ITEM 6 OF THE PROVISIONAL AGENDA: Report of the Secretary of the MAB Programme

1. This report provides the MAB Council with a brief overall update on the development of the MAB Programme since its last session in Paris, France, in June 2019. The report is accompanied by a PPT presentation and is available on-line with other MAB-ICC documents.

2. Statutory duties and procedures related to MAB and WNBR

2.1 At the 31st session of the MAB-ICC, which took place in Paris, France in June 2019, 18 new biosphere reserves were nominated, including one new country – Kingdom of Eswatini. The nomination of Nordhordland marked Norway’s renewed commitment to the biosphere programme, 22 years after the withdrawal of its only other site, Northeast Salvbard Biosphere Reserve. In addition, the session approved eight extensions and/or re-namings of existing reserves. The World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) now comprises of 701 biosphere reserves in 124 countries, including 20 transboundary biosphere reserves.

2.2 In June 2017, at its 29th session, the MAB Council adopted a ‘Process of excellence and enhancement of the WNBR as well as quality improvement of all members of the World Network’. The Council decided to complete the ‘Exit Strategy’ in 2020 and to institute ‘the Process of Excellence’ to ensure that biosphere reserves serve as models for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

2.3 In July 2018, at its 30th session, the MAB Council decided to establish an ad-hoc working group on ‘the Process of Excellence’ in order to take advantage of the opportunities of the process beyond 2020.

2.4 In June 2019, at its 31st session, the MAB Council decided to ask the ad-hoc working group to continue its work to: a) address permanent mechanisms of quality assurance within the World Network; b) further develop the idea of a ‘short and easy review mechanism, coordinated by the MAB national committee and/or focal point, five years after the designation, or last periodic review report’; c) and combine this with proposals for a more streamlined periodic review process.

2.5 The ad-hoc working group met virtually six times and prepared a proposal for the consideration of the MAB Council.

2.6 Due to the current pandemic situation, and in discussion with MAB Bureau Members, countries have been given more time to conclude this process and the proposal from the ad-hoc working group and the exit Strategy will be completed at the next MAB Council in 2021.
2.7 In accordance with the adoption of the Exit Strategy in 2013, biosphere reserves were requested to submit periodic review reports to attest to their compliance with the Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves. At the time, 270 sites in 75 countries were concerned by the Exit Strategy.

2.8 Significant progress had been made since 2017 when the Process of Excellence and Enhancement was established, with all countries responding to this request. Eight countries decided voluntarily to withdraw a total of 38 biosphere reserves from the WNBR, 45 sites are still part of the Process of Excellence and 3 sites are in situations of conflicts are excluded from the process.

2.9 The 26th session of the International Advisory Committee for Biosphere Reserves (IACBR) was held in February 2020, with its recommendations communicated by the Secretariat to the MAB Bureau and all the Member States concerned in a timely manner. The Advisory Committee examined 30 proposals for new biosphere reserves including one transboundary site in three African countries, and four requests for extensions and/or renaming of existing biosphere reserves. Among the biosphere reserve proposals received, four new countries aspire to be included in the WNBR for the first time: Cabo Verde, Comoros, Luxembourg, and Trinidad and Tobago. Of these countries, three of them are Small Islands Development States (Cabo Verde, Comoros, and Trinidad and Tobago). The MAB Secretary received the decision of voluntary withdrawal of the following biosphere reserves: a) five from Australia: Uluru (Ayers Rock-Mount Olga), Croajingalong, Riverland (formerly Bookmark), Kosciuszko and Unnamed (Mamungari) Biosphere Reserves; b) one from Democratic Republic of Congo (Lufira Biosphere Reserve).

