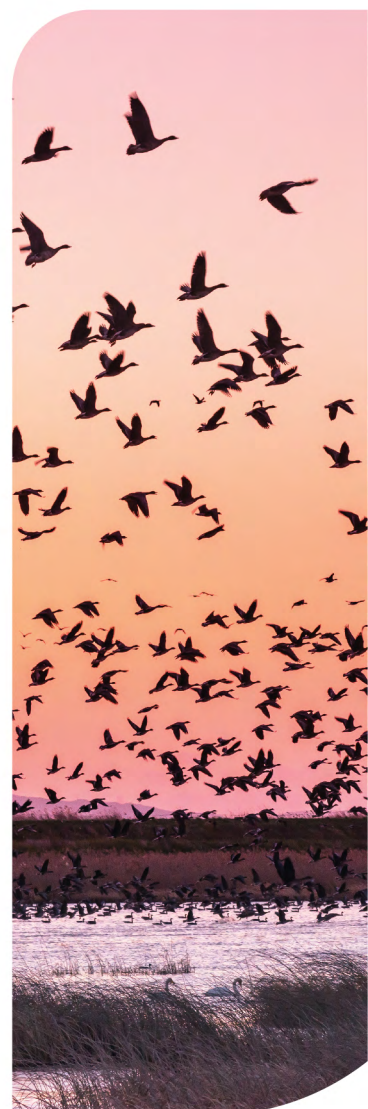


# CAPTURING LESSONS LEARNED FROM NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS

## **VOLUME 3** HOW ASSESSMENTS INFORM POLICYMAKING

JUNE 2024



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The UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) is a global centre of excellence on biodiversity, and nature's contributions to society and the economy.

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## ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

BES-Net	Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Network
BPBES	Brazilian Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CONABIO	National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (of Mexico)
CONANP	National Commission of Protected Areas (of Mexico)
COP	Conference of the Parties
DG	Directorate General
EU	European Union
IPBES	Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
NBSAP	national biodiversity strategies and action plan
NCEA	natural capital and ecosystem assessment
NEA Initiative	National Ecosystem Assessment Initiative
SANBI	South African National Biodiversity Institute
SBSTTA	Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice (of the CBD)
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SGAN	Sub-Global Assessment Network
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNEP-WCMC	United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

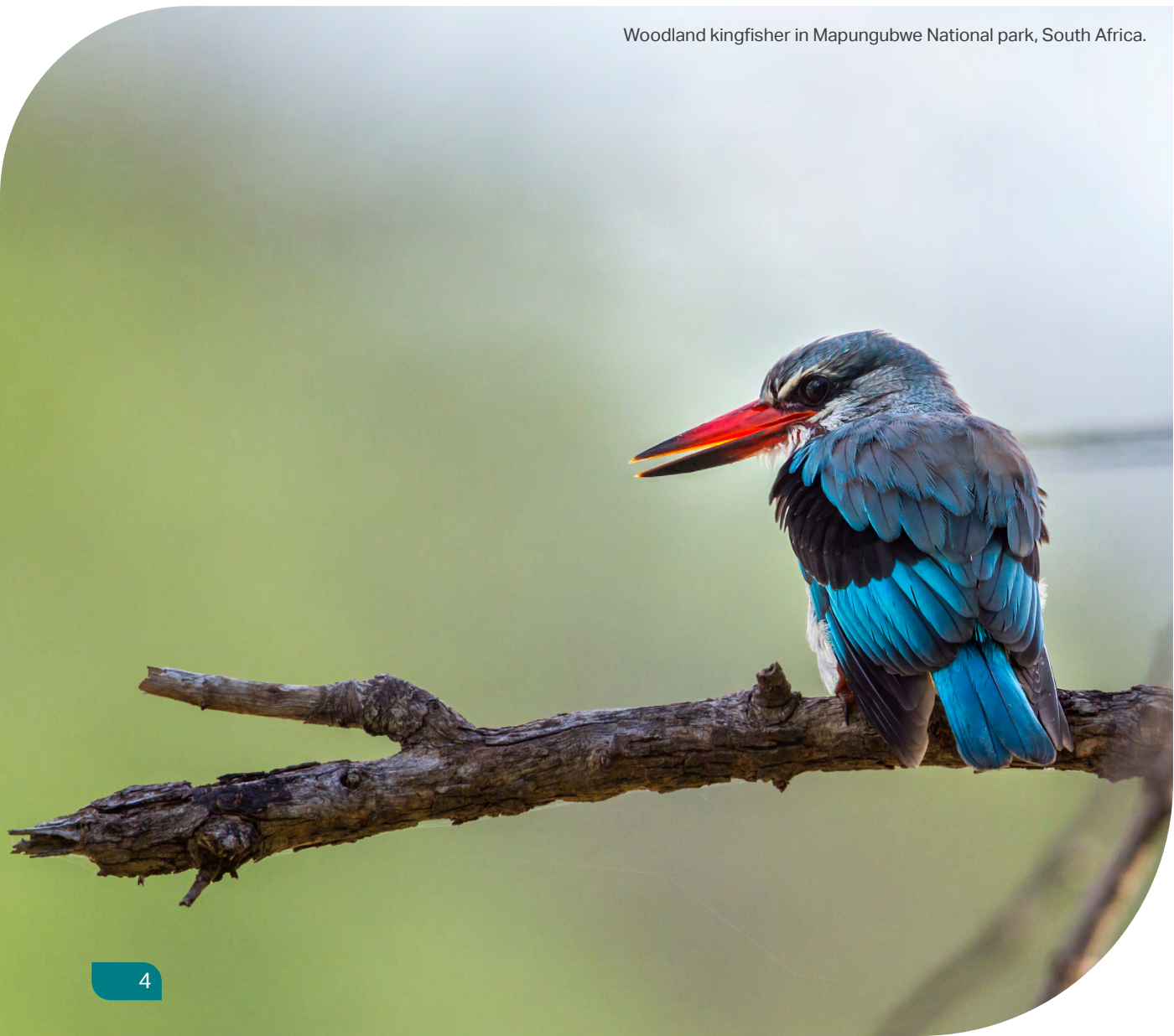


# BACKGROUND

## WHAT ARE ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS?

Ecosystem assessments provide a comprehensive, up-to-date and critical synthesis of knowledge on biodiversity and ecosystem services. They bring valuable insights into the status of biodiversity and ecosystem services, their drivers of change, and the current and future impacts of those drivers. Ecosystem assessments explore the consequences for those depending on nature and evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and responses to counteract biodiversity and ecosystem services loss. Ecosystem assessments engage a wide range of stakeholders to ensure the credibility, legitimacy and relevance of policymaking.

Woodland kingfisher in Mapungubwe National park, South Africa.





# HISTORY OF ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS

The foundation for ecosystem assessments was laid by the landmark 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which explored the interconnections between biodiversity, ecosystem services and human well-being. Initiated by the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, this global initiative laid out critical evidence for the importance of ecosystem management and policies related to it. It also engaged a broad range of stakeholders and set a precedent for subsequent assessments. Building on this legacy, the Sub-Global Assessment Network (SGAN) was created to support regional, national and local assessments.

In 2012, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) was established as an independent intergovernmental body to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services. Since its establishment, IPBES has conducted global, regional, thematic and methodological assessments while also encouraging countries to undertake their national-level assessments using the conceptual and methodological framework of the platform as a guideline.

Among many examples of IPBES products supporting the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, published in 2019, responded to a request by the Conference of the Parties (COP) to the CBD for a global assessment on the status and trends regarding biodiversity and ecosystem services and the effectiveness of interventions, including the Aichi Targets.

The IPBES assessment was key to underpin negotiations on the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework by providing ample evidence that, despite continued efforts, biodiversity and ecosystem services remain under pressure, with deterioration occurring at unprecedented rates in human history (CBD Decision 15/2).

Additionally, Annex VI to decision IPBES-8/1 highlighted that efforts to promote and support the use of IPBES assessment findings in decision-making will include contributions to policy support to capacity-building activities. These efforts will encompass support for national, subregional, or regional science-policy platforms, networks and national ecosystem assessments (IPBES-8/11).

In 2018, the CBD COP highlighted the value of national ecosystem assessments, with decision 14/1 urging Parties to consider undertaking national assessments of biodiversity and ecosystem functions to inform national actions.



# INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre (UNEP-WCMC) established the National Ecosystem Assessment Initiative (NEA Initiative) in 2017, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)'s Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Network (BES-Net) and more recently with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), as part of an innovative consortium between the three UN entities to deliver tailored guidance to support countries undertaking national ecosystem assessments.

To date, the NEA Initiative has directly supported 14 countries in conducting scoping exercises and developing full national ecosystem assessments. In 2021, Zambia and Zimbabwe conducted scoping exercises in preparation for national ecosystem assessments, while Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, and Vietnam developed their full assessments in 2021, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, and Grenada completed their assessments in 2023, and at the time of writing (2024) Botswana, Dominican Republic, Malawi, and Thailand are in the process of developing their assessments and currently under the expert evaluation stage.

Because the assessments have only been approved for a few years, it is not possible to measure their impact. Hence the NEA Initiative reached out to representatives from Brazil, the European Union, Japan, Mexico, South Africa, and the United Kingdom (which all completed their ecosystem assessments previously) for them to share their lessons learned in the use of assessment findings for policymaking. These representatives were invited to share how the findings have been utilized and strategies for maximizing their impact.

Existing lessons and experiences from countries in using the assessment findings to inform policymaking offers useful insights to other countries undertaking ecosystem assessments. This can help them to maximise the use and impact of these new NEAs.



Valle de los Cirios, Mexico.





# LESSONS LEARNED FROM NATIONAL ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS: A WORKING SERIES

Pantanal, Brazil.





In 2021, the NEA Initiative reviewed and compiled lessons that were learned from country partners' experiences of adapting the IPBES methodology to the national level. These insights were collected through hybrid workshops, interviews and a survey with eight of the NEA Initiative's country partners: Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, Ethiopia, Grenada, and Vietnam. Lessons learned are available in two thematic reports: ***Capturing Lessons Learned from National Ecosystem Assessments: Volume I – Common Elements*** and ***Capturing Lessons Learned from National Ecosystem Assessments: Volume II – Stages of the Assessment***.

**Capturing Lessons Learned from National Ecosystem Assessments: Volume I – Common Elements**

focussed on synthesising those lessons that are cross-cutting throughout the national ecosystem assessment process, such as the critical importance of aligning the assessment to national policy priorities, the value of engaging with a wide range of stakeholders and the different ways in which national ecosystem assessments have contributed to capacity development at the national level. In addition to these lessons, a resounding message that emerged from Volume I is that there is no "one-size fits all" approach to adapting the IPBES assessment methodology to the national level, but rather the IPBES assessment methodology should be tailored in a way that is most suitable and relevant for the national context, taking into account contextual factors such as national policy priorities, available knowledge, capacities and data and the need to operate within existing institutional arrangements.

**Capturing Lessons Learned from National Ecosystem Assessments Volume II – Stages of the Assessment**

focussed on synthesizing lessons that were learned from each stage of the assessment process. The lessons captured include the importance of clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the technical support unit and coordinating lead authors, systems for organising, managing, and sharing information and data, engagement methods for facilitating the participation of stakeholders and knowledge holders in the assessment, strategies and tips for maintaining the interest and commitment of authors and methods for identifying and enlisting reviewers for the draft assessment chapters.

This document, Volume III of this series, builds on the previous lessons that were learned and focuses on those learned in countries that are not directly supported by the NEA Initiative in the use of assessment findings. It addresses two key questions:

1. What enabling conditions were necessary to ensure that ecosystem assessment findings inform policymaking?
2. What outcomes and impacts have ecosystem assessments had so far on national policy?

# METHODOLOGY

The methodology used to gather lessons learned and inform the findings of this document involved a multi-step process. First, a review of the ecosystem assessments previously conducted by the participating countries (Brazil, Japan, Mexico, South Africa and the United Kingdom) and the European Union was undertaken. The review provided insights into the focus and scope of each assessment. Based on this review, targeted interview questions were developed to better understand how assessment findings were used to shape and inform policymaking in each country.

To gather detailed qualitative data, virtual interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023 with experts involved in key national and regional ecosystem assessments. These included: the [Brazilian Assessment on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services](#), the [Mapping and Assessment of Ecosystems and their Services: An EU Ecosystem Assessment](#), the [Japan Outlook Assessments \(Japan Biodiversity Outlook 1, Japan Biodiversity Outlook 2, Japan Biodiversity Outlook 3\)](#), the [Capital Natural de Mexico](#), the [South African National Spatial Assessment](#), and the [UK National Ecosystem Assessment](#). Interviews were recorded and transcribed to facilitate comprehensive analysis.

The interview data were subjected to thematic analysis to identify key lessons that emerged from the countries' experiences. This thematic approach allowed for the identification of similarities and contrasts in the way that assessment findings were utilized in national policymaking. The findings were then organized and compiled in this report to highlight both the common elements and unique aspects of the various national experiences.

The lessons presented in this volume are designed to guide and inspire other states, countries and regions to use assessment findings in policymaking.









# KEY LESSONS FROM ECOSYSTEM ASSESSMENTS: MAXIMIZING POLICY IMPACT

## 1. ENGAGING POLICYMAKERS AND STAKEHOLDERS FOR EFFECTIVE UPTAKE

***Involving decision-makers throughout the assessment process maximizes policy relevance and the usefulness of findings***

In Mexico, the government played a central role in coordinating, organizing and documenting the national ecosystem assessment, known as the “Natural Capital of Mexico.” Government officials not only supported logistical tasks, such as organizing meetings, facilitating peer reviews and coordinating the editorial process, but also actively participated as coordinators, authors and reviewers. Over 780 stakeholders were involved, including government representatives. This ensured strong buy-in and ownership of the assessment findings. This early and consistent engagement meant that government personnel were well-informed about the findings. It also resulted in their direct integration into key national policies, including the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) 2016-2030.

***Cross-sectoral collaboration enhances the relevance of ecosystem assessments to a wider range of policies***

Mexico’s assessment exemplified how involving stakeholders from various sectors, including across government agencies, NGOs, and academic institutions, can amplify the impact of assessment findings. This broad-based participation ensured that policies emerging from the assessment, such as new biodiversity conservation strategies, addressed both ecological and socio-economic needs. The result was a more holistic set of policies that considered the diverse perspectives and needs of multiple sectors. Overall, it facilitated stronger and more coherent policy outcomes.






## 2. CONTINUOUSLY IDENTIFYING POLICY-RELEVANT OPPORTUNITIES

*Ensuring assessments respond to both current and emerging policy questions maximizes their utility*

Incorporating policymakers into the process of defining key questions ensures that ecosystem assessments address relevant and timely issues. In Mexico, the findings from the ecosystem assessment directly informed the development of the NBSAP. In the UK, a more targeted approach was adopted. The assessment team dedicated significant effort to producing concise and tailored summaries specifically for policymakers. Rather than simply offering condensed versions of the full assessment, these summaries emphasized key policy-relevant findings by making complex data accessible. The use of a science writer ensured that these summaries communicated technical information clearly. It enhanced their relevance and impact on decision-making processes.



## 3. ITERATIVE ASSESSMENTS TO BUILD A STRONG EVIDENCE BASE



*Periodic and iterative ecosystem assessments build a progressively robust foundation for policymaking*

In countries such as South Africa, Japan and Brazil, ecosystem assessments are conducted iteratively, allowing for the refinement of data and the incorporation of new findings into policy. For example, Japan has undertaken three consecutive ecosystem assessments since 2010. The first, Japan Biodiversity Outlook 1, provided a comprehensive overview of biodiversity trends and identified significant knowledge gaps. It also established a baseline for monitoring progress towards the Aichi Biodiversity Targets adopted at the Tenth Conference of the Parties of the CBD. The second assessment, Japan Biodiversity Outlook 2, updated this information and assessed Japan's progress in achieving the Aichi Targets. The most recent assessment, Japan Biodiversity Outlook 3 (2021), incorporated future scenarios and trends. It also provided policymakers with forward-looking data to inform the country's alignment with the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework. This iterative approach has allowed Japan to continuously refine its policies. It also ensures that these policies remain grounded in the most up-to-date evidence and are responsive to emerging environmental challenges.



