

# **CONSERVATION AUDITS:**

**Auditing the Conservation Process  
Lessons Learned, 2003 - 2007**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY .....	i
INTRODUCTION .....	1
SECTION 1: Conservation Audits in Practice .....	4
SECTION 2: Lessons Learned – Conservation Practice.....	8
SECTION 3: Lessons Learned – The Process of Conservation Auditing .....	17
SECTION 4: Costs and Benefits of Conservation Auditing .....	26
SECTION 5: Conclusion .....	30
WORKS CITED .....	32
APPENDIX A: Conservation Audits Inventory.....	A-1

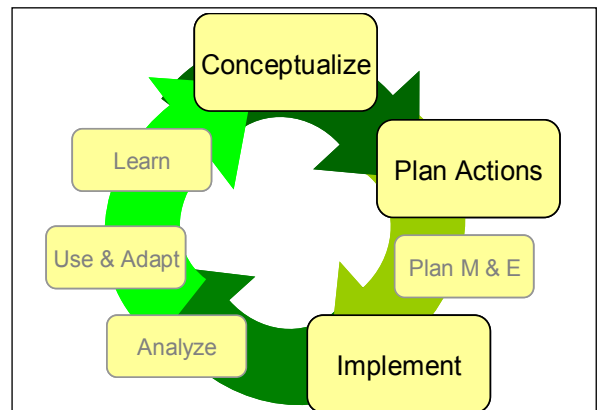
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Background.** Biodiversity conservation organizations invest billions of dollars and tens of millions of person-hours annually striving to conserve the Earth's biodiversity. Credible, science-based data are largely lacking to demonstrate the impact of these efforts, although it is well established that biodiversity continues to decline rapidly in the face of major and growing threats. To significantly reduce the rate of biodiversity loss in the future, available resources must be used as strategically, efficiently, and effectively as possible. Recognizing this need, several of the largest international biodiversity conservation organizations came together to form the Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP)<sup>1</sup>. Working from the widely supported hypothesis that meeting standards of good conservation project design and management will lead to greater efficiency and conservation impact, the CMP has developed and promoted the adoption of the *Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation (Open Standards)*<sup>2</sup> (Figure 1). To complement the *Open Standards* and to assess the extent to which they – or compatible organization-specific standards – are being followed, CMP member organizations have developed the practice of conservation auditing, “a review of the planning, execution/ implementation, and if applicable, the results of a conservation project or program,” and have conducted nearly 40 such audits since 2003. This report, based upon a survey of more than 80 participants as well as a thorough document review, synthesizes the findings of the audits with regard to the state of conservation practice, as well as lessons learned regarding the process and costs and benefits of conservation auditing. The CMP will use these findings to identify priorities for improving the practice of conservation project design and adaptive management, to strengthen the conservation audit process, and to refine the *Open Standards*.



**Figure 1. Open Standards Envisioned: The CMP's generalized project management cycle, as described in the *Open Standards***

**Conservation Practice and Alignment with the Standards: Key Findings.** Although using somewhat different approaches, CMP member organizations generally audited projects against the major elements outlined by the *Open Standards* and found that although more than 75% of projects had rigorously conceptualized and planned their strategies, and that these were being implemented through a suite of actions, less than one-third of projects audited had formal, rigorous systems for monitoring and evaluating effectiveness and impact nor processes for using this information to adapt their strategies and actions accordingly (Figure 2). Projects generally did not maintain documentation detailing successes and failures, findings regarding effectiveness and impact, and key decisions, but often had produced externally oriented documentation focused on education, outreach, and fundraising (with particular emphasis on publicizing achievements). Consequently, although conservation projects and organizations may feel confident that their actions are leading to the mitigation of threats and the improvement in



**Figure 2. Open Standards in Practice: The majority of conservation projects have been rigorously conceptualized and actions are planned and are being implemented. However, few projects monitor their results or, correspondingly, analyze, use to adapt, or learn from monitoring data.**

<sup>1</sup> CMP core members include the African Wildlife Foundation (AWF), The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), and World Wide Fund for Nature/World Wildlife Fund (WWF). Collaborating members include Conservation International (CI), The Cambridge Conservation Forum (CCF), Enterprise Works Worldwide (EWW), World Commission on Protected Areas/IUCN, Rare, and Foundations of Success (FOS).

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this report, a “conservation project” is defined as a set of actions undertaken to achieve defined goals and objectives. Thus, what may be defined as a “program” by an organization is referred to herein as a project.

status of conservation targets, it appears that it is rare that projects have the data necessary to credibly demonstrate their impact, to support and justify decision making with regard to the use of resources available for conservation action, or to follow a scientific process of hypothesis testing, learning, adaptation, and professional exchange.

***The Process of Conservation Auditing: Key Findings.*** Overall, responses to audit processes have been positive. Audit tools and approaches employed to date have resulted in useful assessments of a wide range of project types, from sites to broad regions, geographically-focused to theme- or issue-focused, new to more mature, etc. Auditing organizations have become skilled at planning and implementing audits, in particular. Select areas for refinement include:

- Engaging audit and project team members early in audit planning and ensuring that they are well oriented to the audit process;
- Promoting greater participation in the audit team by external parties and appropriate technical experts;
- Tailoring the time allotted to the complexity of the project;
- Effectively engaging those partner organizations who are most relevant; and
- Using flexible audit frameworks that can be adapted to project context and information needs of project teams and management.

To realize fully the benefits and impacts of auditing, follow-up processes could be strengthened considerably by:

- Identifying a group of individuals who will be responsible for audit follow-up;
- Developing a post-audit action plan with realistic objectives and timelines;
- Increasing senior management involvement;
- Providing access to resources needed to support adoption of audit recommendations;
- Monitoring progress on the post-audit action plan and communicating results to relevant stakeholders; and
- Consolidating audit results in a manner that supports broader learning.

***Costs and Benefits of Conservation Auditing.*** Although a rigorous financial analysis has not been done and the actual impacts of audits on biodiversity conservation cannot be known (as few projects have systems in place to monitor their impact over time), it can be concluded that the benefits of conservation auditing generally outweigh the costs:

- Audit findings are commonly thought to be accurate, generally actionable, useful and acted upon about half of the time, and, when acted upon, are believed to increase project effectiveness;
- Audits build the capacity of staff and promote technical exchange among colleagues;
- The full potential benefits of auditing are not yet being realized, as CMP members have yet to perform a sufficient number of audits to truly support cross-project and cross-organization learning; and
- As audit follow-up processes improve, associated impacts are likely to increase significantly.

In contrast, costs of auditing are minimal, consisting primarily of travel costs, costs for maintaining audit programs, and of staff time (which can be considered as salary or the opportunity cost of being away from primary responsibilities). Overall, conservation auditing absorbs only a tiny fraction of the overall budget of the large conservation organizations and is normally one of only a few initiatives that strive toward greater credibility in the reporting of the effectiveness and impact of conservation actions.

***Implications of Findings.*** The adoption of standards for good project design and management is one means by which conservationists are likely to improve efficiency and strengthen impact by ensuring that an eye is always kept on defining, assessing, and improving progress toward measurable objectives. Conservation auditing supports the adoption of such standards by raising awareness of their existence and providing targeted feedback to conservation projects to better apply the standards and thereby improve their work. In addition, if the conservation projects audited to date are at all representative of the conservation community as a whole, it can also be hoped that auditing will catalyze greater investment in the adoption of standards of good practice by bringing to light the fact that the majority of conservation projects do not have systems in place to monitor progress and impact, evaluate resulting data, and adapt strategies and activities accordingly.

Thus, despite what we'd like to believe, it is quite possible that most conservation projects – and therefore most conservation organizations – cannot credibly assess their effectiveness and impact, and seldom follow an iterative process to learn from and share successes and failures.

Although auditing is clearly one key tool for effecting change, it alone will be insufficient to bring about the necessary shift in the current conservation business culture. For one, the auditing process itself can be improved, particularly by strengthening investment in post-audit actions and by developing more unified tools and methods for conducting audits so that cross-project and cross-organization learning can be consolidated. Beyond auditing, promoting greater adoption of standards of good management practice – and thereby increasing the credibility of reported results – will require addressing several key underlying issues, such as inconsistent leadership and direction regarding adaptive management practice within conservation organizations and by the donor community; a lack of consolidated evidence demonstrating that adoption of the standards is broadly feasible; and a lack of real examples and practical guidance.

To some degree, the conservation community is working to address these issues, at least in part, by carrying out various types of evaluations to assess strategy, effectiveness, and impact; establishing organization-wide initiatives for biodiversity and activity monitoring; and investing in the development of tools, guidelines, trainings, resource kits and staff. However, for these efforts to be truly useful and ultimately improve accountability, credibility, and the design and management of our work, conservationists, and the donors supporting them, must commit to learning whether we are doing the right things, whether the things we are doing are succeeding or failing, and whether we are having the desired impact.

# INTRODUCTION

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## CONSERVATION AUDITS IN CONTEXT

Each year, billions of dollars are spent to promote the conservation of the Earth's biodiversity. Beyond dollars, this investment represents countless man-hours of activity, with three of the largest international conservation organizations (TNC, WWF, CI) alone employing nearly 10,000 staff. If the conservation community were to ask itself – or if our donors or constituents were to ask – what impact this investment has had on the health of the world's biodiversity and on the threats it faces, we would be challenged to provide anything more than anecdotal and qualitative responses, as only a minute fraction of our total investment supports the credible assessment of the impact of our actions.

The high-level monitoring data we do have, such as those resulting from the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA) (WRI 2005) or available through the IUCN Red List of Globally Threatened Species (IUCN 2006), suggest that despite our significant investment of time, effort, and money, biodiversity continues to decline rapidly. During the period 1996 to 2006, a time when investment in biodiversity conservation was greater than ever before, the number of species threatened with global extinction increased from 10,533 to 16,118, a change of more than 65%, with habitat loss serving as the greatest driver of extinctions (IUCN 2006). In recent decades, more than 35% of all mangroves and 20% of all known coral reefs have been destroyed (WRI 2005). At current rates of loss, it is estimated that the Amazon forest will have lost 25% of its original area by 2020 (WWF 2006). Over half of the 14 biomes that the MA assessed have experienced a 20-50% conversion to human use (WRI 2005).

Although past, current, and projected future rates of biodiversity loss are likely lower than they would be were it not for the actions of the conservation community, we are without the data and credible evidence necessary to quantify and characterize our contribution at any scale. Without such information, it is extremely difficult to determine if our actions help, and if they are not only necessary, but sufficient. In turn, we cannot know if we are using the scarce resources available for conservation efficiently. Finally, without measurement/feedback loops at the project level, our ability to learn and to improve our effectiveness – or share that experience and knowledge with others – is greatly impeded.

Given the tremendous threats that must be addressed if biodiversity is to be conserved – escalating human population growth, extensive habitat loss and degradation, an increasing global demand for natural resources, the spread of invasive species – and that “unprecedented additional efforts would be needed to achieve, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss at all levels” (WRI 2005), we must have the utmost confidence that our strategies and actions represent a logical and efficient approach, and that they not only contribute in some way, but indeed have a significant positive impact.

*“...most of the direct drivers of biodiversity loss are projected to either remain constant or increase in the near future. . . Unprecedented additional efforts would be needed to achieve, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss at all levels.”*

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (WRI 2005)

## IMPROVING CONSERVATION PRACTICE

Recognizing the need to increase efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability in conservation practice, several of the largest international biodiversity conservation organizations came together in 2002 to form the Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP), a collective dedicated to “advanc[ing] the practice of conservation by developing, testing, and promoting principles and

tools to credibly assess and improve the effectiveness of conservation actions.” Together, the member organizations of the CMP<sup>3</sup> have developed and supported the widespread adoption of standards for project, program, and/or strategy design and management, based upon the hypothesis that meeting such standards (particularly monitoring and evaluation to promote continual adaptation) will ultimately improve the effectiveness of interventions and promote greater rigor in decision-making processes with regard to allocating human and financial resources. In addition, to gauge the extent to which the standards are being followed, CMP member organizations have developed and tested the practice of conservation auditing: “a review of the planning (conceptualization, actions, and monitoring and evaluation), execution/implementation (activities, monitoring and analyses), and if applicable, the results (impacts, outcomes, and iterations) of a conservation project or program” (CMP 2006).

