators** - Translate the political aspirations captured in goal 15 and targets into indicators that can be measured reliably and reflect appropriate metrics on which to assess the status of biodiversity.
- **The importance of guidance from science** - Singling out habitats for conservation efforts needs to be backed by the most recent evidence. Grasslands for example have experienced a significant decline since 1700 [2]. The ecological zones of Australasia and the Palaeartic have lost 69% and 56% of grasslands respectively. Habitat blocks adjacent to ones that have been cleared are more likely to be cleared, and this can be prevented if the clearance is not allowed to start.
- **The importance of synergy between SDGs and existing MEAs** - Conservation actions stop extinctions, but clearer synergies between MEAs would be hugely helpful in maximising the benefit of political commitment, maintaining and increasing civil society input and making the most of scarce resources. Where the SDGs do not overlap with targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, states and other actors need to decide on ways in which they can be best aligned.

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References:

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