



# Forest fact

Photographer: Marine Elbakidze

## Biodiversity conservation through forest certification

Key factors shaping national Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standard-development processes in Canada, Sweden, and Russia

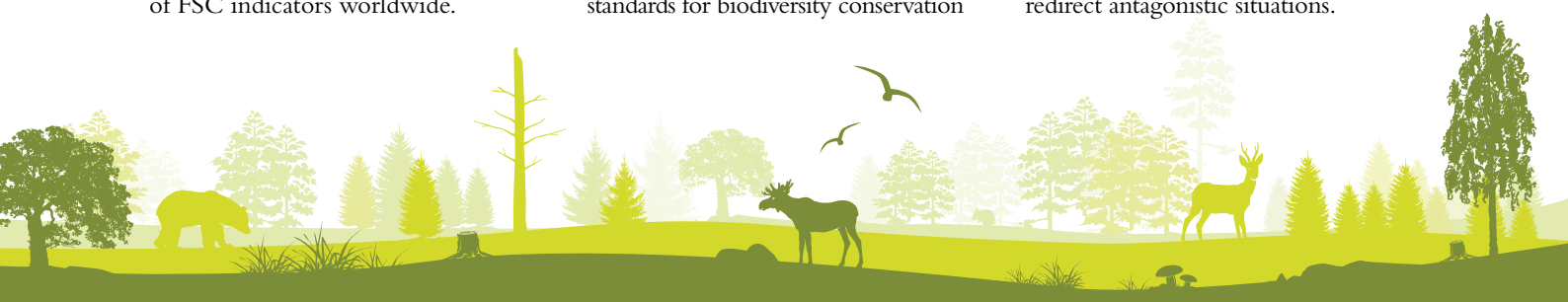
**Marine Elbakidze, Lucas Dawson, Constance L. McDermott, Sara Teitelbaum and Maria Tysiachniouk**

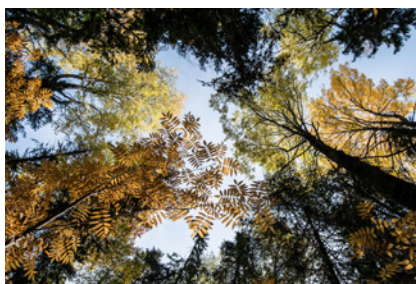
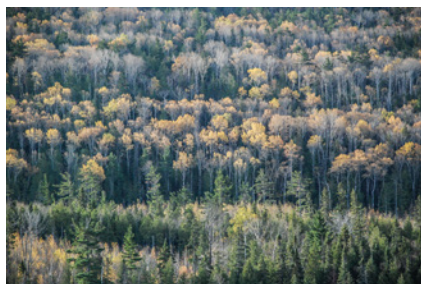
Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standards for responsible forest management are operationalized through national indicators. However, developing national indicators has often proved challenging and controversial, and has raised concerns about differences in FSC requirements among countries. In response, FSC-International has recently introduced International Generic Indicators (IGIs) as a means to improve the quality and consistency of FSC indicators worldwide.

We studied recent efforts in Canada, Sweden, and Russia to revise national level FSC standards in line with biodiversity-related IGIs. We applied the Institutional Development and Analysis framework within a complex systems approach to identify multiple interconnected factors that shaped standard-development processes and outcomes in each country.

Our findings indicate that efforts to enhance consistency in forest certification standards for biodiversity conservation

require better understanding of both external factors and internal group dynamics. In particular, the study shows that different ways of conducting the national standard-setting processes themselves can influence how easy it is for different stakeholders to reach agreement and how satisfied they are with outcomes. The results highlight the importance of developing effective process-focused instruments to support constructive interactions between chambers and to defuse or redirect antagonistic situations.





Intact forest landscapes (left), species diversity (center) and dead wood (right) are among discussed issues during standard-setting processes across three countries. Photographer: Marine Elbakidze.

Transnational private sustainability initiatives, such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), aim to address key global challenges such as biodiversity loss, through the establishment and enforcement of international environmental and social standards. This study examined the FSC's standard-setting process to understand how such initiatives balance international demands for consistent environmental and social performance across countries with national demands for standards adapted to local context.

