



The Conservation Commons

**Supporting a global community of informed conservation
practice**

Statement of Principles

November, 2004

**“The field of knowledge is the
common property of all mankind”**

Thomas Jefferson, 1807

Introduction

On May 25 and 26, 2004, a group of 48 representatives from 27 organizations¹ met at the Headquarters of IUCN - The World Conservation Union – in Gland, Switzerland, with the goal of exploring the establishment of a new paradigm for the sharing of conservation-related data, information and knowledge – a global knowledge “commons”. Participants in the meeting included representatives from the conservation and scientific communities, multilateral organizations, indigenous peoples, and the private sector, who recognized the potential of this initiative to improve informed decision making as well as to accelerate the drive towards achieving the 2010 Target on Biodiversity adopted by the global community in the Johannesburg Declaration. The meeting generated a highly constructive exchange of ideas on the notion of a Conservation Commons. A draft statement of principles was developed through discussion and dialogue, and subsequently revised by the interim steering committee for the Conservation Commons established during this meeting.

Defining the Conservation Commons

The Conservation Commons is first and foremost an idea. It is the expression of a collaborative effort of the conservation community to improve open access to, and unrestricted use of, data, information, and knowledge² related to the conservation of biodiversity with the belief that this will contribute to improving conservation outcomes. At its simplest, it encourages organizations and individuals alike to place documents, data, and other information resources related to conservation in the public domain. Support for this initiative is presently drawn from governments, international and multi-lateral organizations, non-governmental organizations, academia, the private sector, and many other interested parties who share similar goals of ensuring the sustainable use of biodiversity while conserving the integrity of biodiversity for future generations.

Second, the Conservation Commons is an approach designed to improve the management of data, information, and knowledge related to conservation. Many initiatives for generating conservation-related data, information and knowledge resources currently exist throughout the world, at local, national, and international levels, and many more are being created. The Conservation Commons will support and strengthen conservation decision making and our ability to scientifically comprehend the complex integrity of nature through improved logical synthesis of these resources and technical “interoperability” between systems and databases. Similarly, the Conservation Commons will promote informed participation and stimulate innovation in conservation for scientific, social, cultural, economic, spiritual, and environmental ends.

Contributors to the Conservation Commons recognize that:

- The creation of data, information, and knowledge has real costs, and that meeting such costs may require a range of compensatory mechanisms. Contributors to the

¹ Please refer to Annex 1.

² Please refer to definitions in Annex 2.

- Conservation Commons will consistently seek to insure that cost barriers of any kind will not prevent either contributions of resources or fair access to (or use of) conservation-related data, information and knowledge;
- Some data and information are restricted in terms of their use (e.g. confidential, sensitive) and thus will not be considered part of the Conservation Commons;
 - Providers and custodians of data and information have complete control of their data/information and have complete liberty as to deciding what data or information will be part of the Conservation Commons.

An introduction to the Principles of the Conservation Commons

The Conservation Commons is characterized by an underlying set of principles which follow, including definitions of specific terms used in the principles and elsewhere in this document which are provided in Annex 2. Individuals, associations, organizations, governments, and other bodies are encouraged to agree formally to these principles.

It is recognized, however, that while the idea of the Conservation Commons may be compelling in its own right, its adoption and success will depend a great deal on coordinated action by many individuals and organizations in a variety of sectors and at a variety of levels – from local to global. These actions will, in many cases, take the form of distinct projects and initiatives by individual organizations or groups of organizations in support, or under the banner, of the Conservation Commons. These actions will both demonstrate the *value* of the Conservation Commons idea as well as to *promote* concrete initiatives that support access to and integrated management of data, information and knowledge in the service of conservation.

It is recognized that coordinated action under the banner of the Conservation Commons is needed in the following key areas: technology, law, informing organizational culture, expanding resources, and meeting end users needs. A specific set of objectives and expected results have been developed to in order to define actions to be carried out in these areas.

The Principles of the Conservation Commons – Preamble

With the overarching aim of establishing a global partnership within the conservation community for the sharing of data, information, and knowledge in order to accelerate action in support of the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity;

Acknowledging that open access to, sharing, and use of biodiversity data, information, and knowledge resources by all sectors of society concerned with the conservation of biodiversity is essential both to empower them and to enable effective decision making;

Recognizing that global inequities directly restrict access to data, information and knowledge for many of the world's people, with adverse impacts on the conservation of biodiversity;

Understanding our collective responsibility to maintain the highest standards of information quality, as well as personal and organizational integrity, and to actively collaborate in the creation of an effective, stable and trusted conservation-related data, information, and knowledge sharing framework;

Agreeing that all efforts to support a Conservation Commons should, first and foremost, support ongoing initiatives – particularly at the national level – and build capacity within these initiatives to support conservation efforts at all levels;

Noting Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that every individual has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; that this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers;

Recalling Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration, noting that environmental issues are best handled with participation of all concerned citizens, at the relevant level, and that at the national level each individual shall have appropriate access to information concerning the environment that is held by public authorities, and the opportunity to participate in decision-making processes;

