



UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION

Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme

Fifteenth Session of the International Support Group (ISG) of the MAB Programme

UNESCO Headquarters (Paris), Room II

26 April 2019, 10:00-12:00

REPORT

1. The meeting was chaired by H.E. Dr. Stefan Krawielicki, Ambassador and Permanent Delegate of Germany to UNESCO, who opened the meeting and, with the agreement of the participants, adopted the report of the 14th ISG meeting in 2018.
2. The floor was given to the MAB Secretary and Director of the Division for Ecological and Earth Sciences, Dr Miguel Clüsener-Godt, who informed the participants about activities undertaken since the last session of the ISG.
3. The Secretary presented first the statutory duties and procedures related to the MAB Programme and the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR).
4. He reported that the 30th session of the international Coordinating Council of the MAB Programme (MAB-ICC), took place in Palembang, South Sumatra, Indonesia from 23 to 27 July 2018. He thanked the Government of Indonesia for their exceptional organization and support.
5. A total of 380 participants from Member States of the ICC, observer delegations, UN agencies, private sector and NGOs participated at last year's session.
6. Twenty-four new biosphere reserves were nominated and two new countries — Mozambique and Moldova — joined the WNBR. In addition, the session granted two extensions and/or re-namings of existing reserves, and accepted seven withdrawals (five biosphere reserves in Australia, one in the Netherlands and one in the United States). The WNBR now comprises 686 biosphere reserves in 122 countries, including 20 trans-boundary biosphere reserves.
7. The Secretary provided detailed information about the Exit Strategy and the new Process of Excellence and Enhancement. He noted that MAB-ICC had decided to finalize the Exit Strategy by 2020 and to institute a 'Process of excellence and enhancement of the WNBR as well as quality improvement of all members of the World Network' to ensure that biosphere reserves serve as models for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

8. This Strategy defines a path towards improvement of the 64 biosphere reserves that still do not meet the criteria, or have not provided comprehensive information to enable the Council to assess and monitor their progress. The Process takes into consideration the varying situations of the sites concerned, and defines paths to resolve outstanding issues over the next two years.
9. All biosphere reserves have until 30 September 2019 at the latest to become fully functional and report to the Council if they wish to remain in the Network. An exception is made for biosphere reserves in conflict zones.
10. At its 30th session, the MAB Council adopted the Global Communication Strategy and Action Plan of the MAB Programme and its WNBR.
11. The #ProudToShare video campaign was launched in June 2018. The videos share success stories on how biosphere reserves implement the SDGs of Agenda 2030. The videos can be found on the UNESCO YouTube channel and the MAB Instagram account. Due to its success, a call for a new #ProudToShare video campaign has been issued. All videos will be presented at the 2019 MAB Council session and will be hosted on UNESCO social media.
12. The Secretary informed the participants about the laureates of the MAB Young Scientist Award. Eight young scientists from Costa Rica, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (2), Egypt, Ghana, the Russian Federation and Viet Nam received awards. He insisted on the need to strengthen this award scheme through extrabudgetary funding and invited the ISG members to reflect on ways in which they could contribute to this process.
13. Following the information on the outcomes of the 30th ICC, Dr Clüsener-Godt presented some highlights of this year's 25th session of the International Advisory Committee of Biosphere Reserves, which was held from 25 to 28 February 2019. Among the 20 new biosphere reserve nominations received were three countries aspiring to be included in the WNBR for the first time: the Kingdom of Eswatini, Norway and Zambia. If the nominations proposals were accepted at the 30th International Coordinating Council in 2019, they would bring the total number of countries in the network to 125.
14. The Advisory Committee also reviewed 33 Periodic Review Reports, 26 Follow-Up Reports to the ICC, 11 extensions/renamings and 2 withdrawals.
15. The Secretary continued by providing information about the Operational Guidelines for the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (OP-WNBR), which were presented at the 30th MAB-ICC. The objective of the guidelines is to provide clear technical guidance to MAB practitioners and those who wish to join the WNBR.
16. The MAB Secretariat has established an electronic and open access web-based living document compiling contributions and experiences from the MAB community on specific items. An online draft prototype is accessible at the following link: <https://en.unesco.org/op-wnbr> for demonstration purposes.
17. The Council approved the ToRs and road map of the Working Group (WG), highlighting the synergy between the WG and the IACBR. The composition of the WG has been finalized and is now operational. All groups are well balanced in terms of gender and regional representation.

