

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/en/en-publication.html>

² see <http://www.reunion2008.eu/>

³ This shall not imply the establishment of an overall plan and a roadmap supervised by the Member States.

- 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:
 - addressing the wider ecosystem challenge of climate change by maintaining healthy, resilient ecosystems and fostering ecosystem-based approaches which often bring multiple benefits;
 - strengthening capacities at a local and regional scale, including the neighbouring countries, by promoting exchange of information and best practice amongst all stakeholders including local administration, landowners, private sector and civil societies etc ;
 - strengthening existing nature conservation programmes and related efforts within and outside conservation areas;
 - broadening the knowledge base and filling the knowledge gaps;
 - ...
- encouraging and facilitating transboundary working; addressing issues such as invasive alien species, the impacts of climate change and the implementation of CITES⁴;
- developing mechanisms to lever resources including ‘payments for ecosystem-services’ (PES).

These objectives should be seen in the particular context of each of the Overseas Entities and their respective knowledge base, acknowledging the limitations of their institutional capacities.

Wider Objectives:

- To assist the Overseas Entities in meeting their obligations under those MEAs⁵ that have been extended to them (as a contribution to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity).
- To follow the principles of EU instruments for nature conservation⁶.
- As an EU-based scheme, to help attract funding sources for biodiversity conservation for the Overseas Entities.
- To act as an additional asset for the EU in international negotiations, through making an enhanced contribution to meeting the aims and objectives of international conservation instruments.

⁴ Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species

⁵ Multilateral Environment Agreements

⁶ EU Nature Directives (Directives 79/409/EEC and 92/43/EEC, Water Framework Directive (Directive 2000/60/EC, Marine Strategy Directive (Directive 2008/56/EC)

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. Protected areas and ecological networks already exist in some Overseas Entities and development of mechanisms similar to the *BEST* scheme are already under way. The success of *BEST* fundamentally requires a flexible approach.

The restrictions on sourcing materials, services and personnel represent a significant constraint, particularly in small islands. Scale shall be taken into account with regards to geography, administrative framework and resources. The scheme shall also contribute to local capacity building, because many Overseas Entities are remote from the EU and the relevant expertise can often be found within local regions, thus providing better value for money.

Therefore, *BEST* shall be flexible to allow solutions to be specifically adapted to the different local situations. Particular attention will be given to small islands.

It is important that sites and networks which already exist can be proposed in the framework of *BEST* without starting from scratch. Therefore, the selection criteria for the *BEST* scheme must be sufficiently flexible and adaptable to consider PAs and ecological networks that already exist in Overseas Entities based on the principles, criteria and methods already defined by the actors and authorities concerned. In the same way, it must be ensured that ongoing initiatives are taken on board without questioning their fundamental principles.

The objectives attributed to the sites or to the network may range from strict conservation to sustainable use, with an overall aim to ensure fostering sustainable development.

Proposed actions/measures may be:

"positive" (i.e. a constructive action such as surveys of flora and fauna, establishment of guidance documents, biodiversity maintenance or restoration of habitats) or "negative" (i.e. a commitment to prevent or restrict something, such as, creation of a "development-free zone", a ban on certain motor sports etc.).

Actions/measures required will depend on the specific circumstances. In addition, there should be flexibility with regard to the duration of any measures identified.

Basic principles of protection are essential and, where appropriate, they should be underpinned by legislation. These include: requirement to set conservation objectives to maintain ecological integrity and healthy ecosystems; requirement to develop participatory management plans; and, requirement to carry out impact assessment of all plans, projects, programmes and strategies potentially affecting a site.

As far as possible, tendering processes need to be simple and flexible to take account of the much smaller resource base in most Overseas Entities. The scheme needs to take into account the local situation in terms of geography and nature conservation, as well as of the administrative framework and resourcing. A degree of flexibility with regard to the

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 goals:

- the representative protection of the main habitat types and key ecosystems within the PA network;
- the conservation of ecological and evolutionary processes which are at the basis of biodiversity and the maintenance of the connectivity between sites;
- the conservation of viable populations of species;
- the protection of rare, threatened, endangered and endemic species;
- the conservation of natural habitats which are large enough to resist against major disturbances and long-term changes;
- the conservation of biodiversity hotspots;
- the maintenance and restoration of ecosystem services;
- climate change adaptation and/or mitigation.

