

Methodologies for National Interpretation: Toward Improved Guidelines for National Interpretations of High Conservation Value Forest

Introduction

Over the past few years, National Interpretations of HCVF Toolkits have been produced for countries spanning boreal to tropical environments. This has led to a need to consider how the development of national interpretations of the HCV concept can be guided, to build a process that is versatile enough to be applied in a variety of biophysical and national contexts, but sufficiently standardized to promote uniformity across users and countries. There is also a need to explore how insights gained from past experience of HCVF applications in specific national contexts can be drawn upon to provide general advice for developing new Toolkits or for revising old ones. This note has been compiled by Dr Gary Paoli, a forest ecologist and HCVF expert based in Indonesia.

Background

The “Global Toolkit for High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF)” is a set of three documents produced by ProForest in December 2003 with the purpose of guiding the implementation of HCVF assessments on the ground throughout the world. Part Two of the Global Toolkit provides guidance for developing national interpretations, or Toolkits, which are intended to give practitioners more detailed guidance for conducting HCVF assessments in specific national settings. Over the past few years, nine such Toolkits have been produced, spanning boreal to tropical environments, including Canada, Ecuador, Ghana, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Romania, Russia and Viet Nam.

Toolkits have provided valuable assistance to HCVF practitioners throughout the world, conducting assessments in a variety of settings and for a wide range of purposes, including land use planning, sustainable forestry, plantation design and compliance with institutional lending requirements. The development of national interpretations over this period is largely seen in a positive light, providing both a degree of uniformity across national standards, and specialized advice for a given geographic context. Nevertheless, there is a growing recognition of a need for better guidance in Toolkit formulation to ensure that national interpretations are developed in a manner that captures the priorities of global, regional, national and local stakeholders, but still renders the approach practical to implement.

A proposed framework

There are two main issues which need to be addressed:

- First, to explore how the development of national interpretations of the HCV concept can be guided to build a process that is versatile enough to be applied in a variety of biophysical and national contexts, but sufficiently standardized to promote uniformity across users and countries.
- Second, to explore how insights gained from past experience of HCVF applications in specific national contexts can be drawn upon to provide general advice for developing new Toolkits, or for revising existing ones.

The discussion is not intended to focus on the details of field methodologies – though it is recognized that recommendations made for the development of National Interpretations will draw heavily on the field methods used by practitioners in specific national contexts.

Some initial thoughts include the following:

1. Toolkit applications in diverse settings: Can one size fit all?

The HCVF concept was originally developed in the context of FSC certification, but is used today for a variety of purposes in widely divergent contexts. In Indonesia, for example, HCVF is used much more widely in plantation forestry and land use planning than it is in FSC certification. Many practitioners, as well as NGO and industry stakeholders, have questioned whether a single national Toolkit provides adequate guidance for such diverse uses. Thus, an important question to address might be: Can HCVF applications in contexts as diverse as sustainable timber harvesting from natural forest, plantation forestry, palm oil plantation, and even mining, be adequately supported by a single Toolkit? Or should separate documents be produced? How can this be directed globally to ensure some minimum standard of uniformity?

2. Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder consultation is a fundamental aspect of conducting HCVF assessments, especially in the compilation of data relevant to HCVs related to basic needs and cultural identity. Existing Toolkits uniformly emphasize the fundamental importance of stakeholder input in HCVF assessments, and recent experience confirms that the extent and quality of such consultation, and even at what points in the assessment process it occurs, directly impact the credibility and acceptance of the assessment report. Stakeholders complain that because they are not given adequate time to provide focused input to assessors in the field, misunderstandings or overgeneralizations become apparent only after the report is finalized and released to the public. At this stage it is too late for stakeholder input to be incorporated in a revised report, a fact that risks alienating stakeholders and causing problems for the client that commissioned the assessment. According to some stakeholders, this flaw in the assessment process, as it is currently practiced, should be solved.

Specific questions on this topic that could be addressed include: (1) Is adequate time and resources being devoted to stakeholder consultation during HCVF assessments, and, if not, how should guidelines be changed to improve this? (2) To what extent could/should stakeholder consultation be incorporated into the decision making and write-up stages of the assessment process, and how might this be accomplished practically bearing in mind the interests/sensitivities of private companies?

