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Drafting a Conservation Blueprint. A Practitioner's Guide to the Planning for Biodiversity

Craig R Groves

Washington, DC: Island Press, 2003.

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With the signing of the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the establishment of a 2010 target for conserving biodiversity, feverish attempts are underway to develop mechanisms for species conservation within each of the signatories. It may be argued that this could lead to a piecemeal attempt at conservation by local governments with obvious geopolitical boundaries and by NGO's with specific targeted issues. The risk is the development of biodiversity plans void of truly global significance. In this book, Groves and his co-contributors aim to offer a more global perspective to the argument by using ecoregions as planning units.

The book is an attempt to bring to the conservation manager a guide for planning that is informed by numerous planning concepts as well as ecological considerations. Groves draws heavily upon his many years of experience with the Nature Conservancy in the US. He knows that conservation practitioners worldwide have had to learn the complexities of conservation planning and management 'on their feet' and thus inconsistencies of practice may have arisen. He feels that practitioners may not always have the full range of skills necessary to carry out the delicate art that is 'conservation management', thus this book is intended to be a practical guide. As such it is highly informative given that scientifically orientated literature can neglect the practical applications that ecologists and land managers in the field desire most of all.

Groves sets out his case via the mechanism of a three chapter review of conservation planning, its history and key definitions. At this point one is tempted to skip to the 'meat' of his arguments but the literature cited and the synoptic sentences prove very useful and perhaps refresh the mind. It is also illuminating to follow the progress of nature conservation (albeit mainly in the US) and observe past opinion and how this has informed our current 'understanding' of ecological processes. Indeed, one can often observe gaps in knowledge that still pervade. Where Groves intimates there is a lack of scientific consensus one is tempted to disagree (especially in the area of landscape ecology where new insights into landscape processes are now being accepted) only to be reminded that he states that he omits many technical details for practical reasons.

For most readers with a planning background Groves' description of building a regional plan will be easily understood, being that it follows a common sense, sequential planning route. Thus after setting the scene in section one he illustrates how to: define the problem, assemble a team, project manage, and map stakeholders. The crucial difference being that ecological principals are intertwined in the process. In the second section of the book, Groves continues by postulating his "seven habits for highly effective planning" (Chapters 4 to 9). For some practitioners these "habits" may be deceptively obvious but one must be mindful that not all conservationists have a planning background. The seven are: the selection of conservation targets (species, ecosystems, etc.); the evaluation of existing conserved locations (e.g. data gathering); the exploration of information gaps (inventories, gap analysis, expert workshops, etc.); the establishment of management goals; the assessment of population viability (ecological integrity); the selection and design of conservation area networks (linkages, corridors, etc.); the establishment of conservation priorities within these

areas. The author then focuses on key aspects of each of the “habits” providing examples known to him from his experiences with the Nature Conservancy. This is followed by the third section of the book where other contributors, Higgins, Beck and Saxon, respectively examine, freshwater ecosystems, marine ecosystems and the effects of possible climate change on terrestrial habitats. These chapters are a further attempt to utilise the conservation blueprint to address matters more practical and as such these three chapters are extremely valuable and would easily stand alone. Certainly this section is the highlight of the book. Finally, section four draws the argument to a close with a further distilling of information to practical ends. The reader is presented with a well illustrated guide and some strong practical advice, though mostly generalised in an attempt to be non-specific. Always mindful of the cost of conservation, Groves often points out the importance of cost-effective planning and finishes on matters of cost, noting the chilling reality that the cost of conserving the increasing number of endangered species in the US will be between US\$5 and US\$8 billion annually. Having alluded to this at the start, Groves clearly puts the necessity for his planning blueprint sharply into focus.

Throughout the book examples are drawn heavily from the North American and Australian conservation practice. These are locations with substantial ecoregions and where conservation management often focuses on large nature reserves – a luxury in which many other (more urbanised) countries may be lacking. Thus, the application of the blueprint in areas such as Europe might not be as clear cut. The principals are indeed valuable but Groves does not consider fully that landscape ecology in Europe is a mix of cultural and semi-natural habitats, often entwined with historical and political significances, landscape mosaics and agricultural modification. The use of the Australian and American models for conservation planning may not suit all countries and Groves does not allow enough flexibility for regions where landscapes have many values (as is the case in Europe). The book does highlight the strengths of the ecoregional planning process and as such it is an extremely valuable tool for conservationists and spatial planners.

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