

***Are We Measuring  
Conservation Effectiveness?***

A survey of current results-based management  
practices in the conservation community

6 June 2010

## *Are We Measuring Conservation Effectiveness?*

This report was written by an independent consultant, Matthew Muir. Interpretations of results are the consultant's and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the foundations or conservation organizations surveyed, or the Conservation Measures Partnership. The survey, upon which this report is based, benefited greatly from the contributions of Elizabeth O'Neill (WWF), Nick Salafsky (FOS), William Crosse (CI), and Kristen Sherwood.

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## Executive Summary

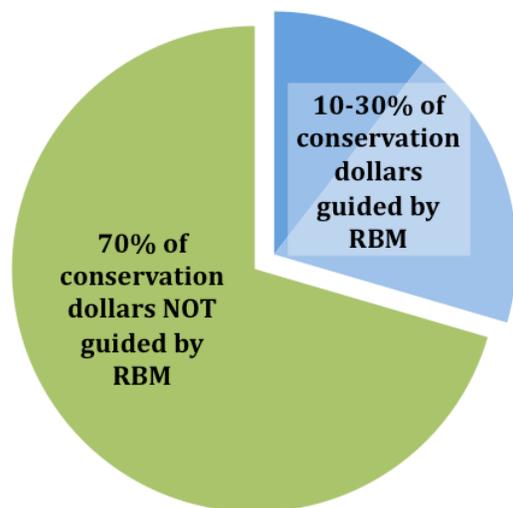
On May 5-6<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the *Measuring Conservation Effectiveness Summit* was held in Palo Alto, CA, at the Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation. In anticipation of the summit, a survey was distributed among leading conservation NGOs and environmental foundation programs. Representing over 3 billion dollars in annual conservation effort and support, a total of 29 organizations completed surveys and produced the first community-wide findings of results-based management (RBM) in conservation.

Five key results are highlighted in this report:

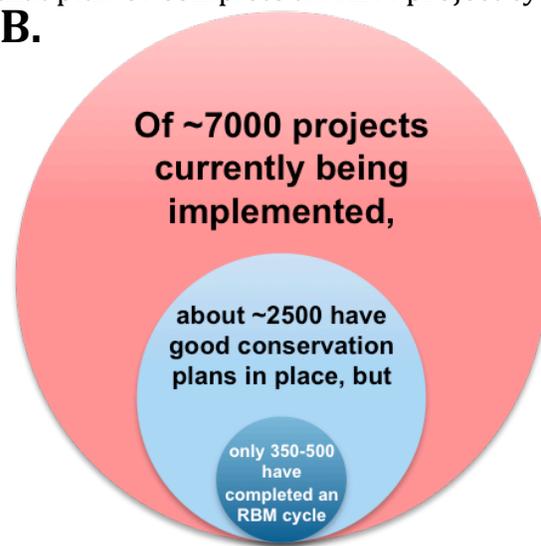
- 1. RBM is viewed as important.** Over 70% of surveyed NGOs and 90% of foundations have a positive attitude towards RBM and view it as a high priority to implement in the future. Almost 95% of NGOs say that it's important to understand whether conservation actions are having their intended impacts and two-thirds claim evidence that RBM leads to improved conservation outcomes.
- 2. RBM is not widely practiced and quality varies a lot.** Despite its stated importance, good RBM still occurs patchily within organizations. Survey respondents reported that only 10-30% of all conservation spending was guided by RBM and only 5% of all projects completed later RBM practices like monitoring and evaluation (Figure 1). The quality of current RBM also limits the capability of conservation organizations to evaluate their own efforts: only half of NGOs use their RBM system to understand whether their projects are having their intended impact. Likewise, three-quarters of organizations do not know if their actions are cost-effective based on the RBM system they employ.

**Figure 1.** Extent to which conservation organizations practice RBM, by (A) percent of conservation spend guided by RBM, and (B) number of projects that plan or complete an RBM project cycle.

**A.**



**B.**



**3. RBM does not happen because it is not a priority in conservation culture.**

One survey respondent described the obstacles to RBM “not so much [as a] lack of support or interest, but [a] sheer lack of resources (time, money, trained people) to do it, especially given all of the other priorities...faced in a day.” Indeed, lack of money was the #1 ranked obstacle identified and over 90% of NGOs called lack of time as a major or extreme barrier to greater RBM implementation. The combination of insufficient time, weak funding, as well as few dedicated staff suggest that RBM is a low priority in many conservation efforts. The root causes, however, remain unclear on why this is true in the culture of conservation.

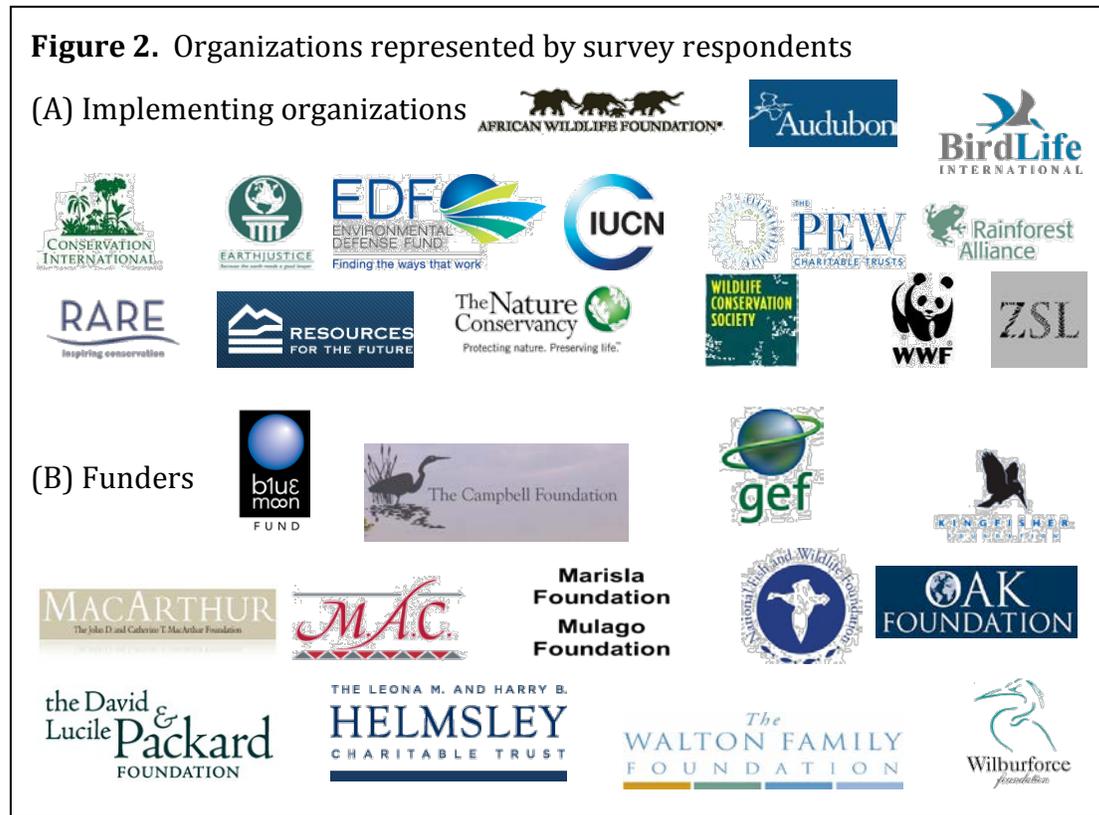
**4. Senior leadership and donors have a key role in the quality of RBM.** An organization’s board and upper management may play a key role in the setting the organizational culture for RBM. For example, where senior leadership understands what RBM is and how it’s implemented, RBM happens to a greater extent. In addition, where RBM has been implemented, about 90% of NGOs say that an institutional mandate was very important or essential. Over 80% of donors cite reporting requirements as important to RBM being adopted and reporting by NGOs of current RBM practices support this hypothesis. In brief, what donors ask of their grantees gets done, but not much else.

**5. Smaller organizations report better RBM.** Conservation NGOs with smaller budgets were significantly more likely to report that more of their efforts were guided by RBM. They also expressed greater confidence in answering key organizational questions with RBM, claimed evidence that RBM leads to improved conservation, and referred to that evidence as a key ingredient to RBM adoption. RBM at large organizations seemed to depend more on top-down pressure, even though their senior leadership was less likely to understand what RBM is and how it can benefit the organization. Quality RBM at larger organizations will likely require different tools and strategies to reach the success seen at a few smaller NGOs.

A 6th key result, that **Funders think NGOs are doing better at RBM than NGOs do**, is tentatively based on the assumption that the grantees of surveyed funders do not fundamentally differ from the surveyed NGOs in terms of RBM practice. See Appendix A (Next Steps: Developing a better baseline) for a discussion of this and other challenges that emerged during survey design and completion. This survey successfully realized its primary purpose—to help frame the discussion in Palo Alto between foundation and conservation organizations. A secondary purpose has yet to be realized, but could be a key next step—to help shape a baseline questionnaire that could be regularly conducted to track progress towards better evidence-based conservation and more widespread RBM.

## Background

Although conservation is not currently a very evidence-based field of practice,<sup>1</sup> several efforts have emerged in the past decade to make it more so. Some have developed within single institutions, some more collaboratively, but all seek a more functional system of measuring, assessing, and sharing the effectiveness of conservation action. Despite these efforts, conservation is still scrambling to answer basic questions about its own performance—What is working? What can be improved? When is a change in approach needed?



