

SCB Helps Deliver the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

On April 21, 2012, delegates from 94 countries agreed to establish and operationalize an Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). The IPBES platform will function as an interface between the scientific community (including holders of traditional knowledge) and policy makers that aims to build capacity for and strengthen the use of science in policy making relating to biodiversity and ecosystem services. Despite the success in finally establishing IPBES, many critical issues remain unresolved at this point, and the substantive work of the platform, addressing critical issues relating to biodiversity and ecosystem services, will likely not begin in earnest until these issues can be resolved. Together with other scientific societies, SCB will continue to have many opportunities as an active stakeholder to provide meaningful input as IPBES becomes operational.

Up to this point, there has never been a global-scale mechanism, recognized by governments as an independent source of policy-relevant knowledge, which brings information together, synthesizes that information, and provides analyses for decision making in a range of biodiversity policy arenas. IPBES will likely provide a key science-policy interface for various multilateral environmental agreements including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention to Combat Desertification, and the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

Panama Negotiations

To participate in the negotiations, SCB sent a four person delegation to Panama from April 15th to April 21st, led by Bengt-Gunnar “Bege” Jonsson from Sweden, and accompanied by Carolyn Lundquist from New Zealand, Olivier Chassot from Costa Rica, and Brett Hartl from SCB’s Washington, D.C. policy office. Carolyn and Bege had represented SCB at previous international negotiations focused on establishing IPBES at Busan, Korea in 2010, and in Nairobi, Kenya in 2011, respectfully. Bege Jonsson deserves species recognition for serving as the chair of the SCB IPBES ad hoc committee. SCB has been represented at most of the formal and informal negotiations leading to the establishment of IPBES, and has submitted formal statements and comments relating to IPBES to the appropriate governments and intergovernmental bodies over the past three years.

Negotiations in Panama primarily focused on five agenda items, the function and structures of the subsidiary bodies of IPBES, the possible work program for the IPBES subsidiary bodies, the rules of procedure for the IPBES platform, the location of the Secretariat of IPBES, and the related legal issues regarding how IPBES would operate as an independent intergovernmental panel.

Progress on these items was mixed.

Germany Selected as Host Country for IPBES Secretariat. After four rounds of voting, the countries present decided, in a 47 to 43 vote, that of the five nations that presented bids to host the IPBES, the physical location of the Secretariat of IPBES would be in Bonn, Germany.

Despite the impressive presentations of South Korea and Kenya, in the end the German offer was the most attractive, given the substantial promised financial support offered by Germany. At least two key differences between Germany's bid and that of others (India, Kenya, South Korea and France) were: (1) Germany pledged several million dollars in support for IPBES as well as \$6.5 million for capacity building work relating to IPBES, and (2) Bonn is a city where nearly twenty other international and transnational bodies with a deep pool of related expertise and research capacity are based, including the Secretariat for the Convention on Migratory Species and the [IUCN Law Centre](#) where the early versions of the Convention on Biological Diversity were drafted.

Structure of the IPBES Platform. After substantial debate, a great deal of progress was made regarding the subsidiary bodies of IPBES. The countries present agreed by consensus that IPBES would establish a small administrative Bureau of 10 individuals to carry on the administrative functions of IPBES. In addition, a Multidisciplinary Expert Panel (MEP) comprising five members from each of the five [U.N. regions](#) (Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and Oceania) would be established to guide the work program of the platform. Notably, the current five region structure will be an interim structure only. Future sessions of IPBES will consider ways of modifying the representation and structure of the MEP to better reflect the biogeographical and ecological regions of the planet. It is also worth noting that the word "Scientific" was dropped from the name of the MEP in order to ensure that it could include a broad set of expertise, such as expertise in policy, social sciences, and traditional knowledge.

Work program of IPBES. There was considerably less progress on the actual IPBES work programme. There was general agreement that the initial activities of IPBES would likely include a catalog of extant biodiversity assessments, the scoping of a future work program, and an assessment of capacity-building needs. However, beyond this, additional refining of work items will have to occur between now and the first plenary session of IPBES.

Rules of procedure and observer status. There was also difficulty in agreeing on some rules of procedure for IPBES, leaving multiple interim-placeholder rules in place until more permanent rules can be agreed on at a later date. Importantly for SCB and other stakeholders, the countries could not agree on rules for observer participation, rules for nomination of experts, and rules for the management and adoption of reports. Decision-making of the plenary sessions, whether by consensus or by majority, was also left undecided. Development of final rules of procedure will be critical if the scientific integrity of the IPBES is to be of a high standard.

Relationship of IPBES to the United Nations. The final remaining obstacle for IPBES is what relationship the platform will have with the United Nations. Although there is general agreement that one or more of the U.N. organizations that address biodiversity (UNEP, UNESCO, FAO, UNDP) should manage the work of the Secretariat, there remains a considerable divide among the countries as to whether IPBES will eventually become a body of the United Nations or remain independent of the U.N. A decision regarding IPBES' ultimate relationship with the U.N. will be decided at the first plenary session assuming that agreement can be reached on the rules of procedure. Fortunately, this dispute should not jeopardize the existence of IPBES and its future work.

What the Establishment of IPBES Means for SCB

Now that the Multidisciplinary Expert Panel of IPBES has been established, there may be opportunities for SCB to nominate members to the MEP. Under the rules of procedure, each of the five U.N. regions will have the ability to nominate 10 individuals for the MEP, from which the IPBES platform will select five for the MEP. In total 50 names will be submitted to the MEP. Especially in developing countries, the ability of SCB to identify experts for the MEP would be particularly important in facilitating the possibility of our members being installed on the MEP. More work needs to be done at SCB to identify the expertise of its members and to keep its expert database current so that when opportunities arise to nominate experts, SCB is ready to do so. We expect that SCB's regional Boards of Directors in consultation with the Marine Section will review their members' expertise in order to be ready to nominate a balanced and broad slate of qualified candidates.

As mentioned above, the governments present at the meeting expressed support for exploring a final regional structure for the MEP that takes into account ecoregional and biological considerations. Dividing the planet based on ecoregional boundaries, while considering the equities among differing populations and country level representation, will be difficult. SCB could attempt to provide meaningful alternative structures to the U.N. Regional division chosen as the interim structure for the MEP.

Furthermore, there will be several opportunities to provide another round of comments on the rules of procedure. SCB will continue to work with other stakeholder groups to provide information documents to guide the plenary and intersessional work, and suggest protocols that will maximize transparency and legitimacy of the platform and its work. First, SCB will be able to offer suggestions for rules of procedure relating to observers at IPBES meetings, the rules of procedure for the operation of the MEP, and rules for the nomination of experts. Most importantly, SCB will be able to provide comments on rules of procedure relating to the management, preparation, and adoption of reports. In particular, SCB will continue to advocate for reports that contain majority, concurring, and dissenting views to ensure that scientific conclusions are not reduced to only such scientific findings that can be agreed to by consensus.

Finally, SCB will provide extensive comments on the work program going forward. We will have the opportunity to develop these suggestions in consultation with other stakeholder groups over the next year. The SCB IPBES committee has put substantial effort into developing relationships with key scientific groups (e.g., IUCN, ICSU/Diversitas) and inter-governmental agencies (UNEP, UNDP, UNESCO) such that our input is welcomed in relevant scientific aspects of the IPBES plenary.

Upcoming SCB and international events present opportunities to develop and refine the positions not only of SCB but also of other groups and nations regarding IPBES. These include SCB's North America, Europe, and Asia Congresses on Conservation Biology in July and August, and the Conferences of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, UNFCCC, among others in the following months.