This document provides general guidance for HCV National Interpretation processes. It is intended for use together with the HCVRN’s “Common Guidance for the Identification of High Conservation Values” (2013).

Introduction

The High Conservation Value (HCV) approach was created in 1998 by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as a tool to protect outstanding environmental and social values in certified forests. It has since been expanded to other ecosystems and adopted by certification schemes for palm oil, soy, sugarcane and biofuels, so that over the last decade maintaining HCVs has become a key component of responsible production and resource use.

There are six categories of HCVs, ranging from rare, threatened and endangered species and habitats, over larger expanses of functional natural ecosystems, to ecosystem services, basic livelihood necessities and the cultural heritage of local communities. These values are ‘global constants’ in the sense that they are valid and apply all over the world, irrespective of ecosystem or production context.

Consequently, the HCV definitions are the same for all users. However, the formulations are generic and brief, and to be operational in the field the definitions need to be interpreted in the national or regional context. Where there are no recognised HCV interpretations, assessors must use the global guidance and interpret the definitions on a case by case basis. However, as the demand for HCV assessments increases, nationally agreed and recognised interpretations become key to enable more standardised and cost-effective practises.

Form a National Partner Group

Even though the HCV approach applies across ecosystems and land uses, the initiative to develop national (or regional) HCV toolkits often comes from a certain commodity sector. If a HCVRN National Partner already exists, this is the forum in which to discuss how to proceed. If there is no HCVRN National Partner, the first step should be to form one1. Where Roundtables or other certification schemes for different commodities operate in the same region (e.g. timber along with soy and sugar), Partners should strive to engage and include stakeholders from all relevant schemes.

1 Please read the HCVRN guidance on National Partners
**Encourage broad participation**

As HCVs address a wide set of environmental and social values, national interpretation processes need to draw upon a similar wide range of experience and expertise. In theory interpretation is largely a technical exercise. However, in practise there are no sharp boundaries between technical aspects and policy, and stakeholders are likely to differ in views of anything from the size of a ‘large’ landscape, to what constitute ‘basic’ needs and what is necessary to cater for them. Thus, HCVRN National Partners are recommended to convene balanced multi-stakeholder working groups for this purpose, with representation from all major interest groups so that no single interests dominate the process. While the aim should be to reach consensus, it is worth taking time to formally agree from the onset how to proceed and take decisions if consensus cannot be attained.²

During the national interpretation process, the HCVRN National Partner could rely on support from different sub-teams. A core technical team composed by highly-qualified experts could be in charge of suggesting national thresholds and other specific information, while a wider team of stakeholders can input on the recommendations made by the core technical team. A national interpretation draft should later be refined and validated by all stakeholders.

HCV interpretations developed together by stakeholders from different schemes carry more legitimacy and authority than narrow sector approaches. However, if only one relevant certification scheme operates in the country or region, it may be appropriate to limit the scope of HCV interpretations to ecosystems and conditions relevant for a specific commodity, and restrict engagement and consultations to stakeholders with expertise and interest in a specific sector.

**Authorities and Assessors**

Most identification of HCVs takes place within voluntary private sector and civil society initiatives. This context is fundamentally different from the legal setting of governments and authorities. In some regions, authorities consider it outside their mandate to engage in voluntary sector approaches, in others they are keen to be involved as they perceive that such initiatives may help them deliver on national sustainability objectives and targets. Whatever is the case, the HCVRN recommends National Partners to contact relevant national / regional authorities at an early stage to gauge their interest, and as a minimum, keep them informed on progress, invite them to open stakeholder meetings and include them in consultations.

It is also useful to have close links to professional HCV assessors and auditors who will eventually carry out much of the actual HCV assessments and audits. However, as it may not be considered appropriate that HCV assessors formulate the rules they will later play by, it may be better to include them as observers or independent technical experts, rather than as decision-making group members.

**Clarify the objectives**

Consistent application of the HCV approach across regions and sectors requires that everyone uses the same set of HCV definitions and follows the same general approach. The internationally recognised definitions adopted by the HCVRN are those of the FSC (updated and revised 2012). The task of national processes is to interpret these common definitions so that they make sense in the national context (but not to change or add to them!). The outcome, often referred to as a “National HCV Toolkit”, may also include guidance on how to manage, maintain and monitor HCVs, appropriate to the characteristics of relevant production sites and landscapes. However, as there is such a range of different HCVs, and such a variety of settings where they may occur, it may be challenging to go beyond

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² For further guidance on how to set up and run multi-stakeholder working groups, including how to engage with stakeholders, see e.g. materials from ISEAL, [www.isealalliance.org](http://www.isealalliance.org).
relatively broad and general management and monitoring guidance – leaving to assessors and managers to fill in the specifics.

It is important to bear in mind at all times that HCV national interpretations are best practice guides. They are not necessarily exhaustive lists of HCVs or strict rules – a certain degree of interpretation by the HCV Assessor will always be needed.

