

Environmental projects get more than half a billion dollars

Global Environment Facility funds its most ambitious international programme ever.

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For once, there is good news for the environment: a flurry of international conservation initiatives and environmental research projects were given the green light last week. They were backed with more than half a billion US dollars in grants from the Global Environment Facility (GEF) in Washington DC, the world's largest funder of environmental projects.

The GEF's funding round for 2011 has shared US\$516.4 million between 40 individual projects and 9 larger programmes. Winning projects include a proposal to protect at least 5% of Brazil's marine territory by setting up marine and coastal protected areas, which was awarded \$18.2 million. The grants were announced at a meeting of the GEF's governing council in Washington DC on 8–10 November.

The batch of winning projects is the "most ambitious" in terms of size and scale to have won funding from the GEF since it was established in 1991, says Gustavo Fonseca, head of natural resources at the agency, who is in charge of assessing and recommending projects for funding.

"The GEF is the mover and shaker of environmental research funding worldwide. It does a fantastic job of pulling in other organizations and harnessing money from them," says Manuel Barange, director of science at the Plymouth Marine Laboratory, UK.

The GEF is an independent financial organization made up of and funded by 182 member governments, including China, the United States and Vietnam. Countries with developing or emerging economies are eligible to apply for GEF funding to help them to protect biodiversity and marine and terrestrial habitats, and to adapt to climate change. Typically local groups including universities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) draw up proposals with the help of agencies such as the World Bank or the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), which also assist in implementing the projects.

Working together

All winning projects are co-financed by interested parties, such as participating NGOs, private companies and the government of the country in which the project will take place. For example, the Brazilian marine and coastal protected area initiative will receive \$98.4 million on top of its GEF grant, including \$20 million from Petrobras, a Brazilian energy company based in Rio de Janeiro.

Another winning project, led by UNEP, aims to investigate the potential for 'blue forest' marine ecosystems, including mangroves and coral reefs, to store carbon over long periods of time. Some scientists argue that marine flora could fix carbon deep in ocean sediments, keeping it locked up for longer than do terrestrial plants, which release carbon back into the atmosphere when they die.

"It's a controversial area of science but it's worth looking at. If we get it right we could benefit tremendously," says Barange.

The project will develop ways to quantify the amount of carbon that these marine ecosystems can sequester, and to value the ecosystem services provided by coastal habitats. Total funding for the project is \$23.1 million, with the GEF awarding \$4.5 million and the rest coming from other governments and organizations.

The grants comprise the second round of funding awarded in the GEF's current four-year budget, which is worth \$4.34 billion in total and will last until 2014.

Fonseca says that the GEF has continued to attract significant funding from donor countries throughout the economic downturn because it is regarded as a "safe and secure investment" in comparison with other international-development investments.



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Mangrove swamps are among the ecosystems that will be studied in the 49 projects and programmes funded by the Global Environment Facility.

“This year has been unusually dramatic,” says Fonseca, referring to the financial crisis. But he adds that the GEF has “not seen much effect on financial pledges. They have been coming in.”

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