



# ISTF NEWS

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## CERTIFICATION HELPS TO REDUCE BIODIVERSITY LOSS IN THE TROPICS

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### The recent ETFRN News sheds light on biodiversity conservation in certified forests

Forest certification has been widely embraced as a forest conservation strategy, but is it effective? After more than 15 years of certification this was the central question addressed in the recently released ETFRN News No 51 on biodiversity conservation in certified forests<sup>i</sup>. Building on a recent review<sup>ii</sup>, this issue brings together 33 articles reflecting practical experiences and insights from a diversity of researchers, conservationists, and forestry and certification practitioners <www.etfrn.org>. The results of a dedicated on-line survey gauge expert opinion and provide additional insights.

Key findings: The articles report a variety of experiences and opinions about certification and its impacts. Despite a good deal of debate some general conclusions can be drawn.

The International Society of Tropical Foresters is a non-profit organization formed in the 1950s in response to a world wide concern for the fate of tropical and subtropical forests, ISTF is dedicated to providing a communications network for tropical forestry disciplines.

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**Certification has helped to reduce biodiversity loss in the tropics:** The ETFRN News provides many instances of positive conservation benefits. The literature supports this view and more than half (58%) of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this conclusion. There is evidence that good forest management practices associated with certification are beneficial for biodiversity. Beneficial practices include the adoption of reduced-impact logging, the establishment of streamside buffer zones and corridors, the creation of biodiversity reserves, and the landscape assessment and planning requirements involved in managing designated “High Conservation Value Areas.”

**These benefits notwithstanding, certified forests are not equal to strictly protected forests in terms of biodiversity:** Some authors stressed that certified forests are not substitutes for protected areas. The literature demonstrates this and it is widely acknowledged by survey respondents. While a majority (60%) thought that the biodiversity losses in certified forests were insignificant or acceptable, 40% thought them too high (17% considered these losses unavoidable while 23% judged them avoidable).

**Conservation benefits of certification are hard to quantify and better data are desirable:** Most survey respondents considered it important to demonstrate with research the effects of certification on biodiversity. In practice, few studies quantify the effects of certification. Opinions on the usefulness of current monitoring programmes required by certifiers are divided. The majority (81%) of respondents agreed that they should be improved. That said, many certification and conservation practitioners consider the conservation benefits of certified forest management practices to be “obvious” and the incentive to underpin this observation with facts is therefore limited. Nevertheless, it is questionable whether in the long run this will be acceptable to consumers and funders including philanthropic groups, NGOs, and development agencies.

**Reducing biodiversity loss from deforestation and forest degradation needs more than certification:** Certification was considered to have had little influence on deforestation and its overall effects on biodiversity conservation in tropical forests remain highly local. Less than 2% of the forest areas of Africa, Asia, and tropical America are certified, and the requirements for certification remain a challenge for many commercial and community forest managers. Some authors expressed doubt about the ability of forest certification to catalyze high-quality forest management at the scale required to make major contributions to biodiversity conservation.

**Partnerships of forest managers with researchers and conservation NGOs may be needed:** Successful examples of conservation benefits through certification often result from partnerships between forest managers (whether concessionaires or communities), researchers, and conservation NGOs. Such partnerships may be key for ensuring that biodiversity conservation is an integral component of forest management. Commitment among forest managers, institutionalization of good practices within forest management processes, and the involvement of local communities were cited as other key criteria for making certification work for conservation. It is neither easy nor cheap to integrate biodiversity management into normal forest management practices, but certified

operations are improving. These improvements are reflected in declining biodiversity-related problems reported during certification re-assessments.

**The High Conservation Value Area (HCVA) approach is a key mechanism for biodiversity conservation :** The HCVA approach allows for local negotiation of biodiversity conservation objectives and for a major contribution through the participation of various stakeholders, including local people. But authors note that the HCVA concept remains hard to implement and can lead to ill-conceived applications.

**The future of certification in conserving tropical forest biodiversity:** Better forest management, improved certification procedures, and further research can all increase the benefits of forest certification for biodiversity conservation:

**Simple standards with large management and conservation benefits** Simpler and more practical standards are needed. These should identify clear biodiversity objectives and the scale at which these must be assessed. Such standards create incentives for implementing best practices (such as reduced-impact logging). Complex standards, such as those that cover every conceivable impact of forest management, may in practice be counter-productive. Formulating biodiversity conservation objectives requires debate and negotiation at the local level, balanced with global interpretations of biodiversity and conservation priorities.

#### **Improving the knowledge base for biodiversity conservation in certified forests**

There is still much to learn about the impacts of forest management on forest biodiversity, but much can be done to improve the information gathered from research and monitoring programs.

- o Carefully constructed comparative studies across continents, management regimes and forest types — focusing on selected, clear, and interpretable biodiversity indicators — are welcome. They will help detect the broad impacts of certification, although they will not provide all the practical answers required by forest managers or conservationists.
- o Additional studies are needed to reveal the relationships between specific certification-required management practices and selected biodiversity parameters. There needs to be some agreement on which management practices and what biodiversity indicators should be included in such studies.
- o Ultimately, the important issue is what a “sustainably managed” forest looks like in terms of biodiversity. The long-term effects of logging are still poorly known, certainly in certified operations, and many tropical forestry operations take place in relatively intact forests. Current management prescriptions remain guesses. It is unknown to what extent production forests can maintain high levels of forest biodiversity in the long run and which species they will contain.

**Extending certification into new areas:** The current challenge is how to develop forest certification into a demonstrated and widely applicable asset for forest biodiversity

conservation and good forest management. The benefits must expand beyond the 2% of production forests so far certified in the tropics.

- o Certification processes must be simplified to increase its suitability for tropical forests managers. Limited management and monitoring capacities remain obstacles to expansion of certified areas and to achieving better conservation management. Complementary measures are needed to address issues such as weak governance, corruption, and disputed land tenure, as well as to entice new markets.

- o It is vital to make certification worthwhile for community and smallholder producers in landscape mosaics. Increasingly, control over large areas of forest has devolved to local communities and more forests have become part of intensely managed landscape mosaics that still hold substantial biodiversity.

- o Ultimately, the important issue is what a “sustainably managed” forest looks like in terms of biodiversity. The long-term effects of logging are still poorly known, certainly in certified operations, and many tropical forestry operations take place in relatively intact forests. Current management prescriptions remain guesses. It is unknown to what extent production forests can maintain high levels of forest biodiversity in the long run and which species they will contain.

Certification stands out from other initiatives to conserve biodiversity as a well-known, flexible, market-based, multi-stakeholder approach. It is not without faults and problems, but once its benefits are better quantified, and the mechanisms by which these benefits are secured are better understood, forest certification looks set to remain an important driver of good forest management for the next decades.

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<sup>i</sup> Sheil, Douglas, Francis E. Putz and Roderick J. Zagt (eds.). 2010. Biodiversity conservation in certified forests. Wageningen, the Netherlands: Tropenbos International, xx + 204 pp.

<sup>ii</sup> van Kuijk, Marijke, Francis E. Putz and Roderick J. Zagt. 2009. Effects of forest certification on biodiversity. Wageningen, the Netherlands: Tropenbos International, 94 pp.