**Develop national interpretations of the HCV definitions**

The main task of the national interpretation working group is to interpret the global HCV definitions and agree on what constitute HCVs in the national context. Part of that process is to analyse the meaning of the brief definition sentences. The intentions behind the definitions are generally clear – e.g. wording to the effect that something is ‘significant’ at a national (or higher) level certainly imply a bar set quite high, as lots of thing have local value without being national priorities. But exactly what does it mean? And what (if any) already identified and categorised national areas /ecosystems /vegetation types may be considered equal to, or serve as a proxies for these values?

These are the kind of questions that the working group must grapple with and eventually resolve. The HCVRN’s “Common Guidance on HCV Identification” outlines the issues in much more detail and suggests how to narrow down alternative interpretations in order to achieve results that are both adapted to the national context, and consistent reflections of the common, global HCV framework. In brief, the working group needs to:

1. **Interpret key terms and concepts for each HCV.** The definitions contain a number of inherently subjective words like ‘significant’, ‘great majority’, ‘large’, ‘basic’, ‘critical’, ‘vulnerable’ and ‘fundamental’. In order to guide HCV assessments, the working group must clarify and agree nationally appropriate, more precise meanings of words such as these – by adding more explanation and/or by providing nationally relevant examples. Other terms that may need clarification and elaboration to be widely understood in the national context are scientifically rooted concepts like ‘endemic species’, ‘threatened species’, ‘viable populations’, ‘natural patterns of distribution and abundance’, ‘habitat’, ‘ecosystem services’. “The Common Guidance for HCV Identification” discusses these and other terms in more detail.

2. **(In large countries): Identify smaller sized units as geographical proxies for ‘national’ scale.** Biodiversity properties like value, rarity and endemism only make sense if related to a certain geographical scale. The definitions of HCVs 1 and 2 refer to scales as ‘national, regional or global’ levels. However, sizes of countries vary over orders of magnitudes, and unless corrected for, national significance will set the bar much higher in countries like Brazil and Russia than in smaller nations. Thus, to generate roughly comparable results, national interpretation processes should operate with roughly similar units of scale. The HCVRN recommends considering units in a size interval from 10 million – 100 million hectares as proxies for the ‘national’ level. Such areas may be administrative (states or other sub-national units) or bio-geographical regions of corresponding size.

3. **Identify already existing, national, regional and global inventories /land classifications /maps /gazetted areas that may correspond or relate to one or more of the six HCVs.** Some land designations may be considered equal to a certain HCV category, e.g. ‘all areas classified as x by the national authorities are to be considered HCV y’. Advice is very useful even if less absolute, e.g. ‘most areas classified as x by (a) recognised, international NGO are likely to be HCV y’. Risk-based analyses may also be informative for users, e.g. ‘land outside areas classified as x are unlikely to hold HCV y’. This is a key part of the work, as drawing upon already existing classification will allow more efficient (and therefore more straightforward and less costly) assessments.
4. **Identify and list nationally relevant sources of information.** Easy access to relevant information, including legal provisions and requirements, also provides for more standardised, consistent and efficient assessments. The working group should survey and collate both information materials, e.g. relevant publication, websites and databases, and contact details of relevant organisations, agencies and academia to which assessors can turn for further information.

The four above elements are partly interlinked, and it may be more efficient to address them in parallel, with frequent feedback between topics, than to attempt to deal with them in sequential order.

**Reach out and consult on drafts**

The number of working group members is a balance between inclusiveness and the one hand, and working efficiency on the other, and in practise many individuals and organisation with competence and a stake in the outcome will not be part of the group. The HCVRN recommends groups to make, and document, genuine efforts to engage as many of these other stakeholders as possible. Key mechanisms include transparency, e.g. by informing about the process on a website, and active outreach, e.g. by convening local and regional stakeholder meetings – such meetings may generate input also from parties that, due to resource constraints or for other reasons, do not readily engage in dialogue at the national level. It is also fundamental to consult widely on draft outcomes and report back on how input received was taken account of. Consultations with the HCVRN Secretariat and Technical Panel is of particular value, both as check-point of alignment and to feed in perspectives of the wider community of HCV users.

**Keep the national HCV interpretation alive**

Once the interpretation has been finally agreed, it should be communicated to potential users, through information channels of certification schemes and through posting on the Network’s website along with other interpretations / national toolkits. This often tends to be the end of the process – the job is done and people who have committed time and efforts are eager to move on. However, a set of national interpretations is never a static product – as assessors and managers start to implement them, there will be requests for clarifications, suggestions for improvements and, with time, a need for revision. To maintain national interpretations as living documents, the National Partner, or one of its member organisations, should act as steward of the interpretations, with a main task of collating and filing feedback and input from users, so that when there is time for revision there is already a library of comments. Contact details of the steward organisation should be communicated nationally and be posted with the interpretation document on the HCVRN website.

**Keep in touch with the HCV Resource Network**

Partners and working groups are welcome to contact the HCVRN Secretariat for information and advice in all stages of the interpretation process – the HCVRN’s mission is to promote maintenance of HCVs through consistent, high quality use of the HCV approach, and the secretariat will be happy to advise and assist as far as time and resources permit.