

More countries publishing ecosystem accounts, considering environment in economic decisions

January 31 2020



Many countries, including Australia, are at last realising the need for the environment and nature to take centre stage. Credit: Pixabay

New research shows that an increasing number of countries are

publishing ecosystem accounts, helping to embed nature in economic and financial decisions.

Internationally endorsed guidelines for ecosystem accounting were released by the United Nations in 2014 and provide a multidisciplinary framework that allows ecological and socio-[economic data](#), including indicators such as GDP, to be combined. This framework underpins compiling a rich and coherent evidence base on the relationship between nature, and economic and social activity.

"While progress in countries with advanced measurement systems such as Australia, Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom might be considered unsurprising, it is exciting and intriguing to see the developments underway in countries such as Guatemala, the Philippines and Rwanda," said University of Melbourne Fellow and co-author, Carl Obst.

"The range of policy applications for ecosystem accounting, from peatland management to reporting on Sustainable Development Goals, is also promising. These policy applications are a significant advance on having application specific data sets that, while useful in their own right, do not collectively convey a common environmental history."

The paper, Global progress in natural capital accounting for [ecosystems](#), finds a growing number of cases in which mainstream environmental data is being integrated with standard economic and financial data, is helping to place environmental considerations centre stage within economic and financial policy.

"The reality is clear—we depend on the environment," Mr Obst said. "It is clear when we consider the sources of our food, fibre and energy. It is clear in the ways in which the environment filters our water and air. And it is clear in the role of nature in underpinning cultures and beliefs.

Unfortunately, our revealed behaviours show we ignore this reality and we take the environment for granted."

Led by Professor Lars Hein from Wageningen University, the research recognises that people, businesses and governments regularly make decisions that treat the environment as separable and often in last place. There is increasing acceptance, however, that the environment must take centre stage. The question now is how.

Mr Obst said in Australia the development of the United Nations System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA), which has driven the latest research, is now underpinned by a nationally endorsed strategy. The SEEA EEA framework has been applied extensively in Victoria in various contexts, for example to support the State of the Bays report, in the assessment of Victoria's national parks and to provide a description of the environmental-economic connections in the Central Highlands. Victoria is also embracing ecosystem accounting in its strategic plans for biodiversity and the provision of clean air and water, he said.

"This integration makes it possible for the [environment](#) to be considered on a regular basis in everyday decisions, not just when natural disasters strike," said Mr Obst. "Further, the regular compilation and publication of ecosystem accounts provides a means for all stakeholders, including the wider community, to assess progress towards environmental sustainability using agreed measures and hence collectively shift ourselves "beyond GDP."

More information: Lars Hein et al. Progress in natural capital accounting for ecosystems, *Science* (2020). [DOI: 10.1126/science.aaz8901](#)

Provided by University of Melbourne

Citation: More countries publishing ecosystem accounts, considering environment in economic decisions (2020, January 31) retrieved 27 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2020-01-countries-publishing-ecosystem-accounts-environment.html>

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