

**European Platform for Biodiversity Research Strategy  
Working group on EPBRS Action Plan**

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<b>REPORT FROM</b>	<b>Martin Sharman</b>		
<b>OBJECTIVE OF MEETING</b>	<b>Review the EPBRS action plan</b>		
place	<b>Hotel Errera, Brussels, BE</b>		
date	<b>19<sup>th</sup> Dec 2007</b>		
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## **SUMMARY**

No textual work on the action plan, but agreement on how to reformulate it: the group focused on ways to make the current list of research issues more useful.

Net outcome: recommendations for consideration by the EPBRS Steering Committee in Slovenia.

Risks: (1) confusion between the aims and objectives of the EPBRS and the research strategy that it promulgates; (2) lack of resources and time to do much work on the documents between sessions.

Political issues: until the EPBRS develops a coherent research strategy, effective communication with its target groups is difficult. A clear research strategy will also make participation in the EPBRS more attractive to policy makers.

Pending issues: develop a vision for the research strategy for presentation to the steering committee.

Next steps: prepare a briefing paper for Jurgen to present to the steering committee containing an outline of the proposals of the group.

Conclusion: although the group was not able to make any concrete suggestions for changes to the action plan as it stands, it identified a range of proposals that if implemented should make the EPBRS more effective.

Recommendation: remove the existing action plan from the EPBRS website without delay.

Next meeting: to be decided by the steering committee.

## **Main results of the meeting**

### 1. Introductory remarks: Context and objective

At its meeting in Porto, the EPBRS steering committee decided to review the EPBRS Action Plan, which was adopted following the Irish Presidency meeting. Several EPBRS members with some additional experts met in Brussels on December 19th to identify what major steps should be taken to review the plan.

### 2. The meeting: Outline and significant events

Jurgen Tack chaired the meeting, which took the form of a freewheeling discussion that covered the vision of the action plan, its key audience, the strategic objectives and

orientation of the plan, the research priorities, means to measure the impact of the work of the EPBRS, and communication.

### Output

The group decided that the necessary work should result – at least in an interim phase – in 4 distinct documents, some or all of which may be brought together in a final document:

1. an assessment of progress made in understanding biodiversity over the past 4 or 5 years. This will certainly bring to light areas of new knowledge of which the EPBRS was not previously aware.
2. a research strategy to promote the conservation and the sustainable use of biodiversity, and to maintain and strengthen capabilities of institutions across Europe to provide the necessary research.

This would outline the aim of the research to be done over the next few years in Europe in broad terms. The group agreed that a small group (Allan, Gergely, Rainer and Martin) would develop a statement that summarises this aim, for discussion at the next meeting of the steering committee.

Beyond any mission or vision statement, the research strategy should set out a rational argument to explain why the identified research aims should be supported rather than any other competing research.

The document should also make clear why it is possible to identify issues, but not to prioritise them – except in the context of a particular question. A simple diagram may help to explain the "chicken and egg" relationship between the various groups of research issues.

The document would cover issues listed under "enabling outcomes" in the current action plan<sup>1</sup> and outline other key strategic issues, including science-policy interfaces, ways of doing research including adaptive management, institutional learning, and criteria to identify critical knowledge sets.

Gergely suggested that BioStrat might be in a position to hire someone to take forward the development of this document.

3. a set of research priorities organised in such a way as to be useful both for funding agencies and for researchers.

Jurgen offered INBO's services, working in cooperation with so-far unidentified members of the EPBRS, to re-organise the existing shopping list of priorities, and to deliver a draft list by June 2008 for discussion by the EPBRS. This would not involve discovering or developing new research requirements, but grouping the requirements identified in the action plan or in EPBRS meetings.

The proposed structure would probably be developed along the lines of the recommendations of the Portuguese Presidency meeting of the EPBRS in Porto ("Life on the blue Planet"), in what the group called a "Russian Doll" model. In this model, the headline issue is formulated as a research priority that is then set out in more detail in subordinate bullets, also formulated as research priorities, as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Funding, coordination, institutional arrangements, and common data standards and quality assurance procedures

## **1. Understand status and trends of marine biodiversity and the impacts of drivers and pressures**

- map, list and rank marine species and habitat types in terms of vulnerability to human impact, species richness, relevance for ecosystem functioning and uniqueness at appropriate temporal and spatial scales;
- ....

The group thought that the re-formulated list of recommendations might require a small set of higher-level super-headline issues<sup>2</sup> in which are nested the headline issues. This would be useful for communication with administrations, to set out the generic areas in which knowledge should be generated.

The re-formulated list might also require the subordinate bullets to be broken down into more detailed tasks that would be of more direct relevance to scientists. In the example above, (fictitious) examples might be

- map, list and rank marine species and habitat types in terms of vulnerability to human impact, species richness, relevance for ecosystem functioning and uniqueness at appropriate temporal and spatial scales;
  - i. determine the distribution of species and habitat types
  - ii. determine the sensitivity of species and habitat types to anthropogenic stresses
  - iii. ...

