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Forests and biodiversity: a focus on primary forests

Executive Summary

This document introduces the topic “Forests and biodiversity: a focus on primary forests”. It specifically focuses on the conservation and sustainable management of primary forests in the Asia-Pacific region, which is rich in biodiversity but facing challenges due to rapid deforestation, forest degradation, and habitat fragmentation; all largely human-induced factors. It provides an overview of the topic and underscores the importance of Other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs), community-based management, and Integrated Landscape Management. It stresses the need to engage Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) and the private sector as key players in the sustainable use and conservation of primary forests.

Suggested Actions

The Commission is invited to recommend countries to:

- share forest-related priorities for regional exchange and coordination as regards the implementation of the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF) including in relation to the conservation and sustainable use of primary forests;
- provide guidance on needs and strategic entry points for FAO to support members in upscaling the conservation and sustainable use of primary forests in the Asia-Pacific region; and
- welcome the GEF8 Indo-Malaya Critical Forest Biome Integrated Program (GEF8 IM CFB IP), as an opportunity for upscaling action on primary forests in the Asia-Pacific region.

The Commission is invited to recommend FAO to:

- support members, upon request and subject to the availability of resources, in the implementation of the KMGBF, through technical assistance to building capacity, development of relevant tools and knowledge products and supporting monitoring of progress;
- continue to support members in improving national assessment and reporting on primary forests, including in terms of increased consistency across countries; and
- continue with the implementation of the GEF8 IM CFB IP, including through the promotion of cross-sectoral linkages and policy coherence in support of mainstreaming primary forest considerations into relevant agricultural sector policies and practices, facilitate sharing of experience and lessons learned with other countries with similar conditions and other relevant initiatives, and report on progress made at its next Session.

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I. INTRODUCTION

1. The importance of strengthening efforts to reverse the loss of biodiversity, particularly in primary forests, is clearly demonstrated both in the observed trend of declining biodiversity and in urgent calls for increased action. Beyond immense biodiversity assets, primary forest conservation is essential to maintain and enhance one of the largest terrestrial carbon stocks, and the provision of climate regulation and other ecosystem service benefits. The Twenty-Ninth Session of the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission (APFC29)¹ and the Twenty-Sixth Session of FAO's Committee on Forestry (COFO26)² both highlighted the potential of forests to help mitigate the negative impacts of global challenges, such as biodiversity loss. Moreover, APFC29 requested that FAO "strengthen the capacity of governments and relevant stakeholders as regards the sustainable management and use of forest biodiversity (including wildlife)". It also invited its members to strengthen the institutional mechanisms for agroforestry and community forestry approaches.

2. The *Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)* serves as the overarching framework for international negotiations on biodiversity conservation, including the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of benefits. The *Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF)* adopted at the last UN Biodiversity Conference in Montreal in 2022, will guide global biodiversity priorities through to 2030, with 23 targets and four goals.³ FAO has a critical role to play in the implementation of the KMGBF as several of these targets relate to agricultural sectors.

3. The *FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors*^{4,5}, which was endorsed in 2019, aims at supporting countries in reducing negative impacts of agricultural sectors on biodiversity and enhancing positive impacts. In 2022, Asia-Pacific members further requested the development of a sub-regional plan on biodiversity mainstreaming in the Pacific sub-region.⁶ COFO26 invited FAO to report regularly on the mainstreaming of biodiversity in the agriculture and forestry sectors. It further requested FAO and its members to put greater emphasis on ways to decouple growth in agricultural production from forest and other biodiversity loss. COFO26 also recommended FAO to support sustainable land management approaches within the implementation of the *FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors* and the draft 2024-27 Action Plan. It acknowledged that sustainable forest management (SFM) and sustainable intensification approaches can play a role at the landscape level to simultaneously support biodiversity outcomes and help meet global wood demand, alongside agroforestry and other multiple-use forest management approaches.

4. With the adoption of the KMGBF, this document takes stock of forest biodiversity priorities in the Asia-Pacific region with a focus on the role of primary forests.