3. The presence of ‘Critically endangered’ and ‘Rare, threatened or endemic species’

HCV 1 relates in part to the presence of biodiversity values within a FMU, and when these values are sufficient to justify designation as an HCV. According to most national interpretations, the confirmed or likely presence of critically endangered species (defined as such by the IUCN Red List or taxa listed on Appendix 1 of CITES) is sufficient to trigger HCV 1 in a FMU, whereas the presence of rare, threatened or endemic species (RTE) triggers HCV 1 only when present at ‘high concentrations’ or in unusual compositions compared to the surrounding landscape.

The experience of practitioners assessing HCV1 has raised many questions, especially in data deficient areas typical for most of the tropics. Expert practitioners enjoy the flexibility that is permitted by most Toolkits to decide when concentrations of RTE are ‘high’, but some argue that the mere presence of critically endangered taxa should not always be sufficient to trigger HCV 1. Conversely, non-expert practitioners often complain that too little guidance is provided by this ‘flexible’ system to aid decisions by non-specialists, especially when data within and outside the FMU are inadequate. An issue of even greater concern related to uniformity is that not all Toolkits define HCV 1 the same way. For example, the Toolkit for Papua New Guinea

considers only Critically endangered or endemic species, while the Toolkit for Indonesia gives rare, threatened or endangered species consideration.

A number of questions could be developed to address these issues, including: (1) How much independence should be granted to those formulating National Interpretations in the treatment of Critically endangered species? Is one individual enough to trigger HCV 1? (2) Should more guidance be provided to standardize the treatment of rare, threatened, endangered or endemic species? Should thresholds for what defines 'high' concentration of such taxa be made more explicit, and if so, how? (3) Should nationally protected species be given equal weight as other international categories, or should this vary with the quality of data supporting such designations and/or motivation for protecting them?

4. Promoting higher standards of quality and professionalism through public review

An occasional criticism of the HCVF process concerns a lack of clarity on the rights and responsibilities of clients who contract third party HCVF assessments (or pre-assessments). If assessment reports are not released to the public, this reduces stakeholder confidence in the HCVF process, especially in cases where the client has made no commitment to abide by management recommendations of the assessment. Should there be national guidelines that require obtaining binding written consent from clients, prior to performing an assessment, to guarantee public access to the final report? What principles should guide this? Is it reasonable to require public release and review as part and parcel of the HCVF process, bearing in mind the sensitivities of at least some private companies? If so, should this be a required feature of all national interpretations?

5. Internal HCVF assessments with external peer reviews: Independence operating on a sliding scale?

There is a growing demand among some HCVF users, especially governments and private enterprise, to develop the internal capacity for conducting HCVF assessments themselves, followed by credible third party peer review and endorsement of the end product. Should national Toolkits address this development? Should guidance be provided by spelling out minimum standards of stakeholder involvement and/or other requirements in order for such assessments to retain credibility?

6. Management prescriptions

Stakeholders often complain about the lack of detail provided by practitioners in the management and monitoring recommendations they make. How much detail should be required of assessors, and how can this be standardized across national interpretations given that specific recommendations will always vary among countries, and even among FMUs within a single country? Stakeholders from all sides of the process desire more information – NGOs want more leverage to hold companies accountable, and private companies want greater details in order to know what, exactly, they are supposed to do. Can this be achieved through improved Toolkit development?

7. Expert advice

The availability, cost and quality of expert advice varies markedly among and within national settings, reflecting differences in the levels of education and training, availability of data for experts to consider and complexity of the questions experts are being asked to consider. Non-expert users of the HCVF Toolkit often complain that there is too much reliance on experts which they simply do not have. Can this issue be addressed through improved Toolkit development?

Suggested topic for discussion

How can stakeholder engagement in HCV assessments be improved, and how can the results of stakeholder consultations be incorporated practically into decision making processes?

In HCV1, what should the thresholds be to trigger active protection of biodiversity values? What guidance for consistency can be given across different national contexts?