Since 2004, CMP members have conducted nearly 40 such audits around the world, consolidating significant learning about 1) the current state of conservation practice with regard to the design and management of strategies, projects, and programs, and 2) the practice of conservation auditing itself, including the utility of the CMP’s primary tool used to audit conservation projects: the *Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation*, published by the CMP in 2004. CMP’s experience also permits a rough assessment of the overall costs and benefits of conservation auditing.

This report summarizes these lessons learned and serves as a complement to the document, *Conservation Audit Protocol*, published by the CMP in December of 2006. In the spirit of learning, evaluation, and adaptive management, the CMP will use the information contained herein to identify priorities for improving the practice of conservation project design and adaptive management, to strengthen the conservation audit process, and to refine the *Open Standards*, with the ultimate intent to improve conservation results along with the confidence of conservation practitioners, donors, and other key stakeholders.

## **METHOD OF ANALYSIS**

To consolidate learning derived to date with regard to conservation practice, conservation auditing, and the *Open Standards*, information and data were acquired and analyzed as follows:

- 37 reports from conservation audits conducted by The Nature Conservancy, World Wide Fund for Nature, and the Wildlife Conservation Society were reviewed to compile an inventory characterizing the audits conducted to date; to assess the extent to which current conservation projects aligns overall with standards of good project design and management; to review the various audit approaches employed to date; and to consolidate feedback with regard to the strengths and areas of improvement of the *Open Standards*, as they are used as a framework for auditing.
- Surveys of audit and project team members were developed and circulated. Responses of more than 80 individuals were compiled and analyzed to generate findings with regard to the strengths, areas of improvements, costs, and benefits of conservation audits.
- Documents generated by a CMP learning activity that provided funds to various planning and evaluation initiatives that utilized the *Open Standards* as a reference tool or

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framework were reviewed to consolidate feedback on the *Open Standards*.

- Interviews of TNC and WWF audit program managers, as well as of individuals holding similar positions at CI, WCS, and AWF, were conducted, in particular to gather information on the history and current status of auditing, including the evolution of auditing practice over the past three years. As these individuals have led many of the audits, these interviews also elicited their thoughts on patterns, themes, and common findings with regard to conservation practice.
- Interviews of audit team members were conducted to gather firsthand, candid feedback from individuals who have participated in audits, which supported in particular the initial framing of this analysis and the development of the surveys described above.

## STRUCTURE OF REPORT

**Section 1: Conservation Audits in Practice** provides an overview of conservation auditing, including a definition of 'conservation audit,' and a characterization of the population of audits conducted between 2004 and the present, including information on who is auditing, the various types of audits carried out, and the nature of the projects and programs that have been audited.

**Section 2: Lessons Learned Regarding Conservation Practice** presents a synthesis of the findings of the audits with regard to conservation project design and adaptive management. This section is organized according to the steps of the *Open Standards*.

**Section 3: Lessons Learned Regarding the Process of Conservation Auditing** summarizes the lessons learned to date with regard to the process of conservation auditing itself—broken down into an analysis of pre-, during, and post-audit. This section also provides a discussion on lessons learned regarding the use of the *Open Standards* as a framework for conducting audits.

**Section 4: Costs and Benefits of Conservation Auditing** provides an overview of the costs and benefits of auditing, including consideration of the impact audits have had on conservation projects to date.

**Section 5: Conclusion** provides a brief discussion of the potential implications of the findings of this analysis.

## SECTION 1: Conservation Audits in Practice

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### 'CONSERVATION AUDIT' DEFINED

The CMP defines a conservation audit as “**a review of the planning (conceptualization, actions, and monitoring and evaluation), execution/implementation (activities, monitoring and analyses), and if applicable the results (impacts, outcomes, and iterations) of a conservation project or program.**” At times, audits also look at aspects such as operational planning and capacity, partnership development, and fundraising. In sum, conservation audits focus on the process of conservation rather than on the evaluation of outcomes or impact, although audits also consider these factors to assess how projects or programs gather and use information on effectiveness to adapt strategies and learn from their work.

Although an audit may sound like a fairly standardized process, the actual specific objectives of each audit can vary, depending upon the factors that have motivated the audit and the stated information needs of the lead organization or of the project being audited. Objectives of audits conducted to date have variously included:

- To **increase the likelihood of positive outcomes** and **increase the credibility** of self-reported results through an assessment of the design and execution of conservation projects, as they adhere to the CMP's *Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation*.
- To **promote program improvement** through a “quality assurance review” and discussion of the organizational best practices for strong project management.
- To **generate credibility** around the work the program is doing and the impacts it is having.
- To **serve as a learning vector**: The program learns from the conservation audit (peer-review) team, the peer-reviewers learn from the program, and the wider organization learns through the sharing of these conservation audit findings.
- To **build confidence among senior management and donors** that their investments are worthwhile.
- To help the project team to **raise 'the quality' of the conservation process** by identifying and adopting best practices, and by so doing, increase the likelihood of biodiversity being conserved.
- To **review the program's application of project cycle management** and **look at strategic alignment** of the program to the global conservation program.
- To look at how the program **makes decisions, develops and implements its work**, and how it **shares the results of its work** in order to improve conservation outcomes and sustainability.
- To **determine adherence** to the organization's global program philosophy and priorities, stated policies and procedures, and recommended methods of intervention.
- And finally, to **pilot test the audit process** itself.

## OVERVIEW AND HISTORY OF CONSERVATION AUDITING

The practice of auditing dates back to as early as 5000 B.C., with references to internal auditing found even in the Bible. Although initially a comprehensive and detailed review used to detect fraud in financial accounting, from the early 1900s to date, auditing has generally employed a process of random sampling to assess the validity and reliability of information being presented by a company or organization.

In 2001, several individuals working with the largest international conservation organizations recognized a common need to better evaluate the impacts of conservation interventions, with an ultimate desire to know whether actions taken were the most strategic possible. From these discussions, the concept of conservation auditing developed. In contrast to simple evaluations of impact, by incorporating the spirit of auditing, organizations would also review the systems and processes by which effectiveness and impact data were generated, thus providing some indication of the credibility of those data. TNC and WWF have spearheaded the practice of conservation auditing since 2003, although other organizations have undertaken similar but much smaller efforts. In addition, the CMP has long had conservation auditing as one of its focal initiatives. Although four years is a short timeframe, the process of conservation auditing has evolved significantly, as CMP member organizations have worked to test this tool and to respond to specific needs expressed by project and/or headquarters staff.

**TNC** began discussing and piloting auditing in 2001 and formalized a Conservation Audit Program at the end of 2003. Since that time, TNC has conducted more than 30 conservation audits. TNC initially utilized as an audit framework its *Conservation by Design* and “enhanced” 5S approach and today uses the next iteration of those tools, the *Conservation Action Planning* (CAP) framework. Although consistently true to assessing projects against a relevant institutional standard, TNC's early audits also contained significantly more evaluative work than present, in that audit teams provided feedback on the overall technical approach and strategy of an audited project. Following a workshop held in September of 2004 to elicit feedback from project and audit team members regarding the audits conducted to date, TNC streamlined its approach to focus primarily on auditing against their Conservation Approach, rather than an overall project evaluation, specifically to drive project teams toward self-evaluation of their own conservation actions and impact. In 2005, TNC also began to use a checklist-like assessment tool to streamline the consolidation and presentation of audit findings. TNC plans to conduct 10-15 peer-review audits in 2007, with an increased emphasis on self-audits at a larger number of projects.

**WWF** has been auditing projects and programs since 2004 and to date has conducted more than 10 audits. As frameworks, WWF has used both the *Open Standards* as well as its own comparable tool, the *WWF Standards of Conservation Project and Programme Management*. WWF has taken a very experimental approach to the development of its audit program, carrying out audits on a wide array of project types and geographies. WWF has also explored a variety of methods, including everything from 'desk audits' (review of a project business plan against the standard) to full program audits, wherein, in addition to looking at the process of project design and adaptive management, such issues as project outcomes and impact, operations (e.g., financial planning and management, human resources management), fundraising, institutional challenges and opportunities, and partnerships were considered. In the past year, WWF has placed greater emphasis on the development and dissemination of its standards and a lesser emphasis on conservation auditing, resulting in few audits being carried out or planned for the immediate future, although a self audit methodology has been developed and piloted in

all of its offices in Asia. WWF also conducts periodic and final evaluations to assess whether its projects have achieved stated goals and objectives.

**Other CMP member organizations**, such as CI and WCS, have undertaken evaluations that included audit-like components, wherein part or all of the design and management of a project or program was assessed against an institutional standard. CI, for example, began conducting evaluations of its international programs and their associated strategies in 2003. This practice, which considered both strategic direction as well as organizational niche and capacity, has now evolved into several discreet processes: program strategy reviews, regional program evaluations, and more informal but ongoing efforts to support and assess the adoption of institutional standards for defining and monitoring biodiversity targets and conservation effectiveness and impact. These processes continue to be ongoing and well supported within CI. WCS has to date conducted one conservation audit and AWF is considering the development of a conservation audit program.

**CMP** has supported conservation auditing since 2003 by providing a venue for cross-organizational exchange on auditing, developing the *Open Standards*, and serving as a pool of potential peer auditors. By consolidating the experiences, approaches, and best practices of its various members, CMP has compiled a recommended methodology for performing an audit, the *Conservation Audit Protocol* (Figure 3), which describes a basic process for planning, conducting, and following up on a conservation audit. The Protocol assumes that either the *Open Standards* or a comparable institutional approach will be used as the overarching framework from which tools and criteria are developed to conduct an audit (refer CMP's *Audit Protocol* for examples of audit tools).

**Figure 3. Generalized process of a conservation audit, from the CMP Conservation Audit Protocol**

**Before the Audit**

- Project selected
- Project team contacted, terms of reference for audit defined, required resources identified
- Conservation audit team built
- Standards to be used as framework for audit introduced to project and audit team members
- Resources requested
- Audit methodology finalized
- Logistic arrangements made

**During the Audit**

- Project and audit teams and other relevant parties introduced
- Scope and agenda for audit finalized
- Project reviewed against standard or framework
- Preliminary findings and recommendations articulated
- Facts checked and opportunity for feedback from project team provided

**After the Audit**

- Report drafted
- Action items to respond to audit identified by project team
- Lessons shared with relevant audiences
- Follow-up by lead organization with project team
- After audit report prepared to reflect on audit process

## **INVENTORY OF AUDITS CONDUCTED TO DATE**

Considered in this analysis are 37 audits carried out since 2003 by CMP member organizations, including TNC, WWF, and WCS. By design, these CMP members sought to audit a range of projects and programs in order to evaluate the effectiveness and appropriateness of auditing at different scales, for different types of programs or projects (e.g., site-based vs. thematic, country vs. landscape, large vs. small), across cultures, at different stages in project development, and across organizations (Figure 4). In nearly every case, projects identified to be audited were volunteers, in that they were made aware of the existence of this tool and agreed to engage in the process in an effort to improve their work.

Audits also varied in scale in terms of the audit effort itself, ranging from 1 or 2-person 'desk' audits, wherein a project design document was evaluated against an institutional framework in

only a few hours, to very large teams taking several months to review project documents, visit the project site and staff, and finalize the report. Many of the audits fell somewhere in between these two extremes, involving a small team of three to six auditors spending three to six days visiting the project and one to two months to write up, get feedback on, and finalize the report.

Team composition also varied across audits, with audit teams ranging in size from two to 10 individuals. A third of the audit teams included only individuals internal to the lead organization, while the other two-thirds included one to four external peer auditors. The latter is the preferred approach<sup>4</sup>.

Finally, audits differed in methodology, as follows:

- WWF conducted three “desk audits,” wherein a programmatic business plan was reviewed against the WWF *Standards of Conservation Project and Programme Management Guidelines*, with no visit to the geographic focus of the project.
- In 2004, TNC carried out seven audits, which followed a common audit framework, but did not utilize a detailed checklist or scorecard.
- In contrast, TNC performed 16 audits in 2005 and 2006, which followed an audit protocol somewhat revised from the 2004 version and also utilized a detailed assessment tool to frame the audit findings.
- Five audits used the CMP's *Open Standards* as an audit framework, including one audit of a WCS project, and four audits of WWF projects.
- WWF conducted five program audits that applied the WWF standards as a framework. These audits also involved a visit to the project location by an audit team and utilized a scorecard to summarize the audit findings.
- WWF/TNC performed one checklist-based audit which involved the rapid review of a project using only a scorecard.