The selection criteria will be regularly evaluated and reviewed. The periodic evaluation of the sites should be handled in a 'light' manner, adapted to the diversity of sites and their characteristics, as well as compatible with the resources available in ORs and OCTs and the scientific competencies at hand.

⁷ See <http://www.jncc.gov.uk/Default.aspx?page=5130>

⁸ CEPF is a global partnership of non-governmental and private sector organisations;
<http://www.cepf.net/Pages/default.aspx>

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 with the potential to have an adverse impact on the conservation status of that site. Immediate and longer term (10-30 years) commitments of the various interested parties will need to be established at the time of submission of the proposal to the European Commission, with the pre-condition that appropriate funding is available.

Taking into account the diversity of competencies in the respective Overseas Entities, it is necessary to identify clearly the administrative authority responsible for the commitment. To allow Overseas Entities and concerned actors to appreciate the consequences of a proposal for a site, the European Commission should set out, using a matrix or similar, the nature of sanctions or penalties when commitments are not kept or when the conservation of the site is jeopardised.

Recognition of existing mechanisms and instruments

BEST contributes to the implementation of the CBD⁹ Programmes of Work on Island Biodiversity (CBD DEC VIII/1) and to the implementation of local biodiversity action plans and the different strategies which are currently under development. In addition the scheme assists the UK Overseas Territories in implementing the biodiversity components of the Environmental Charters, Ramsar and World Heritage Convention.

Existing agreements between the Member States and the Overseas Countries and Territories (e.g. the UK Environment Charters) shall also be considered.

⁹ UK Overseas Territories which are not signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity are encouraged to sign up.

The collaboration laid out in the previous item should build on, and enhance, existing systems. Where possible the implementation of BEST shall use and build on existing competences and procedures.

Balance between the conservation and development needs

Priority will be given to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in areas where the conservation threat is highest and in areas with a high level of human pressure on nature.

Protected areas and ecological networks in the Overseas Entities are faced with important development activities and often include zones with major interaction between human activities and biodiversity. Thus *BEST* will also promote sustainable development – inter alia by supporting conservation approaches which emphasise conservation and livelihood benefits.

Many social and economic activities in Overseas Entities use ecosystem services directly. Therefore, measures carried out under *BEST* shall not be limited to conservation measures in the strict sense. They can include measures that encourage and guarantee the sustainable use of biodiversity. They shall aim to:

- conserve biodiversity;
- facilitate the cohabitation of biodiversity conservation and human activities (in particular, but not only, traditional activities by the local communities);
- contribute to maintain and develop social and sustainable economic activities which benefit the local communities;
- contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation using ecosystem-based approaches.

It is, however, important to note that the greatest conservation threats may not necessarily be in areas with the highest levels of human population. Therefore, *BEST* shall also enable support for areas of high biodiversity importance in entities where the threats are, for example, from invasive species rather than human population.

Reporting

The reporting linked to the management of sites needs to be "light" and the frequency and content must be adapted to the local situation. Therefore it is not practical to impose a unique formula for reporting, but rather indicate overarching items. The launch of *BEST* could focus on a number of key themes (may be up to 10 items) which should be followed-up in all ORs and OCTs in order to evaluate the overall impact of the scheme. The reporting may either inform about the actions and measures undertaken for which financial support has been provided or on the outcomes for nature conservation. Any analysis on the matter shall necessarily take into account external evolution factors, namely climate change, which will have considerable impact on Overseas Entities, but is not yet factored in.

Easy Access

Easy access to *BEST* is one of the keys to ensure its success. Therefore, to compensate the limited capacity in a number of territories, a co-ordination body or mechanism including a

help service may be established, if it is considered necessary. In case it was not possible to establish such an instrument, an alternative solution 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 on territories underpinned by long-term funding will be explored rather than providing grants to individual projects, which are often disjointed, fail to address priorities and put those islands with small populations and limited resources at a disadvantage; as they may not have the capacity to develop project proposals.

Inspiration may be drawn from the UK government funding mechanism for environment in UKOTs, the Overseas Territories Environment Programme (OTEP). The JNCC¹⁰ post providing a focus for funding application work for the UK OTs could serve as a model for access to *BEST*.

