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Andrea Athanas

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Role of business

The role of business in biodiversity and impact assessment

Andrea Athanas

Much has been done in recent years to generate international policy frameworks that promote the integration of biodiversity into impact assessment (Ramsar Convention, Resolution VIII.9 (2002), Convention on Biological Diversity, Decision VI-7 (2002), and the Convention on Migratory Species Resolution 7.2 (2002)), but effective implementation of these frameworks remains a challenge. While implementation of international policy is ultimately the responsibility of the national governments who have signed up to the conventions, others also have a role to play in translating policy commitments into action on the ground. This paper explores how the business community could play a role in moving towards implementing biodiversity and impact assessment policy.

Keywords: business; biodiversity; impact assessment; business case; business drivers; environmental impact assessment

Andrea Athanas can be contacted at Chemin de la cote Malherbe, 1188 St. George, Switzerland, E-mail: andrea.athanas@iucn.org.

IMPACT ASSESSMENT is an important tool that many businesses use to identify and manage environmental issues. Impact assessment is a requirement in most countries for companies to gain a formal licence to implement large-scale projects. However, it is also used by some more forward thinking companies to inform internal decision making, identify and manage risks associated with operations, and engage stakeholders (EBI, 2003).

Impact assessments are also used by public financing agencies, such as the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and private banks, to inform investment decisions. As biodiversity risks and opportunities emerge as key business issues, companies are beginning to embed biodiversity more substantively into internal impact assessment processes.

Traditionally, environmental impact assessment (EIA) has focused on pollution-related issues such as air and water emissions but biodiversity has become a core element of integrated impact assessment approaches that look at health, social and environmental issues together. This trend is demonstrated by the internal guidelines produced by Shell International's Exploration and Production business (Shell, 2002).

Biodiversity has emerged on the corporate agenda as both a risk and an opportunity that must be managed through more rigorous impact assessments and environmental management systems. According to Karina Litvack, Director, Head of Governance and Socially Responsible Investment at ISIS Asset Management (ISIS, 2004a):

“Unless a company can demonstrate high standards with respect to biodiversity, its

position in the marketplace, even its profitability, can be threatened by risks such as challenges to its legal license to operate, disruption to the supply chain, as well as liabilities, damage to reputation and increased operating costs. If properly managed ... perceived biodiversity risks can be turned into mutually beneficial opportunities for both business and biodiversity.”

The movement by companies to manage biodiversity risks and opportunities more effectively has started and impact assessment plays an important role as a tool already available and in use. Some companies (primarily multinationals) have developed internal guidelines for biodiversity and impact assessment in part to pre-empt future regulation (which is expected to result from decisions taken under the auspices of international conventions) and to help meet increasingly rigorous biodiversity requirements and expectations of investors, consumers, governments and the public.

Such companies are positioned to play a role in moving the biodiversity and impact assessment discussion into action as their experiences in developing and implementing guidelines of their own can help strengthen current biodiversity and impact assessment practice and guidance. At the same time, some companies stand as obstacles to stronger impact assessment practices that address biodiversity more substantively. The challenge is to capitalise on the experiences of those companies that are moving forward on the biodiversity agenda and leverage change in less willing companies through supply chains, access to (and cost of) credit, government regulation and enforcement, and consumer pressure.

This paper highlights the drivers (both from the point of view of benefits and risks) for companies to integrate biodiversity into impact assessment practices and the challenges companies have in effectively addressing biodiversity in impact assessment processes. The paper concludes by outlining ways in which the biodiversity and impact assessment community can work with the private sector to forward its agenda.

Emerging issue on the business agenda

Biodiversity is increasingly recognised by the business community as an important issue that poses both risks and opportunities to operations (EBI, 2003; IIED/WBCSD 2002; ISIS, 2004b). Poor performance in relation to biodiversity can result in fines, loss of a licence to operate, customer dissatisfaction, low employee morale, and increases in the cost of capital. Good biodiversity performance can result in easier access to capital, both an informal and a formal licence to operate and customer and staff loyalty (Earthwatch Institute *et al*, 2002; EBI, 2003).

