

Potential for Synergy, Key Theme 5, 21-23/01/02

Why synergy?

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The purpose of this discussion theme is to begin to understand what added-value can synergy - between western scientific and participatory biodiversity assessments - bring. Little has been written about this subject area, and few 'integrative' tools exist, but there is broad recognition that synergising assessments, if properly managed, can bring distinct benefits to both parties. However, it is not suitable in every context and, in the past, 'synergy' has generally been extractive or non-participatory, i.e. scientists using local peoples' knowledge without recognition of their needs, or only as guides etc.

Understanding when synergy is useful and appropriate and directing efforts into developing the tools and mechanisms that will help facilitate greater synergy must constitute the next best step. This is a new and very challenging area - it is hard enough synergising scientific data let alone information that has quite different cultural roots. However, such challenges should make the process all the more exciting. And it will require quite some innovative thinking and commitment to process-based approaches.

The following example demonstrates the different approaches to classification and what benefits synergy might bring: certain tribal societies give edible grasshoppers a different name for each stage of their growth, as such fine-tuned information is essential for knowing when and how to use it. On the other hand, they might identify all sunbirds with a single name. Western scientists take a different approach, giving the grasshopper one name, whilst distinguishing all sunbirds as different species on the basis of its aesthetics, in this case, its colouring. Surely there is potential here to combine such information to yield a stronger and much more comprehensive database?

We are therefore especially keen to seek information from participants on when synergy is appropriate, and of any experience you may have with appropriate and effective 'integrative' methods. Please also refer to the background material and case studies under Theme 5 and some thoughts on synergy on p.18-19 of the workshop background paper.

Potential benefits?

Synergy has various potential benefits as the old saying implies 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. Thus, on the technical side, combining comparable data must result in a stronger information base, as it is likely to be more comprehensive, more detailed and more rigorous, especially as incorporating two data sets can enable cross-checking of data. With regard to the socio-political dimension, any attempt to share information can aid local peoples' empowerment. Usually local/rural people would not have access to scientific information, and yet such information can sometimes help them start to address their access or tenure rights to local resources, or develop a better understanding of use patterns. The latter can be particularly useful when it can help local people monitor illegal use by outsiders or to achieve more sustainable levels of offtake. On the other hand, scientists engaging with local people, can gain alternative perspectives on nature, and information and methods that supplement their own.

These are only some of the potential benefits, the workshop is keen to hear more from participants!

Potential pitfalls

A lot of the data emerging from biodiversity assessments is not easily comparable making its integration difficult. Comparable data is hard to produce because biodiversity per se cannot in all its complexity be quantified by any known all-embracing measure. It has therefore been necessary to identify proxies for biodiversity. Everyone has different interests in biodiversity, and this leads to the selection of different, and hence not easily comparable, proxies. We need to ask ourselves whether attempts to integrate such data, data that from the outset has been collected for very different reasons, is in any way useful and worthwhile? This point is made in view of

the fact that the availability of resources and capacity within this area is declining, and, despite their importance, governments seem to be ever more reluctant to fund such activities. Thus efforts need to be well targeted in order to maximise benefits from the scarce resources that are available.

Another potential pitfall relates to the appropriation of local peoples' knowledge and data without adequately protecting their intellectual rights over it. Whilst this is now a hotly debated issue with the relevant CBD and WTO fora, there is evidence that local people still do not receive adequate recognition for their contributions, and that data is still being usurped, and even sometimes used for significant commercial benefit. There are even so-called 'participatory' approaches that only pay lip-service to the participatory ethic, whilst operating in highly extractive ways. Perhaps we need a rigorous set of standards or codes of conduct on participation to ensure that synergy yields fair and equitable outputs?

How to move towards greater synergy, and when?

Synergy should be easier to achieve if, from the outset, there is common interest and dialogue, between both parties regarding the purpose of the assessment. This should then lead on to the setting of criteria and indicators that are more easily comparable and therefore easier to integrate. Such commonality will not be achievable in every instance, the preceding workshop discussions have highlighted the fact that local people tend to focus on use values whereas the scientists will focus perhaps more on aesthetics or species of special interest to biological science. However, this is not to say that there are areas where there such common interest exists and this could be where to focus the greatest efforts to achieve synergy. What are these areas of common interest?

There is also the underlying issue of incentives. Synergy needs to yield desirable benefits for both parties if they are to be fully incentivised to engage in such activities. The policy and institutional environment can bear influence, but it is also the responsibility of those engaged in such assessment to ensure that the activities are directly useful and yield some tangible and desired benefits to both parties.

Opportunities and constraints to future progress

The decline in resources available for taxonomy and systematics, and other approaches to scientific biodiversity assessment, imply that alternative, more efficient and lower cost methods need to be found. Linking these activities to participatory assessments is a possible way forward, but great care must be taken to ensure that local people are not used as free labour. As discussed above, such activities should occur where there is common interest in assessing biodiversity, yet areas of common interest may not always be spatially coincident. Thus trade offs will be inevitable, yet this may go against a hard or pure scientific approach, it may also go against what local people need. Yet we should not focus on the constraints alone, there is potential here that needs to be explored further. Are there any reflections from among the 'pure' scientists participating in this workshop on whether this is feasible?

Each data set, whether it is scientific or arising from indigenous knowledge, may not be easily understandable or comparable by the other party. Perhaps we need a cadre of 'interpreters' or 'translators', rather than 'tools', who are familiar with both approaches and concepts? Is the development of such expertise possible?

Finally, there have been comments in the workshop discussion regarding the divorced and compartmentalised nature of western scientific approaches to biodiversity assessment as compared to indigenous peoples' more holistic approach. Whilst the scientific approach may yield much deeper insight on individual components of biodiversity, it may, as a result, lose perspective on the broader picture. And yet, globally, there is increasing recognition and hence a greater need to understand biospheric linkages, so as to identify the causes and impacts of processes such as climate change, more effectively. System based approaches are generating more interest, as demonstrated by the promotion of the Ecosystem Based Approach under the CBD. The 'west' has some insight as to how to develop assessments related to these approaches, but there is also much that western science could learn from the more holistic approaches of indigenous peoples.