Key Biodiversity Areas

The Global Standard for Key Biodiversity Areas and the guidelines for business operating within them

Key messages

Key Biodiversity Areas are an umbrella term for sites "*contributing significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity*" [1]. They build on existing initiatives including the Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas, Important Plant Areas, and Alliance for Zero Extinction Sites.

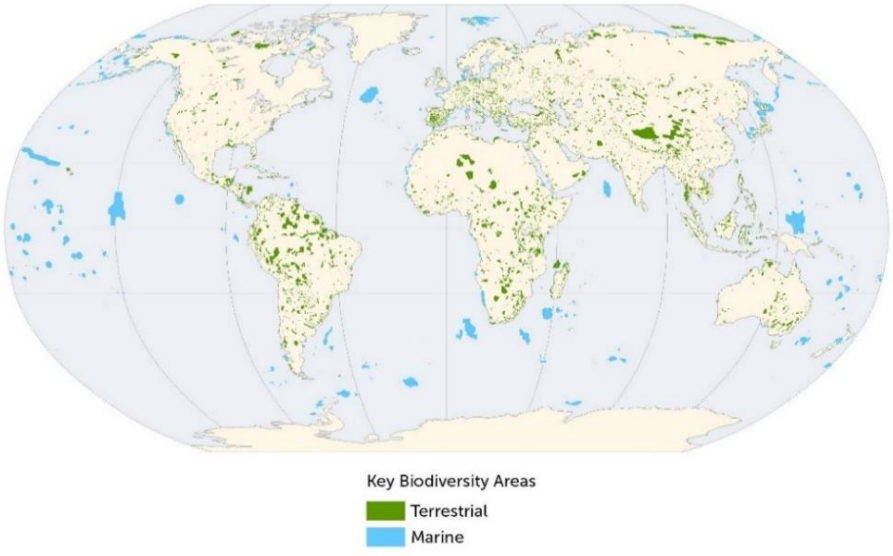
Following a resolution from the International Union for Conservation of Nature World Conservation Congress in 2004, and taking into consideration the needs of end-users, a new Global Standard for Identification of Key Biodiversity Areas was developed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. This aimed to harmonise the criteria used for the identification of important sites for conservation, providing increased clarity and scientific credibility.

Key Biodiversity Areas present extractive companies with a useful tool for identifying areas of high biodiversity value when conducting early assessments of sites. Key Biodiversity Areas are recognised by the International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6 as likely indicating the presence of 'Critical Habitat'.

Guidelines for operating in or near Key Biodiversity Areas developed by the Key Biodiversity Partnership outline how Key Biodiversity Area designations provide a way for companies to identify potential impacts and maximise outcomes of conservation actions.

With the development of the new Global Standard (published in 2016), there is now a rigorous and comparable method for identifying Key Biodiversity Areas. Existing Key Biodiversity Areas identified before 2016 will be verified to ensure they meet the criteria. While this process is ongoing, unverified Key Biodiversity Areas will continue to remain relevant and valuable.

The private sector is encouraged to share data. Doing so will help to ensure the most detailed information is available for the identification, delineation and/or verification of Key Biodiversity Areas.



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Introduction

Extractive companies often operate in areas of high biodiversity value. This can increase the severity of potential impacts caused by their operations on biodiversity [2].

There is therefore a need for companies to understand and avoid or mitigate these impacts. An essential step in this process is to identify where operations may result in direct and indirect impacts on areas of high biodiversity.

The World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas [1] (maintained by Birdlife International on behalf of the Key Biodiversity Areas Partnership) is part of a suite of datasets (including for protected areas and species range data) that can be used to help identify areas of high biodiversity value. It contains data on over 16,000 marine and terrestrial sites designated as Key Biodiversity Areas [3].

The Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT) [4] provides access to the Key Biodiversity Area dataset for diverse analytical purposes (including commercial use), in combination with other relevant datasets such as protected areas.

A GIS dataset of Key Biodiversity Area boundaries can also be requested from Birdlife International for non-commercial use through the Key Biodiversity Area Partnership website.

