



# The VCA Standard

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The Verified Conservation Areas Programme is managed by Earthmind, a non-profit Swiss association based at the IUCN Conservation Centre, 1196 Gland, Switzerland.

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## 1. Caring for our planet, hectare by hectare

Everywhere, life on Earth is under threat. Scientists think that the continuing loss of biodiversity is as serious as climate change. Ecosystems are being degraded, natural habitats are disappearing, and many wild species of fauna and flora are becoming increasingly threatened.

Nature, however, can be conserved. Ecosystems can be restored, natural habitats can be maintained, wild species can be protected, and living natural resources can be harvested sustainably.

All of us – individuals, communities, companies, NGOs, and public agencies – can conserve nature where we live and work. Hectare by hectare, we can conserve our planet.

**The Verified Conservation Area (VCA) Registry** recognises the area-based conservation actions of individuals, communities, companies and others. It is open to any area – marine or terrestrial – that has a conservation programme as set out by this Standard.

Listing an area on the VCA Registry facilitates visibility and public accountability. This, in turn, can generate a range of benefits including public awareness of the VCA's conservation programme, enhanced relationships with key stakeholders, assurance for investors and regulators, and outreach leading to opportunities for financing.

## 2. What is a conservation area?

A Conservation Area is a geographically-defined area managed to conserve nature. A Verified Conservation Area is a geographically-defined area with a conservation management plan and annual performance reports published on the VCA Registry.

We use the **IUCN World Conservation Strategy**<sup>1</sup> definition of conservation:

*Conservation is... the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit to present generations while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.*

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://portals.iucn.org/library/efiles/documents/WCS-004.pdf>



*Thus, conservation is positive, embracing preservation, maintenance, sustainable utilization, restoration, and enhancement of the natural environment.*

Importantly, sustainable utilisation is an integral component of conservation. Thus, area-based conservation programmes may include actions to use living natural resources sustainably as well as actions to preserve, maintain, restore or enhance the area's natural environment.

VCAs directly support the **Sustainable Development Goals**<sup>2</sup> (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda and the objectives of the **Convention on Biological Diversity**<sup>3</sup> (CBD) as follows:

**SDG 14:** *Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development;*

**SDG 15:** *Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss; and*

**CBD Article 1:** *The objectives of this Convention, to be pursued in accordance with its relevant provisions, are the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the utilization of genetic resources...*

VCAs can also support other SDGs including (2) sustainable agriculture, (6) sustainable water management, (8) inclusive economic growth, (12) sustainable production, (13) combating climate change, and (14) building accountable institutions.

Through conservation action in the areas where we live and work, we can contribute to sustainable development. The VCA Registry allows land managers to openly share their conservation experiences and, in so doing, to encourage others to do the same so that collectively we can conserve our planet, hectare by hectare.

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<sup>2</sup> See: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.cbd.int/convention/text/>



### 3. How can I register a VCA?

To register an area as a VCA, an area-based **conservation management plan** is required. To remain registered, **annual conservation performance reports** are required. The requirements for these documents are set out in this Standard.

Plans and reports are publicly listed on the VCA Registry to verify that the area is being managed to deliver conservation outcomes. Additionally, for VCAs that are not externally audited, we request a **letter of support** from an independent, reputable professional. (See Section 6 for more information on the VCA audit process.)

The **VCA Registry** includes three levels of recognition:

<b>VCA Status</b>		<b>Requirements</b>
<b>Confirmed</b>	<i>(Bronze)</i>	Conservation plan, letter of support, and annual reports
<b>Audited</b>	<i>(Silver)</i>	Conservation plan, annual reports, and associated audits
<b>Champion</b>	<i>(Gold)</i>	5 years of audited reports or 10 years of confirmed reports

An area can initially be registered as either a **Confirmed VCA** or an **Audited VCA**. After 5 years of audited conservation performance reports or 10 years of confirmed reports, we will list the area as a **Champion VCA**. In some cases, a land manager may want to inform stakeholders of his/her intention to register a VCA. With submission of a registration proposal and a letter of support, the area can be listed as a **Proposed VCA**.

