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# Action planning - a guide for the perplexed

## David Stroud

Joint Nature Conservation Committee, Monkstone House, City Road, Peterborough PE1 1JY, UK.

Email: David.Stroud@jncc.gov.uk

*“Mobilising people for collective action is a time-consuming process that requires the presence of committed, competent and people-orientated project personnel and shared understanding of project objectives by both the co-operators and the project personnel.”* (Anon. 1996)

### Why action plans?

A cynical view of biodiversity action plans is that they create “just more bureaucracy”. Yet, there are sound legal and practical reasons for developing action plans for conservation.

The legal background is provided by the Convention for the conservation of biological diversity (‘Biodiversity Convention’). Article 6 of the Biodiversity Convention states that:

*Each Contracting Party shall*

*a) develop national strategies, plans or programmes for the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity .....*

*b) integrate the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity into relevant sectoral or cross-sectoral plans, programmes and policies....*

Whilst CBD gives obligations for governments, there are also important reasons for conservation practitioners to draft action plans. Plans, or more correctly, action planning, provide a structure and coherent framework for conservation actions at a variety of spatial scales. Plans provide a means of promoting dialogue between parties and establishing the direction and objectives for conservation policies and actions.

It is very important to be aware that action planning is a *process* and not an end in itself. In this context, the discipline required to analyse problems and derive science-based solutions is crucial. Indeed, the preparation of an action plan may result in the discovery of new critical factors negatively influencing the conservation features under consideration.

### What is an action plan?

Action planning can be defined as conservation planning at any scale above that of the site. Plans may be developed for

- ◆ biotopes/habitats;
- ◆ individual species;

- ◆ groups of species; or
- ◆ processes.

Plans can be drafted at various scales, from local, to national, to international. Thus, considering the interaction of objectives with scale, one can visualise a wide range of scenarios where plans might be developed for conservation purposes — from international species plans to local habitat action plans. Figure 1 gives some examples (mainly for waterfowl and wetlands).

Biodiversity planning should be held in common, and equally owned, by all parties whose activities can affect the status and outcome of the process for the species or biotopes concerned.

### Types of plans

There have generally been two approaches to the preparation of conservation action plans.

The first main group of plans can be considered as ‘expert reviews of conservation needs’. These can be rapid to draft (in that they are typically prepared by a small group of technical experts), and provide comprehensive analysis of issues. These plans set clear agendas for action, whilst being technically very detailed in their analysis of issues and solutions. The problem with such plans is that these very attributes mean that there is often, if not always, little or no ‘ownership’ of the plans by other parties – for instance, government and non-conservation organisations. Plan development generally precedes any commitment to take, or fund actions. This usually means that there is little or no wider commitment to take action and little engagement by those organisations whose actions are necessary.

There are many examples of such expert action plans — the Action Plan series of IUCN’s Species Survival Commission (*e.g.* Gimenez Dixon 1996; Woodroffe *et al.* 1997; Servheen *et al.* 1999) being notable for their taxonomic scope, detailed technical analysis of problems, and suggested solutions. Other examples of such species action plans for birds include those for

	Local	National	International
<b>Species</b>	UK county-scale biodiversity actions plans for priority species	Threatened UK vertebrates, invertebrates and plant species — Biodiversity Steering Group 1998, 1999a,b RSPB species action plans for UK RDB birds	Various waterbird species — Anstey 1989; Green 1992; Stroud 1992; van Nugteren 1997 Globally threatened bird species in Europe — Heredia 1996 IUCN/SSC Action Plans — <i>e.g.</i> Woodroffe <i>et al.</i> 1997
<b>Species groups</b>			Waders at flyway scale — Davidson <i>et al.</i> 1998 Waterfowl at hemispheric scale — USA/Canada 1986 IUCN/SSC Action Plans — <i>e.g.</i> Gimenez Dixon 1996; Servheen <i>et al.</i> 1999
<b>Biotopes/Habitats</b>	UK county-scale biodiversity actions plans for priority habitats	UK freshwater and maritime habitats — Biodiversity Steering Group 1999a,b	Global action plan for the wise use and management of peatlands — Ramsar Recommendation C.VII.1
<b>Processes</b>		Albatross by-catch reduction — Biodiversity Group-Environment Australia 1998 <sup>1</sup>	

Figure 1. Some examples of the wide possible range of action plans (mainly for waterfowl and wetlands) at different scales and for different conservation objectives.