Box 1: Criteria for the identification of Key Biodiversity Areas

Key Biodiversity Areas are identified under the five categories outlined below. The thresholds for each are shown in Annex A. As a site may trigger more than one of the criteria below, a delineation process is used to identify boundaries driven by ecological data, taking into account protected areas and other management data.

Category	Sub-category
A. Threatened Biodiversity	A1. Threatened Species A2. Threatened Ecosystem Types
B. Geographically Restricted Biodiversity	B1. Individual Geographically Restricted Species B2. Co-occurring Geographically Restricted Species B3. Geographically Restricted Assemblages B4. Geographically Restricted Ecosystem Types
C. Ecological Integrity	
D. Biological Processes	D1. Demographic Aggregations D2. Ecological Refugia D3. Recruitment Sources
E. Irreplaceability Through Quantitative Analysis	

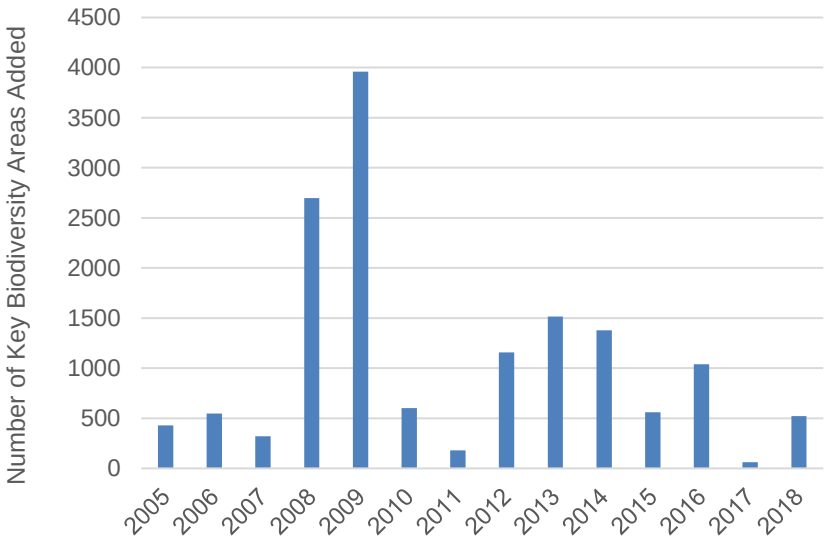

Figure 1: Number of Key Biodiversity Areas added to the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas each year.

Global Standard for Key Biodiversity Areas

Key Biodiversity Areas are defined as "*sites that contribute significantly to the global persistence of biodiversity*" [5].

They have been developed from BirdLife International's work on Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas [6] and then expanded to cover a wider range of taxa, as well as initiatives such as Important Plant Areas [7] and Alliance for Zero Extinction sites [8]. At present Key Biodiversity Areas cover approximately 4% of the world's surface.

Following an extensive consultation process [9] a Global Standard for the Identification Key Biodiversity Areas (Global Standard hereafter) was published by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 2016 [5]. It provides criteria under which an area can be quantitatively assessed for inclusion as a Key Biodiversity Area (Box 1).

The thresholds are applicable and comparable across taxonomic groups. The aim of this Global Standard is to harmonise the identification of sites of global importance for biodiversity conservation so that information regarding biodiversity elements (either species or ecosystems) for which the site is important can be readily accessed and interpreted.

Ecological considerations are the primary drivers for defining Key Biodiversity Areas. A site's identification as a Key Biodiversity Area has no direct implication on its legal status or management regime [10]. The Global Standard does however state that "*the site should be managed in ways that ensure the persistence of the biodiversity elements for which it is important*" [5]. There are no specific management requirements for Key Biodiversity Areas due to the variety of biodiversity elements that can trigger designation.

