

The Application of the High Conservation Value Forest Concept in Central America A Brief Overview

Introduction and Methodology

Over the past decade, the concept of High Conservation Value Forests (HCVF) has been increasingly used to identify and manage critical to forest conservation. The concept was originally developed by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as part of its 9th principle of sustainable forest management. With certified natural forests and plantations accounting for 11% of land area in Central America, this concept is particularly important for the identification of critical conservation sites and maintaining the integrity of the region's ecosystems. This review summarizes the application of the HCVF concept in the 48 FSC-certified forest management units (FMUs) in Central America. 'Central America' includes Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panamá (El Salvador currently has no certified operations). Figure 1 presents a break-down of the regions' certified forests by type and tenure.

Each forest management unit's (FMU's) application of the HCV concept was rated according to one of the following six categories:

- a) addressed-The FMU has both found one or more HCV(s) and integrated the maintenance of that value into the management plan
- b) partially addressed with a Corrective Action Request (a CAR is a stipulation that the certification body makes that must be fulfilled in order for the certificate to be granted)-an HCV was found but not adequately incorporated into forest management (e.g. lack of a monitoring process)
- c) partially addressed without a CAR-an HCV was found though not fully incorporated by the management plan, but not given a CAR by the certification body;
- d) investigated but none found-an adequate HCV assessment was carried out but no HCVs were found in the FMU
- e) did not investigate, CAR-the FMU did not conduct an HCV assessment and received a CAR
- f) did not investigate, no CAR- the FMU did not conduct an HCV assessment and did not receive a CAR
- g) lacking sufficient information (LSI)-the public summary for the FMU was not available online though the relevant certification body had been contacted to ask that it be made available)

