24. BIODIVERSITY IN THE PACIFIC REGION

Drafted by the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme

Protect and conserve the rich natural and cultural heritage of the Pacific islands forever for the benefit of people of the Pacific and the world[i].

SUMMARY

Ensure that conservation has a development context that recognizes, respects and support sustainable development aspirations

Encourage commitment and action to identify, conserve and sustainably manage priority sites, habitats and ecosystems

Protect and recover threatened species and species of ecological, cultural and economic significance

Manage threats to biodiversity, especially climate change and invasive species

Engage in ridge to reef, island ecosystem based management approaches, recognizing the inter-linkages between terrestrial and coastal and marine biodiversity

Continue to commit to the implementation of the Goals and Principles of the Pacific Islands Regional Action Strategy for Nature Conservation

KEY ISSUES

Habitat loss

- Unsustainable logging and forest conversion for plantation and agriculture
- Conversion of terrestrial ecosystems and habitats to agricultural, urban, or other development
- Logging and clearance of mangrove areas, riparian vegetation, foreshore reclamation, coral harvesting, dredging, sand mining and coastal development
- Poorly managed mining operations
- Natural disasters and extreme events such as fires, flooding, cyclones, droughts etc

Invasive species

- Invasive alien species remain the leading cause of species extinction on island ecosystems. They can also cause environmental phase-shift and compromise ecosystem services vital for sustaining island communities.

- Food and economic security are also adversely impacted by invasive alien species, including the introduction of new diseases and pathogens that could wipe out agricultural, fisheries and crop development sectors. This is a critical issue for SIDS because of the limited land resources and capacity.
- The management of invasive species requires a national commitment, as these unwanted species respect no borders, boundaries or jurisdictions.
- The SIDS of the Pacific are committed to addressing invasive species issues, as reflected in past decisions made by the leaders of the Pacific, including the Forum Leaders communiqué, 2012; the Micronesia Chief Executive Summits and the Melanesian Spearhead Group.
- The Pacific SIDS are mobilized to address this scourge to biodiversity through established networks, programmes, tool-kits and guidelines, a committed work-force and passionate champions.

Threatened Species (Terrestrial and Marine)

- Long lived species including cetaceans (whales and dolphins), dugongs, sharks and marine turtles are rather susceptible to over-harvesting due to their low reproductive natures.
- Improvements in fishing methods and technology have increased overharvesting as well as other threats such as by-catch and marine pollution / debris.
- Weak collaboration between relevant agencies to improve the enforcement of harvesting regulations.
- Increased development leading to the fragmentation or loss of habitats used by migratory species moving over land, air or water.
- Low levels of awareness across multiple sectors of society on the threatened nature of these species leading to poorly informed decisions.
- Habitat loss and overharvesting of species for food, building materials, fuel etc
- Impacts caused by invasive species that directly result in the decline in the population of natives birds, and other key species (flora and fauna)

Over-exploitation of natural resources

- Overharvesting of natural resources for commercial and subsistence purposes
- Unsustainable harvesting practices and lack of enforcement of existing environmental legislations
- Increasing populations exacerbating pressures on limited and fragile natural resources
- Physical developments causing changes to the natural environment resulting in degradation of habitats, soils, forests, coastal and inland waters, reefs and creating conflicts in resource use and access

Climate change

- Climate change is predicted to have significant impacts on marine, terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems
- Ecosystem based approaches should be encouraged and integrated into national development plans and sector plans including environmental thematic plans such as NAPAs, NBSAPs, NAPs, JNAPs etc.
- Protection and restoration of natural defenses such as mangrove ecosystems can play a key role in coastal protection

BACKGROUND

The Pacific Islands region, as defined by the island nations and territories of SPREP, covers 90 million sq km and is ecologically one of the richest on earth, with habitats ranging from mountain forest ecosystems to volcanic islands and low lying coral atolls. Amazingly, land makes up less than 1 percent of this region[ii].

The huge expanse of ocean supports the most extensive and diverse coral reefs in the world, the largest tuna fishery, the deepest oceanic trenches and the healthiest and in some cases, largest remaining populations of many globally rare and threatened species including whales and dolphins, sea turtles, dugongs and saltwater crocodiles.

