

Perspective: Learning to speak about Ecosystem Services

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[Editor's note: Lead author Christian Neumann is a marine ecosystem services project manager for GRID-Arendal, a center that collaborates with the UN Environment Programme to support informed decision-making. This article is based on discussions of the focus group "Connecting people and ecosystems: How recognizing, demonstrating, and capturing ecosystem service values can support conservation and development" at the Third International Marine Conservation Congress, Glasgow, 2014.]

The recent scientific advancement of the Ecosystem Services concept and its application to planning and decision-making have increased understanding of the role that healthy, functioning ecosystems play for human well-being as well as social and economic development. Consequently, Ecosystem Services have received growing attention from policy-makers as well as the public. This increased attention reveals the science to a broader, non-scientific audience. This presents a challenge to both communities since they often do not speak a common language.

To overcome this challenge, it is worth keeping a few key aspects in mind.

1. Talk about the big picture

The concept of Ecosystem Services recognizes functional ecosystems as a foundation for social and economic development. It helps us communicate the link between very direct human needs such as clean, healthy drinking water and rather indirect management responses such as securing the quality of upstream ecosystems that provide a water purification function.

2. Know with whom you are talking

When communicating with the public, policy-makers, decision-makers, or private sector representatives, it is important to recognize that people may be familiar with the concept of Ecosystem Services but not with specific terminology. When communicating with non-scientific audiences, through press articles or stakeholder consultation, scientists should use language that reflects the reality and understanding of their audiences.

This situation-specific language should be developed through a "co-creative" process using bi-directional observation and listening. This work will not only promote a shared language; it will enhance knowledge of local Ecosystem Services and their cultural, social, and economic context.

3. Different kinds of values and metrics serve different audiences

Assessing the Total Economic Value (TEV) of Ecosystem Services, especially in monetary terms, has played an important role in bringing public attention to the value of nature's non-market elements. TEV can continue to play such a role in relevant circumstances. In the context of more concrete planning and decision-making situations, however, particularly when informing trade-off decisions, focusing on marginal values of Ecosystem Service change rather than total values may relate better to audiences' needs.

Values and metrics other than economic ones can also be highly relevant to stakeholders and decision-makers depending on local contexts and the objectives of the processes where the information is used. These include, but are not limited to, social values (e.g., safety, livelihoods, health, or social cohesion) and cultural values (such as identity or artistic or spiritual values).

Consequently, it is important to understand the target audience, its association with Ecosystem Services, and its information needs when designing and implementing assessments and valuations.

4. Credibility matters

Ecosystem Services can be used to support arguments for specific, existing objectives such as the conservation of a certain area, ecosystem, or habitat. To avoid undermining scientific credibility, it is important to reveal such objectives when communicating about Ecosystem Services. Similarly, care should be taken to not "oversell" claims about benefits associated with Ecosystem Services (e.g., coastal protection from extreme weather events) to avoid later disenchantment of stakeholders and policy- and decision-makers. Further, the usefulness of arguments for conservation based on Ecosystem Services might not work equally well in all circumstances (e.g., conservation of coastal vs. marine habitats).

Ecosystem Services as a concept is necessarily a reduction of complexity. A fine balance needs to be struck to communicate complexity without losing relevance and tangibility.

5. The language of Ecosystem Services creates new connections

When carefully applied in a relatable manner, without jargon, the concept of Ecosystem Services has the power to bring decision-makers and scientists from different disciplines together. The resulting exchanges build relationships and mutual understanding and serve to further support the concept itself.

By connecting people and ecosystems, the concept of Ecosystem Services can help reconcile environmental protection and sustainable use with social and economic development - as long as we speak a language everyone can understand.

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