

Policy Brief

Recognizing and Valuing Ecosystem Services in Protected & Conserved Areas

Executive Summary

Ecosystem services, the myriad ways natural environments contribute to human well-being, have increasingly become a focal point in global environmental policy. In Eastern and Southern Africa, integrating ecosystem services into protected area management is crucial for advancing both conservation and socio-economic goals. Based on the findings of the second State of Protected and Conserved Areas Report, this policy brief outlines the importance of recognizing and valuing these services, providing a guide for protected area authorities to incorporate ecosystem service considerations into their strategies. It highlights the trade-offs between biodiversity protection and ecosystem services, the distinction between potential and realized services, and the strategic investments needed to enhance benefits. The brief also emphasizes the need for accurate valuation and management of ecosystem services to ensure effective conservation and sustainable use of natural resources.

Introduction

Over the past thirty years, international environmental policies have increasingly focused on how people benefit from nature, leading to concepts like ecosystem services, natural capital, and nature-based solutions. These terms, while overlapping, reflect different aspects of how ecosystems support human life. Globally, the Kunming-Montréal Global Biodiversity Framework emphasizes conserving areas critical for ecosystem services, and the Kigali Call to Action advocates for including unprotected areas in conservation strategies.

Historically, protected areas in Eastern and Southern Africa prioritized biodiversity conservation, often neglecting the broader array of ecosystem services. This has led to a gap in managing these services effectively. Many protected areas were established without considering the diverse benefits that ecosystems provide, such as water purification, climate regulation, and recreational opportunities. As a result, there is insufficient data on how to manage these services and their value compared to other conservation priorities.



Trade-offs Between Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

The trade-off between protecting biodiversity and managing ecosystem services is complex. While biodiversity-focused strategies may not always align with optimal ecosystem service provision, integrating both can lead to more balanced and effective conservation outcomes. Authorities should tailor their strategies to protect and manage ecosystem services while considering potential trade-offs and the needs of local communities.

The concept of ecosystem services includes various types such as provisioning (e.g., food, water), regulating (e.g., climate control), cultural (e.g., recreation), and supporting services (e.g., nutrient cycling). Recent developments have expanded this idea to "nature's contributions to people," emphasizing diverse worldviews and local contexts. This shift underscores the need for protected area authorities to identify and cater to different beneficiaries, ranging from local communities relying on subsistence resources to global stakeholders benefiting from climate regulation.

Understanding the difference between natural capital stocks (e.g., a herd of wildebeest) and ecosystem service flows (e.g., annual population growth) is crucial for sustainable management. Protecting natural capital while managing ecosystem service flows ensures that resources are not depleted faster than they can regenerate.

Strategic investment can enhance the benefits derived from ecosystem services. Investment in ecological infrastructure, such as wetlands and coastal dunes, can replace or complement built infrastructure, often at a lower cost. Additionally, improving access to ecosystem services through investments in sectors like ecotourism can unlock significant economic value. These investments should align with the protected area's management objectives and the needs of its beneficiaries.

Quantifying the value of ecosystem services is essential for informed decision-making. While there are concerns about the commodification of nature, valuation provides a practical means to assess policy trade-offs and integrate natural capital into broader economic systems. Efforts to integrate ecosystem services into national accounting frameworks are ongoing, with positive examples from Uganda and South Africa.

In Eastern and Southern Africa, there is a notable lack of reliable data on ecosystem service values. Analysis reveals that, on average, the monetary value of ecosystem services is higher outside protected areas, though some services, such as recreation and tourism, are more



valuable within these areas. This suggests that protected areas can enhance certain types of ecosystem services but may need to balance access and protection to maximize benefits.

Recommendations

To address these challenges, protected area authorities should:

1. **Prioritize Valuation Studies:** Invest in collecting data on ecosystem services to fill regional gaps and inform policy decisions.
2. **Integrated Landscape Management:** Look beyond protected area boundaries for a comprehensive approach to ecosystem service management.
3. **Targeted Investments:** Focus on services compatible with protection and align strategies with local contexts and stakeholder values.

Conclusion

Integrating ecosystem services into protected area management in Eastern and Southern Africa is essential for achieving sustainable conservation and enhancing human well-being. By acknowledging the diverse benefits provided by nature, addressing data gaps, and making strategic investments, protected area authorities can better balance conservation goals with the needs of people and the environment.

