Conserving Globally Threatened Biodiversity in The East Melanesian Islands

A CASE FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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TROPICAL BIOLOGY ASSOCIATION

CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM PARTNERSHIP FUND

ABOUT THIS REPORT

The Tropical Biology Association (TBA) has been implementing a project titled "Sustaining CEPF's investment in the East Melanesian Islands Hotspot" which involved Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) in Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.

The project is part of the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund's investment in the region from 2013 to 2022. The CEPF investment approach was to fund CSOs (grantees) working to deliver conservation impacts on the ground for people and for biodiversity.

The key aim of TBA's project was to summarize the impacts of the grantees (under their CEPF grants) and to document lessons learned in carrying out the conservation projects. This would then inform the case for sustainability which is described here.

This report contextualises the results (and impacts) in terms of the broader socio-cultural, socio-economic, political, and funding policies, as these can inform how conservation can be sustained in the region.

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ABOUT THE CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM PARTNERSHIP FUND

The Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF) is a joint initiative of l'Agence Française de Développement, Conservation International, the European Union, the Global Environment Facility, the Government of Japan and the World Bank. A fundamental goal is to ensure civil society is engaged in biodiversity conservation.

For more information, visit www.cepf.net

CRITICAL ECOSYSTEM PARTNERSHIP FUND

ABOUT THE TROPICAL BIOLOGY ASSOCIATION

The Tropical Biology Association (TBA) is an international NGO that builds capacity for conservation globally to empower practitioners to manage and safeguard biodiversity. Its growing network of over 2000 alumni spans over 60 countries and is creating a potent international force for conserving precious habitats and threatened species.

For more information, visit www.tropical-biology.org

TROPICAL BIOLOGY ASSOCIATION

THE RATIONALE

If we lived in a world where a region's wealth was measured in biological and cultural diversity, then the East Melanesian Islands (EMI) would be standing head and shoulders above most.

The Islands, which include the island nations of Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea (PNG), qualify as biodiversity hotspots due to their biologically rich yet endangered terrestrial regions.

East Melanesia is home to hundreds of distinctive plants and animals that aren't found anywhere else in the world. These endemics include 3,000 vascular plant species, 41 mammals, 148 birds, 54 reptiles, 45 amphibians and 3 freshwater fishes.

In addition to being a biodiversity hotspot, the East Melanesian Islands also hold exceptional cultural and linguistic diversity. The Island of Vanuatu, for instance, has 108 living languages—more per unit area than any other country.

Geographically, the region is one of the most complex landscapes on Earth, with a diverse range of islands of varying age and development. Isolation and adaptive radiation have led to elevated levels of endemism.

Habitats include coastal vegetation, mangrove forests, freshwater swamp forests, lowland rainforests, seasonally dry forests and grasslands, and montane rainforests. he Islands lie partly within the Coral Triangle, whose ecosystems support 75 per cent of known coral species and an estimated 3,000 species of reef fishes.

Thus, the geographic scope encompasses nearshore marine habitats, such as coral reefs and seagrass beds.

Melanesia's distinguishing ecology and diverse cultures weave into one another to create an ecosystem of great significance—for the entire planet.

The continued survival of this ecosystem is, however, uncertain.

Traditionally, Melanesians have used indigenous knowledge systems to conserve and preserve their land and resources. Over the last few decades, the Islands have experienced rapidly growing and modernizing populations—dynamics that call for extensive reliance on natural resources.

