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Message from EuroMAB 2024

Towards the World Congress of Biosphere Reserves 2025

Adopted on 7 June 2024

It is one year until the World Congress of Biosphere Reserves (WCBR) 2025 in China, which is expected to be a historic milestone for the UNESCO MAB programme. The WCBR 2025 holds the potential to serve as a pivot in keeping the World Network of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (WNBR) on good course and shaping the MAB programme's next decade for the benefit of humankind.

In order to contribute to realizing this potential of WCBR 2025, the participants of EuroMAB 2024, held from 3 to 7 June 2024 in the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Elbe River Landscape, in Lutherstadt Wittenberg, Germany, chose to focus their discussions on input from Europe / North America to WCBR 2025, its preparatory process and the outcome of the ICC session to be held in conjunction with WCBR 2025, tentatively called "post-2025 Hangzhou Strategy and Action Plan" or similar (and which will be abbreviated "post-2025 SAP" in the following).

The participants of EuroMAB 2024, including the participants of its Youth Conference, have agreed on the following consensus recommendations, which are made in their personal capacity and not as government-agreed by their respective Member States, on their expectations as regards (1) the process towards the "post-2025 SAP" and WCBR, (2) the format and structure of the "post-2025 SAP" and (3) the programmatic content of the "post-2025 SAP".

EuroMAB 2024 participants highlight the importance that they do not demand anything as regards the "Post-2025 SAP" which EuroMAB does not live up to itself.

(1) Recommendations on process towards the "post-2025 SAP" and WCBR

The participants of EuroMAB 2024 emphasize that the preparatory process towards WCBR 2025, the preparatory process for the new "Post-2025 SAP" and the WCBR 2025 itself need to ensure continued **participation, inclusivity, and transparency** in all structures and processes. This implies responsibilities of the UNESCO Secretariat, the congress' hosts and the ICC-lead preparations of the "Post-2025 SAP". Beyond the intrinsic importance of these values, safeguarding them will enhance accountability and commitment to subsequent implementation of its results.

(a) The preparatory process leading up to WCBR 2025 and the "Post-2025 SAP" should reflect the **full geographic diversity** of WNBR, akin to the congress itself. Thus, the entire network in all Member States should be afforded meaningful opportunities for participation, ensuring balanced representation by all world regions. The entire network is also called upon to use such opportunities.

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sufficient financial resources for the Biosphere Reserves. The “Post-2025 SAP” should be **engaging and inspiring**, including for young people, and provide examples of how current global and local challenges can be tackled in concrete terms. There should be a one-page summary, there should be short and accessible versions; there should also be material that explains the “Post-2025 SAP” in audiovisual formats.

(b) The “Post-2025 SAP” should be an **integrated strategic document**. It should contain typical elements of a strategy such as Vision, Mission, Objectives, Actions and Performance Indicators as well as indications for a review of its implementation. Indicators should in particular cover participation and inclusivity, e.g. there should be indicators on youth engagement. The “Post-2025 SAP” should clearly build on and reference as the key foundational document the Statutory Framework; it should also clearly specify the Process of Excellence as well as the Technical Guidelines as part of today’s agreed framework to which all existing and new Biosphere Reserves must adhere. It should emphasize that today, finally, all Biosphere Reserves are functional and are managed effectively (as evidenced by adherence to the Process of Excellence).

(c) The “Post-2025 SAP” should be **concise and precise**, combining the functions of a Strategy and of an Action Plan, while rather being shorter than the Lima Action Plan (LAP).

(d) In comparison to the LAP, the “Post-2025 SAP” should **better differentiate the proposed actions** according to bodies and target groups that are primarily responsible for these actions, in line with lessons learned from previous evaluations of the MAB programme.

(e) The “Post-2025 SAP” should create the basis for a **revised format of nominations and periodic reviews** so that they have a greater impact within the biosphere reserves and responsible governmental institutions; this format shall be in line with the recently extended tasks and responsibilities of Biosphere Reserves. It should use more integrative monitoring schemes to ensure good performance of Biosphere Reserves, providing guidance, tools, instruments and regulations regarding evidence and accountability, in order to evaluate the functionality, impact, effectiveness, and efficiency of Biosphere Reserves’ management as well as that of regional and thematic networks. It should also propose means for capacity development to implement the “Post-2025 SAP” in the Biosphere Reserves.

