
IUCN – The World Conservation Union

Summary

of

External Review

October, 2003.

Preface

An External Review of IUCN is an arduous but fascinating task. Like External Review teams before us, we have been able to see only a fraction of the Union and its work, but still feel almost overwhelmed by the complexity of the organisation, the ambition of its vision, the scope of its Programme and the commitment of its community of Members, Commission specialists and Secretariat staff. We are happy to find IUCN in better health and in better heart than it was at the time of the last Review in 1999. But the challenges before it are immense. The Union must move fast and decisively if it is to maintain its leading contribution to human and ecosystem well-being and achieve more in its second half century than it did in its first.

Another experience we have shared with previous External Review teams has been the hospitality of the IUCN family around the world, and the sincerity with which they have been willing to engage with the review process. Special thanks go to our hosts in Nairobi, San Jose and Bangkok.

As we note in this report, the process of such a study can sometimes be at least as valuable as the final product. We commend IUCN Members, Commissions and the Secretariat for their active participation in this exercise, and trust that they found our many debates together as helpful as we did.

We are grateful to all these people, and to the many other partners, donors and informants whom we met, for the time, ideas and information that they contributed to this review. We hope that this report will be a useful input to the Union's discussions and decisions before, during and beyond the 2004 World Conservation Congress.

Gabor Bruszt

Tania Ammour

Jens Claussen

Zenda Ofir

N.C. Saxena

Stephen Turner

Summary

The 2003 External Review of IUCN was asked to assess the performance of the Union's Programme; the strategic relevance of IUCN in the broader sustainable development context; the progress made in strengthening governance, organisational and operational systems; and the financial viability of the organisation. This report addresses all these issues and offers an overall strategic review of the Union's performance and prospects. This summary does not offer a systematic outline of all the report's contents. Instead, it focuses on the strategic issues that we believe are most important for the Union's future.

As a strategic review, this report offers recommendations about steps IUCN should take (see Table 1 on page ix). But it does not aim to be prescriptive. It is not a blueprint. It tries to raise ideas, options and implications. It tries to stimulate debate. Indeed, the External Review process was built to be participatory and open. IUCN responded positively. We believe that the process of the last few months' enquiry and debate may have been at least as valuable as this final report.

IUCN has been an innovative and dynamic organisation through much of its 55-year history. The last two decades have seen rapid growth, substantial achievements and a series of change processes that have helped the Union to adjust to new challenges and an evolving world scene. During that period it has made major contributions to the principles and practice of sustainable development and environmental governance without forsaking its heartland concern with nature conservation. It has expanded its work and its Membership to many new parts of the world, and in particular to developing countries.

IUCN today is a well-established global Union of states, organisations and professionals that plays an invaluable role in the conservation of the earth's resources and the sustainable development of people's livelihoods. Like all other complex organisations, it has its problems and challenges. But these are more than compensated by its strong past performance and its promising potential. To help tackle the problems and challenges while affirming the character, assets and potential of the Union has been the most important and most rewarding task of this External Review.

Since 1993, the Union and its major donors have commissioned periodic External Reviews for an overall analysis of its condition and performance. The most recent ER, in 1999, took place at a difficult time in the Union's history. It identified three areas of urgent concern. One was the then IUCN Programme and the way a new one was being prepared for submission to the 2000 World Conservation Congress. The ER found that the 1997-1999 Programme, and the planning process, were seriously flawed. We find in 2003 that the current Programme, and the consultative processes to prepare its successor, are a major strength of the Union. A second area of concern was the coherence and quality of IUCN's knowledge management, and the role of the Commissions in that process. We find four years later that some progress has been made with regard to knowledge management, although IUCN acknowledges that more needs to be done. Positive steps have been taken with regard to Commissions' role in the Programme, as well as their governance. The overall governance of the Union was the third major problem area identified in 1999, and the problems became more apparent at the World Congress in 2000. IUCN reacted in 2001 with a Governance Task Force. This ER finds that the Task Force has made several sound recommendations that now await approval by Council and the Congress.

