

# Features

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## Convention of Biological Diversity, Biodiversity Indicators, and SSC

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The outcome of the United Nation's June 1997 Special Session of the General Assembly to review and appraise the implementation of Agenda 21 during the first five years after the Rio Earth Summit was sobering. But has really so little happened since Rio? During and after the Rio process, it became very obvious that actions have to happen at the local level. From this perspective, some spots of brighter light are detectable, for example the growing number of SSC members, their activities, and the implementation of action plans.

Whereas UNGASS dealt with the implementation of Agenda 21, a non-binding document, the Conference of the Parties (COP) is dealing with the implementation of the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD), a binding document for the parties (nations). Therefore, there is at least on paper a legally binding instrument available to conserve biodiversity. Decisions of the COP furthermore refine activities to be taken by the parties; the Global Environment Fund (GEF) is providing a financial mechanism for its implementation; and the SBSTTA (Subsidiary Body for Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice) is the scientific and technological adviser for the COP. SBSTTA has turned into a forum that is considerably more focused than at its beginning, and NGOs are allowed as observers. The last meeting of SBSTTA (its third) was held in Montreal, in September 1997.

One item on the agenda, and recurring in various others, was the implementation of Article 7 of the CBD, which requests the parties to develop necessary mechanisms to inventory and monitor biodiversity from gene to species to ecosystem levels, and those that are of relevance for economic, health, or scientific reasons (i.e., not everything should be inventoried). To summarize and communicate the

implementation of Article 7, indicators are demanded that ideally should have a similar function and appeal as the Dow Jones Index, being attractive and understandable to politicians and their constituencies. Interestingly enough, SBSTTA recommended to the COP, within a core set of indicators, only one indicator that covers the species or gene level, involving the changes in numbers of threatened and extinct species. As IUCN's Red List is mentioned for its usefulness for definitions and its provision of an important set of species, SSC as key deliverer of this information might be an active provider of this information in the future.

What would that mean? SBSTTA's recommendations to the Conference of the Parties is quite clear on what matters the design of indicators at the national level (where the Convention operates) have to address:

- the way indicators relate to management questions
- the ability to show trends
- the ability to distinguish between natural and human-induced change
- the ability to provide reliable results (i.e., through the establishment of standard methodologies)
- the degree to which indicators are amenable to straightforward interpretation
- the question of baseline for measurement

It seems that individual Specialists Groups could address most of those questions for their animals or plants, and the Biodiversity Conservation Information System (BCIS) might