By registering a VCA, the land manager openly confirms that the area is being managed to conserve nature. Through being visible and publicly accountable, VCAs managers support a key aspiration of the Consensus Statement<sup>4</sup> of the multi-stakeholder Conservation Measures Partnership (CMP) which is to:

**Share our results respectfully, honestly, and transparently to facilitate learning.** We are not going to succeed every time, but if we are honest in our appraisals of our efforts, we will learn every time. And if we openly share our

<sup>4</sup> See: <http://www.conservationmeasures.org/initiatives/measures-summits/>



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assessments with each other and with the public, we will increase learning and transparency and advance the work of the biodiversity conservation community as a whole.

The following graphic outlines how to register a VCA and stay registered.

1. Confirmed VCA	2. Audited VCA	3. Staying registered
<p>↓</p> <p>1.1 Draft a <b>conservation management plan</b> including a description of the area, conservation status and conservation management.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>2.1 Draft a <b>conservation management plan</b> including a description of the area, conservation status and conservation management.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>3.1 Prepare a <b>conservation performance report</b> annually including conservation outcomes and lessons learned.</p>
<p>↓</p> <p>1.2 Secure a <b>letter of support</b> from an independent, reputable professional.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>2.2 Also secure a <b>management plan audit</b> from an approved VCA Auditor who will review documents, visit the area, and conduct interviews.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>3.2 To maintain Audited VCA status, also secure a <b>performance report audit</b> from a VCA Auditor, who will, at a minimum, review documents.</p>
<p>↓</p> <p>1.3 Prepare the <b>webpage information and files</b> for constructing the area's VCA webpage.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>2.3 Prepare the <b>webpage information and files</b> for constructing the area's VCA webpage.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>3.3 <b>Update the VCA webpage</b>, as needed, e.g. new text, links, or photos.</p>
<p>↓</p> <p>1.4 Submit the plan, the letter, and the webpage items.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>2.4 Submit the plan, the audit, and the webpage items.</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>3.4 Submit the report, the audit (if done), and webpage updates.</p>
<p>↓</p> <p>We will register your Confirmed VCA.</p> <p>Go to 3. ↗</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>We will register your Audited VCA.</p> <p>Go to 3. ↗</p>	<p>↓</p> <p>We will maintain your VCA registration.</p> <p>Repeat 3 annually. ↑</p>



## 4. Area-based conservation management plans

The core document required for registering a VCA is an area-based conservation management plan. The plan should be for a specified period and include the following:

- **Description of the area**
  - **Location and size** – geographic coordinates; mapped boundaries; hectares
  - **Land use** – past, present and future human uses of the area; regulations on use
  - **Owner/manager** – legal status; authorised manager; contact details
  
- **Conservation situation**
  - **Landscapes/ecosystems/habitats** – features; functions; services
  - **Wildlife** – native or alien; resident or migratory
  - **Threats** – degrading or degraded landscapes; threatened, endangered or invasive species; unsustainable use; human-wildlife conflict
  - **Opportunities** – restored and maintained landscapes; protected and enhanced wildlife populations; sustainable use; private and community conservation
  
- **Conservation management**
  - **Strategic objectives** – mitigating threats; realising opportunities
  - **Conservation actions** – delivering the objectives through preserving, maintaining, utilizing sustainably, restoring, or enhancing the natural environment
  - **Conservation indicators** – measuring conservation performance

Further guidance is available online in the **VCA Guidance Note** and Earthmind's VCA Guidance library collection, including recommended best practice for planning, reporting, ecosystem and species conservation, and sustainable land management. A particularly useful tool is the **CMP's Open Standards for the Practice of Conservation**.<sup>5</sup> If the conservation plan is associated with financing, we recommend that it is aligned with the **IFC Performance Standard 6** (PS6) on conserving biodiversity.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See: <http://cmp-openstandards.org/download-os/>