Guidelines for the selection of sites

Sites of high biodiversity and ecosystem services value will be selected based on:

- occurrence of representative marine and terrestrial habitats and species including:
 - red list species;
 - migratory species;
 - endemic species;
- provision of ecosystem services such as flood protection, water provision, erosion protection, climate regulation, contribution to climate change adaptation etc...;
- congregations of species, such as fish spawning areas, seabird breeding colonies.

General scientific approaches for the site selection

It is recommended that the methods to select sites proposed for the *BEST* scheme, the methods to constitute the species and natural habitat lists of ecoregional or specific interest – provided it is decided to elaborate such lists – are based, at least partly on the following approaches:

- ***Large Ecosystem type approach***, linked to the functioning of the concerned ecosystems taking into account the ecological processes. This approach avoids justifications based on the presences of a certain species or habitat and allows an holistic view of biodiversity and to identify sites to anticipate negative developments or impacts of climate change. This approach can be particularly useful when the precise knowledge of species and habitats is lacking. When the available scientific

¹⁰ Joint Nature Conservation Committee

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 of eco-regional or particular interest, whereas the level of precision should appreciate the operational nature of the scheme: cartographic approaches, facility to be easily recognised by local actors, allowing a synthetic regional vision... The naturalness of the habitats must be considered.
- ***Species approach.*** This approach implies the establishment of species lists of eco-regional or particular interest, which must take into account international conventions signed by the neighbouring countries. It is useful to include species which are threatened or rare in Overseas Entities, also when they are not endangered elsewhere. It implies to consider the habitats of those species. If the natural habitats' approach or the species approach is considered it is efficient to mobilise the species approach fully and complement it with the habitats' approach.
- ***Ecological continuity approach,*** which supports species' movement and maintains the permeability of the territories and the natural environment they contain. This approach is particularly pertinent to identify functional entities of a network. It complements the consideration of ecological processes and allows expressing the dynamics and the adaptability of species or more generally speaking ecosystems under changing conditions, namely climate change. This approach implies the identification and conservation of "core zones", ecological corridors and possibly buffer zones around the core zones. It is preferred that this approach shall be a complement to the species and habitat approaches.

Complementing these four approaches, an analysis of the provision of ecosystem services is suggested, including water provision, protection against drought and erosion, climate regulation, contribution to climate change adaptation etc. This approach should not be used in isolation, but should complement others, in particular for sites where the biodiversity conservation interest appears low, but which provide important ecosystem services.

Selection criteria for biodiversity conservation sites

The determination of scientific criteria for the selection of sites:

- does not aim to install a standard scientific methodology, which should then be applied in all Overseas Entities;
- should ensure that the designation has an interest with regards to the conservation of biodiversity and overall coherence with regard to already existing designations. The criteria can be used in two ways: either to develop a methodology to designate sites or to serve as criteria to verify the ecological value of PAs which existed before *BEST* is put in place;
- should favour a realistic approach, operational and comprehensible for local actors, to prioritise and better target the values of biodiversity conservation.

The criteria to select sites should take into account:

- the ecoregional and sub-ecoregional level, where appropriate. The conservation of biodiversity in the Overseas Entities must consider the biogeographical scale taking into account where appropriate the natural distribution area and habitats of species. It

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 sub-ecoecional levels, but must not lead to the neglect of rare species which are threatened or particularly emblematic for one Overseas Entity, by arguing that important populations of this species exist outside the territory of European Overseas Entities.

- The status quo of the knowledge base available (inventories, abiotic factors...), in particular in relation to the establishment of species and habitat lists. When inventories are drawn up, they should be considered, but it should not be an obligation for the participation in *BEST*.
- PAs which already exist and other ecological networks, as well as ongoing projects.

The definition of the methodology, the adaptation of the criteria to the local context, their use, as well as the evaluation of sites concerning their contribution to biodiversity conservation are up to the Member States and the ORs and OCTs.

It is recommended to consult a recognised scientific authority, local or national, on the methodology of the identified sites.

Existing nature conservation sites will also be able to join the scheme.

Where appropriate, local/territory scientific criteria should be used for the selection of sites. Existing scientific site selection tools¹¹ can serve as examples.

Evaluation criteria for biodiversity conservation sites

Criteria to verify whether the objectives of *BEST* have been met, may include the following:

- the contribution of the site to a coherent ecosystem or a functional ecological unit;
- its natural biodiversity (habitat and/or species richness, endemism, rareness);
- its ecological value and representativeness at the eco-regional level, or if appropriate, subeco-regional level and at ORs and OCTs level;
- its contribution to maintain the ecological continuities and the connectivity with other sites already identified;
- its degree of naturalness and integrity.