Other fields have also experienced the shift of the evidence-based movement—most notably medicine.<sup>2</sup> Whereas the struggles of today’s conservationists resembles those of doctors 50 years ago, progress in medicine is now defined by a gold standard of systematically collected and disseminated evidence, housed in dedicated institutions and databases, and shared openly with practitioners and the public. Unsurprisingly, advocates for improving the ability of conservation to measure its own effectiveness often express healthcare-envy.<sup>3</sup>

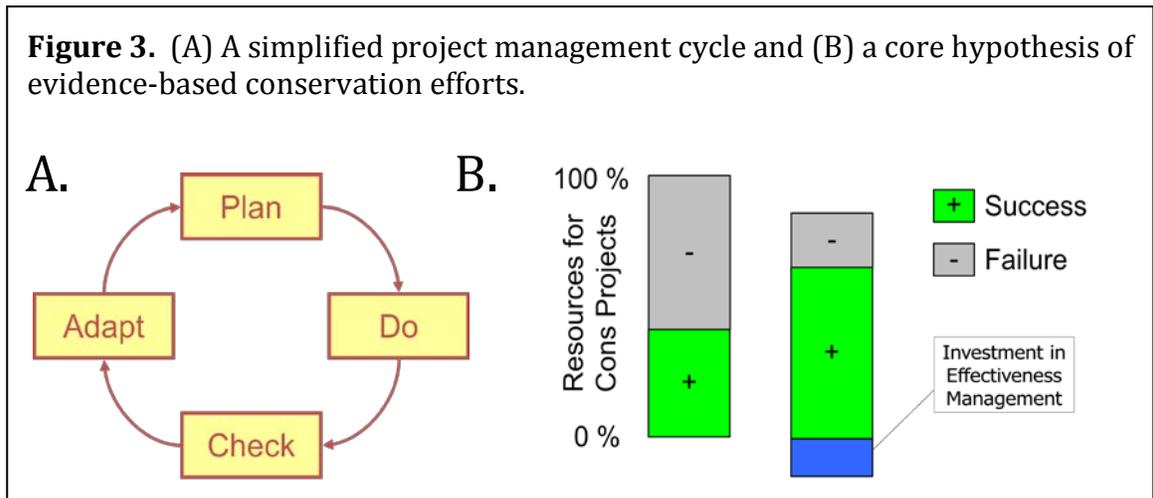
<sup>1</sup> Sutherland et al. (2004) [The need for evidence-based conservation](#).

<sup>2</sup> In addition to medicine, other movements now include evidence-based government policy, education, engineering, and sports. See the online site [Evidence-BasedManagement.com](#) for more examples.

## Are We Measuring Conservation Effectiveness?

In this context, a summit was held on May 5-6, 2010, at the Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation in Palo Alto, CA.<sup>4</sup> The summit brought together senior leadership from conservation and funding organizations, intent on bridging the gap between the rhetoric of “how good it is” to measure conservation effectiveness and the reality of “here’s how we do it.”

In preparation, all summit attendees were invited to complete a survey on their current practices and future outlook of measuring their own performance. Although the sample size was small relative to the entire conservation community, the respondents (Figure 2) represent a robust portion of the world’s bio-diversity spending by non-governmental entities and some of the leading environmental foundations. The survey was the first of its kind.



Because a number of fields and organizations have sought a more evidence-based direction, a number of frameworks, tools, and terminologies have been created. The survey was not intended for any one evidence-based strategy and the challenge was to develop questions that captured the diversity of practices across organizations. The core of most efforts, however, is a basic project cycle<sup>5</sup> and a hypothesis that investment in effectiveness measurement will lead to a greater overall return on biodiversity conservation (Figure 3). Recognizing that there is not yet a consensus on terminology (see Box 1 for examples of related definitions), this report will hereafter use *results-based management* (RBM).

For every conservation dollar spent, about a dime is guided by results-based management.<sup>6</sup> The summit and survey are progress towards a future where the conservation community is accountable for the other 90 cents.

<sup>3</sup> Pullin & Knight (2001) [Effectiveness in conservation practice: pointers from medicine and public health](#). Woodroffe & Hedges (in review) Why are there so few field trials in wildlife conservation and management?

<sup>4</sup> See the Conservation Measures Partnership [website](#) for *Measuring Conservation Effectiveness* summit notes and materials, presentations, and consensus statement.

<sup>5</sup> Roughly, the steps are: Plan-Do-Check-Adapt. Plan: stating your desired results ahead of time, Do: do a conservation action, Check: compare desired results against reality, Adapt: change your conservation action accordingly. A fifth step (Share) is sometimes added.

**Box 1.** Definitions of related concepts in measuring conservation effectiveness.

**Adaptive management:**

(Def. 1) an approach to natural resource policy that treats policies as experiments so as to learn efficiently from experience. \*

(Def. 2) the integration of project design, management, and monitoring, to provide a framework to systematically test assumptions, promote learning, and supply timely information for management decisions. †

**Effectiveness monitoring:** the periodic collection and use of data to understand whether conservation actions are having their intended impacts. ‡

**Evidence-based conservation:** the routine assessment and dissemination of the effectiveness of conservation actions. §

**Monitoring & evaluation:** the periodic collection and assessment of data relative to stated project goals and objectives. †

**Results-based management:** a management strategy focusing on performance and achievement of outputs, outcomes and impacts. ||

**Performance measurement:** the ongoing monitoring and reporting of program accomplishments, particularly progress toward preestablished goals. ¶

**Systematic performance measurement:** the regular monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of conservation actions based on clearly stated goals, objectives, and assumptions so as to assess effectiveness, promote learning, and report achievements. #

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\* Lee (1993) [Compass and Gyroscope: Integrating Science and Politics for the Environment](#).

† CMP (2007) [Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation, Version 2](#).

‡ Salzer & Salafsky (2006) [Allocating resources between taking action, assessing status, and measuring effectiveness of conservation actions](#).

§ [ConservationEvidence.com](#)

|| OECD DAC (2002) [Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results Based Management](#).

¶ GAO (2005) [Performance Measurement and Evaluation: Definitions and Relationships](#).

# This survey.

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<sup>6</sup> RBM varies widely between organizations. Collectively, survey respondents indicated that 10-30% of their conservation budgets are currently guided by RBM. A 10% estimate for the entire community assumes that conservation organizations that did not participate in the summit or survey are less likely to be engaged in the evidence-based movement and are more likely to be towards the bottom of the range given by those surveyed.

## **Survey Methodology**

The survey was designed by the research committee<sup>7</sup> and pilot tested before being distributed for web-based entry.<sup>8</sup> Recipients were identified based on their familiarity with RBM practices at their respective organizations and were encouraged to work through the survey with colleagues. The response rate was 56% for funders (n=14 respondents) and 88% for implementing organizations (n=15 respondents).

Respondents used a number of interpretations of RBM to answer survey questions (Box 2), reflective of the range of RBM frameworks used in conservation. Most survey participants had budgets of between 10 and 100 million US\$ (Box 3). Survey questions were largely qualitative. For example, four-point scales were used to indicate importance (Not Important, Minimally Important, Somewhat Important, Very Important), agreement (Strongly Disagree, Moderately Disagree, Moderately Agree, Strongly Agree), and extent (Does not happen, Happens occasionally, Happens often, Happens almost always). The precision of quantitative answers (e.g., % of budget guided by RBM, # of projects) should not be over-interpreted, as respondents were encouraged to make rough guesses rather than leave questions unanswered. Some questions were open-ended, but all provided room for comments and clarification by respondents. Most questions were about the practices of the entire organization or foundation, while others inquired about a specific audience (e.g., upper management, the board, field staff, grantees).

### **Box 2. What is considered RBM, Part I: Foundations.**

Survey respondents were asked what RBM meant at their organization or foundation. Responses below have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

#### Foundations

- “The constant and direct assessment of grant progress.”
- “A definition of a clear theory of victory, specific outputs and outcomes, and the work steps and resources to accomplish these.”
- “Rigorous post-grant monitoring.”
- Other tools and frameworks used: Spitfire Strategies ‘[Smart Chart](#)’

See full results for quantitative survey questions in Appendix B and the original survey and instructions in Appendix C.

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<sup>7</sup> Summit Research Committee: Sheila O’Connor (chair), Bernd Cordes, William Crosse, Brett Jenks, Richard Margoluis, Matthew Muir, Elizabeth O’Neill, Nick Salafsky, and Kristin Sherwood.

<sup>8</sup> [SurveyMonkey.com](https://www.surveymonkey.com)

**Box 2 continued. What is considered RBM, Part II: Implementing Organizations.**

Survey respondents were asked what RBM meant at their organization or foundation. Responses below have been lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

