

Executive Summary

This report comprises Afghanistan's Fourth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and is intended to focus primarily on assessing the degree to which Afghanistan is being successful in addressing the CBD's 2010 Target and the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Target 7(b) of reducing the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010.

The report also documents Afghanistan's current (i.e., 2009) efforts and progress towards meeting the following three CBD planning targets:

- CBD's Strategic Plan;
- Programme of Work on Protected Areas; and
- Global Strategy for Plant Conservation.

Chapter I provides information on status and trends in Afghanistan's biodiversity. Chapter II describes Afghanistan's efforts at biodiversity conservation planning and implementation. Chapter III describes how Afghanistan has been attempting to integrate and mainstream biodiversity concerns into a broad range of legislation, planning and project execution. Chapter IV summarizes Afghanistan's progress towards meeting the various CBD planning targets. A series of four appendices provides additional information.

Overall status and trends in biodiversity, and major threats

The CBD's 2010 Target is to reduce the rate at which biodiversity is being lost, not to halt biodiversity loss completely. Rigorously assessing this target is difficult because it requires a large amount of quantitative data collected over a long time period. Little information exists for the period 1979 – 2002 and information since that time has largely been confined to the relatively secure central and north-eastern parts of the country. Consequently, trend in biodiversity can only be assessed based on opportunistic measurements, remote sensing, published statistics, intuitive interpretations, and anecdotal information.

The fauna and flora of Afghanistan is not exceptionally diverse with most countries in the world having a higher biodiversity index. There are 137 - 150 species of mammals, 428 - 515 birds, 92 – 112 reptiles, only 6 – 8 amphibians, 101 – 139 fish, 245 butterflies, and 3500 – 4000 vascular plant species native to Afghanistan. The range in numbers results from uncertainty in taxonomy and the questionable validity of some records. Only 7 vertebrate species are known to be endemic to Afghanistan, but estimates for endemic plant species range as high as 30%. Much more basic biological survey work and synthesis needs to be done to fully understand the diversity of the country's organisms.

As a broad generalization, biodiversity appears to be declining at an accelerating rate throughout Afghanistan. Satellite image analysis and assessment of commercial wood volumes show that forests, both closed forest and open woodlands, are rapidly disappearing. Overgrazing and shrub collection for fuel is markedly reducing plant biomass and altering plant communities. Diversion of water and increasingly frequent drought is drying wetlands and rivers with unknown effects on aquatic biodiversity. The ubiquity of weapons following years of war is leading to the loss of large mammals throughout much of the country. Ecological footprint analysis shows that Afghanistan's per capita biocapacity is declining. Large scale remote sensing analysis suggests that nearly 8000 km² of land was degraded between 1981 and 2003.

About 38% of Afghanistan's land area is comprised of ecoregions that are Endangered, 61% as Vulnerable, and only 1% as Stable. The ecoregions at highest threat are in an arc around the country's mountain chain and are comprised of open and closed woodlands.

Afghanistan's rapidly increasing human population presents the major underlying challenge to biodiversity conservation and ultimately to the quality of life of Afghans. Despite years of warfare that killed or displaced millions of Afghans, the population has doubled since 1979 to 24.3 - 32.7 million (depending on estimate accepted) in 2008. The latter figure approximates the highest population level for 2008 predicted in 1978 by the World Bank. Currently, Afghanistan's population growth is among the fastest in the world and the low median age of the Afghans ensures that rapid growth will continue for many years. Afghanistan's population can be expected to increase to 61 - 79 million people by 2050.

Proximal threats to Afghanistan's biodiversity are land encroachment, over-hunting, deforestation, over-grazing, shrub collection, dryland farming, water diversion and climate change. All of these threats have worsened in recent years.

The overall conclusion is that despite an expenditure of more than \$70 million in recent years, Afghanistan will not be able to meet the CBD's target of reducing the rate biodiversity loss by 2010 or in the foreseeable future. The major reasons for this failure are many, but three issues are largely responsible. First, the instability that has gripped the country for 30 years has resulted in Afghanistan being amongst the very poorest countries in world. Biodiversity conservation simply is not as high a priority as such issues as security, health care, and education. The continuing conflict limits the ability to undertake conservation efforts throughout most of the country. The second reason is a lack of Governmental implementation of biodiversity policy and programmes at the ground level as a result of lack of administrative and technical capacity and inadequate funding directed to Government. UN institutions and NGOs have stepped in to fill this gap, but by necessity have expended most of their time and resources on developing the conceptual, legal, and policy structure that will provide the foundation for future implementation. A third reason is that the extent of Afghanistan's biodiversity loss and ecological degradation is so profound, so extensive and population pressures so pressing that halting the decline and restoring a level of ecological integrity to Afghanistan natural environment will be a massive and long-term undertaking that cannot be achieved without simultaneous success in ameliorating poverty.