Existing Comments

I'm working on a national HCVF toolkit for Malaysia, so this discussion is particularly relevant. The global HCVF toolkit and other national interpretations provide some guidance regarding HCV1, however the Malaysian toolkit is being developed primarily in the context of FSC certification so the FSC Principles and Criteria is our main starting point. In this regard it is important to remember that the FSC P&C requires active protection of biodiversity values even if a forest is not HCVF (see Principle 6.2, 8.2(c), etc.). In the context of FSC certification, it is wrong to think that active protection of biodiversity values is only triggered if the HCV1 threshold is crossed.

Even if a forest is not HCVF, the forest manager is required to identify, manage and monitor biodiversity values within an FMU. In particular, the forest manager shall ensure that safeguards exist which protect rare, threatened and endangered species and their habitats (e.g., nesting and feeding areas). Furthermore, in all forests (even non-HCVF) the forest manager shall carry out research and data collection to identify the composition and observed changes in the flora and fauna.

FSC has procedures in place to ensure consistency among national standards based on the FSC P&C. While Malaysia has yet to have its standards endorsed by FSC, they were developed following the general framework provided by FSC.

*Lim Teck Wyn, RESCU
(Network Participant)*

The question posed appears to be directed towards ensuring that HCV 'consumer satisfaction' is guaranteed e.g. if you buy an HCV friendly product from one country it is just as HCV friendly as any other countries.

In my opinion there is no reason to assume that there should be consistency between countries on the thresholds of any one HCV attribute. Each sovereign state has the right to set its own priorities and this can normally be found in the national biodiversity action plan. It is therefore possible to have a biodiversity value in one country that is in some other way considered very important which is not in another country. Through the convention on biological diversity a compromise is attempted between sovereignty and the clear need for countries to work together to maintain global diversity. Therefore assuming each country fulfils its global responsibility then any member countries toolkit has at the very least a consistency at that level.

There is an additional safeguard if the HCV process succeeds in assisting people to make informed choices and that is the choices of the 'consumers'. The stronger the linkages between people, government, companies, and scientists the more likely it is that the appropriate thresholds will be set. Toolkits should not be set in stone, their development should be dynamic, but the overall concept has to be robust and designed in a way to ensure that iterative changes drive towards some global optima.

Phillip Wells, Independent Consultant

(Network Participant)

I like the concept of HCV 'consumer satisfaction'. The rise of the 'global' consumer does indeed raise the question of global consistency in defining HCVs. In this regard, the global definition of HCV does ensure a degree of consistency in the determination of biological HCVs (for example) across different national contexts. The existing definition (for HCVF) states that HCVs are "globally, regionally or nationally significant concentrations of biodiversity values". While it may be possible that a biodiversity value is considered very important in one country but not another, a value considered very important globally would of course apply to all countries. This refines our question to - "What values are considered globally significant in the context of HCV assessments?". The Proforest Global HCVF Toolkit provides some examples and the FSC (STD-40-005) refers to the following for guidance: the 'Global 200' Ecoregions [Olson and Dinerstein (2002)]; biodiversity hotspots [www.biodiversityhotspots.org]; Frontier Forests [www.globalforestwatch.org]. However, a quick glance suggests that none of these approaches are of sufficiently fine resolution to apply to actual ground-level assessments.

Lim Teck Wyn, RESCU
(Network Participant)

In HCV work commissioned by industry, how can the commercial interests of the client be balanced with the public interest in transparency? Should internal assessments be admissible, and if so, how can we ensure that they remain credible?

Can the Toolkits be improved to include better guidance on management and monitoring recommendations, and on the level of expert input needed?

A lot of effort has gone into preparing the existing toolkits but still the entire topic of HCVF does not appear to be picking up any significant traction apart from some application by special interest groups to examine specific, and usually landscape-level related issues. The forest management practitioner is not using this toolkit or even considering the concept of HCVF unless he has a specific interest in forest certification or (as in the case of APP) is trying to create a better image for political reasons.

This may not be related so much to the tool kit itself but rather the concept of HCVF in general. When first embodied as Principle 9 under the FSC system of forest management assessment, it was essentially an effort to capture issues related to conservation, biodiversity, community issues, etc. which risk "dropping through the cracks" of the other 8 Principles. This automatically made the concept of HCVF a bit of a "dog's breakfast!"

