Potential of community forestry as OECMs in Asia

RECOFTC

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1. What are OECMs

Other Effective Area Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) started emerging as a topic of global discussions in the early 2010s. By 2018, the OECM concept was formally adopted through Decision 14/8 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD). The CBD defines OECMS as a "geographically defined area other than a Protected Area, which is governed and managed in ways that achieve positive and sustained long-term outcomes for the in-situ conservation of biodiversity, with associated ecosystem functions and services and where applicable, cultural, spiritual, socio–economic, and other locally relevant values".

OECMs have gained significant importance under the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, which commits countries to conserve 30 percent of terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine areas by 2030, including through approaches such as OECMs. As such, the OECM concept is in the early stages of national adoption and implementation. Their adoption could offer an opportunity to achieve large-scale area-based conservation targets and reduce biodiversity loss.

OECMs and Protected Areas (PAs) are distinct entities. Conservation is a primary objective of PAs, whereas with OECMs, conservation is not necessarily a primary objective, but rather an outcome. This difference allows OECMs to function as an important tool for countries to recognize and support areas of high biodiversity importance that exist outside formal PA systems. OECMs can facilitate conservation under various land management systems, including community forestry, which is the focus of this brief.

Below are the eight criteria developed by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) to assess whether a site has potential for consideration as an OECM.

Table 1. OECM criteria from the new IUCN site-level identification tool (Jonas et al., 2023)

Screening assessment	1. The site is not a PA
	2. There is a reasonable likelihood that the site supports important biodiversity values
Full assessment	3. The site is a geographically defined area
	4. The site is confirmed to support important biodiversity values
	5. Institutions or mechanisms exist to govern and manage the site
	6. Governance and management of the site achieve or are expected to achieve the in situ conservation of important biodiversity values
	7. In situ conservation of important biodiversity values is expected to be for the long term
	8. Governance and management arrangements address equity considerations

2. Defining community forestry in Asia

Community forestry is a broad term encompassing approaches that empower local communities to manage, protect and benefit from local forests that they may have relied upon for generations. Across Asia, these approaches are known by various names, including social forestry, village forestry, participatory forestry, community-based forest management and people-centred forestry. The extent to which these approaches grant communities the right to use and benefit from forest resources varies, based on formal and customary laws.

Figure 1. Map showing PAs, Key Biodiversity Areas (KBAs) and community forestry areas in the Greater Mekong sub-region. It shows partial community forest data, highlighting areas where data are mostly complete. The intersection of community forest areas within KBAs and outside of PAs often satisfy criteria for OECMs. This highlights the role these community-managed areas play in conservation. However, the illustration here represents only some of the considerations that will be necessary to identify candidate areas for OECMs. Ultimately, countries will need to engage in robust consultation processes as well as cross reference diverse datasets as they seek to identify areas that satisfy OECM establishment criteria.

Illustrative overlap between Community Forests and Key Biodiversity Areas in Cambodia and Thailand

