

1 INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, perceptions of the environment have gone through a number of shifts, often marked by a series of landmark events. For example, the myth of 'infinite resources', which pervaded decision-making until the 1960s, gradually gave way to an era of 'environmental protection', which focused on the environmental impacts of waste production and over-consumption. This was followed in the 1970s and '80s by a 'resource management' era, which took a sectoral approach to environmental management. The paradigm of the 1990s is 'sustainable development', or the integration of environmental, social and economic goals in an holistic, equitable mix.

Landmarks in this progression include the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, also known as the Stockholm Conference of 1972, which spawned institutional mechanisms to address global environmental issues, including the United Nations Environment Programme; the World Conservation Strategy in 1980, linking conservation and development issues; the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) in 1987, which gave international recognition to the notion of sustainable development; and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, in 1992.

Over this time, increased recognition has been given to the management of information for environmental decision-making, as well as to the strengthening and networking of organisations. These priorities are vitally important to the development of national strategies, plans and programmes in support of international treaties and conventions on living resources, and are reflected both in Agenda 21 and in the articles of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

Against this background, the Darwin Initiative project entitled *Training in Biodiversity Information Management* was approved in 1996. The Darwin Initiative programme has to date supported more than one hundred and forty projects at a total cost of £15 million. This project supports three of the five principal areas on which the Darwin Initiative focuses, namely institutional capacity building, training, and assisting in the implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity.