

# Guide for National Interpretations of High Conservation Values

November 2019

## Introduction

The High Conservation Value (HCV) Approach was created more than 20 years ago as a tool and framework to protect important environmental and social values. It is now a key component of responsible commodity production and sourcing. The HCV Approach is based on six values (see fig 1) which span from biodiversity and ecosystem services to livelihoods and cultural values.

The wide uptake of the HCV Approach requires that users share a common understanding of what HCVs stand for, and that they rely upon a common methodology for identifying such values. The HCV Network (HCVN), set up in 2006 to promote best practice of the HCV Approach, brings together a wide range of stakeholders all of which adhere to the same, global set of HCV definitions. The HCVN provides guidance and support on how to interpret the definitions and how to identify, manage and monitor HCVs. The HCVN also provides a variety of quality assurance services and tools, including the HCV Assessor Licensing Scheme (ALS), a global scheme for licensing HCV assessors and for monitoring assessments in high-risk contexts.

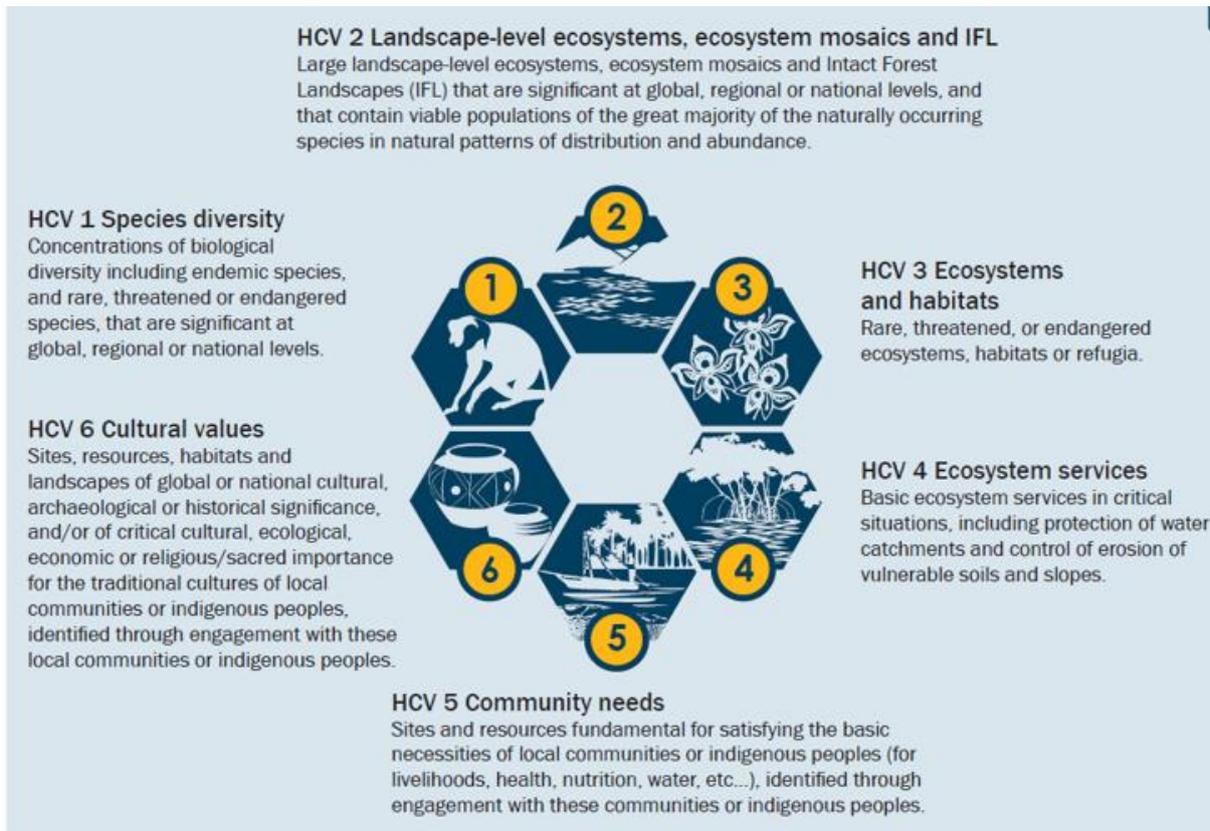


Fig. 1 The High Conservation Value definitions.