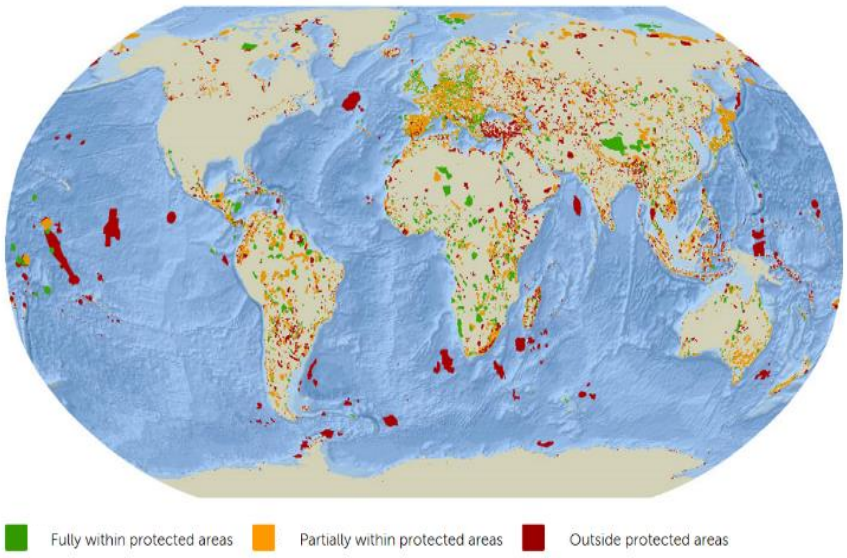

Figure 2: Overlap between Key Biodiversity Areas and Protected Areas (Protected Planet Report 2018 [18])

Confirmation as a Key Biodiversity Area is dependent on the submission of all information required by the Documentation Standards of the Key Biodiversity Area Partnership. This information includes name, trigger biodiversity element (species or habitat that meets the threshold for one or more criteria), criteria met, and delineation.

Stakeholders (e.g. governments or non-governmental organisations) will have the ability to appeal the designation of a Key Biodiversity Area through a separate Standards and Appeals Committee. Challenges may be made against either the data used in the assessment or the delineation process (although not the criteria themselves). Resolution of challenges involves a review of relevant data by challengers and the initial proposing organisation, with the intent of reaching mutual agreement based on the data [11].

Once confirmed, a site is added to the World Database for Key Biodiversity Areas and made available through the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT) [4].

Guidelines for using the Global Standard were release in January 2019. This document contains more technical details that help in the application of the Global Standard, such as the process of delineating Key Biodiversity Areas [12].

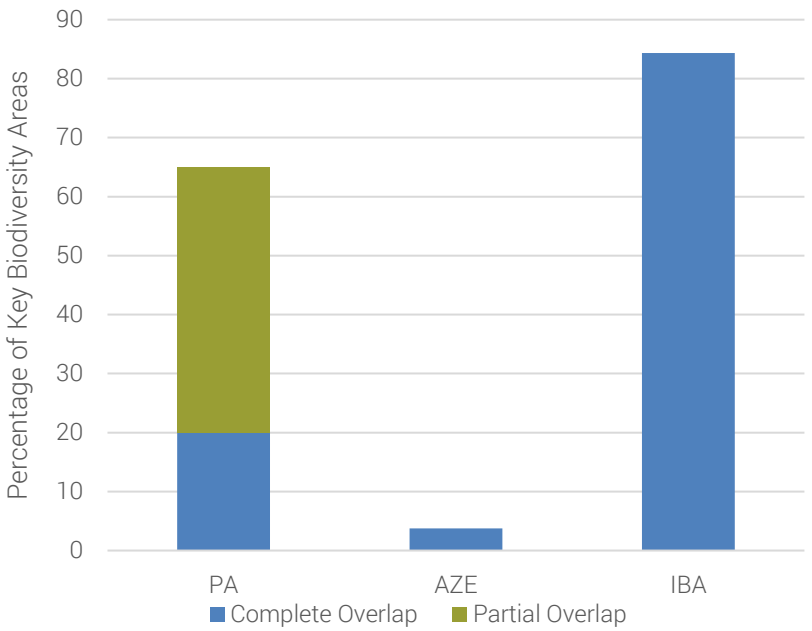

Figure 3: Percentage of Key Biodiversity Areas Overlapping with Protected Areas (PA) [10], Alliance for Zero Extinction (AZE) and Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas (IBA) [1]

Key Biodiversity Areas, Protected Areas, and Other Important Areas for Biodiversity

In many cases, the biodiversity elements that meet Key Biodiversity Area thresholds may also meet criteria for other sites of importance, including Alliance for Zero Extinction sites (all of which are Key Biodiversity Areas) [8] and Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas [13]. A site identified as a Key Biodiversity Area may also be designated as a protected area.