This emergence of biodiversity on the corporate agenda is evidenced by a number of recent publications and initiatives such as *Business and Biodiversity: The Handbook for Corporate Action* (EarthWatch Institute *et al*, 2002) and “Integrating biodiversity conservation into oil and gas development” (EBI, 2003). Biodiversity is an element of a number of conservation organisation and industry initiatives such as the IUCN–ICMM (International Union for the Conservation of Nature–International Council on Mining and Metals) Dialogue (www.iucn.org/business), the Cement Sustainability Initiative (www.wbcsd.org), and the Sustainable Agriculture Initiative (www.saipatform.org).

Biodiversity is also emerging in the finance community as a criterion for determining access to, and rates of, capital. ISIS Asset Management, a UK-based asset manager with over £63 billion under management, recently published a document on extractive industries and biodiversity, exploring the question “Are extractive companies compatible with biodiversity?” (ISIS, 2004b). Insight Investment has done much work to benchmark extractive and utility companies on biodiversity performance (Insight Investment, 2004).

The Katoomba group (www.katoombagroup.org) is a working group of experts from forest and energy industries, research institutions, the financial world, and environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) dedicated to facilitating the launch of green forest products in the market place. It is looking into payments for ecosystem services, recognising the importance of such services for sustainable business operations.

Customers are, in certain markets, also differentiating between products based on biodiversity performance and those based on production processes that have implications for biodiversity. The food sector is one example where some customers differentiate between production methods, giving preference to, and paying a premium for, organic products (IFOAM, 2004) and not accepting genetically modified foods. Although differentiation does happen in some markets, it has yet to be demonstrated that environmental performance plays a significant role in determining consumer preference in other products, such as minerals and metals, where the company extracting the minerals is distanced from the consumer through a long production chain involving many sectors of the economy.

Further pressure (and help) to address biodiversity comes from NGOs. Environmental NGOs represent a diverse group of organisations that have a range of views and strategies for interacting with the private sector. Some, such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, play the important role of advocates and watch dogs, keeping an eye on business activities and alerting the public to deviations from stated standards and practices. Others such as Fauna and Flora International and Conservation International engage with businesses, working with them to help

develop more effective means of identifying and managing biodiversity risks and opportunities (Colchester and Rose, 2004). Together these two groups within the NGO community push and pull the private sector into more effective and consistent approaches towards biodiversity.

Employees also have an important role to play in bringing biodiversity onto the corporate agenda. Strong biodiversity performance is both a source of pride for existing employees — particularly those who have had a part to play in delivering such performance — and a selling point for potential candidates for employment. On the other hand, poor performance can put additional strain and stress on employees — especially when the result is pressure and campaigns from NGOs or boycotts from consumers.

Finally, government regulation, where it exists and is enforced, induces companies to improve biodiversity performance. At the international level, countries have decided that biodiversity should be an integral part of EIAs and strategic environmental assessment (SEA) (for instance, CBD, 2002; the Ramsar, 2002; CMS, 2002) and with time the impact assessment requirements of these international agreements are emerging in national and regional regulations and guidelines (Trewick, 2001).

In summary, managing biodiversity well reduces a company's exposure to risk and opens up opportunities, particularly in terms of stakeholder relations, but also by creating a more stable and productive environment in which to operate. Poor biodiversity management exposes a company to increased risks and poor stakeholder relations. Companies wishing to improve their biodiversity management are turning to tools they already know and impact assessment has become an important way of identifying biodiversity risks and opportunities and addressing them, either through mitigation or enhancement measures.

Integrating biodiversity into IA procedures

Impact assessment is one of the more commonly used tools to identify and address environmental and social risks at the early stages of development. Thus, it is a natural place for many companies to start to implement their biodiversity policies and commitments.

Managing biodiversity well reduces a company's exposure to risk and opens up opportunities, particularly in terms of stakeholder relations, but also by creating a more stable and productive environment in which to operate

There are, in fact, a number of reasons for companies to integrate biodiversity into their impact assessment procedures including:

- managing risk — identifying and managing risks associated with operations and reputation;
- keeping ahead of regulation — avoiding the costs of introducing measures in haste;
- influencing policies — using experience to inform policy makers, thereby encouraging policy frameworks that are more realistic for implementation;
- accessing capital — particularly with the growth of the socially responsible investment sector.

