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Multinational conservation projects could save money

Multinational collaboration on conservation can be more cost-effective than action by a single country, according to new research. The study indicated that a fully-coordinated conservation plan for vertebrates in the Mediterranean Basin, involving all countries in the region, would save US$67 billion (€45 billion) – 45 per cent of the total cost – compared with uncoordinated action, where each country acts independently.

While international collaboration could increase the efficiency of conservation programs, most conservation programmes are currently applied at a national and regional level. There is growing interest in multinational plans but, before they are put in place, they should be assessed for their additional benefits.

This research considered the cost of meeting conservation targets for vertebrates (amphibians, reptiles and freshwater fish), in this case, to maintain a given distribution range of individual species. It compared the cost of meeting these targets through full coordination between more than 20 countries in the Mediterranean Basin, with partial coordination within EU or non-EU countries as well as with national conservation plans. The Mediterannean Basin holds over 25 countries with 250 million people, and large threats are posed to its unique biodiversity. EU Member States cover nearly half of the area.

The results indicated that substantially more money and area of conservation land would be needed for national level conservation efforts in order to achieve similar benefits compared with a fully coordinated multinational conservation action plan. The researchers estimated that a fully coordinated plan would cost approximately $148 billion (€100 billion).

If countries acted individually, it would cost $215 billion (€145 billion) to achieve the same results. Full coordination is slightly more efficient than partial coordination, where only EU Mediterranean countries coordinate their conservation actions. However, the difference between the fully and partly coordinated plans is relatively low. Therefore, the authors suggest that collaboration among EU countries in the Mediterannean Basin can provide a useful compromise at this stage, until full coordination becomes feasible.

Although the research indicates that, in theory, international conservation planning is more efficient, the authors discuss some possible disadvantages. For example, full coordination may reduce local involvement, which can be important to the success of conservation programmes. Furthermore, because multinational conservation actions often tend to focus on the species level, they may miss out populations that are adapted to a specific region, for example, those with local genetic variations within a species.

The researchers suggest a strategy that combines the advantages of both coordinated conservation planning and local planning. In the case of the Mediterranean Basin this could be a key initiative for the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership[1]. The researchers propose that one of the first initiatives should be to establish a Mediterranean-wide database for plants and other taxa and to collect conservation cost data.

1. See http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/euromed/index_en.htm

Source: Kark, S., Levin, N., Grantham, H.S. & Possingham, H.P. (2009). Between-country collaboration and consideration of costs increase conservation planning efficiency in the Mediterranean Basin. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.* 106(36): 15368-15373.

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