HCVs are absolute in the sense that they apply all over the world, irrespective of ecosystem, production context or commodity. Consequently, the HCV definitions (Fig.1) are the same for all users. However, the definitions are generic and brief, and to be operational in the field the formulations need to be *interpreted in the national or regional context*. Where there are no such commonly recognised interpretations, assessors rely on the HCVN generic “Common Guidance for the Identification of HCVs” and apply the HCV Approach case by case. In practice, this means that interpretations developed as parts of assessments in certain country may replicate work done by other assessors in that region. Developing National HCV Interpretations allows everyone to use the same framework – a key to avoid repetition and enable more standardised and cost-effective practices.

This document contains guidance on how to develop national/regional HCV interpretations, for use as part of site-level HCV assessments and/or HCV screening at landscape and jurisdictional levels.

## **Roles and responsibilities**

Topography, climate, biodiversity, and social conditions may differ considerably, also between neighbouring regions. Nationally adapted HCV interpretations need to take account of and reflect such differences, while respecting the intent and wording of the globally applicable definitions. Processes to develop HCV interpretations valid for a certain country or region are normally initiated and conducted by stakeholders from that country or region. However, for the outcome to be considered legitimate, it must be recognised by the wider 'HCV community', including certification schemes, assessors, auditors, NGOs, producers, and buyers both inside and outside the country. As most of these actors lack the national experience and expertise necessary to judge the quality of the content, the primary means for national initiatives to demonstrate quality and legitimacy of a national interpretation is to follow and transparently document and report on due process.

This guidance document outlines how to conduct such processes. The HCVN will provide a certain level of for free support to national initiatives in line with our mission as far as our capacity and resources allow. This support will normally include informing about the upcoming initiative in our newsletter, providing general advice and responses to questions, commenting on drafts, and posting national interpretations developed in line with the procedures outlined in this document on our website. The HCVN also aims to provide extended support upon request as agreed with the initiative. Such for fee activities may include, e.g., webinar presentations to the working group, scheduled skype calls with the organisers, attending meetings in person, reporting on progress and consultations on our website, and organising pilot testing of the interpretation by ALS assessors.

## **Initiate a national interpretation process**

Initiatives to develop national (or regional) HCV 'toolkits' are often linked to a certain commodity sector. However, the HCV Approach applies across a range of ecosystems and land uses, and the initiators should also encourage representatives of other sectors to participate. Such collaboration makes for interpretations that are more widely applicable, and that may be perceived as more legitimate and authoritative than single-sector approaches. As a

minimum, initiatives should attempt to engage with all certification schemes active in the region that reference HCVs in their standards. These schemes may help to ‘spread the word’ and advise on relevant people to contact. Initiatives should also contact and inform the HCVN at an early stage so that we can flag the initiative on our website and discuss how to best provide support.

Funding and timelines are other key considerations. Developing a national HCV interpretation requires time and commitment – usually several face-to-face meetings as well as work in between meetings. Some people may be able to participate as part of their positions in organisations, academia, or companies, and so may not need to be paid for their time. However, others, like facilitators, experts, people with traditional knowledge and HCV assessors consulted as part of the process are likely to require remuneration and reimbursement for their costs. There will also be a need to cover meeting costs for travel, food, and accommodation.

### **Encourage broad participation**

HCVs address a wide set of environmental and social values, and national interpretation processes need to draw upon a range of experience and expertise. In theory, interpreting the global definitions is largely a technical exercise. However, in practice there are no sharp boundaries between technical aspects and policy, and stakeholders are likely to differ in views of anything from the size of a ‘large’ landscape, to what constitute ‘basic’ needs and what is necessary to cater for them. Therefore, the interpretation should be carried out by a multi-stakeholder working group, with balanced representation from all major interest groups.