18. The Secretary then provided an overview of the main MAB activities since the last ISG meeting. He started with the 18th IberoMAB Meeting, which took place in Santa Marta, Colombia from 7 to 9 May 2018. Representatives from 24 countries participated in this meeting.
19. The event was organized by the Ibero-American and Caribbean Biosphere Reserve Network (IberoMAB), the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development of Colombia, the Governorate of Magdalena, the MAB Secretariat, the UNESCO Regional Office for Science for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the UNESCO Offices in San Jose and Quito.
20. The IberoMAB Network adopted the new IberoMAB Action Plan for 2018–2025. The Action Plan is a guide that serves as a basis for initiatives, actions and projects to be carried out in IberoMAB biosphere reserves in accordance with the SDGs.
21. The 15th meeting of the East Asian Biosphere Reserve Network (EABRN) was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, from 29 May to 2 June 2018. Participants focused on elaborating an EABRN strategy for the Lima Action Plan, youth engagement and site-to-site cooperation. The meeting also highlighted the development of guidelines for ecotourism in biosphere reserves.
22. The 11th Southeast Asia Biosphere Reserve Network (SeaBRnet) meeting was hosted by the Thailand MAB National Committee on 21-25 May 2018 to explore, devise and advance local sustainability through the sharing of experiences between networks, as well as to promote and advance the biosphere concept as an efficient tool for sustainable economic and social development.
23. The 8th meeting of the World Network of Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves (WNICBR) was held in Menorca, Spain on 22-26 May. The conference was co-hosted by UNESCO, Jeju Island and Spain.
24. Over 100 people from 33 countries participated in the meeting, which included the presentation of successful case studies on biodiversity and marine management, ecological restoration, plastic and micro plastics, sustainable energy, transport and tourism, as well as environmental vectors. Participatory discussions were conducted to implement SDGs and to discuss and define ways of networking for the next five years (2018–2022).
25. Another event organized by this network was the 6th UNESCO Training Course for Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserve Managers, which took place on Jeju Island, Republic of Korea from 1 to 3 October 2018. The training course was organized by UNESCO MAB and the Jeju Special Self-Governing Province and convened by the Jeju Secretariat of WNICBR.
26. The First IberoMAB Youth Forum took place in the Transboundary Bosques de Paz Biosphere Reserve, located between Ecuador and Peru, from 5 to 8 December 2018. The forum highlighted the importance of youth participation and rejuvenating MAB biosphere reserves. Eighty-nine participants from 43 biosphere reserves from 23 countries in Ecuador met to discuss the roles of young people who work, study or live in biosphere reserves.
27. The participants petitioned for the establishment of an Ibero-American and Caribbean Biosphere Reserves Youth Network. The network would include a representative from each biosphere reserve and one from each country.

