

STRATEGIC PLANNING
MINUTES FROM THE ILTER ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM)
COLIMA, MEXICO, OCTOBER 2005

OCTOBER 27, 2005 – DAY 1
STRATEGIC PLANNING, SESSION I

Hen-biau King, Chair of ILTER

Hen provided an overview and history of the ILTER Network. He emphasized that ILTER is at a critical juncture in its history, moving from being a *project* of the US LTER to being and *independent* organization. He laid out several key challenges to be explored during the AGM about this transition, including but not limited to:

- Moving from financial dependence on US National Science Foundation (NSF) to financial independence
- Clarifying ILTER's purpose going forward
- Determining the optimal legal structure and management plan

Hen then described the process for hiring a strategic planning consultant.

- Job announcement distributed widely, internationally
- Nearly 150 applicants narrowed down to about 10-12 who were interviewed by Hen, Steve Hamburg, and Patrick Bourgeron
- Holly Kaufman selected based on the specific set of skills desired for this project – a an organizational and management professional with a broad environmental background

Steven Hamburg, US LTER International Committee

Steve explained that in 2003, NSF had established an international committee of the US LTER as a mechanism for ILTER to transition, over two years, away from being a US-centered organization to a truly international organization.

Holly Kaufman, Strategic Planning Consultant

Holly introduced her team: Miranda Anderson, Laura Sands, and Emilene Ostlind. She then described what a strategic planning process is, what a strategic plan consists of, and the estimated timeline for the project. (See attached PowerPoint slides for Day 1.)

ILTER will have to answer several key strategic questions in the planning process, including:

- How to become a truly international organization?
- How to transition from full sole support from one national agency?
- What is ILTER's unique value to outside world?
- How does it develop an ownership culture?

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Holly also laid out the need for two active task forces: a planning task force and a development task force. The specific roles of these groups would be discussed further in the next two days.

Holly described the key elements to a successful mission statement, emphasizing that it should: be concise, be understandable to a layperson, describe ILTER's reason for existence, describe the contribution ILTER wants to make in the world, and explain what the members are working towards in common. To clarify her point, she said that : 1) a mission statement should fit on a T-shirt or you should be able to say the whole thing to someone in an elevator before they get off, and 2) if your mother read the mission, she would know what ILTER does.

The group had an initial discussion about ILTER's existing mission, which was developed at the 2004 AGM in Manaus, Brazil and is in the organization's October 2004 "Policy Document":

The mission of the ILTER Network is to develop and effectively deliver to the scientific community, policy makers, and society in general, sound scientific information and predictive understanding of ecological processes associated with large temporal and spatial scales needed to better conserve, protect, and manage ecosystems at local, regional and global scales, their biodiversity, and the services they provide.

Though some ILTER representatives felt this statement was fine, most felt that it is too wordy, and excludes critical elements. It was also noted that several versions of the mission statement exist in different ILTER documents, and that it is important to have only one operative statement (including for sharing with potential funders). Holly said that the group would re-visit ILTER's mission later during the strategic planning sessions in Mexico.

The group also examined ILTER's existing goals (See PowerPoint.) As with the mission statement, Holly noted that ILTER appeared to have more than one version of its goals, but was using the ones stated in the October 2004 Policy Document. Likewise, though some people were satisfied with the goals, the general consensus was that they were probably too wordy and ambitious.

Key outcomes of this initial discussion on mission and goals were that

- 1) The mission and goals for ILTER need to be distinct from those of the national networks
- 2) The goals should be simpler and more focused, and each goal should express only one goal rather than multiple ones

The mission and goals of ILTER were discussed in greater detail during the last strategic planning session.

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OCTOBER 28, 2005 – DAY 2
STRATEGIC PLANNING, SESSION II

Holly Kaufman, Strategic Planning Consultant

The second strategic planning session recapped the prior day's work, assesses ILTER's value to its members and its external constituents, performed a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), and touched on the establishment of two task forces to help develop the ILTER strategic and funding plans.