Some additional drivers for businesses to address biodiversity are provided in Box 1. Most fundamentally, though, integrating biodiversity into impact assessment procedures can help ensure that the company is able to identify, avoid and manage biodiversity risks and opportunities early in project development. Some companies are pushing even further and developing pre-EIA tools (early warning systems) to help identify and avoid potential biodiversity 'show stoppers' (EBI, 2003).

Yet more work is being done to make other biodiversity information, such as species data (habitat, recent and historical sightings and so on) available to companies so that project decisions are informed with a more complete picture of the biodiversity context. These early warning systems are based on the principle that the preferred means of addressing

Box 1. Business drivers for addressing biodiversity

Risk management and cost reduction: Negative impacts on biodiversity are a risk to the company's reputation and operations. The public is increasingly moved to action against activities undermining biodiversity. Sales, financing and recruitment can all be affected.

Obtaining and maintaining a licence to operate: Biodiversity may make it difficult to obtain a licence to operate.

Competitive advantage (operator of choice). A company may gain competitive advantage from being known for operating responsibly in relation to biodiversity. Governments and potential partners and regulators may prefer a company known to manage risks and minimise costs. Customers may differentiate between products based on environmental impact. Furthermore, companies working on biodiversity issues may benefit from being one step ahead of legislation, particularly with regard to impact assessment regulations that are increasingly integrating more specific biodiversity measures.

Improving shareholder value: Recent years have seen the emergence of a number of financial indices that take a company's environmental performance into account (Dow Jones Sustainability Indexes, available at <<http://www.sustainability-indexes.com/>>, FTSE4Good, available at <<http://www.ftse.com/ftse4good/index.jsp>>, and Sustainable Asset Management, available at <<http://www.sam-group.com>>). These indicate a shareholder value for good environmental performance.

Reputational value: Strong environmental and biodiversity performance can enhance brand value, while poor performance may undermine brands, particularly in an age of increased global communication.

biodiversity risks is to avoid them. The systems overlay geographic information on sensitive environments, including protected areas and biodiversity hotspots, with industry data to identify biodiversity risks associated with concessions or development sites. Companies can then take informed decisions early in project development about whether or not to proceed with the project.

Some companies have decided that certain areas of high biodiversity significance are categorically off limits. For instance, the 15 mining companies that are members of ICMM and Shell have committed themselves not to operate in World Heritage sites (Shell, 2003; ICMM, 2003) and are working with IUCN to develop tools to identify other sensitive environments (Phillips *et al*, 2003).

In terms of integrating biodiversity into impact assessment procedures, some companies are starting to develop internal guidelines and standards, largely based on the guidance produced for international conventions such as the CBD and Ramsar but also on experience and expertise from within the company and partnering organisations (EBI, 2003). Such guidelines tend to be more specific than international guidance and tailored to the decision-making and project-development processes of the company.

Significant emphasis is given to involving the right expertise — ecologists and biologists — in the screening and scoping stages of the impact assessment to ensure that potential impacts on biodiversity can be addressed through the assessment. This expertise may come in through consultants contracted to undertake the impact assessment, through in-house expertise, and/or by involving specialists from the biodiversity community.

In some cases, such as the IUCN-convened Independent Scientific Review Panel for the Sakhalin II project (IUCN, 2004a), independent scientific panels have been established to look more closely at specific biodiversity issues, such as potential impacts on a threatened population. In other instances, companies may engage organisations from the conservation community to help implement measures to manage biodiversity issues that have been identified in the impact assessment.

Challenges companies face

Although some companies are making significant progress in integrating biodiversity into impact assessment procedures, they still face significant challenges in doing so effectively. Some of the key challenges are:

- Having the right information. Biodiversity information is dispersed among a large number of actors and is often not accessible to companies. This poses particular challenges to implementing effective early warning systems and often results in an unnecessary duplication of effort.

