

Trials, Tribulations and Transformations: Cultural Ecosystem Services and Pastoral Futures in Mongolia

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Abstract

In contemporary Mongolia, ecosystem services thinking is becoming increasingly influential in contemporary policy initiatives and in framing decision-making around rural futures. These issues are brought into particularly sharp relief by the recent, rapid proliferation of mining activities, which look set to transform economic growth and trajectories. Such transformations are nonetheless profoundly troubling in a number of respects, not least in relation to national identities and contested values around environmental goods and services. In parallel with the growth of mining activities, pastoralism remains an important livelihood strategy for many, with traditional nomadic identity and heritage retaining symbolic and cultural value, as well as practical resonance. Mongolia's commitments to key conservation agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) further problematise understandings and recognition of diverse environmental values and spatial struggles over land rights and land use. Recent examples of the permeation of ES thinking and commodification of natural resources into the policy sphere include the work of a national taskforce to develop a REDD+ roadmap, supported by international carbon finance. A recent UNDP-led initiative has undertaken the economic valuation of Mongolia's protected area system, with the rationale to quantify economic benefits of protected areas (PAs) and their ecosystem services as a tool for policy and decision-making, including through evaluation of trade-offs with alternative land uses. Other sectors are increasingly using ecosystem-based assessment techniques to evaluate costs of alternative responses to environmental change. For example in June 2012 the then Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment and Tourism (MNET) launched a project for ES-based adaptation for water security, to include valuation of ES, aimed at measuring economic costs and benefits of alternative adaptation strategies.

What is common to these diverse issues and projects is their overriding emphasis on economic values and valuation techniques and on provisioning services. Theoretical, methodological and policy-oriented engagement with cultural ecosystem services and with diverse (including non-economic) values and valuation methods remains a major and an increasingly important lacuna in contemporary resource governance and planning. In 2012 an interdisciplinary team of Mongolian and UK-based academics and practitioners initiated a new project to contribute to attempts to address these spaces and silences. In this paper results of this recently completed Darwin Initiative project, '*Values and Valuation: New Approaches to Conservation in Mongolia*' (2012-2015) are used to explore and critique diverse approaches and methods to elicitation of ES values, with a particular emphasis on integrated, participatory approaches and on cultural ecosystem services. The paper further examines the trials and tribulations encountered in the incorporation of these values into an innovative Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) schemes and into policy.

Biodiversity conservation policy is a particular focus. Appropriate valuation of biodiversity and ES is a priority for the Mongolian government with respect to CBD commitments and as enshrined in national conservation strategies. It is also critical in enabling informed decision-making over trade-offs between conservation,

pastoralism and other land uses, notably mining. However, prior to the Darwin project, participatory non-economic valuation, and elicitation of multiple values around ES, especially CES, have been accorded relatively little emphasis in practice, despite widespread reference in policy documents to local knowledge, values and tradition as potential resources for conservation. Since 2012, our work at four case study sites in diverse ecological regions (forest-steppe; steppe; desert-steppe) and with local herders has encompassed valuation and mapping of key ES, including participatory non-economic valuations and evaluation of contributions to biodiversity conservation and well-being. Novel analysis of spatialities of ES, using the SOLVES model, has also been applied. At selected sites these analyses of the nature, spatialities and values of ES have subsequently been used to inform the development of an innovative rangeland PES scheme, through links to the Plan Vivo standard. This has necessarily entailed attempting to render legible local values and concepts of CES and to enshrine them within a market driven standard, albeit one which has recently expanded beyond the basic carbon metric to admit of a greater diversity of ES. Conceptually and through this case study the paper therefore engages with both theoretical and methodological concerns and innovations, and with (limitations in) the translation of new approaches to CES into policy.

Summary

In contemporary Mongolia, ecosystem services thinking is becoming increasingly influential in decision-making around rural futures. In parallel with the growth of mining activities in rural spaces, pastoralism remains an important livelihood strategy, with nomadic identity and heritage retaining symbolic and cultural value, as well as practical resonance. Nonetheless, to date applications of ES-based approaches have placed overriding emphasis on economic values and valuation techniques and on provisioning services. Theoretical, methodological and policy-oriented engagement with cultural ES and with diverse values and valuation methods remains a major lacuna in contemporary resource governance and planning. This paper reports on a recently completed Darwin Initiative project at four sites across Mongolia, which begins to address these spaces and silences. Specifically, analyses of the nature, spatialities and values of (cultural) ES and their translation into an innovative rangeland PES scheme are presented, with reflections on attendant methodological challenges and innovations.