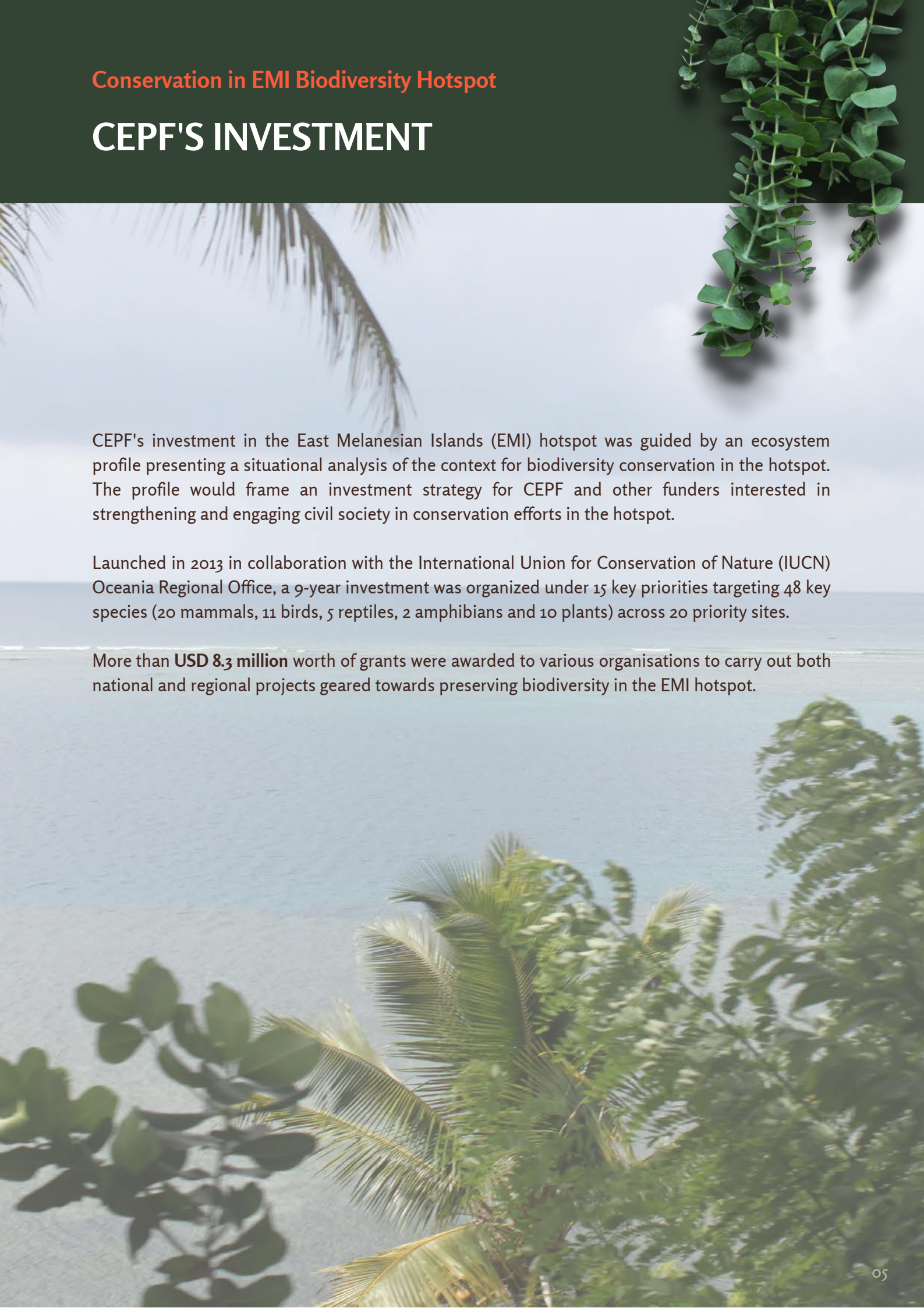
An ecosystem profile for the East Melanesian Islands hotspot, commissioned by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), found that the Islands' biodiversity has been rapidly shrinking due to agricultural expansion and the growth of extractive industries, such as logging and mining.

The habitat loss caused by human activities, the loss of indigenous knowledge systems and the impacts of climate change and variability threaten the Islands' endemic species with imminent extinction.

Without biodiversity,
life would not be able
to sustain itself.