Overall *BEST* should

- aim to protect the various natural and semi-natural habitats which are characteristic for ORs and OCTs and, if appropriate, for the eco-region with a special emphasis on rare and threatened habitats, searching sites and habitats in good conservation status or with high restoration potential.
- allow the designation of important sites for a certain number of plant and animal species with high conservation value on global or eco-regional level : endemic or threatened species, vulnerable species (“Red List” species) and also sites with high species richness.

¹¹ BirdLife International’s Important Bird Areas (IBAs) or Conservation International’s /PlantLife International’s /BirdLife International’s Key Biodiversity Areas, and including nationally (OT) designated PAs, e.g. Ascension National Park, Cayman’s Marine PAs etc...

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. ecosystem-based approaches. Approaches with multiple benefits are given priority.
- promotion of management and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services (e.g. for tourism) in sites for which such an approach is appropriate;
- transitory measures to adapt existing practices towards a sustainable use of ecosystem services including sustainable agriculture, forestry and fisheries;
- measures to safeguard and valorise traditional knowledge linked to the sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem services, guaranteeing equitable sharing of benefits, namely with local and indigenous people;
- education measures at environment centres to inform about the natural patrimony of the designated site and the ecosystem services;
- development and demonstration of best practice for the management and restoration of sites;
- communication actions to valorise the network and sites and the measures undertaken in favour of a sustainable social and economic valorisation of ecosystem services;
- capacity building for local managers and provision of research studentships;
- provision of additional human resources;
- development and implementation of enabling legislation and policies;
- short, medium and long-term follow-up measures with regards to drivers (inter alia climate change) having an impact on biodiversity and ecosystem services;
- identification, designation and management of sites and reporting measures;
- formation of managers and site users;
- support to set up managers network on regional and national level, including managers of *BEST* sites or other PAs.

Proposals may include all or several of the upper mentioned measures. The duration shall be proportionate to the measures involved. In addition *BEST* provides financial support to prepare the proposals for designation for sites and to the management of sites.

Beneficiaries

The beneficiaries of the scheme are primarily the EU overseas entities, i.e. the Outermost Regions (ORs) and the Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) listed in Annex II of the

EC Treaty, as well as the territorial communities¹², the NGOs and natural site managers, who suggest qualifying projects situated in EU overseas. The accession of independent territories might be explored at a later stage.

Eligibility is tackled on a case by case basis, considering the designation criteria. *BEST* may also take into account conditions observed for other designated sites in the concerned OR or OCT.

Funding opportunities

Based on the principle of a co-financing with the Member States and with the agreement of local and national governments a grant-like scheme may be established which shall allow the funding of projects of different scales including studentships for research priorities. The scheme should also foresee support to draw up the proposals and the procedures should be simple and transparent.

The level of funding available could be adjusted according to:

- the existing financial resources of the beneficiary;
- the ecological or functional importance of the site and the added value with regards to an ecological network. Like this a bonus could be attributed to a proposal of grouped sites which form a coherent network, or when the added value of a new suggested site is demonstrated.

BEST should be able to provide variable amounts, limit the burden of proposal making and also allow the support of follow-up actions including management and communication, without the need to make a specific proposal for each aspect. It is noted that the currently available instruments seem to be much too burdensome and too demanding to be adapted to the ORs and OCTs.

Current potential EU funding:

LIFE + (for ORs) – DG ENV

ENTRP (for OCTs) – DG DEV

Structural funds (for ORs) – DG REGIO

FP7 (for ORs and OCTs) – DG RTD

The operation of the funding mechanism for delivery of *BEST* is very important and needs to be carefully considered. It needs to:

- be long term to ensure sustainability of the initiatives. This includes – where appropriate - exploring a more programmatic approach, which would allow a focus on delivery rather than continually writing proposals, which often overstretches the limited capacity on some of the European Overseas Entities;
- have a variety of means by which objectives are achieved;
- be flexible, and able to respond to rapidly changing needs;
- allow for the employment of additional personnel by governments and NGOs.

The establishment of a specific financial instrument shall be explored.

¹² in French "collectivité territoriale

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.