Data Sources:
UNEP-WCMC and IUCN (2024), WDPA, August 2024
BirdLife International (2024), KBA Database, June 2024
Royal Forest Department (2023), Thailand
Forest Administration of Cambodia (2016)
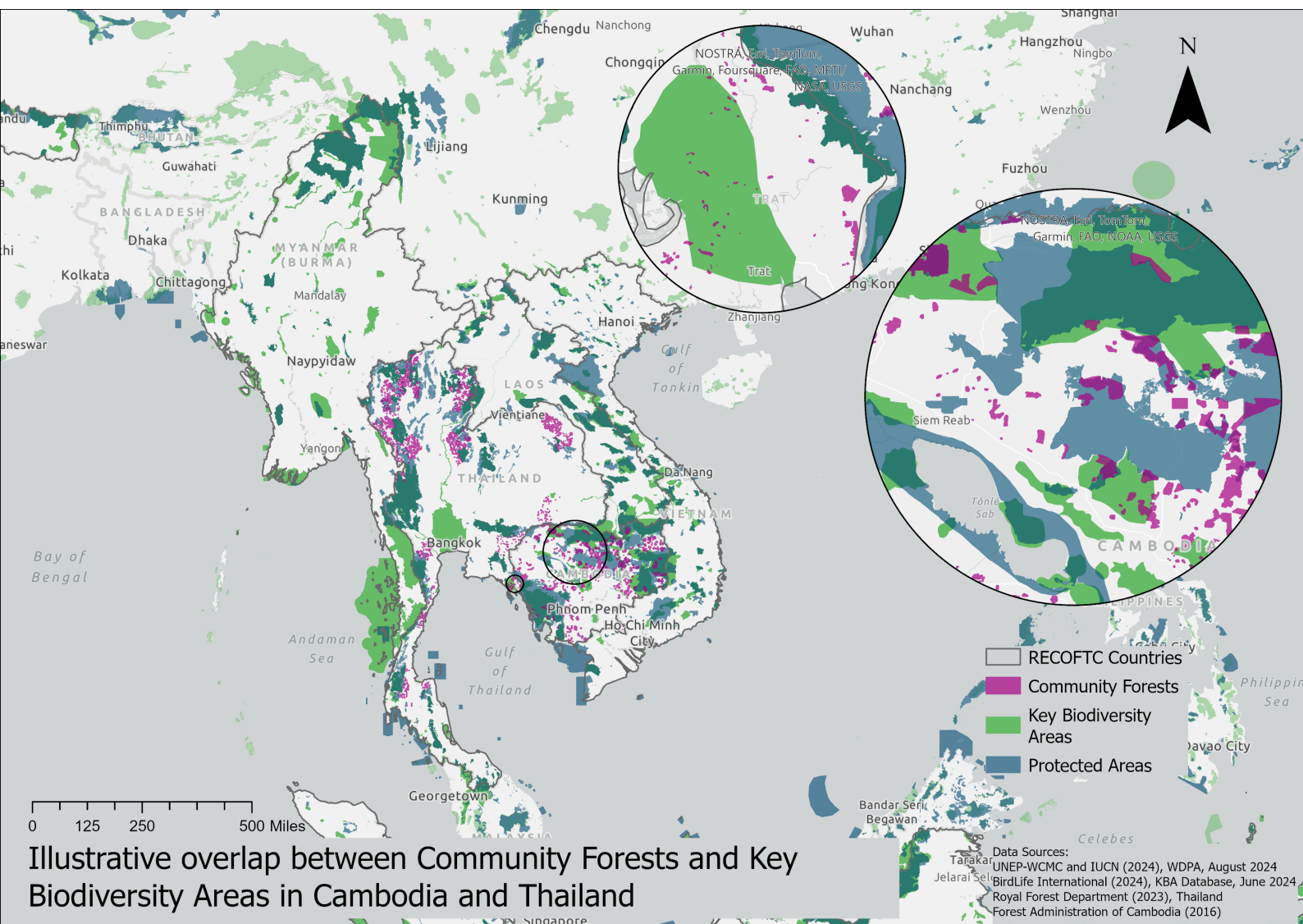
Community forestry is increasingly recognized by governments across the continent and has been incorporated into both Nationally Determined Contributions under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans under the CBD. Community forests involve Indigenous Peoples and/or local communities employing traditional and customary knowledge in their management. As of 2012, communities held statutory tenure rights to 34 percent of Asia's forests[1] through collective and individual land titles, such as Certificates of Ancestral Domain Titles granted to Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines and Land Use Right Certificates issued to households in Viet Nam. Between 2002 and 2012, communities received formal rights to 31 million hectares of forest land, an average annual increase of slightly over 3 million hectares.

Referring to the eight criteria for OECMs listed in Table 1, community forests generally meet the first screening assessment criterion as they are not PAs with conservation as their primary objective. However, whether an area supports important biodiversity values depends on the individual sites under consideration. For community forests, establishing and documenting biodiversity inventories will be crucial in determining whether individual community forests or groups of them qualify. The subsequent six criteria are likely met in most community forests in the region, as they typically have clear delineation and management systems in place.

Based on the IUCN criteria alone, most community forests should be eligible for OECM status, provided free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) is achieved and the key screening criterion of having important biodiversity value is met.

