

The use of certification of sustainable management systems and their possible application to protected area management

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Summary

Certification systems – such as those associated with organic agriculture, forest management, fisheries and ecotourism – can help monitor the effectiveness of protected areas. Three main roles for certification are identified. (1) Certification of operations within protected areas (particularly in Category V areas related to operations such as organic farms, various forms of management for non-timber forest products and ecotourism). (2) Certification of land uses within the buffer zones of protected areas or in the corridors of protected area networks. (3) Creation of additional protected areas as a result of certification (such as the requirement to protect a proportion of forest in Forest Stewardship Council certification schemes). The paper gives examples and suggests that certification within protected areas may in some cases require more stringent application of existing standards or additional codes of practices, for example if a nature reserve is managed as an organic farm to protect the biodiversity associated with cultural landscapes.

Introduction

Attitudes towards protected areas are undergoing a profound series of changes with respect to both their aims and performance. Two issues are of particular relevance here. First, there is an increased emphasis on *protected landscapes and seascapes* (Category V in the IUCN classification system) and an acceptance that not all protected areas will be strict nature reserves, but will include other human land uses within them. Common activities in Category V protected areas include farming, fishing, subsistence hunting and forestry. Many large national parks of Western Europe are based on this model. Although Category V protected areas are uncommon in many other parts of the world, most large protected areas contain human populations and it is being argued that many might benefit from a Category V approach. Similar commercial or subsistence activities may also take place in a Category VI protected area (an extractive reserve). Secondly, there is a growing awareness of the importance of good management within protected areas and recognition that this is often not being achieved. Coupled with this is a move to develop ways of *measuring the effectiveness of management* as a first stage in both identifying problems and identifying ways in which these could be addressed.

It is a prerequisite that “other” land uses within protected areas should be both sustainable and also compatible with the primary aims of biodiversity conservation, ecological management and, where relevant, cultural protection. (It must also be admitted that this is not always the case at present.) The need for what might be termed “minimum impact systems” leads naturally towards existing forms of sustainable or environmentally benign production such as organic farming, ecotourism, managed fisheries and sustainable forest management. Many of these sustainable uses now operate within well-defined frameworks, including agreed operating systems, codes of practice and, increasingly, certification.

Certification refers to a procedure, usually voluntary, whereby a commercial enterprise (farm, fishing fleet, forest management unit etc) agrees to meet certain standards and to have its performance checked by an independent inspector. If the inspector is convinced that the

enterprise meets the agreed standards, the resulting products can carry a symbol to inform consumers, thus gaining extra market share in the green or fair trade market and, in some cases, a higher price for the product. Organic farming symbols are amongst the best known of these certified “ecolabels”.

There are thus a range of developed or developing certification systems that have, in effect, detailed criteria and indicators of performance and regular monitoring systems. The current paper examines if and how these could support efforts to monitor management effectiveness of protected areas.

How could certification systems be used in protected areas?

Given that many protected areas contain other land uses, many of which in turn are suitable for existing certification systems, can this be used to help improve the overall management effectiveness of the protected area? Several opportunities have been identified.

- **Encouraging best practice:** the so-called “green” certification systems all need to include detailed advice about best practice, including standards, manuals and in most cases a large accompanying literature. In the UK, The Soil Association, the largest organic sector body, has published additional guidelines specifically aimed at increasing the conservation value of organic farms and produced in association with a number of nature conservation organisations (Dudley, 1990). Most certification systems have producers’ organisations dedicated to supporting and promoting the system; for example there are over 500 organic agriculture organisations around the world. All such systems will include steps aimed at minimising environmental damage and maximising opportunities for biodiversity: exactly the elements needed on managed land within a protected area. For some certification schemes, for example organic agriculture, research has now shown positive benefits to biodiversity (Stolton et al, 2000). The various codes of practice available for ecotourism companies also offer source material for protected area managers addressing issues arising from recreational pressure. The first way in which certification systems can help is therefore by providing a tested framework for land managers to adopt.
- **Collection of data:** certification schemes include an initial inspection and regular (usually annual) re-inspections to ensure that standards are met and maintained. This requires a considerable expense to the producer, who pays for the inspections, and the development and coordination of a network of trained and experienced inspectors. This information could be used in more general assessments of protected areas that include certified operations. The existence of certification itself will say quite a lot – for example about the commitment of land-owners to good management – and the information collected in the certification process may throw up further useful data: for example about the presence of “natural areas” or biological corridors left on farms, the level of fish take from around a marine protected area or the controls employed by ecotourism companies.
- **Lessons learned:** established certification schemes have already acquired many years worth of experience about the technical, economic and philosophical challenges of running such a system. There have been conscious attempts to share this information, for example between organic agriculture and timber certification (Dudley et al 1997). Assessment of management effectiveness of protected areas, while remaining slightly different in aims, nonetheless shares many common elements with certification systems and could learn from the experience of the latter.

