

**REPORT ON THE E-BIOSPHERE CONFERENCE**  
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**Introduction**

Expectations were high at the start of the e-Biosphere Conference for both the organizers and attendants as they gathered at the Queen Elizabeth II Conference Centre. The Steering Committee responsible for organizing the Conference comprised 15 internationally renowned information networks and biodiversity organizations, including BioNET International and the Inter-American Biodiversity Information Network (IABIN) which are active in the Caribbean region. My attendance at the conference was made possible through funding provided by IABIN/Organization of American States (OAS). While the organizers named in the Conference Programme were from Europe, North America and Australia, other conference delegates not only came from these continents but also from Africa, Asia, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Pacific and Indonesian islands.

The delegates at this three-day conference were challenged with three goals:

- 1) A higher level of shared understanding of Biodiversity Informatics - what it is, what it can contribute and the limits of its current capabilities.
- 2) Exploring the unmet needs of Biodiversity Informatics users, along with the untapped potential for new sources of content and new levels of data integration.
- 3) Recognizing priorities and providing guidance for research and development in Biodiversity Informatics for the coming 5 - 10 years.

The strategies and tools used to meet these goals included in direct talks; an on-site exhibition called the "Street Fair" which had computer demonstrations, exhibits and poster displays; dialogue through an online conference community and break-out groups as well as sessions for open discussion following Power Point presentations.

**Conference Proceedings**

The conference participants had mixed fortunes in meeting that the aforementioned goals. The first goal was only partially met as the wide range of interest groups represented at the conference tended to have different perceptions of Biodiversity Informatics and no single shared concept of biodiversity Informatics had emerged by the end of the conference. Instead, understanding of biodiversity Informatics ranged from systems of biodiversity information management using technological tools to application of technological tools for the distribution of biodiversity information. The "Street Fair" and the conference presentations were of high quality and were very beneficial in educating persons about 1) the scope of Biodiversity Informatics, 2) data and information sharing standards and interoperability, and 3) specific systems and tools that are available. Another plus was the opportunity to meet persons knowledgeable about information systems and tools. However, a major limitation of the presentations and exhibits is that they were primarily focused on increasing online access to biodiversity data and information. In my opinion there was a lack of content on the use of Biodiversity Informatics for improved data and information management by conservation practitioners for offline databases.

With regards to user needs, the most prominent voices coming from the presenters and the audience were those of an academic research community and facilitators of standardized online access to biodiversity information. The importance of Biodiversity Informatics to taxonomists and was repeatedly mentioned but from a rather biased point of view. There was the apparent assumption that taxonomists were generally from tertiary education institutions or museums that were more oriented to sharing information through scientific publications and resistant to other forms of information sharing. However, such an assumption did not account for taxonomists in conservation organizations and some museums who otherwise provide information to conservation policy-makers and practitioners. A minority of the presenters as well as audience participants also indicated the need for biodiversity informatics support for ecologists in the organization of and online accessibility to field observation data collected by both scientists and civil society.

The conference also attempted to address developed and developing countries user needs. However, there was only one presentation dealing with the need to bridge the digital divide between the developed and the developing world. One of the important points in this presentation was the need to empower the developing countries to actively participate and utilize Biodiversity Informatics. Had this insight been explored further during the conference, perhaps the developing countries present would have been far more engaged in identifying priorities and providing guidance for future research and development.

Reports from breakout discussion groups on topics covering biodiversity and related research, public education, developing world and sustainable development, standards development and management, and training of biodiversity informatics provided priorities and preliminary guidance for the future of Biodiversity Informatics. I participated in the training biodiversity Informatics this discussion group. Some key points from this discussion were the need to:

- 1) Develop training programmes at both conservation practitioners and academic levels
- 2) Explore if Biodiversity Informatics could be sustained as a career option or should concentrate on additional training for already employed biologists and information technologists.

In a panel discussion on users' perspectives, constructive criticisms from the audience included observation that the range of users and their needs had not been adequately explored. It was felt that there was a need for greater clarity on the ultimate destination of Biodiversity Informatics. It was also noted that the Convention on Biological Diversity had tried to provide some direction with its promotion of reduction to biodiversity loss by the year 2010.

### **Benefits of the Conference**

The concept of the e-Biosphere Conference 2009 is commendable. It brought together the international stakeholders in Biodiversity Informatics and provided a rare educational opportunity about the progress, strength and weaknesses of this relatively new subject. Biodiversity Informatics is indeed of relevance to Caribbean countries like Jamaica that since ratifying to the Convention on biological diversity have been involved in the creation of electronic databases to manage its biodiversity data and information. Lessons learnt from the conference include the need to be clear of whose or what purpose is being met by the adoption of any Biodiversity Informatics tool, the global emphasis on interoperability of the different tools, and the demands of Biodiversity Informatics systems which require long-term investment funding human and technical resources.