Red Data Books, Action Plans, and the Need for Site-specific Synthesis

N. J. Collar

I was gratified to see my great friend and colleague Simon Stuart’s review of ICBP/IUCN’s recent Threatened Birds of the Americas (Species 20: 46-47). But, relieved as I was to receive his forgiveness for the book taking so long to appear, he was mistaken in attributing the delay to the fact that it covers so many species in so much detail. As my introduction makes clear, funds for the venture dried up for the entire two-year period 1988-1990; had this not happened, the book could certainly have appeared only five years after Simon’s and my Threatened Birds of Africa and Related Islands (1985).

I make this point less in self-defense than in defense of Red Data Books, which no longer appear to figure in the canon of SSC. A seven-year period to cover a continent’s avifauna certainly looks unaffordably long, especially if seven authors are named on the title page. But the book does not, of course, represent 49 man-years. For a start, I myself only worked part-time on the American volume for a total of about a year before the funds dried up; and other authors contributed for various periods at various stages. I would put the total man-years for the 1,150 page book at nine; so, under the strictest of regimes and in the most propitious of circumstances, the book could have appeared in 1988.

My point is that Red Data Books are by no means so expensive, either of time or of money, as Stuart’s review may accidentally imply. There are, in my opinion, many reasons why they actually represent extremely good value and a very wise investment. Whether my views will help in their revival only time will tell, but, even if SSC persists only with its Action Plan series, there remains a further vital area within the data-gathering remit (or at least potential) of IUCN that has been neglected in both the Red Data Book and Action Plan phases of its development. This concerns the synthesis of threatened species data, and in particular their distributional data. The issue of Species that carries Stuart’s review also carries his and Mariano Gimenez-Dixon’s evaluation of the effectiveness of Action Plans.

This paper praises Specialist Groups for having the capacity “to amass large quantities of high quality data at relatively little cost” which, whether true or not (and the point is at least debatable), still leaves them in need of funds “for Action Plan implementation and hiring staff dedicated to Specialist Group activities.” The article concludes by stressing the need to explore “mechanisms that will allow the more effective channelling of SSC Action Plan recommendations to broader audiences that have the ability and responsibility to manage natural resources.”

So, Action Plans need more money to get them implemented, and they need a means to be more accessible to managers and decision-makers. One solution—admittedly only partial, but very obvious—lies in combining projects wherever possible, and repackaging them as site-specific actions that address as broad a suite of species as possible. Gimenez and Stuart give a table of money spent since plans started to be published, with a footnote...
warning that "the figures are not additive as some funded projects address issues covered by two or more Action Plans"; yet nowhere else in the article is there any mention of the cardinal importance of integrating conservation measures from different plans, despite this being the most obvious means of maximizing the value of minimal levels of funding.

I argued this constantly as a member of the IUCN unit that produced Red Data Books in Cambridge through the 1980s. It did not need the opposition to Red Data Books from those who could not see the value of what were effectively large sets of uncosted (and in their eyes unfundable) single species action plans, although such (very real) opposition should certainly have helped concentrate minds on the matter. It was simply a matter of common sense that there should be a small team that took the single species accounts from Red Data Books and reconstituted their information as analyses informing the more area-oriented conservationists and decision-makers where the critical sites of sympatric occurrence of threatened species lie.

Frustrated by lack of interest in this approach, I made sure that each bird Red Data Book account should attempt to identify, in a final entry under Remarks, where overlap with other threatened birds occurred. I even wrote a book (with Stuart) that took this approach, effectively boiling down the 800 pages of Threatened Birds of Africa into 100 pages, along with as much information as we could garner on other threatened and restricted-range life-forms, under the title Key Forests for Threatened Birds in Africa (1988). My colleagues Adrian Long and David Wege are currently doing the same with Threatened Birds of the Americas, and similar thinking lies behind the ICBP (now BirdLife) project to document centers of avian endemism in Putting Biodiversity on the Map (1992).

Coordination can be done with Action Plans, too. The prospect of a particular species of monkey, parrot, snake, butterfly, and plant each requiring and receiving individually tailored action relating to the same site or set of sites is unappetizing. It can do the conservation community no great credit to be drawing up plan upon plan targeting individual species or species groups, with no regard as to which other species can be helped along the way at the same time, under the umbrella of a single project.

Action Plans are clearly now a key component of the SSC agenda. However, it is not just the extension of this component to cover and involve all groups that is needed (and it is one of my abiding concerns that Action Plans represent a kind of special pleading for those elements of life on earth that happen to have a Specialist Group assigned them—hence my continuing belief in Red Data Books). No less important (and in my view far more so, as well as far more feasible) is the addition of a synthesizing authority to integrate information on species’ distributions and requirements, and then to negotiate the development of projects that minister to as many species as possible for, as far as possible, the cost of ministering to one.

N. J. Collar
BirdLife International
Wellbrook Court, Girton Road
Cambridge CB3 0NA, U.K.