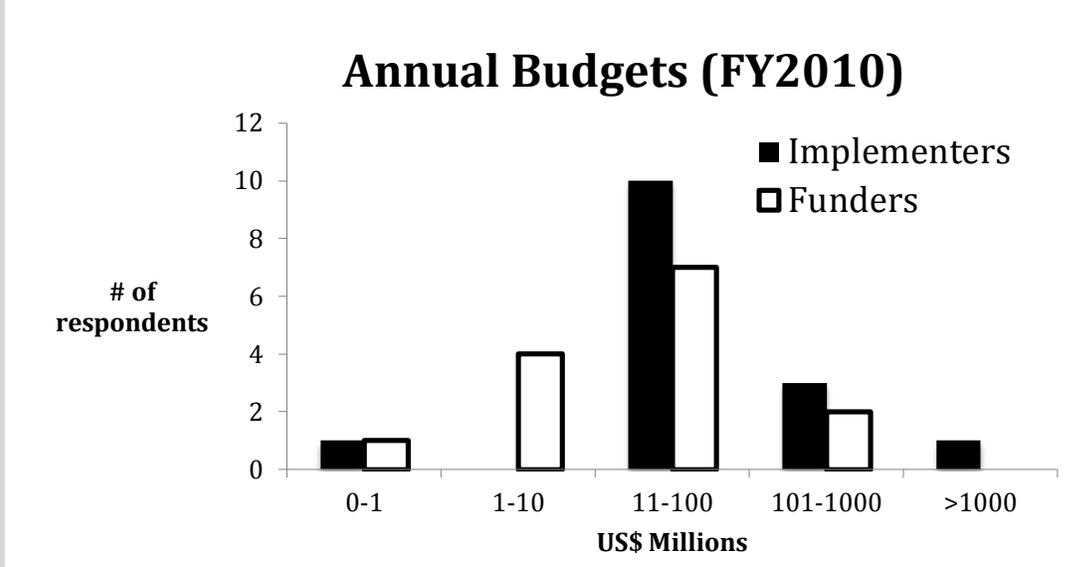
Conservation organizations

- “We follow the [OECD-DAC principles](#) for evaluation and use results based management to manage planning and budgets, cover reporting, and manage the organization.”
- “Projects are measured against the targets in their grant proposals, subject to reviews and annual audits. Programs have five year work plans based on strategies, with objectives and measurable indicators.”
- “Our strategic planning process includes 5 year targets, annual work plans with divisional objectives from which quarterly reports are generated.”
- “We attempt to define, measure, and reward on the basis our goals: ‘policy impact,’ ‘social impact,’ ‘mindshare,’ or ‘communications success.’”
- “We carefully choose investment areas and then evaluate the progress and impact of specific projects using internal peer reviews, scientific data and publications.”
- “At our organization, RBM equates to implementation of the [Open Standards](#).”
- “We undertake systematic range-wide priority setting for species and strategic planning for landscape and country programs.”
- “In advance of each year and according to our 2015 strategy, we identify the key deliverables against expected results in the coming year. We report against the expected results and deliverables every 6 months, which is reviewed by our senior leadership.”
- “We annually track a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), including whether our global spend is in line with our global priorities and whether programs are achieving stated goals and objectives.”
- “We consider RBM as the tracking of achievement towards institutional goals. All projects synchronize their specific goals within an organizational framework, thereby allowing information to flow up for reporting at an organizational level.”
- “A project cycle management approach that includes systematic performance measurement as an explicit component. We also audit conservation projects, including a peer-review of the processes (inputs, actions and outputs) and, where applicable, the results (outcomes and impacts).”
- “We produce a monthly scorecard of each our campaigns that takes into account potential impact, timeline, and partner feedback. We also conduct retrospective analyses and on-site audits that feed into organizational learning.”
- Other tools and frameworks used: Performance and Impact Assessment ([PIMA](#)), Conservation Action Planning ([CAP](#)), Project and Programme Management Standards ([PPMS](#)), Objectives Oriented Project Planning (ZOPP), and Log Frames.

**Box 3. Organizational size of survey respondents**

Survey respondents collectively represented over 1.1 billion US\$ in annual conservation support and 2.1 billion in annual conservation dollars spent (Figure 4). Conservation efforts were allocated by 150 foundation staff through 1,600 grants and carried out by over 16,000 NGO staff in 7,000 projects.

**Figure 4.** Distribution of conservation budgets of survey respondents (FY2010)



The size distribution of both funders and implementing organizations skewed to the right. For example, the largest NGO represented about half of all conservation dollars spent and the largest funder about 70% of total dollars allocated. The median funder gave 13 million US\$ through 60 grants and 6 conservation staff (Table 1). The median NGO annually spends 36 million US\$ on 130 conservation projects and 300 organizational staff (Table 2).

**Table 1.** Characteristics of surveyed foundations (n=14)

|         | US\$ M (FY2010) | Total Foundation Staff | Conservation Foundation Staff | Conservation Granting Programs | Annual Conservation Grants |
|---------|-----------------|------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| TOTAL   | 1171            | 578                    | 148                           | 70                             | 1675                       |
| AVERAGE | 84              | 41                     | 11                            | 6                              | 129                        |
| MEDIAN  | 13              | 18                     | 6                             | 3                              | 60                         |

**Table 2.** Characteristics of surveyed implementing organizations (n=15)

|         | US\$ M (FY2010) | Organizational staff | Programs | Projects |
|---------|-----------------|----------------------|----------|----------|
| TOTAL   | 2094            | 16414                | 608      | 7207     |
| AVERAGE | 140             | 1094                 | 43       | 515      |
| MEDIAN  | 36              | 300                  | 10       | 134      |

## **Six Key Results**

1. RBM is viewed as important
2. RBM is not widely practiced or quality varies a lot
3. RBM does not happen because it is not a priority in conservation culture
4. Senior leadership and donors have a key role in the quality of RBM
5. Smaller organizations report better RBM
6. Funders think NGOs are doing better at RBM than NGOs do

### **Survey Result #1: RBM is viewed as important**

Since the early 2000s, advocates for more rigorous monitoring of conservation action have preached the importance of RBM.<sup>9</sup> Their advances include a research unit that publishes systematic reviews of conservation evidence and a joint venture of organizations that promotes conservation tools for better monitoring and evaluation.<sup>10</sup>

Community attitudes reflect these successes. Over 70% of surveyed NGOs and 90% of foundations have a positive attitude toward implementing RBM.<sup>11</sup> Similar percentages view RBM as a high priority to implement in the future. Not only are attitudes aligned fairly positively, practitioners identify improved effectiveness as the primary motivating factor behind RBM and almost 95% say that understanding whether conservation actions are having their intended impacts is an important question at their organization (Box 4).

#### **Box 4. Consensus on the importance of RBM-orientated questions**

The following questions were identified as *somewhat* or *very* important by more than 85% of respondents at their NGO or foundation (in order of stated importance):

- Are our projects having their intended impacts?
- Are our programs having their intended impacts?
- Are our actions being adapted and improved?
- Can credible results be demonstrated to our board, donors, and supporters?
- Are our actions cost-effective?
- What can be learned to improve our organization's work?
- Do we understand why a project/program fails when it does so?
- Can our actions be better coordinated across the organization?

The wording of questions varied according to respondent type. The wording (and order) presented here is based on the survey of implementing organizations. Parallel questions for funders were adapted as appropriate (e.g., "Are our grantee's projects having their intended impacts?")

<sup>9</sup> In 2002, members of the USAID-funded Global Conservation Program convened with several other conservation organizations that shared concerns about how conservation success was being monitored and measured. See also, [Kleiman et al. \(2000\)](#), [Pullin & Knight \(2001\)](#), [Sutherland et al. \(2004\)](#).

<sup>10</sup> The Centre for Evidence-Based Conservation ([CEBC](#)) and the Conservation Measures Partnership ([CMP](#)).

<sup>11</sup> Averaged across four audiences for NGOs (project managers, program directors, upper management, and the board) and three audiences for foundations (program directors, upper management, and the board).

## *Are We Measuring Conservation Effectiveness?*

Organizations are also spending money on RBM and funders are giving (and withholding) money for its implementation. NGOs report allocating 1-5% of total conservation dollars on RBM in FY2010, including dedicated staff, IT systems, and training and audit programs. Likewise, funders estimated that 1-9% of their funding budget for conservation projects was spent on RBM. Some funders do not support grantees without a strong RBM ethic. For example, one funder wrote: “we do not fund any organizations that are not committed to ongoing [RBM].”

What’s the evidence that RBM works? In 1999, an authority on adaptive management said that the conservation community didn’t have it yet.<sup>12</sup> In 2010, there are several NGOs and foundations claiming evidence. Two-thirds of surveyed NGOs report having moderate to strong evidence that RBM leads to improvements in conservation effectiveness and similarly, over 80% of funders say that it leads to improved conservation outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

In the space of a decade, the message of RBM is out there, it’s shaped viewpoints, money is being spent on it, and the evidence of its utility is growing.

### **Survey Result #2: RBM is not widely practiced and quality varies a lot**

Despite advances, good RBM in conservation still occurs very patchily. For example, in a recent study of over 1,000 Australian protected areas, the effectiveness of only 10% of management interventions could be assessed based on evidence.<sup>14</sup> An advocate for more and better evaluation of conservation effectiveness laments that conservationists cannot unequivocally answer whether their efforts are “money for nothing.”<sup>15</sup> This survey’s results largely support these past critiques—that RBM happens within a limited breadth in the conservation community and quality is still poor overall.

Of the 2 billion US\$ spent annually by survey respondents, only 10-30% of conservation spending was reportedly guided by RBM (Figure 5A). Of approximately 7,000 conservation projects undertaken per year, 1/3 have good conservation plans in place, but only 1 in 20 are estimated to have completed the full RBM cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Adapt) (Figure 5B).

A similar result was found when conservation implementers were asked about specific elements of the RBM cycle (Figure 5C). Most projects complete steps related to basic planning and doing, but progressively fewer check their conservation actions (i.e., monitor, assess performance against goals) or adapt (i.e., use data, learn and improve).

