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A Critical Analysis of Ecosystem Services as a Tool in Conservation Projects

The Possible Perils, the Promises, and the Partnerships

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Human modifications of the environment are growing in number and geographic extent, expanding to all of the Earth's surfaces and affecting the vast majority of the Earth's natural resources. Increases in demand for resources, growing levels of poverty, and more extensive urbanization, among other changes, lead to a need to move beyond parks and classic conservation approaches to incorporate humans and working landscapes more directly in conservation efforts. One approach to do this is to focus on ecosystem services, the benefits ecosystems provide to humans. Here conservation projects that focus only on biodiversity are analytically compared with those that include ecosystem-service goals to dispel myths and explore promises. Projects conducted by The Nature Conservancy, the world's largest conservation organization, are used, and it is demonstrated that not only do ecosystem-service approaches engage new landscapes, stakeholders, and funding sources, but that they do so without neglecting traditional biodiversity goals and the traditional approaches of protection and preservation. Seven case studies that uniquely create a broker-type structure to determine how to distribute money for the provision of particular services to the satisfaction of a wide range of stakeholder interests are focused on. It is found that all use local, independent leadership to initiate partnership formation, which then leads to the creation of a separate institutional entity that has legal rights to determine fund provision. The activities encouraged by these entities, and which therefore appear to satisfy a wide array of interests, are supporting education, rewarding best management practice, creating jobs, and monitoring outcomes.

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