



SHORT COMMUNICATION

REMARKS ON THE VENEZUELAN PROTECTED AREAS SYSTEM AS LISTED ON THE WORLD DATABASE ON PROTECTED AREAS AND CBD AICHI TARGET 11

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ABSTRACT

The territorial zoning system of Venezuela is based on a diverse set of categories called “Areas under Special Administration Regime” (ABRAE), which include protected areas. We discuss first how the Venezuelan government has requested to add a group of ABRAE as protected areas to the World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA), even though the main objectives of Venezuelan ABRAE are not aimed at protecting biodiversity. Second, we identify the weaknesses of the Venezuelan state in fulfilling the function of protecting biodiversity in territorial spaces as envisaged in the Convention on Biological Diversity, and particularly in Aichi target 11. Finally, we address the scant attention of the government of Venezuela to issues related to the governance of protected and conserved areas, and we specifically address Key Biodiversity Areas, and Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures .

Key words: Venezuela, protected area system, WDPA, Aichi Target 11

PROTECTED AREAS CATEGORIES IN VENEZUELA

Since 1983, Venezuela has administered a complex system of areas for land use called Areas under Special Administration Regime (Spanish acronym ABRAE), which establishes guidelines for territorial spaces with different biophysical, environmental and socioeconomic characteristics. It is a system designed for the use, development and conservation of natural, historical and cultural resources, as well as for the protection of infrastructure and country borders, and for the productive development of rural areas and tourism. The ABRAE includes 25 categories. However, most ABRAE are not related to the protection of biodiversity or do not constitute protected areas according to the IUCN definition. For example, the ABRAE list includes Biosphere Reserves (oriented towards conservation and

sustainable development), partially covered by national parks and natural monuments, which are protected areas. However, this is not the case for the so-called Critical Areas with Priority of Treatment that, in general, are of poor conservation value due to agricultural, livestock, agro-industrial, recreational, tourism, mining, urban and forestry activities. Another example of misclassification are the protective zones where industrial, mining and residential development are allowed, including the extraction of hydrocarbons. Most of the forest reserves included in the ABRAE are characterised by management practices that have fragmented forests and damaged ecosystems, while the areas declared as National Hydrological Reserves have lost almost all their forest cover, due to the intense exploitation to which they have been subjected (see

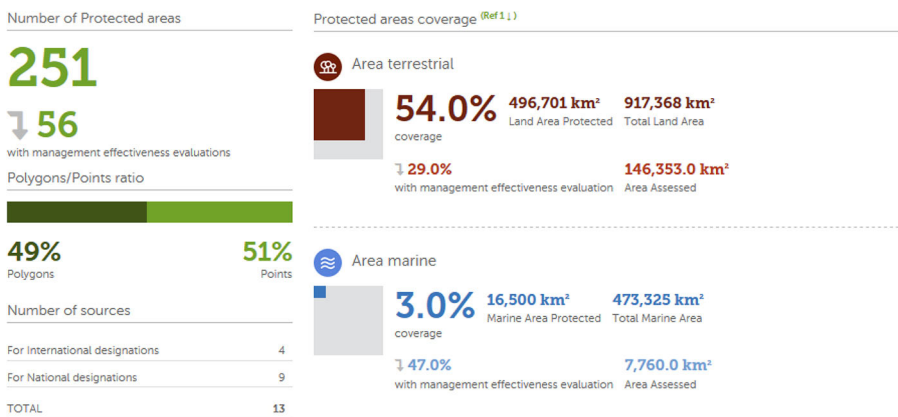
García Peña & Silva Viera, 2014, for a complete list of the ABRAE with their definitions).