Recognizing that Article 8(j) of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) requests Parties, subject to national legislation, to respect, preserve and maintain knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities embodying traditional lifestyles relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity; and that Article 17 of the CBD establishes that Contracting Parties shall facilitate the exchange of information from all publicly available sources, relevant to the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity, taking into account the special needs of developing countries;

Mindful also that the Conference of the Parties to the CBD, in Decision V/16, recognized the rights of indigenous and local communities to have control over their traditional knowledge, innovations and practices relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of

biological diversity, and that access to their traditional knowledge, innovations and practices should be subject to their prior informed consent;

Further recalling the legal and moral obligations emanating from international and national legislation and policies about the need for disclosure of origin/source/legal provenance of biodiversity-related traditional knowledge in scientific works and commercial applications;

And Finally Recognizing Article 4 of the Aarhus Convention on Access to Environmental Information, which requires public authorities to make such information available to the public.

Supporters of the Conservation Commons agree to the following principles:

Principles

Principle 1 - Open Access

The Conservation Commons promotes free and open access to data, information and knowledge for conservation purposes.

Principle 2 - Mutual Benefit

The Conservation Commons welcomes and encourages participants to both use and contribute data, information and knowledge.

Principle 3 - Rights and Responsibilities

Contributors to the Conservation Commons have full right to attribution for any uses of their data, information, or knowledge, and the right to ensure that the original integrity of their contribution to the Commons is preserved. Users of the Conservation Commons are expected to comply, in good faith, with terms of uses specified by contributors and in accordance with these Principles.

1. Annex 1

Organizations Represented at the Meeting of the Biodiversity Knowledge Commons IUCN Headquarters – Gland, Switzerland May 25 and 26, 2004

- American Museum of Natural History
- BirdLife International
- Chevron Texaco Corporation
- CIFOR
- CONABIO – Mexico
- Conservation International
- CRIA – Brazil
- Equilibrium
- Fauna & Flora International
- Global Biodiversity Information Facility
- Global Invasive Species Database
- INBio - Costa Rica
- IUCN - The World Conservation Union
- NASA
- National Botanical Institute - South Africa
- NatureServe
- Red Hat - Open Source Affairs
- Rio Tinto
- Rockefeller Foundation
- Shell International Exploration & Production
- Species Survival Commission
- The Nature Conservancy
- UNEP WCMC
- WCPA, PALNet
- Wildlife Conservation Society
- World Bank
- WWF International

Annex 2 – Definition of terms

Commons – A commons is a *limited* and *conditional* zone of fair use (defined legally, economically and physically/technically) that permits sustainable use of a resource for defined purposes by society (conservation, research, education) without jeopardizing original ownership of contributors (whether individuals, communities, indigenous groups, institutions, or nations) and protects the organizational/individual legal and moral rights of creators or authors of the resource (i.e. right to attribution, right to define integrity of the resource, right to free and prior informed consent to the use of such resources).

Conservation – The preservation of biodiversity, nature, and natural resources along with ensuring the sustainable use of the same.

Data – A gathered body of facts, observations, descriptions or measurements recorded and reported in some standard way. The term “data” is also commonly used to describe the physical form of binary coded signals that are the basis for storage within computers and communication between computers.

Information – Organized and processed data for communication to others, and/or reasoned, rational associations of data that typically have the properties of a proposition or assertion. It typically resides in structured form (e.g. formal publications, maps) or unstructured form (e.g. unpublished “gray literature” reports, memos, etc.).

Expertise – Personal effective capacity (skill) within a domain (or domains) of knowledge based on personal knowledge and experience.

Experience: personal or collective recollection and interpretation of events.

Knowledge – Rational assumptions derived from the analysis of data, information and experience, presumed to be “true” and “reliable”.

Public Domain –The public domain is a space where intellectual property protection does not apply. When copyrights and patents expire, innovations and creative works fall into the public domain. They may then be used by anyone without permission and without the payment of a licensing fee.

Annex 3: Status of Endorsements as of November 3, 2004

Organizations	Endorsement received	Endorsement expected	Pending
American Museum of NH		√	
CI	√		
TNC	√		
Birdlife International	√		
Flora and Fauna International			√
WRI			√
WWF International			√
Invasive Species SG of SSC*	√		
Social Insects SG of SSC	√		
WCS			√
NatureServe	√		
NBI	√		
INBIO			√
CRIA	√		
CGIAR			√
Conabio	√		
CIFOR	√		
IUCN	√		
NASA		√	
UNEP-WCMC		√	
GBIF		√	
Shell	√		
Chevron Texaco		√	
UNDP		√	
UNESCO		√	
Rio Tinto		√	
ICMM		√	
Kew Botanical Gardens		√	
GEF			√
CBD			√
Ramsar			√
WCPA		√	
Assembly of First Nations - Canada			√
Smithsonian Institution		√	
PALNet	√		
TRAFFIC	√		

* Note - SG support for the Principles does not entail SSC endorsement

Annex 4: Schematic of the Conservation Commons

