

Case Study: **Identifying Priorities and Developing Strategies in the Maya, Zoque and Olmeca Forests**

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Purpose and region of analysis

The Selva Maya, Zoque and Olmeca Ecoregional Plan (Selva Maya) comprises an aggregation 18 ecoregions in Belize, Northern Guatemala and Southeastern Mexico. The purpose of the plan was to identify areas of biological significance and the best strategies for addressing critical issues across the planning unit that affect the whole portfolio, large areas or critical areas of the ecoregion, and for sustainably using biodiversity.

Criteria and methods

A process was developed for designing strategies based on the selection of thematic priorities (called in the plan “focal issues”) and aimed to conserve the geographic priorities (areas of biodiversity significance, seen as a whole or critical areas or assemblages of areas) in the ecoregional portfolio. The process included the following steps:

- 1) Definition of a conceptual framework
- 2) Identification of geographical priorities
- 3) Analysis of information for identifying thematic priorities
- 4) Identification of thematic priorities
- 5) Strategy design

See Figure 1.

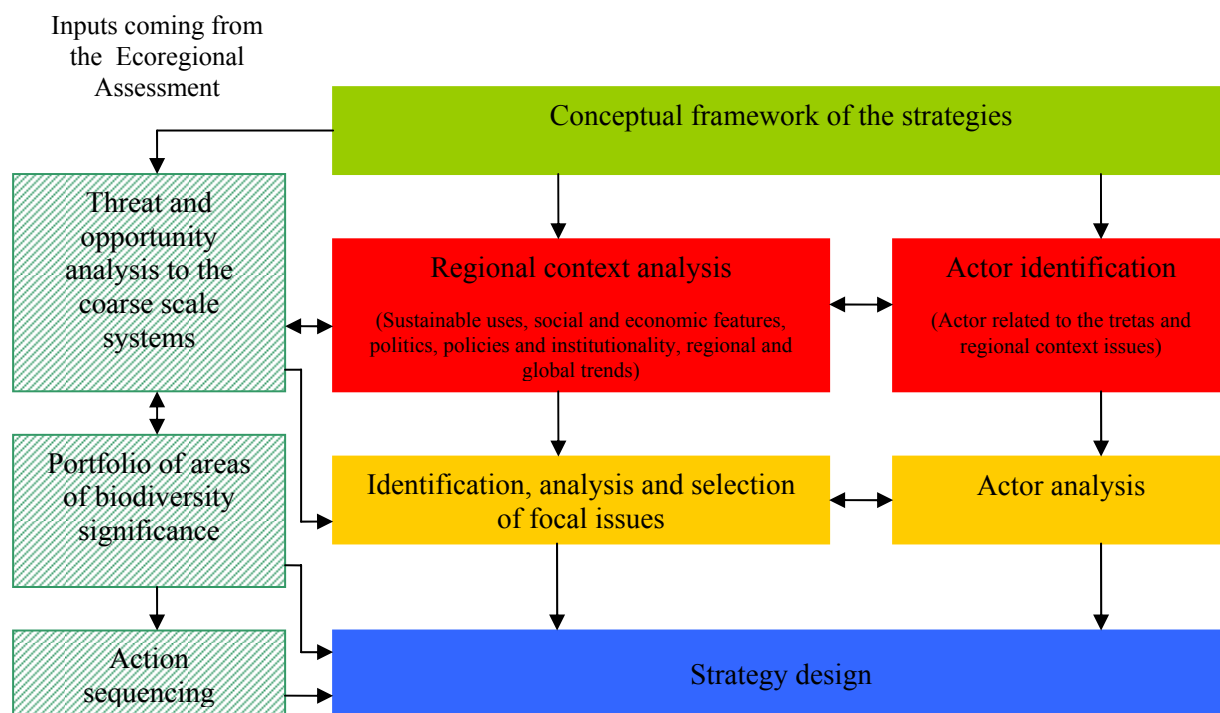


Figure 1. Diagram of steps in the method to design strategies.

Conceptual framework

The ecoregional assessment served as the conceptual framework for the project. It provided criteria and methods for the purpose and scope of the assessment (biodiversity targets and a portfolio of areas of biodiversity significance), scope of the issues and strategies to address them, and ownership of the products.

The ecoregional assessment resulted in a portfolio of areas of biodiversity significance. These areas were selected to best achieve conservation abundance and distribution goals for 832 rare, endemic and endangered species, and 46 natural communities and ecosystems.

Natural communities and ecosystems were assessed for threats. Information on threats was obtained from expert knowledge during workshops and a variety of spatial data that were used to create a “cost” surface to targets. This process resulted in identification and maps of dominant threats, and actors related to the threats.

Analysis of information for identifying thematic priorities

Information for a context analysis was collected from interviews, bibliographic research and documentation of expert knowledge. Socioeconomic, cultural and political information was collected from each country including:

- Specific socioeconomic and demographic statistics for each country and political divisions within them.
- National and regional conservation and development initiatives and plans

- National and regional policies, laws, agreements and treaties
- Cartographic information of spatial threats

Using this information, a preliminary version of the context analysis was developed. Feedback on the context analysis, major actors, and implications for conservation actions was provided by partners in a workshop in order to refine the analysis.