3. Highlight of MAB activities since the 2019 MAB-ICC

3.1 Midterm evaluation of the Implementation of the Lima Action Plan – Results of the mid-term evaluation: UNESCO’s Internal Oversight Service (IOS) Evaluation Office has undertaken, with the assistance of the MAB Secretariat, a mid-term evaluation of the MAB Strategy and its Lima Action Plan in order to examine its relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, impact and sustainability. The evaluation team found that the MAB Programme is highly relevant in the current global context including factors such as climate change, loss of biodiversity and the international drive toward sustainable development. The Programme is aligned with / contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals. The evaluation concluded with a set of recommendations concerning the future implementation of the Lima Action Plan for the attention of all MAB stakeholders that will be presented to the 32nd MAB ICC.

3.2 Meetings and seminars of the MAB Regional and Thematic Networks:

- The 6th General Assembly of the African Network of Biosphere Reserves (AfriMAB) took place in October 2019 in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.
- The 9th meeting of the World Network of Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves was held in the Gouritz Cluster Biosphere Reserve, South Africa from the 15 to 20 September 2019.
- The seminar "IberoMaB 2019: Roadmap for gender equity in biosphere reserves: Diagnosis, mainstreaming and capacity building for action" was held from 8 to 12 November 2019, in Antigua, Guatemala. Thirty-five participants from eleven countries took part in this seminar whose objective was to support socio-economic
development in the biosphere reserves of Ibero-America and the Caribbean with criteria of sustainability and gender equality

- Online regional meeting of AfriMAB network on 24 September 2020 to inform and exchange of experiences related to COVID-19 impact at local level. Almost 100 participants from 21 countries out of the 29 having biosphere reserves in Africa.

3.3 Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual meetings were held with MAB regional and thematic networks to reconnect and support all members, and redefine work plans.

- The IberoMAB Network held its first virtual meeting on 28 May 2020, with the participation of 65 representatives from 24 countries.
- The IberoMAB Youth Network held a virtual meeting on 21 April 2020, to discuss the postponement of the 2nd IberoMAB Youth Forum, the elaboration of the Action Plan and reflect on the COVID-19 crisis.
- The World Network of Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves organized its first virtual meetings on 16 September (English) and 17 September 2020 (Spanish) on ‘Mitigating the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves’.
- Online meetings on the protocol for the survey and monitoring using UVA’s with the five pilot sites of the monitoring project of biosphere reserves home to great apes have been organised by MAB Secretariat.
- The online regional consultation "Science to Enable and Empower Asia Pacific for COVID 19 response" was organized by UNESCO Office in Jakarta in May 2020 to take stock of the impact of the pandemic on UNESCO’s regional science networks, and to discuss on how respond to the challenges. 1,627 registered participants from across 24 countries.
- Online subregional meeting of the Southeast Asian Biosphere Reserve Network held on 16 July 2020 as a platform for the SeaBRnet community to share stories of the impacts of Covid-19 on their sites, offer ideas and solutions for how to return to a new - and better - normal. The meeting welcomed 122 participants, 60% of which are women, from Southeast Asia beyond.
- Two virtual meetings with 30 mountain experts from different regions took place in June and September 2020 to discuss the importance of mountain systems. Of the 701 biosphere reserves in the world, more than 400 are located in mountain regions. MAB recognizes the crucial value of mountain systems for their ecosystem services to humanity and their fragility in the face of global and climate change. For these reasons, the MAB Programme has decided to relaunch the World Network of Mountain Biosphere Reserves. The goal of these meetings are to define the objectives, topics, actions, and partner funding possibilities for the Network.

3.4 The World Network of Island and Coastal Biosphere Reserves, through its secretariats in the Biosphere Reserves of Menorca (Spain) and Jeju Island (Republic of Korea) and the MAB Programme, has open a call for project proposals aimed at mitigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in island and coastal biosphere reserves. Priority will be given to project proposals coming from biosphere reserves located in Small Island Developing States. The deadline to submit proposals is 16 October 2020. Further information can be found on the MAB website.

