

ESEE Conference

PORES workshop: stepping into the debate of power relations and ecosystem services

Short abstract

We believe there is an urgent need to address power relations of and within the ecosystem services (ES) framework. During 23-24 October 2014, in a workshop (PORES) held in the Universidad Pablo de Olavide of Seville, 22 academics participated at a critical and innovative space for debate on this topic. Given the aim of this Special Session to continue that moment, in this contribution we will present the lines along which the debate at PORES flowed. The debate pivoted around two scales of analysis: the power of the ES framework itself, and the analysis of power relations in ES research. Debates and proposals emerged both in terms of theory/epistemology and methods/tools to be applied in ES research. An overall reflection was expressed that the relation between the ES framework and power relations' analysis is a meta-framework, a starting point of a path difficult to go across.

Extended abstract

We depart from the assumptions that 1) power relations are inherent to any life process and 2) there are some socio-cultural aspects of human-nature relationships and environmental challenges that are not sufficiently explicit within the ecosystem services framework (ES) framework. Based on those ideas, we believe there is an urgent need to address power relations of and within the ES research. During 23-24 October 2014, in a workshop (PORES) held in the Universidad Pablo de Olavide of Seville, a critical space for debate on this was opened. Given the aim of this Special Session to continue that moment, in this contribution we will present the lines along which the debate at PORES flowed.

Twenty-two academics from different research areas (e.g. ecological economics, political ecology, environmental anthropology, agronomy, policy) participated. The structure of PORES workshop was divided in four moments: 1) a set of presentations by participants about positions and suggestions in regard to the topic and guiding questions (see 2)) or about case studies, 2) a world-café in which four guiding questions we addressed by all participants, 3) an open-dialogue where emerged topics/ideas were addressed in small affinity groups through which participants could move, and 4) an application of proposed ideas to a case study. In the first part the four questions addressed were: 1) '(why) is it necessary to incorporate power relations analysis within the ES framework?', 2) 'how have power relations been approached in ES research until now?', 3) 'how could power relations' analysis be introduced in the ES framework?', and 4) 'what positive and/or negative consequences could derive from the integration of power relations in ES research?'. In the second part participants worked in four groups generated after a collective brainstorming and assemblage of related ideas. The four groups generated were: 1) commons, 2) trade-offs, 3) how does/should power operate in relation to the ES framework and 4) ethics and action-research. Finally, looking for a practical application of ideas, small groups of 3-4 participants elaborated methodological proposals to introduce a power

relations' perspective in the project "Adaptive governance of mountain ecosystem services for poverty alleviation enabled by environmental virtual observatories (MOUNTAIN-EVO)".

Overall the debate pivoted around two scales of analysis. The first one was **the power of the ES framework itself**. Power relations are inextricably linked to the evolution of the ES scientific framework, which even if conceived by environmental scientists to raise awareness about human dependence on nature, has largely been adopted by economists and policy makers. However, the instrumental perspective of nature as generator of well-being for human populations -inherent to ES-, when exported to certain contexts in which this is not a usual/accepted view, has ethical and political consequences.

The hidden power of the ES framework makes it necessary, hence, to distinguish between different actors, cultures, disciplines, methodologies, researchers, policy-makers, funding agencies, and international research initiatives. Some examples of power mentioned were the monetary valuation of ES, the use of scientific discourses by governments for their interests, and the application of theoretical frameworks in contexts where the notion of well-being is not equivalent to ours. This poses also questions such as: how to deal with our own power within the system (particularly in action-research)? How does the introduction of the ES framework change the system of interest? How does that change affect the research?

Participants agreed that the ES framework embodies relevant but implicit assumptions that are strongly political and that the current monetary and biophysical approaches to ES attract more attention. This bias could be smoothed by the incorporation of the analysis of power relations, hence increasing the attention to the socio-cultural and political dimensions of human-nature relations.

The second scale of analysis at PORES was **within the ES framework**, about how power relations' analysis might serve to make more visible inequities and trade-offs both between stakeholders that are responsible for the provision or use of ES, and of these in relation to the ecosystems' capacity to deliver ES.

From a theoretical perspective, power has been defined historically in very different ways by philosophers such as Weber and Foucault, and can hence be analysed from several different perspectives, e.g. gender, class or analytic perspectives (e.g. economy-centered, anthropocentric, occidental, Euro-centric). An in-depth exploration of previous work on power would be of much interest for ES research.

In fact, participants at the workshop agreed that power relations have only partly been addressed in ES until now, particularly from critical geography, institutional analysis and political ecology analyses. Mostly the consequences of certain policies derived from the adoption of the ES framework, particularly within the arena of payments for ES, have been explored. However, the analysis of power relations in ES should not be treated as an independent element within a research, but rather as a transversal component in every research about social-ecological systems.

Several pros and cons for the integration of power relations' analysis in ES research were highlighted. A positive element would be that 1) it might enable better informed valuations of ES, 2) it would facilitate political ecology analyses of environmental conflicts and 3) it might contribute to evidence hierarchies e.g. in the access to natural resources, between actors, in decision-making. In order to do this, the identification and understanding of local perceptions of justice, fairness and power

are needed.

In contrast, as negative potential outcomes, a concern was expressed that 1) the incorporation of power analysis within the ES framework might increase its complexity and hinder its analytic capacity and 2) its usefulness for communication with policy makers and the general public might be hampered.

A proposal emerged to consider the concept of 'commons' in relation to the one of ES, as it could help in the conceptualization of the relations between humans and nature. Particularly when dealing with goods/services such as water, air or care that are fundamental for the reproduction of life in all its forms, the instrumentalisation of social-ecological functions is insufficient. In such cases, the notion of commons shows a great potential and poses a new question: how can we ensure the existence of those goods/services without turning to the market?

In relation to the methods/tools to be used in order to analyse power relation in ES demand, an overall concern about ethical issues was risen. For instance, if the revelation of power relations within a social-ecological system breaks an equilibrium reached for the survival of the losers, these might be subject to violence or further displacement. Normative principles of research need hence to be acknowledged.

When addressing a social-ecological system not only actors should be identified and characterised, but also their relative positions in the networks of demand of each ES, as well as actors' practices (e.g. policy making, land property tenure, forest resources extraction, farming practices) that influence ecosystem's capacity to deliver ES. The meaning and value given by each actor to each ES (e.g. monetary, spiritual, material) needs to be assessed in order to identify the adequate methodological tools to be used for the identification of power relations and trade-offs.

In addition, the time and spatial scale at which the attention is paid in each case is relevant to adequately address power relations. For instance, at local scale, ethnography might be a useful tool, while at larger scales other tools from political ecology could fit better. Trade-offs between actors in the use of ES might be also displaced in time, e.g. if someone's use of a certain ES excludes the future use of this or other ES by others. In addition to these, other types of trade-offs were mentioned: e.g. between users and SE, between different users, in decision-making, in the methodological tools. In fact, the analysis of trade-offs was noted to have a potential strategic value for the inclusion of power relations within ES research. Additionally, as a two-way-benefit, participants observed that ES analysis might contribute to identify power relations between different actors.

An overall reflection was expressed that the relation between the ES framework and power relations' analysis is a meta-framework, a starting point of a path difficult to go across. Might this be the start of a crisis of the ES framework? If so, how will it be transformed or substituted? Do we keep the operative concept 'thin' or do we describe it 'thick' and explicitly include political and normative concerns? If the nature of the ES concept is changed, would it still be salient? Would the epistemic metaphor loose political power?