

# 'Guided pluralism' – an encompassing approach to ecosystem services

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Credit: Cherry Jiang from Pexels

The function of ecosystem services is to to label the benefits that

humans derive from natural ecosystems and biodiversity in order to include their value into decision-making. The area is attracting much research, but a variety of definitions and underlying paradigmatic assumptions can pose a barrier to effective interdisciplinary research.

The [ecosystem services concept](#) has seen an impressive increase in use across many disciplines and sectors in recent years. For a concept used so widely the question arises: what is the goal that lies at its centre and is there a common understanding among researchers of what it stands for and how to apply it?'

'What is needed,' state researchers working on the EU-funded [OPERAS project](#), 'is the acknowledgment that the ecosystem services (ES) concept cannot be taken for granted as a shared objective.' The team was able to identify five, clearly different perspectives among 33 researchers involved in the OPERAS project.

In 'Identifying Five Different Perspectives on the Ecosystem Services Concept Using Q Methodology' published recently in the journal 'Ecological Economics', the authors say, 'ES research requires a stronger engagement with conceptual differences and underlying normative foundations. This is important first, for researchers to design, carry out, and communicate research clearly, as well as to effectively contribute to our knowledge about [ecosystems](#) and how to manage them.'

The researchers used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative approach used Qsorts, which involves analysing a subject's perceptions through the way in which they sort statements from the literature on ecosystem services. The quantitative element of their research involved statistical analysis. This combination approach lead to the identification of five perspectives on the concept 'ecosystem services'. The team identified these as: Non-economic Utilitarian, Critical Idealist, Anti-Utilitarian, Methodologist, and Moderate

Economist.

The project explains, 'As the labels suggest, the main difference between perspectives we found to lie in value-based assumptions such as nature having an intrinsic value (or not), nature management being utilitarian (or not), or the benefits (or drawbacks) of placing a monetary value on nature.'

## **The impact of perceptions on efficient cross-sectoral research**

As OPERAS established different interpretations among researchers within their own project, they ask what the implications are for applying the concept of ES in practice. They found that rather than trying to pursue some imposed standardisation, the study's participants and the literature all point to the fact that the pluralism is beneficial. The flexibility, in which one concept means different things to many, results in collaborators from a variety of disciplines and sectors all finding a concept that is relevant to them. As the project states, 'it allows successful collaboration between stakeholders with different backgrounds and interests.'

However, OPERAS (Operational Potential of Ecosystem Research Applications) did find that open discussions, in which assumptions and views are explicitly shared, are needed to ensure diverse perspectives can be seen as an opportunity rather than a barrier. The project, composed of scientists, [researchers](#) and practitioners from 27 different organisations, found that, subject to the open discussions taking place, the ES concept can serve an important function for research and practice alike in supporting sustainable ecosystem management.

**More information:** Project website: [www.operas-project.eu/](http://www.operas-project.eu/)

Verena Hermelingmeier et al. Identifying Five Different Perspectives on the Ecosystem Services Concept Using Q Methodology, *Ecological Economics* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.01.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2017.01.006)

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