3.5 The Biosphere and Heritage of Lake Chad (BIOPALT) project, financed by the African Development Fund (ADF) up to US$ 6.5 million, and managed by the UNESCO MAB Programme in cooperation with the International Hydrological Programme (IHP) and the World
Heritage Centre have achieved several important results in its five beneficiaries countries (Chad, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Niger and Nigeria): i) the promotion of green economy Income-generating activities (IGA) and the restoration of degraded ecosystems in favour of 30,000 indirect beneficiaries among the most fragile populations (including 13,000 women). These activities contribute to mitigating the socio-economic impacts of the crisis linked to COVID-19; ii) Assisting the countries of the Lake Chad Basin in the preparation of nomination dossiers for biosphere reserves and World Heritage sites; iii) Training and capacity building on the MAB Programme, World Heritage and the peaceful management of natural resources targeting nearly 50,000 indirect beneficiaries; iv) Updating and improving knowledge on the biodiversity, cultural heritage and hydrology of Lake Chad through a dozen scientific studies. 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.

3.6 The project on ecosystem restoration in the La Selle Biosphere Reserve, Haiti, funded by Spanish Cooperation (AECID) and the Autonomous Authority for National Parks (OAPN) from Spain, came to an end. The objective of this project was to contribute to sustainable human and economic development in the La Selle Biosphere Reserve. The three phases of project implementation produced more than 800,000 seedlings to reforest approximately 480 hectares with both endemic and agroforestry species. Six community nurseries were created with an annual capacity to generate 500,000 seedlings. Some 200 people in six locations received cash contributions as payment for ecosystem services; some 300 people were trained and sensitised to sustainable socio-economic initiatives in three locations; and four groups of mutual socio-economic/community partnerships were created or strengthened.

3.7 Ecosystem restoration is one of Lima Action Plan priority area. With this regard, UNESCO has been fully involved in the review of the Strategy of the UNEP and FAO led UN Decade of Ecosystem restoration (2021-2030). MAB Secretariat participated in several webinars to UNESCO’s capacity of Collaborating Agency together with CBD, UNCCD,UNFCC and UNECE. MAB Secretariat is also an active member of FAO-led Task Force on Best Practices within the Decade.

3.8 The 2nd MAB Youth Forum brought together 176 young people from 83 countries in the Changbaishan Biosphere Reserve in China from 15-18 September 2019, to give youth a voice and an active role towards the 15th Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD COP 15) and the the post-2020 agenda for biodiversity. The young participants between 18 and 35 years old either live or work in a biosphere reserve.

3.9 On 24-26 January 2020 and under the project of "Youth Camp to Enhance Communication Skills in Promoting Climate Change Actions in Indonesia" funded by UNITAR, UNESCO Office Jakarta Youth Leadership Camp for Climate Change was organized in Banyuwangi and Baluran National Park, in East Java. The goals of the camp were to increase the participant's knowledge about climate change, to equip the participants with climate change communication skills through social media campaigns, and to build a network of young Indonesians who care about climate change issues.

3.10 Thanks to the support of the German National Commission to UNESCO, a 2M project to support biosphere reserves in Germany, Poland and Spain was approved by Volkswagen AG and will be launched in the next coming months.
3.11 A new project for USD 250,000 to assist biosphere reserves from Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Senegal that are or were in the Excellence Strategy or in need of support in their governance and/or management was approved by the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID).

3.12 A new small-scale project for USD 50,000 on 'Nature-based solutions for marine and coastal biosphere reserves' was approved by the Government of Flanders of the Kingdom of Belgium, to enhance the governance and spatial planning of island and coastal biosphere reserve in Chile, Ecuador and Peru. The project will be implemented jointly with the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission.

3.13 In partnership with the World Heritage Centre and through the Rapid Response Facility (RRF) over USD 29,000 were granted to the Yabotí Biosphere Reserve (Argentina) to assist the site threatened by poaching and USD 25,000 were granted to the Pantanal Biosphere Reserve to recover from forest fires.

3.14 The MAB Programme coordinated the celebration of the International Day for Biological Diversity that took place on the 22 May 2020. In the framework of the International Day five online panels were organized where expert discussed about the COVID-19 pandemic and nature-based solutions. MAB Youth also contributed to this Day from around the world by giving an insightful overview of the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity.