II. BACKGROUND

5. Biodiversity and ecosystem services are fundamental prerequisites for productive, sustainable and resilient agri-food systems. Defined as the variety of life at genetic, species and

¹ FAO. 2022. Report of the Twenty-ninth Session of the Asia-Pacific Forestry Commission – Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia 22-25 February 2022 (virtual meeting). Bangkok. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9178en>

² FAO. 2022. Report of the Twenty-Sixth Session of FAO's Committee on Forestry – Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/nk728en/nk728en.pdf>

³ CBD/COP/DEC/15/4 ; APFC/2023/7

⁴ The term 'agricultural sectors' in this context includes all areas of crop and livestock production, forestry, fisheries, and aquaculture.

⁵ FAO. 2019. *FAO Strategy on Mainstreaming Biodiversity across Agricultural Sectors*. FAO Council, Rome. CL 163/11 Rev.1. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca7722en/ca7722en.pdf>

⁶ FAO. 2022. Report. Thirty-sixth Session of the FAO Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok. <https://www.fao.org/3/ni607en/ni607en.pdf>

ecosystem levels, biodiversity is indispensable to food security, sustainable development, and the supply of many vital ecosystem services.

6. Home to 14 of the world's 36 biodiversity hotspots, and four of the world's eight main biogeographical regions (Australasian, Indo-Malaysian, Oceanic and Palearctic), the Asia-Pacific region hosts exceptional biodiversity, much of it in highly diverse forest ecosystems, ranging from coastal mangroves to alpine meadows and from tropical rainforests to dry forests. Forest biodiversity extends far beyond trees and plants. Animals, including birds, mammals, insects, and countless microorganisms, are integral parts of forest ecosystems, playing critical roles in processes such as pollination, seed dispersal, and nutrient cycling. Primary forests play an irreplaceable role in conserving this biodiversity. They provide habitat for animal species, many of which are not found in secondary or plantation forests, serve as a refuge against disturbances, and maintain ecological processes that are often lost in disturbed or managed forests. Moreover, primary forests also play an essential role in sequestering carbon and maintaining local and global climate stability and thus offer significant climate benefits that provide a compelling rationale for their conservation, alongside the well-established need for preserving biodiversity. Primary forests in the Asia-Pacific region have significant economic and cultural values for many IPLCs who depend on them for their livelihoods, well-being and cultural identity.

7. Despite its rich biodiversity, the Asia-Pacific region is experiencing a concerning decline in biodiversity⁷ due to human-induced factors such as deforestation, forest degradation, habitat fragmentation, and climate change. According to the FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment (FRA)⁸, among the 19 APFC member countries that have reported on primary forest in 2020, primary forest area totals 86.1 million hectares or 17.1 percent of the forest area in those countries, which is much lower than the global average of 32 percent and has declined by 15 percent since 1990. Specifically, deforestation, forest degradation, and habitat fragmentation, driven by population growth, enhanced economic prosperity, as well as domestic and international demand for agricultural commodities, result in habitat loss and pose risks to numerous species. Rapid economic growth is also a contributing factor as it leads to increased demand for wildlife products, thereby fueling unsustainable trade. The spread of alien invasive species, often expedited by the increased movement of people and goods, further exacerbates the situation. Moreover, events related to climate change have a particularly pronounced effect on certain species and ecosystems. Lastly, an increase in human-wildlife conflicts negatively impacts conservation efforts. Together, these factors create a challenging scenario for the preservation of biodiversity in the region. This challenge is further exacerbated by a “development first” approach that reportedly still dominates policymaking in the Asia-Pacific region. In some countries, protected areas (PAs) are being opened up for the cultivation of commercial crops, mining, infrastructure, and even urban development, despite the existence of policies and laws designed to protect biodiversity.⁹

8. Reversing the loss of forest biodiversity, especially the loss of primary forests, in the Asia-Pacific region requires comprehensive, multi-faceted policies that recognize and value all dimensions of biodiversity: genes, species and ecosystems. Several policy priorities are instrumental in achieving this goal, including effective development and consequent enforcement of appropriate laws and land-use plans, successful implementation of sustainable

⁷ IPBES. 2018. *Chapters of the regional assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services for Asia and the Pacific of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services*.