To clarify, important biodiversity value is defined as supporting at least one of the following:

- Rare, threatened or endangered species and ecosystems
- Natural ecosystems that are under-represented in protected area networks
- High level of ecological integrity or intactness
- Significant populations or extent of range-restricted species or ecosystems
- Important species aggregations, such as spawning, breeding or feeding areas
- Importance for ecological connectivity, as part of a network of sites in a larger area (IUCN WCPA, 2023, in development)

In some countries, there is an ongoing debate about whether community forestry represents a form of PA and thus is ineligible for OECM recognition. However, given that the definition of PAs requires biodiversity conservation as the primary objective, community forestry should not generally be considered to fall within this classification.

3. Current status of OECM strategies and legislation

Countries are expected to develop national strategies for OECMs through a consultative process involving relevant stakeholders and rightsholders. A comprehensive national OECM strategy should include the following components:

- a set of nationally relevant criteria to identify OECMs based on the eight IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) criteria
- a mechanism to formally recognize OECMs at the national level, such as inclusion in a national database, supported by legal or other effective (e.g., customary) laws
- a method of reporting OECM sites to the World Database on OECMs, including technical support for landowners, particularly Indigenous Peoples and local communities
- a system for monitoring and evaluating OECM sites, potentially utilizing existing national frameworks
- a comprehensive financing plan to support OECM implementation and management

In establishing new OECMs, countries should prioritize ecologically valuable areas, such as Key Biodiversity Areas and Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas that are not currently covered by PAs. Additionally, focus should be given to areas that support important biodiversity values, including threatened ecosystems or areas with threatened species, as identified by the IUCN Red List of Ecosystems or IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and other areas of biodiversity importance identified through nationally or sub-nationally established methods and databases.

4. Potential for community forestry as OECMs

When assessing the potential for community forests as OECMs, four important considerations should be highlighted:

- OECMs must conserve important biodiversity values, such as sites with rare species and ecosystems
- OECMs require long-term and not temporary mechanisms and processes to ensure biodiversity conservation
- Areas with sustainable use may qualify as OECMs only if they have very light levels of use
- FPIC from Indigenous Peoples and local communities, as well as explicit permission from landowners or rights holders are necessary prerequisites for establishing OECMs

In Thailand, for instance, the role of community forestry in biodiversity conservation in the context of defining criteria for OECM establishment can be summarized as follows:[2]:

- Preserving genetic resources and habitats outside of PAs
- Creating landscape connectivity between PAs and surrounding areas
- Propagating plants and animals outside of PAs
- Supporting local livelihoods through bio-based economies
- Creating new knowledge by applying and adapting traditional knowledge

Even if a community forest already has strong recognition through supportive laws and policies, aligning with OECM criteria can enhance its conservation impact in several key ways. OECM designation formally acknowledges conservation efforts that

extend beyond traditional PAs, thereby reinforcing and enhancing the ecological and biodiversity outcomes of community forests. By meeting OECM criteria, community forests gain access to new funding opportunities, technical assistance and capacity-building resources, which are crucial for maintaining and improving conservation and management practices. This alignment can also boost the visibility and credibility of community forests on both national and international stages, attracting additional support and partnerships.

Furthermore, OECM alignment demonstrates a commitment to global conservation targets, such as the Aichi Biodiversity Targets and the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework, showcasing the community forest's role in achieving these critical goals.

The OECM alignment process often includes reviewing and strengthening management and governance practices, contributing to more effective and sustainable forest management. Additionally, OECM designation can provide legal and policy recognition, securing the rights and interests of community forests against external pressures. Moreover, joining the OECM network facilitates valuable networking and collaboration opportunities with other conservation entities, enhancing knowledge exchange and collective efforts.

Several key factors related to community forests can determine their potential for successful recognition as OECMs. These include:

- Existing policy and legal frameworks
- The existence and nature of community forest management plans
- The capacities and structure of the community forest management committee

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Policy support for community forests as OECMs[3]

Cambodia	- Target 8 of Cambodia's National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan (NBSAP) 2016 aims to implement effective management plans for existing PAs and conservation areas, including community-based natural resource management areas.
	- While Cambodia has not officially identified any potential OECMs, the 'conservation areas' and 'community-based natural resource management areas' mentioned in the NBSAP could qualify as OECMs if they meet the internationally recognized criteria.
	- Legislation supporting biodiversity conservation in community forests in Cambodia includes the 2002 Forestry Law (currently under revision), the 2003 Sub-Decree on Community Forestry Management and the 2006 Prakas on Guidelines for Community Forestry. These legal instruments aim to contribute to the sustainable management of forest resources and provide a framework for community involvement in forest conservation.