In 2015, the FSC produced a set of international generic indicators (IGIs) to improve the consistency and quality of national FSC standards around the globe and thereby strengthen the credibility of the FSC system. IGIs have been used as a starting point for updating and harmonizing existing national standards in many countries

Our ambition was to understand the revision of FSC national standards according to the biodiversity-related IGIs has impacted national standards, and the resulting levels of satisfaction. We applied the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework to identify and compare multiple factors of recent national FSC standard-setting processes regarding biodiversity indicators in Canada, Sweden, and Russia. To better understand the various causal mechanisms underlying dynamics within and among factors, we integrated the IAD framework with a complex systems approach. The research was based on interviews with stakeholders, as well as comparative analyses of the new standards in each country and of reports regarding the process of developing them.

Our research demonstrates that FSC's international biodiversity-related IGIs have been integrated in different ways in the new national standards, and have resulted in differing levels of stakeholder satisfaction. We identified multiple key internal and external factors that influenced the standard-setting processes across the three countries and shaped their different outcomes ("Table 1.").

#### Key internal factors

##### Level of clarity and ambiguity of biodiversity-related indicators and concepts

Our findings show that the meanings of some IGIs have been changed due to political and social contexts whilst developing the national standards. New biodiversity-related indicators and concepts (e.g., Woodland Key Habitats, Intact Cultural Landscapes) that are only relevant for specific national contexts have been introduced instead. Novel or ambiguous concepts in the IGIs often led to disagreements between stakeholders during the standard development process. Our results show the importance of clearly defined biodiversity-related indicators to avoid unnecessary conflicts regarding their interpretation, leading to negotiation fatigue and other undesirable outcomes. The availability of reliable country-level data and knowledge was also important.

##### Availability of adequate, and widely accepted, scientific information and knowledge

In our cases, the availability and accessibility of reliable and widely accepted data and knowledge was shown to reduce confrontation between stakeholders and increase

willingness to compromise, especially if proposed actions were perceived to increase management costs. When participants were faced with incomplete or insufficient information to resolve a contested issue, negotiation processes failed or were postponed.

##### Perceived stakeholder control over outcomes

Our study shows that stakeholders often perceive each other as attempting to control standard development negotiations even when predefined rules concerning the balance of power exist. Such perceptions strongly influence the negotiation process. It is therefore crucial to manage the different perceptions that chambers develop regarding each other's motivations and respective commitment to achieving mutually acceptable negotiated outcomes. This implies the importance of careful design and management of the negotiation process that acknowledges the influence of the wider context and seeks novel ways to establish common ground and a united purpose for negotiators.

##### Consensus seeking practices

Our study identified that FSC standard-setting processes were prone to "negotiation fatigue." In order to reach agreement, it was important to develop practices to encourage and support dialogue and seek consensus during negotiations. Such practices shaped interactions between negotiation participants and thereby directly and indirectly influenced negotiation processes and outcomes. Important practices included creating space for discussions, improvements in the transparency, efficiency and accountability of the FSC-certification process,

and building consensus around contested issues. These “consensus seeking” practices included efforts made by chambers to allow for a more flexible interpretation of biodiversity-related IGIs in national FSC standards. In this respect, it was crucial to assure stakeholders that biodiversity values were still strongly protected, but with enough flexibility to gain widespread stakeholder support and accommodate contextual differences.

### Key external factors

Several key factors were related to the increasingly polarized societal context surrounding forest management. Heated debates erupted among stakeholders regarding if, and to what extent, FSC certification contributes to biodiversity conservation in production forests. These debates reduced the overall willingness to find acceptable compromises on

biodiversity issues during the standard development processes. The legal context relating to biodiversity conservation was another key external factor. In some cases, the laws in the studied countries provided a lot of space for interpretation regarding the responsibilities of forest companies concerning biodiversity conservation and/or failed to provide necessary clarity for IGIs to be operationalized in alignment with current legislation.

### Conclusions

Efforts to improve the performance of forest certification for biodiversity conservation need to be considered in light of the complex nature of negotiation processes. However, there is limited insight into the factors shaping these negotiation processes and their outcomes. Negotiation outcomes result from interactions between multiple internal and external

factors. These concern stakeholders with various behaviors, norms, views, and agendas, and mirror national and regional contexts. The results highlight the importance of developing effective process-focused instruments to support constructive interactions between chambers and to defuse or redirect antagonistic situations. Finally, we argue that increased societal commitment to biodiversity conservation would help to increase forest certification performance. This implies a need for diverse strategies to make the ideas underpinning the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity more mainstream amongst in core economic sectors and in society in general.