⁸ FAO. 2020. *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020: Main report*. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/ca9825en>

⁹ FAO. 2019. *Forest futures – Sustainable pathways for forests, landscapes and people in the Asia-Pacific region*. Asia-Pacific Forest Sector Outlook Study III. Bangkok. 352 pp. <https://www.fao.org/3/ca4627en/ca4627en.pdf>

agriculture practices and SFM, building capacity and empowering IPLCs, and enhancing international cooperation.

9. Currently, important shares of the remaining intact primary forests of the Asia-Pacific region remain outside PAs and are used for multiple purposes, necessitating a variety of innovative conservation, sustainable use and management mechanisms.¹⁰ These range from area-based conservation measures, Integrated Landscape Approaches, and community-based management that mainstream biodiversity conservation into policies and practices, alongside legal protection, to ensure the effective safe-guarding and socio-ecological sustainability of primary forests. Recognizing effective conservation outside PAs is a specific approach that is gaining traction. CBD Decision 14/8, adopted in 2018, defines “other effective area-based conservation measure” (OECM) as “a geographically defined area other than a PA, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustainable long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and, where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio-economic and other locally relevant values”. In other words, an OECM can complement PAs by filling gaps, connecting habitats, and conserving species that occur outside PAs.

III. EMERGING NEEDS AND PRIORITIES FOR PRIMARY FOREST CONSERVATION IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION

10. In response to the growing global recognition of the importance of primary forests in achieving environmental goals such as climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and sustainable development, world leaders convened at the One Forest Summit in Libreville, Gabon, in March 2023. This meeting marked the start of the One Forest Vision initiative on measuring the net carbon sequestration balance and mapping the most vital carbon and biodiversity reserves. To build on this commitment, it is crucial to cultivate strong, trust-based partnerships that emphasize data sharing. Improving knowledge about biodiversity in primary forests is key to effective conservation strategy development. Deepening comprehension of forest ecosystems, their operations, and their wider landscape roles can better guide landscape management and conservation efforts. Challenges like remote locations, inconsistent primary forest definitions, and differing data collection methods need consideration. Additionally, the diverse visions regarding the conservation and use of the region’s primary forests present another challenge in strategy formulation and implementation. To overcome these challenges, the establishment of a centralized hub for knowledge sharing and learning specific to primary forests can be highly significant. Such a hub can aggregate data on primary forest coverage, changes, and successful conservation strategies, enhancing data accessibility, consistency, and quality. It can support methodologically consistent monitoring across the region and foster research collaboration. As an educational tool, it can raise public and policymakers’ awareness of primary forest conservation’s importance, encouraging wider engagement and support.

11. Integrated Landscape Management can address the need for managing primary forests within the context of broader landscapes, considering the specific socio-economic and environmental factors at play in the region. This approach can help to promote community-based landscape management and biodiversity-friendly sustainable livelihood strategies. These strategies can enhance forestry and agricultural value chains, enabling market access for

¹⁰ Laumonier Y, Azzu N, Adzan G, Narulita S, Khikmah F, Meybeck A, Pingault N and Gitz V. 2022. *Asia-Pacific roadmap for primary forest conservation. Working Paper*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Rome. Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Bogor, Indonesia. CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA). <https://doi.org/10.17528/cifor/008540>

biodiversity-friendly products and services. Moreover, Integrated Landscape Management can buffer the negative impacts of drivers arising in production landscapes that have the potential to negatively influence primary forests. It is essential to create biodiversity-positive economies through the conservation and sustainable use of primary forests beyond PAs by implementing OECMs. OECMs contribute to the creation of ecological networks for species migration and genetic exchange, augmenting overall conservation benefits. Sustainable agricultural practices, including restoration activities, also play a critical role in conserving primary forests in the region.