The result is that investments are made in re-collecting baseline information that may already exist in a database held by a university or a conservation organisation, rather than in investing in further studies that would enhance our collective understanding of important biodiversity. IUCN is currently working with a number of data providers and users under an initiative called the Biodiversity Commons (IUCN, 2004b) to address this issue, but more needs to be done to create systems that enable better decisions for biodiversity.

- Getting consistent implementation of corporate policies and guidelines. In a 'show me' world in which the public and civil society are demanding that companies demonstrate change in behaviour rather than simply talking about laudable goals, corporate policies and guidelines carry little weight unless they are consistently applied throughout the company.

Yet motivating staff throughout a large company to prioritise action for biodiversity is a challenge when quarterly results play such a central role in determining (perceived) shareholder value and share prices in turn determine the pay scales of senior management. Thus, while many companies are able to point to examples of good performance, these often occur because of an inspired and dedicated manager somewhere in the company rather than a consistently applied strategy or policy that encourages every manager within the company to address biodiversity seriously.

- Taking a more strategic approach to land-use planning, using SEA as a tool. Biodiversity and wider environmental issues often create situations of conflict between development and conservation objectives that are difficult to resolve through project-specific impact assessments. Though it is naïve to believe such conflicts could be eradicated altogether, they could be better addressed at more strategic levels through government-led strategic planning processes that are participatory and transparent. Such strategic processes are also better able to address cumulative and synergistic impacts on biodiversity that are often overlooked by project-level impact assessments.
- Involving the right experts in the process at the right time, and linking various components of the impact assessment process (social, environmental, health and so on). Having the right expertise involved early in the impact assessment process is important to ensure that critical impacts on biodiversity are identified and included in subsequent studies. However, consultancies and in-house experts used by companies to do initial scoping work often lack access to expertise in conservation biology. Thus the studies and overall assessments can be biased towards engineering and/or 'brown issues'.

Furthermore, integrated impact assessments are emerging in recognition of the relationships among environmental, social and health impacts

and mitigation measures (EBI, 2003). Though difficult to implement in practice because of issues of expertise and timing, integrated assessments have the potential to improve the effectiveness and efficiencies of impact assessment processes.

- Linking actions proposed in the impact assessments to management plans to ensure implementation. Implementation is often the Achilles heel for companies. All too often, impact assessments are still seen as a regulatory procedure to gain a formal licence to operate in the initial stages of project design and execution. Increasingly, though, NGOs are watching subsequent company performance and holding companies to commitments and predictions made in impact assessments.

This places importance on integrating impact assessment findings and mitigation measures into management plans that clearly assign responsibilities and accountabilities for delivering biodiversity performance. Corporate biodiversity policies and action plans can be an important framework for such management plans, since a corporate policy raises the importance and stature of biodiversity performance above the operational level and an action plan provides a framework for prioritising and implementing actions.

- Identifying relevant indicators for assessing progress in implementing biodiversity actions called for in the impact assessment. Biodiversity indicators are a challenge for the conservation community as well as for businesses. While it is relatively easy to identify process indicators that measure whether or not mitigation measures are being implemented or the processes are in place to manage biodiversity impacts, outcome indicators for biodiversity remain illusive. Thus the effectiveness of mitigation measures or biodiversity management, in terms of results for biodiversity conservation, remains unknown. Consequently, a company cannot be sure whether the mitigation measures and management plans are having their intended effects, making adaptive management a challenge.
- Developing and implementing effective mitigation measures for biodiversity impacts. The extended time horizon for achieving biodiversity outcomes compared to the relatively short development time horizons for many projects means that it is often difficult for companies to ensure that the mitigation measures have intended outcomes. Thus adaptive management of biodiversity throughout the course of the project remains important, even if it is a challenge.

This requires ongoing access to the right expertise, robust monitoring and assessment processes, and a management culture that enables managers to take appropriate decisions and make necessary investments in biodiversity throughout the life span of the project. This last element is often the most challenging for a company, particularly in

the context of markets that focus on quarterly results and encourage continuous cost-saving measures to enhance short-term profits.

