A decisive moment in biodiversity conservation occurred on 5 June 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, when the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) was opened for signature.

The CBD is concerned with ‘the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components, and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the use of genetic resources’. These goals have been translated into an extensive list of over 300 obligations covering a wide range of topics, including international cooperation, public education and agricultural biodiversity. The CBD recognises that taxonomists have a vital role to play in supporting biodiversity conservation. This was acknowledged in the Darwin Declaration, which stated that, ‘There is an urgent need to train and support more taxonomic experts, and to strengthen the infrastructure required to discover and understand the relationships among the world’s biological diversity.’ In response to this declaration the Global Taxonomy Initiative (GTI) was established. The GTI’s Programme of Work urges countries to carry out a range of activities, including needs assessments, capacity building and developing a coordinated taxonomic information system, that are intended to ensure that the taxonomic expertise and data needed for biodiversity conservation are in place.

However, the CBD is only one of a growing number of international treaties and agreements that address the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources, and which place obligations on the countries that sign up to them. Other such agreements include the Bonn Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the Convention on Combating Desertification (CCD), the Bern Convention on Habitats, and many more. Over 150 international treaties addressing environmental issues are currently in force in the UK according to the UN’s ECOLEX database.

The obligations contained in these treaties address not only the actions countries must undertake to conserve biodiversity, but also requirements to submit reports on implementation activities to a convention secretariat or governing body. Moreover, because there is often a degree of overlap between these various treaties, different treaties may place equivalent obligations on countries, and may request the same or similar information in reports. Many of these initiatives will require taxonomic information or expertise to support implementation of activities. This can include information on species distribution, diversity or status, services such as training and capacity building, and even the repatriation of data held in natural history collections. The question hanging over the systematic community, and indeed over the entire biodiversity conservation community, is how best to engage with all these various conventions and initiatives.

The danger for developed countries, such as the UK, which are often party to a large number of agreements, is of duplication of effort and a lack of coordination as different Government departments strive to comply with the overlapping requirements of different international agreements.

The danger for developing countries is that generating reports and monitoring progress, not to mention sending delegations to international conferences, uses up a large proportion of the total resources available for actually implementing the agreement in question. Nevertheless, international agreements are often the only way for such countries to make their voices heard, often through joining forces and establishing lobbying groups (e.g. the Group of Likeminded Megadiverse Countries).

The risk for systematic organisations, particularly those with large internationally important collections, is subtly different. While agreements are being negotiated, taxonomic institutions must carry out lobbying to ensure that the importance of taxonomy is recognised and appropriately incorporated. Although international systematic organisations are not usually obliged to submit reports, once an agreement is concluded, they are often called upon to invest their own resources in appropriate implementation activities. Further resources may also be needed just to keep track of new developments and opportunities for cooperation or funding that arise through such agreements. The costs involved in attending international meetings and forging links with other stakeholders can be considerable, and it is not easy to know where to draw the line. Getting involved in more international initiatives may lead to increased costs, but may also result in access to a greater number of potential funding sources. Not getting involved, or taking a back seat in relation to a particular agreement, may lead to taxonomy not being included in the subject matter of the agreement and as a result resources not being allocated for taxonomic work. This can result in decisions that affect biological diversity being based on incomplete or inaccurate taxonomic or biological information.

With taxonomists increasingly being asked to justify the place of taxonomy in biodiversity conservation, the need to ensure that taxonomy gets more than a passing mention at the international level is even greater. The compilation of a series
of case studies on the value of taxonomy to society by BioNET International\(^\text{10}\) is an example of the lengths taxonomists have to go to justify their calls for taxonomy to be recognised as an essential element in biodiversity conservation, and to be appropriately resourced.

The current situation in the UK is a good example of how the escalation in the number of biodiversity conservation agreements is impeding conservation rather than advancing it. Currently the UK is putting real effort into biodiversity conservation and achieving significant successes, but this is in the absence of a clear overall national-level policy linking conservation action to obligations contained in the CBD and other international agreements. The result has been a plethora of regional and national level initiatives and projects which are all laudable but which may reinvent the wheel out of ignorance of previous or parallel projects, and therefore risk waste of resources.

The situation in the UK is further complicated by the devolution of power to the regions. At the national level, the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) has been superseded by regional action plans put in place by regional partnerships (Wales Biodiversity Partnership,\(^\text{11}\) Scottish Biodiversity Forum).\(^\text{12}\) However, the UK’s participation in international conventions is still governed from Westminster, and responsibility for a number of conservation related issues still lies, or is shared, with national institutions such as the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), the Environment Agency and the Forestry Commission. This has led to uncertainty over responsibilities for the implementation of international conventions and a lack of coordination, because regional initiatives are developed in isolation from one another. Devolution has also highlighted the difficulties inherent in trying to produce a single national report when many organisations are involved in a wide range of unconnected initiatives.

Moves are afoot in the UK to try and improve the flow of information between organisations involved in biodiversity conservation activities and the Government departments responsible for keeping track of implementation. The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) has supported a series of projects intended to assess the UK’s progress in implementing the CBD,\(^\text{13}\) to develop a one-stop shop for international nature conservation information\(^\text{14}\) and to develop a system for gathering information about implementation activities, online.

The experiences of the UK are shared by many of the other countries that have signed up to these agreements. This has led to a widespread call from national governments for greater coordination between the agreements themselves in terms of the information they require countries to submit in their national reports, and, more importantly, what obligations these agreements place on countries. Although only limited steps are currently being taken by the secretariats of the various agreements to harmonise implementation and information gathering activities, there are some signs of a light at the end of the tunnel.

The three ‘Rio Agreements’ (Biodiversity, Climate Change, Desertification) are becoming more integrated through a process of ‘trialogue’,\(^\text{15,16}\) in order to compare, coordinate and consolidate activities and information related to the three conventions. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is working with a range of countries and convention secretariats to review and test different ways of achieving increased harmonisation and streamlining of reporting requirements.\(^\text{17}\) The European Environment Agency (EEA) has developed a database describing the environmental reporting obligations that countries have towards the EEA, European Commission and international conventions, with a view to ‘streamlining’ reporting processes.\(^\text{18}\)

All the systematic community now has to do is to work out which of the growing number of harmonisation initiatives to get involved in.

### Notes