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LIFE ON LAND



Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

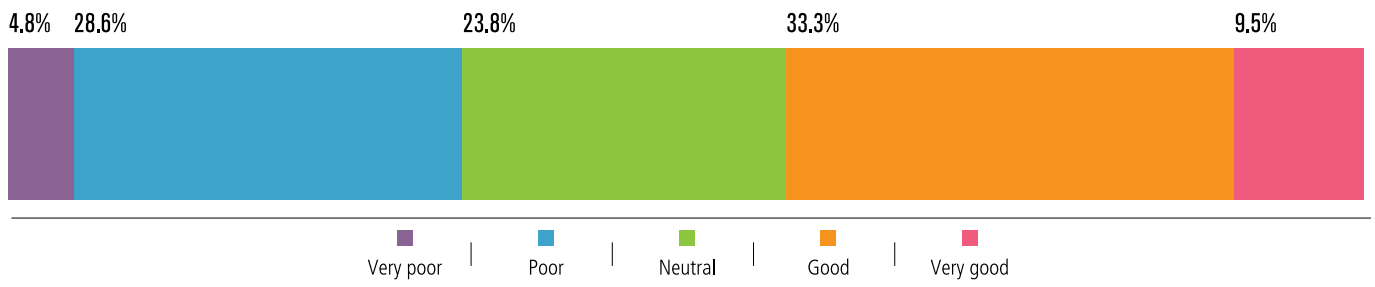
I. SUMMARY

Rapid urbanization, increasingly affluent lifestyles and changing food consumption patterns and overall economic growth trends are increasing the demand for resources and services and exerting increasing pressure on ecosystems all over the Asia-Pacific Region. Ecosystems are threatened throughout the region due to expanding and increasingly intensive agriculture, unsustainable oil palm and rubber plantations, fires, forest clearance, poorly regulated extractives industries, aquaculture and illegal wildlife trade. The total forest area has increased in Asia since 1990 but this figure hides the continuing loss of natural forests behind the expansion of planted forests, and sub-regional trends differ. Southeast Asia, for example, shows an increased rate of forest cover loss as well as a reduction in biomass stocks (indicating degradation), despite an increased area of protected forests and stability in areas under forest management plans¹. The number of threatened mammal and plant species increased by more than 10 and 18 per cent respectively in the last decade. Rural livelihoods are intimately connected with and negatively affected by the deteriorating health of terrestrial ecosystems. The drivers of land-use change vary between sub-regions. Larger and more developed countries are more impacted by large-scale agricultural development while smaller countries, especially Small Island Developing States, suffer from land degradation from small scale activities like shifting cultivation or urban expansion from population growth. Degradation of terrestrial ecosystems results in loss of current and future benefits in terms of the multiple services provided by terrestrial ecosystems, including for rural livelihoods, disaster risk reduction, water supply, food security and carbon sequestration. Lastly, a key challenge identified in the ESCAP multi-stakeholder survey² was the need to ensure community and indigenous people engagement in addressing biodiversity conservation and protection.



II. CURRENT STATUS³

Perception on progress made on **SDG15**, based on a multi-stakeholder ESCAP survey



A. AREAS WHERE GOOD PROGRESS IS MADE

Sustainable Management of Terrestrial Ecosystems

In 2014, almost half of the region (24 countries) had protected terrestrial areas (target 15.1), totaling almost 3.2 million square kilometers and accounting for 13.9 per cent of the land in these countries. Some countries with low populations have been able to put high proportions of their land in protected areas, such as Bhutan (48 per cent) and Brunei Darussalam (47 per cent)⁴. Larger countries have also made progress, including Australia and Indonesia that have dedicated 17 per cent and 12 per cent of its total land area respectively⁵. As to China and India, they have expanded plantation forest and protected area coverage. By 2018, all except for 1 country/territory (Nauru) will have terrestrial protected areas totaling 4.7 million square kilometers equivalent to 17.5 per cent of the land⁶.

