

# Impact Evaluation of GEF Support to Protected Areas and Protected Area Systems



**Protected areas form the core of global biodiversity conservation, and the GEF has been supporting them since its inception.**

## KEY FINDINGS

### 1. Targeting pressures beyond PAs.

Loss of global biodiversity continues at an alarming rate, driven largely by habitat loss. Since the pilot phase, GEF strategies have increasingly targeted development pressures beyond PAs.

This is reflected in the GEF's shift in priorities from establishing individual PAs toward the sustainability of PA systems and networks, mainstreaming biodiversity in productive landscapes and production sectors, and interventions targeting highly specific drivers through the integrated approach pilots.

**2. Lowering habitat loss.** The GEF has helped protect at least 2.8 million km<sup>2</sup> of the world's nonmarine ecosystems. Of the 1,292 GEF-supported PAs geocoded by the evaluation, 58 percent are classified as Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs), currently the highest scientific standard used to assess global biodiversity significance. GEF support is contributing to biodiversity conservation by helping

lower habitat loss in PAs, as indicated by less forest cover loss in GEF-supported PAs compared to non-GEF-supported PAs. GEF-supported PAs also generally show positive trends in species populations and reduced pressures on biodiversity at the site level.

**3. Increased capacities.** GEF support has helped build capacities that address key factors affecting biodiversity conservation in PAs, mainly involving PA management, support from local populations, and sustainable financing. In visited sites, GEF support was found to have contributed to developing dedicated PA staff and leadership, and synergistic relationships with other donors and local government. Stronger management capacities were evidenced. In many cases, PA management activities have produced social and economic benefits, which have helped improve community attitudes toward the PA and their willingness to cooperate with PA staff. Despite improvements, sustainable financing of PAs remains a concern.

**PURPOSE AND METHODS:** This evaluation assessed the impacts of Global Environment Facility (GEF) support to biodiversity conservation in nonmarine protected areas (PAs) and PA systems. The evaluation covered 618 projects in 137 countries over the period 1991–2015. Findings were derived from portfolio, geospatial, and case study analyses, including interviews and field visits in seven countries. The evaluation was carried out jointly with the Independent Evaluation Office of the United Nations Development Programme.

**WEB PAGE:** <http://www.gefio.org/evaluations/biodiversity-impact-evaluation-support-protected-areas-and-protected-area-systems>

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**ABOUT US:** The Independent Evaluation Office (IEO) of the GEF has a central role in ensuring the independent evaluation function within the GEF. [www.gefio.org](http://www.gefio.org)

“**GEF support enables adaptability and a higher likelihood of broader adoption when three elements are combined: long-term engagement; financial sustainability; and creation of links across multiple approaches, stakeholders, and scales.**”

—Jeneen Garcia, IEO

Evaluation Officer

**4. Large-scale change in governance.** GEF support contributes to large-scale change in biodiversity governance in countries by investing in PA systems, including legal frameworks that increase community engagement. As of 2008, the GEF had invested in the PA systems or subsystems of 57 countries. These investments have supported policy development and management capacities, and promoted implementation of innovative management approaches and sustainable financing mechanisms. In many cases, interventions implemented at the PA level are part of a larger system-wide intervention. All PAs that reported mainstreaming, replication, or scaling-up of GEF-supported interventions continued or sustained these interventions within the PA.

**5. Key elements of support.** GEF support is most effective where it combines long-term engagement; financial sustainability; and creation of links across multiple approaches, stakeholders, and scales. Longer-term projects enable the testing and scaling-up of innovative management approaches that other funders—especially governments—find too risky to invest in. In addition, the GEF invests in the adoption of a range of innovative approaches introduced by multiple stakeholders, rather than any single approach. GEF funding was also found to give greater attention to creating links between different scales and among different stakeholders that otherwise would not interact over a longer period of time. In general, GEF’s cofinancing requirements help catalyze collaboration among stakeholders, allowing coordination with funding from

governments and other donors. In cases where countries did not request support at the system level, the GEF was unable to deliver interventions in this manner.

## BACKGROUND

Since its pilot phase, the GEF has adopted a comprehensive approach to biodiversity conservation. In its earliest years, its approach to biodiversity conservation primarily involved PAs, and included a variety of interventions ranging from PA demarcation, establishment of long-term funds, promotion of local participation and integrated conservation, and application of geospatial technology for PA management. The 2004 Biodiversity Program Study indicated that 75 percent of GEF biodiversity projects since the pilot phase included some PA elements.

Biodiversity priorities in GEF-3 had an explicit focus on providing support for a representative range of ecosystem types. Both GEF-4 and GEF-5 biodiversity focal area programming evolved in tandem with Convention on Biological Diversity strategies by giving more attention to the management and sustainability of PA systems and networks, rather than establishing or supporting individual PAs.

