

Wetlands: value to locals matters most

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A new way of valuing ecosystem services, incorporating the local perspective, is the driving force behind a project assessing aquatic ecosystems in highland areas of Asia

We know when something is valuable to our everyday lives. We do not need a price tag. This is precisely what the HighARCS project attempts to do: to measure the socio-economic value of ecosystem services, but without counting in euros, renminbi or dollars. Instead, local opinions

take precedence. "One of the first activities undertaken at each site was a situation analysis which identified the stakeholders at all levels associated with site [wetlands](#)," explains Kevin Smith, IUCN (International Union for [Conservation of Nature](#)), an [ecologist](#) involved in the EU-funded project who is based in Cambridge, UK.

Talking to the people who matter brings critical issues and conflicts out into the open. For example, "understanding who currently benefits from a wetland, in which way and who would benefit or lose from a change in the wetland is a fundamental part of decision analysis anywhere on the planet," notes environmental economist Patrick ten Brinks of the non-profit Institute for European Environmental Policy located in Brussels, Belgium. "A social and stakeholder assessment is an invaluable and essential part of a valuation. If not done, important social, economic and environmental issues risk being overlooked."

The value of local knowledge is not to be underestimated. "Valuation is therefore an important institution in itself to engender change in the way societies respond to the crises of continued wetland loss and degradation," comments Ritesh Kumar, conservation programme manager with Wetlands International South Asia, located in New Delhi, India. However, he warns that "the valuation process itself has to be credible not only as a tool for achieving economic efficiency, but also social fairness and ecological sustainability."

For example, in China, project mediation has smoothed out conflicts between local fishing and village communities and local industries and hydropower stations, located on the Beijiang River in the Guangzhou province. Dam operators upstream of the fishing villages no longer open the dam gates without warning fishermen of the impending dangers. "A typical issue which HighARCS is helping to resolve is the conflict between controlling and rule-making public authorities and the local communities having to obey these rules and regulations," Smith tells

youris.com.

Another site, in Vietnam, has identified fish of economic importance to villagers but also of biodiversity concern. A number of fish species may even be new to science, according to project coordinator Stuart Bunting, a research fellow at school of biological sciences of the University of Essex, UK. And he believes these could act as flagship species. "These flagship species will be part of a communication and education process that will include measures such as the production of 'fish rulers' for people catching fish and buying in the market," notes Smith. These will be "small durable cloth rules that show the minimum length of a fish that should be caught, allowing for the species to reach maturity and breed before being caught."

The methods adopted by HighARC, and lessons learnt, will be fed into an online toolkit that will address every step of sustainable resource management for wetlands. "Classical approaches to conservation have always tended to exclude humans from conservation planning, taken them to be drivers of ecosystem degradation and thereby tend to regulate human behaviour as a means to achieve conservation outcome," says Kumas.

"Delivering conservation in developing economies, wherein natural resources play an important role in livelihoods, needs to be based on an explicit recognition of wetlands as evolving and complex socio-ecological systems with humans as a part of the ecosystem," he concludes, adding: "Implementing this worldview of conservation is challenging and complex," and so is not in vogue in many countries.

Provided by Youris.com

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