



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization

Organisation  
des Nations Unies  
pour l'éducation,  
la science et la culture



Canadian  
Commission  
for UNESCO

Commission  
canadienne  
pour l'UNESCO

# Guidelines and Process for Biosphere Reserve Periodic Reviews – Canada

---

*Produced up on consultation with  
the Canadian MAB Committee, Biosphere Reserves and past reviewers*

*January 2014*

## Table of Contents

1.0	Purpose & Goals of Periodic Reviews .....	3
2.0	Roles & Responsibilities .....	4
3.0	Principles Guiding the Review Process .....	6
	APPENDIX A: Specific Roles and Responsibilities of Key Actors.....	7
	APPENDIX B: Sample Generic Interview Questionnaire.....	9

## 1.0 Purpose & Goals of Periodic Reviews

Biosphere Reserves are recognized under UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme as ecologically significant regions that promote sustainability and conservation by engaging all community stakeholders and supporting research and monitoring. Through partnerships between people and nature, they are ideal to test, demonstrate and share results on innovative approaches to sustainable development from local to international scales. Biosphere Reserves address one of the most challenging issues we face today: how to maintain the health of natural systems while meeting needs of communities?

Every ten years, regions designated as Biosphere Reserves by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Man and Biosphere (MAB) Programme undertake a periodic review to provide an overview of their contributions. The Seville Strategy (1997) established the need for such reviews to ensure that Biosphere Reserves are meeting criteria outlined in the [Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves](#). In Canada, an additional focus has been placed on the learning and reflective opportunities provided by periodic reviews. Finally, the review increasingly serves as a renewed engagement of the local authorities and stakeholders to serve and act as a Biosphere Reserve.

Each Biosphere Reserve consists of both an “environmental territory” and the governance structure or human elements of the designated area, which namely facilitates collaboration between different local stakeholders, including various levels of government, non-governmental organizations, the private sector etc. These local “convener organizations” act as the leaders and focal points for the Biosphere Reserve governance structure and are integral to fulfilling the mandate of the MAB Programme. Without regulatory functions per se, they act as the *stewards* of their respective Biosphere Reserves, ensuring continual development and learning.

Periodic reviews are an international requirement designed to ensure that the high standards characterizing the UNESCO designation are met and that programme objectives are achieved. In this sense, reviews validate the continuing dynamism and contributions of Biosphere Reserves to the three functions as outlined in the Seville Strategy: conservation, development and capacity building. In order to be considered functional, Biosphere Reserves as “convener organizations” are expected to satisfy their obligations to both the local and the global communities. As a primary focus, functional Biosphere Reserves provide local and regional leadership in conservation of biodiversity and socio-economic development. Second, they are designated by UNESCO based on their potential to contribute to the larger network of Biosphere Reserves and to demonstrate the application of sustainable development principles to a wider audience, both nationally and internationally.

In Canada, the periodic review process and forms have been adapted to address specific needs and considerations. Given the unpredictability of the political, economic, cultural and social factors in which they operate, Biosphere Reserves are not expected to exhibit a perfect record of activity. Consideration is therefore particularly given to the convener organization’s ability to adapt to the changing environment and to address emerging challenges. In addition to validating the functionality of Biosphere Reserves and to serve as a renewed commitment to the Biosphere Reserve designation, periodic reviews also provide an opportunity to reflect on progress achieved over the past ten-year period. Finally, it is hoped that the inclusion of various stakeholders in the review processes contributes to enable effective resource allocation, to strengthen accountability and transparency and to develop new strategies and action plans. Evaluations and reviews in general have strong potential and value in enhancing stakeholder involvement and in assisting Biosphere Reserves to orient their activities by providing a learning environment and informing management planning.

Examples of Canadian periodic reviews can be consulted via the Canadian Biosphere Research Network website at <http://www.biosphere-research.ca/>

## 2.0 Roles & Responsibilities

The key actors involved in every periodic review in Canada are the Biosphere Reserve “convener organization”, the reviewers and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, principally advised by its MAB committee. Each has a different role and responsibility ensuring the success of the exercise. Communication among the three groups and equitable division of work is essential. Specific responsibilities of each are outlined in Appendix A.

### Biosphere Reserve “Convener Organization”

The “convener organization” is the steward and administrator of the Biosphere Reserve, and as such is expected to have the clearest understanding of the contextual political, social, cultural and environmental factors influencing its functionality.

