

Assessing ecosystem services: Increasing the impact on decision making

November 5 2015



Irrigated rice fields in the Sapa region, Vietnam. Credit: Pavel Stoev

Assessments of ecosystem services (ES), aiming at informing decisions on land management, are increasing in number around the globe, but only in a few cases recommendations are then applied by decision-makers in real life. In a new paper published in the journal [*Ecology and Society*](#) a team of researchers aims to bridge the gap between scientific research and policy needs, by providing a new step-by-step problem-oriented approach for informing land-use decisions.

Often ES assessments are found to fall short in targeting information needs by [decision makers](#). To improve their applicability in practice, the research team suggests a problem-oriented approach, putting the real-life needs and issues faced by stakeholders at the core of an ES assessment.

The scientists compared existing ES assessments concepts with focus on informing land use decisions, identifying opportunities for enhancing the relevance of ES assessments for decision making. Building on extensive experience of four projects in Brazil, China, Madagascar, and Vietnam, they developed a step-wise approach for better focussing ES assessments on the information needs in land use decisions, throughout the decision process:

- Scoping phase (A): structuring ES information according to land use problems identified by stakeholders,
- Assessment phase (B): collecting context-specific ES information as needed by decision makers, and assessing relevant management options,
- Implementation phase (C): Synthesising, integrating and presenting information for decision support.

The development of each of them is broken down into several steps to provide an easy to follow workplan oriented towards maximum relevance for stakeholders.

Achieving a shared understanding of the role of ES within the social-ecological context can already be beneficial for the decision-making process. ES assessments are learning processes within which the design is refined and re-adjusted in the course of the assessment process and in response to newly acquired knowledge.

"To paraphrase Albert Einstein, assessments should be as simple as possible, but no simpler. We recognize that stepwise approaches are a

simplification of the process required to fully understand the complexities involved in social-ecological systems." comments the lead author Johannes Förster. "However, our approach is meant to provide pragmatic guidance for making ES assessments more policy-relevant by focusing the design of assessments on particular land-use problems, stakeholder priorities, and [information](#) needs to explore options for more sustainable [land management](#)."

More information: Johannes Förster et al. Assessing ecosystem services for informing land-use decisions: a problem-oriented approach, *Ecology and Society* (2015). [DOI: 10.5751/ES-07804-200331](https://doi.org/10.5751/ES-07804-200331)

Provided by Pensoft Publishers

Citation: Assessing ecosystem services: Increasing the impact on decision making (2015, November 5) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-ecosystem-impact-decision.html>

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