

Global 'eco-survey' plan gets a rough ride

[LONDON] A global assessment of the state of the world's ecosystems, in which thousands of scientists worldwide would look at the extent to which ecosystems can continue to support human needs, has been proposed by a group of scientists and environment policymakers.

The proposed assessment is modelled partly on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an organization of climate scientists set up in 1987 by the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) and the World Meteorological Organization.

But despite its support in the scientific and conservation community, governments of both developed and developing countries have given the proposal a lukewarm reception. There is a feeling that few governments will heed a document whose contents they cannot influence.

The first international scientific assessment of the state of the world's ecosystems would aim to identify 'hot spots' — constituents of the natural environment, such as species, forests and fisheries, that are under threat — and suggest remedial action. It would begin next year and end in 2002.

The overall aim of the so-called Millennium Assessment would be to provide a single source of accurate, policy-relevant ecological science advice to national governments and to UN environment conventions, including those covering climate change, biodiversity, desertification, fish stocks and forests.

The project has received enthusiastic backing — including some promises of financial support — from, among others, the World Resources Institute, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the World Bank, various United Nations agencies, the International Council for Science (ICSU) and the Megascience Forum of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

It is also supported by the government of

Ecuador, whose environment minister is president of the IUCN. But representatives of many other governments are less enthusiastic. One specific concern is that conservation groups may try to use the results of such an assessment to influence national conservation policies: at present, these groups are denied a strong voice on the main international conservation decision making body, the UN biodiversity convention.

One representative from a developed country points out that signatories of the UN biodiversity convention have already given their blessing to the more focused — but so far unfunded — Global Taxonomy Initiative, put forward by Diversitas, a network of scientists organized through the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization and ICSU. This aims to do primary taxonomic research, and to train scientists from developing countries.

But, despite unanimous support from governments, funding agencies such as the UN's Global Environment Facility (GEF) appear unlikely to fund the taxonomy initiative. In contrast, the ecosystems assessment has the enthusiastic backing of GEF's chief executive, Mohammed El-Ashry.

Critics of the ecosystems assessment also claim that comparisons with the IPCC are invalid. The IPCC was set up at the request of signatory countries of the UN climate convention for an accurate scientific assessment of the world's climate. Its latest report confirmed a human role in climate change and led to the signing of the Kyoto Protocol (see *Nature* 390, 649-650; 1997).

But according to John Ashe, Antigua and Barbuda's ambassador to the United Nations, none of the UN environmental conventions has requested an ecosystems assessment. "This looks like scientists dreaming up jobs for themselves," says Ashe. "If such an assessment is needed, it ought to be requested by governments, and not handed down in this top-down way."

Many policymakers from developed and developing countries share Ashe's scepticism. Tewolde Berhan Egziabher, general manager of the Environmental Protection Agency of Ethiopia, says that the IPCC was asked for guidance on human-induced climate change as "there was a major difference of opinion among scientists" on that issue. By contrast, he says, "I don't think that anyone in conservation is saying that species extinction or natural resource depletion is not an important issue."

Both Egziabher and Maurice Iwu, a member of the Nigerian delegation to the biodiversity convention, acknowledge that an ecosystem assessment has scientific merits, "provided that it involves carrying out primary research in the field, and is not a rehash of what we already know".

Another concern for developing countries is the strong support for the initiative from conservation groups and UNEP. Relations between developing countries and the conservation community, including UNEP, have often been tense. This is partly because the former suspect the latter of promoting conservation at the expense of development.

Six years ago, state parties to the UN biodiversity convention snubbed a UNEP assessment of the state of the world's biodiversity, saying that the agency had failed to obtain their consent or that of their scientific advisory body before undertaking the study.

Abdul Hamid Zakri, the Malaysian chairman of the biodiversity convention's scientific advisory body, says that most developing countries saw the UNEP document as "others telling us what our priorities are". He thinks that the ecosystems assessment will fare better if it is intended as "guidance only and is not in any way an obligatory measure".

But the assessment's backers — particularly conservation groups — are motivated partly by a sense that scientific advisory bodies attached to UN environmental conventions are too political, in that their government-appointed member scientists are swayed unduly by national or regional political priorities when giving scientific advice.

Governments will be invited to nominate the assessment's technical lead authors. But the authors themselves will be chosen on scientific merit by a separate policy committee of representatives of UN and non-government scientific and environmental institutions, with ICSU playing a prominent role.

Social as well as natural scientists will take part in the assessment's design. Walter Reid, director of the Millennium Assessment, promises that if the plan does not generate enough support from policymakers after a one-year pilot, launched this year, the main assessment will be scrapped. **EhsanMasood**



Taking stock: researchers performing a biodiversity inventory in Costa Rica inspect an insect trap.