(3) Recommendations on the programmatic content of the “Post-2025 SAP”

The participants of EuroMAB 2024 express the following recommendations, which include recommendations based on the discussions held in individual workshops. More generally, they emphasize that the “Post-2025 SAP” should embrace the principles of participation, inclusivity and transparency, including broad and diverse participation and leadership such as that of youth, indigenous peoples and local communities, to the same extent as they are expected for WCBR and its preparatory process.

(a) The “Post-2025 SAP” should highlight the **WNBR as an instrument to address the triple planetary crisis** (climate crisis – biodiversity crisis – pollution crisis). While the role of Biosphere Reserves in the evolving individual crises needs to be emphasized as well, considering current loss

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and suffering, integrated approaches to climate change and the biodiversity crisis are certainly the main opportunities and challenges of the coming decade for Biosphere Reserves. They should and can play an important role in moving towards the sustainable use of resources and **more sustainable food systems and agricultural practices, forestry, extractive industries and fisheries**. Similarly, Biosphere Reserves are expected to develop strategies for the sustainable use and management of water resources.

(b) The “Post-2025 SAP” should highlight the importance of the WNBR as a network of **innovative test and model regions for sustainable development** with critical linkages to recent developments of **intergovernmental law, agreements and programmes on biodiversity conservation, ecosystem services and climate change**. The WNBR is the only intergovernmental network of sites covering more than 5 % of the world’s land surface. It should increase its efforts of relevant awareness raising and position itself more prominently, since it offers huge opportunities to promote the meaningful, inclusive implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the post-2030 Agenda, as well as other UN agendas/strategies.

(c) The “Post-2025 SAP” should position the WNBR as a **network of implementation areas for the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF)** covering all GBF goals and targets. The WNBR is very well placed as part of the integrative frame of the GBF, specifically as a network of sites of inclusive conservation to put GBF into localized and holistic action and thus to make GBF relevant. Because of its long-term permanence, the WNBR is suited to engage people and communities even beyond 2030, and as a framework to demonstrate that effective conservation on 30 % of the area requires sustainable development on the other 70 %. There is great potential for parts of all Biosphere Reserves’ zones to be recognized as “Other Effective Conservation Measures” (OECMs); identifying OECMs in individual Biosphere Reserves should involve MAB National Committees, Biosphere Reserves themselves, and their local communities and diverse knowledge holders, taking into account specific conditions and contexts.

(d) The “Post-2025 SAP” should encourage an active role of Biosphere Reserves in **natural hazard risk management** through support and partnership in a long-term approach. In particular this applies to freshwater-related hazards. More broadly, Biosphere Reserves are a suitable framework to address **freshwater management** in a comprehensive understanding of the value of water from upstream to downstream by securing participation of stakeholders, rights holders and communities. The “Post-2025 SAP” should encourage establishing a thematic network that will unify aquatic socio-ecosystems in dealing with common problems, coping with climate change through finding shared solutions.

(e) The “Post-2025 SAP” should support Biosphere Reserves in using and promoting **Nature-based Solutions (NbS)**, inter alia by their very own action, by promoting the understanding of NbS through positive messages and through bridging various fields of interest, and while acting as neutral mediators, motivating the reconciliation between nature and people. The IUCN global standard for NbS can be used in this regard.

(f) The “Post-2025 SAP” should support Biosphere Reserves in planning and implementing **ecological corridors** in addition to core areas, buffer zones, and transition areas, in order to maintain or restore effective ecological connectivity, reduce fragmentation and increase resilience.

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(g) The “Post-2025 SAP” should highlight the role of Biosphere Reserves in **sustainable economic development**. Biosphere Reserves should be encouraged to apply the principles of circular economy in their daily work and initiate projects closing value cycles and thus fostering sustainable economic development. Sustainable tourism should be better used as a powerful leverage for biodiversity conservation and social benefits; this requires tourism to be transformed based on knowledge generated through standardized monitoring.

(h) The “Post-2025 SAP” should promote the role of Biosphere Reserves in the development and use of **renewable energies**. In and around Biosphere Reserves, Renewables should preferably be implemented in a decentralized way, appropriate to the zonation and in scale, be well planned in cooperation with local communities and be beneficial to them and to ecosystems, while avoiding ecosystem fragmentation. Such implementation should be monitored and managed adaptively.