## 4. IMPROVING COORDINATION ACROSS GOVERNANCE SCALES

*Ecosystem assessments provide a common evidence base to support decision-making across governance levels*

In Mexico, the national ecosystem assessment served as the foundation for developing sub-national (state-level) assessments. This informed the creation of state biodiversity strategies and ensured coherence between local and national policies, allowing for a unified approach to biodiversity conservation. Additionally, the findings from Mexico's assessment have been used in the country's reporting under international agreements, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, where the assessment's data on genetic, species and ecosystem diversity has been instrumental in measuring national progress.

## 5. FLEXIBILITY IN RESPONSE TO CHANGING POLITICAL CONTEXTS

*Adapting strategies to changing political landscapes sustains the relevance of assessment findings*

In Brazil, the 2019 change in central government affected the uptake of ecosystem assessment findings at the national level due to shifts in policy priorities and the restructuring of relevant ministries. To address this, the assessment team refocused its efforts on engaging sub-national entities, particularly the State of São Paulo. São Paulo used the findings from the Restoration Assessment to inform state policies on pollination and sustainable land management, particularly in agriculture. The state's approach emphasized the preservation of interconnected native forests to support pollinators, prompting initiatives such as the reforestation of the Cerrado, a crucial biome for biodiversity. Though not yet legally mandated, these policies reflect São Paulo's shift toward more ecologically sustainable practices that have been influenced by the ecosystem assessment findings.





## 6. PROMOTING COHERENCE ACROSS POLICY INSTRUMENTS

### *Ecosystem assessments improve coherence between climate and biodiversity policies*

In the European Union, early discussions surrounding the EU Green Deal emphasized the importance of aligning climate and biodiversity policies. The governance of various ecosystem types, ranging from forests and wetlands to marine ecosystems, often falls under different Directorate Generals (DGs). Each DG is tasked with monitoring and managing these ecosystems based on the latest available data. However, assessing ecosystems in isolation provided limited insights, as it neglected the interactions between different types of ecosystems. To address this, the EU conducted a comprehensive ecosystem assessment, which served as the evidence base for the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 and the EU Nature Restoration Law. The assessment also helped identify suitable sites for the Trans-European Nature Network, which aims to improve nature connectivity across Europe.



## 7. ENGAGING A BROAD RANGE OF ACTORS

### *road stakeholder involvement enhances multi-dimensional biodiversity policies*

When ecosystem assessments are developed through collaboration with national public entities and stakeholders from various sectors, the likelihood of the findings influencing a wide range of policies increases. In Mexico, inter-institutional collaboration between government agencies such as the National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (CONABIO), the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (CONANP), NGOs and academic institutions enabled a more comprehensive approach to conservation planning. This collaboration helped identify gaps in Mexico's network of protected areas and guided the development of new regulations by creating a more holistic approach to biodiversity conservation that balanced ecological, economic and social needs.



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This document has explored some of the lessons learned from previous ecosystem assessments at national and regional scales. It has also highlighted some of the impacts that these assessments have had on policymaking. The document provides valuable insights on how ecosystem assessments can catalyse policy change and deliver wider impacts.

This review emphasizes that the successful integration of assessment findings into national policy hinges on several key factors: early and sustained engagement with policymakers for example through their active involvement throughout the assessment process; strategic communication of findings; and iterative assessment approaches that build upon prior work and thereby enable ongoing refinement of biodiversity-related policies.

The analysis also underscores the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration. By engaging a diverse array of stakeholders, including ministries and agencies across national and local government, NGOs, the private sector, and academic institutions, countries can ensure that assessment findings inform a broader spectrum of policies and practices. The adaptability demonstrated by Brazil, by shifting its focus from national to sub-national policymakers in response to changing political contexts, highlights the importance of flexibility in maintaining the focus of the assessment process on users and relevance.