28. The main conclusions were presented in the Forum's Final Declaration. This Declaration was sent to the President of the IberoMAB Network and all MAB National Committees of the IberoMAB Network.
29. The 24th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was held from 2 to 15 December 2018 in Katowice, Poland. The UNESCO Delegation present at COP24 followed closely the negotiations, which resulted in the adoption of the Paris Agreement 'rulebook', the operating manual procedures after the global deal enters into force in 2020.
30. MAB representatives participated in several UN side events and sessions organized at national pavilions at the COP, highlighting the contributions of biosphere reserves as climate change observatories, and promoting climate science, monitoring, mitigation and adaptation actions in line with the Paris Agreement and the 2030 Agenda.
31. The 3rd Huangshan Dialogue on UNESCO Sites and Sustainable Development was held in Huangshan, China, from 31 October to 3 November, and focused on the importance of Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)-related activities in UNESCO biosphere reserves.
32. The Huangshan Dialogue is organized by the International Centre on Space Technology for Natural and Cultural Heritage (HIST), and is the first of its kind to apply space technologies to the monitoring and preservation of natural and cultural heritage under the auspices of UNESCO.
33. In the outcome document, UNESCO and the Integrated Research on Disaster Risk (IRDR) Programme propose several recommended actions, including establishing an international task group on DRR for Internationally Designated Areas (IDAs) and promoting DRR for IDAs at the 2019 Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction. IRDR will continue its attention and contributions to DRR for UNESCO sites.
34. The MAB Secretary participated in the 4th Meeting of the Coordination Board for the Establishment of the Transboundary Mura-Drava-Danube Biosphere Reserve, which took place in Velika Polana, Slovenia, in January 2019. The meeting forms part of the process for the establishment of the first transboundary biosphere reserve to encompass five countries: Austria, Croatia, Hungary, Serbia and Slovenia.
35. Dr Clüsener-Godt then briefly presented other activities. He started with the strategic coordination meeting 'Science to Enable and Empower the Asia Pacific for the Sustainable Development Goals', which was organized by the UNESCO Office in Jakarta on 30 July – 1 August 2018, in Jakarta, and resulted in a commitment to strengthen partnerships among UNESCO and its science partners and stakeholders across Asia and the Pacific.
36. The Congo Basin Forest Partnership held its 18th plenary meeting in Brussels in November 2018. This followed by the International Conference of Ministers in charge of Defence, Security and Protected Areas on the fight against poaching and other cross-border criminal activities, which was held in N'Djamena, Chad, on 23–25 January 2019.
37. Explicit mention was made of UNESCO and its MAB Programme in the N'Djamena Declaration, as responsible for facilitating 'the setting up and operation of a transhumance consultation framework which would make it possible to analyse the fundamental questions transboundary transhumance and to develop appropriate solutions'.

38. A seminar on 'Risk management of natural hazards in the in Ibero-American and Caribbean region: protected natural spaces as areas of action' was held in Akumal, Mexico, from 6 to 9 November 2018. The seminar aimed to provide support to the management of Ibero-American and Caribbean biosphere reserves through the prevention, management and reduction of major risks in the region.
39. UNESCO conducted a fact-finding mission in Iceland with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss possible cooperation with the Icelandic 'Land Restoration Training Programme' (LRT). The majority of the countries where LRT is currently working are also members of the MAB community.
40. MAB and the Icelandic Government will prepare a joint event to be held during the 'Conference on Ecological Restoration', organized by the Society of Ecological Restoration, in Cape Town in September 2019.
41. Iceland reiterated its strong interest in nominating a biosphere reserve, and it was agreed that the MAB Programme would provide technical support as appropriate.
42. The Secretary invited Member States to participate in World Biodiversity Day on 22 May 2019, based around the theme 'Our Biodiversity, Our Food, Our Health', by forwarding recipes from their respective biosphere reserves. This will enable the MAB Programme to showcase the diversity of products in biospheres, and highlight the connection between biodiversity conservation and knowledge and practices that are respectful of biodiversity.
43. The recipes, created with products from biosphere reserves, should be sent in English, French and/or Spanish, before 5 April 2019. The Head of UNESCO's Restoration Services will select a number of recipes and prepare them for all UNESCO Headquarters staff. All recipes will also be shared on the MAB website.
44. The following upcoming meetings were also mentioned: the 12th SeaBRnet Meeting (25-29 March 2019, Legazpi City, Philippines), EuroMAB 2019 (2-5 April, Dublin), 9th SACAM Meeting (25-27 April, Bhutan), 7th Plenary session of the Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (29 April – 4 May, UNESCO HQ), the 1st Meeting of Central American Biosphere Reserves (7-9 May, Copán, Honduras), the 2nd Global MAB Youth Forum (September, China) and the EABRN meeting (Pyongyang, DPR Korea, to be confirmed).
45. After presenting the above activities, the Secretary moved on to MAB's partnerships. One of key partnership is the BIOSphere and Heritage of Lake Chad (BIOPALT) project, which is funded by the African Development Bank to the amount of USD 5.6 million. Project activities are managed jointly by the UNESCO MAB Programme, the International Hydrological Programme (IHP) and the World Heritage Centre. The main goal of BIOPALT is to create a transboundary Biosphere Reserve in the Lake Chad Basin.
46. The project has four main components: (i) updating and improvement of knowledge of the hydrological, natural resources, socio-economic and cultural data of the socio-ecosystems of Lake Chad; (ii) capacity-building for the management and protection of Lake Chad's natural and cultural resources and elaboration of biosphere reserve and World Heritage site status dossiers; (iii) pilot actions for the rehabilitation and restoration of ecosystems and the promotion of green economies; and (iv) monitoring and evaluation of the project, development of capitalization supports and dissemination of results.