Additional details on the projects audited can be found in Appendix A.

**Figure 4. Characterization of the 37 conservation audits conducted to date**

- **Lead Organization:** 13 WWF, 1 WCS, 23 TNC (including 1 TNC audit of one USFS project – a TNC partner),
- **Geographic Distribution of Projects:** 14 US, 23 non-US, representing: 3 Africa, 7 Asia, 2 Europe, 5 Latin America, 3 Caribbean, and 3 Global
- **Project Scale:** 16 site, 6 landscape, 7 regional (multi-country), 4 country, 3 global
- **Project Size (staff):** 9 with 1-10 staff; 4 with 11-30 staff; 4 with >30 staff; 17 not reporting; 3 not yet staffed
- **Project Size (annual budget):** 8 at ≤ \$250k; 14 at \$250k - \$1M; 7 at >\$1M; 6 at >\$5M; 2 with information not available
- **Project Age:** 7 at ≤ 5 years; 13 at 6-10 years; 10 at 11-20 years; 4 at >20 years; 3 not yet started
- **Audit Team Composition:** 12 audits teams with only internal staff (generally 3 - 7 people per team); 23 with internal and external staff (9 used 1 external, 6 used 2, 3 used 3, and 5 used 4 or more. Two teams are of unknown composition.
- **Audit Duration:** Varies from 2 to 10 months to plan the audit. Usually 2 to 7 days to visit the project or program. Generally 1 to 6 months to produce the audit report.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to have individuals external to the lead organization on conservation audit teams to diversify thinking and improve credibility. While some discussion and even testing of “third-party” conservation audits has happened, and such events will likely happen, it is unlikely that such will be the standard in the conservation community in the near future.

## SECTION 2: Lessons Learned – The State of Conservation Practice

### INTRODUCTION

Together, the findings of the 37 audits of conservation projects conducted to date permit an assessment of the extent to which the design and management of conservation projects align with the standards for effective conservation project design and management. This section presents a synthesis of these findings, using the *Open Standards* as a commonly held model (Figure 5), although understanding that many of the audits utilized TNC- or WWF-specific frameworks that nonetheless align well with the *Open Standards*.

To facilitate the review of the results presented in this section, the extent to which the audited projects were found to align with a given element of the *Open Standards* is indicated using the following scheme:

- ✓✓✓✓: 75% or more of audited projects align well with the standard
- ✓✓✓: 50% to 75% of audited projects align well with the standard
- ✓✓: 25% to 50% of audited projects align well with the standard
- ✓: Less than 25% of audited projects align well with the standard

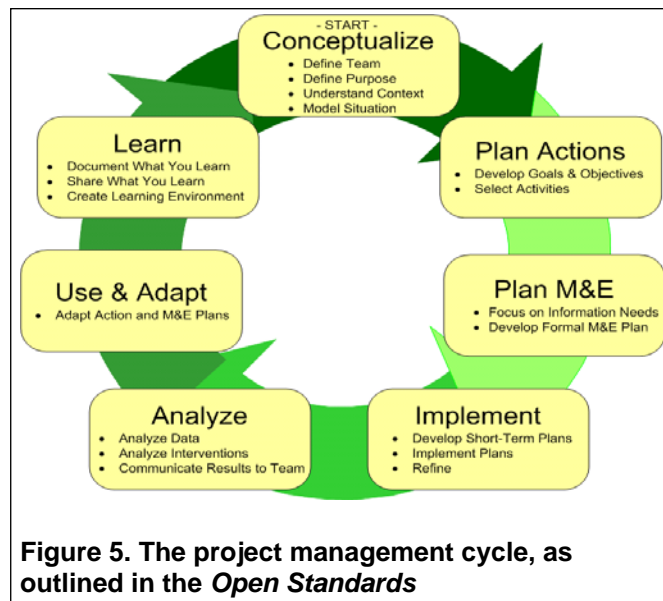
It is worth noting here that audit results are presented in many different ways, including qualitative or descriptive prose, scorecards, checklists, brief summary reports, etc. Therefore, the analysis required to generate the lessons learned presented below was similarly qualitative, involving the review of all of the audit reports to identify common patterns, themes, findings, and recommendations. In no way should this analysis be considered statistically or scientifically rigorous, however, it is robust in that it reflects the findings of 37 audits conducted on a range of project types and in an array of contexts.

Each section below corresponds to one of the major elements of the *Open Standards* cycle, and is organized first to outline the tasks within the element and then to provide an overview of the current state of practice, per the findings of the 37 conservation audits.

### CONCEPTUALIZE

#### Tasks

- **Define team:** Identify who is involved in the project (both internal to the organization and through partnerships) and define their primary roles and responsibilities. Identify the project lead. Assess the required technical capacity for the project.



- **Define purpose:** Define the project purpose, including the overall vision, the scope (geographic and/or thematic), and the project targets and their status.
- **Understand context:** Develop an understanding of the social, political, and economic situation influencing the project. Specifically, identify and prioritize key threats, opportunities and stakeholders.
- **Model situation:** Articulate a “picture” of the project that presents the relationships among the project targets and key contextual factors. This is generally conveyed as a conceptual model or other structured framework.

### **State of Practice**

**Define team [✓✓✓✓]:** *Project teams are frequently well defined.* The membership of teams is generally well articulated, particularly for those individuals internal to the lead organization. To a lesser extent, this is also the case for project team members who belong to partner organizations. Across the audits, project teams were generally found to be strong in terms of technical capacity, local knowledge, and enthusiasm for their work. For about half of the projects audited, the roles and responsibilities of team members were well defined, although usually more rigorously for the internal team than for key partners (i.e. the extended team) involved in the project. Several audits also looked at the extent to which a capacity needs assessment has been performed to identify gaps and develop an associated response strategy. It is rare that this has been done, and in a few cases, staffing and the strategic initiatives of the project align seemingly as a result of initiatives being pursued based upon the individual skills and interests of team members. In a few cases, it appeared that staffing was determined by factors such as historical precedent and the need to meet short-term capacity requirements of specific initiatives.

The primary audit recommendations related to definition of teams were: 1) Better define roles and responsibilities, particularly for members of partner organizations; and 2) Consider conducting a capacity needs assessment and aligning staffing accordingly.

**Define purpose [✓✓✓/✓]:** *The purpose of most conservation projects is frequently well defined.* Usually, the project scope is clearly articulated and most projects have a vision statement, although in many cases, this articulation could be improved to state clearly the desired state or ultimate condition of the project scope. Most projects have defined project boundaries – whether these be geographic or thematic. In the case of geographically focused projects, there is usually a map of the project area, and in some cases, GIS has been used to map biodiversity targets and threats against the scope of the project.

*The weaker aspect of most statements of project purpose is that of the definition of project biodiversity targets.* Most projects do identify focal biodiversity targets, but in a number of cases, the justification for choosing the specified targets is unclear and undocumented. Both WWF and TNC ask that their projects further identify a set of 'focal' targets – a subset of the total set of targets – that aid in focusing the work of the project. In some cases, these focal targets have not been prioritized. TNC further assesses whether viability indicators have been defined for the focal targets, and have found that one-third to one-half of the audited projects have not done so, which greatly compromises the ability of these projects to assess the impact of their actions on targeted biodiversity.

The most common audit recommendations with regard to defining project purpose were: 1) Refine the vision statement to specify the desired future condition of the project scope; 2) Ensure that focal targets have been defined through a prioritization process and articulate the resulting justification; and 3) Define (or update) viability indicators for the focal targets.

**Understand context** [✓✓✓]: *The project context is frequently well understood, at least in an informal manner.* Often, analyses have been performed to identify threats and opportunities, key stakeholders, and other contextual elements. Much less frequently have these analyses included prioritization processes to identify the most critical threats to address or stakeholders to influence. In addition, the analyses are often not integrated in a manner that shows the inter-relationships among these factors and their relative influence on focal conservation targets. For example, stakeholder analyses, when they have been conducted, often omit a strong analysis of the motives and/or incentives driving behavior with regard to natural resource use. For larger projects that encompass multiple sites, landscapes, or major initiatives, situation analyses often have been done at the finer scales of the project, but generally not for the project as a whole, which can impede the identification of project-wide priorities for mitigating broad-scale threats.

The most common audit recommendations with regard to understanding project context include: 1) Formally (i.e., explicitly) articulate the project context; 2) Prioritize among threats and opportunities; and 3) Ensure that motives driving the behavior of key stakeholders are understood and explicitly articulated.

**Model situation** [✓]: *Projects rarely have a conceptual model of the situation with which they are working that shows the relationships among the focal targets, threats and opportunities, stakeholders, etc.* The most common audit recommendation with regard to modeling the project situation is to develop a model or, at a minimum, to describe key causal chains that link targets to threats, opportunities, stakeholders, etc.

## PLAN ACTIONS

### Tasks

- **Develop goals and objectives:** Define goals that describe the desired future state of the project's focal targets. Define objectives that describe the desired future state of the highest priority key factors (threats and opportunities). Link goals and objectives to the conceptual model.
- **Select activities:** Strategically select from an array of potential activities those with the greatest potential to reach goals and objectives. Link activities to conceptual model.

### State of Practice

**Develop goals and objectives** [✓✓✓]: *Goals and objectives are frequently articulated for conservation projects, however they are often not phrased in a manner that is measurable or that indicates clearly the desired future state of a target or key factor.* Furthermore, there is often confusion in hierarchical phrasing, in that goals are written as objectives, or vice versa, or goals or objectives are only developed for conservation targets but not for key factors. For larger, more complex projects, goals and objectives have often been fairly well defined at finer scales, but have not been well articulated for the project as a whole. In cases where goals and objectives have been defined, it is not uncommon that they appear to be overly ambitious given the human and financial resources available to the project, thereby requiring a similarly

ambitious fundraising strategy as well as careful prioritization of activities to be undertaken. Finally, for those projects without well defined targets and or situation analyses, it is not possible to have well articulated, strategically sound goals and objectives and, as projects generally do not have conceptual models, it is rare that goals and objectives have been incorporated into such a model.

The most common audit recommendations with regard to the development of goals and objectives were: 1) Describe goals and objectives that are explicitly linked to the focal targets and key factors of the project; 2) Ensure articulation of objectives is SMART – specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and time-limited; and 3) Prioritize stated goals and objectives to align with project resources.

**Select activities [✓✓✓]:** *In nearly all cases, project activities have been identified and are underway; however, it is often unclear how those particular activities were selected. The Open Standards as well as CMP member organization standards recommend that activities are chosen through a strategic alternatives analysis of some kind, one which incorporates the situation analysis / conceptual model. Although this is sometimes the case, very often activities arise due to historical precedent, funding opportunity, individual preference or capacity, political reasons, partnership opportunities, or in the name of “piloting” a new type of initiative or approach. The audits have also found that the capacity requirements necessary to support the array of ongoing activities of a given project often exceed the available capacity of the project, and in these cases, audit teams have recommended that projects review their portfolio of activities to identify and prioritize those of greatest importance to the project goals and objectives.*

The most common audit recommendations with regard to selecting activities were: 1) Conduct and document a strategic analysis that identifies those activities most likely to efficiently and effectively achieve the objectives of the project; and 2) Reassess and refine the portfolio of activities to ensure that the project isn't trying to do too much with too little.

## PLAN MONITORING AND EVALUATION

### Tasks

- **Focus on information needs:** Identify information needed to evaluate effectiveness of actions, and changes in status of focal conservation targets and key 'threat' factors. Characterize who will use monitoring data and how it will be disseminated to them.
- **Develop formal monitoring and evaluation (M & E) plan:** Define indicators and methods to gather necessary data. Develop work plan component, including roles, responsibilities, resources, and timing related to data collection and management.

### State of Practice

**Focus on information needs [✓✓]:** *The importance of gathering and analyzing monitoring data is generally well understood and acknowledged, however it is rare that projects have extended this awareness to the point of identifying what they 'need to know' (specifically, what critical questions they are trying to answer), or identifying the key audiences for monitoring data collected. In some cases where monitoring is occurring, data collection efforts are not necessarily providing the information needed to assess effectiveness and adapt strategy. For example, several 'demonstration projects' audited were regularly collecting data to determine*

the impact of the adoption of 'best practices' on agricultural production, but were not collecting data to assess the resulting impact on targeted biodiversity.