Conservation in EMI Biodiversity Hotspot

CEPF'S INVESTMENT



CEPF's investment in the East Melanesian Islands (EMI) hotspot was guided by an ecosystem profile presenting a situational analysis of the context for biodiversity conservation in the hotspot. The profile would frame an investment strategy for CEPF and other funders interested in strengthening and engaging civil society in conservation efforts in the hotspot.

Launched in 2013 in collaboration with the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Oceania Regional Office, a 9-year investment was organized under 15 key priorities targeting 48 key species (20 mammals, 11 birds, 5 reptiles, 2 amphibians and 10 plants) across 20 priority sites.

More than **USD 8.3 million** worth of grants were awarded to various organisations to carry out both national and regional projects geared towards preserving biodiversity in the EMI hotspot.

CEPF's investment in the EMI Hotspot

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS

The CEPF's investment program would be guided by the following 5 strategic directions:

01 Empower local communities to protect and manage globally significant biodiversity at priority Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) under-served by current conservation efforts.

02 Integrate biodiversity conservation into local land-use and development planning.

03 Safeguard priority globally threatened species by addressing major threats and information gaps.

04 Increase local, national and regional capacity to conserve biodiversity through catalysing civil society partnerships.

05 Provide strategic leadership and effective coordination of conservation investment through a Regional Implementation Team.

DUGONG RAY- image credit: Ray Aucott via Unsplash

Image credit: Bob Brewer via Unsplash

CEPF's investment in the EMI Hotspot

KEY RESULTS & IMPACTS

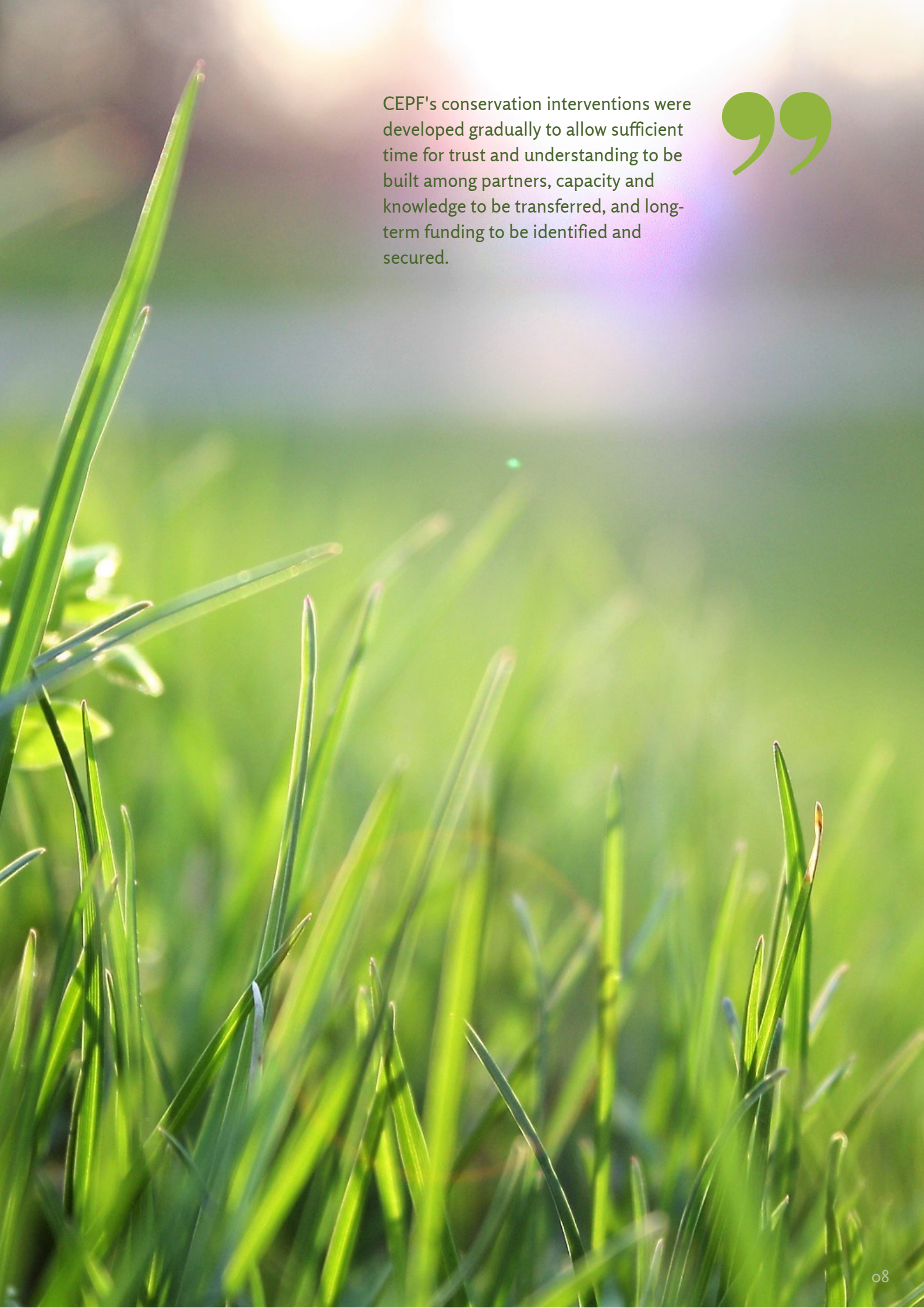
Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) delivered a total of **114 projects** tackling the various conservation priorities in the EMI Hotspot. All five strategic goals were met.

