

Royal Society response to the International Mechanism of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (IMOSEB) consultation

This document is the Royal Society's response to the consultative process towards an International Mechanism of Scientific Expertise on Biodiversity (IMOSEB).

The Royal Society is the UK's independent National Academy of Science, promoting excellence in science, engineering and technology, both in the UK and internationally. The Society encourages public debate on key issues involving science, engineering and technology and the use of high quality scientific advice in policy-making.

1 Summary

The Royal Society strongly supports the need for urgent action to address the loss and deterioration of biodiversity. We agree that the scientific community has a crucial role to play in identifying and communicating the risks of biodiversity loss to decision makers around the world. The Society supports the IMOSEB process in principle and is keen to see the momentum of this initiative maintained. However, to ensure the long term success of the process we encourage the Executive Committee to first agree the objective of the mechanism and ensure that it has strong political support, before agreeing what form the mechanism should take. To do this, the Committee must first clarify which priority biodiversity needs the mechanism is intended to address. The Society considers that the primary objectives of an IMOSEB should be to provide an independent, authoritative scientific voice on international biodiversity issues, to guide regular assessments of biodiversity and ecosystems science, to address emerging issues of importance to biodiversity, and to increase the profile of the biodiversity issue and of biodiversity science and experts. Existing scientific networks are unlikely to fulfil these needs but could play an important supporting role to the IMOSEB process. In addition to being used to help define an IMOSEB, the results obtained from the consultation process should be used to identify other opportunities for meeting local, national, and regional biodiversity needs.

2 Introduction

Biodiversity is fundamental for current and future social and economic livelihoods (Royal Society 2003). The accelerating loss of biodiversity should therefore be of major concern to decision makers around the world. However difficulties in measuring biodiversity loss and our limited knowledge about global biodiversity numbers, and the distribution, ecology, population size or evolutionary history of many of the species described (Royal Society 2003) mean that the critical nature of this problem has not yet been widely recognised by decision makers outside of the biodiversity community.

The Society has previously recommended that there be an urgent emphasis on synthesis of existing knowledge, improvements of data collection and recording to increase its utility and availability, and proactive efforts to address current knowledge gaps (Royal Society 2003). In the same report we recommended that biodiversity measures be carefully defined to ensure that assessments or other biodiversity activities achieve their objectives. We have prepared our response to the IMOSEB consultation on the basis of these two key points.

3 The need for an IMOSEB

The Royal Society agrees that the scientific community, alongside governments, non-governmental organisations, the business community and local communities has an essential role to play in halting the global loss of biodiversity. The Royal Society agrees that none of the existing mechanisms currently meet the needs that we consider to be of the highest priority when considering biodiversity issues of *international* importance. For example, invasive species, and the development of scientifically robust 2010 biodiversity indicators, have not been adequately addressed despite the efforts of the CBD mechanisms. The Society therefore supports the need for an international mechanism of scientific expertise on biodiversity (IMOSEB).

4 IMOSEB Options

While we encourage the Executive Committee to maintain the momentum of this important exercise, we recommend that more time and effort be taken to build wide political support for the need for an appropriately defined IMOSEB, to identify the priority needs to be addressed, and to develop a range of realistic options. A failure to develop a practical, and cost effective mechanism that addresses the right needs would not only hinder international efforts to reduce biodiversity loss but would also reduce the credibility of the biodiversity community as a whole. The Society therefore strongly recommends that the Executive Committee seek agreement on the function, objectives and political mandate of the mechanism and use this as the basis for agreeing an appropriate form.

From our reading of the background consultation documents it is not clear to us what the objectives of the mechanism are intended to be or who the target audience is intended to be. It appears that there are a range of potential objectives, for example: to undertake or alternatively, coordinate global or regional regular assessments; to provide a mechanism for agreeing scientific consensus positions on biodiversity issues of international significance; to proactively provide scientific advice on emerging issues of international significance; to increase the profile of biodiversity with policy makers; and to provide advice to decision makers at the local, national, regional, and international levels. It is unlikely that a single mechanism will be able to fulfil this range of objectives, so we encourage the Executive Committee to consider:

- 1 which are the priority objectives requiring an *international* mechanism;
- 2 whom the mechanism is intended to inform and benefit;
- 3 to develop criteria against which the different options can be evaluated; and
- 4 on this basis, to design one or a number of mechanisms (as appropriate).

Without wishing to prejudice this, the Royal Society considers that the primary objectives of an international mechanism should be to:

- Provide an independent, authoritative scientific voice on biodiversity issues that cross national boundaries (ie issues that can only be addressed at an international level);
- Oversee or guide a regular global review of biodiversity and ecosystems science. The scope of such assessments should be defined using the framework defined in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. The mechanism should also provide a framework for regional, global, or local assessments;
- Undertake or facilitate special reports on emerging issues of importance to biodiversity, particularly those that are transnational and/or cross-sectoral in nature;
- Proactively increase the profile of the biodiversity issue through active engagement at the international and national level and through support of local processes;

- Actively increase the profile and esteem of scientists working in the biodiversity field to help encourage the development of new generations of biodiversity scientists.

We note that the success of such a mechanism will be dependent on:

- 1 strong authoritative and credible leadership;
- 2 provision of adequate long-term financing and resourcing;
- 3 intergovernmental support;
- 4 non-governmental support; and
- 5 the location and affiliations of the mechanism. These must be carefully considered so as to maximize the independence and international credibility of the mechanism.

The Royal Society strongly encourages the Executive Committee to ensure that these are met before embarking on any one option.

5 The use of scientific networks

While the Society does not believe that the primary objectives of an IMOSEB can be met solely through the use of existing networks of independent scientists (proposed option 4), we strongly encourage the Executive Committee to ensure that existing scientific networks are used and strengthened to support an IMOSEB. The Royal Society has a good appreciation of the value of utilising networks of independent scientists for the formulation of advice on science, standards and principles. These networks are not biodiversity specific, and care would be needed not to overwhelm members. However, with professional central support and management, and strong oversight and peer review, these networks could form an initial basis for improving the coordination of biodiversity related research and the timely provision of scientific advice to decision makers.

6 Use of the consultation results

The Society acknowledges that the consultation process has resulted in the collection of very useful information about the shortcomings and strengths of existing frameworks and the biodiversity community. To meet the needs that cannot be fulfilled through the IMOSEB the information obtained should be used to maximum advantage to identify where opportunities may exist for strengthening existing mechanisms and processes. We recommend that the Executive Committee ensures that the results of the consultation exercise are analysed in a way that enables the targeted communication of appropriate advice to the relevant bodies at the local, national, regional, and international levels.

7 References

The Royal Society 2003 *Measuring biodiversity for conservation*. Policy Document 11/03.
Available online at: <http://www.royalsoc.ac.uk/document.asp?tip=0&id=1474>.

Any inquiries about this document should be sent to: Rachel Garthwaite, The Royal Society, 6-9 Carlton House Terrace SW1Y 5AG, United Kingdom. E-mail: Rachel.Garthwaite@royalsoc.ac.uk Tel: +44 (0)207 451 2526 Fax: +44 (0)207 451 2692.