A conceptual comparison between the categories of ABRAE and the definition of protected areas by IUCN reveals the contradictions mentioned above. The inconsistency of classifying some ABRAE as protected areas, despite not fulfilling any of the functions defined by IUCN, has not only been maintained but even increased with the addition of two more categories not legally considered as ABRAE: coastal parks and wooded lots (Hernández, 2007). This situation regarding the reporting of the System of Protected Areas of Venezuela has prevailed for more than three decades, and constitutes the government's official vision that is publicly reflected in the profile of protected areas of Venezuela in the WDPA. However, the Fourth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity (Venezuela, 2011), published in advance of the National Strategy for Biodiversity (ENB), conveys the idea that all ABRAE are protected areas, also promoting the creation of other categories (not yet declared) of protected areas, such as Special Aquatic Habitats for Exploitation or Intensive Use, and Public Works

Protection Areas. In this way, the Fifth National Report to the Convention on Biological Diversity (Venezuela, 2015) indicates that almost 50% of the national territory is included under protected natural areas. In fact, the current profile of protected areas of Venezuela shown by Protected Planet (WDPA) indicates a territorial coverage of marine and terrestrial protected areas that total 54 per cent (Figure 1). However, we estimate that this extension to the protected areas, for the same date of data download corresponds in reality to 23.27 per cent (Figure 2). It should be noted that the area of El Caura National Park, recently declared (2017), is not included here, since this new protected area has not been added to the WDPA list to date.

WDPA is the digital platform for global information on terrestrial and marine protected areas and is the product of an initiative called Protected Planet that results from a collaboration between UNEP, the World Conservation Monitoring Centre (WCMC) and IUCN: it constitutes the official global source on protected areas. The information compiled in the WDPA measures the progress of countries towards the achievement of Aichi Target 11 and, therefore, constitutes a means to evaluate





National designations		Regional designations		International designations	
16		0		3	
Categories	Count	Categories	Count	Categories	Count
National Park	46			UNESCO-MAB Biosphere Reserve	2
Forest Reserve	10			World Heritage Site (natural or mixed)	1
Natural Monument	34			Ramsar Site, Wetland of International Importance	5
Wildlife Refuge	6				
Wildlife Reserve	5				
Biosphere Reserve	2				
Protective Zone	54				
Other Area	7				
Forest Plot	8				
Hydrological Reserve	10				
Federal Dependency	1				
Critical Priority Area	7				

IUCN Management categories			Governance types			
Management categories	Count	%	Name	Governance type	Count	%
II	43	17.13	Not Reported		251	100.0
III	33	13.15				
IV	8	3.19				
V	54	21.51				
VI	49	19.52				
Not Reported	61	24.3				
Not Applicable	3	1.2				