Ecosystem assessments have also proven to be instrumental for enhancing policy coherence across different governance levels. In Mexico, the national assessment served as the foundation for sub-national strategies, ensuring alignment between local and national biodiversity policies. In the European Union, the assessments provided crucial evidence for the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030, fostering coherence between climate and biodiversity policies, and supporting initiatives such as the EU Nature Restoration Law.

In conclusion, this document demonstrates that when ecosystem assessments are fully integrated into policymaking - and when policymakers are fully integrated into the assessment process - they serve as a robust platform for informing evidence-based decision-making. By engaging a wide range of stakeholders, ensuring that assessments are adaptive and tailoring findings to address specific policy needs, countries can significantly enhance the impact of these assessments on national biodiversity, sustainability and development goals. These lessons offer a valuable insight for countries aiming to maximize the influence of their ecosystem assessments in shaping effective, long-term policy outcomes.

The following recommendations are intended to provide practical guidance for those looking to maximize the impact of their ecosystem assessments on policymaking.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Early and sustained engagement with policymakers**

Engage policymakers and decision-makers in the assessment process from the outset and maintain consistent engagement throughout. Regular consultation with policymakers from the planning stage to the conclusion will ensure that findings remain aligned with policy needs. This will result in there being stronger buy-in and better integration into national strategies and action plans.

## **Tailored communication strategies**

Develop tailored strategies that meet the needs of identified audiences, particularly policymakers. Complex scientific findings should be distilled into clear, accessible and actionable messages that decision-makers can easily understand and use. This approach should be employed both during the assessment and after its completion to maximize policy impact.

## **Cross-sectoral collaboration and policy coherence**

Foster cross-sectoral collaboration by bringing together stakeholders from across government ministries and agencies, NGOs, the private sector and academic institutions to ensure that diverse policy needs are addressed. This collaboration should be sustained across sectors (including biodiversity, climate, and economic sectors) to ensure that ecosystem considerations are fully integrated into all areas of national planning. By promoting policy coherence at both national and sub-national levels, governments can develop more comprehensive and sustainable development strategies that align biodiversity conservation with broader socio-economic goals.

## **Policy coherence across governance levels**

Align ecosystem assessments with both sub-national and international policy frameworks. By using assessment findings as a common evidence base, it can support decision-making at all governance levels. This coordination should be encouraged both during and after the assessment process to ensure that biodiversity strategies are coherent and well-integrated.

## **Adaptability to political changes**

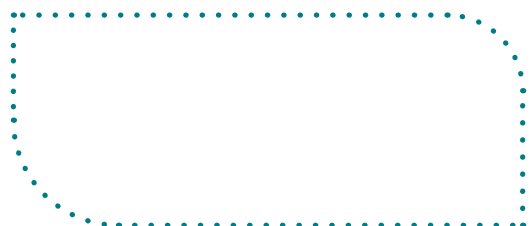
Ensure that the national ecosystem assessment findings remain relevant to current and future administrations. Engagement at sub-national or regional levels may be important in cases where national-level political support diminishes, enabling assessment findings to continue influencing policy across multiple levels of governance by maintaining their relevance and impact over time.

## **Regular and iterative assessments for long-term impact**

Commit to conducting ecosystem assessments regularly and iteratively. This allows findings to build on previous assessments, incorporate new data and respond to emerging challenges. Continuous assessments as part of long-term biodiversity monitoring ensure that policies are informed by up-to-date evidence. This process should be supported by consistent funding to maintain continuity.

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Nikko National Park, Japan.







The NEA Initiative hosted by UNEP-WCMC contributes to a world where countries are able to assess the status and drivers of change to biodiversity and are empowered to transform policies to account for people and nature. The NEA Initiative builds capacity, provides support, and fosters knowledge exchange through a highly qualified, multicultural, and interdisciplinary team of practitioners and partners. Our approach is tailored to country needs, building a community of practice across five continents.

Since 2017, the NEA Initiative has worked with 14 countries to scope or conduct their national ecosystem assessments. Our support is delivered in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) through the Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Network (BES-Net). Through this work, the NEA Initiative supports the rolling work program up to 2030 of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and the IPBES Capacity-building Rolling Plan.

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