There are positive trends in reforestation and afforestation (target 15.2) driving substantial increases in planted forest cover, which has resulted in net increase in forest cover in the region. Several countries in the region have made commitments to the Bonn Challenge, and forest restoration is included in the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) of many countries.

There are good regional examples of countries participating in global conservation efforts and addressing threatened species issues (target 15.5), including the Global Tiger Recovery Programme⁷ and the Global Snow Leopard Ecosystem Protection Programme⁸, in which all tiger and snow leopard range countries have strong participation. Multiple countries in the region are participating in the Global Environment Facility-funded Global Wildlife Program, which brings together 19 countries across Asia and Africa in coordinated efforts to combat wildlife trafficking.

Transboundary Collaboration⁹

Interest is growing in transboundary collaboration on protecting areas of high biodiversity conservation value areas such as the Greater Mekong Sub-Region, the Terai Arc landscape in India and Nepal, or the area covered by the Heart of Borneo initiative¹⁰.

National-level Policies and Plans

The Asia Pacific region's countries are making steady progress in formulating policies in support of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and its Aichi Biodiversity Targets¹¹. The development of National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans (NBSAPs) under the framework of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) has become a key policy tool for many countries (target 15.1). Some countries such as Viet Nam have introduced subnational biodiversity plans. However, although countries in the region have made progress in developing/revising NBSAPs, implementation challenges remain.



Technical capacity for measuring forests and Greenhouse Gas emissions from the forest sector

National capacity has advanced substantially for many countries in the region to design and implement national strategies for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+) and report on their performance to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) as part of their contribution to the Paris Agreement on climate change. Eleven developing countries in the region have submitted Forest Reference Emission Levels to the UNFCCC, including India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Papua New Guinea and Viet Nam, providing a benchmark against which Greenhouse Gas emissions and removals can be measured. Several countries are already implementing or in advanced stage of designing National Forest Inventories, enabling the provision of up-to-date information on forest biomass stocks, and changes in stocks over time.

B. AREAS REQUIRING SPECIFIC ATTENTION AND ASSOCIATED KEY CHALLENGES

Natural forests

Between 2000 and 2015, roughly 135,333 square kilometers of natural forest area in net figure (calculated as forest area minus planted forest) was lost in the region, roughly three times the size of Denmark, and accounting for 10.6 per cent of the world's total natural forest loss. The largest loss was registered in South-East Asia, which lost around 158,862 square kilometers of natural forest area within the same period¹². Although total forest cover has increased slightly due to increased forest plantation especially in China, biodiversity-rich primary forests have reduced in area and most forests continue to be degraded. In East and Southeast Asia, the forest area as a percent of total land area (SDG 15.1.1) has increased slightly from 28.5% in 1990, to 29.6% in 2015¹³. In Oceania, the forest cover is lower and has remained stable around 20% between 1990 and 2015.

In sub-tropical Asia, commercial and subsistence agriculture is responsible for one-third of forest loss each year¹⁴. One of the most recent drivers of forest loss from agriculture has been palm oil production, which has more than doubled in the past decade, with most of the expansion in Southeast Asia, especially in Indonesia and Malaysia that make up over 80% of the world's supply.

Habitat degradation and biodiversity loss

The region accounts for about one third of all threatened species in the world, and roughly two-thirds of Asia-Pacific countries experienced an increase in the number of threatened species between 2008 to 2010¹⁵. In 2016, the five countries in the Asia-Pacific region with the largest number of threatened species were Australia (971), China (1,082), India (1,063), Indonesia (1,300) and Malaysia (1,275)¹⁶. A primary issue concerning threatened species (such as elephants, rhinos, pangolins, tigers and snow leopards) and biodiversity in general is that of illegal trade in wildlife and forest products (target 15.7), the value of illegal wildlife trade being estimated at \$US 7 billion to \$US 10 billion globally. Forest degradation is a critical parameter to monitor for impacts on biodiversity. Remote sensing analysis of partial canopy cover loss, which can be used as a proxy for forest degradation, indicates that significant areas of remaining forests had undergone degradation between 2000 and 2012, with South and Southeast Asia exhibiting the largest amount of partial canopy cover loss globally with over 50 million hectares detected¹⁷.