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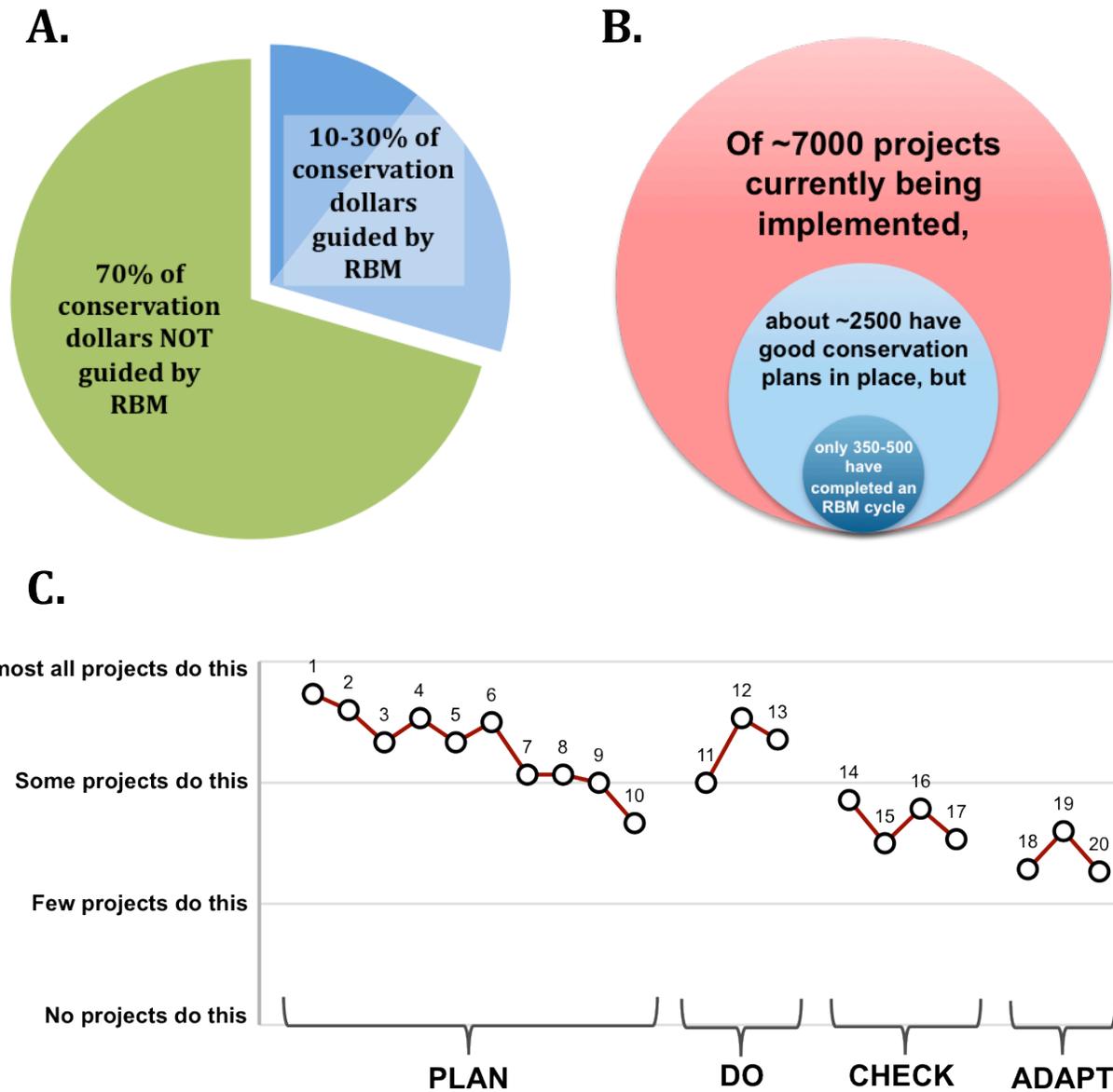
<sup>12</sup> Lee (1999) [Appraising adaptive management](#).

<sup>13</sup> 90% of funders also claim evidence that RBM leads to improvements in conservation grant making.

<sup>14</sup> Cook et al. (2010) [Conservation in the dark? The information used to support management decisions](#).

<sup>15</sup> Ferraro & Pattanayak (2006) [Money for nothing? A call for empirical evaluation of biodiversity conservation investments](#).

**Figure 5.** Extent to which conservation organizations practice RBM, by (A) percent of conservation spend guided by RBM, (B) number of projects that plan or complete an RBM project cycle, and (C) average extent to which projects complete specific elements of the RBM project cycle.

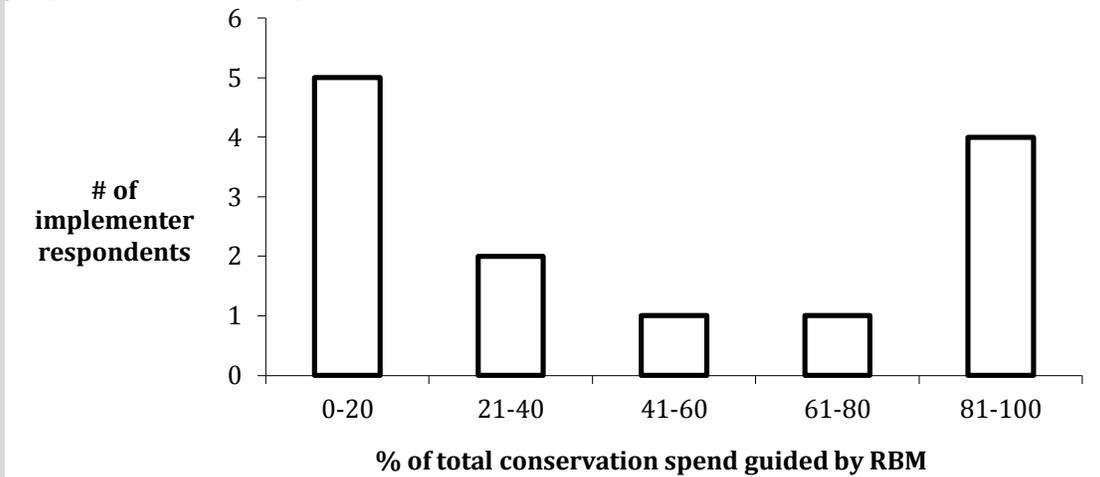


Legend for specific elements of RBM cycle: (1) ID project scope, (2) ID partners in planning process, (3) ID stake-holders in planning process, (4) ID conservation targets, (5) ID threats, (6) ID actions to abate threats, (7) situation analysis, (8) prioritize threats to act upon, (9) prioritize actions to implement, (10) articulation of logic models, (11) develop action plan, (12) develop operational plan, (13) implement operational plan, (14) develop monitoring plan, (15) implement monitoring plan, (16) assess status of conservation targets, (17) assess performance of conservation action, (18) use data to adapt & learn, (19) share data internally, (20) share data externally.

**Box 5. Where RBM happens well, Part I.**

The practice of RBM varies greatly. Across the organizations surveyed, the extent to which RBM is implemented is U-shaped: some NGOs report that almost all their efforts are guided by RBM, while others report guidance of almost none of their efforts.

**Figure 6.** The U-shaped curve of RBM across the conservation community.



Where RBM is happening, survey respondents also identified and ranked the top three ingredients or catalysts that brought the organization to its current state. In order of ranked importance, ranks weighted 3-2-1:

- Institutional mandate of RBM [33% of 1<sup>st</sup> place ranks]
- Presence of a champion for RBM within organization [7%]
- A vision for what could be accomplished with RBM [27%]
- Evidence that RBM led to increased effectiveness and/or efficiency [13%]
- Dedicated funding for RBM [0%]
- Dedicated RBM program with staff supporting implementation [7%]

Note that these are not necessarily the conditions necessary to make further progress, but the factors that account for the current state of RBM adoption.

The current quality of RBM systems has real consequences for conservation organizations. Despite its high stated importance (Box 4), only 50% of NGOs can use their RBM systems to positively answer whether their projects are having their intended impacts and 75% do not know whether their actions are cost-effective. Learning from experience likewise underperforms. Only 40-50% of organizations can use RBM to effectively understand how conservation efforts can be improved or why a project fails when it does so.

**Survey Result #3: RBM does not happen because it is not a priority in the culture of conservation**

The culture of conservation has been characterized as one of accepting low standards of evidence.<sup>16</sup> What stands in the way of changing that culture? Survey respondents were asked to identify what impeded RBM adoption at their NGO or foundation, or among their grantees (Box 6).

**Box 6. Obstacles to RBM.**

Survey respondents ranked the top three obstacles to RBM adoption. In order of ranked importance, ranks weighted 3-2-1:

NGOs:

- Lack of money [36% of 1<sup>st</sup> place ranks]
- Lack of time [21%]
- Lack of incentives to change the status quo [14%]
- Lack of demand from upper management [0%]

Funders' perception of grantees:

- Lack of time [40% of 1<sup>st</sup> place ranks]
- Lack of an overall culture of accountability to the bottom line of biodiversity conservation [30%]
- Perception that RBM is too complex [10%]

Funders:

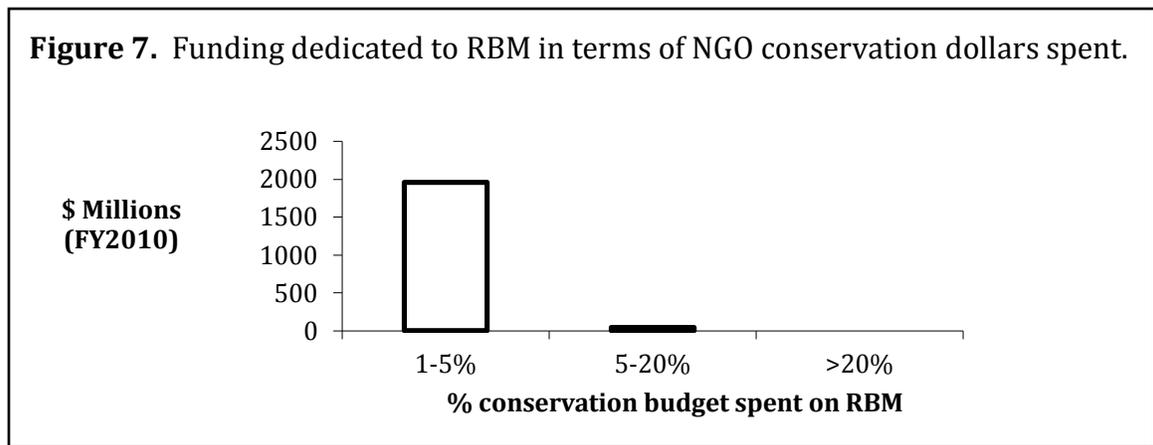
- Lack of incentives to change the status quo [25% of 1<sup>st</sup> place ranks]
- Perception that RBM is too complex [25%]
- Lack of time [0%]
- Lack of demand from upper management [17%]

*Lack of money.* Funding dedicated to RBM represents 1-5% of conservation spending by NGOs (Figure 5) and 80% of NGOs identify money as a major or extreme barrier to greater RBM implementation. Lack of money is also the #1 ranked obstacle by organizations. It is not clear what a sufficient level of funding would be<sup>17</sup> or whether current RBM funding could be spent more effectively.

