



Telling the Story of Nature's Benefits

Finding the most compelling way to talk about preserving healthy natural areas has been a challenge for decades. In many cases, environmental arguments hinge on the need to protect natural areas for their intrinsic worth. While that argument works for some audiences, it is vulnerable to traditional economic analyses that portray conservation measures as “too expensive.” The good news is that healthy natural areas provide a host of benefits to surrounding communities—it’s just the value of those benefits has been traditionally overlooked.

A movement is growing to calculate the benefits provided by well-functioning ecosystems and ensure these benefits are factored into land and resource management. This approach is typically called “ecosystem services,” and it covers a growing range of very different projects—from a city contemplating planting trees along a local creek in lieu of constructing a cooling tower, to calculating the value of services provided by urban forests. Essentially, these efforts and ecosystem services as a whole are reframing the debate over land management decisions that affect millions of acres of public and private land. However, champions of ecosystem services struggle to articulate what they are trying to do and win the support they need to be successful.

MAKING A BETTER CASE

Polling shows that Americans overwhelmingly support the idea of calculating the benefits of nature, but the language currently used to describe ecosystem services projects is a mix of scientific and financial jargon. In 2012 Resource Media, with support from the Bullitt Foundation, conducted a preliminary assessment of how the concept of ecosystem services is being communicated in the media and by government/NGO proponents. Our report contained the following messaging recommendations:

- Instead of “ecosystem services,” talk about nature’s value/benefits.
- Acknowledge the incalculable benefits provided by nature before talking about dollar values.
- When it comes to nature’s benefits, focus on those that are most tangible, easy to understand and beneficial for public health and safety.

As with any process that involves resource management, public dollars and complex scientific concepts, the potential for controversy and blowback is significant—which makes how practitioners talk about their projects critically important.

How much are trees lining a river worth? Under traditional economic modeling, nothing beyond their lumber value. But trees provide a host of valuable functions: shade to keep water cool for fish and other aquatic life, filtration to remove pollution and keep water clean and stream bank stability to prevent erosion.

By calculating the tangible and intangible benefits of nature and incorporating those valuations in land and resource management decisions, we address a gap in traditional economic analysis and ensure protection of healthy natural systems makes dollars and cents.

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Project Types

Making the Case

Projects that calculate the value provided by natural systems.

Incentivizing

Good Land Management

Projects that encourage the use of mechanisms to pay landowners/managers to manage land in a way that provides specific benefits.

Conservation Alternatives

Projects that utilize the power of nature to solve or prevent problems that would otherwise require technological fixes. Includes green infrastructure projects.

About Us

Resource Media is a non-profit PR firm that helps its partners succeed in a dynamic communications landscape. We develop and implement successful communications strategies for the environment, communities and public health.

PRIORITY NEEDS

Improving messaging is an important start, but much more needs to be done. As part of our analysis, we examined the communications needs of different types of projects (see side-bar). We found that *Conservation Alternative* projects (which include green infrastructure projects) require the most immediate and focused attention due to the real potential for controversy and opposition. In light of these findings, we have identified the following near-term action items:

Positively Frame Green Infrastructure Projects

Infrastructure projects that use natural systems to replace “hard” infrastructure make up the majority of ecosystem services projects coming online now and in the near future. These green infrastructure projects largely rely on funding from taxpayers and/or ratepayers, which increases their exposure to criticism and controversy. Impressions developed from these early green infrastructure projects will have a lasting impact on advancement of the field. In order to avoid a Solyndra-type blowback, an aggressive effort must be made to positively frame green infrastructure projects in news coverage and showcase the many benefits they provide communities. Investment in framing green infrastructure efforts in a positive way will pay dividends down the road— just as the failure to do so will burden advocates well into the future.

Develop Case Studies

Many decision makers are intrigued by the possibilities of ecosystem services thinking, but require proof of concept before they will consider trying it themselves. Practitioners and advocates need help to develop a story bank of compelling case studies that illustrate a variety of ecosystem services approaches. These case studies can serve as templates for future projects, offering concrete examples of how this work is moving from the theoretical to the practical.

Develop Message Guide and Provide Message Coaching

A comprehensive message guide and message coaching are needed to provide ecosystem services practitioners with the tools, resources and skills to effectively make a case for an ecosystem services approach.



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