

GUIDANCE NOTE
ON BIODIVERSITY DATA SHARING
- FOR EPFI CLIENTS

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	2
1. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE OF EP4 BIODIVERSITY DATA SHARING	2
Rationale	2
Type of biodiversity data to be shared	2
Benefits of data sharing	3
2. RECOMMENDED STEPS FOR EPFI CLIENTS.....	4
Objective	4
How to incorporate the standardized biodiversity data gathering format into your contracts and subcontracts.....	5
How to approach data privacy, confidentiality and/or potential copy right issues	5
Use of other acceptable biodiversity information repositories.....	5
Guidance on sharing secondary biodiversity data and ecosystems data	6

INTRODUCTION

This Guidance Note comprises information to support the implementation of the requirements contained in Principle 10 and Annex B of the Equator Principles version 4 (EP4) on reporting of biodiversity. This Guidance Note does not establish new principles or requirements.

Unless stated otherwise, all references to the 'Equator Principles' in this document relate to the Equator Principles text dated July 2020. The contents of this document will be updated over time to reflect the experience of Equator Principles Financial Institutions (EPFIs) and EPFI clients, and in response to other changes affecting implementation (e.g. regulatory developments and technological advances).

This Guidance Note was compiled by a representative group of subject matter experts to assist EPFI clients through the process of formatting and sharing biodiversity data and addressing attribution, confidentiality and data privacy issues.

1. PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVE OF EP4 BIODIVERSITY DATA SHARING

Rationale

Biodiversity baseline and monitoring data is crucial for understanding how industrial, infrastructure, agricultural and extractives projects could impact, or are currently impacting, the living natural environment. This data tells us much about the biodiversity impacts we must avoid, mitigate, restore or offset and are crucial for aligning with international best practices and performance standards, including IFC Performance Standard 6. Biodiversity data gathering is one of the most expensive and time-consuming components of the impact assessment process. From on-site observations, experts must account for the complete range of species and habitats, as well as migratory patterns and lifecycles of species across seasons. Aligning the data collection period with the project and financing lifecycle can be a challenge. Failure to anticipate and plan for multiple site visits across seasons to understand the temporal differences in the likely impacts of a project can lead to delays and additional costs. Additionally, many transactions subject to the Equator Principles occur in developing countries with an abundance of biodiversity that tend to lack robust datasets of local biodiversity due to less resource availability.

Type of biodiversity data to be shared

Biodiversity data encompasses all structured information data at the molecular, species and ecosystem level. This data can be either primary biodiversity data, i.e. observations or collections at a

specific time and place, or synthesized or interpretive (secondary) data where data is combined from different sources, e.g. species distribution maps. Although much of the information presented in Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) tends to be interpretive or synthesized data, this is usually based on large volumes of primary biodiversity data.

The Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF) network focuses on providing ‘species occurrence’ data that records:

- a) the observation, collection or detection of a named organism;
- b) the time when the organism was observed, collected or detected; and
- c) the place where the organism was observed, collected or detected.

A species occurrence record typically includes, at a minimum, a scientific name, a locality and a date. Traditionally, these records have been collected from sources such as natural history collections and fieldwork and monitoring surveys. Other sources to emerge more recently include camera-trap images, eDNA sequences and citizen science projects.

Principle 10 of the EP4 recommends that EPFIs encourage their clients to share species occurrence data. While name, time and place data represent the minimum recommended level of information, records can also include other useful information, such as the method used for the observation, abundance counts, habitat structure (like height, stratification, density), abiotic characteristics (like substrates, hydrology, climate) and associated information about land use and threats.

Benefits of data sharing

Despite its potential value beyond the needs of a project, biodiversity data is rarely shared with non-project affiliated actors. Instead, valuable data is archived within company systems and the accrued benefits of sharing these data in a standardized format with data infrastructures such as the GBIF or national repositories are lost. These benefits include:

- Reduced field survey effort, resulting from better species targeting, baseline information, and understanding of species occurrence.
- Reduced time spent in finding biodiversity information by leveraging information from past data collection.
- More advanced data on critical areas, habitats or sites where endangered, critically endangered or migratory species exist, so these may be avoided in the earliest stages of project design and planning.

For example, it is estimated that spending on biodiversity assessments in Western Australia alone is of the order of US\$16-200 million per year (WABSI 2017). As companies share and use increasing

amounts of existing data, the cost of biodiversity assessments will fall. In Western Australia, where sharing of biodiversity data by companies already occurs, it is estimated that the value of existing data is of the order of US\$100 million and that companies could save about US\$39 million per year by having access to the shared data (WABSI 2017).

Other broader benefits of sharing data through data infrastructure such as GBIF include:

- Greater industry and public confidence and trust in the EIA process through improved transparency.
- Reduced risk for industry and government through better information and less reliance on the 'precautionary principle'.
- Improvement in the quality of biodiversity survey data.
- A better baseline of data for research.

These benefits arise with minimal incremental cost in biodiversity data gathering because data can be collected in the format required for uploading to global or national biodiversity databases from the outset. EPFI clients and their biodiversity consultants will need to expend substantial effort and resources in training biodiversity management staff on this Guidance Note. This will lead to uniform data gathering and formatting that enables data sharing. The shared resources will further benefit the data collector by improving data quality.

2. RECOMMENDED STEPS FOR EPFI CLIENTS

The following guidance provides recommended steps to assist EPFI clients and their biodiversity consultants to gather biodiversity data in such a way that will enable data sharing.