GEF-6 programming directions have a strong focus on addressing drivers to better tackle the root cause of environmental degradation—and thus position GEF support to better contribute to the current needs of PAs and the factors affecting the long-term loss of biodiversity.

Thus, while on the one hand addressing the immediate localized pressures to biodiversity, GEF support has from inception also increasingly

sought to address upstream factors affecting PAs. Previous evaluations have pointed out many lessons learned from this experience that are being applied more broadly, including engaging local stakeholders in many of the major PA issues affecting biodiversity. The GEF considers integration of PA management with that of their surrounding areas important because it can provide benefits to both biodiversity and human well-being.

## RESULTS

**Conservation outcomes.** Geospatial analysis of data available between 2001 and 2012 show that GEF-supported PAs lost up to four times less forest cover than the countrywide aggregate, and at least two times less than PAs that were not supported by the GEF in the same biomes and countries. Choosing a country where highly reliable data on GEF support were available, analyses show that GEF-supported PAs in Mexico avoided up to 23 percent forest loss from 2001 to 2012 compared to PAs that did not directly receive GEF support during this period, with results varying across biomes and ecoregions.

Another analysis looked at 88 cases of species in 39 GEF-supported PAs, supported by 29 projects where conservation of these species was linked with project objectives. The analysis found that 45 percent of these cases had a positive trend in wildlife abundance, 39 percent presented no change, and 16 percent showed negative trends. In PAs where conservation of a particular species was not strongly linked with GEF project objectives, there was a greater incidence of the species population trend not changing or worsening. Of 191 completed projects reviewed, 68 percent reported positive environmental impacts. Field visits corroborate that GEF support has helped reduce threats to biodiversity at the site level.

**Management approaches.** Information gathered through the Management Effectiveness Tracking Tool (METT)

indicates that GEF-supported PAs tend to have well-established legal status, boundaries, and design. Improvements over time were greatest in process-related aspects such as management planning, law enforcement, PA regulations, and resource inventory. Key contributing factors to improved law enforcement and compliance with regulations were found to be a combination of strong management capacities and community engagement activities—both of which the GEF has supported to a significant extent in the majority of PAs. The evaluation found that a consistent source of funding is critical to the effective operation of PAs. Yet only in a few of the visited PAs did governments increase official PA budgets. PAs that benefited from sustainable financing mechanisms or relatively stable sources of revenue were able to fund operational costs without being highly dependent on national government budget allocations.

**Community engagement.** Sixteen of the 17 GEF-supported PAs visited reported increased community participation, with GEF support indicated as contributing to such success in 14 of the PAs. Most commonly, community participation involves vigilance and intelligence gathering and joining

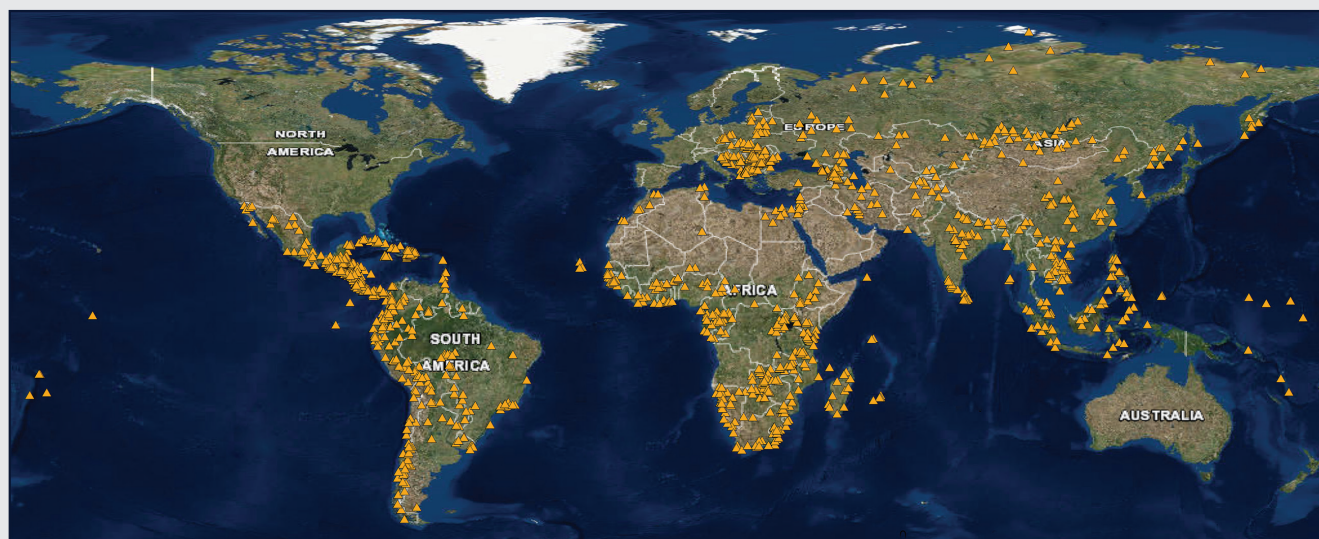
park staff in PA management activities. Field interviews revealed that positive changes in community attitudes and interactions were the result of three types of interventions: environmental education; establishment or improvement of mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation between communities and PA staff (often through the adoption of co-management approaches and/or a legal framework that establishes use or management rights for communities); and the creation of benefits for communities as part of PA management activities, or at least the implementation of measures to mitigate the loss of economic benefits.

