IUCN envisions sustainable development as a path that leads to a just and prosperous world which values and conserves nature by ensuring, through effective and equitable governance, that its resources are used sustainably.
Background Information

Context of the survey
As a result of the Rio+20-conference, countries are in the process of establishing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). IUCN considers that this process is a great opportunity to shape the post 2015 road map for sustainable development including nature as an essential component. Although environmental awareness seems to be greater than at the time when the Millennium Development Goals were drafted, the challenge remains. There are many different movements pushing specific issues forward and the real value and role of biodiversity and ecosystem services in sustainable development could be lost.

Given the above, it is essential that IUCN capitalizes on all its constituencies and components to influence the process. In this context, the Global Policy Unit of the IUCN Secretariat conducted a survey among the IUCN Membership on the SDGs process, with two purposes: 1) to gather information on the views of IUCN Members on sustainable development and the SDGs process, 2) to mobilize the IUCN Membership and raise awareness of this important international process. The survey was open from 4 December 2013 to 10 January 2014.

Level of participation
114 IUCN Members from all of IUCN’s Statutory Regions participated; this constitutes 9.3% of the IUCN Membership. The percentage of IUCN Government and NGO Members participation was almost equal. 8.1% of IUCN State Members/Government Agencies participated and 9.3% of NGO Members (national and international). In addition, some affiliates also participated, 5.3% of all participants. The rate of participation was quite good, compared to similar consultations.

The survey as an awareness raising tool
The survey was structured in a manner not only to inquire about the viewpoint of participants, but also to take the opportunity to provide key information on the SDGs process, the Open Working Group on the SDGs (OWG), and the different options to portray biodiversity and ecosystem services in the SDGs. Simultaneously, it gave some background information on sustainable development in general and contained multiple links to further reading and to the specific web-pages on the IUCN website.

A strong increase in traffic on the webpage on SDGs on the IUCN website could be noticed during the period of the survey. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Pageviews of IUCN SDGs Webpage during the course of the survey
The dates and number of page views correspond exactly with the number of participants of the survey. Participants followed the link to visit the IUCN SDGs webpage (www.iucn.org/SDGs). The survey thus seems to have sparked interest and a desire to read more about the SDGs process in general and IUCN’s work on the topic in specific. Participants took an active step to learn more about it. The survey fulfilled its purpose as an awareness raising tool.

The Position of IUCN’s Members on the SDG Process

The survey consisted of 11 multiple choice questions and one open-ended question. Some questions addressed sustainable development in general; some others addressed the SDGs process and the Members’ views on crucial issues.

Result 1: Most of the respondents are already engaging in the process

The survey showed that a great proportion of the IUCN Members that answered the survey is already involved in the SDGs process (71.7%). While 19.5% stated their institution is little involved, the majority (52.2%) are either involved or even very involved.

Different institutions get involved through different means and most are in one way or another participating. 42.85% participate in the OWG sessions either as a State party or a stakeholder. Many produce analytical briefs and/or conduct advocacy (through specific websites, letters, etc.) (Figure 2). 37.5% of government agencies/states stated they were participating in the OWG session as a country.

There is a 22.1% minority that is not at all involved so far. However, 66.67% persons from institutions that are so far not involved in the SDGs process wish for more involvement of their institution and 56% would like to participate more through IUCN in the process either by actively engaging or receiving more information through specific websites. While 96% of uninvolved are familiar with sustainable development issues, the majority of respondents from the institutions not involved (66.67%) is not familiar or has absolutely no knowledge of the SDGs process. A lack of knowledge and perhaps a lack of resources could be the reason for the non-engagement of some organizations.

Figure 2: Ways of participation in the SDGs process

- Open Working Group sessions (as a country representative)
- Open Working Group sessions (as a stakeholder)
- Through analytical briefs
- Through advocacy (specific website, writing of letters, …)
- My institution does not participate
Result 2: Sustainable development and SDGs are highly relevant

The majority of respondents consider that the concept of sustainable development is more relevant than ever (97.37%) and sees the SDGs process as a good opportunity to integrate the environmental with the social and economic dimensions (91.23%). (Figure 3) Although the majority of respondents agreed that sustainable development consists of tradeoffs between environmental, social and economical considerations, there was a minority of 13% that disagreed or even strongly disagreed. In clarification of their response, some participants explained their disagreement with a statement reaffirming the view that tradeoffs can't always be made, but that some habitats and sites must be protected at all costs. However, others said that the question should not be about trade-offs at all, but rather about finding win-win situations.

The majority of respondents strongly believe (96.46%) that nature offers many solutions for development challenges and supports human well being. No respondent disagreed with this statement. It would seem Nature's contributions to human well being are hence widely understood by respondents.

Figure 3: Agreement with relevant statements
Result 3: A sustainable world is based on intergenerational equity, respect of ecological limits and nature based solutions

In an open question, participants were asked for their vision of a sustainable world. Despite the variety of answers given, there are several common elements in the answers given. The word cloud included in the cover page gives an indication of where the key elements lie. The vision of respondents seems to be a sustainable world that is social, human, contains elements of the environment and ecosystems and puts a focus on how we use resources in a manner that takes future generations into consideration. The word “change” is recurrent as well as “democracy”, “peace” and “respect.”