Indonesia	▪ Target 11 of Indonesia's NBSAP (2016) is, "Realization of sustainable maintenance and improvement of conservation areas". This target primarily refers to national parks and other types of PAs, rather than to OECMs. The NBSAP did not explicitly mention OECMs in its targets. Potential OECMs in Indonesia could include community-managed forests, such as Village Forest or 'hutan desa' schemes and Indigenous Peoples-led conservation areas. These areas could be considered OECMs if they meet the internationally recognized criteria. ▪ Indonesia has two main community forest models. The first community forestry (or 'hutan kemasyarakatan'), which enables farmer groups to sustainably manage production or protection forests. This model is legally based on the Forestry Act of 1999 and the Ministry of Environment and Forestry Regulation No. 9/2021 on social forestry management. The second model is customary forest (or 'hutan adat'), which formalizes the rights of traditional communities to continue practi sing their customary use of forests in their territories. This model recognizes and supports Indigenous Peoples' traditional forest management practices.
Lao PDR	▪ Target 1.5.2 of Lao PDR's NBSAP states, "Geographically contiguous village forestry sites are recognized/promoted to form an organic part of [two biodiversity] corridors that would link critical fragmented habitats together". While OECMs or related terms were not explicitly mentioned in the NBSAP, some of the village forestry sites and corridors described in Lao PDR's NBSAP targets could potentially qualify as OECMs if they meet the necessary criteria. ▪ The legal framework supporting community (or village) forestry in Lao PDR consists of the 2019 Forestry Law and the 2021 Department of Forestry Technical Guidelines on Village Forest Management Planning under the Forestry Law.
Myanmar	▪ Myanmar's latest national report (2018) to the Convention on Biological Diversity includes national targets related to terrestrial coverage and mentions Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs), some of which can be considered OECMs according to the IUCN WCPA criteria. The report states that by 2020, "8% of Myanmar's land area [will have been] conserved within protected areas, including ICCAs". Potential options for ICCA designation include community protected areas, community forests and sacred forests. ▪ The legal basis for community forestry in Myanmar is established through several key documents such as the 1995 Myanmar Forest Policy, the 2001–2031 National Forest Master Plan, the 2018 Forest Law, the 1995 Forest Rules (with 2019 revisions ongoing) and the 2019 Community Forestry Instructions.

Nepal	▪ While Nepal currently lacks specific strategies for OECMs, an ongoing project funded by the Global Environment Facility is developing national criteria and indicators for OECMs and identifying potential sites. With 82.7 percent of Nepal's forests located outside the PA system, there is considerable potential for OECMs. This includes 11 Forest Conservation Areas outside the PA system and several Community Conserved Areas that could qualify as OECMs, such as sacred forests, community forests, sacred wetlands and religious groves.
	▪ Nepal's community forest model, pioneered in the 1970s, is the oldest of the country's community-based forestry types. It accounts for approximately 90 percent of all formal community-managed forest areas in the country. The legal framework for this model is established by the Forest Act 2019 (originally Forest Act 1993), Forest Regulation 2022 and the Community Forestry Development Guidelines (revised in 2015).
Philippines	▪ Target 19 of the Philippines' NBSAP states, "By 2028, there will be a 10% increase in total area from 2015 levels of terrestrial [,] including inland wetlands[,] protected areas managed through the National Integrated Protected Areas System (NIPAS) and other conservation measures (Indigenous Community Conserved Areas, Local Conservation Areas, Critical Habitats) that overlap with key biodiversity areas." Currently, the Philippines has 15.87 percent terrestrial and inland water coverage and 1.74 percent marine coverage, with 273 PAs and 178 OECMs. A pending Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas bill would provide legal recognition for OECMs.
	▪ The Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM) Program is the Philippines' primary strategy for sustainable forest management and social justice in upland areas. Upland communities play a crucial role in restoring degraded forestlands and protecting remaining forest cover. Executive Order 263 (19 July 1995) and its implementing rules and regulations (Department Administrative Order 96–29) establish CBFM as the primary approach for achieving sustainable development of forest resources and social justice.
Thailand	▪ Although OECMs were not explicitly mentioned in Thailand's NBSAP, the term 'conservation areas' was used alongside 'protected areas'. Potential OECMs in Thailand include areas not classified as PAs, such as Forest Parks (22 in Thailand, covering 105,184 hectares) and Non-Hunting Wildlife Areas. Notably, community forests are not explicitly mentioned as potential OECMs.
	▪ Thailand's community forestry model enables communities to participate in the conservation, rehabilitation, management, maintenance and use of natural resources, the environment and biodiversity. This is achieved by managing local forests outside PAs in cooperation with the government. The legal foundation for this model is established in the Community Forest Act of 2019 and its associated regulations.