The number of working group members is a compromise between inclusiveness on the one hand, and working efficiency on the other, and in practice many individuals and organisations with relevant expertise and a stake in the outcome will not be part of the group. The initiative should make genuine efforts to engage as many of these as possible through other means as part of the process. Key mechanisms include transparency, e.g., by informing about progress on a website, and active outreach, e.g., by convening local and regional stakeholder meetings – such meetings may

generate input also from parties that, due to resource constraints or for other reasons, do not readily engage in dialogue at the national level.

Historically, most identification of HCVs has been part of voluntary certification. However, also governments and other authorities may use the HCV Approach to help deliver on jurisdictional and national sustainability targets. We therefore recommend national initiatives to contact and invite relevant authorities at an early stage. As a minimum, they should be kept informed of the progress, be invited to open stakeholder meetings and included in consultations.

National HCV interpretations should not be considered strict or exhaustive rules, but rather a set of best practice guidelines, the application of which still needs evidence, consultation with stakeholders and good judgement by the assessor. Thus, the initiative should also seek input from professional HCV assessors and auditors, as these will eventually carry out much of the HCV assessments and audits. However, as it may be considered inappropriate for assessors to be too deeply involved in formulating the rules they will later play by, it may be better to include them as observers or independent technical experts, rather than as decision-making group members.

### **Agree rules of engagement**

For a working group to be effective and considered legitimate, it needs to agree on the rules of the game, and how to communicate and engage with interested parties outside the group, including<sup>1</sup>:

- Composition – has the initiative reached out to all sectors, groups, and competencies that it aims to engage with? Is the working group well balanced in terms of interests, and do members represent social as well as environmental expertise?
- Commitment – are potential group members aware of the objectives and timeframe, and are they able and willing to engage to the necessary extent?
- Representation – who are members of the group, and what is the process for allowing new members?

---

<sup>1</sup> For further guidance on how to set up and run multi-stakeholder working groups and engage with stakeholders, see e.g. materials from ISEAL, [www.isealalliance.org](http://www.isealalliance.org).

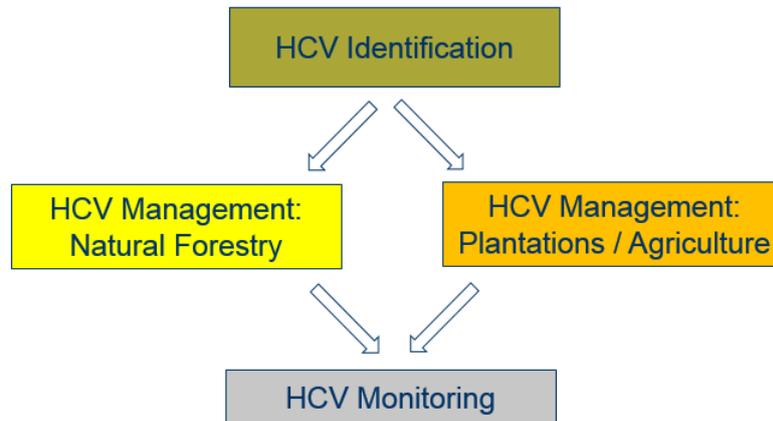
- Contact person/secretariat – designate a person/organisation through whom stakeholders can contact the working group and engage with the process;
- Decision-making - while working groups usually aim to reach consensus (often defined as absence of sustained opposition from one or more group members), it is worth taking time to formally agree from the onset how to proceed and take decisions if consensus cannot be achieved, in order to keep momentum and avoid impasses;
- Invites – select dates for meetings that facilitate attendance and send out invitations well in advance;
- Minutes - take notes of the proceedings of meetings and circulate minutes to participants, including as a minimum a copy of the agenda, meeting dates, locations, what people participated and what decisions were taken;
- Facilitation - efficient leading of meetings is key to good progress – where feasible, it may make sense to engage an independent facilitator, and/or cooperate with a professional process organiser;
- Communication – develop a simple strategy for reporting and communicating on progress that includes identifying what stakeholders to actively inform, how to reach out to them, and how to solicit their input and feedback.
- Documentation – log and document each step in the process by filling in the National HCV Interpretation Process Documentation Sheet (see Annex) as you proceed. Attach the completed sheet when you share the final version of the National HCV Interpretation document with the HCVN. The sheet, which we will make available on our website along with the final interpretation document, serves as means for the HCVN and the wider HCV community to recognise your National HCV Interpretation as the outcome of a due, inclusive process.