Where possible the final list should contain cross-references to particular recommendations from the plenary meetings.

## 4. one or more action plans relating to key policy areas.

### Focus on target groups

The group identified the main audience for the research priorities and the action plans as EU, national or local research policy makers. This includes the ERA-Nets.

Around this bull's-eye of target groups is a wider group of research managers who need not finance research themselves, but direct research within their institutions. This includes the Networks of Excellence.

A wider circle is the world of researchers, and beyond that, other organisations including civil society organisations. The group spent some time discussing the extent to which researchers can be helped to see their work in the context of policy needs.

The message that we need these target groups to understand is (a) that the EPBRS is a trustworthy source of guidance and that (b) the issues identified in the 4 documents, and in particular in the strategy, priorities and action plans, are worthy of close consideration for funding or research. The action we would like them to take is (a) to seek to participate in the EPBRS and (b) to prioritise issues identified by the EPBRS for funding. The structure presentation and exact formulation of the recommendations strongly influence the ease with which they can be adopted by these target groups<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps structured around "data and knowledge", "methods and instruments" and "policies and management", although this needs further discussion.

<sup>3</sup> This is the reason for the "Russian Doll" model proposed for the research priorities. Each level of detail is aimed at one circle of the concentric target audiences.

The EPBRS does not exist in a vacuum. The group understands that each of these target audiences listens to advice from other sources, and that it may be important to know what those other sources are and where they in turn get their information.

It is important for the future focus and formulation of the EPBRS recommendations to know how they are used in planning agendas, and by whom. The group agreed that recommendations influence the Framework Programme agenda and national agendas in Member States whose national platforms promote their use by introducing and explaining them to appropriate target audiences.

#### Strategy of the EPBRS itself

Although the group was tasked with reviewing the action plan, it became clear that such a review will in some cases point to the need to review the aims, objectives or working methods of the EPBRS itself. Indeed it was not always easy to separate the discussion on the aims and objectives of the EPBRS from the research strategy that it proposes<sup>4</sup>.

Questions concerning the niche of the EPBRS, criteria for selecting issues for discussion at the EPBRS meetings, and the method for prioritising the research topics identified at those meetings should be answered in the "aims and objectives" document, not the research strategy. The "aims and objectives" should also clarify the relationship between any action plan and the recommendations coming from the meetings.

The relationship of the EPBRS with environmental policy and management strategies may need to be rethought. Adaptive management and other structured techniques of learning by doing require that research is intimately linked with governance. If the EPBRS considers this community as a client, then its interface with the policy world is not restricted to research funding and planning, but touches on environmental policy and management.

### **3. Risks, political issues**

Un-prioritised shopping lists of open-ended research issues may lead to three undesirable reactions along the following lines.

1. if we know so little about everything, what grounds are there to insist on urgent action?
2. if you can't tell me which of these issues is the most important, why should I believe that any of them are sufficiently important to divert funds or research efforts from other areas?
3. you identified this as a priority in 1999, and work has certainly been done on this topic since then. Why is it still listed here?

The group did not have time to discuss the FP7 roadmap in any detail, but agreed that a thread of "sustainable use" is useful and rational.

### **4. Conclusions, recommendations, next steps**

In a rapidly changing world the need for knowledge increases faster than science advances, and the continued and increasingly urgent need for cost-effective, targeted research is a strong justification for the continuation of the EPBRS.

The group proposes to recommend to the steering committee in Slovenia:

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the aims and objectives of the EPBRS identifies the need to fill knowledge gaps relevant to environmental legislation. The research strategy should identify the specific directives of greatest importance.

- A vision of the research strategy for the EPBRS, perhaps based on the existing boxed text in italics at the start of the current action plan.
- To withdraw the current action plan from the EPBRS website.
- To establish small drafting teams to develop of a set of documents to replace the current action plan.
- To mandate INBO with clear terms of reference to reformulate the current list of priority issues.
- To investigate the possibility of using BioStrat funds to engage an appropriate person to help to formulate the research strategy.
- To convene a workshop in June or September to discuss the draft research strategy and priority issues.
- To aim to adopt the priority issues at the French meeting of the EPBRS in November 2008.
- To discuss and possibly adopt the research strategy at the French meeting.
- If it is not already adopted, to adopt the research strategy at the Czech meeting in the first half of 2009.
- At the Swedish meeting, to publish the outcome of the expert assessment of biodiversity status (following on the Finnish model).
- To adopt one or more action plans for research for the next 20 years at the Swedish meeting.

The group also proposed that the services of the Commission poll the national platforms and other EPBRS members for comments on the FP7 roadmap.