The most common audit recommendation with regard to focusing on information needs simply reiterated the standards: Identify the information needed to assess the effectiveness of project activities with specific regard to outcomes (changes in threat status) and impacts (biodiversity health).

**Develop formal M & E plan [✓✓]:** *Less than one-third of audited projects have a formal M & E plan that clearly defines indicators, data needs, and methods to support the assessment of activity effectiveness or status of focal targets or key factors.* In nearly all cases, monitoring and evaluation was found to be the weakest element of project cycle management. Reasons projects give for not having monitoring plans and practices include lack of sufficient resources (e.g., one project with a well developed monitoring plan estimated that monitoring would absorb up to 25% of the total project budget), data, technical capacity, or incentive. The argument is also made that the science to support monitoring is not sufficiently well developed. It is worth noting, however, that a few of the projects audited do have well-developed M & E plans, suggesting that effective monitoring is possible.

The most common audit recommendations with regard to developing formal M and E plans were: 1) At a minimum, define a discreet and simple set of indicators that support the evaluation of effectiveness and change in status of focal targets and key factors; and 2) Develop a formal monitoring plan, complete with indicators, data needs, methods, and roles and responsibilities defined, ensuring that data collected responds well to the information needed to evaluate and adapt the project.

## **IMPLEMENT**

### **Tasks**

- **Develop short-term plans** to implement selected activities and M & E. Define tasks, roles, and responsibilities of team members. **Implement** plans and **refine** them along the way.

### **State of Practice**

**Develop, implement, and refine plans [✓✓✓]:** *All of the projects audited were implementing activities according to some type of work plan or action plan.* Auditors observed what seemed to be impressive examples of ingenuity, commitment, strategy, and skill. As the audits generally did not include an analysis of impact or effectiveness (because of a lack of project reported data), whether the activities being undertaken were the best use of the time and resources of the projects was not formally assessed and reported and therefore cannot be surmised here.

*Consistent with the finding that less than one-third of projects audited had M & E plans was the finding that even fewer than one-third of projects were actually carrying out rigorous monitoring of any kind.* In the cases of the few larger, more complex projects audited, it was found that work plans were often disaggregated to finer scales, but did not then roll up to represent one coherent plan for the project or program as a whole, or to nest into larger scale operating unit plans.

In some audits, WWF considered whether projects had adequately assessed the resources

needed to implement the targeted activities and found that in most cases, projects had well described budgets, but that an assessment of additional funding needs and an associated funding strategy were sometimes lacking. Similarly, although staffing needs were generally fairly well assessed and met, needs requiring outside stakeholder engagement often were not as clear. In a similar vein, several audits noted that projects appeared to be overextended in terms of both money and capacity.

Common recommendations with regard to implementation included: 1) Evaluate resource and capacity needs of the project and develop and carry out plans for meeting those needs; 2) Implement monitoring and evaluation; and 3) Continually reassess and refine the suite of activities being undertaken.

## **ANALYZE**

### **Tasks**

- **Analyze M & E data.** Consolidate M & E data and analyze results against predetermined standards or criteria for effectiveness or change in status of targets or key factors.
- **Analyze interventions.** Assess if goals and objectives were met, review assumptions, analyze indicators, and analyze thresholds of goals and objectives.
- **Communicate results to team.** Share with the project team the findings of the analysis, including recommendations and details that assist with the interpretation and consideration of the findings.

### **State of Practice**

**Analyze data and interventions [✓✓]:** *As less than one-third of the projects audited were carrying out monitoring work, correspondingly few were regularly and systematically analyzing monitoring data.* Most audited projects indicated that they conducted such analyses informally through meetings, status checks, annual planning exercises, etc. And in many cases, due to donor reporting requirements, basic data on progress toward completing activities were collected, consolidated, analyzed, and reported. It should be noted, however, that such requirements rarely include rigorous analysis of the impact of activities on biodiversity targets or associated key factors. It is also worth noting that analysis of data is only useful inasmuch that measurable objectives have been defined or described in some form. Finally, based upon the audit findings, it seems rare that projects rigorously analyze whether initiatives have succeeded or failed.

**Communicate results [✓✓]:** *As it is rare that monitoring data are collected and analyzed, it is correspondingly rare that associated results are communicated within project teams or to relevant audiences internal or external to the organization.* Most communication activities within projects are externally oriented and focus more on outreach, education, and fundraising, than on sharing information to support the evaluation and adaptation of strategy. Most projects report on “activities,” if anything at all.

The most common audit recommendation with regard to analyzing data and interventions and communicating results was simply to implement a formal and systematic process for consolidating, analyzing, and sharing monitoring data. In some cases, it was advised that such

a system did not have to be complex and burdensome; rather, it could address a few basic indicators and a regular schedule for sharing key data to ensure that information is provided consistently in order to support decision making and strategy adaptation.

## USE/ADAPT

### Tasks

- **Adapt actions and M & E plan.** Reexamine assumptions and the conceptual model and assess progress toward objectives and activities. Adapt as necessary to improve effectiveness, efficiency, and impact. Review M & E plan and modify as necessary to ensure key data are collected.

### State of Practice

**Adapt actions and M & E plan [✓✓]:** *Very few of the audited projects employed a systematic and rigorous process for assessing their effectiveness and progress and adapting strategies as necessary.* Many acknowledged the importance of such a practice, however, and the audits generally found that project strategies and activities are regularly being adjusted in response to opportunities, changing conditions, and observations about effectiveness. As stated in the report for the Madagascar Spiny Forest, “Field staff are engaged in a continuous process of implicit (non-formal, inside your head) planning, monitoring, and adaptive management.” Unfortunately, these informal processes (e.g., meetings, annual reviews) often go undocumented, and so the audits found that few projects have records of their evaluations of successes and failures, findings regarding effectiveness and impact, and key decisions that have led to the adaptation of strategies or activities. As with the implementation of rigorous monitoring, a few of the audited projects do systematically assess and adapt their strategies, demonstrating that it is a feasible practice to employ.

The most common audit recommendations with regard to adapting actions and M & E plans were: 1) Regularly assess progress through analysis of appropriate indicators – set up an explicit adaptive management practice; and 2) Consolidate and update documentation that supports decision-making regarding strategic direction and activities.

## LEARN

### Tasks

- **Document and share what you learn.** Systematically document progress and process. Develop and implement a dissemination strategy to share what you've learned with external audiences.
- **Create a learning environment.** Provide a safe environment for questioning, taking risks, and openly discussing failures as well as successes.

### State of Practice

**Document and share what you learn [✓].** *Although few of the audits rigorously considered “Learning,” those that did assess found that although many projects produce significant documentation, much of it is externally oriented and focuses on education, outreach, and fundraising (with particular emphasis on publicizing successes).* Few of the projects audited

have an explicit strategy for documenting and sharing the learning they derive through their work. Those 'learning' publications that are generated tend to be science and research focused and intended for academic publications.

**Create learning environment [✓].** *The very few audits that considered this factor seemed to find that projects generally do not cultivate a learning environment in which open discussion of failures, the taking of risks, or the consolidation and exchange of “lessons learned” are encouraged.*

As projects rarely have a strong explicit learning component, the audit recommendations commonly reflected the standards with regard to encouraging the documentation and sharing of information and the cultivation of a learning environment.

## CONCLUSION

All standards used to audit the 37 conservation projects are cyclical, in that the process of good conservation planning is step-wise – first the project purpose and targets are defined, then the context influencing those targets is assessed, then planning occurs in which goals, objectives, and actions are prioritized and selected, which is followed by definition of information needs, indicators, and monitoring, which feeds into an analysis of effectiveness and ultimately an adaptation of the project goals, objectives, activities, etc. Given the cyclical nature of these standards, it is not surprising then that the quality of later steps in the cycle is dependent on the extent to which the earlier steps have been done well. This can be seen in Figure 6, which summarizes the findings of the 37 conservation audits.

The audits conducted to date demonstrate that, within the “conceptualization” phase of project design, although the **purpose** of conservation projects is generally well defined, **situation analyses** and the articulation of project **goals and objectives** can frequently be strengthened. The greatest concern with regard to strong adaptive management, however, is that project objectives are at times not clearly linked to project targets and key factors, or stated in a manner that is measurable, thereby impeding a credible assessment of progress and effectiveness.

Although we’d like to be confident that the **activities** being pursued by most conservation projects contribute in some way to mitigating threats or leveraging opportunities and thereby, to some extent, alleviating stresses on focal conservation targets, because evidence of the analytical processes leading to the selection of, and subsequent change of, activities is

**Figure 6. Summary of the findings of the 37 conservation audits, showing the extent to which the planning and management practices of the audited projects align with the Open Standards.**

**Key:**

- ✓✓✓✓: >75% align well
- ✓✓✓: 50% to 75% align well
- ✓✓: 25% to 50% align well
- ✓: <25% align well

<b>Conceptualize</b>	
Define team	✓✓✓✓
Define purpose	✓✓✓/✓
Understand context	✓✓✓
Model situation	✓
<b>Plan Actions</b>	
Develop goals and objectives	✓✓✓
Select activities	✓✓✓
<b>Plan Monitoring and Evaluation</b>	
Focus on information needs	✓✓
Develop formal M & E plan	✓✓
<b>Implement</b>	
Develop, implement, and refine plans	✓✓✓
<b>Analyze</b>	
Analyze data and interventions	✓✓
Communicate results	✓✓
<b>Use/Adapt</b>	
Adapt actions and M & E plan	✓✓
<b>Learn</b>	
Document and share what you learn	✓
Create learning environment	✓

frequently undocumented, it is at times unclear that the chosen activities are the most efficient and effective means to attaining the desired changes in the target conditions for the project as a whole.

The foremost concern brought to light by the audits, however, is that few conservation projects follow formal, structured processes for **monitoring, evaluating, adapting,** and **learning** from their actions, although it is clear that this occurs informally to some degree in almost every case. Consequently, although conservation projects and organizations may feel confident that their actions are leading to the mitigation of threats and improvement in status of conservation targets, it is rare that projects have the data or practices in place to credibly demonstrate their impact and justify their decision making and strategy selection with regard to the use of resources available for conservation action.

## **SECTION 3: Lessons Learned – The Process of Conservation Auditing**

### **INTRODUCTION**

As described above, CMP member organizations have applied various approaches to conservation auditing, responding to the need to test the audit tool as well as to the specific information requests of the host organization and/or project team. Approaches to auditing have also been adapted over time, as auditors identified and addressed gaps, eliminated weaknesses, and better leveraged strengths in their processes. For example, a few key changes to audit approaches have included:

- Adjusting language, pre-audit interactions, and the engagement of project teams to ensure that audits were viewed by project teams as **a tool to help improve – rather than to police – their work.**
- **Streamlining pre-audit information requests** so as not to overtax the project or audit teams, but also to ensure that the audit team was adequately oriented to the project or program to make the best use of time during audit visits.
- **Increasing the efficiency of the audit process** by cutting down on field visit time, producing and presenting preliminary findings while still in the field, and generating and sending to the project team the draft audit report within a month or two.
- **Cutting back on the number of partners consulted**, to ensure focused interaction between the audit and project teams and make conservation audits less “intimidating.”
- **Refining the composition of the audit team**, to ensure that it is large enough to include both depth and breadth of experience as well as individuals external to the host organization, but small enough as to be manageable, focused, and not overwhelming to the project team.
- **De-emphasizing external evaluative elements or analyses** (e.g., externally derived evaluations of past impact, strategic direction, operational capacity) to focus primarily on assessing the alignment of a project against a standard, and encouraging project teams themselves to conduct regular self-evaluations of strategy effectiveness and impact.

These adaptations and other learning regarding methods and best practices acquired through observation and informal feedback provided by audit and project team members are largely reflected in CMP's *Conservation Audit Protocol* (Figure 3). Additional feedback consolidated through this analysis is presented below, organized in a manner that aligns with the major sections of the *Protocol* framework: Before the Audit, During the Audit, and After the Audit. General lessons regarding the use of the *Open Standards* as an auditing tool are also contained herein.