## Clarify the scope

Consistent application of the HCV Approach across regions and sectors requires that everyone uses the same definitions (available on the HCVN website). The task of national processes is to interpret these common definitions so that they make sense in the national context (but *not* to change or add to them!).

While national initiatives should strive for cross-sectorial engagement and participation, they may still end up focusing on HCVs related to production of a certain commodity (such as cultivation of oil palm) and on ecosystems and social settings relevant in that context. In any case, HCVs in areas or ecosystems that are off limits to, or unlikely to be impacted by forestry or

agriculture (e.g., high alpine areas) are not likely to receive much attention. Thus, the initiative needs to agree on what to cover from the outset and make clear the scope of the final product.



*Fig. 2 Schematic illustration of National HCV Interpretation materials with common-for-all guidance on HCV identification that divides into two or more separate management strands for different sectors, then uniting again into common-for-all guidance on HCV monitoring.*

The outcome, variously referred to as a “National HCV Interpretation”, “National HCV Toolkit”, or “National HCV Framework”<sup>2</sup>, may also include guidance on how to manage, maintain and monitor HCVs, appropriate to the characteristics of relevant production sites and landscapes. However, as there is such a range of different HCVs, and such a variety of settings where they may occur, it may be challenging to go much beyond distinguishing between general practises in contexts where there is no conversion of natural ecosystems, and management and safeguards applicable to expansion of plantations and agriculture, leaving to assessors, managers, and practitioners to fill in the details (Fig. 2). For general guidance on how to plan and conduct management and monitoring activities, see the HCVN’s [“Common Guidance for the Management and Monitoring of HCV”](#).

---

<sup>2</sup> This is the term used by FSC

## Structure the work

Part of the interpretation process is to analyse and agree on the meaning of the brief definition sentences. The intentions are generally clear – e.g. wording to the effect that something is ‘significant’ at a national (or higher) level implies a bar set quite high, as many things have local value without being national priorities. But exactly what does it mean? And what (if any) kinds of already identified and categorised national areas /ecosystems /vegetation types may be considered equal to, or serve as a proxies or indicators for these values?

These are the kind of questions that the working group must resolve. The HCVN’s “Common Guidance on HCV Identification” outlines the issues in much more detail and suggests how to narrow down alternatives in order to arrive at interpretations that are both adapted to the national context, and consistently reflect the common, global HCV framework. In brief, the working group needs to:

1. Interpret key terms and concepts for each HCV:

The definitions contain subjective words like ‘significant’, ‘great majority’, ‘large’, ‘basic’, ‘critical’, ‘vulnerable’ and ‘fundamental’. In order to guide HCV assessments, the working group must clarify and agree nationally appropriate, more precise meanings of words such as these – by elaborating on them and/or by providing nationally relevant examples. Other terms that may need clarification and explanation are scientific concepts like ‘endemic species’, ‘threatened species’, ‘viable populations’, ‘natural patterns of distribution and abundance’, ‘habitat’, ‘ecosystem services.’ The Common Guidance for HCV Identification discusses these and other terms in more detail.

2. (In large countries): Identify smaller units as geographical proxies for ‘national’ scale:

Relative characteristics of biodiversity like value, rarity and endemism are meaningful only if related to geographical scales. The definitions of HCVs 1 and 2 refer to ‘national, regional or global’ contexts. However, sizes of countries vary over orders of magnitudes, and unless corrected for, national significance will set the bar much higher in the likes of Brazil and Russia than in smaller countries. Thus, to generate comparable results, interpretation processes should operate with roughly similar units of scale. The HCVN recommends units in a size interval from 10 million – 100 million hectares as proxies for the ‘national’ level. Such areas may be administrative (states, provinces or other sub-national units) or bio-geographical regions of corresponding size.

