Wetlands in an action-inspiring work program of IPBES

Summary

Despite many challenges, the IPBES platform and its first work program successfully delivered knowledge syntheses on key questions regarding biodiversity and ecosystem services. The second work program of IPBES can increase its potential societal impact, by demanding that the proposed deliverables include knowledge syntheses on effective measures to reduce biodiversity loss and sustainably manage nature's contributions to people. Wetlands are typical examples of ecosystems under pressure which globally contribute substantial nature-based solutions that help meet the Sustainable Development Goals and biodiversity conservation targets. Country delegations can ensure that the next IPBES work program inspire public, private or civil parties to act, by putting the spotlight on effective measures for change, embracing and acknowledging nature-based solutions, such as those offered by wetlands, and ensuring societal inclusiveness and engagement in the new work program.

Four key messages for country delegates in the IPBES negotiations:

Country delegations can consider the following actions in preparation of, during and after the IPBES plenary in Paris:

- **Communicate** and ensure media coverage on the importance of biodiversity and nature's contributions to people in addressing global change challenges to increase awareness.
- **Negotiate** a strategic program of IPBES that contributes knowledge on measures which are actually effective in changing the current loss of biodiversity and their contributions to people towards a more positive future.
- **Engage** with public and private sectors as well as in civil society to identify how your work at IPBES can inspire action and facilitate societal change.
- **Translate** the outcomes of the IPBES plenary into clear messages of relevance and meaning, for your country, your societal actors and challenges, for instance by highlighting the nature-based solutions that are already proven to be effective, such as those offered by wetlands.

The stakes

Two key elements at the 7th IPBES plenary in Paris will be the Global assessment of biodiversity and ecosystem services, and the new work program. The development of the global report is an amazing achievement, but its results indicate a continued loss of biodiversity and their contribution to people's well-being. Deliverables proposed for the new IPBES working program cover important knowledge gaps, notably the connections between drivers and impacts. However, the policy relevance of the Deliverables could be improved if they would inspire informed action by public, private and civil parties, by including knowledge syntheses on effective actions. Actions such as nature-based solutions provided by wetlands have proven to effectively address drivers and impacts on the current global loss of biodiversity and their contributions to people.

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The Global assessment of IPBES will likely point in the same direction as previous global assessments: that we continue to loose biodiversity at alarming rates, that this threatens the contribution of nature to people and that we are unlikely to reach the majority of the Aichi Targets by 2020. Wetlands and the biodiversity they host and support are particularly threatened, while the contribution this particular nature provides to people is crucial for the populations' well-being, especially in arid regions such as the Mediterranean basin. The recent Ramsar Global Wetland Outlook highlighted a global loss of wetland habitats of 35% between 1970 and 2015, and that 25% of wetland-dependent species whose conservation status was assessed are threatened with global extinction. In the Mediterranean region, where water shortages coincide with societal growth, the percentage of wetland loss is even higher at 48% between 1970 and 2013, whilst 36% of assessed wetland-dependent animals in the Mediterranean are threatened with global extinction (Mediterranean Wetland Outlook 2).

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Governments have continued to demonstrate their commitment to addressing climate change and the biodiversity crisis in political conventions as well as more concrete actions. For instance, over the past decade, Mediterranean countries have continued to designate sites under the Ramsar Convention despite the fluctuations in the economic markets and the migration issues (Mediterranean Wetland Outlook 2). However, the effective impact of these actions has not yet been sufficient to reduce the loss of biodiversity or improve human well-being. The interdependencies of people and nature and therefore the need to become more effective in protecting biodiversity and ecosystem services to ensure future human well-being figure in proposed thematic assessment on the interlinkages among biodiversity, water, food and health (Deliverable 1a) in the new work program of IPBES.

Assessments alone do not halt the current loss of biodiversity, improve the long-term resilience of nature's contributions to human well-being, or ensure that worldwide ambitions for the Sustainable Development Goals come within reach. IPBES, being a science-policy interface that stimulates awareness and knowledge exchange on biodiversity and ecosystem services, could play a key role in empowering societal actors in addition to governments to achieve effective change for the conservation of nature. For instance, increased awareness of local actors of how they can sustainably manage coastal wetlands to provide food, ensure water quality and protection from flooding can result in a shared local stewardship to maintain healthy and functioning coastal wetlands, instead of seeing them as potential key locations for construction sites. Country delegations at the upcoming IPBES plenary in Paris can increase the policy and societal relevance of the next IPBES work program by ensuring that proposed deliverables identify which actions can effectively address the current loss of biodiversity.