The following key results outline the successes:

- Established or strengthened the management and protection of (12) Key Biodiversity Areas and facilitated the formal designation of (17) protected areas covering more than 40,000 hectares.
- Established conservation incentives such as ecotourism, payment for ecosystem services and conservation agreements in seven sites.
- Improved knowledge and information for (30) globally threatened species, developed species recovery plans for (12) species, and established science-based harvest management regimes for species. Additionally, (20) new species were discovered through CEPF-funded projects, including the Coconut-cracking Giant Rat in Solomon Island, a new species of Cornifer Frog and the Horseshoe Bat in PNG.
- Grew and developed the capacity of local CSOs with the registration of (11) new organisations and improved organisational capacity for existing local CSOs. This was achieved through training courses in areas such as the development of conservation projects, proposal writing and financial management. 14 of the CSOs that benefitted from the CEPF grants secured further conservation work funding.

Image credit: Bob Brewer via Unsplash

- Promoted knowledge sharing and networking among CSOs through (6) grantee exchange events at national and sub-national levels and (2) virtual meetings.
- Fostered the formation of local CSO networks and partnerships among communities, CSOs and government, further strengthening conservation efforts.
- Developed a financial sustainability strategy for (8) local CSOs.
- Raised awareness on conservation among host communities about the importance of various species in their areas, the importance of conservation and how it is linked to sustainable livelihoods.
- Nurtured the growth of national leaders for locally-driven biodiversity conservation.



CEPF's conservation interventions were developed gradually to allow sufficient time for trust and understanding to be built among partners, capacity and knowledge to be transferred, and long-term funding to be identified and secured.

APPROACHES THAT HAVE PROVED SUCCESSFUL

01 Putting local communities at the heart of conservation—and linking it to livelihoods

Local communities are generally not motivated to conserve biodiversity by notions of vulnerability or endemism but by a mixture of utilitarian and cultural values. The limited understanding of biodiversity conservation, compounded by mixed, inappropriate and frequently confusing messages from conservation organisations, was identified as a significant factor contributing to biodiversity loss in the EMI Hotspot. Therefore, there was a need to raise awareness about biodiversity conservation's importance and frame messages accordingly.

This was achieved through the creation of income-generating opportunities that linked conservation to sustainable livelihoods and training programs that helped demystify conservation. Women, in particular, play a critical role in environmental stewardship because of their contributions to livelihoods. However, their participation in conservation work is impeded by socio-cultural practices that limit the types of activities they can engage in. Education was centred around the importance of habitats and how their unsustainable exploitation can undermine the natural resource base that supports livelihoods.