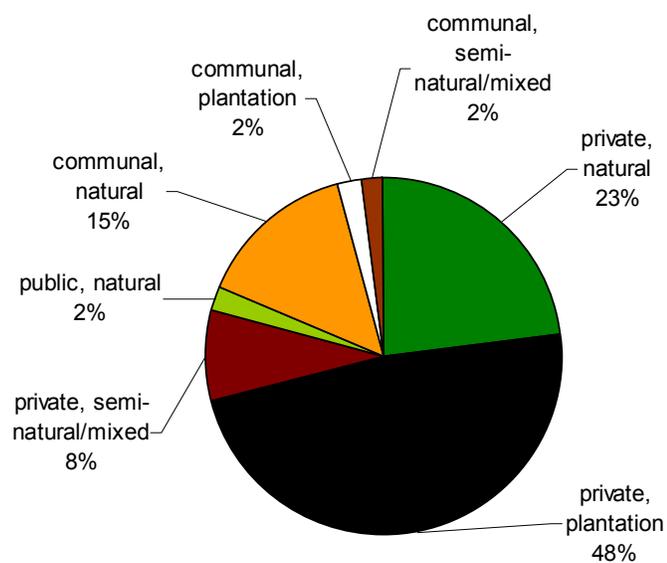


Figure 1. Central American Certificates by Tenure and Type

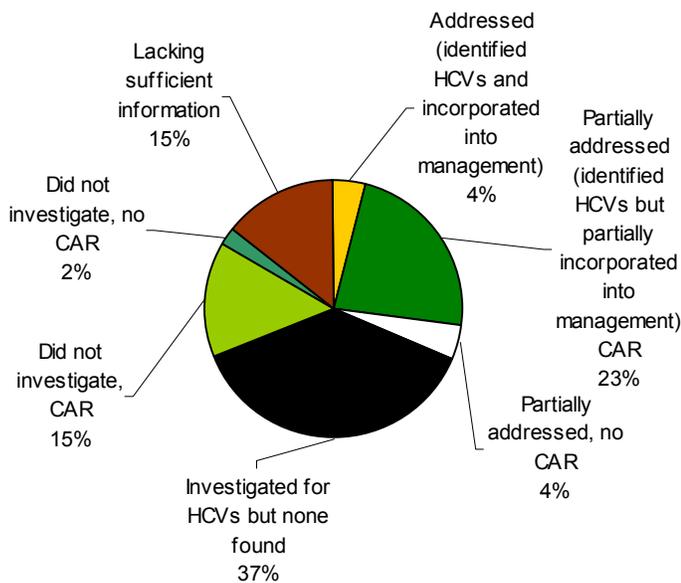


Figure 2. HCV Assessment by Count of Certificates

may give fewer CARs for Principle 9 because CARs may already be given for Principle 6 which considers some similar issues. Principle 6 also stipulates that endangered species must be identified and forests managed with their conservation in mind. The important distinction to be made between the two principles, however, is that Principle 9 concerns itself not only with endangered species but also takes into account values such as the cultural significance of a forest to a communities, the provision of basic necessities to communities, the importance of the forest at a landscape level, among other characteristics. Principle 9 emphasizes those forest values which are most exceptional, and critical, not only at the scale of the FMU but nationally and internationally.

The FMUs under communal tenure received a greater number of CARs (33% or 3 FMUs, Figure 3) for not investigating HCVs than privately owned units (14%). In addition, in no cases did communal FMUs fully address HCVs, with the majority receiving a CAR for partially addressing the concept. These findings could be explained by that fact that most communal FMUs (7 of 9) are natural forests, which inherently present greater challenges for HCV assessment than do plantations. The capacity for communal FMUs to carry out HCV assessments may also be limited by the number of personnel and resources available. Indeed, the three FMUs which did not assess for HCVs are all greater than 20, 000 hectares. Finally, that assessments are not conducted does not necessarily imply that management does not take these values into account. Indeed, since most of these natural communal forests are managed by the very communities who live in them, many of these conservation priorities are taken into account, regardless of whether or not they have explicitly defined the values.

Are HCVs being assessed for and found in certified FMUs?

According to the most recent public summaries (to February 2007), 69% of all certified forest management units (FMUs) conducted assessments for HCVs (Figure 2). Of those FMUs that conducted assessments, 45% found one or more HCV. The majority of HCVs were identified in natural forests (73%) which makes sense given that most HCVs are related to natural forest ecosystems.

In 17% of total certificates, there was no attempt at identification of HCVs. It has been suggested that certification bodies

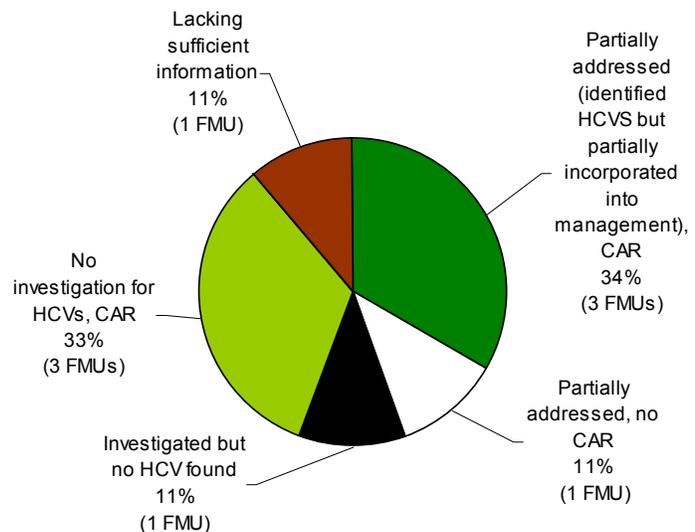


Figure 3. HCV Assessments in Communal Forests

How are certification bodies using the concept?

There are four certification bodies operating in Central America: SmartWood, SGS, SCS, and GFA. It is clear from Figure 4 that SmartWood is responsible for the majority of Central American forest certificates (66%), which represents 90% of the area certified FMUs. Since the certification body is responsible for assessing the appropriate application of the HCV concept within FMUs, SmartWood clearly has the greatest influence on the way in which this concept is being applied in the region.

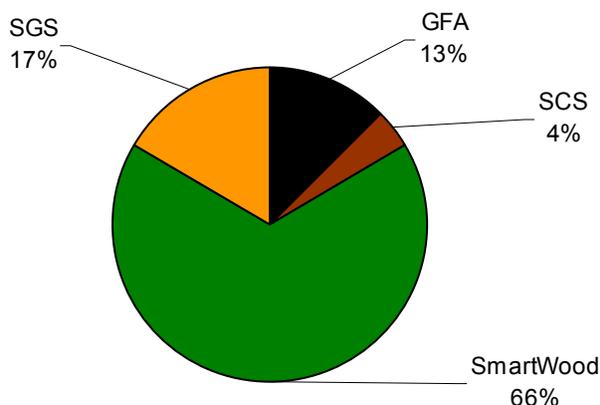


Figure 4. Central American Certificates by Certifier (number of certificates)

From brief questionnaires distributed to representatives of the four certifiers in the region, it was found that most felt that adoption of this concept will require the cooperation of governments, NGOs and conservation agencies, and scientists. It also appears that in the case of communally-held FMUs in particular, none of the six HCVs in particular but rather the concept as a whole presents a challenge. However, it was suggested that those values which deal with species or ecosystem classifications at international or national scales can be especially difficult.