One of the first required steps for the Biosphere Reserve is to identify the individual who will serve as the Biosphere Reserve Focal Point for the periodic review. This focal point will centralize communication with the other actors involved in the periodic review, including reviewers and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. The name and coordinates of this individual representing the Biosphere Reserve must be communicated both externally and internally within the Biosphere Reserve prior to the commencement of the review.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the Biosphere Reserve “Convener Organization” is the development of a thorough *self-study*, which serves as the first key contribution to the final document. Ideally, the self-study document represents a collective effort by various groups involved in the Biosphere Reserve, including its board members and closest partners. The specific groups involved and approach used to develop the self-study is expected to be described as an introduction to the self-study. This document should use the periodic review form as the necessary format, ideally between 50-100 pages long, and is to be provided to the reviewers minimum one month prior to the site visit. In addition to the information requested through the pre-established form, the self-study should be accompanied by support letters by key local and regional stakeholders (various levels of government, elected officials, Aboriginal organizations, private sector, academia, and civil society), similar to the ones submitted with the original nomination submission. Biosphere Reserve annual reports, media clippings, newsletters and a bibliography of key studies and research on the Biosphere Reserve should also be made available to the reviewers upon request.

In addition to producing the self-study, the “convener organization” plays a central role in preparing and facilitating the reviewers’ site visit by recommending key issues to address, a tentative schedule, and a list of potential interviewees which includes both groups originally supporting the Biosphere Reserve designation and current partners. While such recommendations should be made by the Biosphere Reserve, the prerogative remains with the reviewers.

Following the submission of the report to UNESCO (Paris) by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, the Biosphere Reserve “convener organization” facilitates the dissemination of the report, including key findings and recommendations, to its Board, members and local community. Finally, the Biosphere Reserve develops an implementation plan based on both the UNESCO recommendations and its own local reflections resulting from the review.

Progress achieved as follow-up to the periodic review recommendations should be communicated by the Biosphere Reserve to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO within one year following the review. Failure to do so, particularly following a review which determines that essential criteria are not met, may result in delisting from the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve World Network.

Canadian Biosphere Reserves are requested to produce an annual report, to be publicly accessible and ideally found on the Biosphere Reserve's website. An electronic copy or web link should be sent to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

### Reviewers

External reviewers are selected by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, as volunteers, upon consultation with the Canadian MAB committee. A combination of both academic qualifications and practical Biosphere Reserve experience and understanding are sought, either for each individual reviewer or among the reviewers' team. Such qualifications are deemed to favor objectivity and constructive insight while also encouraging learning and the sharing of best practices among sites.

The reviewers' main responsibilities consist of becoming familiar with the Biosphere Reserve being reviewed (namely by analyzing the self-study submitted by the Biosphere Reserve), being accessible, using an inquiring mind during the site visit, and preparing the final document to be submitted to UNESCO. In addition to the information provided through the self-study, the final report, as authored by the reviewers, assesses strengths and weaknesses of the Biosphere Reserve and provides recommendations on ensuring the successful long term development of the Biosphere Reserve. Reviewers are expected to remain critical thinkers throughout the exercise.

Because of time constraints, the main purpose of the reviewers' site visit is to validate the content of the self-study and to reflect on strengths and weaknesses, rather than gathering data as done in previous years.

### Canadian Commission for UNESCO

The Canadian Commission for UNESCO acts as the liaison body and facilitator for the review process: it reminds Biosphere Reserves of their pending review, assigns reviewers, provides financial support for the site visit subject to available funds, and then submits the final report to UNESCO, authored by the reviewers on behalf of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. Once the report has been reviewed by the UNESCO MAB International Coordinating Committee, the recommendations are provided by UNESCO to the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, which then communicates the information to the relevant Canadian groups.

The main stages of involvement by the Commission and its Canadian MAB committee are therefore in the early stages of the process (such as requesting a Biosphere Reserve focal point for the review or contacting reviewers) and in the dissemination of the reviewers' findings once the report is completed. In submitting the final periodic review report to UNESCO, the Commission may, upon advice from the MAB committee, express its considerations on the Biosphere Reserve's effectiveness in meeting the criteria of the World Network.

The Canadian MAB committee is an ad hoc committee of the Commission for UNESCO. Through their advisory role, members of the Canadian MAB committee provide guidance on, and assist in, the coordination of Biosphere Reserve periodic Reviews; make recommendations on Canadian participation to the UNESCO MAB programme, and provide advice on the development of the MAB programme in Canada. As such, the Secretariat of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO works in close collaboration with Canadian MAB committee members regarding the undertaking of Periodic Reviews, without undermining the role of the reviewers.