3. Identify national / regional / global land classification or designations that may correspond to one or more of the six HCVs:

The working group may use areas or land categories identified and designated through national or regional surveys as proxies for a certain HCV category, e.g. 'all areas classified as x by the national authorities are to be considered HCV y'. Advice is very useful even if less absolute, e.g. 'areas classified as z by a recognised, international NGO *are likely to host* HCV w'. Risk-based analyses may also be informative, e.g. 'areas characterised as x are unlikely to contain HCV y'. This analysis is a key part of the work, as using existing national designations and land use categories facilitates interpretations and allows for more efficient (and therefore more straightforward and less costly) assessments.

4. Identify and list additional, nationally relevant sources of information for use by assessors:

Easy access to relevant information, including legal frameworks and requirements, provides for more standardised, consistent and efficient assessments. The working group should survey, collate and reference best available, preferably science-based information materials, e.g. relevant publications, websites and databases, including national Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standards for forest management, nationally valid risk analyses for Controlled Wood (which includes risks related to HCVs), and FSC's national HCV frameworks (FSC's counterparts of national HCV interpretations for use in forestry contexts).

The above four strands of work are interlinked, and it may be more efficient to address them in parallel, with frequent feedback between topics, than to attempt to deal with them in sequential order.

### Consult on drafts

Working groups are expected to produce and consult on at least one draft version of national HCV interpretations before finalising the document, and to report back on comments received (individual sources normally anonymised), including how these are considered and addressed in the next iteration. The International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling (ISEAL) *Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards* provides more guidance on how to conduct consultations (as well as on many other aspects of multi-stakeholder processes). Include the HCVN secretariat in

consultations along with national stakeholders to get feedback based on our expertise and international experience.

### **Finalise the output**

Once the working group has agreed on a final version of the national HCV interpretation, the outcome should be effectively communicated to potential users, through national information channels as well as through the HCVN. Our website and newsletters reach many users; we are also in regular contact with ALS-licensed HCV assessors, and with organisations that provide training on various aspects related to use of the HCV Approach.

At this stage, people who have committed time and efforts may be happy to let go. However, a national HCV interpretation is never a static product – as assessors and managers start to implement them, there will be requests for clarifications, suggestions for improvements and, with time, a need for revision. To maintain national interpretations as living documents, the working group should therefore, before it dissolves, appoint one of its member organisations to act as *steward* of the interpretation, with a main task of collating and filing feedback and input from users, so that when there is need for a revision, there is already a library of comments and suggestions.

### **Keep in touch with the HCV Network**

Working groups are welcome to contact the HCVN Secretariat for information and advice during all stages of the interpretation process – the HCVN's mission is to promote maintenance of HCVs through consistent, high quality use of the HCV Approach, and the secretariat will be happy to advise and assist as far as time and resources permit. Contact us at:

[info@hcvnetwork.org](mailto:info@hcvnetwork.org)

## Annex: National HCV Interpretation Process Documentation Sheet

Country or region:
Initiating organisation(s) / individual(s) with contact details:
Contact person(s):
Organisations / individuals invited to engage with the process, with dates, affiliations/interest group/sector and contact details:
Working group composition – organisations / individuals, with affiliations/interest group/sector and contact details (including additions/changes):
Coordination and facilitation (where relevant):
Procedure – please log all major steps in the process and annex minutes from decision-making working group meetings and calls:
Consultation(s) – document consultation(s) on draft version(s) of the interpretation – dates, communications, invitations for comments, number and affiliation of respondents etc.
Field testing / reality-checks (where relevant):
Final HCV Interpretation – date, scope, supporters:
Stewardship – contact details of organisation / individual agreeing to collate comments, questions and suggestions for future revision of the Interpretation:
<i>(annex should be 'flexible' fill in – with row space increasing as needed)</i>