

IUCN-Holcim Independent expert panel visits eight Holcim sites in Spain (June 2008)

Making biodiversity part of business

One of the objectives of the Holcim-IUCN agreement is to develop a more comprehensive and forceful corporate biodiversity policy and strategy at Holcim. An independent expert panel was formed to review Holcim's current practices and to recommend ways to incorporate biodiversity conservation into the Group's operations.

The only way the panel can fully understand how Holcim's operations relate to biodiversity management is to visit the sites. In June 2008 the panel conducted the first of two scheduled trips, visiting Holcim Spain and reviewing eight sites in five days.

The objectives of the site visits are to understand how Holcim selects, operates, and closes quarry sites, to record best practices and identify gaps in current quarry rehabilitation projects, and to understand how Holcim integrates biodiversity into its environmental and social impact assessments for green-field and expansion projects.

The panel visited these eight sites:

- Jerez cement plant (overview of cement operations)
- San Isidro (focus on rehabilitation of aggregate quarry)
- Cierro del Viento and Casa Colorada (marl quarries close to Jerez)
- Cabral and Dos Hermanas (quarries for Jerez cement plant)
- El Puente (sand and gravel operation and quarry, under rehabilitation)
- Gador cement plant (to attend a local stakeholder dialog meeting)

The panel gained an understanding of the challenges and opportunities Holcim faces at various sites in various stages of operation. The experts reviewed and commented on rehabilitation planning at each site, especially concerning issues identified in environmental studies and impact assessments. Holcim Spain informed the panel that the main challenges it faces are complicated permitting, public acceptance of operations, applying current regulations to historic sites, and effectively communicating that the company manages its quarries with biodiversity in mind.

Quarries can increase biodiversity

During the panel visit it became evident that good quarry management and rehabilitation can actually increase local biodiversity. The El Puente gravel pit is an active site where the rehabilitated areas have become a haven for an increasing variety of birds. Bird-watching towers have been erected on the site. The site was awarded first prize in environmental best practices by the local government. Rehabilitation plans can seek to maintain or enhance biodiversity.

It is impossible to know the original condition of some sites, either because they are too old or were acquired without historic records. Regional flora can give clues as to which species would likely thrive on a site. At the Gador plant in Almeria, Holcim Spain is evaluating a variety of plants in test plots to see which ones flourish in the local environment.

Holcim's quarries are but a speck in the regional landscape, with limited potential to expand biodiversity in the broader environment. The San Isidro quarry is surrounded by olive groves, a monoculture, highlighting the unique challenges of quarry rehabilitation in support of biodiversity.

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