IUCN has thus worked proactively over the last four years to tackle the major issues identified by the 1999 ER, as well as the many other challenges with which it is constantly confronted. Overall,

we are happy to report that IUCN is in better health and in better heart than it was at the time of the last External Review in 1999. The Union continues to do more and achieve more than would seem possible with the resources at its disposal. Through the commitment and expertise of its Secretariat, Commissions and Members, IUCN has continued to build its reputation as a strong and capable contributor to sustainable development, from the forums of international environmental governance to the fields and forests of natural resource users. Funds invested in IUCN yield very positive returns. Examples in recent years include the Union's role in building and now implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity; its continuing development of knowledge about nature and its conservation; the way it builds capacity through its Membership, Commissions and many partnerships; and the way it builds awareness and action, as through its strong performance at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development.

The programming crisis of 1999 is history now. The quality of IUCN's current Intersessional Programme is a major reason for the Union's stronger performance. The Programme has given better structure and focus to the organisation's work. Preliminary signs are that these qualities will be enhanced in the next Programme. Overall, the Programme has provided a stable and conceptually compelling framework for pursuing the Union's mission, although the framework is still more permissive than directive and achievements at overall global level now need to be followed through at the level of component thematic and regional programmes. Scope and support have been provided for innovation. Good progress has been made with monitoring and evaluation, although the function continues to be under resourced. More is needed if IUCN is to achieve its intended quality as a learning organisation that understands the outcomes and impacts of its work.

Since 1999, the Secretariat has launched innovation in several aspects of knowledge management. The current Programme has helped IUCN to develop the concept. Progress remains incomplete, however, and a new study of the issue was recently commissioned. We hope that this study can be completed in time for the next Congress, and that it will be integrated with the Secretariat's proposals for an upgrade of its electronic knowledge services. The Commissions make many vital and valuable contributions to the Programme, with which their activities have now been formally integrated. Some problems of quality and co-ordination remain, and Commissions are constantly challenged by scientific and institutional developments in their various fields. Overall, however, the role of the Commissions within the Union has been consolidated, and the knowledge management issues identified by the 1999 ER are receiving active attention.

Like many organisations, IUCN does not function in exactly the way a reading of its constitution might suggest. Members are not as central to implementation of the Programme as the Regulations imply they should be. Does this matter? IUCN performs well with the limited direct inputs that Members make. There is no doubting the broader commitment of Members to the Union's vision and mission. The Secretariat is making increasing and fruitful efforts to involve Members more in formulating and delivering the Programme. Despite these strengths, IUCN will only achieve truly global impact in an increasingly globalised world if it marshals the enormous capacity of its Members more explicitly and effectively into execution of its Programme. Where Members are already strong and well resourced, this capacity should be deployed to extend the coverage and impact of the Programme. Where Members are fewer and weaker and the Secretariat's presence through country and regional offices is stronger, the Union needs a long term logic that builds Member capacity and leads ultimately to a more supportive, background role for the Secretariat. These strategies are necessary for IUCN to sustain and build its credibility and increase its impact, which remains limited in many parts of the world.

IUCN has come a long way with a predominantly entrepreneurial mode of management of its Secretariat. Opportunities were seized, and quality work was done. But the development has been

fragmented and uneven. As the Union grows more sophisticated, it needs stronger, more consistent, more strategic management. The Council must rebuild itself in order to give the necessary strategic direction. The Director General, as Chief Executive of the Union, should consider transforming the Executive Management Group from a basically operational advisory body into a strategic management team.

Regionalisation and decentralisation have transformed the Secretariat over the last 20 years. They have created strengths and challenges for the Union. Reviews of the process have so far been inconclusive. Some diversity in organisational structures and systems is a necessary strength. But it must be guided by a strategic consistency that is currently lacking in IUCN. That strategy should be more explicit about how and why the Secretariat builds, operates and reduces or withdraws its presence in regions and countries. It should rationalise governance structures and relations at regional and national levels. It should provide financial models for funding regional and country roles in the design and execution of the Programme. It should provide a rationale for the role, size and location of Headquarters functions in the Secretariat.