To derive the 'lessons learned,' findings, and recommendations provided in this section, audit and project team members were surveyed, documents providing reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of particular audit processes were reviewed<sup>5</sup>, and four individuals who have responsibility for leading audit (or similar) programs for TNC, WWF, WCS, and CI were

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<sup>5</sup> Glover's Reef, Belize (WCS); Madagascar Spiny Forest (WWF); Indochina (WWF); an internal WWF document presenting lessons learned to date regarding auditing.

interviewed. To construct the surveys, CMP's *Conservation Audit Protocol* was used as a framework. Altogether, more than 80 individuals responded to the surveys, 48 of whom had participated on audit teams and 36 had been members of audited projects' teams or management. These individuals represented 16 organizations (67% TNC, 13% WWF, 2% WCS, 2% USDA, and 15% other organizations) and more than 10 countries (approximately 70% from the United States). Most of the respondents from both audit and project teams characterized themselves as being project or program managers, ecologists, or conservation scientists. In other words, most held positions requiring a solid understanding of conservation planning, strategy design and management, and/or project execution. Of the 37 audited projects considered in this analysis, only one was not represented by survey respondents (audit or project team members).

Rather than restate lessons learned with regard to audit process that are already reflected by the best practices outlined in the *Conservation Audit Protocol*, the sections below merely emphasize aspects of what is being done well and potential areas for improving the audits, as indicated and prioritized by survey respondents and the various individuals interviewed. Furthermore, rather than provide a lengthy list of recommendations, the following sections identify those potential improvements that appear to be most critical to ensuring the greatest positive impact of conservation audits.

## BEFORE THE AUDIT

**What Is Being Done Well.** Overall feedback on the pre-audit phase is positive, with about 90% of audit and project team members alike agreeing that before their respective audits began they:

- Understood the **purpose** of the audit;
- Could see the **potential benefits** to the project from the audit; and
- Could see how an audit of the project might contribute to **broader learning** regarding conservation practice.

### Before the Audit

- Project selected
- Project team contacted, terms of reference for audit defined, required resources identified
- Conservation audit team built
- Standards to be used as framework for audit introduced to project and audit team members
- Resources requested
- Audit methodology finalized
- Logistic arrangements made

About two-thirds of the respondents believe that they:

- Had an appropriate level of **input** in the planning of the audit;
- Received an appropriate level of **financial support** from the head office of the host organization;
- Spent an appropriate amount of **time** to prepare for the audit; and
- Received an appropriate level of **technical support** from the host organization; and

About one-half to two-thirds of respondents indicate that they:

- Had an adequate understanding of the **audit framework** to be used;
- Had an adequate **understanding of the planned audit process**; and

- Had an adequate **understanding of their respective roles** in the process.

Regarding **preliminary information**, about 90% of project team members believe that the type and quantity of information requested of them was appropriate, while about two-thirds of audit team members feel the same (with several of the remaining third indicating that they had received too much information).

Regarding the **audit team composition**, respondents valued most the following characteristics:

- Diversity in experience, position, background, and geographic representation;
- Strong specialized expertise appropriate to the project being audited;
- Complementarity of knowledge and experience;
- Depth of overall knowledge and experience; and
- Participation of one or more individuals from outside the host organization.

**Areas for Improvement.** Although generally responding positively regarding the pre-audit phase of most audits, audit and project team members, as well as managers of audit programs, identify several elements of audit processes that could be further strengthened, as indicated below.

- **Target appropriately the preliminary information request.** Information gathered through this analysis indicates that it is critical to ensure that the preliminary information requested of the project team **effectively orients, but does not overwhelm, audit team members**, and at the same time **does not represent an overly burdensome request to the project itself**. It is believed that such information should provide a concise overview of the project and, to the extent possible, an initial self-assessment of how well the project aligns with the standards to be used for the audit. Although the WCS audit of the Glover's Reef project found that it was possible to carry out an audit successfully without giving the audit team much pre-information, in other cases, it was felt that audit team members should have been better oriented to the project before conducting the audit. In particular, several audit team members indicated that they were not given sufficient time to review the preliminary information.
- **Ensure that audit and project team members are engaged early and are well oriented.** Several audit and project team members suggest that greater effort should be made to **engage them in the process of designing the audits** to ensure that all parties understand and agree to the purpose, scope, and structure of the audit as well as their respective roles in it. Audit program managers feel strongly that a sense of buy-in to, and ownership of the audit process by the project team is critical to its near- and long-term success, and engendering these feelings must begin from the start of the process.
- **Promote greater participation in the audit team by external parties and appropriate technical experts.** Audit and project team members as well as audit program managers support strongly the inclusion in the audit team of individuals external to the host organization. Nearly 20 respondents indicate that they felt **greater external involvement was needed** in their respective audits, and several indicate that those external auditors should come from project partner organizations or from projects similar in context and strategy. In addition, several respondents felt that the audit team should

have **greater specialized technical expertise** (including geographic context and language skills) appropriate to the project. This is particularly important in audit processes that intend to provide feedback on strategic approach and execution, in addition to conducting a basic audit.

## DURING THE AUDIT

**What Is Being Done Well.** Overall feedback on the audit phase is positive, with about 75% or more of audit and project team members agreeing that they:

- Were **adequately oriented** to the audit process and that sufficient effort was made to address any outstanding concerns;
- Were given **sufficient understanding** of the framework used to audit the project;
- Were able to **constructively participate** in and contribute to the process.

### During the Audit

- Project and audit teams and other relevant parties introduced
- Scope and agenda for audit finalized
- Audit conducted
- Preliminary findings and recommendations articulated
- Facts checked and opportunity for feedback from project team provided

More than 75% also agreed that:

- The **audit process was adapted as needed** to the specific project context and information needs;
- The audit process **allowed the audit team to gain a comprehensive understanding** of the project;
- In nearly all cases, the **audit team provided an adequate overview of their preliminary findings** to the project team; and
- The **framework used was appropriate** for auditing the respective projects and was adaptable to most project contexts.

**Areas for Improvement.** Although generally responding positively regarding the audit, audit and project team members, as well as managers of audit programs, identify several ways to further strengthen audit processes.

- **Ensure that the time allotted is appropriate**, given the thematic, historical, political, and or geographic complexity of the project. Although more than half of all respondents indicate that the amount of time allowed for the audit was enough or more than enough, more than 40 percent of audit team respondents feel that the time allotted for the audit was less than was needed, and several individuals made separate comments indicating that the time allotted for their audits was too short. Interestingly, nearly 25 percent of project team respondents indicate that the time allotted was more than was needed. This feedback simply indicates that the timing of an audit should be tailored to the nature of the project being reviewed, rather than simply following a standard audit timeline.
- **Evaluate carefully the involvement of partner organizations** and engage those who are most relevant. A third of project and audit team respondents indicate that too few partners were involved in the audit process. This reflects, in part, a recent trend by TNC to question partners less in the audit process as a means to focus more on the

conservation process and to de-emphasize “external evaluation.” Nonetheless, several individuals strongly encourage greater involvement of partners in the audit process.

- **Use a flexible audit framework that can be adapted to the project context,** particularly for larger, more mature, more conceptually complex projects. Although in most cases, the audit frameworks used – whether they were based on the *Open Standards* or on organization-specific standards – were thought to be appropriate, several respondents, including audit program managers, indicate that the existing frameworks are more easily and appropriately applied to smaller, geographically-focused, and moderately mature projects. Additional considerations and adjustments may be required when auditing projects known not to have applied their institutional frameworks to project planning, at times due to lack of awareness of the frameworks themselves. Although it is still possible and appropriate to audit such projects, a training or facilitated planning effort may be considered instead of an audit, if the primary objective of the audit is to introduce standards to these projects. As the CMP is continually striving to improve its tools and products, specific feedback regarding the use of the *Open Standards* as an audit framework is provided in Figure 7.
- **Promote ownership and accountability within the project team.** Audit managers have found that the success of an audit depends largely on the receptiveness of project leaders to the process. Therefore, every effort must be made to ensure that the audit process responds to needs articulated by project leaders and that concerns and issues raised are addressed promptly.

## AFTER THE AUDIT

Although more than 85% of project team members indicate that **merely going through the audit process is an educational and helpful experience**, it is the actions taken following the audit – whether they involve a change to the design or management of a given project or the application by members of the audit team of knowledge gained through their participation in an audit – and the resulting change in impact of those actions that truly determine an audit's overall success.

There is a good indication that the **post-audit period represents the weakest element of the overall process**, however.

After the Audit	
→	Report drafted
→	Action items to respond to audit identified by project team
→	Lessons shared with relevant audiences
→	Follow-up by lead organization with project team
→	After audit report prepared to reflect on audit process

**What is being done well.** It appears that the process of consolidating and communicating the audit findings is handled well. More than two-thirds of respondents agree that the findings of the conservation audits:

- Are **provided in a timely and clear manner**;
- Are **based on an adequate understanding of the project** by the audit teams;
- **Provide a balanced presentation** of the strengths and the areas of improvement of the project; and
- **Accurately reflect the extent to which the project aligns with the framework** used.

## Figure 7. Using the *Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation* as an audit framework

Although most of the audits conducted to date used organization-specific standards as frameworks, five of the audits used the CMP's *Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation*, including the audits of the WCS Glover's Reef project and of the WWF AREAS, European Alpine Ecoregion, Indochina, and Madagascar Spiny Forest programs. In addition, TNC's and WWF's frameworks align well with the *Open Standards*, and thereby permit consideration of lessons learned with regard to the structure and application of the *Open Standards* for auditing. From these various sources, it is possible to consolidate the following general findings regarding the strengths of and potential ways to improve the *Open Standards*.

The *Open Standards* have worked well as an audit framework in that they:

- **Provided a logical framework around which to structure the audit and supporting tools, such as questionnaires and checklists.**
- **Were appropriate for use in auditing projects of different scales, thematic focus, geographies, and contexts.** They appear particularly well suited for site-based projects or simple programs, although this seems to be true of the practice of auditing in general.
- **Have been well received by partner organizations**, in that are viewed as somewhat “institution neutral,” key terms and concepts translate well across organizational lines, and they may be considered as more of a learning – rather than policing – tool. As a result, the *Standards* can work particularly well for auditing projects involving many partners, and can also serve as a unifying framework for conducting later trainings and workshops involving partner organizations.
- **Align well with the institutional frameworks of WWF and TNC**, the two organizations performing the greatest number of audits, which suggests that they are more or less comprehensive and represent a unified framework.
- **Enable auditors to learn one framework** that can then more easily be transferred to audits of other organizations' projects.
- **Provide a common format around which to organize audit results**, and therefore may more easily support cross-project and cross-organization learning.

The CMP can continue to strengthen the application of the *Open Standards* as an audit tool by:

- **Ensuring that they are applied to projects that are sufficiently developed and familiar with the *Standards*** (or compatible, institution-specific standards). For younger projects, or projects not yet oriented to a project planning and management framework, a training or facilitated planning process may be more appropriate than an audit.
- **Developing guidelines and/or tools that support the adaptation of the *Standards*** for large, complex, and well-established projects, or for projects that may have very limited resources to support project cycle management activities.
- **Ensuring that the associated scorecard or checklist incorporates a means to note informal processes** that respond to key elements of the standards. For example, all projects continually adapt their work, but it is rare that this is done through a formal, structured process, as recommended by the *Open Standards*.
- **More widely disseminating the *Open Standards*** themselves, through orientations and trainings.
- **Creating tools and resources that support self-auditing** or facilitated self audits.
- **Developing complementary tools and guidance that support project impact assessment and technical/strategy review**, as requested by many project teams.

Finally, at this time, it is difficult to derive one of the greatest potential benefits of auditing – cross-project and cross-organization learning – because the audit findings are presented using many different formats and approaches, despite the fact that the basic content is nearly the same. **CMP might consider developing a single audit framework**, used by all CMP members, that has as its core the *Open Standards*, but then has additional modules to respond to organization-specific needs. For TNC, an additional module would be needed to assess whether viability indicators for conservation targets have been established. For WWF, additional modules on “Planning for Sustainability” and assessing project operations plans would be needed.

In addition, more than 85% of respondents concur that the audit processes (before, during, after) are **transparent** and over two-thirds feel that the audit results have been handled with **sufficient concern for confidentiality**.