It is however also important to recognise that Key Biodiversity Areas defined on ecological grounds often include areas that are commercially productive or areas already being managed by other interest groups (e.g. private reserves, indigenous lands) [14]. It is therefore not always necessary or of benefit to confer formal protection to Key Biodiversity Areas [15].

Key Biodiversity Areas and the extractives sector

Key Biodiversity Areas and International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6

The International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6 is increasingly seen as a benchmark for companies when considering risk and impacts on biodiversity.

Key Biodiversity Areas are identified in Performance Standard 6 as "*internationally recognised areas*" in which companies are required to meet a range of criteria (see Annex B), including the implementation of programmes to promote conservation and effective management [16].

In addition, the International Finance Corporation acknowledges that Key Biodiversity Areas "*will often qualify as critical habitat*" [17], in which case they would be subject to more stringent requirements to secure project funding. These would include ensuring no alternative sites are available and preventing all measureable adverse impacts on biodiversity trigger species or habitat.

The close alignment between Key Biodiversity Areas and Performance Standard 6 allows companies to highlight sites that likely contain critical habitat at an early stage. To this end, the Key Biodiversity Areas dataset has been incorporated into a global screening layer for Critical Habitat [18]. This can be useful for screening projects and prioritising sites for in depth review of conditions on the ground.

Guidelines on Business and Key Biodiversity Areas

Following the publication of the Global Standard, the Key Biodiversity Area Partnership has produced guidelines for companies operating within, or in close proximity to, Key Biodiversity Areas [14]. Both project and corporate level guidance for managing risks posed to biodiversity within a company's area of influence (defined as the area in which business activities cause impact both directly and indirectly) are provided. This guidance is applicable across all sectors.

The guidelines strengthen and support the mitigation hierarchy, and are intended to be used across the "*area of influence and*

entire life cycle of the operation, from pre-feasibility to closure (and, where relevant, site rehabilitation)" [14]. However, it is noted that Key Biodiversity Areas are designated for a variety of biodiversity elements, and can therefore have a variety of stakeholders and management regimes. As a result the guidelines should be applied while considering the specific management already in place for the Key Biodiversity Area in question.

A total of 15 guidelines are provided, 10 of which relate to decision making at the project-level and five to the corporate level. The emphasis is not just on reducing impacts on biodiversity, but on how companies can provide positive biodiversity outcomes (Box 2).

Guidelines 1-10: Project-level

The first 10 guidelines relate to project level decision-making. The majority relate specifically to the biodiversity element(s) that triggered the identification of a Key Biodiversity Area and so the actions required may differ greatly between Key Biodiversity Areas. They include requirements to:

- include the trigger biodiversity element in data collection (both for baseline and monitoring data collection);
- focus on the trigger biodiversity element when applying the mitigation hierarchy;
- generate conservation benefits for biodiversity elements impacted by existing operations that have subsequently become the trigger for the designation of a Key Biodiversity Area.

Box 2: Positive actions for supporting biodiversity conservation in Key Biodiversity Areas [14]

Companies can contribute to the conservation of the biodiversity elements for which a Key Biodiversity Area was identified by recognising its value and taking action to maintain or improve its condition. This can be done in a variety of ways:

- Offsets: Key Biodiversity Areas should be considered priority sites for offsetting residual impacts for companies operating near the Key Biodiversity Area. This enables businesses to increase biodiversity conservation outcomes when compared to offsets outside Key Biodiversity Areas.
- Corporate Social Responsibility: Key Biodiversity Areas provide the opportunity to target internationally recognised important biodiversity elements with additional conservation actions. This ensures that benefits to biodiversity conservation are maximised, while also providing increased visibility for companies.
- Data Sharing: Prior to and during project implementation companies are likely to collect a range of biodiversity data. Sharing this data with key stakeholders can help clarify and track the status of the Key Biodiversity Area.