How is the concept affecting management?

Case Study 1: Hermanos Ubeda

Country: Nicaragua
 Certifier: SCS
 Tenure: Private
 Type: Natural
 Size: 3500 ha

Hermanos Ubeda originally received a CAR in 2001 for inadequate investigation into the presence of HCVs. The certifier suggested that the FMU coordinate with local universities and research institutions in order to determine what specific social and ecological attributes would indicate an HCV in the region, and to subsequently investigate the presence of these attributes. Following this advice, Hermanos Ubeda made contact with CATIE and the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua in order to identify highly valued social and ecological characteristics of the region. In the most recent public summary, it was determined that part of the FMU lies in a 10,000 hectare riparian zone. For this reason, 350 hectares of the FMU will be set aside for conservation.

Case Study 2: Barrios Enlace Comercial Cia. Ltda. (Baren Comercial)
 Country: Guatemala
 Certifier: SmartWood
 Tenure: Private
 Type: Natural
 Size: 66458

In 2002 Baren Comercial received a CAR for failing to delimit specific within the FMU where special management of HCVs was necessary. Three months later, the FMU had successfully identified 4 sites with unique characteristics. Among these were a concentration of wild fauna, an archeological site, and two areas identified as niches for rare species. Management strategies that allow for the conservation and natural regeneration of these species, such as special precautions to prevent forest fires, were implemented. While these changes did comply with the original request, SmartWood maintained the CAR because the FMU did not specifically refer to the six specific HCVs outlined in Principle 9. Furthermore, the management and monitoring strategies offered by Baren Comercial were considered inadequate for maintaining the integrity of the forest area.

**Case Study 3:
La Sociedad Civil el
Esfuerzo**

Country: Guatemala
Certifier: SmartWood
Tenure: Public
Type: Natural
Size: 25386 ha

The FMU originally declared the presence of certain HCVs, but received a CAR for not delimiting specific HCV areas and strategies for management. After further investigation, the FMU determined that 20% of its total area is eligible for protection and conservation. It also established a list of criteria for identifying high conservation values, and announced plans to review these criteria in a general forum open to the public. In a case similar to Baren Comercial (above), the original CAR was maintained on the grounds that the FMU failed to detail more specific management strategies for the conserved area.

Where do the challenges for applying this concept lie?

It appears that while most FMUs are undertaking investigations for HCVs, they do not implement adequate management and monitoring strategies for the maintenance of those values. This can be inferred from a comparison of cases in which HCVs are fully addressed to those in which they are only partially addressed. Of all certificates which mentioned HCVs, none made reference to the six specific HCV values as defined by the FSC. This observation suggests that while general knowledge of the concept exists, specific application of the terms is lacking. Use of these terms is arguably important because it reflects a clear understanding of the value itself and agreement upon specific attributes of a forest that can be considered HCV.

With regards to identification of HCVs in communal, natural forests, it can be argued that while a number of these FMUs are not undertaking HCV assessments, this does not imply that their forest management does not take such values into consideration. With this in mind, it appears that what is needed is a way in which it can be recognized that these FMUs do take into account these HCVs without necessarily adding an additional evaluation to the process of certification.

Credits and Acknowledgements

This review is the work of Kate Herrmann and Adela Maciejewski Scheer, students of McGill University, Montreal, Canada. It was prepared during January-April, 2007, at the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) office of the Forest Stewardship Council where the two worked as interns. The initial idea for the review was suggested by Daniel Arancibia, who was at the time the FSC's LAC regional representative. A draft of the document was reviewed by Dawn Robinson, Tim Rayden and Chris Stewart of ProForest (UK) and they are acknowledged for their very helpful insights and comments.