Objective

EPFIs provide financing for projects that collect a multitude of biodiversity data. This data can be expensive to collect and is particularly valuable for future development project baseline assessments as well as for regulators, conservation organizations and communities¹. Due to the low cost of making this data standardized and publicly accessible, and the collective global benefits of doing so, (including for the EPFI's clients, the EP4 has incorporated biodiversity data sharing into its information sharing principles².

¹ Biodiversity data sharing is an effort in part to support the right of access to environmental information to individuals and groups in vulnerable situations and in doing so aligns with the Escazú Agreement's emphasis that it is "the right of every person of present and future generations to live in a healthy environment and to sustainable development."

² EP4 Principle 10.

How to incorporate the standardized biodiversity data gathering format into your contracts and subcontracts

When an EPFI client develops a project, they may engage an environmental consultant to support baseline data gathering, including biodiversity data. This consultant may utilize a data gathering style and format that differs from the Darwin Core data standard that is accepted by GBIF. To avoid additional costs and/or reformatting, the EPFI client is encouraged to specify within its brief to the environmental consultant, or within its subcontracts, that data be gathered and formatted to align with this Guidance Note. The need for data sharing should be communicated at all levels of the project to ensure that the contract and scope are written with a requirement to support the agreed upon method. GBIF provides tools that can assist consultants formatting and publishing data through Darwin Core: <https://www.gbif.org/publishing-data>.

How to approach data privacy, confidentiality and/or potential copy right issues

Data published to GBIF are attributed to one of three Creative Common licenses:

CC0 – for data made available for any use without any restrictions

CCBY – for data made available for any use with appropriate attribution

CCBY-NC – for data made available for any non-commercial use with appropriate attribution

EPFI clients are encouraged to publish data of the highest precision and, where appropriate, to support transparency and re-use of data for research and planning, in line with national and international laws and regulations on data privacy and copyright. Consideration should be given to any confidentiality issues, including due to the data being commercially sensitive or subject to legal privilege, and where appropriate, permission should be sought.

In addition, data publication should be done with sensitivity and input from specialists where there are concerns that publication of precise locations of endangered species may lead to poaching or other threats to species populations. GBIF also provides additional guidance on best practice for generalizing locations of sensitive data - <https://www.gbif.org/document/80512/guide-to-best-practices-for-generalising-sensitive-species-occurrence-data>.

Use of other acceptable biodiversity information repositories

In addition to GBIF, the biodiversity data collected may contribute significantly to other regional, national or international institutes that host their own databases for specimen records. There are

many global, national and regional biodiversity repositories and EPFI clients or their environmental consultants should analyze if the biodiversity data collected by them could be relevant to such institutes and contribute it where possible, in addition, but not as a substitute, to submitting data to GBIF.

Guidance on sharing secondary biodiversity data and ecosystems data

Data on habitats and ecosystems are equally as valuable as species occurrence, data but are even less accessible for most regions and the GBIF does not currently support such information sharing. This data may be georeferenced as lines (transects), points, or polygons, depending on the sampling approaches employed and may include data on:

- species composition,
- structural (e.g. height, stratification, density) and abiotic (e.g. substrates, hydrology, climate) characteristics, and
- land uses and threats.

EPFI clients may be encouraged to apply the International Vegetation Classification (IVC) and Description of World Formation Types or EcoVeg system, as an appropriate global standard for the hierarchical classification of ecosystems.

Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) are sites of global importance for the persistence of biodiversity and are recognized as likely Critical Habitats by IFC Performance Standard 6 as well as the Equator Principles. The World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas (WDKBA) has the option to upload standardized data from a KBA monitoring assessment tool to track changes at sites over time. EPFI clients are encouraged to use this assessment tool when operating near a KBA and to upload the data to the WDKBA. As not all taxa have been assessed for KBAs, EPFI clients are also encouraged to apply the KBA criteria (see <http://www.keybiodiversityareas.org>) to sites where they have collected biodiversity data to assess whether the site would meet KBA status. If an EPFI client is assessing whether to operate within an existing KBA, it is even more important that both the KBA monitoring assessment tool is applied and that any biodiversity element (species or ecosystem) that triggers KBA status at a site is monitored before, during and after the operations of the EPFI client to ensure there is no decline in biodiversity. Capacity to store this type of data is being developed by GBIF but is not available at the time of writing this Guidance Note. At this stage, it is recommended that EPFI clients retain this data such that it can be uploaded to a centralized database once the capacity becomes available.

Additional resources that may be suitable for sharing habitat and ecosystem biodiversity data, should the EPFI client be interested in doing so, are provided below:

Database	Description	Notes
Knowledge Network for Biocomplexity (KNB) https://knb.ecoinformatics.org/about	International repository intended to facilitate ecological and environmental research.	Supports Digital Object Identifiers (DOIs). Multiple file formats for data upload is available.
Ocean Biogeographic Information System (OBIS) https://www.obis.org/manual/contribute/	Global open-access data and information clearing-house on marine biodiversity for science, conservation and sustainable development.	Data uploaded via OBIS nodes Integrated Publishing Toolkit (maintained by GBIF). Adheres to Darwin Core data standard.
Data Observation Network for Earth (DataONE) https://www.dataone.org/contribute-data	Provides access to international data across multiple member repositories, supporting enhanced search and discovery of earth and environmental data.	Data submitted through member nodes
World database of Key Biodiversity Areas (WDKBA) http://www.keybiodiversityareas.org/home	Database of sites of global importance for the persistence of biodiversity. Site are recognized as likely critical habitat by IFC PS6.	Allows online submission of proposal and monitoring data for sites.