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United Kingdom  
National Commission  
for UNESCO

# UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme

## Frequently Asked Questions

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## What is the biosphere?

The biosphere comprises all parts of the land, seas, and atmosphere of Earth which living organisms are found.

## What is a biosphere reserve?

A biosphere reserve is an area that has been recognised for its unique mix of plants and animals, valued environment and sustainable way of life of the people who live and work within this area.

Biosphere reserves are designated by the Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme of UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and rely on local cooperation to ensure the careful management of the resources within biosphere reserves that allow development without harming the area for future generations.

## What are the functions of biosphere reserves?

Each biosphere reserve should fulfil three functions that work together and reinforce one another:

- **A conservation function** - to preserve genetic variation, species, ecosystems and landscapes
- **A development function** - to foster sustainable economic and human development
- **A logistic function** - to support research, monitoring, education and information exchange related to local, national and global issues of conservation and development.

## Is a biosphere reserve similar to those big domes?

No, a biosphere reserve isn't an artificially constructed area. They are real places where people live and work. The local community care for the environment and manage resources in the biosphere reserve that allow stable and sustainable economic growth and development.

## What are the benefits of biosphere reserves?

Biosphere reserves provide a framework for projects that improve people's lives and protect the environment in a sustainable way. Communities, local stakeholders and government officials gain an increased awareness of environmental and development issues.

Biosphere reserves may attract funding to demonstrate approaches to conservation and sustainable development that can provide lessons to be applied elsewhere.

## Who is in charge?

Local communities are integral elements in a biosphere reserve. The communities are key decision makers in how the biosphere reserve is run and governed, ensuring the biosphere reserve meets its functions and objectives.

## What is the difference between a biosphere reserve and a natural World Heritage Site?

A biosphere reserve is a representative ecological area with three mutually reinforcing functions: conservation, sustainable development and logistic support for scientific research and education.

Natural World Heritage Sites must have outstanding universal value in accordance with the UNESCO Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972).

## How does UNESCO ensure that biosphere reserves function properly?

Biosphere reserves are governed by “soft law”. Member States of UNESCO commit to apply the Statutory Framework for Biosphere Reserves and undertake a ten-yearly periodic review process for each biosphere reserve.

The MAB national committee in each country ensures biosphere reserves fulfil the criteria and function properly; in the UK this is the UK MAB Committee.

## How does an area become a biosphere reserve?

Organisations that wish to create a biosphere reserve need to go through a formal process set by UNESCO. Details can be found here:

<https://unesco.org.uk/become-a-unesco-biosphere-reserve/>

## How does UNESCO decide on designating an area a biosphere reserve?

UNESCO undertakes its own review and approvals procedures and makes the final decision. This includes review by a special international advisory committee of experts and then by the Bureau of the MAB Programme and its International Co-ordinating Council (ICC).

The approvals process is undertaken only once a year, so deadlines for submissions are important. Dates for submission can be found on the UNESCO website.

## What makes an area suitable to become a biosphere reserve?

Biosphere reserves are renowned for their exceptional environments and a high diversity of life. Biosphere reserves are areas where the special attributes of the area are considered to be potential assets for the local people and local societies.

When an area demonstrates good examples of using and preserving these resources, it may become a biosphere reserve.

## Are people allowed to live in a biosphere reserve?

To fulfil the criteria for biosphere reserve, people must live in the area. The concept of sustainable development depends on local support and involvement. The people living in the area are essential to biosphere reserves.

**For more information on UNESCO Man and the Biosphere Programme, click here:**

<https://www.unesco.org/en/mab>



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