



## 5.1 The HCV approach

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### Maintaining critical biodiversity values in tropical managed forests

The Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) introduced the concept of High Conservation Value (HCV) in 1999 to define forest areas of outstanding importance: high conservation value forests (HCVFs). The HCV approach describes six exceptional values or attributes of a forest area, which cover a broad range of biodiversity, ecosystem services and socio-cultural values (Box 1). The focus on conservation values enables stakeholders — ranging from local communities all the way up to international bodies — to define what is truly important to them. It also allows them to identify explicit management targets, while providing great flexibility for developing locally appropriate approaches.

FSC requires that forest managers identify HCVs within their forest management units (FMUs), manage these to maintain or enhance the values identified, and monitor conservation impacts. HCV areas are not necessarily set aside for conservation alone. Appropriate HCV management within natural forests can range from complete protection to extractive uses such as selective logging or harvesting of natural products. It always requires stakeholder consultation and a precautionary approach to managing HCV areas within a wider landscape context.

Published evidence regarding the biodiversity benefits of the HCV approach in tropical forests remains disappointingly scarce (van Kuijk, Putz and Zagt 2009). Nonetheless, application of HCV has prompted many companies to invest in high-quality conservation assessments and conservation management plans. There is ample circumstantial evidence that companies do modify their behaviour to meet HCV requirements of certification: in half of the certification reports for 104 tropical FMUs examined by Peña-Claros, Blommerde and Bongers (2009), corrective action requests (CARs) were issued against the requirement for defining HCVF, while recertification reports for the same FMUs



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COMMON LANGUAGE  
FOR INDUSTRY,  
CONSERVATIONISTS,

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HCV APPROACH OFFERS SIGNIFICANT  
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CRITICAL CONSERVATION VALUES WITHIN  
PRODUCTION LANDSCAPES.

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demonstrate that over approximately five years the focus of managers shifts progressively from HCV identification through to management and monitoring. Globally, Newsom (2009) found a mean of 22% forest area (2.5 million ha) designated as HCVF, mostly to maintain biodiversity values, in a sample of 117 FSC-certified FMUs.

### Box 1. The six high conservation values

High conservation value areas are critical areas in a landscape which need to be appropriately managed in order to maintain or enhance high conservation values. There are six main types of HCV area:

- HCV1 Areas containing globally, regionally or nationally significant concentrations of biodiversity values (e.g., endemism, endangered species, refugia)
- HCV2 Globally, regionally or nationally significant large landscape-level areas where viable populations of most if not all naturally occurring species exist in natural patterns of distribution and abundance
- HCV3 Areas that are in or contain rare, threatened or endangered ecosystems.
- HCV4 Areas that provide basic ecosystem services in critical situations (e.g., watershed protection, erosion control)
- HCV5 Areas fundamental to meeting basic needs of local communities (e.g., subsistence, health)
- HCV6 Areas critical to local communities' traditional cultural identity (areas of cultural, ecological, economic or religious significance identified in cooperation with such local communities)

Source: HCV Resource Network Charter, adapted from the Forest Stewardship Council.

The HCV concept has been widely adopted beyond its original context of forest certification. It provides the cornerstone of standards for important tropical and subtropical crops such as oil palm, soy and sugar cane. The concept is also finding its way into the discourse on carbon and REDD+ though its inclusion in the Climate, Community and Biodiversity Alliance certification scheme, and in World Bank and IFC safeguard policies, as well as in the purchasing and investment policies of major companies and commercial banks. The HCV approach may also become a significant driver for land-use planning and plantation design (McCormick et al. 2009).

By providing a common language for industry, conservationists, communities and financiers, the HCV approach holds out a genuine opportunity to tackle difficult issues in land-use planning, cross-sector cooperation, landscape-scale conservation, and ecosystem payment mechanisms. Significant risks also arise from the concept's rapid emergence, however: poor understanding of the concept, inconsistent local interpretations and guidance, and potential misapplications in agricultural planning. These major challenges prompted concerned stakeholders to create the HCV Resource Network ([www.hcvnetwork.org](http://www.hcvnetwork.org)), which is dedicated to maintaining the integrity of the concept.

In order to achieve positive outcomes, the HCV approach needs to be much better understood by managers, practitioners and auditors. One problem is that most HCV assessments are seen only by certification bodies. The public summaries of HCV management plans too often lack the detail that auditors require, and too few companies recognize the presence of well-managed HCVs as an asset (including marketing value). However, some progressive companies publish detailed reports, recognizing the potential for constructive feedback and promoting novel partnerships. Greater openness — including peer reviews — would help us all to better understand how the concept is being applied. The HCV Network encourages transparency and has developed peer review templates (HCV Resource Network 2010), which are available to any third-party reviewer and which will be especially useful for large or potentially high-impact operations.

Conservation scientists need to engage with the implementation of the HCV approach; for example, by becoming actively involved with the HCV Network's efforts to integrate site-level HCV management with systematic conservation planning, develop robust guidance for implementing the HCV approach in plantations (pulpwood, palm oil or agricultural crops), and adapt the concept to non-forest ecosystems such as grasslands and wetlands.

Finally, the conservation benefits of the HCV approach within forests need to be demonstrated beyond the existing indirect and circumstantial evidence. There are significant challenges in disaggregating the impacts of different forest management operations, but useful research could include comparisons of HCV management prescriptions between FMUs, quantitative analyses of the nature and status of areas designated for HCV management, and short- to medium-term outcomes for specific conservation targets designated in HCV management plans.

The many large-scale processes that are now using the HCV concept for conservation planning demand better research and collaboration, and provide opportunities to influence and guide the development of major land use industries towards a more holistic approach to local- and landscape-scale conservation.

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