ENVIRONMENTAL DETERIORATION IN RURAL MEXICO: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT


An overview of the theoretical framework on environmental deterioration reveals a lack of definition of the concepts and terms related to this issue. Several terms, such as "desertification" and "fragmentation," among others, are widely used by ecologists but are clearly not synonymous with environmental deterioration. A consequence of this vagueness is the lack of clear criteria to differentiate areas that are only moderately modified from those in which true deterioration has occurred. Also, unified methods to efficiently evaluate environmental deterioration in rural areas are lacking.

Based on the conceptual review and the analysis of the case study, we suggest that environmental deterioration comprises at least three clearly distinct dimensions: the abiotic setting, the biological attributes, and the social characteristics of the process. Finally, we define environmental deterioration as any modification of the environment that implies a reduction or loss of its physical and biological qualities, caused by natural phenomena or human activities, ultimately representing a decrease in the availability of ecosystem goods and services to human populations.

The methods used to evaluate environmental deterioration at La Montaña allowed us to separate modifications that cause deterioration from those that do not. This investigation, carried out in a relatively short time and with a minimum financial investment, yielded a satisfactory assessment of the state of the environment at the regional and community scales, recognizing early indicators of deterioration. This approach may be particularly useful in rural regions that share many characteristics with La Montaña, such as critical environmental problems, extreme poverty, and insufficient background information about these issues.

Keywords: ecosystem goods and services, environmental alteration, damage, and risk, environmental deterioration, components of, environmental deterioration, analytical framework, environmental deterioration in rural Mexico, land degradation in developing countries, land misuse, chronic, La Montaña region (Guerrero), Mexico, social/economic factors in environmental degradation

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