

Commission for Environmental Cooperation

Strategic Directions for the Conservation of Biodiversity Regional Approach Concept Paper

Executive Summary

In 1997, the Council of the CEC initiated a review of the North American Agreement for Environmental Cooperation and the effectiveness of the Commission in its implementation of the agreement. As a result of this review, the Council decided that a strategic approach and a more narrow focus were needed. Subsequently, a project to define the focus and long-term agenda of the CEC's biodiversity program was approved by Council in late 1999.

The development of this Strategic Plan is a rational process based on the best available science and geared to the unique features and niche of the institution. In keeping with the CEC's belief of an open, participatory approach, the development of the Strategic Plan incorporates the thinking of stakeholders from all sectors representing North American society. The first part of the process sought to assess the state of biodiversity in the continent, its major threats, common priorities and opportunities for collaboration; the second part brought together feedback of stakeholders from varied sectors. These two parts guided us in the development of the third component: a set of priorities concerning issues and regions.

To maximize the impact of the CEC in North America, it is necessary to define scales that are realistic, pertinent, and effective for given challenges. Whereas some CEC project work is best undertaken at a North American scale, in other instances, it is widely recognized that the collaborative approaches based on ecosystems or regions¹ are fundamental to effective and efficient biodiversity conservation. Neither one should exclude the other. Nor will the CEC regional work override existing initiatives. Rather, the regional approach is an attempt to ground projects and initiatives and develop synergies with all other relevant programs so as to more holistically approach complex conservation action.

The CEC convened a workshop with leading ecologists to identify biodiversity important regions that due to their biological continental significance and high level of threat makes them prime candidates for focused North American attention. As a result, 14 regions were identified: 1. Arctic Tundra/Archipelago; 2. Arctic Coastal Tundra/North Slope; 3. Bering to Baja; Gulf of California Coastal/Marine Systems; 4. Yukon/Yellowstone/Sierra Madre Corridor; 5. Prairies/Chihuahuan Desert Corridor; 6. Northern Forests/Softwood Shield; 7. Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Lowlands; 8. Greater Gulf of Maine/Coastal/Marine System (Nova Scotia to New England), Gulf of St. Lawrence/Grand Banks; 9. Chesapeake Bay; 10. Southern Appalachians; 11. Rio Bravo/Laguna Madre Corridor; 12. Transverse Neovolcanic Belt; 13. Maya Reef and Southern Florida Coastal/Marine Systems; and 14. "Selva Maya," Tropical Dry and Humid Forests.

For the CEC, regions: that are shared or linked; in which we can capitalize on the synergistic effect of the four CEC program areas; and in which we can build on institutional partnerships, present the most promising challenges that can be tackled in a holistic, efficient and effective manner. It is through this process that the Conservation of Biodiversity program has narrowed the scope to the following priority regions: Bering to Baja, Gulf of California Coastal/Marine Systems; Yukon/Yellowstone/Sierra Madre Corridor; Prairies/Chihuahuan Desert Corridor; Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Lowlands; Greater Gulf of Maine Coastal/Marine System.

¹ "Region" in this paper means a geographic unit that results from the convergence of ecological importance, threats and opportunities. A region represents an intermediate scale between the locality and the subcontinent and can comprise parts of one or more ecoregions (*sensu* CEC, 1997).