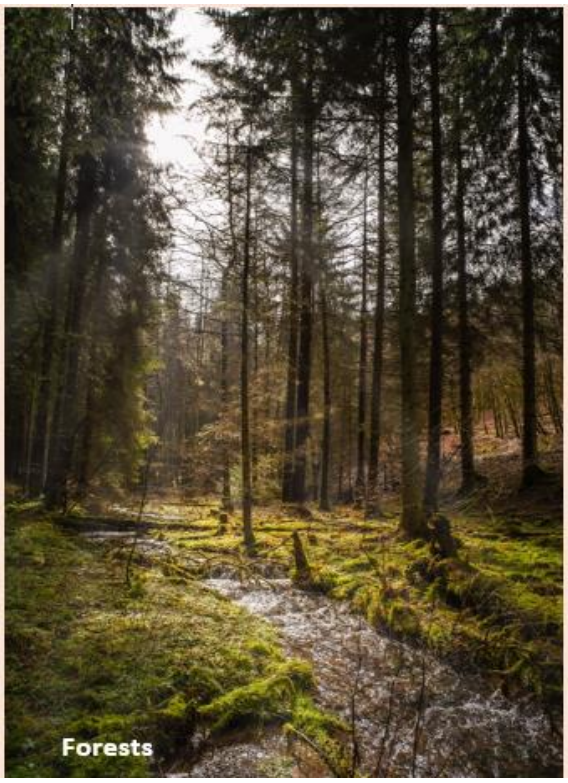
Regional Centre for Mapping of Resources for Development

RCMRD

RCoE-ESA

Regional Center of Excellence for Biodiversity, Forests & Seascapes for Eastern and Southern Africa

October, 2024



POLICY BRIEF

Data-Driven Decisions

Strengthening Ecosystem Management in Eastern and Southern Africa

Executive Summary

This policy brief highlights the importance of data in enhancing the efficacy of ecosystem management within biodiversity, forests and Seascape ecosystems. As biodiversity loss and degradation escalate, the need for informed decision-making is imperative. The recent workshop therefore brought together policymakers, conservationists, researchers, data experts and various professionals to explore how leveraging data insights can lead to sustainable and impactful ecosystem management. **A significant highlight of the workshop was the launch of the RCoE-ESA Geoportal, a platform designed to bridge the data gap and enhance collaborative efforts in conservation initiatives within the region**.

Participants discussed challenges hindering effective data utilization, including gaps in data sharing, limited access to technology, and insufficient collaboration among stakeholders. However, the workshop showcased promising case studies where data-driven approaches have significantly improved conservation outcomes, demonstrating the potential for replication across the region. To address these challenges, the brief outlines key recommendations: investing in robust data infrastructure, enhancing capacity building for local communities, fostering collaborative networks, signing of the data sharing agreement, and implementing comprehensive biodiversity monitoring systems. By adopting these strategies, the participating countries can strengthen their ecosystem management, ultimately leading to healthier ecosystems.

The call to action is clear: embracing data-driven decision-making is essential for effective conservation in the face of ongoing environmental challenges. The potential benefits extend not only to biodiversity conservation but also to regional stability and sustainable development, making the integration of the RCoE-ESA Geoportal a pivotal step toward achieving these goals.

Background

Protected and conserved areas play a vital role for both ecological balance and human livelihoods. These areas are essential for safeguarding endemic species, supporting tourism, and providing resources that local and indigenous communities rely on for their economic well-being. Despite this significance, ecosystem management in the region faces several challenges.

Lack of comprehensive and reliable data on biodiversity, habitat conditions, and threats hampers effective decision-making and resource allocation, leading to substandard conservation outcomes. Limited access to technology and training constraints the ability of conservation practitioners and local communities to collect, manage, and analyse data. This gap restricts the potential for data-driven insights to inform management strategies.

More so, the lack of effective data-sharing mechanisms among countries in Eastern and Sothern Africa (ESA) with transboundary ecosystems has hindered the development of coordinated strategies for protecting and restoring biodiversity resources.

Accurate data enables evidence-based insights. By analysing ecological data such as species populations, habitat conditions, and climate variables, policy makers under various capacities get to identify trends and this insight is essential for developing effective management strategies that prioritize conservation and sustainability. Effective data utilization allows for monitoring and evaluation of conservation practices. For instance, regular collection and analysis of data for baseline assessments

The RCoE_ESA Geoportal is a centralized platform designed to streamline access to critical ecological data. It specifically hosts datasets on seascapes, forests, and biodiversity, covering 24 Eastern and Southern Africa countries. By facilitating centralized data hosting, the geoportal fosters collaborative data contribution and sharing by different stakeholders. It is anticipated that the datasets will contribute greatly to improved decision-making and promote a more integrated response to environmental management efforts.

