

The BEST scheme

"Voluntary scheme for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services in Territories of European Overseas"

to promote conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services in European overseas entities inspired by the experience with EU nature conservation

Introduction

EU Outermost Regions (ORs) and Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) (hereafter 'Overseas Entities'), are home to exceptional biodiversity. Situated in the three large oceans and at a range of latitudes, these entities are very biodiversity rich and play host to more endemic species (species that are exclusive to a restricted geographical area) than are found on the whole of continental Europe.¹ Considering both terrestrial and marine areas and their associated specificities, marine biodiversity constitutes a significant part of the biodiversity in the Overseas Entities. The interaction between terrestrial and marine ecosystems is key to their respective functioning.

In July 2008 a conference on "The European Union and its Overseas Entities: Strategies to counter Climate Change and Biodiversity Loss" was held in La Réunion under the French Presidency of the European Union². *BEST* is a follow-up to the "Message from Réunion Island".

Box 1: Paragraph 13 of the "Message from Reunion Island"

"There is an urgent need for EU Member States and the European Commission, together with the ORs and OCTs, to establish a voluntary scheme for the protection of species and habitats, inspired by the Natura 2000 approach. This scheme should be easily accessible, flexible, adapted to the local situation, balance conservation and development needs, as well as take into account existing mechanisms and tools. The implementation of the scheme should be based on local commitment and shared financing."

Objectives

The objectives of *BEST* are to provide further means to protect biodiversity and ecosystem services in the ORs and OCTs through:

promoting the establishment and effective management of marine and terrestrial protected areas (PAs) in the Overseas Entities, also taking into account already existing PAs;³

¹ see <http://www.reunion2008.eu/pages/esa27mu/nt>

² see

implementing sustainable management of marine and terrestrial resources, which contributes to protecting important species, habitats and ecosystem functions outside PAs.

strengthening conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the Overseas Entities by:

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Basic principles

Flexibility

The Overseas Entities are very diverse in terms of geographic location as well as their climatic, environmental, social and financial conditions. Most of them, with the exception of French Guyana and British Antarctic Territory, are islands, often very small. Their institutional arrangements and, in many cases, environmental skills vary considerably.

composition of the proposal as well as the requested budget should be allowed. Proposals for *BEST* shall be submitted annually.

The reporting burden needs to be proportionate and adapted to the specificities of the Outermost Regions and Overseas Countries and Territories, taking into account the normally limited human resources (which are at the disposal of the environmental authorities in a number of the Overseas Entities), the different local situation, and the limits of scientific knowledge and local scientific competences.

Scientific underpinning

The selection of sites for *BEST* will be according to scientific principles and subject to assessment, whilst being mindful that in many instances data may be limited. The lack of good quality data will not necessarily result in exclusion from the scheme. The scheme shall include options to improve the knowledge base in the form of inventories and regular assessments. Priority will be given to collecting the baseline data where it does not exist. *BEST* shall attempt to directly address the specific needs of the individual Overseas Entities.

BEST shall also promote networking to provide for the improvement and sharing of knowledge. The collaboration with existing networks e.g. UK Overseas Territories Training and Research Programme⁷ is encouraged.

The proposed sites shall be based on existing criteria and priorities which have already been defined e.g. Important Bird Areas (IBAs), Important Plant Areas (IPAs), Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF)⁸ sites etc. and contribute to all or at least some of the following

Commitment and responsible authority for the designation of sites

For *BEST* to be effective, collaboration is needed between local (OR and OCT) governments, scientists, legal authorities competent in the field of the environment, local authorities, landowners and managers, NGOs in ORs, OCTs, Member States and the European Commission.

"Voluntary scheme" means that there is no legal obligation to join the scheme. However, the decision to join the scheme will entail an agreement that the beneficiary respects the agreed principles.

The authority to designate sites for conservation and sustainable use purposes, and to agree on the management regime required, will lie either with the MS or the local government, or through a joint approach. Considering *BEST* will fall under the frame of the EU, which implies a co-financing approach, any proposals would require the support by the local OR and OCT authorities, with the exception of sites situated in an OR with existing national protection status.

Given the generally current limited scientific knowledge base and capacity in many of the Overseas Entities, pursuing goals which equate to achieving Favourable Conservation Status (FCS) of habitats and species in sites proposed is not feasible. Setting more realistic targets e.g. to assess issues related to the protection of habitats and species and to assess the impact of any projects ((F)-7

help service may be established, if it is considered necessary. In case it was not possible to establish such an instrument, an alternative ~~instrument~~ might be envisaged e.g. a special reserve in an existing financial instruments such as LIFE+. The process shall be as simple as possible and the administrative burden kept to a minimum. The duration of the projects should be long enough to take into account the biological cycles and ecosystem dynamics of the targeted biodiversity. (There should be no limitation of 3 years as in LIFE+.)

In parallel, a strategic approach to promote the development of biodiversity work programmes

- knowledge is not sufficient to underpin the ecosystem type approach, an approach on a sub-ecoregional level might be preferred.
- ***Natural and semi-natural habitat approach***. This is an integrative approach and allows overcoming the sometimes incomplete knowledge on species distribution in Overseas Entities. It implies the constitution of lists of natural and semi-natural habitat

is also important to include the neighbouring countries which share the same species and natural habitats, to investigate their status and conservation approaches. This should allow *BEST* to contribute to biodiversity conservation at the ecoregional and

Eligible Measures

BEST shall provide funding opportunities for:

- measures to strengthen the knowledge base with regards to the site concerned, including collection of baseline data in places where this information does not exist, monitoring activities including – inter alia – climate change impacts on biodiversity and ecosystems and monitoring and management of the impacts of invasive alien species;
- actions of “passive management”: observation, follow-up and reporting about natural evolution and spontaneous adaptation of ecosystems;
- actions of “active management”: maintenance and restoration of high biodiversity areas and healthy ecosystems, creation of protection infrastructure and recovery programmes for critically endangered species;
- measures to develop more intensive management considering the ecosystem services namely for the benefit of the local population;
- measures to mitigate and adapt to climate change based on ecosystem services, i.e.

Opportunities for collaboration and cross OCT & OR working

The scheme will provide opportunities for collaboration and cross OCT & OR working and the development of regional initiatives which will pool resources and expertise to address issues such as the impacts of climate change and invasive alien species.