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<sup>16</sup> Woodroffe & Hedges (in review) Why are there so few field trials in wildlife conservation and management?

<sup>17</sup> 75% of this survey's top implementers of RBM—the far right column in the U-shaped curve of Figure 4—still say that lack of money is a major barrier to greater RBM adoption. Two of three top implementers, however, spent 5-20% of their budget on RBM, rather than the 1-5% of most survey respondents.



*Lack of time.* In contrast, one funder writes the problem of limited RBM is “something not easily fixed just by a donor giving [organizations] more money,” but is rooted in a “sheer lack of...time...to do it.” Indeed, over 90% of NGOs identify lack of time as a major or extreme barrier to greater RBM implementation. Funders generally agreed: finding the time was the greatest obstacle among their grantees and within their own foundation’s practices (Box 6).

*Lack of staff.* Lack of time for RBM is linked in principle to the quantity and quality of human resources allocated toward the effort. 80% of NGOs identify lack of dedicated RBM staff as a major or extreme barrier and 65% think that lack of training is a major barrier. The ratios of RBM staff to conservation efforts are indeed stark statistics: 1 NGO staff person dedicated to RBM for every 100 projects and 230 organizational staff; 1 RBM auditor for every 500 projects; 1 foundation staff person dedicated to RBM for every 90 grants.

*Perception that RBM is too complex.* About half of funders identified the perceived complexity of RBM as a major obstacle to implementation at their own foundation and a similar number reported that their grantees did not understand what RBM is or how it is implemented. The importance of this obstacle was only partially supported by NGO survey responses: about 50% identified this perception as a major or extreme barrier, but few ranked it as top obstacle and 2/3 of surveyed NGO levels<sup>18</sup> have a reportedly thorough understanding of RBM.

The combination of insufficient time, weak funding, few staff, and limited understanding suggests that RBM is a low priority for many conservation efforts. Other organizational barriers like *lack of demand from upper management*, *lack of incentives to change the status quo* and *lack of a culture of accountability* (Box 6) also suggest a cultural shift is necessary to see greater implementation of RBM.

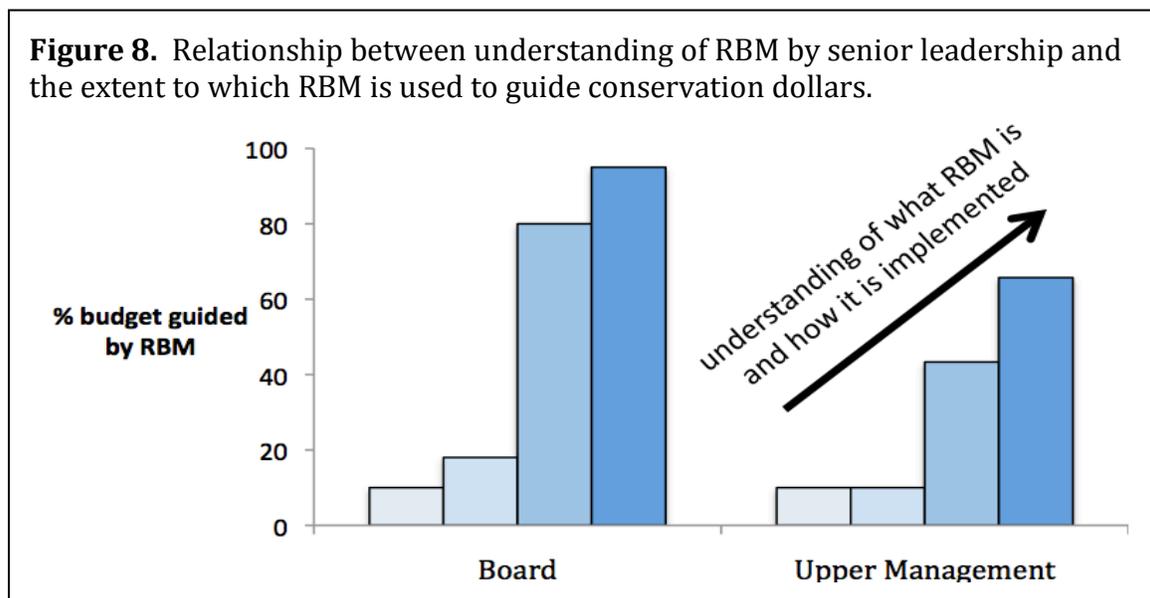
<sup>18</sup> Project staff, program directors, upper management, and the board.

#### Survey Result #4: Senior leadership and donors have a key role in the quality of RBM

Lack of money, time, and staff are proximate reasons why RBM is not practiced widely in conservation. The root causes remain unclear of why RBM has been a low priority, but this survey’s findings suggest that senior leadership<sup>19</sup> plays a key role.

For example, the third most important driver<sup>20</sup> of RBM at NGOs is to satisfy requests from the board and upper management. Where boards and upper management understand RBM, RBM happens to a greater extent (Figure 8). Of the surveyed funders, 60% report that a donor requirement was an important catalyst to their own grantees adopting RBM. Similarly, about 90% of NGOs say that where RBM has been implemented, an institutional mandate was very important or essential. A mandate, it turns out, is also particularly important to the extent to which RBM is implemented at NGOs (Box 7).

If a mandate is a ‘hard’ tool of top-down pressure, funding requirements can be considered an effective ‘softer’ alternative. For example, 80% of funders cite a reporting requirement as very important or absolutely essential to their grantees adopting RBM. Even where funders are not explicitly guiding NGOs towards RBM, the grant-making process likely has an important role in determining the culture of RBM in conservation (Box 8). As one respondent put it, “We need funders to demand that solid [RBM] be a condition of their grants and we need them to specifically fund [RBM] efforts.”



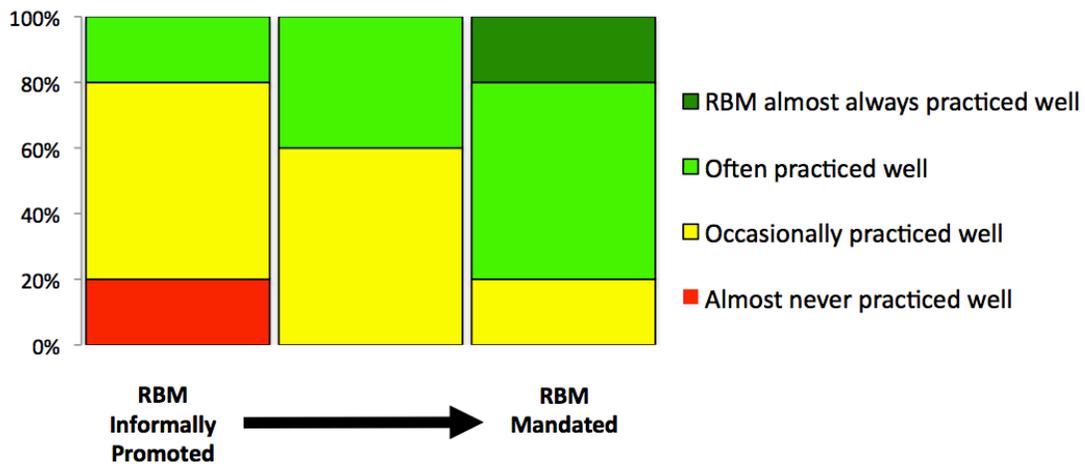
<sup>19</sup> Senior leadership is intended broadly here, as to include NGO and funder audiences that exert “top-down pressure”—upper management, the board, and funders.

<sup>20</sup> Behind *improving effectiveness* and *enabling project effectiveness to be evaluated*.

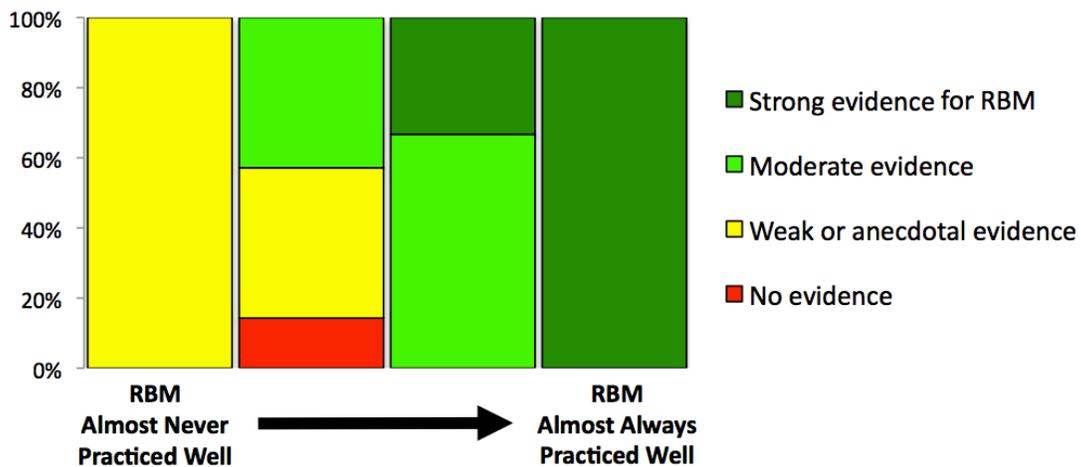
**Box 7. Where RBM happens well, Part II.**

For conservation organizations that have not yet adopted it, RBM can represent a ‘chicken and the egg problem.’ RBM would be adopted to a greater extent if there was more compelling evidence of its cost-effectiveness, but the evidence will continue to accumulate only in a patchy and limited manner if RBM is not adopted more widely. Survey results do not resolve this circular problem, but they do support its core linkages: where RBM is mandated institutionally, RBM happens to a greater extent (Figure 9). Where RBM happens to a greater extent, the evidence is stronger that RBM works (Figure 10).