White Stork *Ciconia ciconia* (Goriup & Schultz 1991), White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala* (Anstey 1989), and White-winged Wood Duck *Cairina scutulata* (Green 1992).

A second and different approach is taken with what might be called ‘consultative plans’. Such plans are not just a statement of conservation needs but (at least in part) imply organisational commitment to tackle the problems addressed. Whilst there is more prospect of actions being undertaken — through the greater ‘ownership’ of the plan and engagement with it of key parties — they take much longer to draft and finalise. This is because the agreement of multiple organisations is required (especially relating to expenditure of resources and possible changes or organisational policies that will be required).

### Structure of plans

Experience has shown that the detailed structure of action plans is largely unimportant. The main challenge is to implement a plan, not to draft it.

All plans should follow a three-part structure that follows the international norm for site management plans. This aids the development of a logical and analytical approach to the implementation of actions. This top-level structure is:

- Part 1. **Description** or “What do we know?”

- Part 2. **Evaluation** or “What do we want to do?”
- Part 3. **Prescription** or “How do we want to do it?”

There are various models for structure of plans. For species, the format adopted by for some international plans for geese (Stroud 1992; Nugteren 1997) closely follows the UK/French standard for site management plans (NCC 1987) since adopted by the Ramsar Convention (Resolution C.V.7 - see Ramsar Convention Bureau 2000e), and others (*e.g.* Eurosite 1999). A more simple structure has been adopted for plans for globally threatened birds in Europe (Heredia 1996).

The structure adopted for UK species and habitat Biodiversity Action Plans is likewise simple (Biodiversity Steering Group 1995; 1998 *etc.*), although it is typically obscure as to what commitment actually exists to implement the various desired actions.

In drafting an action plan, attention to the following can help aid its eventual implementation:

- The language used is important, and should be appropriate for the target audience. Plain English (or other language(s) used) should be always employed. If the plan contains much technical detail and it is important to communicate the contents of the plan to

those without a technical background, it would be appropriate to think about a non-technical summary document. In these instances, the plan might also usefully contain actions related to developing public awareness of the actions being undertaken (see also Ramsar Convention Bureau 2000d).

➤ In drafting a plan, consultation with interested parties is essential — especially if these some change in the behaviour or activity of these organisations/ individuals is anticipated. To this end, clearly focussed workshops can be helpful to explore the issues and reach conclusions, although these should be clearly steered. There is much available guidance relevant to such initiatives in the field of participative management of protected sites (*e.g.* WWF-Pakistan 1996; Claridge & O’Callaghan 1997; Ramsar Convention Bureau 2000c; IUCN 1999). Much of this guidance can be readily adopted for the purposes of guiding community involvement in the preparation of action plans.

➤ Throughout the drafting of the plan, a party willing to provide the services of a Secretariat is essential to keep the process moving on. Actual drafting of elements of the plan may be devolved with responsibilities assigned, but there needs to be central co-ordination of the process.

➤ It is essential to form a Steering Group or Committee to oversee the process of plan preparation. This should ideally contain representatives from the main stakeholder groups or sectors potentially affected by the implementation of the plan (*e.g.* other Ministries or departments in the case of a plan developed by a government conservation department). Responsibility for drafting aspects of the plan may be assigned within this Group.

### **Ideal objectives**

Plans should contain ideal objectives. These are literally ‘ideal’ and should be of a very long-term nature. They will serve to guide the overall direction of action for the duration of the planning process. Indeed, the objectives may not realistically be achievable in a defined time-scale but their clear statement will give direction to conservation actions.