In addition, a number of guidelines focus on working within a Key Biodiversity Area and as such are more broadly applicable across a range of sites. The guidelines suggest that Key Biodiversity Area stakeholders are consulted, the appropriate financial planning is carried out to ensure the persistence of mitigation measures, and that new owners continue mitigation in the event of divestment.

Guidelines 11-15: Corporate-level

The corporate-level guidelines refer to data generated through operating in Key Biodiversity Areas and the potential to act within Key Biodiversity Areas that are not impacted by current or proposed operations. They address:

- the relevance of reporting on Key Biodiversity Areas as part of the Global Reporting Initiative's areas of high biodiversity value outside of protected areas;
- ensuring compliance with policies and standards (e.g. using Key Biodiversity Areas as part of a screening process to identify 'Critical Habitat' [16] as part of the International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6);
- sharing data with appropriate scientific bodies and the Key Biodiversity Area Partnership to improve the quality of the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas.
- how companies can use Key Biodiversity Areas in order to increase their positive actions on biodiversity by targeting trigger biodiversity elements, either through additional conservation actions, or to offset residual impacts caused outside Key Biodiversity Areas.

Limitations of Key Biodiversity Area Data

While the identification of Key Biodiversity Areas is valuable to extractive companies, users should be aware of the following considerations when using the data.

Under the Global Standard, the Key Biodiversity Areas Partnership aims to re-evaluate Key Biodiversity Areas every 8-12 years [9]. As a result, data regarding Key Biodiversity Areas and their trigger biodiversity elements may not necessarily reflect their current condition on the ground. The database should therefore be used during initial screening processes to identify likely priority sites for biodiversity, but it should be noted that:

- the conditions on the ground may have changed since a site was last evaluated and therefore companies may need to undertake further investigation; and
- some sites will need data assessments to confirm their global Key Biodiversity Area status.

The process for verifying the Global Standard for 16,000+ Key Biodiversity Areas already identified is a significant undertaking that will likely take many years. During the transition period, the database will contain both Key Biodiversity Areas verified against the Global Standard and those which have not yet been verified (and therefore may or may not meet the Global Standard). Users should be aware of this potential difference, especially when making comparisons between sites.

It is not currently possible to identify whether a Key Biodiversity Area has been designated under the new criteria of the Global Standard. Sites not meeting the Global Standard may still have locally significant biodiversity values. Sites that do not meet the Global Standard will be retained in the database as regional Key Biodiversity Areas [3]. Some countries are also starting to identify national Key Biodiversity Areas (e.g. Canada) [3].

Due to the quantitative scientific approach taken by the Global Standard, there are likely to be both locations and taxa for which there is insufficient data to assess against the thresholds. Surveys should be conducted for species that could trigger Key Biodiversity Area status, and the results fed back into the process for identifying and verifying Key Biodiversity Areas, to help address these gaps.

The Global Standard offers a harmonised and quantitative method to identify areas of high biodiversity value. However, a number of other approaches (such as Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas) exist and not all areas of biodiversity value will meet the criteria for Key Biodiversity Areas. Therefore, Key Biodiversity Areas should be used in combination with data collected locally, other global datasets, and nationally available datasets identified in consultation with stakeholders to understand, avoid or mitigate potential impacts on biodiversity.

While ecological factors drive the identification of Key Biodiversity Areas, there is often significant overlap with the designation of protected areas and other land uses. In order to increase the utility of the Key Biodiversity Areas concept, management practicality is considered when defining boundaries for Key Biodiversity Areas. Existing management boundaries often influence Key Biodiversity Area boundaries. This can lead to Key Biodiversity Area boundaries that:

- exceed the area in which the trigger biodiversity element is present;
- only partially cover the area in which the trigger biodiversity element is present;
- comprise two adjacent Key Biodiversity Areas, one of which is within an existing management boundary and one that is outside it.

Overlaps with protected areas and other areas of importance for biodiversity should always be considered in conjunction with Key Biodiversity Areas, as should the potential for areas immediately surrounding Key Biodiversity Areas to have high biodiversity values.

