Understanding Conservation Success at Fauna & Flora International
Introduction

Fauna & Flora International (FFI) works to conserve threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science, and which take into account human needs. Our approaches include the engagement of local communities, policy makers and the private sector, and we often work to build the ability of both organisations and individuals to engage in or conduct their own effective conservation programmes.

As part of our work to deliver effective conservation, we are committed to understanding the changes brought about by our work and the ultimate impact that this work has on the biodiversity we are seeking to conserve. In doing this we can also ensure that our interventions are effective, that our resources are put to best use and that we can learn from our conservation activities to ensure other initiatives and new projects are well designed and honed through adaptive management for maximum impact.

What does conservation success look like?

Conservation is rarely easy. Biodiversity is often declining as a result of multiple threats, each with complex socio-political drivers. Defining and determining conservation success is equally complex and varies significantly with the particular context that a project works within and with the issues that it is working to resolve.

How we define success will depend on what we are seeking to do, but in the long-term we would want to see, for instance, that a population of a species had stabilised or increased, key sites and habitats were well managed, there were fewer external threats to these sites, and that more effective organisations and communities were able to take forward such efforts themselves.

SOME EXAMPLES OF FFI’S CONSERVATION SUCCESSES INCLUDE:

PEMBA FLYING FOX
By supporting community-led protection of the Pemba flying fox FFI saw numbers of this species rise from 5,000 to 27,000 over 15 years. As a result of these efforts the species has been delisted from the highest category of threat, Critically Endangered, to Vulnerable.

PROTECTING INDONESIA’S FORESTS
By working with communities to secure tenure and management rights to forest habitat surrounding Kerinci-Seblat National Park, we have measurably reduced deforestation rates and maintained critical habitat for key species. In just three years one village reduced deforestation to below 0.5% per year from a rate of 1.99% per year, with the presence of Sumatran tigers in forests around the village recorded throughout this period.

ANTIGUAN RACER
FFI led the work to recover the Antiguan racer, which at the time we intervened was the world’s most endangered snake, with just 50 individuals on a single offshore island. A programme of habitat restoration over the last 15 years has enabled this species to increase its population to over 890 individuals and its distribution to across four islands.
Why look at conservation success?

There are a number of reasons why we need to understand conservation success:

- We work on urgent issues with often limited resources. We therefore need to understand if what we are doing is working and to what extent. Regular assessments of our impact keep us focused on the end goal for our work, and help us adapt our projects if they are not delivering the expected results.

- Assessing our success helps us to reflect on what works, and why, in different contexts and projects – we can learn from this as an organisation and also work to share lessons externally with our peers to improve practices more widely.

- Demonstrating the impact of our work is key in terms of our accountability to partners, communities, donors and other key stakeholders.

- Understanding the impact of our work is an important motivator as it helps staff, partners and donors see that our efforts are worthwhile.

- Donors and charity regulators are calling for greater accountability and transparency across the charitable sector, including the need for charities to demonstrate that they are achieving the societal benefits they aspire to. Within the conservation sector there has been a growing focus on demonstrating “conservation success” or “impact” over the last 15 years.
The challenge

Understanding conservation success and assessing the impact of conservation interventions can be challenging for a number of reasons:

• Conservation takes time – biodiversity responses may take decades and as a result there may be a significant lag time between our work and results, especially changes in biodiversity, becoming evident.

• Conservation projects often tackle a broad suite of issues which can be complex and interdependent, often using a host of conservation approaches. Understanding which specific activity or result has driven change and how can be hard to untangle.

• Conservation projects adapt over time – linking specific change to particular interventions can be highly challenging.

• Threats to biodiversity can change over time and new ones can emerge in existing project sites.

• What we define as success can vary depending on the context a particular project works in or the issues it is working to solve.

• Resources available for conservation are often limited and ensuring sufficient investment into effective monitoring can be difficult.

• FFI predominantly works through partners or in situations where there are other players or factors that also contribute to change. In these situations it is not necessarily appropriate to claim any attribution of change to FFI. Instead we look at our "contribution" to success, in the context that we are working within.

WORKING ACROSS GENERATIONS

Seeing a biodiversity response as a result of our conservation efforts can often take a significant amount of time. A good example of this is our project to protect turtles in Nicaragua, where we aim that our work protecting turtle nesting beaches and reducing off-shore threats will ultimately increase populations of turtle species. However, while we are able to measurably reduce the threats to these species in the short term, changes in overall population numbers are unlikely to be seen for over 30 years, when the turtles we are protecting today return to nest themselves.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF THREATS

We have in the past successfully intervened to improve the situation for a site or a species only for further threats to emerge and that set us back.

We experienced this first hand with the Arabian oryx which we helped to bring back from the brink of extinction to a population of 1000 individuals, only to see a resurgence of hunting, which has only recently been brought under control.

Traditionally it has been much easier for conservation organisations to focus on demonstrating the immediate outputs from their work in the shorter term - especially when this is all that can be demonstrated within short (c. three year) donor cycles. Outputs may include number of people trained, or the production of research reports as a result of project activities.