The individual answers provided can be clustered into three main themes; inter-generational equity, the respect of ecological limits and nature as a provider of solutions. Below one quotation on each theme is given to summarize the answers from the IUCN Members.

Inter-generational equity
“A world where people are living under favorable conditions and where all activities being carried out to ensure permanent improved living conditions are environmentally and ecologically sound; ensuring the continual rejuvenation and availability of natural resources for future generations. A sustainable world is seen through the way we care for each other, the environmental resources and for the needs of the future generations.”

Respect of ecological limits
“Reduction of poverty and of consumption through recognition by all that the natural environment is a priceless asset to be nurtured and cared for and used for human benefits over countless generations within the limits of its natural capacity.”

Nature Based Solutions
“It should be based upon a purely nature-based system and technologies. Nature has many good solutions but only human stubbornly denied them and stick to very narrow science knowledge and economy disciplines.”

and another respondent envisions a sustainable world as a place, where “humanity lives more equitable and some do not live over the limits. Where we understand nature is the solution and we are a part of it.”

Please find a compilation of all open-question answers here.

Result 4: Key obstacles to sustainable development include lack of understanding and patterns of consumption and production

The IUCN Members were further asked to rank a list of possible impediments to sustainable development to identify the most important obstacles. The list comprised 14 issues ranging from environmental to governance issues and issues concerning the availability of resources (financial, technical etc.).

The following list shows the top-5 of this ranking:

1. General lack of understanding of nature’s contributions to human wellbeing
2. Patterns of consumption and production
3. Population growth that adds pressures on the environment and makes it harder to ensure food / water / job security for all.
4. Lack of leadership / good politicians / adequate institutions
5. Poverty

Result 5: Patterns of consumption and production is one of the most urgent issues to be included in the SDGs

After ranking the biggest obstacles to sustainable development IUCN Members were asked which issues/topics are crucial to be included in the Sustainable Development Goals. The first four ranks are displayed below.

1. Patterns of consumption and production
2. Ecosystem conservation/restoration to support ecosystem services
3. Mainstreaming biodiversity considerations nationally (across sectors/ ministries)
4. Climate change
5. Water/water infrastructure

In addition, participants had a space to add other issues not mentioned in the proposed list. Out of 20 additional issues, four related directly to water.

Result 6: Biodiversity and ecosystem services should be included in all SDGs and in a stand alone goal

Based on the current discussions on SDGs, it transpires that there are three main ways to include nature in the SDGs framework; first there could be a stand-alone goal specifically on nature, biodiversity, ecosystem services, secondly environment, biodiversity and ecosystem services could be integrated (possibly as targets) into all existing and relevant SDGs, and explicitly show how nature contributes to each of them; thirdly there could be a combination of the two approaches, where environmental considerations are included in relevant SDGs and a stand-alone goal would reflect the supporting planetary system. For a more comprehensive explanation of the different options and a suggestion on including biodiversity into various SDGs, please refer to the IUCN Policy Brief on the Aichi Targets, IUCN’s views on the process and IUCN’s response to the Focus

Figure 4: Preferred option for environment in SDGs

59.1% A separate stand-alone goal
10.6% An integration of environment into each of the other goals
4.8% A combination of a separate stand-alone goal on environment and the ...
A minority of respondents consider a separate stand-alone goal on nature as the desired outcome of the SDG process (4.5%). The rest would either prefer an integration of nature, biodiversity and ecosystem services into each of the other goals or have a combination of a stand-alone goal with integration into all relevant goals. The last option is preferred by the majority of respondents, 59.1%. (Figure 4)

Conclusion

The IUCN Survey has shown that the majority of the respondents to the survey is, in some way or another, engaging in the SDGs process and considers it an opportunity for the integration of nature, biodiversity and ecosystem services into sustainable development planning. Even the institutions not yet involved are interested in the topic and would like to get more involved. Nearly all participants see nature as a fundamental input to development planning and as essential to human well being.

A lack of understanding of this connection is shown as the biggest obstacle to achieving sustainable development and, therefore, efforts for building the arguments and communicating these links clearly to the general public, policy makers and other sectors/ministries should continue to be made and biodiversity should be mainstreamed in all relevant policies. The biggest environmental issues to be included in the SDGs are patterns of production and consumption, ecosystem conservation/restoration to support ecosystem services, climate change and issues addressing water infrastructure.

Many of the answers point to the same direction: nature, biodiversity and ecosystem services are essential for human well being and development. In order to ensure that this is reflected in the SDGs framework, respondents favor a two-folded approach: nature fully integrated and linked with all other themes of the SDGs, and at the same time included in a goal that ensures its visibility as an important issue on its own.

The survey raises important questions and gives some stimulus for future work. How can the obstacles mentioned be overcome? Should IUCN give more thought to the implementation mechanisms for the SDGs to ensure their full implementation in the future and national mainstreaming? And what are the best ways for IUCN to mobilize the part of the IUCN membership which is not yet engaging but has a desire to engage through IUCN?

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Or exchange directly in the relevant group on the Union Portal: https://portals.iucn.org/union/group/2847.