Guidelines were issued on how communities can use and manage their land with emphasis placed on the application of Traditional Agricultural Knowledge to address environmental threats.

Under the CEPF program, several Community Conservation Areas (CCAs) were registered, and in some sites, conservation deeds were issued, paving the way for community-led protection of natural resources.

The CEPF program included initiatives that contributed to community development such as improving food security through backyard gardening, providing safe drinking water and establishing ecotourism as an alternative income resource.

Image credit: Vika Chartier via Unsplash

APPROACHES THAT HAVE PROVED SUCCESSFUL

02 Building and enhancing local capacities

The conservation-focused civil society sector in the EMI Hotspot remains dominated by international organisations. While these organisations provide an essential channel for external funding and technical expertise, they do not always have the local relationships, legitimacy or the stability of mission necessary to support successful, long-term conservation interventions on the ground. Therefore, the CEPF program invested in developing and supporting national and regional conservation leaders who can advocate for conservation objectives at these levels and strengthen, coordinate and give a voice to local communities.

The investment strategy paid off.

11 new CSOs were registered and the capacities of existing ones were upgraded through targeted training. Local CSOs have now acquired the skills to develop management strategies, effectively implement financial policies and network amongst themselves and with international organisations.

These networks have aided in the sharing of skills, knowledge and opportunities.

At the individual level, the CEPF program created opportunities for local graduates to gain employment and build their knowledge and skills in environmental sciences. This has increased the pool of expertise in the region, reducing the need for the fly-in-fly-out model of conservation that was heavily reliant on international experts.

Similarly, individuals in leadership roles (village elders, ward representatives and chiefs), marginalised groups (youth & women) and other key conservation stakeholders such as rangers have also received training that has broadened their capacities.

APPROACHES THAT HAVE PROVED SUCCESSFUL

03 Conserving species and habitats

Building up a body of knowledge on biodiversity is necessary to enable governments and customary landowners to make appropriate management decisions. In the EMI Hotspot, fundamental information gaps exist concerning species' conservation status, distribution and taxonomy, distribution of critical habitats, rates of habitat loss, value of ecosystem services and much more. Extensive research and fieldwork are required to fill them.

CEPF's strategic investment direction to safeguard priority globally threatened species by addressing major threats and information gaps translated to the generation of extensive data through research and related activities.

The Biological Rapid Assessment and Ethno-Biological collections helped identify, confirm and document species and habitats within designated conservation areas.

The information gathered has added to local, national and global knowledge on endangered species and has been used to inform conservation actions in various regions. CSOs have also relied on this information to make a case for conservation work within their communities.

HAWKSBILL TURTLE- image credit: Kris Mikael

APPROACHES THAT HAVE PROVED SUCCESSFUL

04 Creating a sustainable environment through financing, practice and policy

Successful and enduring conservation results may require years if not decades of work and are not ideally suited to short-term, project-by-project financing. Indeed, uncertain and irregular funding is a significant constraint to conservation initiatives across the globe. And while most conservation programs run for an average of 2 to 5 years— often not enough time to demonstrate impact—the CEPF investment strategy ran for 9 years.

CEPF's conservation interventions were developed gradually to allow sufficient time for trust and understanding to be built among partners, capacity and knowledge to be transferred, and long-term funding to be identified and secured.

Ecotourism programs were recognised as reliable long-term funding solutions and their implementation has succeeded in modelling the benefits a sustainable business can deliver to the environment and the people.

Lobbying for the incorporation of good practice and lessons learnt into local and national policies can also advance sustainability in conservation.

The Vanuatu Environment Science Society (VESS), for instance, created guidelines and a code of conduct on how to interact with dugongs in the water and implemented an endemic bats protection project. Both initiatives led to clear and substantial gains for conservation—the first initiative was incorporated into the Vanuatu tourism minimum standards policy, and the second led to the banning of hunting endemic bats.

