High Conservation Value Forests

High Conservation Value Forests (HCVFs) are defined by the Forest Stewardship Council as forests of outstanding and critical importance due to their high environmental, socio-economic, biodiversity or landscape values. WWF is developing and extending the HCVF concept in its wider protect-manage-restore programme. HCVFs comprise the crucial forest areas and values that need to be maintained or enhanced in a landscape. HCVFs are found across broad forest biomes (tropical to boreal), within a wide range of forest conditions (largely intact to largely fragmented), and in ecoregions with complete or under-represented protected area networks. HCVFs could be old-growth forests in Siberia, habitats of threatened orang utans in Southeast Asia or the sacred burial grounds of a North American first nations people. Although originally designed as a tool to help certification, the HCVF concept is being extended to more general conservation planning including the design of representative networks of protected areas and buffer zones.

The identification of HCVFs requires a multi-scale approach. First a rapid assessment and mapping of *potential* HCVF areas is made at a global or continental scale, based on indicators of biologically or environmentally important forest values that can be mapped at this broad scale. Next, these areas are further refined within ecoregions and a more detailed investigation within a given landscape delineates *actual* HCVFs, including local stakeholder consultation to identify forests that meet community needs and maintain cultural identity, and scientific research to identify biologically important forest stands and those critical for maintaining ecosystem functions and populations of endangered species.

WWF believes the first priority is to ensure that HCVFs are adequately represented in protected area systems. In practice, many HCVFs will continue to be managed outside protected areas and here approaches will vary – e.g. enhanced management or long-term "no-cut" reserves – but should always aim to maintain HCVF values. In regions where the forest is largely degraded, HCVF management should be consistent with a forest landscape restoration strategy (see separate position paper) that addresses ecological, social and economic objectives. Two principles are paramount: (1) HCVFs are managed to *maintain the attributes that are of high conservation value*, and (2) management employs the *precautionary principle*, which requires that where the effects of extraction and other management are unknown, values are insured through a cautious approach.

WWF calls on producers, retailers and investors in the forestry, agricultural, mining and petroleum sectors and governments to ensure that their business activities do not promote the clearing or degradation of HCVFs.

WWF will work with partners to identify and protect HCVFs by:

- Developing tools for identification of HCVFs that are applicable around the world, particularly through pilot projects and dissemination of the lessons learned
- Developing tools and activities for the adequate protection of HCVFs that are applicable around the world
- Working with the Forest Stewardship Council in developing detailed guidance on the application of FSC's Principle 9 that covers HCVF
- Co-ordinating with other organisations, so that a HCVF approach can integrate conservation agendas
- Working to ensure, where appropriate, that development of the HCVF concept is coordinated between interested organisations
- Further developing the concept of HCVFs as a useful guide for fulfilling ecologically friendly procurement policies for forest products
- Promoting and helping to apply the HCVF concept with forest managers and forest management certifiers in selected ecoregions

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One of a series explaining the WWF/IUCN Forests for Life strategy and WWF's current five-year target-driven programme on forests.

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