Figure 1. Venezuelan protected areas coverage Source: WDPA 18th April, 2019

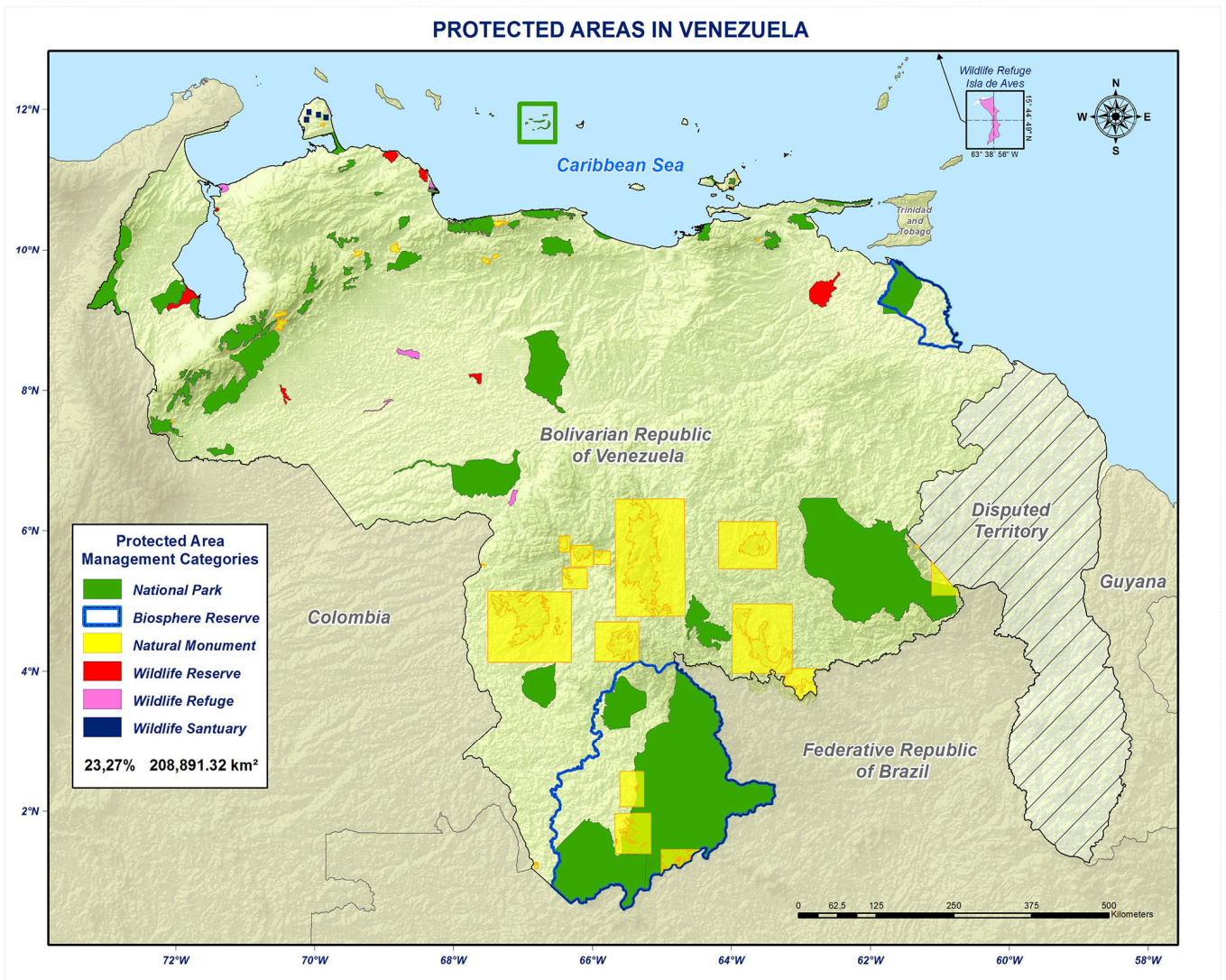


Figure 2. Protected areas of Venezuela, 2014 (source: Eduardo Gómez Villegas)

the implementation of the commitments of the countries to the CBD; it is used to calculate indicators related to international processes (UNEP-WCMC, 2017), but it does not always consider the management status of the protected areas included in this database. Governments are responsible for reporting relevant information to be included in the WDPA (Lopoukhine & Ferreira de Sousa Diaz, 2012). It should be recalled that Aichi Target 11 recommends that “By 2020, at least 17 per cent of terrestrial and inland water areas and 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas, especially areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem services, are conserved through effectively and equitably managed, ecologically representative and well-connected systems of protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures, and integrated into the wider landscape and seascape” (CBD, 2011).

Governance of protected areas, Other Effective Conservation Measures and Key Biodiversity Areas in Venezuela

Both IUCN and the CBD Secretariat recognise that biodiversity conservation is not and should not be limited to protected areas, because much biodiversity remains outside these areas (Lopoukhine & Ferreira de Sousa Diaz, 2012). According to Aichi 11 there is the possibility of also recognising “Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures” (OECMs). However, the definition of OECM has been ambiguous and subject to interpretation (Butchard et al., 2016)¹. Such ambiguity makes it difficult to interpret which areas in Venezuela could achieve the status of OECMs. There are local examples and initiatives that could be considered as OECMs. These seek to conserve natural spaces under governance models of specific areas, where measures have been taken to protect species and (or) ecosystems

through the management of areas and territories, managed by local communities in collaboration with NGOs, foundations and universities. As an example, land managed by indigenous peoples has been reported in the state of Amazonas (Gorzula, 1993). Another more recent local example includes a conservation area on Isla Margarita, established for the protection of endemic psittacine species (<https://www.worldlandtrust.org/what-we-do/where-we-work/venezuela>). There are other initiatives of private and community protected areas for the protection of species and ecosystems. However, in the Venezuelan case, the WDPA only includes those areas administered by the State, without considering community and privately managed areas.

Another concept of interest are Key Areas for Biodiversity (KBA), promoted by IUCN since 2004 (IUCN World Congress, Bangkok) in order to establish criteria to identify and highlight areas of high importance that contribute to the global protection of biodiversity. The identification of a site as a KBA is based on criteria and thresholds that are independent of the legal status of the protected area, so that each site must be evaluated according to relevant pre-established criteria, in the case that there is available data, for example based on the proportion of the global population of a species that faces a high risk of extinction, or of ecosystems or species threatened or geographically restricted or with high risks of extinction (IUCN, 2016). In Venezuela, this practice has not been applied, and the relevant information is yet to be published: knowledge about KBAs and the associated methodology is limited to a small circle of experts.