**Governance support.** One of the earliest ways in which GEF support dealt with systemic challenges to governance at the PA level was by helping strengthen the country's PA system. In the four visited countries that received support at this scale, the GEF was credited for contributing to policy making grounded in scientific research and broad stakeholder consultation, improved human resource management, and greater financial transparency and efficiency. Sustainable financing mechanisms established with support from the GEF in three of the countries have allowed the national

government to eventually take on the costs of sustaining the PA system and to leverage funds from other donors. Changes in the legal framework for communities to access or manage land and resources were often found to coincide with increased community participation, even in unsupported PAs.

**Broader adoption.** Of the 191 completed projects analyzed, 45 percent reported both some type of broader adoption and environmental impact taking place by project end. Another 34 percent include arrangements for some type of broader adoption. Only 5 percent include no intention or design for broader adoption. Management approaches such as PA management plans developed through GEF support were the most commonly mainstreamed initiatives. PA financial mechanisms introduced through GEF support—such as user fees, revolving funds, and public-private partnerships—were reported to have been mainstreamed in 46 percent of projects. Much less frequently reported were instances of replication, reported in 26 percent of projects. Scaling-up was the least commonly reported process, with at most 11 percent of projects reporting an occurrence for any type of intervention. However, this is expected, as these numbers

**FIGURE 1: Location of GEF-supported protected areas**





capture results at project completion and do not account for long-term transformational processes.

## CONCLUSIONS

**1. Addressing the socioeconomic conditions that will ensure local community commitment to biodiversity protection.** GEF support has frequently helped attract government funding and support from other donors to address basic community needs, improve infrastructure, and increase economic opportunities in local communities. Efforts supported by the GEF—including co-management arrangements, the leveraging of resources for infrastructure, small-scale job creation, and environmental awareness-raising—have been reported to increase community cooperation and compliance with PA regulations, and in some instances have been linked to reduced overexploitation of PA resources. While socioeconomic benefits are generated, in many cases there has been an unequal distribution of benefits due to geographic and socioeconomic differences among adjacent communities and their residents. Even within areas where community benefits are evident, field visits showed that the extent to which different groups benefit from the same intervention varies. This is an area of concern that relates to the GEF social safeguards put in place in 2013, as community perceptions that PAs undermine livelihoods can contribute to the persistence of local pressures on biodiversity.

**2. Developing a more reliable and practical monitoring system to track and assess results at the project and portfolio levels.** The GEF has provided considerable support to biodiversity monitoring using the METT, which is required as part of a project's regular reporting processes. But use of and capacities to fill out the METT vary across PAs, making the quality of the data collected uncertain, or uneven at best. The composition of stakeholders present during the completion of the METT was found to affect the total score. Furthermore, while the METT was designed to assess improvements in management effectiveness over time, only 14 percent of the 1,924 PAs that had submitted them could be analyzed for this purpose, as the rest of the PAs had completed a METT only once during the course of the GEF project. On the other hand, many of the documents submitted at project approval or completion, including terminal evaluations, did not provide the basic information on which PAs were supported by the project, through which types of interventions, and over which time periods. This made the task of assessing impact more difficult, as the evaluation could not always identify the specific areas the GEF had supported.

**3. Investing in broader governance issues to address large-scale drivers.** Despite the progress made as a result of GEF contributions, development pressures continue to threaten biodiversity in visited PAs. The upsurge in wildlife poaching in Africa and forest clearing in Latin America to support terrorism and drug-trafficking activities are examples of how transnational economic drivers are able to overpower

the large strides made in improving law enforcement capacities, governance frameworks, and global environmental awareness. Apart from these, legally sanctioned activities such as tourism, agriculture, and mining within or adjacent to PAs, also—when not aligned with PA management objectives—in many cases act as large-scale pressures, with the similar effect of reversing or limiting the positive impacts of the interventions. Some of these pressures are the result of conflicting priorities and a lack of effective coordination among the relevant government agencies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure best targeting of GEF support by using geospatial technology combined with the latest scientific criteria for site selection.
- Mitigate unequal distribution of costs and benefits to local communities.
- Coordinate with mandates beyond environmental sectors to address large-scale drivers.
- Streamline project reporting requirements.
- Create a program for learning what works for whom and under what conditions. ■