This strategy needs to link to a strategy for the growth of the Union. Over the last 20 years, that growth has been most marked in the Secretariat. Growth is one of the most natural characteristics of a successful organisation. IUCN is successful. It faces enormous challenges in pursuing its mission. The question is not whether it should grow, but how. Concentration on continued rapid expansion of the Secretariat would be financially risky and would increasingly contradict the character of the Union. Other, not mutually exclusive, growth strategies could be Membership-driven growth; partnership-driven growth; and multi-centre growth. The Union should be clear about how it intends to grow.

Designing appropriate governance for this uniquely complex organisation, and making it work, remain a challenge. At the heart of this challenge, and a core strength of the Union, is the democratic nature of this governance by institutions that represent its Members. The Governance Task Force appointed by Council in 2001 has made important progress. The External Review has not tried to duplicate its efforts. Instead, we offer some comments. We strongly support the message of the Task Force to Council: real reform is now essential to maintain the credibility and performance of the Union. We endorse the Recommendations of the Task Force regarding the operations of the Congress and the governance of the Commissions. We also underline its recommendations for a more clearly empowered Bureau within Council, to make governance more efficient and effective. The Task Force is working carefully to determine the best way to adjust the definition of the IUCN Regions and to systematise governance at regional level. We endorse these efforts. We believe that stronger and better formalised regional governance – balanced with the global character and responsibilities of Membership – is in the interest of the Union, and should be the subject of a full-scale trial in a selected Region. Overall, IUCN is close to resolving the governance problems identified by the ER in 1999. Council and the Congress must now act to endorse and execute the recommendations of the Task Force.

IUCN is well managed financially and has enhanced its financial stability. But it has to live with chronic instability in its funding. Partly this is because short term project finance is so great a part of the total budget. In many parts of the Secretariat, the internal, self-justifying imperatives of the 'project machine' are more compelling drivers of what is planned, budgeted and done than the Union's Programme. IUCN needs strategic clarity about its business model. Does it exist to pursue its mission through whatever project funding it can obtain, rationalising these activities through the conceptually powerful but operationally permissive framework of the Programme? Or does it use the Programme to drive and direct its funding arrangements? We believe that the latter is the only viable strategy for the future of IUCN. But it means that the Union and those who support it must agree a broader range of framework funding arrangements at country,

regional and global levels. We can assure IUCN that many funding agencies are ready to do this, and that framework funding at country and regional level will not necessarily endanger such funding at global level. We can assure funding agencies of our confidence that IUCN can use framework funding responsibly and effectively. Consequently, our recommendations do not focus only on existing donors increasing their global framework funding: rather, on framework funding being more widely used at all levels of IUCN operations.

For many years IUCN has depended heavily on development funding agencies. It is important to widen its funding base. Many Ministries such as Finance, Environment, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Infrastructure share some of IUCN's concerns and would be prepared to support its work. It is an important task for the Council and the Director General – but also for the current donor agencies – to engage such Ministries and their institutions as partners for the Union.

IUCN has made strong progress since the 1999 External Review. It makes a globally respected contribution to international environmental governance and the promotion of sustainable development. The first of the three most urgent issues identified by the 1999 review, the Programme, has been transformed from a weakness to a strength. The second, knowledge management, is being addressed, but remains a work in progress. Thirdly, The Union has tackled its governance issues seriously. Now is the time for it to address two further, fundamental strategic issues: its character as a regionally structured, global membership organisation; and ways to drive and resource its work through its Programme.

IUCN could not have made progress without the sustained and visionary support of its donors. We hope that this 2003 External Review will strengthen the basis for continued trustful co-operation between the Union and its supporters.