Key actions taken in support of the Convention's three objectives and to achieve the 2010 target and goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan of the Convention

Among the actions taken to further the CBD Objectives, Articles and Programmes of Work include the following:

- Promulgation of the Environment Law (EL) providing umbrella legislation for all environmental issues;
- Development of draft legislation including a Forest Law, Rangeland Law, Medicinal Plants Law, Protected Areas Regulations, Hunting Regulations, Species Trade Regulations;
- Establishment of several formal and informal committees to coordinate environmental initiatives;
- NCSA/NAPA process to determine priority actions under the CBD, UNFCCC, and UNCCD as well as the capacity needs to address them;
- Development of NCSA and NAPA follow up projects;
- Wildlife surveys in the Pamirs, Central Hindu Kush, and Nuristan;
- Establishment of the BAPAC and the Wakhan Pamir Association as environmental co-management committees;

- Establishment of a process for listing species at risk and to determine Harvestable or Protected Status;
- Development of a management plan for the proposed Band-i-Amir National Park and its approval by the BAPAC;
- Initiation of the process of developing an NPASP for Afghanistan;
- Development of an EIA legislation and interim procedures; and
- Initiation of many CBNRM projects.

Areas where national implementation has been most effective or most lacking

Implementation of the Convention has been most effective in development of institutional and legal instruments. In the past two years, Afghanistan has promulgated the Environment Law and the EIA Regulations and has several more laws and regulations in the pipeline (Protected Area Regulations, Fauna Conservation and Hunting Regulation, Rangeland Law, Draft Forest Law). A variety of processes have recently been initiated including interim EIA measures, listing of species at risk, model protected area community-based, co-management committees, wildlife research in a few key areas, development of a National Protected Areas Systems Plan, establishment of a CITES permitting system. A variety of committees have been formed to ensure coordination and mainstreaming of environmental activities.

Implementation has been most lacking in terms of field level protection of biodiversity. While there has been considerable success at developing central government biodiversity policy and planning initiatives, very little of this has been implemented in the countryside. Due to a variety of institutional reasons, the government has not legally designated its first national park nor allocated funding to its management. Afghanistan has not yet received funding to develop a National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) and, consequently, detailed planning and target setting specifically relevant to the CBD have not yet been done.

Major obstacles encountered in implementation

The obstacles to implementing the CBD in Afghanistan are numerous and many are fundamental, systemic issues. Among the most significant are:

- The deteriorating security situation makes it difficult for scientists, NGOs and government staff to safely visit the majority of the country and undertake research, consultation and implementation activities.
- The grinding poverty of most rural Afghans makes implementation of biodiversity conservation impossible unless accompanied by economic benefits. Linking immediate benefits to long-term conservation actions is usually difficult.
- Due to many reasons, prohibitions, decrees and laws are not being effectively enforced.
- Lack of technical and administrative capacity on the part of government staff and institutions hamper execution of planned activities. Developing this capacity will require a decade or more of very significant funding and mentoring by the international community.

Priorities for the Near Future (2009 – 2010)

Priority actions for the next two years include:

- Write a NBSAP for Afghanistan incorporating biodiversity indicators, targets and specific strategies for implementing priority elements of the CBD;
- Complete drafting and passage of key environmental legislation such as the Protected Area Regulations, the Fauna Conservation and Hunting Regulation, the Rangeland Law and the Forest Law;
- Engage the Government more fully in the activities of the CBD and CITES;
- Undertake field studies of selected species and ecosystems to better understand biodiversity status and trends;
- Complete the NPASP for Afghanistan articulating clear targets for the protected area system and methods for implementing it;
- Ensure that Band-i-Amir, Ajar Valley, Big Pamir, and Shah Foladi are legally designated as protected areas and receive adequate funding for effective management;
- Continue to develop the human and institutional capacities of MoAIL and NEPA, as well as other institutions having cross-cutting connections, at the national and sub-national levels;
- Implement projects on a pilot-scale that encourage a community-based approach to NRM, the experiences of which should feed into policy and regulatory activities at the central level; and
- Develop innovative ways to undertake biodiversity conservation in concert with poverty alleviation.