

Takeaway Summary – Stakeholder engagement

Project Purpose

Ecosystem Services inherently involve people whose values define the benefits of nature's services. Thus researchers need to involve stakeholders to make ecosystem services meaningful. However, it can be challenging to appropriately identify and meaningfully engage stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is a key component of OPERAs and each of the 12 OPERAs exemplars (case studies) has engaged stakeholders in different ways. In this paper, we synthesize our experiences from surveys and interviews with the 12 exemplar leads to gain insights into what worked well, where there were challenges, and what might be best practices for stakeholder engagement in ecosystem services research.

Initial Findings

Among the common themes we have identified thus far:

- The term “ecosystem services” may not resonate with stakeholders even though they intuitively understand the concept. For example, birdwatchers may know that birds depend on a healthy marine ecosystem but think more in terms of concrete things like breeding grounds. It is thus important to connect ecosystem services to their reality.
- Identification of benefits provided by ecosystem services may differ depending on the stakeholder. For example, while researchers might value sand dunes for biodiversity, local residents may care that the dunes provide flood protection. It is important to understand what different stakeholders care about and approach the work in ways that resonate with them.
- Involvement of different stakeholders can foster relationships and communications that might otherwise be missing or contentious. For example, an NGO might be a conduit of information between scientists and residents who might not otherwise interact.
- Stakeholders are often asked to give a lot of themselves and thus need to understand what they will get out of participating to motivate their involvement.

Why is this important?

Much has been written about the importance of engaging stakeholders, but how it actually plays out can vary greatly. Given the diversity of experiences amongst the OPERAs exemplars, OPERAs provides an excellent case study through which to explore on-the-ground, day-to-day challenges and successes of stakeholder engagement in ecosystem services research.

Who benefits from this?

Both academics and stakeholders will benefit from insights that encourage more successful interactions between them.

How could this be used in policy or practice?

Our hope is that the insights from the paper will be used in practice by academics looking to meaningfully engage stakeholders in ecosystem services research.