| Viet Nam | • OECMs were not explicitly mentioned in Viet Nam's previous NBSAP. However, there are indications that OECMs may be included in the 2022 NBSAP, which has been approved but has not yet been published. Natural production forests, which are found within production forests but are protected and managed separately by assigned organizations or groups, represent a potential OECM category in Viet Nam. |
| | • Community forest management in Viet Nam enables communities, households or individuals to use, manage and protect areas of production forest, protection forest or special-use forest that have been allocated to them. The legal framework for this model is established in the 2013 Land Law, the 2017 Forestry Law and various regulations, such as Decree 156/2018/ND-CP, which enforces selected articles of the Forestry Law. |

5. Challenges

Concerns over Indigenous Peoples and local community rights

There are potential risks associated with OECM recognition in community-managed areas like community forests. Resistance to OECM recognition has already emerged among grassroots stakeholders in multiple countries, primarily driven by concerns over increased restrictions and reduced autonomy over community lands. This has led to default opposition to OECMs by several community forestry associations. Conservation advocates and governments must prioritize addressing the concerns of local communities regarding OECMs. This involves actively listening to their perspectives, engaging in meaningful dialogue and implementing measures that explicitly safeguard and strengthen community rights and land tenure.

Given the early stages of OECM policy development in many countries, the consideration of community rights has remained limited. To foster trust and acceptance of OECMs as a high-potential conservation approach, it is important to initiate early and transparent communication with local communities about OECM objectives and implications. This process should include collaboratively developing and implementing robust mechanisms that safeguard existing community land tenure and rights, ensuring that OECM recognition enhances, rather than diminishes, local community autonomy in land management decisions.

The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) acknowledges that OECMs require support through measures that strengthen the governance capacity of their legitimate authorities. These measures should ensure positive and lasting biodiversity outcomes. While recognizing that national circumstances differ, the CBD emphasizes that any related legislation should reinforce and recognize existing effective governance systems. The aim is to enhance these systems rather than replace or unnecessarily modify them.

Benefits and incentives to Indigenous Peoples and local communities

The recognition of OECMs may impose costs on communities, including increased conservation responsibilities, potential loss of autonomy over land use and verification expenses. To address these concerns, it is crucial to develop parallel incentives that offset these costs. Current discussions about incentives are often vague and primarily focus on potential private sector investments in OECM-recognized areas. However, the specific mechanisms for funding distribution remain unclear.

For local communities to consider consenting to OECM recognition, clear and practical incentive structures, including proof of concept, are essential. Piloting these incentive structures, even in initial stages is crucial for establishing community-level support and interest. Without demonstrable benefits and structures that deliver tangible results to local communities, the potential for OECM establishment in community-managed lands may be significantly reduced.

Some potential incentive systems and modalities for piloting and further exploration include:

Financial benefits

- Biodiversity credit issuance
- Payment for ecosystem services
- Carbon credit issuance (for habitat preservation)
- Direct payment schemes for measurable increase in biodiversity
- Ecotourism promotion in OECMs
- Tour guide rights for OECM communities in adjacent protected areas
- Certification and promotion of OECM products (e.g., non-timber forest products)

Non-financial benefits

- Enhanced climate resilience
- Cultural conservation and preservation
- Recognition of traditional knowledge and values
- Social empowerment in managing natural assets
- Improved ecosystem services (hydrological cycling, soil fertility, microclimate, etc.)