### **3.0 Principles Guiding the Review Process**

#### Clear, Transparent and Fair

In order to ensure clarity, transparency, and fairness, the Biosphere Reserve Periodic Review Focal Point, reviewers and the Canadian Commission for UNESCO are expected to communicate and collaborate before, during and after the site visit. It is encouraged that procedures, timelines, roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for input and engagement be clearly identified and communicated among the three key groups involved, including local Biosphere Reserve communities and review participants

#### Inclusive, Accessible, and Equitable

To the extent possible, communications and engagement opportunities in the periodic review should reach and include as many key Biosphere Reserve-related groups as possible. This includes (but is not limited to) different levels of government, businesses, indigenous communities and NGOs that have been key players and involved with the Biosphere Reserve organization within the ten years covered by the review.

The key to fulfilling this principle is by reconciling time constraints, with the multitude of stakeholders to involve. Recognizing that site visits by the reviewers are relatively short (normally two to four days), BR convener organizations are encouraged to contribute by organizing interviews and starting the dialogue with stakeholders prior to the visit.

The final reports are public documents which are meant to be cited as credible background documents and shared, especially within the reviewed Biosphere Reserve and the World Network of Biosphere Reserves.

#### Respectful

For each periodic review, the Biosphere Reserve focal point and reviewers are expected to jointly determine the most appropriate approach, preferred modes of communication, and specific timeline of the periodic review process. As such, it is hoped that the process reflects the needs, desires and constraints of both the Biosphere Reserve and the reviewers while meeting the established objectives of the review exercise. Expectations of the periodic review's outcome are firm, yet the manner in which this outcome is achieved is not. It is understood that the most positive review experience come out of a process that reflects the Biosphere Reserve's specific context, is a collaborative effort, and fulfills the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved.

#### Meaningful and useful

While periodic reviews are mechanisms used by UNESCO to determine whether Biosphere Reserves remain functional, they also provide opportunities for improvement, re- alignment of priorities and modernizing approaches. They provide a perspective on implementation of the objectives and goals as presented by the Biosphere Reserve in its designation documents.

#### ***For more information, please contact:***

Dominique Potvin  
Programme Officer, Natural Sciences  
Canadian Commission for UNESCO

150 Elgin Street, P.O. Box 1047  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5V8  
Tel.: 613.566.4414 or 1.800.263.5588, ext. 5517  
Fax: 613.566.4405  
[dominique.potvin@unesco.ca](mailto:dominique.potvin@unesco.ca)

**APPENDIX A: Specific Roles and Responsibilities of Key Actors**

	Biosphere Reserve “Convener Organization”	Reviewers	Canadian Commission for UNESCO, in consultation with Canadian MAB committee
<p><b>Before site visit</b></p>	<p>Designation of the designated Biosphere Reserve (BR) Focal Point concerning the review (liaison with CCU, reviewers and local groups).</p> <p>Submission of self-study one month prior to site visit; including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Filled out periodic review form</li> <li>- Support letters of key regional stakeholders (similar as designation requirements)</li> <li>- BR Annual reports</li> <li>- BR media clippings</li> <li>- Bibliography of key studies and research on the BR</li> </ul> <p>N.B. Failure to provide a self-study by the due date will be interpreted as indicative of functionality concerns:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The site visit may either be delayed until self-study is submitted; or</li> <li>- BR may be designated an ‘inactive’ site pending further discussion and review.</li> </ul> <p>Notification to local community of upcoming review and solicitation of involvement by key groups (businesses, individuals, indigenous communities etc.). Online modes of communication are encouraged to ensure that the process is as open as possible.</p> <p>Provision of recommendations to reviewers for the site-visit including list of potential interviewees; tentative schedule, logistical support for accommodation and transportation, including estimated costs.</p>	<p>Establishment of contact with BR convener organization to discuss the envisioned review process, clarify expectations, tentative schedule etc.</p> <p>Upon receiving self-study by BR (one month in advance of site-visit), initial assessment of information completeness and key areas of focus during site-visit.</p> <p>Consultation with BR to establish tentative schedule and list of interviewees and schedule (There is no obligation for the reviewers to be limited by BR recommendations).</p> <p>Upon consultation with BR focal point, submission of proposed site-visit budget to Canadian Commission for UNESCO (for approval).</p>	<p>Oversee the Canadian timeline for required Periodic Reviews and notification to BRs.</p> <p>Selection and contacting of reviewers; provision of background and process information; facilitation of initial contact between BR focal point and reviewers.</p> <p>Approval of pre-established site-visit budget and tentative schedule as submitted by reviewers in consultation with BR.</p>

