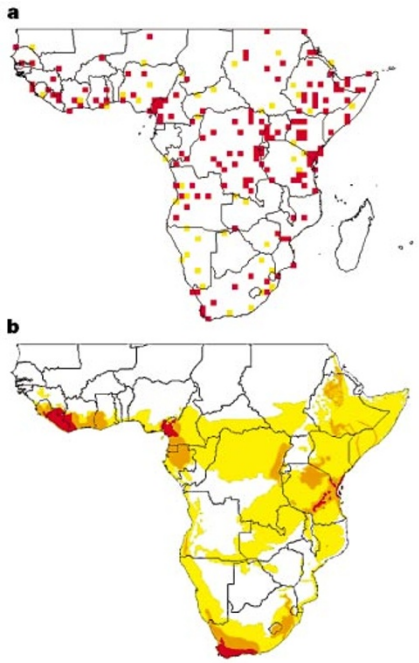

Figure 1 Conservation priorities for Sub-Saharan Africa. **a,** Quantitatively derived conservation priorities[4] for ~4,000 species of bird, mammal, snake and amphibian, mapped on a 1° grid. Coloured cells depict the top 200 areas from which 97.5% of species mapped have been recorded. Red squares are irreplaceable because they contain the entire known distribution of one or more species; orange cells are flexible areas for which alternatives (not mapped) are available. **b,** Conservation International's Hotspots[5]; the World Wildlife Fund US's Global 200 most biologically important ecoregions[6]; and BirdLife International's Endemic Bird Areas[7]. Red, orange and yellow show areas of intersection between three, two and one system(s), respectively.

predict fine-scale species distributions by overlaying environmental data onto species-range maps, to identify areas where all of a species' habitat requirements are fulfilled[3]. Another short cut is to base conservation priorities on well-known taxonomic groups[10]. The problem with this is lack of knowledge of cross-taxon congruence[11] — for example, conserving birds may not be enough to protect biodiversity as a whole.

Attempts to address the lack of data on African biodiversity must go hand-in-hand with improved collaboration at all levels — see the letter from Mace *et al.* (page 393). Effective collaboration is urgently needed between the biological and social sciences, to incorporate human geography into the quantitative priority-setting process in the tropics[12]. The development of parallel priority-setting initiatives is another symptom of the lack of effective coordination to date. Furthermore, difficulties have arisen over data dissemination and public access to information. Such tensions between data providers (for example, museums) and users (such as non-governmental organizations) can be eased by considering mutually beneficial collaborations. For instance, conservation groups could increase their funding for the publication of biological data, and groups with mutual interests could collaborate on fund-raising to pay for data collection. Finally, much greater use should be made of existing collaborative networks[13].

Effective translation of continental priorities into action depends fundamentally on consensus from local decision-makers. One way of forging this is through expert-based priority-setting workshops[14] to assess key regional areas for conservation values in different taxonomic groups and to prioritize these areas across groups. From this synthesis, an integrated set of local priorities can be developed incorporating information on ecology, current and future threats, and landscape-level linkages. Essential components are a commitment to training, empowerment of local specialists, and repatriation of biodiversity information.

Such conservation-prioritization workshops have been held recently for the Upper Guinea region (December 1999) and for the Congo Basin (March 2000). The consensus forged by governmental, non-governmental and academic representatives from the countries in these regions has provided a solid base to translate priorities into action. We believe that our suggestions will considerably increase the chances of further progress while opportunities for effective conservation in Africa remain.

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Community groups could show Unesco the way

Sir — We approve of your recommendation that Unesco should focus more closely on its core goals (*Nature* **404,** 109; 2000). And we wish to go further with some concrete suggestions. Within the UN system, Unesco is unique in having a double representation. Each member State has a permanent diplomatic delegation representing its government, and, in addition, a national commission representing the academic and scientific community and 'civil society' — the grouping of all kinds of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that exist to promote the interests of citizens.

The worldwide rise in influence of civil societies shows the way forward for Unesco. In all possible ways, Unesco should improve its relations with civil society organizations, and foster their development: closer cooperation with NGOs, universities and so on could actually lead to useful savings and increased efficiency.

Unesco should apply to its own functioning the principles of ethics and good governance. Its recurrent drifts into double standards (proclaiming lofty ideals while carrying out dubious internal practices) are no longer acceptable: Unesco should dedicate itself to promote a culture of evaluation.

Lastly, if we are serious about our social responsibilities, we scientists should see that science and technology remain firmly anchored inside Unesco.

Britain's return to Unesco in 1997 after leaving during the 1980s was a welcome move, but, for a proper implementation of the previous points, we do hope that the British National Commission for Unesco will be promptly reconstituted. From the French side, we eagerly look forward to fruitful discussions and stimulating debates with our British colleagues and partners. The pioneering contributions of Joseph Needham and Julian Huxley, at the birth of Unesco, have not been forgotten.

Our conviction is that the full restoration of this distinguished British tradition will be an important element in the renovation process of Unesco.

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