About two-thirds of project team respondents believe their audit provided **insights that could not be gained from within the project**, although approximately 15% felt that this was not the case. About half of the respondents indicate that the audit generated **information that is new to the project team** (20% feel that this was not the case).

**Areas for improvement.** The **extent to which audits positively influence project design and management is somewhat unclear**. Slightly more than half of project team respondents indicate that the audit findings have been useful; that the process of translating audit findings into an action plan has been straightforward; and that they have worked to strengthen their projects in accordance with audit recommendations.

When asked what specific changes had been made to strengthen their projects as a result of being audited, few respondents provided clear, concrete responses. Nonetheless, **there is a general sense that some follow up action has occurred**, primarily involving improved strategic planning processes and decision-making. Respondents also indicate that **the audit has catalyzed broad changes in the way that they work**, by helping them to: better prioritize and streamline their actions, identify with a 'bigger picture' (e.g., from a site perspective within and ecoregion), feel more confident that they are on the 'right track,' coordinate more effectively with partners, and better understand and apply institutional planning frameworks.

It is important to note that audit team members are often conservation project managers as well, and through the application of learning gained through participation in conservation audits, their projects may also improve (this is, in fact, an intended consequence of staffing peer-review teams). When asked to specify how they had applied learning gained through participation in an audit to their own work, some audit team members were unable to identify specific actions, while others listed the following: improved decision-making and planning (including more rigorous prioritization of actions), application of the audit method to identify areas for improvement in project design and management, greater emphasis placed on monitoring for both project improvement and to contribute to learning, and more strategic partnership development.

Based upon comments provided by respondents and information shared by audit program managers, it is likely that, in part, **the fact that nearly half of all projects audited do not adopt in a significant way the audit recommendations may be due to weak follow-up processes (as well as due to whatever factors that lead to the existing low level of adoption to begin with)**. To address this issue, CMP member organizations who conduct audits should consider investing time, energy, and resources into the development of audit follow-up processes that include the following elements:

- **Identify a group of individuals who will be responsible for audit follow-up.** In most cases, audit follow-up depends largely on the initiative of the project teams themselves, and monitoring of post-audit actions and impact has been uneven. An audit follow-up team should include a primary responsible person with authority on the project team, a contact person from within the audit team, a senior manager with oversight of the project, and the organizational audit manager, if there is one.
- **Develop a post-audit action plan with realistic objectives and timelines.** Generally,

in addition to providing the audit report summarizing the findings and recommendations of the audit, matrices are also prepared that identify specific action items to improve the design and management of the given project, and these matrices are sometimes followed by a 'management response' from project managers and supervisors. Beyond this, however, rarely have CMP member organizations conducting audits implemented a follow-up procedure that includes a clear timeline with specific milestones. In addition, audit reports or action matrices often include what could be viewed as an insurmountable list of action items, although in some cases, these have been prioritized via the audit process.

- **Increase senior management involvement.** To date, engagement by senior management in audit follow-up – which can be a critical catalyst for action – has generally been weak. Several project and audit team members indicate that greater involvement by senior management is needed, not only to catalyze action on audit recommendations, but also to increase the visibility of the projects themselves.
- **Provide access to resources necessary to support adoption of audit recommendations.** Only one-third of project team respondents indicate that it has been feasible, given available capacity and resources, to implement the recommendations of their audit. Approximately 15% indicate that this has not been the case at all (the remainder did not comment or were neutral). Similarly, about one-third believe that their organizations have provided sufficient technical and financial resources to respond to audit findings, while another third do not believe that their organizations have provided sufficient resources to support follow-up actions. To support the adoption of audit recommendations, project teams will often require access to financial assistance, technical support, training, and/or relevant tools, and one concept under consideration is the creation of a pool of funding specifically for audited projects to do just this.
- **Monitor progress on the post-audit action plan and communicate results** to relevant stakeholders, particularly to audit team members, many of whom indicate a desire to receive such information.
- **Consolidate audit results in a manner that supports broader learning.** One significant potential benefit of auditing is the collection of data on conservation practice from a wide range of project types and contexts. Until the performance of the analysis presented in this report, however, audit results had not been aggregated in a manner that supported the identification of patterns, broader lessons learned, elements of conservation practice requiring improvement, etc. To realize the full value of conservation auditing, audit programs should adopt data management practices that support cross-project and cross-organization learning.

It is well known that conservation practitioners tend to be overtaxed with regard to their current workload and available human and financial resources. Without a strong audit follow up process, it is safe to assume that many of the audit recommendations will not be adopted to the degree necessary, as they may be viewed as additional work, above and beyond current workload – even though audit recommendations generally do little more than reinforce the need for a project to adopt the standard business practices of the organization of which it is a part.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, responses to audit processes have been positive. Audit tools and approaches employed to date have resulted in useful assessments of a wide range of project types, from sites to broad regions, geographically-focused to thematic, new to more mature, etc. Auditing organizations have become skilled at planning and conducting audits, although to realize the potential benefits and positive impacts of audits, follow-up processes need to be strengthened considerably. Specific recommendations for strengthening the design/planning, execution, and follow-up of audits are summarized below.

### **The pre-audit process could be strengthened by:**

- Targeting appropriately the preliminary information request to ensure that it effectively orients, but does not overwhelm, audit team members and at the same time does not represent an overly burdensome request to the project itself.
- Ensuring that the audit and project team members are engaged early and are well oriented to the audit process, and that they have had sufficient involvement in the design of the audit.
- Promoting greater participation in the audit team by external parties and appropriate technical experts.

### **The audit process itself could be strengthened by:**

- Ensuring that the time allotted is appropriate, given the thematic, historical, political, and or geographic complexity of the project.
- Evaluating carefully the involvement of partner organizations and engaging those who are most relevant.
- Using a flexible audit framework that can be adapted to the project context and information needs of the project team and senior management.

### **The post-audit phase could be strengthened by:**

- Identifying a group of individuals who will be responsible for audit follow-up.
- Developing a post-audit action plan with realistic objectives and timelines.
- Increasing senior management involvement.
- Providing access to resources necessary to supporting adoption of audit recommendations.
- Monitoring progress on the post-audit action plan and communicating results to relevant stakeholders.
- Consolidating audit results in a manner that supports broader learning.

## SECTION 4: Costs and Benefits of Conservation Auditing

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### INTRODUCTION

In promoting the adoption of standards – in part, through conservation auditing – CMP members are operating under the hypothesis that by following a structured approach to conservation project design, management, and measurement, conservation projects will have a higher likelihood of achieving and being able to credibly demonstrate their intended impacts. When asked (in the survey described in Section 3) if they supported this hypothesis, over 90% of audit team members and nearly 100% of project team members concurred (although several with the caveat that standards must be reasonably flexible and adaptive so as not to apply a one-size-fits-all approach to the great diversity of conservation projects that exist). As stated by one respondent, “Without a cycle of design, implementation and monitoring/ evaluation, there is no objective way of judging whether the resources deployed have had the desired impact.”

Therefore, by promoting the adoption of project design and management standards, we can be confident that audits can contribute indirectly to improved conservation action. In the interest of efficiency and effectiveness, however, it is important to consider whether the benefits of auditing genuinely outweigh the costs.

### BENEFITS OF CONSERVATION AUDITING

Audits contribute to improved conservation practice in multiple ways. First, conservation audits are intended to strengthen projects by assessing and providing feedback on the extent to which standards of good conservation practice are adopted and applied well. As reported earlier, more than half of the project team respondents believe that their projects are improving as a result of being audited.

Second, although the recommendations from audits are not pursued in all cases, **audit and project team members and audit program managers do perceive additional benefits of auditing** (Table 1). Beyond improving the design and management of conservation projects, more than 75% of audit and project team members responding to the surveys feel that their **knowledge and skills as conservation practitioners have increased** as a result of participating in an audit and that they can see how conducting audits of a large number of projects **can contribute to learning regarding conservation practice**. Furthermore, about 60% of project team members agree that being audited has **helped to highlight the successes and strengths of their project** to partners and within their own organizations (although approximately 15% disagree). Table 1 lists additional benefits of auditing identified by respondents.

Respondents also provide several indications that they believe that auditing is a beneficial practice worth supporting in the future. Approximately 70% of audit team respondents and 85% of project team respondents agree that it is **useful to assess only the extent to which a project aligns with a standardized framework**. In addition, 60 to 70% of respondents agree that they:

- Would want to participate on a peer audit team, or would want a member of their staff to do so;
- Would request an audit of their own projects or recommend an audit to another project team;

- Would like tools and resources for conducting self-audits in the future; and
- Believe a follow-up audit should be conducted in the future, within 3 years (54%), 5 years (23%), 1 year (11%), or in more than 5 years (6%). Only 2% of project team members believe that a follow-up audit should never be conducted.

Finally, as discussed earlier in Section 3, conservation audits not only provide feedback to improve specific conservation projects, but also enable the identification of strengths, weaknesses, new techniques, and best practices that are observed across projects. This knowledge can help conservation organizations to adopt best practices and new techniques and can support the identification and development of tools, training, opportunities for technical exchange and learning, and standards.

**TABLE 1. Costs and benefits of conservation audits, as identified by audit and project team members.**

	<b>Costs</b>	<b>Benefits</b>
<b>Per Project Team Members</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Opportunity cost</li> <li>• Stress</li> <li>• Moderate financial costs to support logistics of audit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved strategic focus and goals</li> <li>• Peer interaction and exchange</li> <li>• Fresh, outside perspective</li> <li>• Opportunity to “step back” and reflect, focus on the big picture</li> <li>• Ideas on how to better integrate with partners</li> <li>• Increased visibility within organization</li> <li>• Being forced to apply the institutional framework</li> <li>• Forced succinct articulation and communication of project, which helped to identify key components and aspects of context.</li> <li>• Identification of strengths and weakness in project design</li> <li>• Education of staff regarding institutional framework</li> <li>• Increased awareness by key senior staff</li> <li>• Better enabled evaluation of 'superficial gain' from 'real gain and accomplishment'</li> <li>• Reaffirmation of project direction and accomplishment</li> </ul>
<b>Per Audit Team Members</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time</li> <li>• Opportunity cost</li> <li>• Stress, frustration, feeling of being overworked</li> <li>• Local travel</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity to reflect and gain perspective on own project</li> <li>• Interaction, exchange, and networking with peers (audit and project teams)</li> <li>• Improved knowledge of, and/or appreciation for institutional standards</li> <li>• Increased understanding of constraints faced by projects outside of the US</li> <li>• Opportunity to see another project or region</li> <li>• Increased knowledge of host organization</li> <li>• Opportunity to use knowledge to assist another project</li> <li>• New perspectives on how to address conservation issues</li> <li>• Opportunity to participate in process of self-examination – exposure to methods</li> </ul>

## **COSTS OF CONSERVATION AUDITING**

To date, costs for conservation auditing are largely comprised of staff time for both project and audit teams (which can be viewed as salary or as opportunity cost for time away from regular work activities), travel/meeting expenses for audit teams, audit program support costs, and miscellaneous costs associated with report production and dissemination, pre-audit materials preparation, etc. TNC estimates that a domestic audit generally costs \$5,000 and an international audit, \$10,000 (not including salaries for participating staff or audit program staff). WWF estimates that costs for their audits have ranged from \$3,500 to \$38,000. Most project and audit team members indicated that any costs incurred through their participation in an audit

were nearly nonexistent or minimal.

## CONCLUSION: BENEFITS VERSUS COSTS

Overall, approximately half of all respondents agree that the costs of audits (Table 1) outweigh the benefits, while 15% disagree. To increase the net benefit of auditing, **over 75% of audit team respondents and nearly 90% of project team respondents indicate that the process should include a technical evaluation – in which the audit team provides focused and substantive feedback on the selection and execution of the project’s strategies and actions – as well as an assessment of impact.**

It should be noted here that **the ultimate measure of success of an audit is** not whether the design and/or management of a project have improved (nearly 50% of project team respondents feel that their projects have improved as a result of being audited, while 10% do not believe that being audited has catalyzed an improvement and the remaining 40% did not comment or were neutral on this issue) but more importantly **the extent to which the audit increases the impact of a project in terms of biodiversity conservation.** As discussed earlier in this report, however, very few of the conservation projects audited are rigorously monitoring their conservation impact, thus confounding an ultimate assessment of impact of the conservation audits themselves. Nonetheless, when asked if they believe that, as a result of being audited, the project was likely to have greater conservation impact, of the 60 individuals responding to this question, nearly 50 percent firmly agreed (Figure 8). Another 30 percent indicated that they hoped or thought this might be the case, with most of these feeling that the impact would depend on the extent to which the recommendations of the audits were implemented (with greater implementation resulting in greater conservation impact). The remaining 20 percent of respondents felt that the audit would not lead to increased conservation impact.