Recommendations

Our analysis indicates that the WDPA, on the basis of information generated by the government of Venezuela, includes management categories that do not meet the definitions established by IUCN and the CBD. Furthermore, Protected Planet seeks national data on protected areas that are compiled in collaboration with a wide variety of local and national governmental and non-governmental organisations; but in the case of Venezuela, this information was collected and provided exclusively by the Venezuelan government.

To avoid misreporting protected areas, we recommend that the responsible national authorities link the categories of protected areas with the concepts applied by the CBD and IUCN. Other management categories that do not agree with those of IUCN should not be included. On the other hand, it is necessary to report other private, community and indigenous OECMs. When the information reported to Protected Planet

excludes conservation areas managed by communities or private organisations, important information on the real landscape of biodiversity management at the national level is lost. Therefore, it is essential to find ways to verify, rectify and complement the information provided to the WDPA. The situation in Venezuela may reflect similar cases of other countries with deficient information.

We have also detected a gap in documenting the representativeness of biodiversity in the national system of protected areas, characterised and hierarchised according to ecoregions, understood as biodiversity units at the regional (or continental) scale, and in the case of Venezuela at the national level. In this sense, in addition to the map of bioregions prepared by the government, a map of ecoregions conceptualised and validated by the national scientific community is required, in such a way that it offers a panorama adjusted to the reality of the distribution of landscapes, ecosystems and species.

Finally, it is important that the Venezuelan State make efforts to apply important concepts for the conservation of biodiversity, including OECMs, KBAs and governance schemes in protected areas.

ENDNOTES

¹ Guidance on the definition and recognition of OECMs was recently adopted by the Convention on Biological Diversity in CBD decision 14/8 on “protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures”, adopted by 196 Parties at the 14th Conference of the Parties (November 2018). Guidelines to support identification of OECMs will be published by IUCN during 2019.

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RESUMEN

El sistema de ordenamiento territorial de Venezuela se fundamenta en un conjunto diverso de categorías denominadas Áreas Bajo Régimen de Administración Especial (ABRAE), entre las que se incluyen las áreas protegidas. En primer lugar discutimos el cómo el gobierno venezolano ha solicitado agregar un grupo de ABRAE como áreas protegidas en el World Database on Protected Areas (WDPA), a pesar de que los objetivos principales de las ABRAE venezolanas no están dirigidos a proteger la biodiversidad. En segundo lugar planteamos debilidades del estado venezolano para cumplir con la función de los espacios territoriales para la protección de la biodiversidad, vinculados con el Convenio sobre la Diversidad Biológica (CDB), particularmente con la Meta 11 de Aichi. Por último, abordamos la escasa atención que el gobierno de Venezuela le presta a temas relacionados con la gobernanza en áreas protegidas, específicamente con las Áreas Clave para la Biodiversidad, y con las Otras Medidas Eficaces de Conservación Basadas en Áreas.

RÉSUMÉ

Le système de zonage territorial du Venezuela repose sur un ensemble varié de catégories appelées Zones Sous Régime d'Administration Spéciale, qui comprennent des aires protégées. Nous discutons d'abord de la manière dont le gouvernement vénézuélien a demandé d'inclure un groupe de ces zones en tant qu'aires protégées dans la base de données mondiale sur les aires protégées, alors même que les objectifs principaux de ces zones au Venezuela ne visent pas à protéger la biodiversité. Deuxièmement, nous identifions les faiblesses de l'État vénézuélien dans l'accomplissement de la fonction de protection de la biodiversité dans les espaces territoriaux telle qu'envisagée dans la Convention sur la Diversité Biologique, notamment en ce qui concerne l'Objectif 11 d'Aichi. Enfin, nous abordons le peu d'attention que le gouvernement du Venezuela accorde aux questions liées à la gouvernance dans les aires protégées et conservées, et nous traitons en particulier les zones d'importance biologique et d'autres zones clés pour la biodiversité.