Even when real-world changes are identified as short- or medium-term outcomes (such as the number of patrols taking place or people using skills they have learnt) it can be difficult to demonstrate how our work links to long-term impacts for the focal species, sites or landscapes that we are seeking to conserve.

Our focus, therefore, moves beyond this. We work to assess our longer impact and aim to understand and demonstrate how the activities conducted within our project-level operations lead, directly or indirectly, to the ultimate goals we have for our projects in terms of how sites and species respond.
Impact assessment in conservation

In both the development and environmental sectors there has been much debate around approaches to assessing and evaluating impact over the last 10 years, and a huge amount has been published on the subject. Amongst other things there continues to be discussion around the use of experimental approaches as a basis for proving impact (often using a control site or counterfactual to compare to the project site). Equally there is a significant exploration and acceptance of a causal pathway approach to project impact evaluation (for example based around comparison against a Theory of Change – a description of how and why change is expected to happen in a particular context).

FFI has actively engaged in wider debate around assessing impact in conservation since 2002. We were strongly engaged with the ‘Measures of Conservation Success’ project\(^1\) – a collaboration with other Cambridge Conservation Forum (CCF) partners funded by the MacArthur Foundation. This developed a conceptual model for how change is achieved through different conservation interventions and demonstrated that intermediate outcomes were good predictors of long-term impact. This means that whilst monitoring long-term impact is often difficult, tracking changes in intermediate outcomes (such as improved conservation management or reduced threats to biodiversity) is a good surrogate from which likely impact can be predicted (Kapos et al., 2008, 2009).

We continue to apply what we learnt from this project and believe this approach still has the greatest relevance to understanding the success of our initiatives, since it is well grounded in the reality of conservation, and is a practical tool that can be easily applied to different project contexts. We continue to monitor and engage with the wider debate in this area and particularly as part of the Cambridge Conservation Initiative (CCI) collaboration.

\(^{1}\) http://www.cambridgeconservationforum.org.uk/initiative/harmonising-measures-conservation-success
Applying this organisationally

Lessons from the ‘Measures of Conservation Success’ project were embedded into FFI’s organisational approach to annual reporting. This approach links outcomes reported by individual projects to generalised conceptual models of change and impact, which we call “impact chains”.

Impact chains for different categories of conservation intervention articulate expected causal relationships between short-term outcomes, longer-term outcomes and eventual impact. Taking the findings of Kapos et al., 2009 as a basis we apply and test one assumption that evidence of planned interim outcomes provides assurance that long-term impacts are likely to follow. We further test this within our projects (see over).

Each year every FFI project submits an annual report. Within each annual report projects are asked a) what they have done during the previous calendar year and b) the outcomes or changes observed during the previous calendar year that their project has contributed as a result of work undertaken at any point in the project’s history.

Projects are asked the same questions for different types of conservation interventions and this information is subsequently analysed to understand which stage each project is at on our eight generic organisational impact chains.

At an organisational level, we are therefore able to take a snapshot in any year to see what proportion of projects are reaching different stages of each impact chain – reflecting the extent of change we are achieving across the organisation. With consistent reporting year-to-year we will be able to look at the extent of change along impact chains over time, showing how as an organisation we are tracking and delivering change.

The approach to impact assessment described above is presented each year in our annual Conservation Report. This data also helps to track indicators in FFI’s Business Plan and informs our annual Trustees Report, which helps fulfil our accountability under UK Charities Law. Information on impact assessment from the Conservation Report also feeds into a wide range of external proposals and communications.

Example impact chain showing the intermediary outcomes on the path to biodiversity recovery through the direct management of sites.
Applying this to projects

Whilst our organisational impact chains provide a generalised overview across the organisation, effective impact assessment needs to be integrated at a project level. A project Theory of Change is a key process that we use to both design our projects and to develop appropriate monitoring strategies tied to impact assessment. By linking projects’ monitoring plans to their Theories of Change, we aim to ensure monitoring effort is focused on indicators of long-term and intermediate impacts, as well as collecting basic information on outputs and activities. We also support our projects to ensure the evidence they collect is a true indicator of change - this could be either quantitative or qualitative evidence, with a particular focus on context-appropriate and sustainable monitoring tools.

With project-level Theories of Change in place, along with monitoring plans designed to capture evidence of change at key stages along the project’s pathway of impact, FFI aims to be better able to document outcomes attributable to individual projects, to improve tracking of our organisational impact over time, and to confidently demonstrate our contribution towards improving the status of biodiversity.

Reporting and communicating conservation success at FFI

Currently our Conservation Report is the main tool we use to report and communicate an annual snapshot of how our portfolio of projects is delivering impact.

As well as giving us critical insights into conservation success, our annual reporting process provides important information on key project-level learning. A learning report is compiled every year, documenting what has gone well and what has challenged projects each year (reflecting on both internal and external issues) and identifying approaches that could be useful to other projects.

Wherever possible we seek opportunities to apply the lessons that come out of the annual reporting process across our portfolio of projects.

We recognise that there is still more to be done to ensure this process is as strong as it can be and we continue to focus on ensuring projects have developed a Theory of Change and monitoring plans linked to relevant impact chains, to improve not only individual project tracking, but overall evaluation of our impact as an organisation.
REFERENCES
