1 INTRODUCTION

Solutions to environmental concerns are usually complex and it is not always obvious how to determine what information is needed to achieve conservation goals. This is particularly true when decision-makers have only a hazy idea of their requirements. The price for not pursuing this challenge is heavy. Without the 'right' information, there is a risk that stakeholders in environmental decisions will select inappropriate options, with potentially damaging consequences for living resources. Information needs analysis is the process whereby needs expressed in a variety of ways — narrow, broad, technical or bureaucratic — are guided into a **consistent, mutually agreed set of information priorities**. It focuses on a series of basic questions concerning information usage, such as:

- Who are the intended users of the information?
- How will it influence living resource policy or management?
- Over what time-scale is it needed?

In the rush to implement technology or shed light on natural phenomena, answers to these questions are sometimes neglected. Information needs analysis addresses this challenge by stimulating a dialogue between the researchers, data managers, analysts and publishers (i.e. information professionals) who are involved in producing information, and the target audiences (users) who need — or are perceived to need — information to improve the quality of their decisions.

In the interests of cost-effectiveness, it seems obvious that such a dialogue should take place. However, the frequency of comments such as 'the government never uses my data' or 'the information arrived too late' or 'was too detailed to understand' are testament to this not being the case. The basic questions of **what information is relevant** at a specific time, and **when, how and to whom** it should be delivered, are vital to avoid time and money being wasted on information or information systems which are not used — or usable — by decision-makers.