**Figure 9.** Where RBM is mandated, it happens to a greater extent.



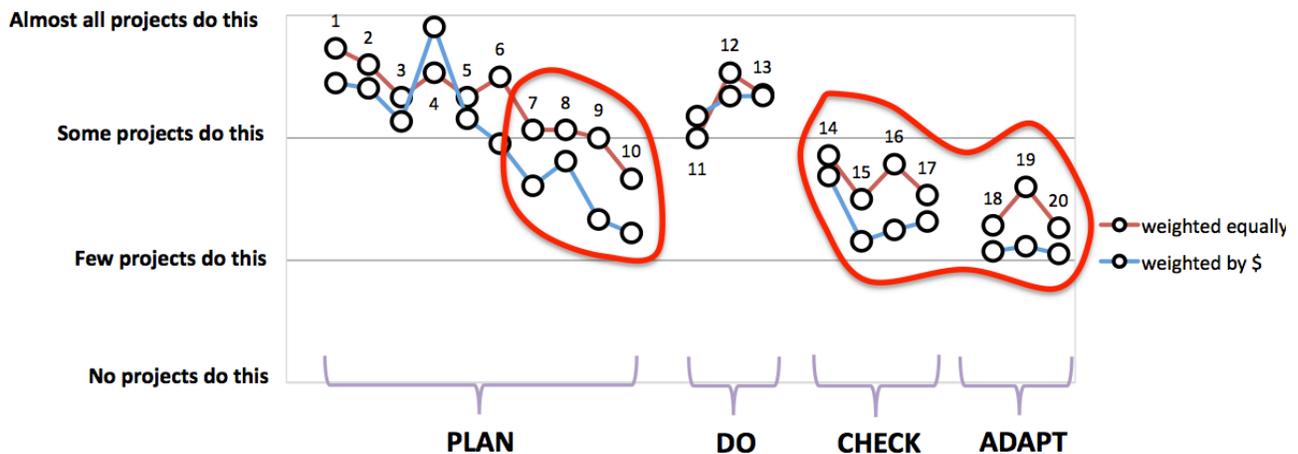
**Figure 10.** Where RBM happens to a greater extent, the evidence is stronger that it works.



**Box 8. The Do-Just-Enough Hypothesis.**

Most conservation projects complete steps related to basic planning and implementation, but progressively fewer evaluate and adapt their conservation actions, or even do the more advanced stages of project design (e.g., prioritization, log frames). This pattern becomes more pronounced when responses are weighted by total conservation dollars spent (Figure 11: blue line). One possible explanation is that project managers are completing only what donors require of them in the grant-writing process—basic project design & implementation. The bare minimum might be expected given the lack of time, money, and staff (see Box 6: Obstacles to RBM) that conservation organizations must overcome to practice RBM. Still, the results suggest that if more donors required and funded the steps circled in red in Figure 11—situation analysis, prioritization of threats and actions, articulation of assumptions, monitoring & evaluation, and sharing data—then more conservation projects would be adaptively managed.

**Figure 11.** Average extent to which projects complete specific elements of the RBM project cycle, weighted equally (red line) and by conservation spend (blue line).



See complete legend in Figure 3. Circled RBM elements include: (7) situation analysis, (8) prioritize threats to act upon, (9) prioritize actions to implement, (10) articulation of logic models, (14) develop monitoring plan, (15) implement monitoring plan, (16) assess status of conservation targets, (17) assess performance of conservation action, (18) use data to adapt & learn, (19) share data internally, (20) share data externally.

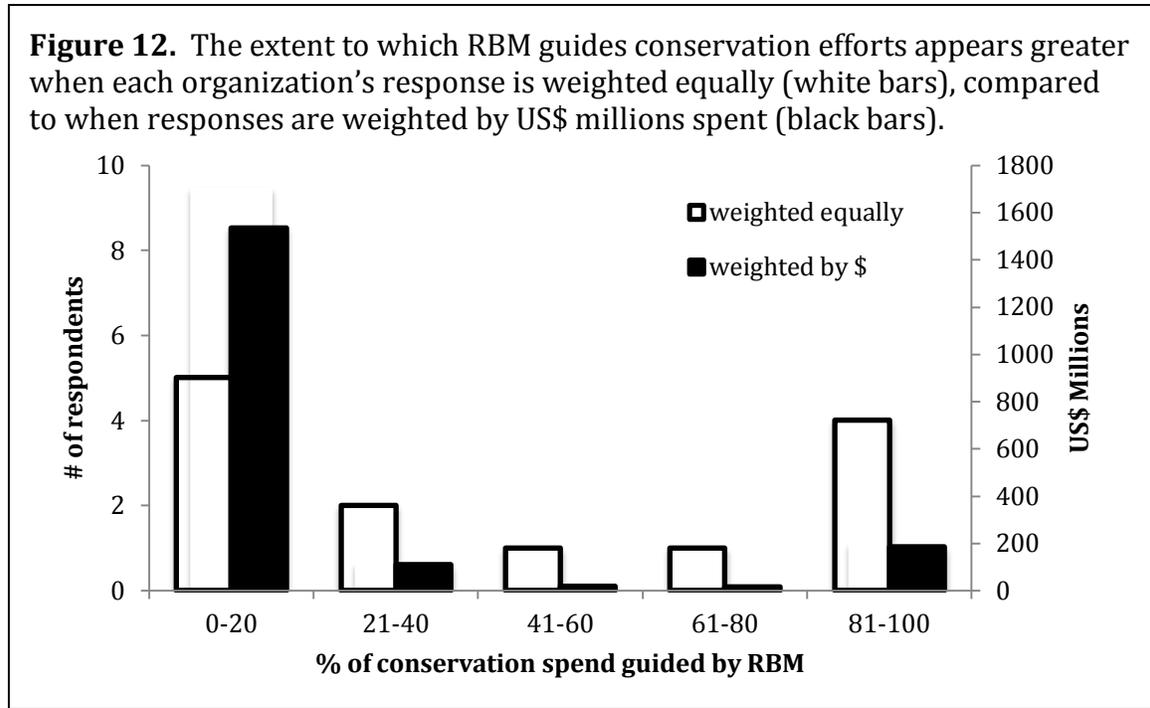
**Survey Result #5: Smaller organizations report better RBM**

Conservation NGOs with smaller budgets were significantly more likely to self-report that they do RBM well and that more of their budget is guided by RBM.<sup>21</sup> They also tend to express greater confidence in their ability to answer key organizational questions using RBM,<sup>22</sup> as well as claim evidence that RBM improves conservation.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Logistic regression with annual conservation budget as the continuous variable. Do RBM well:

df=1/14,  $\chi^2=4.80$ , p=0.03. % projects guided by RBM: df=1/12,  $\chi^2=4.64$ , p=0.03.

<sup>22</sup> Are projects having their intended impact? Are the organization's actions cost-effective? What can be learned to improve the organization's work?



Indicative of the difference between organizations, when survey results are weighted by conservation dollars spent, the appearance to which RBM is practiced well clearly diminishes (Figure 12). The same pattern emerges for most RBM practices when considered individually (Figure 11).

NGOs of different sizes also appear to face different obstacles to RBM adoption and overcome them in different ways. Larger NGOs were significantly more likely to cite the following as barriers: lack of demand from upper management, lack of board pressure, and lack of donor pressure (Figure 13).<sup>24</sup> They were also significantly more likely to report that a donor requirement or reporting requirement enabled RBM to be adopted and significantly less likely to cite evidence of improved effectiveness as a key ingredient to RBM.<sup>25</sup> In essence, RBM at large NGOs lives and dies by top-down pressure.

Smaller NGOs also face a smaller hurdle in human capacity. The senior leadership (upper management and boards) at smaller NGOs is reportedly more likely to understand what RBM is, how it benefits the organization, and its implementation.<sup>26</sup> Smaller NGOs were also significantly less likely to report that RBM is perceived as too

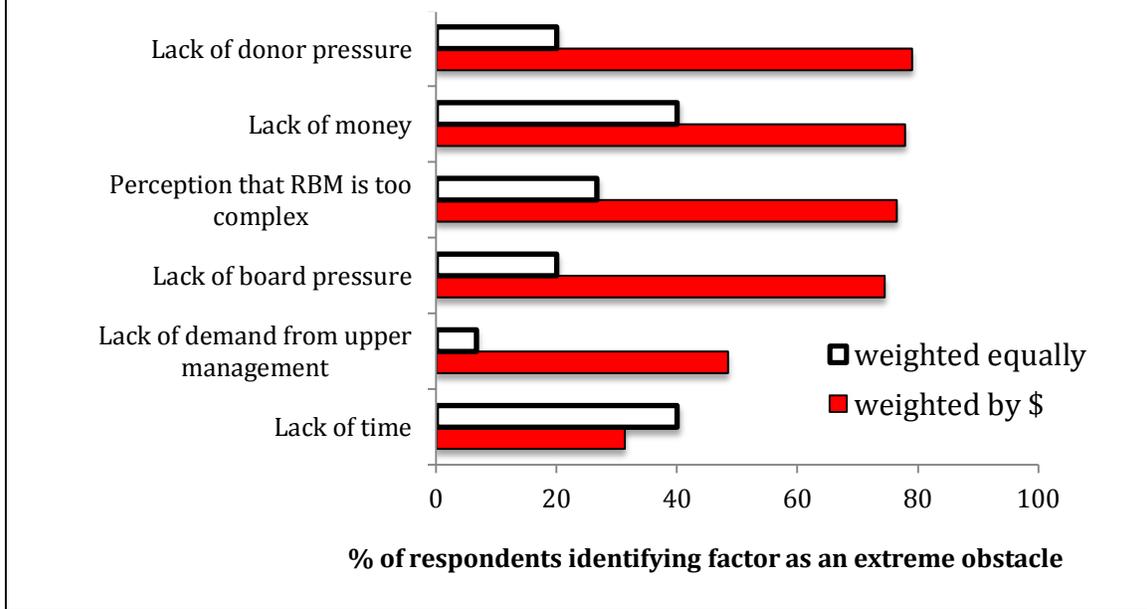
<sup>23</sup> Evidence of RBM leading to improvements in conservation effectiveness:  $df=1/14$ ,  $\chi^2=3.86$ ,  $p=0.05$ .