Key Themes of ILTER Network

Holly summarized the key themes about ILTER from the first day's strategic planning session as:

- ILTER – the international organization - has and should have a unique role distinct from the roles of the national and regional networks
- ILTER is about long-term, site-based research
- Collaboration is also a key aspect
- Internal information management and data sharing are critical
- External information delivery is also key

Network members added the following as fundamental aspects of ILTER. It should:

- Be multi-disciplinary
- Recognize environmental change
- Preserve biological legacy
- Define “long-term” as both forward and backward
- Utilize the understanding of ecosystem processes over the long-term to inform decisionmakers

Internal Value of ILTER

A lively discussion ensued about the value of an international network to its members. The discussion examined the *current* value of ILTER to its members, what the value of ILTER should be to its members in *five years*, and the value of ILTER in *ten years time*. As members brainstormed about this question, the strategic planners kept notes on a PowerPoint slide, which can be viewed as an addendum to these minutes for detailed responses. A summary is provided here.

Current value of ILTER to members includes: collaboration, increased knowledge of global trends, and increased credibility of country and regional networks.

In five years, members want ILTER's value to them to include: proof of the concept, and increased access to funding.

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In ten years, members want ILTER's value to them to include: collaboration and use of research data, data sharing, education of younger scientists, preservation of data, sustainable funding, theory development, informing decisions, predictive modeling, capacity building, incorporation of social scientists, and flexibility.

External Value of ILTER

The network members brainstormed about the value of ILTER to external stakeholders, after examining a chart that illustrated ILTER activities and competencies compared to other similar organizations. Please view the PowerPoint slides for Day 2 which include the chart and more details on this discussion.

Current value of ILTER externally includes: a focus on whole ecosystems, long-term emphasis, site-based network, interdisciplinary research, emphasis on a variety of aspects of ecology, driven by scientific inquiry (as opposed to some other agenda), government sanctioned research, and long-term capacity building.

Five year value of ILTER to external stakeholders includes: collection and preservation of valuable data, organized outreach, partnership and cooperation with socio-economic scientists, inclusion of human ecosystems, increased membership and better data coverage.

Ten year external value of ILTER includes: data that informs decision-making, increased network interactions, and wide data availability.

Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT)

Members were divided into four teams, each assigned with developing a list of ILTER's:

- Strengths (what are ILTER's *internal* assets?)
- Weaknesses (what are ILTER's *internal* deficits?)
- Opportunities (what *external* conditions exist that work in ILTER's favor?)
- Threats (what *external* conditions exist that may hinder ILTER's future?)

Each team developed lengthy lists available in the PowerPoint slides.

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OCTOBER 29, 2005 – DAY 3
STRATEGIC PLANNING, SESSION III

Holly Kaufman, Strategic Planning Consultant

The third day of strategic planning focused on refining the mission and goals, and developing the planning and development task forces. Additionally, an unscheduled conversation occurred that challenged members to assess their commitment to ILTER's future and speak candidly about their concerns and hopes.

Mission

After compiling the extremely valuable information obtained from ILTER members during the first two strategic planning sessions and questionnaires that people filled out, Holly presented a sample revised mission statement:

ILTER's mission is to inform solutions to environmental and socioeconomic problems by increasing the understanding of ecological systems through a global network of scientists engaged in long-term, site-based research.

The group largely felt that this mission had most of the correct components; however it needs further refinement. Please see the PowerPoint slides for specific comments by ILTER members. The Planning Task Force will work on the mission and comments from all members are welcome. [Miranda - DO WE WANT TO SAY THAT?]

