Using ecosystem services in public engagement and dialogue on the natural environment

What opportunities and challenges arise for policy practitioners and decision makers in using an ecosystem services perspective to engage publics, and explore their priorities for the natural environment?

**Living With Environmental Change
Policy and Practice Notes**

Note No.23
December 2015

Managing the natural environment from an ecosystem services starting point has been a distinguishing feature of recent environmental research and policy and practice. Applications of the concept within decision making commonly emphasise broad and deep stakeholder engagement, but this involves working with a new language and philosophy to understand and value the natural world. What potential benefits and opportunities arise for organisations with responsibilities and interests in environmental management, such as local authorities, national delivery bodies and NGOs, when using an ecosystem services perspective to engage wider publics in dialogue about the natural environment and how it should be managed? How can barriers to communication and engagement be overcome?

What do we mean by ecosystem services when we are making decisions about the environment?

The idea of ecosystem services is the core concept in the Ecosystem Approach. This Approach:
— Promotes integrated thinking about the management of land, water and living resources.
— Might include, for example, managing catchments to reduce flood risk and improve drinking and bathing water quality, or deciding how to balance food production with other benefits from agricultural land.
— Is based on public involvement. According to the Convention on Biological Diversity making decisions about ecosystem services is first and foremost a matter of societal choice.

Why use an ecosystem services perspective as part of public engagement and dialogue?

An ecosystem services perspective can encourage public interest in, and debate about, the natural environment and its management because it:
— **Promotes holistic thinking** – bringing together a range of resource management issues into a single framework. It encourages people to understand the connections between diverse agendas and thus explore priorities in a systematic, joined-up way.
— **Makes it personal** – emphasising benefits to well-being means that the connection between the natural environment and people's quality of life is unambiguous. Priorities for the natural world are discussed in terms that matter directly to people.
— **Broadens the remit** – revealing that the natural environment is important for people's quality of life in many and diverse ways. The perspective encourages a more expansive view of the reach of environment issues.
— **Challenges assumptions** - highlighting that land can be managed for a variety of potential benefits. This helps unsettle assumptions about what land is supposed to be for, as well as people's roles in the management and use of land.
— **Acknowledges complexity** – showing that decisions about how the natural environment is managed are rarely clear cut. It therefore invites and provokes debates about the relative merits of different courses of action.
— **Provides a positive outlook** – emphasising the services and benefits of the natural environment, rather than a gloomy, problem-focused agenda implying limits or constraints on personal freedoms.

What barriers may impede the use of ecosystems services in public dialogue?

Using a novel framework in public engagement always has some drawbacks:

— **Language** – the concept of ecosystem services has currency in policy and scientific communities, but may be viewed as abstract jargon and therefore off-putting to a wider public.

— **Categories** – the categories used to group different types of ecosystem services may be confusing. For example, regulating services may be mistaken by general audiences for the practice of regulation, as in governance and law making, or the practical act of management.

— **View of nature** – the concept of ecosystem services may be taken by people to imply the natural world is purely about human gain. They may be reluctant to engage with a framework if it is thought to obscure wider duties of care and responsibility to nature.

— **Complexity** – The sheer diversity of issues conveyed by the framework of ecosystem services can be daunting. People may struggle to see how the framework can be used and how they as individuals or communities could influence change.

What role can monetary valuation evidence play?

Valuation of ecosystem services in monetary terms is a prominent strand of this perspective from an economic starting point and is designed to inform choices and priorities for the natural environment. However, there are pros and cons when using this evidence as part of the engagement process:

— Monetary valuation evidence may be viewed by people as encouraging a consumerist view of nature. Its use in decision making may be seen as analogous to commodifying nature and invite concern among people that nature is something for which public funding can be cut, or something that is currently free, but for which people will have to pay in future.

— Overreliance on monetary valuation evidence may be viewed as inadequate by people the closer to home the context for dialogue and decision making gets, in both geographical and personal terms, and the more risks and uncertainties a decision and engagement process is addressing.

— Money provides a measure of worth that many people will readily understand and this may help to promote awareness of nature's value at a broad societal level, as well as help to provoke, and set the terms of, a wider debate on valuing nature.

What are the key considerations for practitioners when using ecosystem services in public engagement and dialogue?

When organisations and groups responsible for environmental policy delivery set out to engage people from an ecosystem services starting point they need to:

— Use the concept and framework of ecosystem services to inform, rather than lead, public debate and dialogue. This means allowing people to discover ecosystem services on their own terms. A good starting point for initiating discussion is to explore the different ways people affiliate with "nearby nature". Ask general questions to build understanding and introduce key concepts, such as:
  – What matters to you about your local natural environment and why?
  – Why might your local environment be considered important to members of the community, or useful to society as a whole?

— Experiment with grammar and terminology - The use of active verbs to distinguish between types of ecosystem service may help to build understanding; eg nature "supports", "maintains", "provides" and "enriches" as opposed to "supporting", "regulating", "provisioning" and "cultural" services. In general, the idea of cultural and provisioning services may be more easily grasped by non-specialists than that of supporting and regulating services.

— Keep the language simple, but embrace the overall complexity. Although the language of ecosystem services risks being viewed as obscure or alienating people can cope with, and indeed readily acknowledge, the complexity and ambiguity of decision making implied by an ecosystem services perspective.

— Emphasise expansive and positive concepts of economic value when exploring how the natural world can be managed. In engagement processes:
  – Using terms such as "prosperity" and "investment" conveys an economic message, but is likely to resonate more deeply with societal values for the environment than economically narrow terms such as "profit" and "payment".
  – Focusing on what people and communities "save" and "gain" when society invests in nature is a more attractive economic proposition than messages focused on "costs" and "penalties".

— Encourage defensible and transparent valuation. Valuation exercises should be explicit about underlying assumptions and weaknesses.

— Put valuation on a participatory and qualitative footing. Public dialogue should be sensitive to the cultural and historical context of decisions, appraise these from an ethical point of view (rights and wrongs; winner and losers) and capture people's stories and interpretations of change alongside abstract valuation information.

Further information

LWEC Policy and Practice Note No 11: Taking account of shared and cultural values of ecosystem services
http://www.nerc.ac.uk/research/partnerships/lwec/products/ppn/ppn11/
Valuing Nature Network resources on public dialogue
http://valuing-nature.net/naturally-speaking
Sciencewise http://www.sciencewise-erc.org.uk/
UK National Ecosystem Assessment http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/
Convention on Biological Diversity https://www.cbd.int/convention/
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