**APPENDIX A: Specific Roles and Responsibilities of Key Actors**

	Biosphere Reserve “Convener Organization”	Reviewers	Canadian Commission for UNESCO, in consultation with Canadian MAB committee
<p><b>During site visit (approximately 2-4 days)</b></p>	<p>BR acts as a host to the reviewers: facilitating travel and accommodation within the BR, introducing reviewers to key groups and individuals representing a variety of perspectives, being available to support reviewers during the site visit.</p>	<p>Reviewers validate sources and reliance of information provided in self-study.</p> <p>Highlight gaps in data and perspectives.</p> <p>Conduct interviews with consideration and appreciation of BR’s specific context (see Sample questions in appendix).</p> <p>Reflect on specific contributions of BR “convener organizations” compared to actions of stakeholders which may take place without the BR.</p>	<p>If needed, Commission clarifies recommended process and desired outputs.</p>
<p><b>After site visit (6 months maximum)</b></p>	<p>After site visit and upon reception of draft report, BRs are invited to limit their comments to overall reaction and to flag any factual inconsistencies (within one month). The BR convener organization should not be encouraged to influence overall tone of report (negative/ positive).</p> <p>Upon reception of UNESCO comments, BR disseminates key findings and recommendations to local community and develops implementation plan addressing recommendations (1-4 months upon reception of recommendations).</p> <p>Within one year following the recommendations of the review, BR informs the Commission through a letter on progress achieved in implementing recommendations and other review follow-up.</p>	<p>Based on the self-study and findings of the site-visit, writing of the report following the provided templates.</p> <p>Before submitting final version to Canadian Commission for UNESCO, reviewers share draft version with BR focal point requesting verification for factual inconsistencies or inaccuracies.</p>	<p>CCU and its Canadian MAB committee review the final report :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a) to determine whether the report is satisfactorily complete to be submitted to UNESCO</li> <li>b) may assess and communicate to UNESCO if the examined BR is judged to satisfactorily meet criteria of the world network of BRs according to Canadian standards.</li> </ul> <p>Once the report is judged to be satisfactorily complete, the final copy is submitted to UNESCO via an official letter of the Secretary-General of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO</p> <p>Upon reception of UNESCO’s comments on the review, the Commission serves as the official communication channel between UNESCO and the BR to report on implementation progress.</p>

## **APPENDIX B: Sample Generic Interview Questionnaire**

### **Suggested generic questions to ask when requesting community input**

Considering that BRs are meant to promote conservation and sustainable development / livelihoods (e.g., forestry, fisheries, tourism, etc.) through research, education, training, and collaboration:

1. What have been the greatest successes in reference to the three Biosphere Reserve functions (conservation, sustainable development/livelihoods/resource management, and logistics/governance):
  - 1.1 accomplished by the Biosphere Reserve organization?
  - 1.2 by others in the region?
  - 1.3 because of the designation?
2. What are the key past, present and future challenges to fulfilling the Biosphere Reserve functions:
  - 2.1 faced by the BR organization?
  - 2.2 faced in the region?
  - 2.3 of the designation (concept, operationalizing on the ground)?
3. What have you learned over the past ten years?
  - 3.1 Concerning the BR organization?
  - 3.2 In the region?
  - 3.3 Concerning the Biosphere Reserve designation (concept, operationalizing on the ground)?
4. What are your perspective on future directions for fulfilling Biosphere Reserve functions:
  - 4.1 for the Biosphere Reserve organization?
  - 4.2 for the region?
  - 4.3 in terms of 'living up to' the designation?

### **Additional questions for Biosphere Reserve staff and board members**

5. What have been the changes to your Biosphere Reserve zones (core, buffer, transition/area of cooperation)?
6. With whom have you partnered with over the past 10 years?
7. With whom have you done the most work? Please provide information about how your organization collaborates with others.
8. Partnerships and collaboration
  - 8.1 Who (NGOs, govt, research institutions, other) would you like to work with?
  - 8.2 Why, and what do you envision?