**Table 1. Key external and internal factors, which triggered the core dynamics of standard-development processes in Canada (A), Sweden (B), and Russia (C).**

#### A. Canada

Internal factors	
Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operational drafting of standard undertaken by staff and consultants, with input from technical experts.</li> <li>Ability of chambers to find consensus around contested issues without resorting to partisan positions.</li> <li>Efforts of SDG to increase flexibility/minimize prescriptiveness.</li> <li>FSC-Canada's development of innovative procedures for standard negotiations.</li> <li>Adequacy and timeliness of stakeholder outreach efforts.</li> </ul>
Biodiversity-related indicators and concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ICL concept under development.</li> <li>FSC-Canada adopts a consensus-based, holistic landscape approach to development of biodiversity targets.</li> <li>Perceived flexibility of forest management under new standard.</li> <li>Development of indicators to integrate IFL concept with the concept of ICL Development of three main management options for caribou.</li> </ul>
Level of control over outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conflict between FSC-Canada and FSC-International.</li> <li>FSC International's desire to strengthen regional/international consistency of FSC standards.</li> </ul>
Available scientific information and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Availability, accessibility and adequacy of relevant scientific, cultural and technical expertise and data.</li> </ul>

#### B. Sweden

External factors	
Forest governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Criticism from environmental NGOs regarding the implementation of FSC standards.</li> <li>Polarization of "forestry" debate.</li> </ul>
Legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Space for interpretation regarding responsibilities of forest companies.</li> <li>Clarification and operationalization of WKH concept.</li> </ul>

### Internal factors

Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Criticism from environmental NGOs regarding the implementation of FSC standards.</li> <li>▪ Polarization of "forestry" debate.</li> </ul>
Biodiversity-related indicators and concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Inclusion of WKH concept in the national FSC standard.</li> </ul>
Level of control over outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Desire of environmental chamber to control biodiversity outcomes.</li> <li>▪ Prescriptiveness of FSC standards.</li> </ul>
Available scientific information and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Knowledge gaps regarding new biodiversity indicators (e.g, WKH).</li> </ul>

### C. Russia

#### External factors

Forest governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Perception by state officials that FSC-certification is a "foreign" phenomenon</li> <li>▪ Long-running debate/conflict between forestry industry and environmental NGOs.</li> </ul>
Legislation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Pressure on environmental chamber to ensure conservation of biodiversity (incl. IFLs) .</li> <li>▪ Institutional instability (incl. Government forest regulations).</li> </ul>

#### Internal factors

Practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Efforts by environmental chamber to clarify new terms and relate them to legislation.</li> <li>▪ Efforts to improve transparency, efficiency, and accountability of the FSC-certification process.</li> <li>▪ Engagement of environmental NGOs in the standard development process.</li> </ul>
Biodiversity-related indicators and concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Clear, unambiguous terminology/ descriptions regarding IGLs and newly-introduced concepts.</li> </ul>
Level of control over outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ FSC efforts to protect and maintain biodiversity (incl. IFLs &amp; key biotopes).</li> </ul>
Available scientific information and knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Adequacy, availability and accessibility of relevant scientific data, methodologies and knowledge.</li> </ul>

### Key words

International Generic Indicators; FSC-standard; harmonization; societal context; debate.

#### >> Read more

**Elbakidze, M., L. Dawson, C. L. McDermott, S. Teitelbaum, and M. Tysiachniouk. 2022.** Biodiversity conservation through forest certification: key factors shaping national Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) standard-development processes in Canada, Sweden, and Russia. *Ecology and Society* 27(1):9.

#### Authors

##### Marine Elbakidze

Associate Professor, Faculty of Forest Sciences, SLU, Sweden.  
[marine.elbakidze@slu.se](mailto:marine.elbakidze@slu.se)

##### Lucas Dawson

Researcher, Faculty of Forest Sciences, SLU, Sweden.  
[lucas.dawson@slu.se](mailto:lucas.dawson@slu.se)

##### Constance L McDermott

Associate Professor, University of Oxford, UK.  
[constance.mcdermott@ouce.ox.ac.uk](mailto:constance.mcdermott@ouce.ox.ac.uk)

##### Sara Teitelbaum

Associate Professor, Sociology Department, University of Montreal, Canada.  
[sara.teitelbaum@umontreal.ca](mailto:sara.teitelbaum@umontreal.ca)

##### Maria Tysiachniouk

Researcher, University of Eastern Finland, Faculty of Geography and Historical Sciences.  
[tysiachn@yandex.ru](mailto:tysiachn@yandex.ru)



#### Forest fact

ISSN: 1400-7789. **Production:** Advant. **Editor:** Annika Mossing. Sciences 2022. **Publisher:** Göran Ericsson. **Illustrator:** Fredrik Saarkoppel, Kobolt Media AB.