Accessibility of Key Biodiversity Area Data

The World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas is available for commercial use through the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT) [4].

Each Key Biodiversity Area has data regarding the biodiversity elements that triggered its designation, which can be used to inform decision-making processes.

It can be reviewed in combination with other datasets, such as the

International Union for Conservation of Nature Red List of Threatened Species and the World Database of Protected Areas, in the Integrated Biodiversity Assessment Tool (IBAT) [4]. This allows users to consider the context within which the Key Biodiversity Area may have been delineated in relation to existing boundaries, as well as identifying potential areas of high biodiversity value that are not captured within the Key Biodiversity Area.

Private Sector Data and Key Biodiversity Areas

In the Guidelines for operating in or near Key Biodiversity Areas, the private sector is encouraged to share data in a manner that improves the overall functionality of the Key Biodiversity Area dataset. Through Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs), Critical Habitat Assessments, and other biodiversity data gathering processes, companies potentially have a wealth of data that could be used to assess, identify and/or verify Key Biodiversity Areas.

As company data typically cover sensitive or potentially impacted species regardless of taxonomic group, it has the potential to address the current balance in favour of Important Bird and Biodiversity Areas within the Key Biodiversity Areas data.

It could also provide data on more remote areas in which companies have the resources to operate but conservation organisations may not.

The use of company data could therefore improve the coverage and monitoring of Key Biodiversity Areas both geographically and taxonomically, strengthening the credibility of the database as a tool for identifying areas of high biodiversity value.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Extractive companies are obliged to mitigate their impacts on biodiversity through national regulation, financial institution standards, and corporate policies. The process of identifying impacts is complex, involves assessment at all stages of a project, and the need to consider direct, indirect, and cumulative impacts.

Key Biodiversity Areas provide a standardised means of identifying areas designated for their high biodiversity value. By collating information from national-level partners, the World Database of Key Biodiversity Areas provides a valuable resource for companies to use as part of screening processes. In particular, the close alignment of Key Biodiversity Areas with the International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6 enables companies to rapidly identify and target sites likely to contain 'Critical Habitat' for further investigation. The Global Standard supports a more representative and credible Key Biodiversity Areas dataset. This should in turn lead to greater recognition and adoption of the Key Biodiversity Areas concept by businesses as part of due diligence and reporting processes.

The guidelines for using the Global Standard [12] will further support users (such as extractive companies) to identify and reduce the negative impacts of their operations. Extractive companies could consider Key Biodiversity Areas as targets for conservation action as part of achieving net positive impacts on biodiversity through the mitigation hierarchy. A framework for doing this is outlined in the guidelines for business (see Box 2) [14].

Company data, collected through processes such as Environmental Impact Assessments, could also play an important role in identifying Key Biodiversity Areas, particularly in remote areas or for taxonomic groups that are currently less well represented by existing Key Biodiversity Areas.

Northern Alps, Japan – Key Biodiversity Area

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Annex A – The Global Standard for the Identification of Key Biodiversity Areas [5]