How businesses fit into the broader agenda

Some companies are making progress in integrating biodiversity into impact assessment procedures, but they are still faced with a number of challenges. At the same time, other companies have been slow to recognise the importance of biodiversity and remain reticent about taking concrete steps to address it by, for instance, integrating it into their impact assessments.

There is, however, a rationale for involving business within the broader agenda on biodiversity and impact assessment. As the corporate sector is a major user of impact assessment tools and techniques, it is important to involve it in processes aimed at progressing impact assessment techniques and broadening and/or deepening the scope. For those companies already actively engaged in addressing biodiversity issues, opportunities for playing an active role in promoting and enabling the integration of biodiversity into impact assessment processes include:

- Sharing ecological information acquired through impact assessments. Companies collect data through impact assessment processes. As pointed out earlier, some of this data is collected repeatedly for certain areas because it is not shared more widely. One example given at an IAIA conference showed that the consultant presenting the paper had repeated the same study for the same part of the Niger Delta several times for different companies under separate contracts (IAIA, 1999).
Some companies, such as Shell, BP and RioTinto have made initial efforts with the World Conservation Monitoring Centre to share ecological information collected in their impact assessments with a more global audience (UNEP-WCMC, 2003). Such initiatives should be continued or further developed to include other companies and industry groups.
- Strengthening decision-making capacity within governments to differentiate between 'good' and

Some companies are making progress in integrating biodiversity into impact assessment procedures, but are still faced with a number of challenges: others have been slow to recognise the importance of biodiversity and are reticent about addressing it

'bad' impact assessments with regard to biodiversity. The IAIA-led Initiative on Capacity Building for Biodiversity and Impact Assessment will play an important role in enabling government bodies and individuals working within governments to differentiate between good and bad impact assessments. Biodiversity is not always easy to explain or understand, and it may at times be necessary to supplement government (or lender) reviews with external scientific reviews. Independent scientific panels can provide such expertise or insight, but are challenging for governments to implement in a credible manner.

- Supporting the development of a 'level playing field', in which biodiversity is a required element of impact assessments, rather than an add-on. International policy on integrating biodiversity into impact assessment (CBD, Ramsar, CMS) has been an important first step towards creating a more robust regulatory framework for biodiversity in impact assessment. However, much more needs to be done to implement such international policy and guidance in binding national policies and procedures. Such national legislation would create a more level playing field for companies with regard to biodiversity performance, and leaders in the field recognise the benefits of making laggards meet higher standards.

For those companies that are not yet actively engaged on biodiversity issues, the challenge for the biodiversity and impact assessment community is to build awareness and insight action. This could happen by:

- promoting biodiversity and impact assessment through an industry forum, perhaps using examples from the 'leading' companies to demonstrate the value and benefit of taking action;
- encouraging governments to create regulatory frameworks that require companies to take action on biodiversity and impact assessment;
- encouraging leading companies to require suppliers, business partners, and others they work with to have biodiversity policies and action plans that include biodiversity and impact assessment practices;
- work with the financial services industry, including public financing agencies, private-sector banks, and the insurance industry, to establish requirements and standards for biodiversity and impact assessment for companies and projects they invest in and support.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the private sector is important to the ultimate implementation of the biodiversity and impact assessment policy and legal frameworks that have evolved under the auspices of international conventions such as the CBD, Ramsar and CMS.

The biodiversity and impact assessment community should seek opportunities to work with those companies within the private sector that are positioned to take action in integrating biodiversity into impact assessment practices and guidance. This can benefit the conservation community both by delivering conservation outcomes on the ground around the projects that develop under this improved planning process, and by gaining access to more and better information about the status and trends of biodiversity.

At the same time, the biodiversity and impact assessment community should be looking to work with governments to establish stronger regulatory frameworks that require biodiversity to be integrated into all impact assessments, regardless of which company is implementing the project. Finally, the conservation community should work to improve techniques for monitoring conservation outcomes of specific measures, and should remain vigilant about the quality of impact assessments and subsequent implementation of mitigation actions.

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