> It is increasingly recognised that a critical success factor in the conservation process is meaningful community engagement.

KEY LESSONS LEARNT

Adaptive management (project design and implementation)

Project design should be flexible enough to allow for potential setbacks during implementation—some of which are beyond human control. And before implementation, it is essential to recognise, and acknowledge existing local community practices, governance structures, and protocols. It is also prudent to consult with key stakeholders, particularly those in decision making positions.

Human resources

Working with a skilled/experienced, committed and cohesive team/staff with clear terms of reference is a critical driver of success.

Partnerships and collaborations

Forming alliances based on transparency, honesty, and accountability can leverage a diverse range of expertise, experiences and networks to deliver sustainable results towards a common goal.

Communication

Consistent communication with staff, partners and stakeholders maximises the chances of success. Communication should be tailored to different audiences. And as key stakeholders in conservation, community members should be given access to all the relevant information.

Capacity building

This should be provided within the context of partnerships or networks with explicit codes of conduct or social contracts among their members to ensure that issues of power, equity and accountability are considered.

INTEGRATING THE LESSONS LEARNT INTO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Human Resources and Capacity Building

People are the foundation of every organisation. This is why close to 40% of CEPF investment in the Hotspot was earmarked for local, national and regional capacity building. Recruiting appropriately skilled and committed personnel with clear terms of reference is imperative for effectively implementing conservation projects. This, however, presents a challenge in the EMI for several reasons.

Most institutions in the region operate on temporary employment regimes, hiring the experts and staff they need for the duration of a project; remuneration is dictated by the amount of available funding for the specific project. This makes it difficult to retain talent on a long-term basis. And because conservation work is deemed less financially attractive than private sector work, it becomes challenging to maintain and sustain a highly skilled workforce.

Recommendations

- Larger, more established organisations working within the EMI Hotspot can tap into their human resource/expertise to help smaller organisations fill the capacity gaps until they can stand independently.
- Create an awareness and understanding of the tools developed by international organisations for conservation actions and use them to increase efficiency.
- Donors and capacity-building organisations can provide tailored training for local staff.
- Emphasise the significance of conservation and shift the focus from extrinsic motivators (financial rewards) to intrinsic motivators (doing meaningful work).
- International experts could act as mentors for the local CSOs so that on their exit, the CSOs can continue the work independently.
- There is a growing body of fresh science graduates and early career scientists who can be trained to fill the capacity gaps. Deploying these graduates to various locations could help grow the network of experts across the country, gradually lessening the need for outside expertise in the long term.
- CEPF is one of the few donors who fund staff positions. CSOs could engage other donors to consider funding staff positions when applying for project funding.
- Create a pool of persons capable of training other people on the relevant topics.
- Since most conservation organisations are working towards similar goals or even implementing similar activities, sharing expertise could be more cost-effective.

INTEGRATING THE LESSONS LEARNT INTO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Community Participation and Engagement

It is increasingly recognised that a critical success factor in the conservation process is meaningful community engagement. A number of factors however, limit the participation of communities in the EMI Hotspot. Resistant local leaderships, traditional gender roles that sideline women and youth, conflicts and conflicts of interests within the conservation areas, and a general low awareness of conservation's benefits impede conservation efforts.

Entities pushing for unchecked utilisation of natural resources for personal gain (e.g. mining, destructive logging, conversion to plantations, among others) also undermine the conservation efforts. For conservation to work, it should address local people's priorities, including livelihoods and food security; but communities should also have realistic expectations towards what conservation can deliver.