I assume that any current debate on HCVF has gone beyond the FSC context and HCVF tries to create relevance for itself and a reason for existing as a concept other than in support of the FSC system. If this is not the case, then the issue of HCVF is essentially a dead end debate.

I'd like to see the concept of HCV couched more in the context of practical forest management. The issues covered under HCV need to have very practical relevance to a forest manager, technical, etc. and therefore, they need to be integrated into the normal information collection, planning, and operational functions of a normal concession, not just in the considerations of a concession seeking forest certification.

For this reason, I have recently proposed that we develop an operational guide to HCV as part of the Reduced Impact Logging series of 5 manuals which TFF has recently completed. (see www.tff-indonesia.org). These manuals are designed as "how to" procedures manuals and provide technical guidance in a format and a language which technical staff of a concession can understand and recommendations which concession staff can actually implement without declaring themselves a national park!

I think that unless we get the topic of HCVF translated down to this level, the HCVF debate will remain largely an intellectual exercise.

Arthur Klassen, Tropical Forest Foundation
(Network Participant)

I agree with the sentiment here. The toolkit was a first attempt to link the concept to forest management, but was written without the benefit of much experience applying the ideas. There is clearly an urgent need for the type of operational guide you are suggesting (we are also planning to produce something similar this year), and more communication of tools and case studies in general (which is partly the purpose of the resource network).

However I also think that there is a great deal of work that can be done to improve the uptake of practical approaches and methods *within* FSC certification. Identifying and managing HCVF should ensure forest certification really delivers better management of biological values, ecosystem services etc. Yet too often we see corrective actions raised against principle 9 without much consensus on what the forest manager can do to improve the situation. Part of the reason for this is that people see HCVF as an afterthought...as you suggest, collecting up issues that haven't already been covered. I think integrating some of these ideas more thoroughly into normal forest management planning processes – though some clearer guidance material – would help enormously.

Tim Rayden, ProForest
(Network Participant)

Can single national toolkits be flexible enough to cover the wide variety of applications in which HCV concepts are being used? Do we need a toolkit for each application, and if so how would we maintain standards across toolkits?

I have problems in the use of HCVF delineation concept in FMU level, so I try to interpret it by my self.

Could you give me input for my approach in the demarcation on forest conversion FMU concessions (e.g. Pulp wood concessions, Palm oil concessions)?

In the Indonesian toolkit, it is mentioned that:

Any forest containing a HCV is deemed to be a High Conservation Value Forest (HCVF).

Below are approaches that I made, based on Indonesian (Riau) situation:

The delineation aimed to ensure that impacts of plantation development would be minimized. At several FMUs, the percentage of HCVF area (quantity) became central part though basically all forests consisting HCV (quality) should be protected and properly managed. The plantation development in the FMU should be integrated to the HCVF management by putting an emphasis on conservation of forest and habitat for maintaining viable population of wildlife.

Following are some issues to be addressed when determining the 'threshold':

1. If impacts of forest exploitation are comparable to HCVF management of FMUs and their surrounding areas and HCV could be enhanced?
2. What extent a forest consisting HCV in the FMU can be converted to allow the maintenance of ecosystem?
3. In which location and environment the HCVF principles can be disregarded though in fact almost no forest consisting no high conservation values.
4. At what priority level an HCV is agreed upon to be disregarded by all stakeholders?

Based on the reality of the field situation, size and location and shape of HCV delineation at FMU level as defined by different parties is influenced by many factors, among others as the following

First, inappropriate concession permits and regulations by the Indonesia government have always resulted in the ecosystems disturbed by the concession.

Second, the high threats to HCV; which are coming from illegal logging, poaching of wildlife, illegal land exploitation and non conservation-oriented company operations.

Then, the other factor is the company's commitment and openness, collaborative conservation-oriented activities, and monitoring efforts by many parties.