<sup>24</sup> Lack of demand from upper management:  $df=1/14$ ,  $\chi^2=6.90$ ,  $p=0.01$ . Lack of board pressure:  $df=1/14$ ,  $\chi^2=7.80$ ,  $p=0.01$ . Lack of donor pressure:  $df=1/14$ ,  $\chi^2=7.94$ ,  $p=0.005$ .

<sup>25</sup> Donor requirement to adopt:  $df=1/12$ ,  $\chi^2=9.35$ ,  $p=0.002$ . Donor reporting requirement:  $df=1/13$ ,  $\chi^2=4.34$ ,  $p=0.04$ .

<sup>26</sup> Understanding what RBM is and how it implemented: (upper management)  $df=1/14$ ,  $\chi^2=4.00$ ,  $p=0.05$ ; (the board)  $df=1/13$ ,  $\chi^2=3.24$ ,  $p=0.07$ . Understanding what the possible benefits of RBM are: (upper management)  $df=1/14$ ,  $\chi^2=4.13$ ,  $p=0.04$ ; (the board)  $df=1/13$ ,  $\chi^2=3.74$ ,  $p=0.05$ .

**Figure 13.** Extreme obstacles to RBM, weighted equally (white bars) and by conservation dollars spent (solid bars).



complex and significantly more likely to cite evidence that RBM works as key ingredient to current implementation.<sup>27</sup>

While the challenges of implementing RBM may loom large at big NGOs, the opportunities are equally great. For example, the three largest NGOs represent over half of all possible RBM efforts in the survey. It seems likely that conservation at the biggest scales will need different strategies and tools to improve RBM (e.g., central databases, engagement of senior leadership, top-down pressure) than at conservation organizations with fewer people and projects.

**Survey Result #6: Funders think NGOs are doing better at RBM than NGOs do**

*This finding should be considered tentative because it assumes that the conservation organizations funded by the surveyed donors do not fundamentally differ from the surveyed NGOs in terms of RBM practice. See Appendix A—Establishing better links between funder responses about grantees & the organizations that receive the grants—for a discussion of this issue.*

Survey results suggest a general gap in perception of RBM: foundations are more positive toward RBM than NGOs are.<sup>28</sup> But attitudes are not the only difference. Funders may also perceive that NGOs do RBM better than they actually do.

<sup>27</sup> A perception that RBM is too complex:  $df=1/14$ ,  $\chi^2=5.76$ ,  $p=0.02$ . Evidence that RBM leads to increased effectiveness:  $df=1/13$ ,  $\chi^2=4.00$ ,  $p=0.05$ .

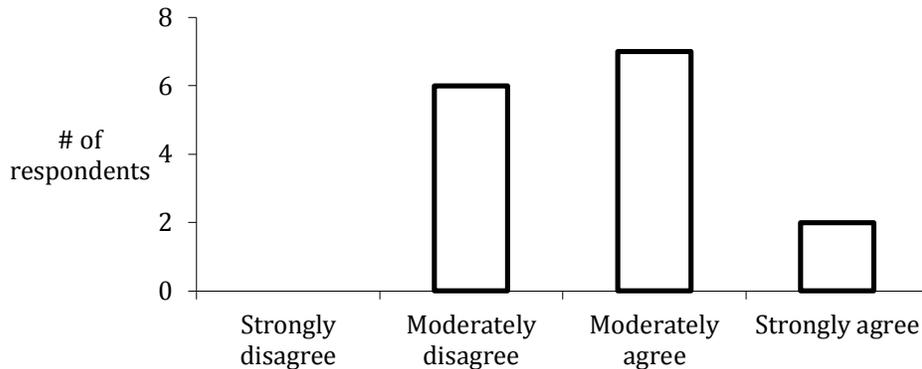
<sup>28</sup> ChiSquare contingency test (combining all audiences: project and program staff, upper management & boards):  $df=2$ ,  $\chi^2=6.03$ ,  $p=0.049$ .

## Are We Measuring Conservation Effectiveness?

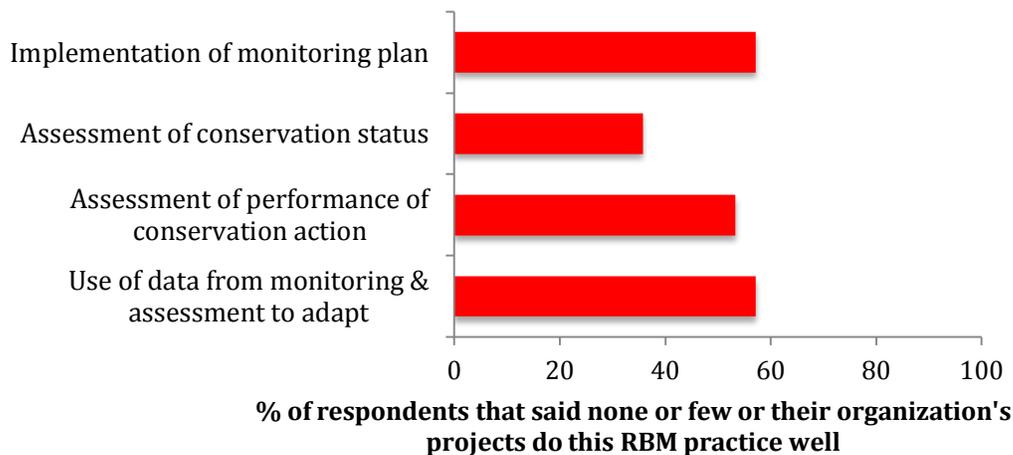
For example, 85% of funders are confident that by using RBM, they can understand whether their grantee's projects are having their intended impacts. In contrast, only half of NGOs say so. Funders also report that about 70% of their grantees' projects have good conservation plans in place and 35% have done a full RBM cycle (Plan-Do-Check-Adapt). In contrast, NGOs report that about 40% of their projects have good plans in place and only 6% have completed a cycle (a difference of 175 and 600%, respectively). Whereas NGOs collectively cite that 10-30% of their conservation efforts are guided by RBM, funders believe that 75-95% of their portfolios' dollars are guided by RBM.

**Figure 14.** The disjunct between when respondents were asked to (A) generally assess RBM at their organizations and when asked to (B) specifically assess the achievement of some defining elements of RBM.

### A. Does your organization do RBM well?



### B. Extent to which key elements of RBM are done well



## *Are We Measuring Conservation Effectiveness?*

In part, this finding may reflect a general disjunct between perception and practice of RBM. When NGOs were asked generally whether they do RBM well, the answers show a rosier picture than when they're pushed to estimate the proportion of their conservation projects that are guided by RBM or the extent to which they achieve key elements of RBM practice (Figure 14).

### **Supplementary Documents**

Appendix A (“Next Steps: Developing a better baseline”) is a summary of challenges that emerged during survey design and completion, as well as suggestions to overcome these issues for future survey efforts. Appendix B contains full results for quantitative survey questions and Appendix C contains the original survey and instructions.

## **Appendix A. Next Steps: Developing a Better Baseline**

The *Measuring Conservation Effectiveness* Summit led to a number of proposed initiatives to improve the practice of conservation.<sup>29</sup> The questionnaire presented in this report can be considered a summit “pre-initiative.” As a qualitative snapshot of the community’s behavior, the survey realized its primary purpose—to help frame the discussion in Palo Alto between foundation and conservation organizations. A secondary purpose has yet to be realized, but could be a key next step—to help shape a baseline questionnaire that could be regularly conducted to track progress towards better evidence-based conservation and more widespread RBM.

Gleaned from this questionnaire’s responses and discussion at the summit, the following suggestions are proposed for an improved future survey of RBM practices:

1. More quantitative, less qualitative questions
2. Better explanations for contentious or unclear terminology
3. Questions that capture intra-organizational variation
4. Questions that capture whether an organization’s RBM is driven by dedicated staff or institutionalized behavior
5. Establishing better links between funder responses about grantees & the organizations that receive the grants
6. More appropriate questions for advocacy or policy-driven organizations

**1. More quantitative, less qualitative questions.** Some respondents commented that the abundance of questions with 4-point scales was too qualitative (i.e., too open to individual interpretation, of limited value for baseline data) and/or restrictive (i.e., they wanted an option between two of the choices). The challenge of a more quantitative format is that several respondents struggled with precision and lack of information. For example, some respondents could not offer more than a rough guess of how many projects occurred within their organization. Alternatively, some respondents said that quantitative-orientated questions were a learning opportunity that provoked useful inquiries and information about their organization’s structure and budget. The value of more quantitative questions will need to be balanced with the likelihood of institutional capacity and support to accurately answer them.