Recommendations

- Incorporate essential services and sustainable livelihood options into conservation programs/projects to incentivise communities.
- Promote nationwide expansion of community-based programs such as the ranger training programs.
- Identify community gatekeepers or influencers (persons that yield the most influence in the community) and equip them with the tools and knowledge to promote conservation.
- Build the capacity of community leaders such as chiefs and church leaders and train them on the importance of conservation.
- Link up with private sector organisations that promote sustainable livelihood alternatives through their CSR programs.
- Incentivise the communities to participate in conservation not only during the project implementation but also after it ends.
- Improve the way the communication of conservation messages is conducted in host communities.
- Increase female participation by including them in education and training and advocating for more active leadership roles for women.
- Facilitate conservation dialogues with land owners and key stakeholders to reduce resistance to conservation programs.
- Improve and intensify communication on protected species.
- Apply traditional knowledge to agricultural practice.
- The formal education sector should review and enhance national curricula to emphasise nature, biodiversity, environment and conservation.

INTEGRATING THE LESSONS LEARNT INTO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Land and Tenure Rights

This is the most prevalent challenge to conservation sustainability with numerous issues relating to land tenure, boundaries and land rights.

Complications arise from the fact that most of the land is held by the people (customary land owners), not the state. In theory, this should make access to land and resources for companies operating in the timber, mining or agro-industry sectors difficult, as consent from the community would be a prerequisite for operations. In reality, however, unclear or contested ownership and tenure arrangements over land and natural resources enable companies to gain temporary access by circumventing collective decision-making processes and working directly with local elites.

There is also resistance to establishing conservation areas due to misconceptions about land acquisition laws. In some areas, conservation projects may traverse several tribal boundaries, worsening existing conflicts or creating new ones. Therefore, it is crucial to address issues related to land tenure/rights, preferably before the commencement of conservation projects.

Recommendations

- Pay attention to the local context for customs, ideologies, and value systems and take the initiative to create a narrative that fosters sustainability.
- Devise effective mechanisms framed by local context and value systems to engage land owners/custodians and local chiefs in the conservation to reduce conflicts.
- Consult with and build consensus with landowners to address potential conflicts.
- Although there has been an emphasis on conserving large areas, working with small landholders can effectively achieve conservation goals.
- Advocate for the creation of more legally protected areas and Community Conservation Areas (CCAs).
- The CSOs and communities need to know the laws governing resource use, especially at the community level. Education may help reduce conflicts and misinformation as well as help build trust among the parties involved.
- Conservation legislation (regulations, laws and policies) needs to fit with the current situations and the conservation agenda.
- The regional administrative units break down the areas into small parcels of land headed by chiefs. This may complicate the implementation of projects, but it can also be a strength—once you get the chief invested in the conservation initiative, you have the community he governs too. As such, the chiefs and other local decision-makers are vital assets in conservation if they have the correct information.

INTEGRATING THE LESSONS LEARNT INTO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Policy and Legislation

There has been a lot of groundbreaking work done under the CEPF. The next step should be adopting a strategic direction to translate the conservation actions into policy and legislation changes to cement the role of government in conservation sustainability.

There is also a need to assess the existing leadership and governance structure and identify areas where the conservationists can tap into the decision-making roles and influence governments to think about and act on conservation.

Recommendations

- Mainstream KBAs lessons to establish national KBA programs integrated into existing government programs.
- Push for legislation that regulates the establishment and management of protected areas while supporting the need for communities to develop sustainable livelihoods.
- Ensure that conservation initiatives align with the existing policies/legislation.
- Disseminate data/information, especially on species distribution and habitat requirements.
- Working with the provincial governments, the council of chiefs, and local area chiefs to decentralise conservation management will help bring the agenda close to home and utilise existing administrative networks.
- Strengthen environmental laws and improve their enforcement.
- Influence conservation-related policy by incorporating lessons learned during project implementation into local and national policies or guidelines.
- Increase local awareness of national policies to establish trust between the communities and the governments and open the door for productive cooperation.
- Create new protected areas where feasible and enforce regulations/laws in the existing protected areas.
- Engage political and community leaders at provincial and local levels to increase their participation, foster partnerships and build collaborative networks.

