

MAB Strategy Group

A proposal for discussion: a World Network of Biosphere Regions

During the meeting of the Strategy Group (UNESCO Paris, 13-14 November 2014), it was suggested that it could be desirable to change the name 'Biosphere Reserve' to 'Biosphere Region' (both can be abbreviated as BR), and that this would be an appropriate time to do so, when a new 10-year strategy and action plan are being developed. The majority of members of the Strategy Group agreed that this possible change should be included in the discussions, involving all MAB stakeholders, regarding the future Strategy. The Strategy Group recognised that the International Coordinating Council (ICC) would have to make any decision.

It was emphasized that the possibility of such a change was included in paragraph 4 of the 'zero draft' presented and discussed at the 26th session of the ICC in 2014. This noted that a number of countries already do not refer to sites included in the World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) as Biosphere Reserves, calling them instead 'Biosphere', 'Biosphere Area', 'Biosphere Park' or 'Biosphere Region' – or equivalents in languages other than English. Recent research conducted for EuroMAB has shown that words 'Biosphere Reserve' can be counterproductive with regard to understanding, promotion and application of the concept for BR managers, other MAB stakeholders, the public and policy-makers.

Arguments for the change of name to 'Biosphere Region' include the following (not in any order of priority):

- The word 'Reserve' has a number of negative connotations: e.g., reserves for indigenous people (e.g., in North America) and exclusion of local communities (e.g. Africa), and also suggests that these places are protected areas (cf. nature reserves) with a primary focus on nature/biodiversity conservation. While nature/biodiversity conservation remains an important part of the current concept, and must be the focus of core areas, the broader emphasis is on sustainable development.
- The word 'Region' is quite neutral. Its positive connotations include the facts that effective BRs are rooted in regional identity, and Article 3 of the Statutory Framework explicitly states that BRs should operate on a regional scale;
- The word 'Region' starts with the letter R, so that this change would not require a change in the common references to BRs, and the initials of the WNBR would remain the same.
- The word 'Biosphere' would be retained, to emphasize that BRs are part of the Man and the Biosphere programme, and global understanding of the concept of the Biosphere continues to increase.

There are also arguments to retain the name 'Biosphere Reserve', as follows:

- In some countries, the word 'Reserve' is important for emphasizing strict protection of the core zone, and changing the concept in national policy documents could threaten this protection;
- In some countries, the word 'Reserve' does not have negative connotations but instead signals resources set aside for later use, which has positive connotations;
- The word 'Region' is an administrative term in some countries.

A compromise, that allows for flexibility between Member States, could be refer to the totality of the transition area, buffer zone(s) and core area(s) as a 'Biosphere Region' (i.e. "The World Network of Biosphere Regions"), whereas the core zone could still be referred to as "Biosphere Reserve" in countries where this is considered more appropriate, e.g. when the term is used in national policy and law.