The Pacific is home to a high proportion of endemic and threatened flora and fauna - some of the highest percentages of endemic species per capita in the world can be found in this region[iii]. However, Pacific Island biodiversity is under intense pressure from natural and human-induced disturbance, alien species introductions, population growth and other threats. Its flora and fauna are among the most highly threatened in the world. Furthermore, the small size and isolated nature of our islands makes them extremely vulnerable to these threats. Many of these endemic and threatened species are of material resource or spiritual and cultural significance to Pacific people.

Notable achievements and successes by Pacific Island Countries have been widely acknowledged internationally such as the Micronesian Challenge, the Phoenix Island Protected Area which is the largest marine protected area in the world, the expansion of the Locally Marine Managed Areas, the political support and commitment from Pacific Forum Leaders to the Pacific Oceanscape Framework, and many other key accomplishments that have been widely recognized.

At the international global level, all fourteen Pacific Island Countries have ratified the Rio Conventions mainly the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). In addition to

these, PICs are also party or signatory to other biodiversity related Multi-lateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) and Protocols such as the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, The World Heritage Convention and the Biosafety Protocol of the CBD.

At the regional level, policy frameworks, programmes and project have been developed, endorsed and implemented to guide biodiversity conservation in the Pacific with an emphasis on implementing actions to address key threats to biodiversity. Some of these policy frameworks include the Action Strategy for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas, Guidelines for Invasive Species Management in the Pacific, Pacific Islands Regional Marine Species programme 2013 – 2017, Regional Shark Action Plan, Oceania Humpback Whale Recovery plan, the Pacific Islands Regional Guidelines for Whale and Dolphin Watching, Regional Wetlands Action Plan for the Pacific Islands 2011 – 2013 and the SPREP Strategic Plan 2010 - 2015. The two main overarching strategic frameworks that provide direction and guide biodiversity conservation in the Pacific are the Action Strategy for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas and the SPREP Strategic Plan 2010-2015.

The Action Strategy for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas in the Pacific Region[iv] charts the course for conservation practice in the Pacific. The Strategy aims to provide focus and strategic guidance for concerted conservation action, encourages coordination and cooperation amongst key conservation players and to collaborate closely in a holistic manner for greater conservation impacts on the ground. Central to the Strategy are the eight Principles for Nature conservation in the Pacific which are basically the code of conduct for all those engaged in conservation in the Pacific to follow. The Action Strategy is informed by the priorities in the NBSAPs and supports the implementation of other key regional policy frameworks including the Pacific Plan. A coalition of regional organizations and partners under the auspices of the Pacific Islands Round Table for Nature Conservation are working together to support the implementation of the Action Strategy.

The SPREP Strategic Plan 2010-2015[v] which was endorsed at the 21st SPREP Council Meeting in 2010 has biodiversity and ecosystem management as one of its strategic priorities to guide the work of SPREP and its members and partners in addressing key biodiversity threats and issues. The priorities and targets within the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Management Strategic priority of SPREP responds to priorities in the NBSAPs and regional strategies such as the Action Strategy for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas, Guidelines for Invasive Alien Species Management in the Pacific, Whales and Dolphins Action Plan, Regional Wetlands Action Plan, Marine Species Programme and the Regional Shark Action Plan.

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SPREP (2009): *Action Strategy for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas in the Pacific Island Region 2008-2012, Apia, Samoa*

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KEY DOCUMENTS & HYPERLINKS

SPREP (2009): Action Strategy for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas in the Pacific Island Region 2008-2012 http://www.sprep.org/Pacific-Environment-Information-Network/regional-frameworks-and-strategies-director

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[i] SPREP (2009): Action Strategy for Nature Conservation and Protected Areas in the Pacific Islands Region 2008 - 2012

[ii] Source: Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme.
[iii] Ecosystem Profile: Polynesia-Micronesia Biodiversity Hotspot – May 2007 - http://www.sprep.org/attachments/PacificRegion_47.pdf
[iv] Ibid
[v] SPREP (2011): Pacific Regional Environment Programme Strategic Plan 2011-2015