Key Insights from the Workshop

During the workshop, participants identified data as a valuable resource, likening it to "the new oil." Its potential to drive informed decision-making and sustainable practices is immense, underscoring the need for robust data collection and analysis in conservation efforts.

There was a strong consensus on the importance of including indigenous communities and the broader public in the policy-making process. Their local knowledge and perspectives are invaluable for creating policies that are both effective and culturally relevant.

During the workshop, the RCoE_ESA team was able to showcase current data on the protected areas for each of the 24 participating countries. **Figure 1** illustrates a summary of the region's statistics. Participants were able to validate the data and make comments.

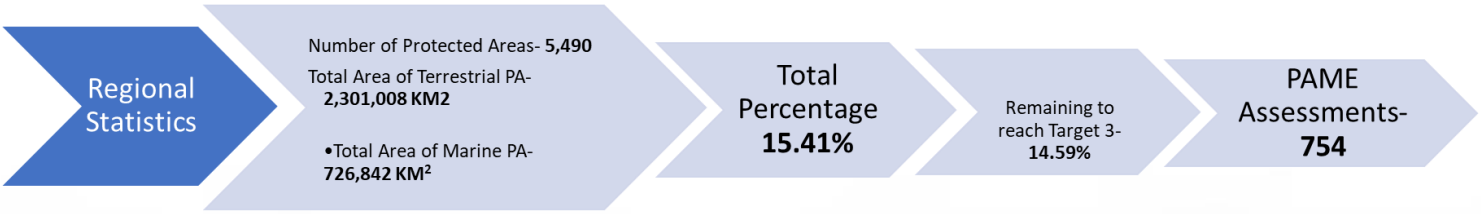


Figure 1: Regional Statistics on Protected Areas in Eastern and Southern Africa Region

A key discussion point was the necessity of presenting data in formats that are understandable and accessible to all stakeholders. Ensuring that information is tailored to meet the needs of different groups will enable effective utilization in their respective areas of practice.

The 24 participating countries were then called upon to sign the data-sharing agreements, which aim to foster collaboration and transparency and ensure the region's growth.

Collaboration among organizations engaged in similar conservation efforts was highlighted as essential. By sharing experiences and learning from one another, stakeholders can achieve better results and enhance the overall effectiveness of their initiatives.

Recommendations

This policy brief therefore gives the following recommendations;

- **Allocation of resources for developing data collection and management systems.**
- **Encouraging partnerships between governments and tech organizations to create accessible platforms. These platforms should leverage cutting-edge technology to provide user-friendly interfaces that allow diverse audiences from policymakers to local communities to contribute to and utilize data for environmental stewardship.**
- **Utilizing citizen science initiatives to engage local communities in data collection. This will empower local communities to actively participate in data collection processes, fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility towards their natural environments. By training community members to gather and report data on biodiversity and ecological health, we not only enrich the dataset available for conservation but also enhance public awareness and appreciation of local ecosystems.**
- **Conducting capacity building for local communities and conservation practitioners on data analysis and interpretation. This will help maximize the impact of collected data, by equipping local communities and conservation practitioners with the skills necessary for data analysis and interpretation.**
- **Promote workshops to increase awareness of the value of data in conservation. These workshops then provide a platform for sharing best practices, fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, and inspiring a collective commitment to leveraging data for the protection and preservation of biodiversity.**

Conclusion

The insights gathered from the workshop underscore the urgent need for immediate action in adopting data-driven approaches to ecosystem management. By leveraging the wealth of data available, stakeholders can make informed decisions that not only enhance biodiversity conservation but also strengthen community resilience and promote sustainable development.

Given the transboundary nature of ecosystems in ESA, there is need for countries to strengthen cross-border collaboration for data collection and ecosystem management. Joint conservation programs and regional policy frameworks are essential to ensure shared ecosystems are managed sustainably.

The potential benefits for implementing these recommendations are profound: healthier ecosystems, empowered local communities, and a more sustainable future for all.

Now is the time to act: harnessing the power of data and information to drive meaningful change and ensure the resilience of our seascapes, forests and biodiversity.

References

Protected Planet: https://www.protectedplanet.net/en

RCoE_ESA Geoportal: https://rcoe-geoportal.rcmrd.org/

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About this Policy Brief

This Policy Brief is part of many to come, aimed at supporting policy-makers on leveraging data and information insights from the three thematic areas of the **RCoE-ESA project**: Biodiversity, Forests, and Seascapes in coming up with effective and data-driven policies that will best see the effective management of these ecosystems.

The Policy Briefs can be found at https://rcoe-geoportal.rcmrd.org/pages/policy-briefs

The policy recommendations made do not necessarily reflect the views of all **RCMRD** partners.

Funded by the European Union