12. Recognizing the crucial role of IPLCs is vital for primary forest conservation in the Asia-Pacific region. Compared to Latin America, and Africa, IPLC forest tenure remains very weakly recognized across much of the region, excluding Pacific countries. Ensuring IPLC engagement and recognizing and respecting their land and resource rights can lead to better environmental outcomes. Meaningful engagement of IPLCs in decision-making processes, recognizing their role as equal partners and ensuring adequate benefit sharing on their behalf can foster more effective and inclusive strategies for the long-term conservation and sustainable use of primary forests. Supporting sustainable livelihoods that align with conservation objectives can ensure that the protection of primary forests does not come at the expense of the economic needs of IPLCs. Furthermore, incorporating customary practices and local knowledge plays a pivotal role in promoting nature-positive agricultural models.

13. The private sector has the potential to play a pivotal role in the conservation of primary forests in the Asia-Pacific region, through the deployment of innovative strategies in support of Integrated Landscape Management. To fully leverage this potential, it is critical to foster an enabling investment environment. One effective way to achieve this is through the promotion of producer-public-private partnerships. Engaging businesses, specifically those within the agricultural, forestry, and extractive sectors, in conservation efforts within buffer zones and broader landscapes, can encourage the adoption of sustainable practices. This approach not only reduces adverse impacts on forests but also utilizes the resources, technical expertise, and innovative capabilities of these businesses to scale up effective conservation strategies. Public-private partnerships, blending the regulatory capabilities and public accountability of the public sector with the efficiency and resources of the private sector, can serve as a robust mechanism for achieving SFM and broader conservation goals in the Asia-Pacific region.

14. Financial institutions are increasingly perceived to possess the capacity to assess, disclose, and alleviate biodiversity-related risks and impacts within their lending and investment portfolios. Their funding choices and International Cooperation have notable potential to influence biodiversity outcomes, both positively and negatively. Consequently, the strategies these institutions employ can become influential, potentially making access to finance more difficult or expensive for businesses neglecting to address deforestation and other adverse biodiversity impacts within their supply chains. By fostering responsible practices, these financial institutions can stimulate corporate adoption of sustainable methods. Comprehensive government strategies, requiring coordination among various governmental entities, to effectively conceive and execute, for example, National Biodiversity Finance Plans or similar instruments within the region may offer future avenue to promote biodiversity conservation in primary forests.¹¹

15. Innovative funding and investment are key to addressing financing gaps and driving primary forest preservation in the Asia-Pacific region. Approaches such as Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) including REDD+, certification, and voluntary biodiversity credit markets can offer adaptable, interrelated mechanisms. Implementing and managing these

¹¹ Target 19 of KMGBF <https://www.cbd.int/gbf/targets/>

mechanisms effectively is crucial. PES includes a variety of methods to reward sustainable land management, encompassing options from direct payments to certification programs. A collaborative co-investment strategy is essential, engaging a wide range of stakeholders such as governments, private sector entities, international organizations, and financial institutions. This strategy can be supported by various fiscal tools and biodiversity impact certificates, creating an opportunity for companies to supplement their own initiatives in reducing biodiversity impacts.¹² Together, these varied methods could form a robust financing framework for sustainable development and natural resource conservation in the Asia-Pacific region.

IV. FAO'S WORK ON PRIMARY FORESTS

16. For over four decades, FAO has tracked the status and trends of primary forests, defining them as “naturally regenerating forests of native tree species, where there are no clearly visible indications of human activities, and the ecological processes are not significantly disturbed”. Measuring primary forest areas consistently across diverse global biomes and data sources has presented challenges, consequently FAO initiated a special study in 2019 to address key issues. This collaborative effort, involving global partners from academia, international bodies, and the FAO member countries, aimed to refine guidelines and methodologies for reporting on primary forest areas. Future work planned includes the finalization of biome-specific guidance documents and developing geospatial tools to assist countries in accurately reporting primary forest extents and changes. This enhanced focus on primary forests underscores FAO's commitment to providing authoritative and relevant information to support global efforts towards SDG 15 and the UN Strategic Plan for Forests 2017-2030. This information can help inform policies and initiatives in the Asia-Pacific region and worldwide.

