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Abstract

Implementing any conservation intervention, including Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), in the context of weak institutions is challenging. The majority of PES programs have been implemented in situations where the institutional framework and property rights are strong and target the behaviours of private landowners. By contrast, this paper compares three PES programs from a forest landscape in Cambodia, where land and resource rights are poorly defined, governance is poor, species populations are low and threats are high. The programs vary in the extent to which payments are made directly to individuals or to villages and the degree of involvement of local management institutions. The programs were evaluated against three criteria: the institutional arrangements, distribution of costs and benefits, and the conservation results observed. The most direct individual contracts had the simplest institutional arrangements, the lowest administrative costs, disbursed significant payments to individual villagers making a substantial contribution to local livelihoods, and rapidly protected globally significant species. However, this program also failed to build local management organisations or understanding of conservation goals. By contrast the programs that were managed by local organisations were slower to become established but crucially were widely understood and supported by local people, and were more institutionally effective. PES programs may therefore be more sustainable when they act to empower local institutions and reinforce intrinsic motivations.

Keywords

Biodiversity conservation; PES; Direct payments; Common-pool resources; Ecotourism; Institutions

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