**Figure 8. Select responses to the question: *Do you think that, as a result of being audited, the project is likely to have greater conservation impact?***

*Positive responses:*

Project team member: The outside advice we got from the team really helped us hone in on some of our project weaknesses in a way we couldn't have done alone.

Audit team member: Yes. As this was a second audit, we were able to see changes based upon the first audit. I think it demonstrated that if the program team is invested in the outcomes and findings of the audit, it will have an impact on their work (and eventually this will lead to greater conservation impact).

*"Maybe" responses:*

Project team member: We are a very independent and adaptive program, and the audit was but one, temporary feedback on our course and methods.

Audit team member: Yes, provided recommendations are put in place and, where applicable, resources are found or reallocated as appropriate.

*Negative responses:*

Project team member: The audit did not provide adequate tangible, substantive strategies designed to improve conservation impact.

Audit team member: If done at an earlier stage of implementation of the project the audit finding will be more applicable.

Until conservation projects are designed and managed in a manner that permits the ongoing evaluation of impact on biodiversity – the very practice that conservation auditing promotes (about two-thirds of project team members generally feel that by implementing audit recommendations, they will be able to more credibly report on the impacts of the project) – the contribution of conservation audits or any other measure to strengthen a conservation project will remain difficult to determine. However, it is possible at this time to conclude that the benefits of auditing outweigh the costs:

- The theory behind the utility of auditing is generally supported;
- Audit results are commonly thought to be accurate;

- Audit results are thought to be useful to project teams about half the time;
- Audit results are more or less actionable and are acted on about half the time;
- When acted upon, audits are believed to have a positive impact on project effectiveness; and
- Audits provide additional benefits, beyond simply contributing the strengthening of the audited projects themselves.
- Finally, it should be recognized that, as discussed in Section 3, the full potential benefits of auditing are not yet being realized.

In contrast, **costs of auditing are minimal**, with the most significant cost of auditing – staff time – often considered time well spent in that it contributes to learning and exchange, and is often an intra-organization transfer of staff time from one initiative to another. In addition, auditing absorbs only a minute fraction of the overall budgets of the large conservation organizations and is normally one of only a few initiatives that strive toward greater credibility in the reporting of the effectiveness and impact of conservation actions. Nonetheless, to further promote auditing as a standard, widely-adopted business practice, organizations are also developing approaches, such as self-audits or facilitated self-audits, that can be utilized when human or financial resources are particularly limited.

## SECTION 5: Conclusion

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There is little doubt that even greater losses of biodiversity would be witnessed without the efforts of conservationists. Yet there is also no doubt that we face a tremendous challenge given the numerous, powerful, and growing threats driving global biodiversity loss. Consequently, the resources available for biodiversity conservation must be used as effectively and efficiently as possible, with efficiency in the field of conservation ultimately measured as the positive impact on biodiversity resulting per dollar or amount of effort expended.

The adoption of standards for good project design and management is one means by which conservationists are likely to improve efficiency and strengthen impact by ensuring that an eye is always kept on defining, assessing, and improving progress toward measurable objectives. Conservation auditing supports the adoption of such standards by raising awareness of their existence and providing targeted feedback to conservation projects to better apply the standards and thereby strengthen the conceptualization, articulation, monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of their work.

In addition, if the conservation projects audited to date are at all representative of the conservation community as a whole, it can also be hoped that auditing will catalyze greater investment in the adoption of standards of good practice by bringing to light the fact that the majority of conservation projects do not have systems in place to monitor progress and impact, evaluate resulting data, and adapt strategies and activities accordingly. Thus, despite what we'd like to believe, it is quite possible that most conservation projects – and therefore most conservation organizations – cannot credibly assess their effectiveness and impact, and seldom follow an iterative process necessary to learn from, share, and adapt based upon successes and failures.

Although auditing is clearly one key tool for effecting change, it alone will be insufficient to bring about the necessary shift in the current conservation business culture. For one, the auditing process itself can be improved, particularly by strengthening investment in post-audit actions and by developing more unified tools and methods for conducting audits so that cross-project and cross-organization learning can be consolidated.

Beyond auditing, increasing the extent to which conservation projects are managed using systematic and data-supported means – and thereby increase the credibility of reported results – will require addressing one or more underlying issues, including<sup>6</sup>:

- A misconception that conservation projects actually are already adaptively managed in a rigorous manner;
- A belief that because conservation projects are already adaptively managed in an informal manner, more formal, scheduled, and data-supported practices are not needed;
- A lack of sufficient human and financial resources to support monitoring and evaluation;
- A lack of emphasis on learning and improvement of business practice within the conservation community;
- A focus by project managers and teams on “mandatory” actions rather than on “best practice” actions;

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<sup>6</sup> Based upon discussions within the CMP, with conservation practitioners at a Conservation International workshop on conservation intervention monitoring, with an audit and project team considering TNC's Shiawassee Watershed project, and with TNC-Colorado staff following a presentation of the preliminary results of this analysis.

- Inconsistent leadership and direction regarding adoption of adaptive management within conservation organizations and by the donor community;
- A lack of evidence demonstrating that adoption of adaptive management practices is broadly feasible; and
- A lack of real-world examples and practical guidance regarding “full cycle” adaptive management, including low-input (e.g., money, time), but scientifically sound methods for defining and collecting data on indicators of the status of biodiversity targets and key factors, and of the effectiveness of conservation actions.

To some degree, the conservation community is working to address these issues, at least in part, by carrying out various other types of assessments and evaluations to assess strategy, effectiveness, and impact, establishing organization-wide initiatives for biodiversity and activity monitoring, and investing in the development of tools, guidelines, trainings, resource kits and staff. For these efforts to be truly useful and ultimately improve the design and management of our work (and the credibility of our measures of success), conservationists, and the donors supporting them, must commit to learning whether we are doing the right things, whether the things we are doing are succeeding or failing, and whether we are having the desired impact. Underlying this commitment must be increased accountability, a strong will to improve conservation practice overall, and a recognition that conserving the world’s biodiversity is an extremely ambitious and complex endeavor that must be pursued with true scientific rigor and good business practice.

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## APPENDIX A: Conservation Audits Inventory

- ❖ Data presented below reflect the characteristics and status of each project at the time of the conservation audit.
- ❖ “N/A” : Information Not Available

Conservation Project	Lead	Country	Additional Location Information	Approx. Budget of Project	Approx. # of Staff	Project Start Year	General Description of Project	Audit Scale	Audit Approach	Year of Audit	Audit Team Composition
<b>Atlantic Forest Program</b>	TNC	Brazil		>\$1M/yr	N/A	2005	The remaining 7% of the Atlantic Forest (orig. 330 million acres) is among the biologically richest and diverse forests in the world and exhibits a high number of species that can be found nowhere else on Earth. Primary threats to the remaining forest include illegal logging and extractive activities of valuable timber species, land conversion to pasture, agriculture, and forest plantations, expansion of urban areas and suburban development. Key strategies include protection and creation of public areas and private reserves, reforestation of degraded areas, implementation of financial mechanisms to sustain conservation funding.	Regional	TNC Tool-based Audit	2006	4 Internal TNC 1 External (CI)
<b>Block Island</b>	TNC	United States	Rhode Island	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	1972	Cooperation between Block Island Conservancy, the Block Island Land Trust, the Town of New Shoreham, the State of Rhode Island, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, TNC and others have preserved more than 40% of this 6,200 acre-island. Key threats include loss of habitat due primarily to second-home development, habitat disturbance/destruction due to overuse, and inappropriate use of pesticides and other toxins. Primary strategies include land conservation and environmental education.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	6 Internal TNC
<b>Clinch Valley</b>	TNC	United States	Virginia	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	1990	Conservation of key areas and resources within the 2,200-square-mile watersheds of the Clinch, Powell, and Holston rivers of southwestern Virginia and northeastern Tennessee, employing strategies of preserve establishment and management, education and outreach, promotion of conservation forestry, and community engagement. Combating threats of incompatible forestry and agricultural practices, invasive species, and non-point source pollution.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	4 Internal TNC 1 External (U. of Virginia)
<b>East Kalimantan Program</b>	TNC	Indonesia	Kalimantan	>\$1M/yr	50	2001	A 'ridge to reef' program to conserve ecological connectivity among some of the 'last great places' of Borneo. Key strategies include working with community, industry, & government, eco-regional planning & portfolio leverage, collaborative forestry / land-mgmt between communities and concessionaires, funding concession agreements for Orangutan conservation, forest certification and timber tracking, and establishing a Marine Protected Area (MPA).	Site/ Landscape	Strategy Review	2004	2 Internal TNC 4 External (1 Consultant, 1 Chemonics, 1 Harvard U., 1 Latin Inc)
<b>Emas/ Cerrado Conservation Project</b>	TNC	Brazil	Cerrado	<\$250k/yr	N/A	~2000	Development of strategies to maximize conservation of natural habitats in agricultural landscapes and disseminate agricultural best management practices that increase production efficiency while improving ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation around Emas National Park and the Cerrado.	Site	Strategy Evaluation and Audit	2004	5 Internal TNC 1 External (Cerrado Zero Tillage Association)

Conservation Project	Lead	Country	Additional Location Information	Approx. Budget of Project	Approx. # of Staff	Project Start Year	General Description of Project	Audit Scale	Audit Approach	Year of Audit	Audit Team Composition
<b>Glacial Ridge</b>	TNC	United States	Minnesota	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	2000	Restoration of more than 8,000 acres of wetlands and about 16,000 acres of Tallgrass Prairie through acquisition and effective management. Key threats include habitat fragmentation and invasive species. To date, the Conservancy has restored 100 wetlands and seeded more than 8,000 acres of prairie.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	5 Internal TNC 1 External (USFS)
<b>Greater Flint Hills</b>	TNC	United States	Oklahoma, Kansas	<\$250k/yr	3	1989	Conservation of 4.9 million acre landscape using preserves and easements, natural process restoration, education and awareness, and invasive species control and prevention.	Site	Strategy Evaluation and Audit	2004	3 Internal TNC
<b>Grenadines Program</b>	TNC	Grenadines		\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	2002	Marine conservation around the islands of the Grenadines. Strategic actions have included planning, network establishment, and capacity building. Current and future activities include strengthening management of MPAs, biological monitoring, and capacity building. Key threats include inappropriate coastal development, agricultural run-off and overgrazing, sand mining, poaching, overfishing, recreational overuse, inappropriate anchoring, and pollution.	Country	TNC Tool-based Audit	2006	6 Internal TNC 4 External (1 RARE, 1 Org. of Eastern Caribbean States, 2 NOAA)
<b>Hawaii Watershed Partnership</b>	TNC	United States	Hawaii	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	1991	Altogether, nine landscape-scale watershed partnerships managing nearly one million acres of the best remaining native ecosystems in Hawai'i. Such partnerships allow TNC to develop and implement management plans at the landscape scale regardless of land ownership boundaries. Each partnership must have a management plan, be adequately funded, and have key staff in place. The partnerships are in various stages of development, with some implementing threat abatement at scale and others building toward that.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	6 Internal TNC
<b>Jamaica Program</b>	TNC	Jamaica		\$250k - \$1M/yr	4.5	1990	Countrywide program (2.75 million acres) that focuses primarily on enhancing protection and management of national system of protected areas, with additional focus on other freshwater, terrestrial, and marine resources.	Country	Strategy Evaluation and Audit	2004	3 Internal TNC 1 External (CI)
<b>Kimbe Bay</b>	TNC	Papua New Guinea	Island of New Britain	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	2002	Conservation of a 700,000-hectare bay within the Coral Triangle. Employed participatory CAP planning and now focusing on implementing a network of MPAs. Key threats include runoff and sediments from timber harvesting and agriculture, over harvest of marine resources for subsistence and commercial use, and rapid population growth.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2006	5 Internal TNC
<b>Komodo</b>	TNC	Indonesia	Komodo Island	>\$1M/yr	N/A	1995	Project focused initially on expansion of Komodo National Park to include marine areas. Work since has supported effective management of the park, and ultimately the development and institutionalization of the Komodo Collaborative Management Initiative, a wide-ranging program of investments, policy reforms, management interventions, socioeconomic development, and institutional strengthening. TNC supports this work through a new joint-venture with an Indonesian private tourism company.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2007	6 Internal TNC
<b>Lassen Foothills</b>	TNC	United States	California	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	1997	Conservation of critical resources within the 900,000-acre Lassen Foothills ecoregion through land acquisition/easements and management, restoration of natural processes (e.g., fire), and riparian protection. Combating key threats of rural subdivision and development, altered freshwater flow regimes, invasive species.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	7 Internal TNC

