

Introduction

SPECIAL SECTION: FORUM ON VALUATION OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES

The value of ecosystem services

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There has been much recent interest in the topic of ecosystem services and their value to society, stimulated, in part, by the recent paper in *Nature* (Costanza et al., 1997—reprinted in this issue)¹ and a book collecting several recent studies (Daily, 1997). These are certainly complex and controversial issues, but ones that are central to ecological economics (Bingham et al., 1995) and to the prospects for sustainability. They also elicit an extremely wide range of views. The aim of the forum was to further the discussion and stimulate new ideas on these topics. We were not seeking merely friendly affirmation, nor were we seeking merely critiques of the above works (although this certainly needs to be part of the process). Rather, we were hoping to encourage thoughtful discussion and commentary on the fundamental issues these works raise from a range of different perspectives and extensions to new, as yet uncharted areas.

¹ The paper received broad media coverage, including stories in the NY Times, *Newsweek*, *Science*, *Science News* and *US News and World Report* and reports on US National Public Radio and the BBC. It was also included as one of Discover magazine's top 100 science stories for 1997.

To further this goal, we invited a selection of well-known economists, ecologists and others to contribute commentaries to this Forum.² Their responses appear following the reprinted *Nature* paper. As you will see, they indeed cover a range of perspectives, from those who basically agree that this work is important but raise other important issues, to those who question the wisdom of the exercise of valuing ecosystem services itself, to those who question the validity of the methods used. But most contributors also have something new to add to the mix. The Forum closes with a response from the authors of the *Nature* paper to the issues raised in the invited commentaries.

As the lead author of the *Nature* paper, I can say that one of the primary goals in writing it was to stimulate discussion. We knew that the very idea of coming up with an estimate of the global value of ecosystem services and the crude and imperfect methods we used would provide large and easy targets for academic sharpshooters from

² *Nature* itself was not prepared to handle such an elaborate and broad-ranging discussion. We also established an email forum, immediately following the publication of the paper. See: <http://csf.Colorado.EDU/seminars/ecovalue/> for an archive of those comments.

the entire spectrum of disciplines. But there are much larger issues at stake and one cannot make progress without taking the first, crude and shaky steps.

The National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis (NCEAS), which funded the initial study, is also funding an ongoing working group on the value of ecosystem services to advance the work in this general area. In addition to providing a broad ranging set of perspectives on the issue of the value of ecosystem services and a critical review of the initial studies, the commentaries in this forum will be helpful in directing the next steps in the process towards those that are most effective and productive.

References

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