When awareness rose of the nature of the drastic measures that are required to tackle climate change, scientists, NGOs, industries and the general public (including young people) went out of their way to express their support for the implementation of these drastic changes in policies and food and energy markets. The same societal support exists for the conservation of nature and nature's contribution for people and the new working program of IPBES offers an opportunity to mobilise that support in the public and private sectors as well as in civil society.

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Despite the fact that IPBES had to run before it could crawl, its first strategic program successfully boosted the development of biodiversity and ecosystem service monitoring, and it continues to stimulate data generation at a global scale while striving to be inclusive of different knowledge types, cultures and values. With its second work program, country delegations can ensure that IPBES inspires public and private sectors, as well as civil society, to take informed and inclusive steps towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. A proposed thematic assessment on the interlinkages among biodiversity, water, food and health (Deliverable 1a) can go beyond identifying the linkages and for instance stipulate for which major challenges nature based solutions exist that have been proven to be effective.

Conservation of wetlands is a nature-based solution for reaching the Sustainable Development Goals

IPBES as well as Ramsar have already stipulated that wetlands are a crucial factor for meeting the Sustainable Development Goal. Wetlands typically contribute to key challenges such as protecting people and capital from hazards such as flooding events, ensuring water and food security, purifying water for use by people and industries. Yet these ecosystems also suffer the most from the pressures of global change. Concrete examples of the contributions of wetlands to both nature and people include:

- Peatlands and seagrass beds storing and sequestering substantial amounts of carbon, thereby contributing to solutions for climate change.
- Mangroves and lagoons providing important nursery habitats for species of international conservation importance, such as the eel, as well as species that form an important food source, such as the sea bass.
- Temporary ponds allowing for extended grazing periods in Mediterranean climates while providing habitats for many endemic species, notably plants, invertebrates and amphibians.
- Saltpans, chotts and sebkhas providing crucial nesting grounds for birds like flamingos, while simultaneously contributing to food security and providing resources for generating income (e.g. through salt harvesting).
- Coastal wetlands buffering inland areas from extreme sea levels and salt intrusions.
- Riparian marshes and forests protecting agricultural land and cities by absorbing water from overflowing rivers.
- Rivers providing water for agriculture and simultaneously host many endemic plant, fish and mollusk species.
- Urban wetlands acting as refuges for biodiversity, whilst reducing temperatures and being the focus of many cultural experiences and activities (e.g. inspiration, swimming, fishing).

Healthy and well-functioning wetland systems are powerful nature-based solutions and case studies have demonstrated their impact. Country delegations can ensure that the new IPBES work program includes evidence syntheses on nature-based solutions from these and other ecosystems to identify measures which can already be taken.

IPBES: moving from potential to impact

Results from the IPBES work program form no obligation for any country delegation or other public, private or civil parties to change their policies or business or management plans. Country delegations can ensure IPBES fully plays its role in informing the process of developing realistic, feasible and measurable post 2020 biodiversity targets as well as making progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition to identifying which pressures need to urgently addressed, IPBES deliverables and working groups can include evidence-based recommendations for effective conservation measures and modeled projections showing how desirable future scenarios can be reached – because these outputs could drive real, effective and positive changes for nature and human well-being. Effective measures need to be identified to really change the outcome for nature and human well-being. Nature-based solutions, that simultaneously address biodiversity conservation and sustainable development issues, can be particularly effective.

Concretely, country delegations can do the following in preparation of, during and after the IPBES plenary in Paris:

- **Communicate** about the importance of conserving biodiversity and nature's contributions to people. International **media coverage** of IPCC sparked a great number of press releases, education programs, business initiatives and research investments. IPBES has not (yet) gotten the same kind of exposure. Start now by communicating what you think are the key points of the upcoming plenary, what is at stake and explain which contributions from societal partners, business and researchers can have an impact.
- **Future outlooks** should form the final chapter in any IPBES assessments. It is fantastic that the IPBES strategic program will fill more knowledge gaps, but more emphasis should be given in which information should lead to informed decisions that can actually result in **more positive futures**.
- **Effective measures** require a mixture of key social and technical elements to ensure successful results. In preparing for IPBES and after the plenary, country delegations can **engage with societal actors and business** on how they think the IPBES activities should be perceived and subsequently translated into measures and actions.
- **Implementation** of nature-based solutions is only really effective if societal actors are aware and engaged in their implementation. After the IPBES plenary, **go beyond communicating** findings on negative trends and highlight which measures you particularly find promising in the context of your country for your challenges with human well-being and global change.

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This position paper has been developed with the help of Tour du Valat, research institute for the conservation of Mediterranean wetlands and MedWet, a regional initiative of Ramsar. For more information please contact: Ilse Geijzendorffer (geijzendorffer@tourduvalat.org) or Alessio Satta (Satta@medwet.org).

Further reading :

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