Associated with ideal objectives, more short-term objectives and targets should be set. Thus, for an action plan addressing the status of a critically endangered species, an ideal objective might be to restore species X to the whole of its former natural range, whilst the immediate objective of the plan might be to increase the population of species X from 50 to 300 individuals in the course of the next 10 years.

A good example of ideal objectives comes from Uganda’s national wetland policy, which has five goals:

- ❖ to end practices which reduce wetland productivity;
- ❖ to maintain the biological diversity of natural or semi-natural wetlands;
- ❖ to maintain wetland functions and values;
- ❖ to establish the principles by which wetland resources can be used optimally now and in the future; and
- ❖ to integrate wetland concerns into the planning and decision making of other sectors.

### **Plan implementation**

The largest challenge for those who seek to develop action plans is to ensure that they do not become inaction plans. Generally, the major challenges of action planning are to understand and work with people. This means taking an analytical approach and considering, at the earliest stages, which the various stakeholder groups are, and how best they can be involved. There needs to be continual consideration of relationships and how they may be developed and influenced. This requires considerable time and patience! There are many plans that exist on paper, yet have done little to alter activities on the ground.

Important considerations are that the plan should:

- ✓ clearly define who is responsible for its implementation. This needs to be written in from the outset;
- ✓ ideally define the resources that are needed to implement the plan at the outset<sup>1</sup>; and
- ✓ consider structural needs, especially within government where coherent implementation of national policy can sometimes be problematic in the absence of adequate inter-departmental co-ordination (see Ramsar Convention Bureau 2000a).

Finally, it should be stressed that the production of conservation Action Plans is not an end in itself, but part of a continuing *process*. Plans should help and facilitate rather than hinder action and co-operation. This process involves regular review, and modification of actions in the light of this feedback. It will also include substantial components of diplomacy, negotiation (to achieve mutually acceptable solutions which benefit respective parties), and the development of agreements that will be honoured. There needs to be the commitment to find

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<sup>1</sup> Although there are examples of plans where resources were not initially earmarked at the outset and the implementation process has successfully sought subsequent financing (*e.g.* the North American Waterfowl Management Plan – USA/Canada 1986).

ways through problems to joint, shared solutions that will stand the test of time.

### Problems with plans

A number of action plans have been developed in recent years which, for various reasons, have yet to be fully implemented. Given the large amount of time and resources that went into the development of these plans, this is a highly regrettable situation. Various common themes emerge from 'still-born' action plans that allow us to avoid these situations developing in the future.

Particular problems seem to emerge where:

- ❖ The plan or planning process is driven by a single organisation (or country in the context of an international plan), but without wider ownership from other parties. If the commitment to co-ordination from that lead-partner then starts to wane, the whole initiative can rapidly stagnate.
- ❖ Even where one organisation continues to give leadership, action planning can also hit problems if there is no wider enthusiasm for the process. There needs to be wider 'ownership' of the process. Engagement with key stakeholders or relevant sectors (e.g. fisheries, agriculture) at the earliest stages is crucial in this respect.
- ❖ Such ownership needs to be real — *i.e.* it needs to transcend nominal sign-up and be reflected in actual changes to the operational or corporate planning of organisations or agencies. Ownership should thus be judged in terms of actions rather than words!
- ❖ Where the planning process has started to become too complex and bureaucratic. Most government conservation agencies have few resources and very limited staff time. The time required to implement an action plan is always competing with other high priority demands on staff time. Accordingly, when these demands on that time become excessive, engagement will most probably fail.
- ❖ Plans will generally fail to achieve their full potential where provision has not been made for a Secretariat or other central co-ordination facility. The need for such co-ordination for the lifetime of the plan is critical.
- ❖ Where there is no active review mechanism. As for site management plans (NCC 1989; Eurosite 1999; Ramsar Convention Bureau 2000e), regular feedback and review of actions is essential.

### Sources of further information

The Ramsar Convention has recently published the Ramsar 'toolkit'. This provides international best practice guidance on various aspects of wetland wise-use and management. As noted above, much of this guidance is also highly relevant to aspects of successful conservation action planning.