**2. Better explanations for contentious or unclear terminology.** That respondents had to be asked to define the central focus of the survey (Box 3) indicates the lack of consensus on the terminology of RBM. Indeed, the language of the survey used a new term: systematic performance measurement (SPM). The term was created by committee to be accurate and general enough to describe the diverse practices of how conservation effectiveness is measured,

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<sup>29</sup> See the Conservation Measures Partnership [website](#) for a developing list.

but also hitherto undefined enough so that respondents could recognize their own organization's practices within its definition.<sup>30</sup> When a longer, more interactive discussion could be held at the summit, attendees replaced *SPM* with *RBM*. Better explanations of the concepts behind terminology, including individual elements of *RBM* (Figure 3C), would improve the ability of organizations to communicate what they do and what they've learned to others in the conservation community.

- 3. Questions that capture intra-organizational variation.** Some respondents said that the quality and understanding of *RBM* varied widely within their organization. As one put it, *RBM* is used "best at the center where I can keep my hands on the rudder, and gets worse the further out you get." Another commented on the challenge of giving a single score to describe how well different audiences understand *RBM*—"we have some board scientists who understand [*RBM*] extremely well but on average board members don't have a good understanding of [*RBM*]." Another said that the "high variance across the organization" made answers to some questions, "maybe meaningless." There is clearly an opportunity for better questions on how *RBM* varies within organizations.
- 4. Clarifying the unit of investigation.** Questions that better capture intra-organizational variation will necessarily require an agreement on the appropriate organizational unit to sample. Are programs the right unit for some questions? National offices? Individual projects? Individual staff? Grouped audiences (e.g., boards, upper management)? Questions that use the entire organization as the sampling unit are challenging for respondents from institutions with high internal variance (see quotes above). The range of organizational structures further complicates this challenge. Some respondents did not answer questions because the unit in question (e.g., program) was poorly defined at their organization (see Box 9 for how respondents collectively defined *projects* and *programs*).
- 5. Questions that capture whether an organization's *RBM* is driven by dedicated staff vs institutionalized behavior.** Some respondents took issue with questions about *dedicated RBM staff*—"no one is dedicated; it's part of everyone's job." Another: "everyone working on projects and programs has some role, but overall the "specialists" who can lead are very low, as are the resources expended on these activities." Similarly, one wrote that, *RBM* "is part of everything we do...we don't specifically break out *SPM* as a 'stovepipe' activity." For these organizations' respondents (which tended to report that *RBM* was practiced extensively), *RBM* has become institutionalized behavior and the survey questions about dedicated staff and dedicated financial resources were misguided.

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<sup>30</sup> Systematic performance measurement: the regular monitoring, evaluation, and adaptation of conservation actions based on clearly stated goals, objectives, and assumptions so as to assess effectiveness, promote learning, and report achievements.

**Box 9.** Definitions used for *projects* and *programs* across surveyed organizations.

Programs

- Of indeterminate length, plans on a four-year cycle.
- A set of projects connected by either geographical location (South Central Asia, UK and Europe) or theme (marine and freshwater, wildlife health).
- Thematic divisions of work in organization.
- A program is a group of projects.
- A collection of researchers working around a common theme such as "climate" or "ecosystem services"
- A program includes a team of people working towards a common goal with a common geography, target audience or other unifying theme.
- A set of initiatives under a broad policy issue umbrella such as protecting wildlife, clean air, climate change, etc.
- Ongoing initiative at national, landscape and species level.
- A group of projects, the objectives of which contribute to a single overall goal.
- National offices, priority programs and network initiatives.
- A collection of staff working on a specific strategy (science, policy, field demonstration) or operational function (resources, IT, Human resources)
- Cross-cutting, organization-wide, staffed programs. Also, administrative regional programs, which are further divided into operating units.
- A cluster of campaigns organized around a theme.

6. **Establishing better links between funder responses about grantees & the organizations that receive the grants.** About a third of the questions in the funder survey asked about the RBM practices of their grantees.<sup>31</sup> These were intended to be parallel questions to those answered by conservation organizations, enabling comparison between the two groups. The structure of the survey, however, made this comparison problematic.

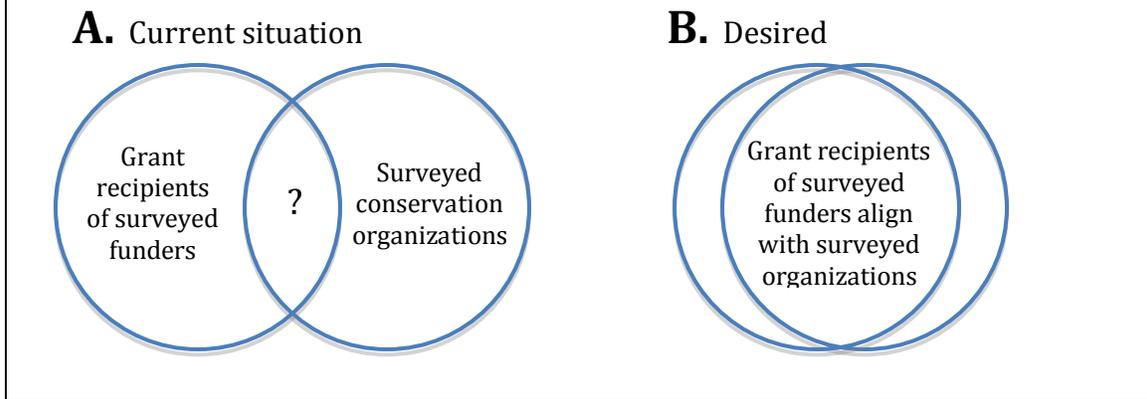
Funders were not asked to identify the grantees for whom their answers were based on, nor were these grantees necessarily representative of the foundation's grantees as a whole (funder respondents were asked to respond only for the grantees in their portfolios<sup>32</sup>). The gap in the collective budget reported by surveyed NGOs (~2,100 million US\$) and the conservation funding in the respondents' portfolios (~450 million) indicates the potential disjunct between the grantees described in funder responses and the conservation organizations that were surveyed.

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<sup>31</sup> For example: Do your grantees do RBM well? What are the key obstacles to RBM adoption among your grantees?

<sup>32</sup> Portfolios of respondents represented about 40% of the total conservation funding at the surveyed foundations. The sample was dominated by a single large donor, however, and if that funder's budget information is excluded, the surveyed portfolios represent only 15% of the funding budget among the remaining surveyed donors (~50 million out of 370 million).

**Figure 15.** The overlap of conservation organizations sampled in the survey.



Insofar as the conservation organizations supported by the surveyed funders do not fundamentally differ from the surveyed NGOs in terms of RBM practice, the comparison of survey responses may be valid. But without a stronger link between funders and grant recipients, the survey's findings cannot be interpreted without the caveat that the survey may not have sampled the same population of grantees and conservation NGOs. Future efforts should increase the overlap of this sample (Figure 13).

**7. More appropriate questions for advocacy or policy-driven organizations.**

Some respondents from organizations and foundations that primarily support advocacy work commented that the survey questions were a poor fit for their conservation activities. In an advocacy context, respondents suggested that measures of performance are often qualitative, not quantitative. One respondent wrote:

“A group may be doing everything brilliantly, but we may not be able to measure it. And even efficient and effective campaigns can fail to achieve a desired policy change. There are so many contextual facets to this work: the time, the place, organizational capacities, and economic, social, and political dynamics. Furthermore, various grantees and funders may work on a particular component of advocacy: message development, media outreach, voter education, direct lobbying, policy analysis, scientific research, etc., and the impacts of these various components are not always easy to assess.”

Another critique of how the questions were framed:

“The language seems to suggest that the programs being assessed have a somewhat tidy relationship between planning, implementing, monitoring, and adapting. This plan/implement/monitor/adapt approach could work well in a stewardship or land management context. I'm less convinced this model is useful in an advocacy context, where multiple players work for and against policy changes, and social, economic and political variables can upend even a perfectly run campaign effort. Some groups have developed

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interim outcomes that might indicate progress towards a broader policy goal, but achieving these outcomes does not guarantee success.”

An [initiative](#) formed at the summit to better measure policy-advocacy effectiveness. Future survey questions of advocacy and policy-orientated efforts may have to be tailored specifically for that conservation sector and should be developed based on the summit initiative’s findings.

**Box 9 continued.** Definitions used for *projects* and *programs* across surveyed organizations.

### Projects

- Of a fixed length: i.e. has a start and end date; size does not matter.
- A more or less distinct operating unit in a given location (or worldwide in the case of databases).
- A discrete funded project.
- A discretely defined policy campaign.
- Funded grants, contracts, or individually pursued research reports, academic papers, or workshops.
- A project is a specific time-limited product-oriented investment. The product could be a policy change, or a document (like a study or manual).
- An initiative with a specific policy goal.
- Discrete budgeted conservation efforts with assigned staff
- Field-based large-scale conservation projects.
- Time-delimited set of activities conducted within the context of program with a defined start, middle and end.
- A group of interrelated activities and results, with the necessary resources required to achieve them, designed to achieve a specific time-limited objective.
- A specific initiative with discrete funding and explicit timeframe for completion.
- Any set of actions undertaken by a group of people and/or organizations to achieve defined strategic outcomes and ultimately the organizational goals. Actions can directly contribute to achieving conservation results (desired conservation state) or indirectly contribute to achieving conservation results (amplification).
- A set of complementary strategies and actions implemented at any scale and designed to accomplish a set of time-bound conservation objectives. The most common interpretation of “project” is a single-place-based project.
- A campaign with a discrete beginning, middle and end.

*Are We Measuring Conservation Effectiveness?*

**Appendix B. Full Survey Results**

Appendix B will contain full results for quantitative survey questions.

**Appendix C. Original Survey Questions**

Appendix C will contain the original survey and instructions.