Conservation Project	Lead	Country	Additional Location Information	Approx. Budget of Project	Approx. # of Staff	Project Start Year	General Description of Project	Audit Scale	Audit Approach	Year of Audit	Audit Team Composition
<b>Mackinaw River Watershed</b>	TNC	United States	Illinois	<\$250k/yr	N/A	1990	Conservation of the Mackinaw River Watershed, addressing primarily stresses posed by agriculture, the predominant land use in the watershed. Primary strategies include compatible resource management, research, natural processes restoration, law and policy.	Regional	Strategy Evaluation and Audit	2004	5 Internal TNC
<b>Madre de las Aguas Conservation Area</b>	TNC	Dominican Republic		<\$250k/yr	N/A	~2003	Conservation of the mountainous Madre de las Aguas, which shelters the headwaters of 17 rivers that provide energy, irrigation and drinkable water for more than 50% of the population of the DR. Primary focus is on expanding and linking the network of protected areas and ensuring their effective management. Key threats include unsustainable logging, uncontrolled fires, slash and burn agriculture, expansion of sun-grown coffee fields and hillside farming, which cause soil erosion and significant species loss.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2006	3 Internal TNC 2 External (Little Miami Incorporated, AWF)
<b>Mesoamerican Reef Program</b>	TNC	Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, Honduras		\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	2003	Conservation of the second most important barrier reef system and coral reef complex in the world. Combating unsustainable fishing, inadequate fisheries management, coastal habitat loss due to tourism and development, declining water quality (especially due to agricultural run-off, and coral bleaching caused by climate change.	Regional	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	2 Internal TNC 2 External (WCS, WWF)
<b>Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (USFS)</b>	USFS	United States	Illinois	<\$250k/yr	25	1996	Conservation of a 30,000-acre tallgrass prairie. Key strategies have included management planning and restoration with native species.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit, adapted for use for USFS project site	2006	10 External (TNC)
<b>Sacramento River</b>	TNC	United States	California	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	~1997	Restoration of a continuous 100-mile stretch of ecologically viable riparian habitat to flood-prone lands along the Sacramento River through natural process restoration, replanting of native species, community engagement, and land acquisition.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	7 Internal TNC
<b>South Puget Sound</b>	TNC	United States	Washington	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	~2000	Conservation of matrix prairie and oak woodland along south edge of Puget Sound. Threats include land conversion for agricultural and housing, disrupted fire regimes, and invasive species. TNC and partners are working to create a network of parks and preserves (including additional lands protected), remove invasive species, and restore native grasses and oak seedlings on hundreds of acres.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	5 Internal TNC 1 External (Peregrine Consulting)
<b>Southern Cumberlands</b>	TNC	United States	Alabama, Tennessee	<\$250k/yr	5	2001	Conservation of freshwater biodiversity and matrix forest through land protection of headwaters and riparian restoration.	Regional	Strategy Evaluation and Audit	2004	4 Internal TNC
<b>Sulawesi</b>	TNC	Indonesia		\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	1991, grew in 2003	Ecoregional conservation of Sulawesi Island, including support to management of Lore Lindu National Park (568,000 acres).	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	3 Internal TNC 1 External (World Bank)
<b>Upper St. Joseph River Watershed</b>	TNC	United States	Indiana, Michigan	<\$250k/yr	1.5	1992	Watershed conservation employing strategies of land management; compatible resource management (encouraging application of Best Management Practices (BMPs) in surrounding agriculture), invasive species control & prevention, education and awareness, and natural process restoration to combat key threats posed by agriculture and invasive species.	Regional	Strategy Evaluation and Audit	2004	3 Internal TNC
<b>White Sands Missile Range</b>	TNC	United States	New Mexico	\$250k - \$1M/yr	6-8	1997	TNC as manager of the Army's Integrated Training Area Management Program for White Sands (2.2 million acres), addressing issues of invasive species, altered fire and hydrologic regimes, and disturbance and fragmentation from military land use practices.	Site	TNC Tool-based Audit	2005	4 Internal TNC

Conservation Project	Lead	Country	Additional Location Information	Approx. Budget of Project	Approx. # of Staff	Project Start Year	General Description of Project	Audit Scale	Audit Approach	Year of Audit	Audit Team Composition
<b>Bering Sea Ecoregion Programme</b>	TNC/WWF	United States, Russia	Bering Sea	\$250k - \$1M/yr	N/A	1998	Combating threats posed by overfishing, bycatch, pollution, the introduction of nonnative species, and global warming.	Regional	Checklist-based audit	2004	4 Internal WWF 1-2 External (TNC)
<b>Glover's Reef</b>	WCS	Belize		<\$250k/yr	2	2004	Promote the conservation and sustainable use of the marine resources of Glover's Reef Atoll. Key approaches include: policy reform, fisheries management, marine protected areas management, basic research, environmental education, and training	Regional	WCS pilot audit	2004	6 Internal WCS 7 External (CZMAI, 2 TNC, WWF, 2 BAS, Belize Fisheries Department)
<b>Amazon Keystone Initiative</b>	WWF	Brazil	Amazon Basin	est. at \$10-60M for 5 years	not yet started	not yet started	Combating the threats of infrastructural development throughout the Amazon Basin, providing support to the Amazon Regional Protected Area programme, assisting the creation of a Pan-Amazonian Conservation Initiative with a significant programme on protected area networks.	Network-supported initiative	Desk Audit of Initiative Business Plan	2006	2 Internal WWF 2 External (FOS)
<b>Asian Rhino and Elephant Action Strategy (AREAS) Programme</b>	WWF	Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Nepal, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam		>\$1M/yr	2.5	1998 (for AREAS, but related projects started in the 1970s)	Focal areas include Terai Arc North Bank Landscape, Tri-Border Landscape, Cat Tien NP, Heart of Borneo, Teso Nilo Conservation Landscape, Bukit Barisan Selatan NP, Ujung Kulon NP. Programmed seeks to conserve landscapes supporting the three threatened Asian Rhinoceros species and the threatened Asian elephant by connecting and safeguarding protected areas that support them. Strategies include habitat protection and restoration, anti-poaching, land-use planning, rhino translocation, and collection of data needed to improve species management. Also addresses cross-cutting issues such as wildlife trade, elephants in captivity, and human-wildlife conflict.	Large institutional program	WWF Program Evaluation	2003	3 WWF Internal 2 External (FOS)
<b>Bycatch Keystone Initiative</b>	WWF	North Atlantic, Pacific and East Africa marine areas, and the markets in USA, Japan and Europe		\$21-29M for 5 years	not applicable	not yet started	The long term goal is to reduce global bycatch by 50% with a focus on transforming fisheries to make bycatch no longer profitable, legal, or socially acceptable. The focus is on Pacific long line fleets, tropical shrimp fisheries, and cod bycatch in the North Sea and Grand Banks.	Network-supported initiative	Desk Audit of Initiative Business Plan	2006	2 Internal WWF 2 External (FOS)
<b>Congo Basin Keystone Initiative</b>	WWF	Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Central African Republic, Chad		\$25M for 5 years	not applicable	not yet started	This initiative aims to 1) re-establish connectivity in two major landscapes- Sangha tri-National area and the Ngoila-Minton Corridor; 2) have 4 logging companies active in the Congo Basin certified; 3) have 5 major financial institutions adapt and implement social and environmental principles in investment portfolios in the Congo Basin; and 4) get 15 leading extractive and transport companies to implement policies to reduce the threat of the bushmeat trade.	Network-supported initiative	Desk Audit of Initiative Business Plan	2006	2 Internal WWF 2 External (FOS)
<b>East Africa Marine Ecoregion Programme</b>	WWF	Tanzania, Kenya, Mozambique		>\$1M/yr	5	2001	EAME seeks to conserve marine and coastal environment of the region for conservation and sustainability. Strategic framework includes 5 components: 1) priority seascapes and the marine protected area network; 2) enhancing the enabling policy and legal environment; 3) livelihoods promoting sustainability; 4) conserving wide-ranging species and addressing transnational threats; and 5) monitoring, innovating, and capacity building.	Large institutional program	WWF Program Audit	2006	2 Internal WWF 1 External (FOS)

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<b>European Alpine Ecoregion Programme</b>	WWF	Austria, Germany, Italy, France, Switzerland		>\$1M/yr	6	1999	The European Alpine Programme aims to reduce the threats to biodiversity (esp. alpine forests, meadows, freshwater areas, and threatened species) from all major infrastructure projects. It also aims to raise awareness to involve more people in protecting species and habitats and using resources more wisely.	Regional	WWF Program Audit	2004	2 Internal WWF 2 External (1 FOS, 1 WCS)
<b>Global Conservation Programme</b>	WWF	Global		\$60M/yr (partial)	55	2002 (for current phase)	The GCP (80% of WWF's work worldwide) is the combined effort of the WWF Network to achieve the targets and milestones of the six global programmes – Toxics, Climate Change, Forests, Freshwater Species, and Marine – as well as those of the priority 59 Ecoregion Action Programmes. The GCP also includes network activities that are implemented through Global Policy Initiatives.	Large institutional program	WWF Full Audit	2006	3 Internal WWF 3 External (but close to WWF) 4 External (Independent)
<b>Indochina Programme</b>	WWF	Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos		>\$1M/yr	135	1985	The Indochina Programme coordinates the growing number of WWF projects through offices in Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. Work currently focuses on 3 priority ecoregions: the Greater Annamites; the Dry Forests; and the Mekong River. Key threats include wildlife trade, illegal logging, and over-extraction of natural resources, for both subsistence and commercial uses.	Regional	WWF Pilot Audit, with CMP	2004	2 Internal WWF 2 External (1 FOS, 1 TNC)
<b>Macroeconomics Programme</b>	WWF	Global	Based in Washington DC	>\$1M/yr	11	1989	Covers four main areas of work: Economic Change, Poverty, and Environment; Trade and the Environment; Applied Environmental Economics; and Extractive Industries. Often focuses on how policies of the World Bank and other major multi-laterals influence national agendas.	Large institutional program	WWF Office Audit	2004	1 Internal WWF 1 External (TNC)
<b>Madagascar Spiny Forest Programme</b>	WWF	Madagascar		N/A	15+	1998	Seeks to conserve Dry Tropical Forests and Spiny Forests found in Southern Madagascar. WWF has prepared a series of assessments and analyses aimed at developing ecoregion-based conservation strategies. WWF works closely with partners to combat key threats, such as land conversion to agriculture and ranching.	Site	WWF Program Audit	2003	2 Internal WWF 1 External (WCS)
<b>Papua New Guinea Programme</b>	WWF	Papua New Guinea		N/A	20+	1995	Seeks to conserve the third largest tropical forest on Earth as well as critical marine and freshwater areas. Addressing unsustainable natural resource extraction for both commercial and subsistence use, weak governance mechanisms, complex legislative and tenure systems, lack of protected areas, and weak PA management.	Country program	WWF Program Audit	2006	1 Internal WWF 3 External (1 Arizona State U., 1 Australian National U; 1 University of PNG)
<b>Sweden Programme</b>	WWF	Sweden		\$17M/yr	53	1971	Five main programmatic areas: forests, freshwater, marine, education, and cultural landscapes. Activities target WWF Global Conservation Programme targets and milestones.	Country program (with international elements)	WWF Program Audit	2004	3 Internal WWF 1 External (TNC)