

Communique - the Cubango-Okavango River Basin, trajectories in biodiversity and ecosystem services

10/7/25

The aim of the workshop was to develop the world's first river basin map based on the IUCN Global Ecosystem Typology, to inform protection of the land and rivers of one of the world's last free flowing rivers, the Cubango-Okavango River Basin.

Recommendations

The workshop made the following recommendations to guide participating countries, non-government organisations to support protection of the extraordinary biodiversity and ecosystem goods and services of the Basin.

- **Creation of a new resource.** Encourage a standardised transboundary approach with use of the Global Ecosystem Typology with potential to inform management of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the Cubango-Okavango River Basin (CORB) including protected areas; wetlands listed under the Ramsar Convention; World Heritage Area and the Kavango Zambezi Trans Frontier Conservation Area (KAZA).
- **Fill information needs.**
 - Identify data gaps for targeted investment in science, research and monitoring to provide the required data, particularly river flows and climate change, informing decisions on integrated water resource management (IWRM).
 - Establish ongoing commitment to open access and available data, including data sharing protocols across the three governments and other non-government and research organisations.
- **Investment.** The work provides a useful framework for investment by government and non-government across the whole basin system, beyond parts of the system and individual species.
- **Improve reporting.** There is a need for regular public reporting on the indicators of the ecosystems across the basin, including using satellite data and available data on biodiversity and ecosystem services at basin, national and international levels.
- **Strengthen collaboration.** Whole of basin communication and collaboration is essential, among non-government, government and private organisations, working together to develop solutions as well as investments at the basin scale.
- **Enhance capacity.** There is a need to improve capacity of institutions responsible for the management of the water and related resources of the basin for sustainable management of the system.

More than 60 policy makers, land and water managers, community stakeholders and scientists from Angola, Botswana, Namibia, Australia, United States, South Africa and United Kingdom met over three days (8 -10 July 2025) to discuss current and anticipated future changes in the environment of the Cubango-Okavango River Basin (CORB). The CORB is made up of Angola in the upper and mid catchment, and Namibia in the mid catchment and Botswana in the lower catchment, including the Okavango River Delta.

The workshop was coordinated by the PLoS Alliance, the Permanent Okavango River Basin Water Commission (OKACOM) and Okavango Research Institute (ORI). The PLoS Alliance consists of Arizona State University, King's College London and University of New South Wales. Delegates focused on the ecosystems, such as the rivers and floodplains in the Okavango Delta and forests in the catchment in Angola, with their different animals, plants and other organisms. They also discussed the ecosystem services provided by the Basin, including food, water, material for building and tourism, as well as cultural and spiritual values. The delegates provided their expertise to identify different ecosystems in the Basin and indicators for monitoring this biodiversity and ecosystem services. The workshop was primarily funded by the winner of the 2015 International River Prize, the Lake Eyre Basin Alliance, represented by their delegates.

The workshop focused on applying the IUCN Global Ecosystem Typology to the CORB, the first major river basin in the world to produce a standardised and scientifically robust foundation to inform conservation and management of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, as well as human-made ecosystems. The CORB will be at the forefront in applying this new global standard to develop management strategies for ecosystems across an entire river basin. This guided the workshop in identification of indicators, threats and ecosystem services for the different types of ecosystems. Governance needs to focus on transboundary ecosystem management and threat mitigation, better connecting local communities to decision makers within countries and across the basin.

Next steps

Key outputs from the workshop to be realised in coming months include:

- The first standardised map of terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems across the CORB, identifying gaps in data and information and utilising available maps and the expert knowledge of the delegates.
- Reports for each of the ecosystems in the basin will detail the supporting ecosystem processes, including the relevant biological, climate, flow and fire indicators, the ecosystem services, threats, potential management solutions and data gaps, as well as providing photographs to illustrate key features of the ecosystems.
- A scientific paper will develop and share the learnings.