



2.4 Auditing and biodiversity conservation

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Why stakeholders and the right tools are so important

Occasionally, concerns are raised about how biodiversity conservation is addressed during audits of forest management (Bennett 2001) and the expertise of in auditing teams. Here I try to inform the discussion concerning the link between certification and biodiversity based on my experience of auditing. It is useful to clarify what audits do and don't do.

An audit is a systematic, independent and documented process for obtaining evidence and evaluating it objectively to determine the extent to which the criteria are fulfilled. The principles of FSC audits are based on the internationally recognized and widely implemented ISO system. Audits assess compliance against specific requirements and ignore factors not included in these requirements. The biologist's role in developing standards and tools to help forest managers meet the standards is vital.

In addition to forest management audits, FSC operates a third-party accreditation assessment of the competencies and capabilities of Certification Bodies or CBs (e.g., SGS Qualifor, Soil Association Woodmark) to implement the FSC certification system, again in line with the internationally recognized ISO system. These assessments aim to maintain the quality and consistency of forest management audits.

The FSC system does not require CBs to monitor biodiversity conservation directly; for instance, during field audits of Certificate Holder (the forest management unit or the forest management company). CBs are required to assess if the Certificate Holder has an appropriate management system in place to achieve biodiversity objectives; that this system is implemented; and that the Certificate Holder monitors its impacts to inform its operations.



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I don't think the main problem of how to appropriately address biodiversity concerns is one of poor auditing or of auditors not checking biodiversity requirements. I cannot prove this, but it could be assessed through a review of both publicly available CB reports of forest management certificates, and of Accreditation Services International's publicly available witness reports of CBs. A larger problem is the complexity of some of the concepts being considered and how to develop the local standards required to incorporate these concepts and identify measurable indicators.

An example of a complex concept that must be audited is Principle 9 on High Conservation Value Forests (HCVFs). FSC requires that management activities in HCVFs maintain or enhance the attributes that define such forests. The definition and practical interpretation of some elements of HCVFs, for example their scale, is not straightforward. Similarly, the operational interpretation of key concepts such as "maintain the ecological functions and the integrity of the forest" is complicated. The question becomes: what should be assessed to determine if ecological function is being maintained?

Stakeholders can influence the way in which biodiversity conservation is assessed in the certification process in a number of ways, from being involved in the formulation of local standards to participating in the auditing process.

What is certain is that the selection of indicators by these stakeholders shapes the impact of certification on biodiversity conservation. Determination at the local and operational level of complex concepts can be strongly influenced by the locally adapted standard. Indeed, this local standard provides the indicators against which certification is assessed, including those relating to biodiversity conservation. Local standards are often the result of a negotiated agreement reached through consensus among diverse stakeholders. As few of these people have experience with auditing, the standards are often developed without adequate consideration of the context of auditing. This can lead to problems. Getting the standards and indicators right is crucial. It involves engaging with people with the right skills and experience, not only in technical issues and social issues, but also in auditing.

An auditor's job, and the processes he or she follows, is well defined, but a worker is only as good as the tools, standards and indicators on hand. Stakeholders really can influence the development of local standards and have positive impacts on certification's ability to improve biodiversity conservation.

Reference

Bennett, E.L. 2001. "Timber certification: where is the voice of the biologist?" *Conservation Biology* 15: 308–310.