*Ramsar handbooks for the wise use of wetlands:*

*Handbook 1. Wise use of wetlands. 24 pp.*

*Handbook 2. Developing and implementing National Wetland Policies. 64 pp.*

*Handbook 3. Reviewing laws and institutions to promote the conservation and wise use of wetlands. 46 pp.*

*Handbook 4. Integrating wetland conservation and wise use into river basin management. 32 pp.*

*Handbook 5. Establishing and strengthening local communities and indigenous people's participation in the management of wetlands. 92 pp.*

*Handbook 6. Promoting the conservation and wise-use of wetlands through communication, education and public awareness — The Outreach Programme of the Convention on Wetlands. 46 pp.*

*Handbook 7. Strategic Framework and guidelines for the development of the List of Wetlands of International Importance. 60 pp.*

*Handbook 8. Frameworks for managing wetlands of International Importance and other wetlands. 60 pp.*

*Handbook 9. Guidelines for international co-operation under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. 51 pp.*

The handbooks are freely available in English, French and Spanish from the Ramsar Bureau, as well as published on the Ramsar web-site — [www.ramsar.org](http://www.ramsar.org).

Comprehensive guidance on the preparation of UK local Biodiversity Action Plans has been published by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions:

*Guidance for local Biodiversity Action Plans.*

1. *An introduction. 7 pp.*
2. *Developing Partnerships.*
3. *How Local biodiversity Action Plans relate to other plans.*
4. *Evaluating priorities and setting targets for habitats and species.*

These are available from UK Biodiversity Secretariat, DETR, Tollgate House, Houlton Street, Bristol BS2 9JD, UK.

Similar useful guidance exists in the form of a 107 page report published by the Scottish Office in 1997: *Local Biodiversity Action Plans. A Manual*. This is available from The Secretariat of the Scottish Biodiversity Group, Scottish Executive, Rural Affairs and Natural Heritage, Victoria Quay, Leith, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ, UK.

A useful summary of actions required under the Biodiversity Convention including action plans and planning) is given by Hill *et al.* 1996.

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# Action planning and implementation for the conservation of biodiversity of the Saba Bank, Netherlands Antilles

**Paul Hoetjes**

Dept. of Public Health and Environment, Section Environment and Nature, Schouwburgweg 24, Curacao  
Netherlands Antilles. Tel: +5999 7363530 Email: milvomil@cura.net

The Netherlands Antilles consists of a group of five islands in the eastern and southern Caribbean. The islands are:

Bonaire: well known for its beautiful reefs; 10,000 inhabitants

Curacao: with similarly well-developed reefs as Bonaire. The city of Willemstad, seat of the central government, is a World Heritage Site; 150,000 inhabitants

Saba: Small steep volcanic island with top shrouded in mist, with beautiful 'elfin forest'; approximately 1000 inhabitants

St. Eustatius, or Statia: with a large volcanic crater with a vegetation of highly developed evergreen seasonal forest; approximately 1500 inhabitants

St. Maarten: Half French, half Dutch; a beautiful island, however with rampant development; approximately 30,000 inhabitants.