47. BIOPALT is a technical partner of the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100), a country-led effort to restore 100 million hectares of land in Africa by 2030.
48. BIOPALT also participated in BAPA+40, the United Nations' Second High-Level Conference on South-South Cooperation, which took place in Buenos Aires, from 20 to 22 March 2019. Through this project, the MAB Programme coordinated a side event entitled 'South-South Cooperation in UNESCO Biosphere Reserves: Transboundary cooperation for sustainable livelihoods, green economies and conservation'.
49. Another important partnership is the project 'Biosphere Reserves as a Tool for Coastal and Island Management in the South-East Pacific Region (BRESEP)', which is coordinated by the MAB Programme with the financial support of the Flemish Government of Belgium. The project was launched in 2014 and ended in December 2018.
50. The BRESEP project aimed to create and strengthen existing biosphere reserves in coastal zones and islands in the South-East Pacific in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Peru, as well as to promote biosphere reserves as a tool of sound innovative practices from a social, cultural and environmental viewpoint that bring added value to local socio-economic activities and, in this way, improve the livelihoods of the region's populations.
51. The main results of the project consisted of the creation of the first transboundary biosphere reserve in South America – Bosques de Paz (Ecuador-Peru), the extension of four biosphere reserves to include coastal or marine areas, the improvement of governance in six biosphere reserves through the creation of a management committee/plan, the organization of over 15 training courses and meetings, the celebration of the first forest fire workshop for biosphere reserves, support for the first IberoMAB Youth Forum, and joint work with the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission to improve marine and coastal planning. The second phase of the project is under discussion with the donor.
52. The Secretary then explained that the UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize for Environmental Conservation, which is funded by the Sultanate of Oman, recognizes the outstanding contributions of individuals, groups of individuals, institutes or organizations to the management or preservation of the environment. Only UNESCO Members States acting in consultation with National Commissions, or non-governmental organizations maintaining official partnerships with UNESCO and active in relevant fields, can submit nominations for the prize. The deadline for submission of application forms for the 2019 UNESCO Sultan Qaboos Prize is 15 July 2019.
53. The Secretary informed the participants about a project on ecosystem restoration being implemented in the La Selle Biosphere Reserve, Haiti, which is funded by Spanish Cooperation (AECID) and the Autonomous Authority for National Parks (OAPN) from Spain.
54. The objective of this project is to contribute to sustainable human and economic development in the La Selle Biosphere Reserve. Such development is achieved through the recovery of forest resources, the rehabilitation of ecosystem services and the promotion of actions that imply a socio-economic benefit. The objective is to improve the quality of life of local populations and their future generations.

55. Another important partnership presented by the Secretariat was the 'Economic valuation of ecosystem services in biosphere reserves' (EVAMAB), which is funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO).
56. The project is testing effective rapid assessment methods in four selected African biosphere reserves: Pendjari Biosphere Reserve (Benin), Lake Tana Biosphere Reserve (Ethiopia), Mount Elgon Biosphere Reserve (Uganda) and Lake Manyara Biosphere Reserve (Tanzania). The project aims to assess the economic value of ecosystem services. The final results should be available in May 2019.
57. The Secretary explained that UNESCO is one of four UN partners of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), along with FAO, UNDP and UNEP. The MAB Programme has participated in the work of the platform since its inception through the mobilization of experts, knowledge holders and its network of biosphere reserves for the purposes of assessment, capacity building and communication.
58. The 7th Plenary meeting of IPBES will take place at UNESCO Headquarters from 29 April to 4 May 2019 upon the invitation of France. On this occasion, an exhibition celebrating biodiversity and the MAB Programme will be displayed on the exterior fences of UNESCO Headquarters (from 1 April until mid-May) with the support of AXA Insurance and the Spanish Delegation to UNESCO.
59. Dr Clüsener-Godt then presented the UN Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP), a unique alliance of nearly 100 national governments, conservation organizations, research institutions, United Nations agencies and private companies, coordinated by UNEP and UNESCO. More than 7% of the total range area of great apes is situated in biosphere reserves. Last year, Gombe Masito Ugalla in Tanzania – the area where Dr Jane Goodall began her pioneering study of wild chimpanzees – became a biosphere reserve. On 21 March 2019, an information meeting on the protection of great apes and the current and future role of UNESCO took place at UNESCO Headquarters, in the presence of UNESCO's Director-General and the Director of the Musée National d'Histoire Naturelle (France).
60. The Secretary briefed the participants about the 31st Session of the MAB Council, which was held at UNESCO Headquarters from 17 to 21 June 2019. Invitations to MAB Council Members and Observers were sent with the agenda and timetable in mid-February.
61. The main items of the next MAB Council are: new Biosphere Reserves, Periodic Review Reports, Implementation of the Lima Action Plan, the Process of Excellence and Enhancement of the WNBR, the Michel Batisse and MAB Young Scientists Awards, Youth Activities, Technical Guidelines and the new MAB website.
62. Several side events and panel sessions will be organized within the framework of the Council. These include an exhibition on the World Network of Biosphere Reserves and SDGs, a side event on the 2019 MAB Youth Forum, a panel and exhibition on biosphere reserve goods and services, a panel on biosphere reserves and peace, and a side event organized by the Jane Goodall Institute. In addition, an excursion to the Marais Audomarois Biosphere Reserve will take place on 21 June 2019.
63. The Secretary finished his presentation by inviting all Member States to receive updates on all MAB activities by subscribing to the MAB Facebook, Twitter and Instagram pages.

64. The Chair thanked the MAB Secretary for his presentation and opened up the floor for comments on the presentations. The Member States also thanked the MAB Secretary for his extensive report and expressed their satisfaction with the operation of the MAB Programme.
65. Salvador congratulated Ecuador and Peru on the creation of the Bosques de Paz Biosphere Reserve, which promotes peace and communication among neighbouring countries. She noted that in the case of El Salvador, the tri-national Trifinio-Fraternidad Transboundary Biosphere Reserve also enhanced communication among the three countries.
66. The Ambassador of El Salvador then asked the Secretary to explain the technical reasons behind the withdrawal of biosphere reserves by countries in recent years.
67. The Secretary first congratulated El Salvador on the establishment of the first transboundary biosphere reserve in Latin America. With regard to the question, he explained that the WNBR consists of two types of biosphere reserves – those established pre- and post- the Congress of Seville in 1995. The Congress established the Statutory Framework and the MAB Action Plan, which stipulate that biosphere reserves should have a governance structure and adequate zonation, in order to be functional and to distinguish them from other national and international nominations (i.e. national parks, World Heritage sites).
68. In 2013, the MAB Council adopted the Exit Strategy, which identified 270 sites that were not meeting the criteria of the Statutory Framework. Since that date, extra efforts have been made to support those countries including assistance in seeking financial support, provision of expertise and exchange of experiences. However, many sites lacked the necessary capacity to resolve the issues in question. For example, several of these sites were (and remain) national parks and were not able to integrate local populations into their site.
69. The Secretary also noted that biosphere reserves work not only with national governments but also with stakeholders at the local level. Many national governments that want their sites to remain part of the WNBR have thus been unable to achieve this aim. However, he explained that it is important that countries have the possibility to voluntarily withdraw their sites.
70. New biosphere reserves established post-1995 are not concerned by this situation. Instead, they must submit a Periodic Review every 10 years to the Advisory Committee. If the required information is not submitted, or the biosphere reserve is not functional, measures can be taken on time. It is important to note that this process was implemented because the countries asked the Secretariat to impose stricter rules, in order to ensure that the WBNR consisted of sites of excellence.
71. The delegate of St Vincent and the Grenadines asked the Secretary to clarify three issues: (i) governance of the MAB Programme and steps to be taken to improve dialogue between the MAB Council and the Advisory Committee; (ii) current and future challenges facing the MAB Programme; and (iii) the possibility of capacity-building training courses that incorporate account best practices.
72. The Secretary first highlighted the importance of SIDS for UNESCO and specifically the MAB Programme. In fact, the Secretary will visit St Vincent and the Grenadines and Granada in June 2019 to provide support to both countries regarding their possible biosphere reserves nominations.