(i) The “Post-2025 SAP” should call for increased and continuous support to **education and scientific research** across disciplines and domains, including all ways of knowing, as an indispensable core task of Biosphere Reserves. Biosphere Reserves should develop their own research strategies as key to implement research that is valuable to them, with possible elements such as definition of the research questions, resources, relevance, collaboration processes, flexibility, sharing platforms and follow-up activities. Biosphere Reserves should enhance their commitment to using, developing, and testing technology and digital tools to assemble an open-access database of innovative solutions, to facilitate knowledge sharing, to promote education and learning, and to encourage diverse and broad participation across borders. Climate education as part of transformative Education for Sustainable Development and high-quality education in general, whether for children, young people or adults, can have an enormous societal impact using comparably small resources. Successful education methods should be shared in the WNBR to inspire replication.

(j) The “Post-2025 SAP” should highlight the role of Biosphere Reserves as **places fostering human rights, equity, democracy and positive social change**. They should and can be model regions for the meaningful participation and involvement of diverse communities (including people not of European descent), stakeholders and rights holders. They should also promote gender equity. As applicable, they should enable learning within and across the landscape, for example the exchange and mutual learning of urban and rural settings. They should also address human health and wellbeing. At the same time, they should also strengthen critical roles of communities and key stakeholders in society such as scientists, journalists, or artists. They should and can be strengthened in their potential peacekeeping and peacebuilding function, their role for the just transition, and their potential role for global justice, including environmental/climate justice, as well as addressing the consequences of historical injustice in development and nature conservation.

(k) The “Post-2025 SAP” should foster **governance approaches** in and of Biosphere Reserves that are in line with and strengthen their up-to-date conceptual understanding. This includes multi-level, whole-of-society governance as well as inspiring and ensuring bottom-up engagement. At the same time, the “Post-2025 SAP” must call for stable financial commitment of governments. Targeted **communication** is another critical component of a well-functioning Biosphere Reserve: Serious games and roleplay models can contribute to bringing opinions, perspectives, and communities closer in an

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inclusive way. The “Post-2025 SAP” should also emphasize that the **management teams** of Biosphere Reserves shall be multi-disciplinary, covering competencies in all relevant areas of biodiversity conservation, sustainability, scientific research and education.

(l) The “Post-2025 SAP” should encourage Biosphere Reserves to better highlight the significant roles that **Indigenous peoples and their knowledge systems** play for humankind and nature.

(m) The “Post-2025 SAP” should promote and support long-term, meaningful, and mutually beneficial **partnerships between youth and constituencies of the MAB Programme** at all levels, i.e. local, national, regional and international. In order to foster intergenerational justice, it should reframe youth involvement as decision-making, leadership, and diplomacy, with youth being understood as educated, competent, creative, and resilient MAB stakeholders with an impactful, innovative vision for the future. Opportunities for youth such as training, capacity development, youth-led projects and youth conferences should be ensured, just as funding concerning youth participation, research, training, and operations. Spaces should be fostered to build relationships of mutual respect between youth and non-youth by creating opportunities for reciprocal mentorship and intergenerational sharing, including of institutional knowledge, engaging youth in intergenerational dialogue based on trust, avoiding tokenism, accepting different perspectives and ways of working and entrusting decision-making to them.

(n) The “Post-2025 SAP” should be a **framework for more effective and intensive cooperation in the WNBR**. Well-functioning, **WNBR thematic networks** support cooperation both among Biosphere Reserves and between Biosphere Reserves and scientific institutions. The “Post-2025 SAP” should strengthen existing WNBR thematic networks and promote cooperation within these networks. The establishment of further thematic networks is recommended. At the same time, **bilateral and multilateral North-North, North-South and South-South Partnerships**, effectively based on equity, need to be expanded and need additional funding. A starting point of such cooperation between Biosphere Reserves can be academic exchange and youth exchange. Strengthened long-term cooperation between individual Biosphere Reserves or even their Member States as a whole will be extremely important. In this respect, EuroMAB has a special responsibility as the largest and financially strongest network within the WNBR.

(o) At the same time, the “Post-2025 SAP” should encourage the WNBR to make better use of the **UNESCO family in its full diversity** and focus more strongly on cooperation with other UNESCO networks and UNESCO designated sites. Cooperation of UNESCO designated sites as hubs for place-based sustainable development and education should be increased at international, regional, national and local levels, respecting their different roles and character. In research and education, the WNBR should establish bridges e.g. towards UNESCO Associated Schools, UNESCO’s ESD communities, UNESCO Category 2 Centres and UNESCO Chairs. It should also encourage the WNBR to better cooperate with UNESCO’s freshwater and ocean programmes, UNESCO LINKS, UN decades, and create new momentum for environmental ethics.