<sup>6</sup> See: <http://www.ifc.org/ps6>

## 5. Annual conservation performance reports

Annual conservation performance reports are required for VCAs to remain listed on the Registry. A report should normally be delivered by the end of February for the preceding calendar year, and it should include the following information:

- **Conservation outcomes** – measured results of conservation actions
- **Lessons learned** – shared experiences on addressing threats and realising opportunities
- **Adaptive management** – revisions, if any, of the conservation programme

If the area's conservation plan is substantively revised, the revised plan should be posted on the Registry.

VCAs will be recognised on the Registry as Champions after 5 years of audited reports or 10 years of confirmed reports.

## 6. Audits for enhanced verification

Land managers may want to provide additional assurance to stakeholders – customers, neighbours, investors or regulators – through an **auditing process**. The VCA programme facilitates and, indeed, recommends enhanced verification through external, independent audits. Not only do audits provide additional assurance to stakeholders, they also assist land managers to deliver better conservation outcomes.

To register an area as an **Audited VCA**, its conservation plan must be audited by an approved VCA auditor. To maintain this status, the annual conservation performance reports must also be audited.

The audit process includes a review of documents, a visit to the area, and interviews with stakeholders. A site visit is mandatory for the initial audit of the area's conservation plan. If possible, the site should also be visited for audits of annual performance reports.



The audits should address questions such as the following:

- *Is the required information included in the plan or performance report?*
- *Does the plan include an adequate assessment of the area's conservation situation?*
- *Do the plan's objectives and actions set out a strategic approach to enhancing the conservation status of the area?*
- *If the plan is associated with funding, is it aligned with IFC PS6?*
- *Are measurable indicators used to assess and report on conservation outcomes?*
- *Does the conservation performance report adequately report on the previous year's activities and their contribution to programme objectives?*
- *Does the report share lessons learned and, if appropriate, explain how management has been adapted?*
- *Should the area be listed or remain listed as an Audited VCA?*

A VCA can be listed as an Audited VCA at any time by submitting an audit of its conservation plan and audits of subsequent annual conservation performance reports. Alternatively, if a land manager decides not to continue with performance report audits, the area can remain listed on the Registry as a Confirmed VCA.

## 7. Approved VCA auditors

VCA managers are encouraged to nominate independent, reputable conservation professionals to audit their plans and reports. Otherwise, they can choose from the roster of auditors on the VCA website.

All VCA auditors must be approved by the **VCA Advisory Board**. Approved auditors are listed on the VCA website, and their audit reports are published on the VCA Registry.

A prospective auditor needs to submit a letter of application and a CV which includes contact information, current employment details, academic qualifications and a summary



of relevant professional experience and expertise. The letter must be signed and dated. It also needs to include the following sentence:

*I hereby request to be approved by the VCA Advisory Board as a VCA auditor and to undertake audits responsibly and with integrity in support of recognising and encouraging area-based conservation.*

## 8. The VCA's webpage

Each listed conservation area has its own webpage on the VCA Registry. The VCA's plans, reports, audits, and further information are listed on the page.

For the construction of the VCA webpage, the following information is needed:

- **Area Name** – official name
- **Description** – overview of the area, approximately 150 words
- **Size** – in hectares
- **Region** – geographical
- **Ecoregion** – using the WWF classification<sup>7</sup>
- **Status** – Audited, Confirmed or Proposed
- **Conservation Action** – summary of conservation plan, approximately 150 words
- **VCA Reports** – Management plan, annual reports, letter of support, audits
- **More Info** – additional documents and links to website, social media, videos
- **Location** – Geocode address to locate the area on a Google map
- **Three Photos** – high quality, captioned photos; normally a landscape, a native plant and a native animal

The information provided on a VCA's webpage can be updated at any time.

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<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.worldwildlife.org/biomes>