

Cultural ecosystem services: from non-materialities to relationalities

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Short Abstract

The construction of culture as a class of ecosystem service presents an interesting test of the ambitions of an ecosystems approach to decision making. This paper explores the theoretical conundrums arising from efforts to understand ecosystems as objects of cultural concern and considers the operational complexities associated with understanding how, and with what consequences, knowledge about cultural ecosystem services are created, communicated and accounted for in real world decision making. The paper specifically forwards and develops a conceptual framework for understanding cultural ecosystem services in terms of the environmental spaces and cultural practices that arise from interactions between humans and ecosystems. The types of knowledge, and approaches to knowledge production, presumed by this relational, non-linear and place-based perspective on cultural ecosystem services are discussed and reviewed.

Long Abstract

The construction of culture as a class of ecosystem service presents an interesting test of the ambitions of an ecosystems approach to decision making. This paper explores the theoretical conundrums arising from efforts to understand ecosystems as objects of cultural concern, and outlines a conceptual framework for understanding of cultural ecosystem services that specifically departs from readings of cultural ecosystem services as a priori products of nature that people utilise for a particular benefit to well-being. We argue that cultural services are best understood as processes and things that people actively create and express through interactions with ecosystems. We specifically advance a definition of cultural ecosystem services as the contributions ecosystems make to human well-being in terms of identities they help frame, the experiences they help enable and the capabilities they help equip.

Key conceptual and analytical themes running through our argument include making distinctions between: *cultural values* - collective norms and expectations that influence how ecosystems accrue meaning and significance for people; *environmental spaces* - the places, localities, landscapes and seascapes in which people interact with each other and the natural environment; *cultural practices* - expressive, symbolic and interpretive interactions between people and the natural environment; and, *cultural benefits* - dimensions of human well-being that can be associated with these interactions between people and the natural environment. More generally the framework seeks to make clear the distinction between cultural services and benefits, which have tended to conflate in research and practice and this we suggest has erroneously often served to construct cultural services as a purely intangible and non-material domain. This conflation is not inconsistent with analytical distinctions made in the ecosystem services framework, but undermines the utility of concept from the perspective resource management. It also obscures a wider theoretical

tradition of cultural studies research recognising and exploring culture as a material artefact.

At the heart of our argument is the idea that the many and varied cultural goods and benefits associated with ecosystems arise from cultural practices and the related cognitive, non-cognitive and embodied interactions occurring between people and a range of (culturally constructed) environmental spaces. Thus, the emphasis of the framework rests on explicitly rejecting linear and unidirectional constructions of the contributions ecosystems may make to well-being, calling instead for a relational focus. As such it is consciously designed to disavow the ecosystems approach of any tendency toward simplistic environmental determinisms when making the case for nature in decision making, or more specifically when imagining the role of culture in environmental concerns. We argue this approach is an important development on existing accounts of cultural ecosystem services in the published literature.

Understanding and accounting for cultural ecosystem services is argued to be an essentially interpretive and plural issue: what matters, where and why is always open to cultural revision and debate. We argue the challenge facing the decision maker and environmental manager is how to approach culture in ecosystem management in ways that reveal, recognize and dignify this inherent diversity whilst avoiding the idea culture is simply outside the ambit of systematic appraisal when developing and approaches to and options for ecosystem management. In this vein our framework implies the need for methodological plurality; interplaying and blending together sources and forms of evidence that straddle official and informal, tangible and intangible, as well as cognitive and physical elements of human interactions with a range of environmental spaces. Disaggregated in term of spaces, practices and benefits, the concept of cultural ecosystem services lends itself to a range of assessment approaches that can provide a varied and robust evidence base to aid decision making. The specific types of knowledge, and approaches to knowledge production, presumed by this relational, non-linear and place-based perspective on cultural ecosystem services are discussed and reviewed.