

Friday 11 July 2014, Cape Town:

African scientists flesh out a business case for mobilizing biodiversity data

On 1 July 2014, over 20 African scientists convened at Hotel Pantagruel in Cotonou, Benin, to design a training programme and build a business case for mobilizing policy-relevant biodiversity data. It was the third in a series of workshops held in the framework of the innovative and collaborative project, *Mobilizing Africa's policy-relevant biodiversity data*, which is generously funded by the [JRS Biodiversity Foundation](#) and coordinated by [SANBI](#) in partnership with African participants of the [Global Biodiversity Information Facility \(GBIF\)](#). The project aims to develop a strategy for mobilizing Africa's biodiversity data whilst strengthening regional capacity and collaboration in biodiversity informatics.

The workshop took place between two related meetings, namely those of the GBIF Africa Science Committee (30 June 2014) and the GBIF Africa Nodes Committee (2-4 July 2014).

With a view to identifying the different ways and means by which biodiversity informatics training can be effectively delivered, participants were invited to share their personal experiences on how and why they had become biodiversity informaticians. A lively discussion ensued, in which participants revealed the diversity and, arguably, the irrelevance of their academic and professional backgrounds (none held a degree in biodiversity informatics per se). The participants cited various reasons for having become biodiversity informaticians, ranging from fortuitous job openings and inspiring training events to an appreciation of the importance of biodiversity data and a passion for nature conservation. Of the many engaging training events on which they reflected, most were physical workshops organized by GBIF Secretariat, with relatively few being provided by other organisations or through electronic means. It was suggested that the opportunities for peer-to-peer learning exchanges and networking associated with being part of an international collective, served to stimulate and sustain participants' involvement in biodiversity informatics.

The participants then split into breakout groups, and each was tasked with designing different components of a biodiversity informatics training programme aimed at alleviating chronic capacity constraints and streamlining the 'data-science-policy value chain'. Some groups elaborated on technical training (e.g. capturing, digitizing, geo-referencing, publishing and modelling biodiversity data). Other groups focused on social aspects (e.g. fundraising, negotiation, lobbying, diplomacy, and communication). All groups deliberated over the target audience, contents, format, medium, tutors, languages, materials and schedule of the training programme before reporting back in plenary. With respect to the target audience, it was suggested that in addition to data managers and scientists, policymakers should also receive training, specifically on how to quickly acquire and correctly interpret biodiversity data. Notwithstanding acknowledgement of poor internet connectivity in some African countries, there was general agreement that the most cost-effective means to provide the training would be online, by way of webinars and downloadable materials. Moreover, it was recommended that the training programme be designed to complement and make use of existing training opportunities.

The project coordinator gave assurances that these and other recommendations will be duly implemented.

In the second half of the day, participants explored opportunities to forge strategic partnerships, leverage additional resources, and build a business case for mobilizing biodiversity data.

Ms Nadine Bowles-Newark of UNEP-WCMC presented her organisation's activities and plans concerning biodiversity informatics in Africa. Her presentation highlighted considerable scope for cooperation between UNEP-WCMC and the GBIF Africa Group, and paved the way for a broader discussion about partnerships and fundraising. It was agreed that the GBIF Africa Group would sustain close communication with UNEP-WCMC and other relevant partners with a view to minimising duplication of effort and maximizing synergy.

Participants were then requested to split into breakout groups, one for each of 9 thematic priority areas identified at a previous project workshop (i.e. GMOs, marine, freshwater and wetland, agro-biodiversity and forestry, invasive aliens, native and endemic, insects, medicinal, and threatened species). Each group was tasked with writing a short business case for mobilizing data in the thematic priority area assigned to them, by elaborating the background, rationale and relevant case studies. A representative of each group was then invited to give a 2-minute 'sales pitch' – as if speaking to a potential donor – on why their particular thematic priority area is important to Africa and merits funding. The exercise compelled participants to define the value proposition of mobilizing biodiversity data in Africa and generated a wealth of useful material. Their contributions will serve as a basis for developing a set of attractive factsheets to be used by the community as marketing tools.

Finally, participants explored the notion of organizing a major African data-science-policy conference in 2015. They considered the conference's aims, scope, target audience, timing, size and potential partners. At least four strongly-related projects were identified, all of which could converge into one large joint event. Such a collaborative conference was described as an unprecedented opportunity to train key African officials including scientists and policymakers, whilst showcasing the achievements of the GBIF Africa Group and attracting the attention of international donors.

The meeting was then brought to a close, with gratitude being paid to the hosts, namely, the University of Abomey-Calavi and the Republic of Benin's Ministry of Environment, Housing and Urban Development and indeed, to all the participants who made such active contributions.

The next steps of the project will be to implement the training programme, compile useful tools and resources, and expound the business case for mobilizing data in thematic priority areas.

Project webpage: http://biodiversityadvisor.sanbi.org/?2nd_level_items=mobilising-africas-biodiversity-data&parent=projects&home_items=projects

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