Finally, company's goodwill and varied understanding of the HCVF concepts; some companies conducted HCVF assessment of the already operated concessions such as done by Smartwood assessment of APP concession where the companies conducted the assessment after land clearing. There are companies conducting assessment during land clearing (for example, 6 FMUs APRIL, and even during the assessment review by stakeholders (APRIL 6 FMUs and 5 FMUs), also there are companies conducted it before the land clearing (ProForest on APRIL concession in Tesso Nilo).

Anyway, I think it is important for the points above to be use as considerations for improving the Toolkit or making specific toolkit for specific application.

*Arif Budiman, WWF Tesso Nilo Riau Conservation Programme
(Network Participant)*

I wish to point out what I regard as a severe deficiency of the HCV approach, at least as so far applied in all forms of forest certification hitherto, including the FSC. The problem comes out well in a just published FSC audit from Bialowieza old growth forest in Poland. The HCV of the area is of a rare forest type in Europe (lowland oak beech), of which only a small part is protected. The full FSC report can be read here:

<http://www accreditation-services.com/res/PublicSummaries/asirep54sgs2006polandsummary.pdf>

Because of failures to correct non-compliance recorded earlier, as well as multiple new problems, the certifying company was given three months to address the issues of the [Bialowieza audit] report or its FSC certificate in the region will be suspended.

While ENGOs probably generally welcome the findings of the audit, one key problem related to certification policy in general comes out well in the FSC Bialowieza audit, as indeed could be expected. I quote the FSC auditor's comment on p.8 related to calls from NGOs and other stakeholders that no logging at all can be justified in certain parts of Bialowieza where older growth (= growth considerably above the normal commercial final cutting age) near-natural forest conditions prevail:

"Whether or not forest management should be stopped in a case like Primeval Forest Puszcza Bialowieska is a political decision and outside of the scope of this certification."

By "political decision" the auditor presumably means a decision of the Polish state whether to give these stands strict protection or not. Implicit in the statement is that if a stand is not protected, FSC is willing to give it a certificate as long as its statutes' requirements are otherwise met. However, you cannot both keep your pie and eat it - in this case both retain your old forests' natural values and log the forest at the same time. Of course some forest management regimes are more ecologically detrimental than others, but there are quite strict biological limits to what these can achieve compared to just letting nature take her course (or, at most, with management for biodiversity and nature tourism). For evidence of this, see for example the numerous data sets cited by Prof. Ilkka Hanski at:

http://www.birdlife.org/action/change/europe/forest_task_force/forest_conservation.pdf

It is very important that the FSC deals with this problem in future with some "political decisions" of its own. Getting involved in the logging of biologically very valuable forest is a very dubious thing; indeed, I have met young forest conservationists who viewed the FSC as a problem

organisation, because any country where FSC is active their calls for more or stricter protection get the retort "we have an FSC certificate, our conservation situation is already in order". Of course the FSC does not make such claims for its system, but because it does not require an evaluation of a country's conservation situation overall before issuing an FSC certificate, there is more than a grain of truth behind the young conservationist's disgruntlement.

A final point to make is that this problem applies really only to very large landowners, whose holdings are of the order of five figures or more in hectares. In most cases, if 95% of a private 20-hectare 400 year-old oak stand is logged, and 5% is left under typical FSC requirements, the nation's biodiversity is not much affected overall. It might be sad, but it is not a big deal except locally. But if this is done by, say, a national government owning tens of per cent of the nation's forests, then the result will be poor indeed. Typically for Europe, remaining valuable forests are concentrated in certain regions, so that applying FSC certification regionally (as is usually the case) without looking at the overall national forest conservation situation (as well as the relative location of different forest types), leads to the kind of problems we are seeing in Bialowieza.

This is why, despite the FSC audit's new requirements, I fear that disputes over Bialowieza and similar problems certificates will not be finally solved because current FSC statutes do not give the auditors the tools for doing so. Were the typical European FSC "5% for protection" requirement applied looking simultaneously across all Polish national forests, then one would be able to create a much better plan as to where this 5% ultimately would be located (implemented over a certain period of time). This would go a long way to improving the implementation of the FSC's own statute #9, which the organisation is in fact breaking all the time because of the lack of holistic conservation need analyses described here. I would add that forest conservation science has the tools, at least in Europe, to relatively quickly provide such analyses. See e.g. www.inspirit.ee/bfm

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