Goals

The ILTER members discussed the organization's goals, and the need for prioritizing ILTER's efforts. Holly had asked people to say what their goals for ILTER would be if they could only name three. From that, she and her colleagues developed a very draft list of what seems to be ILTER's top five goals:

- Facilitate comparability of local, national, regional, and global ecological data
- Foster collaboration and coordination of long-term ecological research
- Facilitate exchange of, access to, and preservation of long-term, ecological data
- Deliver ecological information to decision-makers
- Educate the next generation of scientists

Members agreed that these were a good encapsulation of the main priority areas for ILTER to focus on, but that these goals still need considerable refinement and clarification. The Planning Task Force will use them as a starting point to develop appropriate organizational goals, which will help frame the strategic plan. Please see the PowerPoint slides for details of comments on these goals.

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Task Forces

Holly described the two initial task forces that are necessary to move forward on the strategic planning work:

- Planning Task Force:
 - Engages with Holly and her team to grapple with key strategic issues and decisions
 - Refines and solidifies the mission, goals, and strategies
 - Reviews documents before circulation
 - Ensures members are informed of and engaged in strategic planning
 - Coordinates with Development Committee

- Development Task Force:
 - Provides input on funding plan
 - Provides ideas and contacts for potential funders and develops relationships with potential funders
 - Coordinates review of all funding proposals for ILTER
 - Coordinates with Planning Task Force
 - Eventually, fundraises

Members Commitment

Prior to committing themselves to the strategic planning process, some members raised the question about whether the ILTER membership was fully committed to ensuring a successful future for ILTER. One member stated that if the task forces and the strategic planning were “done right” by the members, the rewards would be enormous, resulting in a successful and very valuable organization. However, he emphasized that the process would be difficult and would require significant time and commitment. He challenged his colleagues to speak up about their level of commitment to ILTER. Did members want to put in the effort and resources necessary to ensure a successful future for ILTER?

The room was silent for several minutes as people pondered this “make it or break it” question.

After a period of time, Hen-biau suggested that every person in the room respond, and the microphone was passed from person to person. Some people, especially initially, expressed uncertainty, skepticism, and doubt. The majority of people responded favorably, expressing some level of commitment to ensuring ILTER’s survival and success. People’s comments included:

- We have a unique chance *now* to do this right; we shouldn’t miss this opportunity
- ILTER has done a lot already with almost no money

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- Some country networks wouldn't exist without ILTER
- Optimistic that we're talking about this
- Can contribute partnership, fundraising, resource development, and strategic planning experience
- A non-member participant said: came here to learn, this is a turning point, good to put this on the table
- Committed and thankful for NSF support
- Committed to help
- We have a head start by having existed for 12 years, but we also have to launch this planning process as if the network didn't already exist
- The initial silence is worrisome and may indicate lack of commitment
- Let's proceed and make use of what we have, everyone brings something different from the organizational experience they have behind them
- Was hesitant to join a problematic network, but feels lucky to have joined, recognizes different needs from each country
- All of us have ILTER responsibilities already, so we need a more specific focus before we can commit more time, want to see the steps for organizing this, what tasks can we ask for funds for?
- I will commit a portion (3-5%) of time and budget to ILTER
- NSF is also willing to contribute, the transition has been difficult, we're trying to get better organized, commitment expressed here makes it worth it
- We've been working hard over the last few years to set up our own country network and are ready to contribute on a global scale (offered funding)
- We must continue our work; I am committed to contribute
- "I have never put so much commitment into anything in my life."
- Patient and committed to hard work, enthusiastic about a plentiful harvest
- Happy to hear the positive statements, believe very much in ILTER, can offer personal commitment as well as commitment from UK and Europe, will take on any role as assigned by Executive Committee, will respond to any request about how to participate in a task force
- Countries who are not here have not had this experience (of the strategic planning presentations), but we still need to get their commitment

The session concluded with a request from Holly for members to volunteer for one of the two task forces. During the upcoming field trips to MEX-ILTER sites, Holly and her team would be talking to people, seeking their input on all aspects of the planning process, and seeing which members would like to be involved in these committees and/or others that may need to be formed as the planning process unfolds.