73. The Secretariat has paid particular attention to the instructions of the Member States concerning the Governance of the MAB Programme, particularly with regard to improving communication between the MAB Council and the Advisory Committee. In fact, the Chair of the Advisory Committee attended the last MAB Council and the Chair of the MAB Council attended the last meeting of the Advisory Committee.
74. The most important challenge for the MAB Programme is the limited human and financial resources. Work continues to increase, as the number of biosphere reserves rises each year, but the available resources are lower. The Secretariat is actively working to mobilize funds and a significant proportion of activities are supported by extrabudgetary funds.
75. Regarding the exchange of experiences, current training courses are based substantially on the exchange of good practices among biosphere reserves.
76. In answer to an inquiry by the delegate of the Republic of Korea on the subject of the MAB Programme's contribution to climate change, the MAB Secretariat replied that the expert who coordinates all climate change activities in UNESCO works for the Programme, and that the Programme is highly active in this area.
77. Thanks to the financial support of the Government of Jeju, studies have been carried out on the impacts of climate change on biosphere reserves in Mauritius, Madeira, Principe and Menorca, as well as approaches to mitigate their effects, with the aim of extrapolating the results to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves. Good practices of adaptation to climate change have also been shared through the Network of Islands and Coastal Areas.
78. As the Republic of Korea is due to propose a new Category 2 Centre to UNESCO on sites with multiple designations, the Secretary hopes that this centre will help to boost training around the topic of climate change and sustainability in the WNBR, as well as in other UNESCO-designated sites.
79. In response to a question by the delegate of Ethiopia on support to countries for land and forest restoration, the Secretariat affirmed that Africa is a priority for UNESCO and, as such, the Programme is mobilizing funds and technical capacities. The BIOPALT project, as mentioned above, is working intensively in the five countries of the Chad Basin. The Programme is also seeking support from the European Union. The WNBR was recently presented at the Afri100 Initiative meetings and was appraised as an excellent tool for ecological restoration.
80. The delegate from St Vincent and the Grenadines took the floor again and asked the Secretariat to duly inform the delegations about all activities, since they had not received information about the IberoMAB Youth Forum. She also asked the Secretariat to arrange meetings on dates that do not coincide with other important meetings, and to consider holding the ISG Meeting in February when fewer meetings are due to take place.
81. The Secretary took note of this request and stated that he would try his best, but explained that the high number of meetings and lack of available rooms made it difficult to meet all such demands.
82. Before closing the meeting, the Chair took the floor to thank Dr Clüsener-Godt for his presentation and the delegates for their active participation. He suggested that for the next ISG meeting a few 'Proud to Share' one-minute movies could be shown to the Member States.

83. The Chair then declared the fifteenth session of the International Support Group (ISG) of the MAB Programme closed.