Identification of thematic priorities

Thematic priorities (named “focal issues” in this process) were identified and selected through:

- Evaluating the scope and impact of the issue. Expert information, information review and consensus obtained during workshops served as the source of information which focused on the relevance of the issue to the tri-national region (the entire regional assessment region), and relevance to each individual country.
- Assessing the scope and severity of the issue, based on threat analysis, expert opinion and consensus reached in workshops.
- Assessing the linkages and multiplier effects of issues (importance of the issue in terms of their reinforcing effect on other issues), using a Leopold-style chart model.
- Determining influence capacity (the opportunity for the conservation alliance to have a successful impact on the issues), using expert opinion and consensus achieved during workshops.

The final selection of focal issues was made combining the results of each one of the criteria, following the formula:

$$FAE = [(QR_n + 2(QR_t) + QM + QEm) / 5] - AI$$

Where:

FAE = Result for each focal issue

QR_n = National relevance

QR_t = Trinational relevance

QM = Magnitude

QEm = Multiplier effect

AI = Influence domain

This process identified 18 focal issues, a more robust context analysis, a comprehensive threats analysis and a preliminary analysis of actors.

Strategy development

Strategies were developed by regional experts in large and small working groups. Large groups were used for analyzing information and stating first rough versions of the strategies (preliminary set of strategies), using the context analysis information, actor analysis, threats analysis and the maps of areas of biodiversity significance. In order to pursue the purposes of the plan (as stated above), the strategies were grouped in five categories.

- Threat abatement

- Ecological viability
- Sustainable use
- Enabling environment
- Result sustainability

Small groups reviewed, edited and refined the first set of strategies in order to make them technically and scientifically sound and robust. Products were repeatedly reviewed by the group for refinement. Each strategy was completed with the four following elements:

- vision for the selected thematic priority
- strategic objective
- strategic actions
- action steps

Products/outcomes

The context and threat analyses led to the identification of 32 primary issues that were potentially relevant to consider for strategies aimed to targeting threat abatement, conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Seven of them were related to social context, 9 to economic context, 13 to politic and institutional context, and the remaining 13 were threats. Throughout the further prioritization, 15 of these issues were selected as thematic priorities (“focal issues”), and strategies were developed around them. In addition, throughout the revision of the resulting strategies, 4 other thematic priorities, and their respective strategies, were also incorporated into the plan in order to include all the aspects required for implementation (enabling environment, for instance), and sustainability of the results over the long term.

Strengths and weaknesses

Strength--Good context analysis

The context analysis was the major “raw material” for both the focal issue identification and the strategy identification and design. It provided the information and the rationales for supporting strategies, and participants in workshops repeatedly suggested that a well achieved ecoregional plan is the one that gives the same attention to the socioeconomic information than to the biological information.

Strength--Understanding the difference of the scales of the planning unit, the focal issues, the strategies and implementation.

Because of its scale, the geographies encompassed in planning units such as the Maya Forest are large and complex. It was thus very important to understand that the issues have differences from one region to the other, and these differences had to be considered in the strategy design. But, on the other hand, the strategies of the plan couldn't be dispersed in addressing small scale issues that had to be considered at only a site-level. The formulation of a table analyzing what kind of issues and strategies the plan had to considered (and what were the nuances as well), was very clarifying for both priority setting and strategy development.

Strength--Thinking on the strategy design as an iterative process, and not a linear process.

The strategy design process has to repeatedly come back to the results previously obtained, and to revisit them in the light of new findings and analyses. Working that way with the Maya Forest teams demonstrated that the constant feedback of the process made people see things from a different perspective and restate the results. The threat analysis, context analysis and actor identification mutually nourished each other. Moreover, coming back to priorities in order to ensure that key aspects or new issues are not overlooked ensured more solid strategies. Probing questions are also important. Asking the question “Are we ensuring the ecological viability of our conservation targets over the long term with the current strategies?” helped to incorporate three new focal issues.

Strength--Good actor/partner participation and inclusion

More than quantity of participants, it was important to think of quality of participants. Quantity did not necessarily reflect quality, however a good selection of actors and partners for the right activities along the planning process, did represent quality results.

Strategies emanated from and were inherently linked to focal issues and priority sites. Thus, it was very important to engage experts from the field of biological sciences, and the field of socioeconomic sciences along the process.

The number of participants was determined by the specific objective of each activity. The Maya Forest demonstrated that large working groups were good for gathering and reviewing information, validate results, and to achieve consensus, but they were useless for fine tuning final products. Small groups were more effective for refining the results, adding technical content and making them more coherent. Shifting from small to large working groups and vice versa made the process dynamic and effective.

Weakness--Actor involvement for the implementation and issues analysis

It is important to involve more key actors related to the further implementation of the strategies. Amongst others, these actors include: donors, implementers of conservation actions, local governments, bi- and multilateral organizations. Their support is critical for both strategies in particular and the whole plan. It would be useful to involve specific experts in some particular issues, or eventually organize specific workshops on issues that need broader or deeper analysis.

Weakness--Regarding context analysis

Despite the importance that was given to the context analysis, there are still things that could be improved, such as:

- Creating a data base for social, economic, cultural, political and institutional factors
- More and better involvement of experts in the social, economic, cultural, political and institutional fields
- Better time management for the context analysis, and better time balance between the portfolio design and the context analysis and strategy design.

Weakness--Capacity analysis

A thorough capacity analysis (not fully developed in the Maya Forest process) may be informative for better balancing the manageable and feasible vis-à-vis the conservation needs.

Weakness--Measurable objectives

An analysis of more quantitative information on context issues combined with the capacity analysis would help to refine measurable strategic objectives.