

An institutional perspective on conserving biodiversity

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It is increasingly recognised that effective conservation decision making needs to be informed by an integrated understanding of the social-ecological system of which it is part of. Institutions created for the protection of biological diversity include legal and organisational frameworks, property rights mechanisms, and social norms and traditions that govern conservation behaviour and guide decision making. The factors that affect the effectiveness of institutions have been extensively explored in fields such as resource management and institutional economics but limited in the field of biodiversity conservation. Our paper explores aspects that affect the capacity of institutions to steer social-ecological systems towards successful biodiversity conservation. We explore the 'problem of fit', or mismatches of scale between institutions and ecological processes. We propose that spatial, temporal and functional mismatches are the result of a number of decisions that are made throughout the process of development and implementation of conservation initiatives. As a result, the institutions that are created through this process (e.g. selection of a protected area, or the implementation of a property right mechanism), and that are designed to govern conservation outcomes, are prone to failure. We highlight the role of structural characteristics of social networks in mediating mismatches of scale and in enabling the formation and establishment of successful institutions in a conservation setting.