6. Ways forward

To realize the potential of community forests as formal OECMs, several urgent tensions need resolution. These primarily involve balancing local and community rights to manage and benefit from collective or customary lands with conservation goals. Conservation must be presented and designed as a win-win scenario for biodiversity and local communities, rather than a zero-sum game or a situation rife with trade-offs that historically disadvantage local communities. To prevent wholesale rejection of OECMs

by Indigenous Peoples and local communities, proactive discussion and consideration of safeguard mechanisms beyond FPIC are essential. OECM recognition should be accompanied by a comprehensive framework of clear, explicit and culturally appropriate incentives that tangibly benefit local communities while supporting conservation objectives.

Key proposed steps include:

1. Establish national thematic working groups including socioeconomic aspects for OECM consultations and design.

2. Establish conflict resolution mechanisms to address disagreements during the OECM designation process, with regular consultations and feedback sessions.

3. Determine a hierarchy for potential OECM sites, prioritizing areas of biodiversity value currently lacking protection and consider where community forests fit within this hierarchy.

4. Develop safeguards and principles for OECMs specific to Indigenous Peoples and local communities at the regional and global levels to guide national discussions.

5. Systematically consider equitable benefit distribution and assess incentive mechanisms to accompany OECM recognition of Indigenous Peoples' and local communities' lands.

6. Ensure long-term support mechanisms, such as funding or technical assistance, for effective and sustainable OECM management.

7. Conduct capacity-building and national consultations with potential stakeholders to enable informed FPIC and engagement in national OECM dialogues.

8. Align and harmonize national community forestry institutions and regulatory processes with OECM objectives, including biodiversity considerations in community forestry registration templates, management plans and potentially in community forestry management committee roles and responsibilities.

Endnotes

1. RECOFTC. (2013). Community forestry in Asia and the Pacific: Pathway to inclusive development. RECOFTC.

2. From Thailand OECM socioeconomic working group.

3. The list comprises RECOFTC focal countries along with the Philippines, which is a proposed RECOFTC focal country.

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RECOFTC

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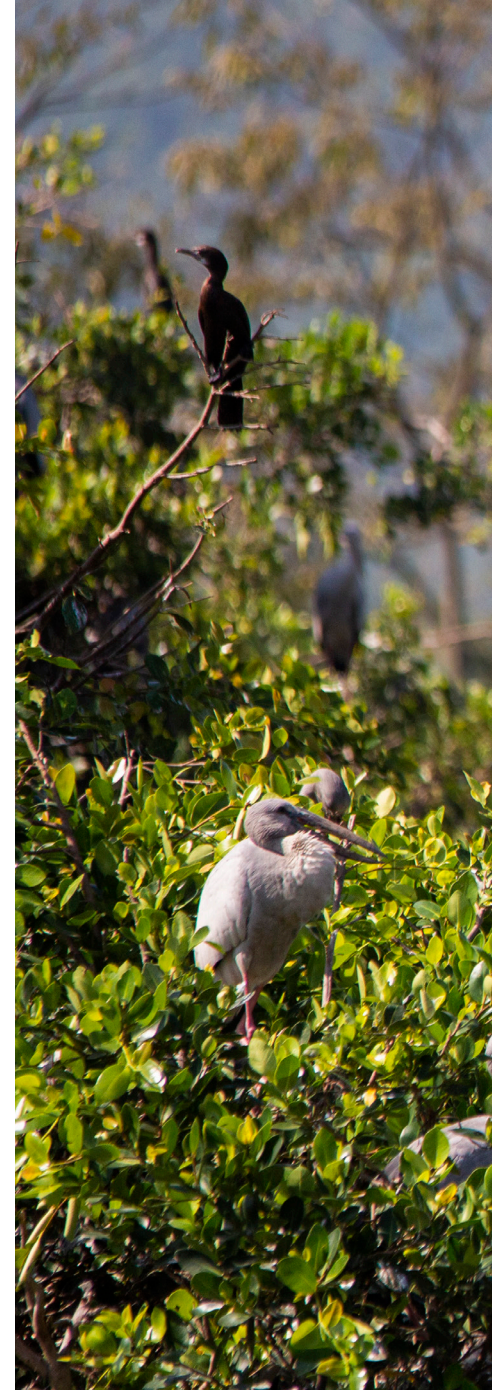
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