Category	Criteria	Thresholds
A. Threatened Biodiversity	A1. Threatened Species	Site regularly holds one or more of the following: a) ≥0.5% of the global population size AND ≥5 reproductive units of a Critically Endangered (CR) or Endangered (EN) species; b) ≥1% of the global population size AND ≥10 reproductive units of a Vulnerable (VU) species; c) ≥0.1% of the global population size AND ≥5 reproductive units of a species assessed as CR or EN due only to population size reduction in the past or present; d) ≥0.2% of the global population size AND ≥10 reproductive units of a species assessed as VU due only to population size reduction in the past or present; e) Effectively the entire global population size of a CR or EN species.
	A2. Threatened Ecosystem Types	Site holds one or more of the following: a) ≥5% of the global extent of a globally CR or EN ecosystem type; b) ≥10% of the global extent of a globally VU ecosystem type
B. Geographically Restricted Biodiversity	B1. Individual Geographically Restricted Species	Site regularly holds ≥10% of the global population size AND ≥10 reproductive units of a species.
	B2. Co-occurring Geographically Restricted Species	Site regularly holds ≥1% of the global population size of each of a number of restricted-range species in a taxonomic group, determined as either ≥2 species OR 0.02% of the global number of species in the taxonomic group, whichever is larger.
	B3. Geographically Restricted Assemblages	Site regularly holds one or more of the following: a) ≥0.5% of the global population size of each of a number of ecoregion-restricted species within a taxonomic group, determined as either ≥5 species OR 10% of the species restricted to the ecoregion, whichever is larger; b) ≥5 reproductive units of ≥5 bioregion-restricted species OR 30% of the bioregion-restricted species known from the country, whichever is larger, within a taxonomic group; c) Part of the globally most important 5% of occupied habitat for each of ≥5 species within a taxonomic group.
	B4. Geographically Restricted Ecosystem Types	Site holds ≥20% of the global extent of an ecosystem type
C. Ecological Integrity		Site is one of ≤2 per ecoregion characterised by wholly intact ecological communities, comprising the composition and abundance of native species and their interactions
D. Biological Processes	D1. Demographic Aggregations	Site predictably holds one or more of the following: a) An aggregation representing ≥1% of the global population size of a species, over a season, and during one or more key stages of its life cycle; b) A number of mature individuals that ranks the site among the largest 10 aggregations known for the species.
	D2. Ecological Refugia	Site supports ≥10% of the global population size of one or more species during periods of environmental stress, for which historical evidence shows that it has served as a refugium in the past and for which there is evidence to suggest it would continue to do so in the foreseeable future.
	D3. Recruitment Sources	Site predictably produces propagules, larvae, or juveniles that maintain ≥10% of the global population size of a species.
E. Irreplaceability Through Quantitative Analysis		Site has a level of irreplaceability of ≥0.90 (on a 0–1 scale), measured by quantitative spatial analysis, and is characterised by the regular presence of species with ≥10 reproductive units known to occur (or ≥ 5 units for EN or CR species).

Annex B – Requirements for Key Biodiversity Areas as set out by International Finance Corporation Performance Standard 6

Key Biodiversity Areas are identified in Performance Standard 6 as "*internationally recognised areas*" [a], and conferred the same status as legally protected areas. Therefore, a project within a Key Biodiversity Area must:

- meet the requirements of paragraphs 13-19 (see below);
- demonstrate that it is legally permitted;
- be conducted in accordance with any government recognized management plan;
- consult all appropriate stakeholders; and
- implement additional programmes to promote and enhance the conservation aims of the area (as appropriate) [a].

Paragraphs 13-15: Natural Habitat

Performance Standard 6 defines natural habitat as "*areas composed of viable assemblages of plant and/or animal species of largely native origin, and/or where human activity has not essentially modified an area's primary ecological functions and species composition*" [a]. There are requirements relating to no net loss of biodiversity in natural habitats where feasible, and for conversion or degradation of natural habitats to occur only when mitigated appropriately (according to the mitigation hierarchy), consultation has been conducted and no other viable alternatives exist [a].

Paragraphs 16-19: Critical Habitat

Critical Habitat is defined as "*areas with high biodiversity value, including (i) habitat of significant importance to Critically Endangered and/or Endangered species; (ii) habitat of significant importance to endemic and/or restricted-range species; (iii) habitat supporting globally significant concentrations of migratory species and/or congregatory species; (iv) highly threatened and/or unique ecosystems; and/or (v) areas associated with key evolutionary processes*" [a].

For projects to proceed within Critical Habitat there should be no viable alternatives outside of Critical Habitat and no impact on either the biodiversity element for which the Critical Habitat was designated or Critically Endangered or Endangered species. There is also a requirement to implement a long term biodiversity monitoring and programme. All actions taken to mitigate impacts for projects within Critical Habitat should be documented in a Biodiversity Action Plan aiming to achieve net gain for the biodiversity element for which the Critical Habitat was designated [a].

Further to the requirements set out by Performance Standard 6, the associated Guidance Note states that Key Biodiversity Areas will "*often qualify as Critical Habitat*" [b]. This means criteria between Key Biodiversity Areas and Critical Habitat are strongly aligned.

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