INTEGRATING THE LESSONS LEARNT INTO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Funding and Reporting Processes

The majority of the CSOs in the region have limited awareness of the funding opportunities available to them. In addition, the financial controls, management capacity and governance arrangements of many local and national civil society organisations, are not to the standards many international donors are comfortable with. Thus, most local organisations struggle to meet the terms and conditions stipulated by the funders.

Furthermore, the current focus on climate change means that some CSOs may have to forego species-specific activities in their work if they want to secure funding for conservation work.

Recommendations

- Map out donor funding opportunities available for conservation in the region. This will help the CSOs discover who the donors are, their conditions for funding, what they are funding and how they disburse funds.
- Create a national conservation network that enables strategic partnerships, disseminates information about alternative funding opportunities and facilitates sharing of experiences and lessons.
- Use the networks built under the program to share information on funding opportunities and explore collaborative funding for projects.
- In most instances, governments already have systems that collect donor information that can be built upon and strengthened.
- Diversify funding among CSOs, including business opportunities to increase the CSOs' financial resilience and reduce reliance on donors with inflexible specific agendas.
- Develop more user-friendly and flexible reporting formats.
- Convene more donor round tables, so donors understand the realities that CSOs face. This may influence donors to be more flexible with their agendas and finance accountability systems.
- Recruit and train staff on the relevant processes, including management, technical capacity and finances.
- Incorporate reporting as part of the capacity building for the grantees.
- Build open lines of communication between the grantor and the grantees so that grantees would be comfortable asking for assistance if they face any difficulties with reporting or other aspects of project implementation.
- Build partnerships between the communities and the local and provincial governments so that the CSOs' work becomes part of the regular reporting carried out by these government offices.

INTEGRATING THE LESSONS LEARNT INTO A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Geographical Complexities

Most Islands in the region are geo-physically isolated and prone to natural disasters. Poor access increases the cost and time it takes to run field activities. Some areas have no telecommunication services, and grantees are forced to travel long distances for even the simplest communication needs.

Diverse communities also come with diverse languages; this can further inhibit effective communication.

Recommendations

- Engage local leadership (MPs) to help improve accessibility to the remote places, impressing upon them the importance of better access to such areas for conservation and economic gains.
- Introduce a platform allowing grantees to enter reporting data online and offline. Grantees in remote parts of the islands can thus fill in the data on-site and then synchronise it with the online platform when they have access to telecommunication services.
- Donors and other funding agencies can provide retail grants to buy boats for transportation to the remote islands or facilitate dialogue workshops with the communities and other key stakeholders.
- CSOs should consider decentralising their human resource from the capital to various Islands to cut travel costs and bring support closer to the project sites.
- Project implementers should have contingency plans for situations or events beyond their control. Similarly, flexibility in project implementation is important.

NEW DIRECTIONS

Sustainability will be achieved in the EMI Hotspot if the impacts of CEPF's investments are maintained beyond the lifetime of the funding. Indeed, there have been many successes under the program whose lessons can be replicated and scaled. Visions for the future include:

- Efficiently functioning CSOs with the capacity to deliver on conservation goals.
- Recognition, by the government, of all 5 KBAs as protected conservation areas and creation of more and larger legally protected areas for the biologically important species.
- Well-established, mutually beneficial partnerships with all levels of government.
- An accessible database or portal for biodiversity.
- Endorsement of land use plans by Local level governments (LLGs).
- Consistent supply chain markets for sustainable livelihoods and increased incomes for community members through thriving and sustainable livelihoods.
- Further exploration and expansion on presently successful carbon trading concept.
- Increased conservation research and more exchange programs between local and international researchers.
- Establishment of ranger programs with appropriate skills and tools to monitor protected areas.
- Self-sustaining conservation sites.
- Stronger environmental laws and improved enforcement of these laws to safeguard natural resources.
- Collaborative and cooperative relationships with all stakeholders to promote and accelerate conservation.

Sustainability will be achieved in the EMI Hotspot if the impacts of CEPF's investments are maintained beyond the lifetime of the funding.

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