Sustainability and Ethics in ES Research and Practice

Central Goal or Afterthought?

ESP 2013 Open Topic Session
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Earth Condominium
Organizing the Global Neighbourhood
THE DAY BEFORE TOMORROW
The Day After Yesterday
...Boundaries have been reached...
ES is rooted in sustainability thinking

“The ultimate goal of ES valuation is to improve the well-being of every individual, now and in the future.”
What is sustainability about?

Our existence depends on natural capital

Our behaviour impacts natural capital

Natural capital supply has limits

Everyone has rights to access a fair share

What about current ES practice?
• **Diversity** of debates, methods, tools, case studies and concepts

• But also **Common Critical Blind Spots** in ES research and practice
Four Blind spots...

1 - Limits

• Referred to as boundaries, resilience, carrying capacity, tipping points, thresholds, ...

• **Ecological sustainability value** (Costanza & Folke)

• Intuitively evident and widely recognized throughout literature as a main goal

• hardly implemented in current practice

• *Most research* -beyond introductions- *almost exclusively emphasizes efficiency without defining ecological limits to resource use*
Four Blind spots...

2 - Fairness

- Referred to as equity, solidarity, rights, common goods, benefit distribution, multiple values, option value, intangible values, ...
- **Social sustainability value** (Costanza & Folke)
- Implies equity across regions and actors.
- *Fairness should be at the core of valuation of ES, but is largely overlooked in place-based ecosystem assessments*
- Contributions from both science and practice point out that fairness and distribution issues needs to be better considered.
Four Blind spots...

3 - Complexity

- Referred to as uncertainty, data gaps, risks, complexity,....
- Agreed-upon assumptions invoke decision risks to society
- *Generally, valuations disregard the complexity factor. Dealing with complex issues requires choices, which are per definition normative*
- Rather than paralyzing practice and discarding crucial issues by focusing exclusively on minimizing uncertainties a transparent and pragmatic attitude towards complexity is needed
Four Blind spots...

4 - Reality check

• Ecosystem services is a mission-oriented concept: sustainable management of natural resources to increase human well-being has always been the final aim.

• Throughout the book, contributors refer to “practice” to locate the concept’s usefulness

• *The concept of ecosystem services risks to remain a paper concept without real life implications.*

• Evaluation of REAL resource use reduction and wellbeing redistribution should lead the way.
No Root, No Fruit...

- ES = strategic concept
- ES = vehicle
- Awareness is raised
- Implementation starts

Core arguments need to move to the forefront to succeed in real sustainable development.
What can WE do about it? In only 2 hours?

- We could check how ES assessments can aid a real-life concrete sustainability initiative

- We could initiate a WG and idea(s) to promote ethics and sustainability in ESP

...Lets do both.
Session 7...

• Part I: listen & think (one hour)
  – Joachim Spangenberg – “How can ES serve SD?”
  – Paulo Magalhães - “Earth Condominium Initiative”
  – Alexandra Aragão – “What’s Law got to do with it?”

• Part II: think and talk (one hour)
  – ES assessments as indicator for the earth condominium initiative?
  – ESP WG-sustainability: mission, strategies, publication?
Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree that these are “blind spots”?
   1. Limits to resource use – ecological value
   2. Benefit distribution – fairness value
   3. Complexity of socio-ecological systems
   4. Real life impacts of ES projects

2. What can we do about it?

3. Which steps can a sustainability working group take?

4. How could we evaluate ES projects?

5. Is the UNESCO proposal for the intangible natural heritage useful and why (not)?

6. How could ES assessments be legally implemented to manage the intangible natural heritage?
Do you agree that these are “blind spots”?

- Limits to resource use – ecological value
- Benefit distribution – fairness value
- Complexity of socio-ecological systems
- Real life impacts of ES projects
What can we do about it?
Which steps can a sustainability working group take?
How could we evaluate ES projects?
Is the UNESCO proposal for the intangible natural heritage useful and why (not)?
How could **ES assessments be legally implemented** to manage the intangible natural heritage?