

Friday 28 March 2014, Pretoria:

African nations hone in on policy-relevant biodiversity data

Africa's leading biodiversity informaticians convened in Pretoria last week to inject impetus into a collaborative and innovative project aimed at ensuring relevant biodiversity data is available to support evidence-based policymaking.

The workshop took place at Pretoria National Botanic Garden from 25 to 27 March 2014 and attracted 25 delegates from 14 countries. It was the second in a series of such gatherings held in the framework of the project, ***Mobilizing Africa's policy and decision-making relevant biodiversity data***, which is generously funded by the [JRS Biodiversity Foundation](#) and coordinated by the SANBI's Biodiversity Information Management Directorate in partnership with African Participants of the [Global Biodiversity Information Facility](#) (GBIF).

The overarching aim of the project is to develop and implement a strategy for mobilizing African biodiversity data while strengthening regional collaboration and capacity in biodiversity informatics. The strategy will set priorities for capturing, digitizing and publishing biodiversity data with a view to reinforcing the knowledge base on which policies and decisions concerning biodiversity are made.

To this end, delegates to the workshop in Pretoria reviewed a draft toolkit for determining policy-relevant biodiversity data, critiquing four theoretical approaches set out therein. The delegates then reported on their greatest successes in mobilizing biodiversity data and assessed the various drivers that stimulated such mobilization. These were found to include international commitments, project specifications, executive orders, private research and intuition.

After exploring the notion of 'policy-relevance', the delegates conjectured three types of biodiversity data in each of their respective countries considered as essential for evidence-based policymaking. For example, in Mauritania, bird data was deemed as essential to support policymaking in the country's important ecotourism sector. In Angola, data on invasive alien algae was deemed as essential to inform fisheries management and protect coastal livelihoods. In Guinea, data on aquatic species threatened by the construction of hydropower dams was deemed as essential to the long-term sustainability of the River Senegal and the communities depending on it.

The institutions holding the policy-relevant data were then identified and mapped creating a visual overview. Delegates provided descriptions (where known) of the completeness, condition and accessibility of the policy-relevant data in each identified institution. This exercise shed light on the current scope, gaps, distribution, ownership, and access-constraints of the data concerned. Most of this data was deemed to be only partially accessible, in written form, and largely incomplete.

A facilitated discussion ensued, addressing the various barriers and potential solutions to data mobilization, which fed into a broader discussion on capacity requirements. Delegates specified the type of training to receive in future project workshops with a view acquiring the skills necessary to mobilize policy-relevant data.

The next steps of the project are to finalize the toolkit to determine policy-relevant biodiversity data; further refine and corroborate the data priorities of each African country; and design and implement a training programme to address the community's most pressing capacity needs. Additionally, it has been proposed that a 'data-science-policy' conference be organized in late 2014. This conference would allow biodiversity informaticians to meet directly with researchers, scientists and policymakers to co-define their data-mobilization strategies.

SANBI's Biodiversity Information Management Directorate would like to extend warm gratitude to all the African partners who actively participated in the workshop and to the JRS Biodiversity Foundation and GBIF for their financial, technical and in-kind support.

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

Project contact: Russell Galt (r.galt@sanbi.org.za)



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