Rapid and continuing land use change and increases in demand for natural resources and arable land present serious challenges for the sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems in the region. Some forms of agricultural investments—notably large-scale investments in land—can entail significant environmental and social risks, reducing access to natural resources and cause the loss of livelihoods, especially where land rights are unclear and governance is weak. Large-scale destruction and conversion of primary forests due to the increase in the production of commodities, such as palm oil, combined with the lack of application of environmental standards, legal loopholes, or corruption will have a detrimental effect on ecosystems and the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. The Asia-Pacific region's share of



protected terrestrial areas is smaller than the global average and is far below the 17 per cent global Aichi Biodiversity Targets of the Convention on Biological Diversity. As 17 per cent is not solely a coverage target, many countries that have coverages above 17 per cent would not meet the target if the target was broken down into its individual components. Afghanistan and the Maldives had the lowest percentage of protected terrestrial areas, with less than 1 per cent.

Reconciling the exploitation of natural resources, such as mineral resources, with sustainability will require strengthening institutions that facilitate dialogue and the wide participation of local communities and stakeholders (including the private sector).

Invasive alien species (target 15.8)^{18,19}

Invasive alien species are found in all countries in Asia and the Pacific. They affect the region's key terrestrial, wetland, coastal, marine and estuarine ecosystems, including human production systems such as plantations and horticulture, and have a particularly strong impact on the region's oceanic islands. Invasive species are implicated in over half of known bird extinctions on islands, and many of these in the Asia Pacific region²⁰.

III. PROMISING INNOVATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

Regional environmental cooperation

Asia and the Pacific countries are demonstrating a strong willingness to cooperate on better solutions for major common sub-regional and regional environmental issues. Examples include the Secretariat of the Pacific Regional Environment Programme, the Ganges River Basin water sharing agreement between India and Bangladesh, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Agreement on Transboundary Haze Pollution and the Greater Mekong sub-region's Core Environment Programme. Additional UN supported regional environmental cooperation mechanisms include the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development and the Forum of Ministers and Environment Authorities of Asia and the Pacific.

National level actions

Many countries have made commitments to change their land management policies and practices and reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+) under the Paris Agreement of the UNFCCC. The UN-REDD programme is helping 18 countries in Asia-Pacific to better monitoring their forests and quantify the deforestation and forest degradation as part of their national strategies and contributions to combat climate change.

Using market-based mechanisms to promote sustainable forest management

Using voluntary certification schemes for forests and forest products, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) contribute to promote legal and sustainable management of forests. Focusing on ecosystem services provided by forest ecosystems and built upon the core of the global FSC certification system, the Forest Certification for Ecosystem Services programme²¹ has expanded in the region, with successful pilots in Nepal, Indonesia and Vietnam. It enables market-based mechanisms that include activities meant to guarantee the beneficiary that the forest being managed explicitly maintains or enhances the provision of a given ecosystem service such as water, biodiversity or recreational services. The EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT)²² Action Plan is another initiative using market-based mechanisms getting traction in the Asia-Pacific region with 128 country projects. The initiative aims to reduce illegal logging by strengthening sustainable and legal forest management, improving governance and promoting trade in legally produced timber.



Community-based initiatives

A number of countries, particularly in South and Southeast Asia, have developed community-based forest management and set up Joint Forest Management Committees, Community-based Forest Management and Forest User Groups. In Viet Nam's Province of Lam Dong, forest based ecosystem payments helped to improve the quality of life of more than 40 000 rural poor and helped to conserve more than 200,000 hectares of forest. In terms of species conservation, the Dugong and Seagrass Conservation Project - a regional UN Environment/GEF project supported by the Convention on the Conservation on Migratory Species - focuses on the dugong range states of Indonesia, Malaysia, Solomon Islands, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Vanuatu. It seeks to work with local communities to help them understand the benefits of conserving dugongs and their habitat. Further, civil society actions carried out by national NGOs, community-based organizations (CBOs) and indigenous peoples' organizations (IPOs), in support of the Aichi Biodiversity Targets are underway with support from the UNDP-implemented GEF Small Grants Programme, now operational in 90% of the eligible countries (30 in total) across the Asia-Pacific region.