17. FAO is in the process of developing a comprehensive Global Programme on Biodiversity Mainstreaming in Forestry to enhance the role of sustainably managed forests and trees outside forests in biodiversity conservation, management, and sustainable use. The Programme builds on the recommendations of the FAO-CIFOR global review of biodiversity mainstreaming in forestry.¹³

18. In relation to the Asia-Pacific region, following recommendations from the Third Asia-Pacific Forest Sector Outlook Study (2019), FAO and CIFOR produced the Asia-Pacific Roadmap for Primary Forest Conservation¹⁴ to inform decision-makers and actors on assessing the state of primary forests in the region and identify priority areas and priority actions for primary forest conservation. Specifically, the roadmap pointed out the need for an accurate mapping of forest types that *inter alia* includes field surveys in addition to remote-sensing assessments. It also pointed out the need for coherent cross-sector policies, specific action plans, and diverse conservation and sustainable management strategies to address the threats to primary forests. The roadmap also identifies a need for PAs to be supported by the sustainable management of primary forests outside PAs.

19. FAO also provides technical support and capacity development to countries. For instance, FAO is implementing a GEF5 Integrated Forest Management Project in Solomon

¹² Treyer, S., Karsenty, A., Mushiye, O. (2023). International biodiversity finance: reframing payments for ecosystem services within a co-investment for sustainable development approach. IDDRI, *Issue Brief* N°01/23

¹³ Harrison, R.D., Shono, K., Gitz, V., Meybeck, A., Hofer, T. & Wertz-Kanounnikoff, S. 2022. *Mainstreaming biodiversity in forestry*. FAO Forestry Paper, No. 188. Rome, FAO and Bogor, Indonesia, CIFOR. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc2229en>

¹⁴ Laumonier Y, Azzu N, Adzan G, Narulita S, Khikmah F, Meybeck A, Pingault N and Gitz V. 2022. *Asia-Pacific roadmap for primary forest conservation. Working Paper*. Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Rome. Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Bogor, Indonesia. CGIAR Research Program on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry (FTA). <https://doi.org/10.17528/cifor/008540>

Islands. The project will eventually establish 25 000 hectares of PAs on tribal customary land. The project also includes the provision of alternate livelihood support and Sustainable Land Management Trainings for IPLCs and the establishment of two bachelor's degree programmes in Forestry and Environmental Science. FAO is also implementing a GEF6 project that aims to catalyse transformative change of India's agricultural sector to support the achievement of national and global environmental benefits and conservation of critical biodiversity and forest landscapes. Another project being implemented by FAO is under GEF7, to strengthen the conservation of globally significant biodiversity in four landscape complexes of Northeastern and Eastern Thailand through improved management of forest landscapes.

20. More recently, IUCN and FAO are co-leading the development of the GEF8 Indo-Malaya Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Program that consists of three country child projects in Lao PDR, Papua New Guinea, and Thailand, together with a regional coordination and technical support project, which aim at maintaining the integrity of globally important primary forests in Indo-Malaya to maximize multiple global environmental benefits related to carbon and biodiversity, as well as human well-being. This program will work with multiple partners to reduce threats to primary forest conservation, focus on expansion and effective management of protected and conserved areas, and improve practices for enhanced IPLCs' resilience and benefits in primary forests outside PAs, including buffer zones. The program will also create an enabling environment for primary forest conservation and leverage incentives and finance for the conservation and sustainable management of primary forests. As part of its activities, the program will conduct a biome-wide diagnostic assessment focusing on primary forest conservation and develop an Indo-Malaya regional strategy specifically aimed at this crucial task. Furthermore, it will create a Primary Forest Investment Forum to stimulate investment and innovation in this area. To facilitate policy coordination, knowledge sharing, and learning, an Indo-Malayan Critical Forest Knowledge Hub will also be established.