3.15 The MAB Programme coordinated the celebration of the World Environment Day that took place on 5 June 2020 with an interactive meeting with UNESCO Permanent Delegates, with the participation of the Assistant Director-General for Natural Sciences of UNESCO, Shamila Nair-Bedouelle and the Secretary of the MAB Programme, Miguel Clusener-Godt.

3.16 IPBES. The 7th Plenary meeting of IPBES took place at UNESCO HQ from 29 April to 4 May 2019. UNESCO MAB participated in the work of the platform since the start through mobilizing its experts, knowledge holders and network of biosphere reserves for the assessment, capacity building as well as communication functions. The first intergovernmental interdisciplinary global scientific report on the state of biodiversity was adopted on 4 May by 132 member states and the report launched at UNESCO on 6th May with the participation of the Director general of UNESCO. Human activities are the main threats to biodiversity loss, but local and indigenous knowledge are recognized as key to conservation of biodiversity. Solutions include for governments to promote and use more multifunctional and connected sites such as biosphere reserves. The MAB programme will enhance its participation, including in the second work programme and in the scoping phase of the new assessments.

3.17 UNESCO MAB signed a five year partnership with Louis Vuitton Moët Henessy (LVMH) group to support the work of the MAB programme on biodiversity. Within the scope of this partnership, the LVMH group will be present alongside UNESCO at major international events in the next two years. This agenda includes the IUCN World Congress and the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15) to the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2021 in Kunming, China. UNESCO MAB will provide scientific support for LVMH Maisons to advance their sustainable sourcing programs via its network of 701 biosphere reserves, as well as the international scientific expertise aggregated via the MAB programme and network. Thematics include prevention of fire and deforestation in the Amazon region, training of beekeepers and maintenance of pollination services in biosphere reserves.
3.18 **GRASP.** The UN Great Apes Survival Partnership (GRASP), is 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 are situated in biosphere reserves. In the framework of the AfriMAB network of “Biosphere reserves home to Great Apes” MAB Secretariat, with the French National Museum of Natural History (MNHN) and Sebitoli Chimpanzee Project in Uganda is developing a project to survey and monitor great apes and their habitats in 19 African biosphere reserves with UAVs, which reduces human disturbance in protected areas and prevents any risk of transmission of zoonotic diseases. The project will focus specifically on biodiversity health, following the One Health approach. Five sites in Guinée (Badiar biosphere reserve), Sénégal (Niokolo Koba Biosphere reserve), RDC (Luki Biosphere reserve), Cameroun (Dja biosphere reserve) and Tanzania (Kibale national park) will serve as pilot sites to develop the monitoring protocol. Drones have been purchased by MAB in support to the implementation of this project in the 19 African biosphere reserves.

3.19 **MAB contribution to UNESCO activities on climate change.** The 25th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change was held from 2 to 13 December 2019 in Madrid, Spain. 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.

3.20 **‘Economic valuation of ecosystem services in biosphere reserves’ (EVAMAB),** which is funded by the Belgian Federal Science Policy Office (BELSPO) 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) was completed. As a result of the project, a publication “Manual for Valuation of Ecosystem services for African biosphere reserves” will be published by end of 2020.

3.21 **The collaboration with Congo Basin Forest Partnership has expanded through BIOPALT project following 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. MAB programme and biosphere reserves has been fully integrated in the road map of the German Facilitation of the CBFP for 2020-2021.

3.22 **UNESCO’s regional office of the Sciences for Latin America and the Caribbean has committed to a regional consultation with experts linked to UNESCO biosphere reserves global geoparks and, to develop a regional UNESCO Sites climate, risk and resilience platform,** in order to tackle challenges in today’s world. The objective of this consultation is to gather climate action and risk experiences, knowledge and data from to UNESCO biosphere reserves global geoparks from the entire region; and to support the UNESCO Latin American and the Caribbean Technical Advisory Group to determine the desirable scope and focus of such a platform.