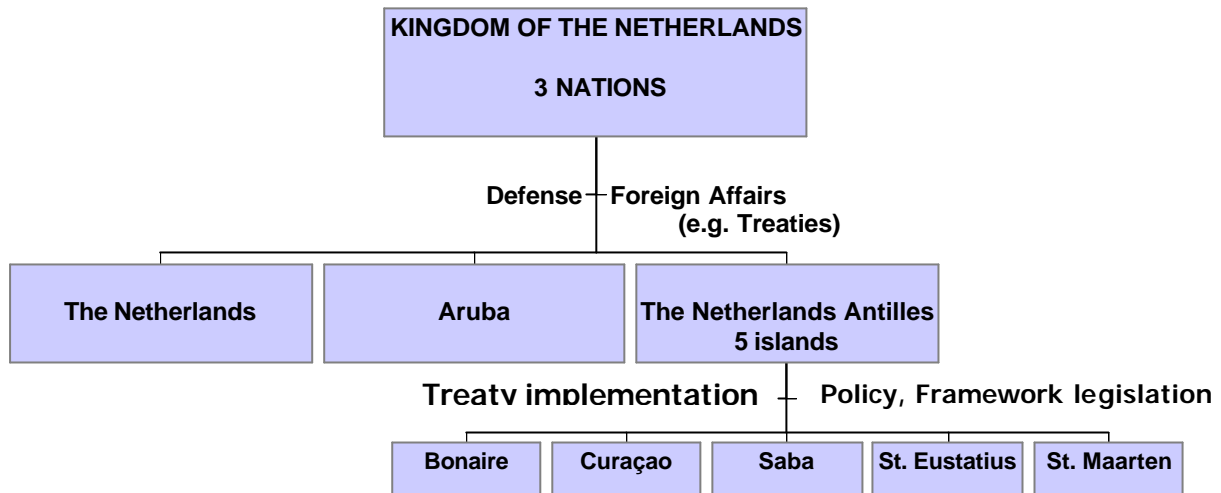
The Netherlands Antilles forms part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which consist of 3 nations of equal status: The Netherlands, Aruba, and the Netherlands Antilles.

The Kingdom as a whole deals with defence matters and Foreign Affairs (in practice this means the Netherlands)

The five islands of the Netherlands Antilles, Bonaire, Curacao, Saba, St. Eustatius or Statia, and St. Maarten, function more or less as a federation, with policy and legislation set out as frameworks which the islands fill in and implement.







The Environmental Section thus sets national policy concerning the environment and nature conservation. Treaties that the Netherlands Antilles are part of (Cartagena Convention with LBS and SPAW protocol, CBD, Ramsar, Bonn Convention and Inter-American Sea Turtle Convention) are implemented through framework legislation. Each island then implements this through its own nature ordinances, which must be formulated within a certain time. National nature policy entails among others that each island is mandated to protect at least one terrestrial and one marine area.

One area that falls largely under the central government, and not one of the islands, is the Saba Bank, only four miles from the smallest island, Saba. The Saba Bank is a large submerged shallow marine area, partly within Saba's territorial waters, and for about two thirds in the Economic Fishery Zone of the Netherlands Antilles. It is bigger than all the islands of the Netherlands Antilles put together, mostly shallower than 50 metres.

Our first step was to commission a review and quick

survey of the bank. About 150 km<sup>2</sup> of the Bank are reefs; corals are found there. The eastern and southeastern edges are covered with actively growing coral reefs, which are very rich in cover and diversity. These reefs are an important source of coral and fish larvae for the surrounding regions. The bank is also an important fishery resource

Very little was known about the bank except for a general idea of where the reefs were situated and the depth profile for the Bank. Being such a rich area, however, we felt that we needed an integrated management plan for the area.