Integrating SDG 15 in national plans and implementation through flagship programmes (target 15.9)

For example, the government of the Philippines, through the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) as the lead agency for development planning, has integrated the Sustainable Development Goals in the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2017-2022 as well as in the various subnational and sectoral development plans. Flagship programmes and projects that will contribute to the achievement of the SDG 15 targets include an Expanded National Greening Program, Protected Area Management Enhancement Project, Sustainable Land Management, Philippine Operations Group on Ivory (POGI) and Illegal Wildlife Trade.

IV. PRIORITIES FOR ACTION²³

- **Address the information deficit:** A recurring constraint is the lack of information and data to accurately assess the status, trends, risks, threats and conservation needs for biodiversity in the Asia Pacific region. Improved collection and communication of information to support policy and planning will help to achieve the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, and the SDGs.
- **Mobilize resources from private and global funds including payments for ecosystems services (target 15.b):** Resources for biodiversity conservation are limited in some countries in the Asia Pacific region. Conversely, many Asian and Pacific countries also have rapidly growing economies. Given this situation, seeking out multiple avenues for mobilizing financial resources for biodiversity conservation and sustainable use could be helpful.
- **Increase stakeholder engagement and awareness in addressing SDG 15:** Key strategies to increase protected areas and broader action on SDG 15 include expanding the role of the private sector, civil society as well as indigenous peoples and local communities through innovative and diverse participatory governance models. This includes increasing awareness of the contribution of biodiversity and ecosystems services to people's lives.
- **Strengthen sustainable land management (SLM) and biodiversity management in production landscapes:** SLM is needed especially across agricultural land and forest production areas but also urban areas, as these have not had as much attention as protected areas, yet these are the very areas where the threats and extinctions are highest. A wider "landscape-approach" is being proposed by many agencies but is difficult to implement in practice with fragmented land ownership and often poor coordination across many government agencies.



- **Mainstream biodiversity across government sectors:** An essential conservation need is to mainstream biodiversity considerations into decision making including in the Ministries of Finance, Agriculture, Infrastructure, Planning, Tourism and Education amongst others. This could be done by adopting an integrated approach to sustainable development, planning and implementation, taking into account the links between SDG 15 and other SDGs, such as SDG 2- Zero Hunger, SDG 3- Good Health and Well-Being, SDG 6- Clean Water and Sanitation, SDG 12-Responsible Consumption and Production, etc.
- **Implement SDG 15-related priorities identified at the first Asia-Pacific Ministerial Summit on the Environment²⁴:**
 - Protecting natural capital and ecosystem integrity including wildlife and biodiversity;
 - Strengthening environmental cooperation including regional dialogue to discuss environmental issues, including those that have transboundary impacts;
 - Strengthening environmental governance and institutions;
 - Strengthening scientific basis of policy-making and knowledge sharing;
 - Enhance sustainable livelihoods, including through access to resources and ecosystem services for all, in particular women and vulnerable groups, recognizing their lack of access to resources and ecosystem services.

TARGETS

15.1 By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements

15.2 By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally

15.3 By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world

15.4 By 2030, ensure the conservation of mountain ecosystems, including their biodiversity, in order to enhance their capacity to provide benefits that are essential for sustainable development

15.5 Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species

15.6 Promote fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and promote appropriate access to such resources, as internationally agreed

15.7 Take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both demand and supply of illegal wildlife products

15.8 By 2020, introduce measures to prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of invasive alien species on land and water ecosystems and control or eradicate the priority species

15.9 By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts



15.a Mobilize and significantly increase financial resources from all sources to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity and ecosystems

15.b Mobilize significant resources from all sources and at all levels to finance sustainable forest management and provide adequate incentives to developing countries to advance such management, including for conservation and reforestation

15.c Enhance global support for efforts to combat poaching and trafficking of protected species, including by increasing the capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities

END NOTES

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