3.23 **The MAB Programme has started to work on preparations for the 50th anniversary of the Programme.** The celebration will take place throughout the year 2021 and will include a full programme of activities and concrete actions. The agenda item SC-20/CONF.232/11 will inform MAB Council members in detail about this activity.
3.24 Due to the current pandemic situation, the MAB Programme has organized several webinars to support Member States:

- **MAB Global Communication Strategy webinar series**: focused on designing promotion initiatives that reflect the MAB Global Communication Strategy approved in 2018. The webinars, available in English, Spanish, and French were designed to connect and support the WNBR in the co-creation of a narrative on the network's role and solutions for the implementation of the Agenda 2030 in connection with the on-going COVID-19 crisis. The series focused on four topics: communication, tourism, youth and local business.

- A webinar on COVID19 and the loss of biodiversity as threats to the survival of the great apes took place on 3 and 11 June 2020. Panelists discussed about biodiversity health, zoonosis, and particular risks for great apes and humans and how to reduce them.

- On the occasion of World Environment Day, UNESCO New Delhi and Surabhi Foundation along with partners National Biodiversity Authority of India, WWF-India and TERI organized a webinar to discuss the ‘Framework for developing a Television Series on India’s 11 Biosphere Reserves’. The webinar gave an opportunity to highlight the importance of the biosphere reserve model in a pandemic such as COVID-19.

- A webinar on 'Sustainable Production and Food Security in times of COVID19' was held by the IberoMAB Network.

- A virtual Workshop in English and Spanish on 'Carrying-Capacity Model for Sustainable Management' was organized by the MAB programme and the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile. The goal of the workshop was to discuss a software that will allow local governments to predict impacts on the environment, basic services, economy and local culture from population increases, both in terms of tourists over the summer months and more permanent influxes arising from migration.

- The UNESCO Almaty Office in collaboration with the MAB Secretariat has launched a series of webinars entitled "UNESCO MAB Programme in Central Asia in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic". On 29 July 2020, the first webinar on "In Harmony with Nature: The Role of UNESCO MAB Programme" took place, which was attended by 222 participants. The online meeting brought together MAB community representatives from Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Russia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. This series of webinars, held in the Russian language, aim to strengthen the capacities of countries to establish and manage Biosphere Reserves as model sites for sustainable development.

4. **Improving participation, quality and the related instrumentation of WNBR**

   **Technical Guidelines for Biosphere Reserves** (TGBR). The MAB Secretariat has been directed to develop an electronic and open access web-based living document compiled of contributions and experiences from the MAB community on specific items. The draft Technical Guidelines for Biosphere Reserves (TGBR) were prepared with inputs from members of the Technical Support Group of experts. The document was reviewed by IABCR and approved by MAB Bureau.
5. Conclusion

5.1 The current COVID-19 pandemic has created new challenges for the MAB Programme and the World Network of Biosphere Reserves. Part of the field work had to be delayed, but the MAB programme has tried to support its biosphere reserves by mobilizing funds and technical support.

5.2 With due attention to the recommendations of the IOS mid-term evaluation of the MAB Strategy and the Lima Action Plan, the implementation of the Strategy and the LAP continues, pursuing the overall targets of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change,

5.3 It is very important for the MAB and its WNBR to keep this continuity, finalise the excellence strategy next year and to establish the Technical Guidelines for Biosphere Reserves. The MAB agenda continues to mobilise all stakeholders at the local, national, regional and global level.

5.4 The MAB Programme seeks constantly for new partnerships, like LVMH and Volkswagen AG, in order provide full support to its stakeholders, particularly young people involved in the programme. MAB continues constantly to invest in new ideas and concepts for the implementation of the SDGs.

5.5 Concerning the WNBR, and following the appeal of the Director General of UNESCO, the MAB Programme would like to invite all Member States of UNESCO to join actively the Programme by establishing MAB National Committees and more and larger Biosphere Reserves dedicated to biodiversity conservation and integrated sustainable development.

6. The MAB Council is invited to review the report and guide the Secretary to improve the service of the Secretariat in all aspects concerned.