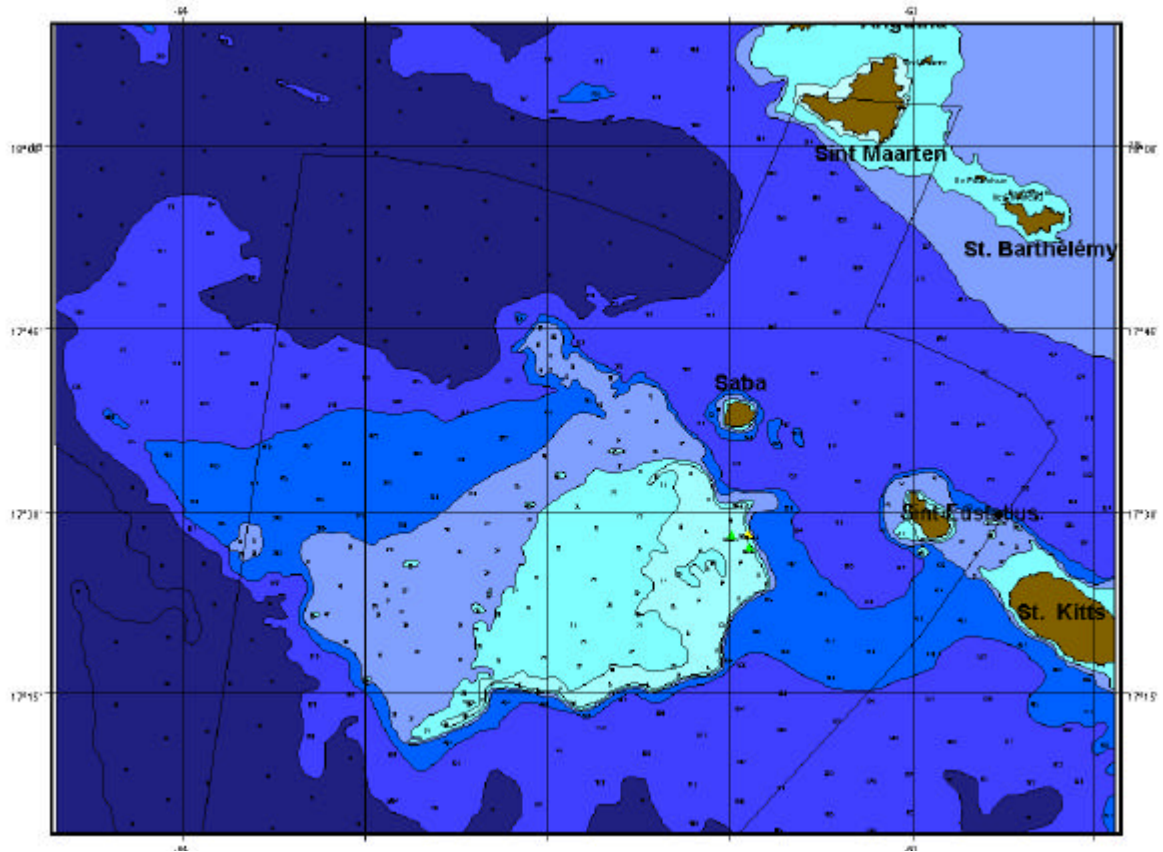
For that we first needed to get a good picture of the entire biodiversity of the Bank and do a complete biodiversity mapping of the Bank.

The first step was a fishery survey about a year ago, fishery being potentially a risk if overfishing was going on; we did not know whether this was so. It was also the easiest to find funding for, since it was a clear economic resource, and it was easy to convince people that it needed management for it to be sustainable. The Bank in fact proved to be of great economic

importance to the island of Saba, especially through the lobster fishery and to a lesser extent red snapper fishery. The FAO had estimated the maximum sustainable yield for the bank at 30-40 tons of lobster. It is in fact at the moment 100 tons and there are no obvious signs of overfishing; average size is among the highest in the Caribbean.

The fishery survey, however, was just the start; it was helpful in creating the necessary attention for the Bank. We now need to start mapping the different habitats of the bank, describing those habitats and their species composition, identify sensitive species and areas. Conch and sea turtles come to mind right away. Only then can a sustainable





Saba Bank: 40 by 60 km submerged atoll; 8-200 m depth: 2400 km<sup>2</sup>; 8-50 m depth: 1600 km<sup>2</sup>



Coral reefs of the Saba Bank



management plan for the area be formulated.

So, we now know more or less what we want to do, and how to go about it, but what is still lacking of course is the funding. We are looking everywhere for funding for the biodiversity survey of the Bank, and we have not found the way yet. There have been some dead ends already, in particular regarding funding through the GEF. The Netherlands Antilles are in a similar position to the UK Overseas Territories; we are part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands and as such have signed the Biodiversity Convention. The Kingdom as a whole, however is not a developing country. It is in fact a donor country. The Netherlands Antilles as such are not considered to be a signatory of the Convention, thus are not eligible for GEF funding. We will keep looking for funding of course and hope the now evident economic importance of the bank will help.