- **Protected area certification:** the questions of whether or not protected areas are suitable for some kind of certification scheme, and whether this would be desirable, remain open to discussion. However, if such schemes are developed, existing certification schemes *within* protected areas could and should be included within the overall protected area “certification”.

Where could certification be used?

Production certification systems could only ever have a use in selected protected areas where wider land uses are permitted or encouraged – within Category V and Category VI protected areas (Protected Landscape/Seascape and Managed Resource Protected Area). There may also be limited use for certification in Category IV reserves (Habitat/Species Management Area) where regular management is required to maintain habitats to meet the requirements of specific species – for example certification of forest management in cases where this is used to maintain a species rich cultural landscape. In the specific case of ecotourism, certification may have much wider application in that tourism is permitted and often encouraged in all but Category Ia (Strict Nature Reserve/Wilderness Protection) areas.

This also plainly has limitations; certification of production systems is not the same as protection and to some extent certification could be used as an excuse for diluting protection, particularly in cases where governments or other landowners are already trying to “bend” the definition of protected areas to increase commercial access to resources within protected areas. An early indication of the sort of clash that could result is currently seen in Poland, where Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification of part of the Bialowieza forest is seen by local NGOs as a sign that the government does not intend to increase the size of the strictly protected area (Society for Bialowieza Forest Protection, 1999). Similarly, in Sri Lanka, natural forest is currently likely to be cleared for organic tea production on the edge of a World Heritage Area creating a potential clash between sustainable production and protection (World Rainforest Movement, 2000). Certification will therefore never be a panacea and should not be used as an excuse for business as usual.

In areas where certified processes are compatible with protected area aims, three main uses have been identified. These are described below and examples given where possible.

- **Certification of operations within protected areas**

Certification within protected areas (related to operations such as organic farms, various forms of management for non-timber forest products and ecotourism) can all help to define and control sustainable land uses in those protected areas containing significant human populations.

In Europe for example, organic farming is increasingly being adopted within protected areas. Promotional work by the Associazione Italiana Agricoltura Biologica within regional parks in Italy encouraged 113 farms within protected areas to apply for certification between 1996 and 1997 (Compagnoni, 2000). Similar developments have taken place in the Triglavski National Park in Slovenia (Slabe, 2000) and in several protected areas in Hungary (Frühwald, 2000). In the UK the National Trust, a conservation organisation that is today also the largest single land owner in the country, is now actively encouraging farmers on its land to pursue organic agriculture.

Forest certification offers similar possibilities. In Mediterranean Europe, the development of non-timber forest product certification is seen as a way of encouraging traditional forest management systems that encourage and sustain biodiversity in cultural landscapes. Seven pilot protected areas are working with the WWF Mediterranean Programme Office, including the Guidiana Valley Natural Park in Portugal, the Chouf Forest Protected Area in the Lebanon and the Feija National Park in Tunisia (Moussouris and Regatto, 1999). More traditional timber management is also a

possible candidate for certification within landscape protected areas and for example members of the organisation Coed Cymru (“Welsh woodlands” in the Welsh language) are certified for traditional woodland management within the Snowdonia National Park (Jenkins, pers comm).

The Pan Parks initiative offers a new approach, where protected areas are assessed and certified specifically for their tourism potential. Currently operating in Europe, it aims to create a network of outstanding internationally recognised protected areas offering unique, high quality nature-based tourism. It is hoped that Pan Parks will become widely known as the natural capitals of the continent and the concept is based on partnership between all actors involved (Anon, 1999). Pan Parks already has some draft standards (Kun, 2000) and a proposed star rating system (van de Vlasakker, 2000).

