

Government: Plan for ecosystem services

Natural and managed ecosystems provide food, water, and other valuable services to human societies. Unnoticed by many in the scientific community, the values associated with ecosystem services have been integrated into U.S. government policy. A recent administration memo (1) put U.S. federal agencies on notice: The clock is ticking to integrate ecosystem services into their planning and decision-making. By 30 March 2016, agencies are to describe approaches for “conducting decision-relevant and scale-specific ecosystem-services assessments, as well as plans for effective monitoring and evaluation.” The administration stresses that such policies may be most effective when incorporated into existing decision-making frameworks.

As members of the Ecological Society of America’s (ESA’s) Steering Committee on the Intergovernmental Platform for Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (2), we urge U.S. federal agencies to consider how this recent mandate provides opportunities to leverage the global impact of IPBES while achieving national policy objectives. IPBES, which was established with support from the United States but not mentioned in the administration’s memo, provides scientific assessments of the state of biodiversity and ecosystem services (3). At its fourth plenary, one month before the administration’s deadline, IPBES will likely approve the first of its global ecosystem service assessments.

We encourage U.S. federal agencies to familiarize themselves with these assessments and the ongoing IPBES work program. Creating a cross-agency policy agenda for understanding, monitoring, and managing ecosystem services in the United States would reduce the risk of scattered and inconsistent national-level policy mechanisms and would align U.S. policy and IPBES goals. Seeking input from the country’s scientific community would help build a secure foundation for these policies and offer U.S. scientists an opportunity to contribute their knowledge to the scientific foundations upon which effective environmental policy rests.

Lucas N. Joppa,^{1*} James W. Boyd,² Clifford S. Duke,³ Stephanie Hampton,⁴ Stephen

T. Jackson,⁵ Katharine L. Jacobs,⁶ Karim-Aly S. Kassam,⁷ Harold A. Mooney,⁸ Laura A. Ogden,⁹ Mary Ruckelshaus,¹⁰ Jason F. Shogren¹¹

¹Microsoft Research, Redmond, WA 98052, USA. ²Resources for the Future, Washington, DC 20036, USA.

³Ecological Society of America, Washington, DC 20036, USA.

⁴Washington State University, Center for Environmental Research, Education and Outreach, Pullman, WA 99164, USA.

⁵United States Geological Survey, Southwest Climate Science Center, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA. ⁶University of Arizona, Center for Climate Adaptation Science and Solutions, Tucson, AZ 85721, USA.

⁷Cornell University, Department of Natural Resources, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA. ⁸Stanford University, Department of Biological Sciences, Stanford, CA 94305, USA.

⁹Dartmouth University, Department of Anthropology, Hanover, NH 03755, USA. ¹⁰The Natural Capital Project, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA. ¹¹University of Wyoming, College of Business, Laramie, WY 82071, USA.

*Corresponding author. E-mail: lujoppa@microsoft.com

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