Certification would also be an ideal framework for approaches in marine protected areas, where protection often accompanies sustainable, particularly small-scale, fisheries (Wells, 1999). The Marine Stewardship Council has for example completed the pre-assessment for certification of a cockle fishery operating in a marine protected area in South Wales, UK (designations include Special Area of Conservation, National Nature Reserve and Ramsar Site) (Coates pers comm).

- **Certification of land uses in the buffer zones of protected areas or in the corridors of protected area networks**

A secondary and closely connected use of certification could be in the buffer zones of existing protected areas – where they could also play a role in maintaining the integrity of protected areas in stricter categories. Buffer zones are by their nature areas where land management is tempered to help maintain the integrity of the core protected area. As this usually requires some compromises and also often commercial sacrifices by people living or working in the buffer zones, certification of their operations could help mitigate this by increasing their market share or allow them a certain mark-up on their products.

This option has been explored most thoroughly in the MesoAmerican Biological Corridor, a projected complex of protected areas and sustainable management stretching over seven countries and involving over a hundred NGOs and over a thousand communities. The initiative envisages a range of sustainable land uses within the buffer zones and linking areas, including certified forest management and organic agriculture, perhaps with an additional label to show that the products come from the biological corridor (Salas pers comm.). Use of organic certification in protected area buffer zones is also being examined in Europe (Stolton et al, 2000).

- **Creation of additional protected areas as a result of certification**

A slightly different side effect of certification is the creation of additional protected areas directly as a result of stipulations within the standards.

This aspect is most clearly seen at present within the standards of the Forest Stewardship Council, where certified operations are obliged to set aside 5 per cent of their forest management unit for protection. Whilst the long-term security of this is still open to question, as there is no guarantee that the land will remain certified indefinitely, the medium term result is that if large areas of forest are certified then quite apart from the broader environmental gains, there will also be a significant increase in land under protection.

For example, the fact that the four major forest companies in Sweden are now all certified by the FSC should add at least 400,000 ha of additional forest protected areas to the country’s protected

area network (calculated from Dudley et al, 1999). More importantly, it formalises the concept of establishing protected areas on land owned by private commercial companies. Although this is not a novel concept in Scandinavia and has been practised in an ad hoc manner for some time, certification is bringing these ideas into new areas. If such “certification protected areas” could be incorporated into a wider protected area network, for example following the type of landscape ecological planning being promoted by the Finnish Forest and Parks Service, the gains would be even greater.

The extent to which this model can be transposed onto other certification systems – for example in agricultural plantations or with the development of protected areas specifically for ecotourism – has yet to be explored.

Conclusions

These ideas are still very new and often at an experimental or even theoretical stage. It is therefore premature to make firm recommendations about their applicability or future use. Further work is still required to determine the real costs and benefits of certification; for example so far there has still been no systematic attempt to determine whether existing forest certification schemes actually increase or protect forest biodiversity in practice. Some of these questions go beyond protected areas into the general field of sustainable development but relate to their long term use within or around protected areas.

Another important question to be addressed is whether current certification schemes by themselves are sufficient to satisfy the requirements within protected areas or whether some other “layer” of certification is required – either in terms of additional guidelines or in the form of a separate label as suggested in the MesoAmerican Biological Corridor.

We believe the evidence brought together in this paper is sufficient to show that protected area managers, and the World Commission on Protected Areas, should be making closer links with existing certification schemes, both in terms of developing additional expertise and because of the guidelines, information and potential verification systems that they can bring to protected areas. Indeed, at a workshop between IUCN and the International Federation of Organic Agricultural Movements (IFOAM) in 1999, participants developed a joint action plan for future collaborative work which suggested that “IUCN should encourage organic agriculture in protected area categories where such land use is permitted” and that “IFOAM and IUCN should identify best practice in protected areas and agricultural lands with a view to disseminating these more widely” (Stolton et al, 2000).

One way to develop these ideas would be to arrange more joint meetings or workshop to bring together key players in existing certification schemes to discuss these with specialists involved in both the management and the assessment of protected areas.

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