

Post-Conference Report
ACES 2014 Tuesday Lunch Town Hall
December 9, 2014 | 12:15pm-1:20pm

Title: *Ecosystem Services and Municipal Planning: Engaging Local Decision-Makers*

Descriptions and Goals

In towns and small cities, local decisions or recommendations about land-use planning, infrastructure, and development are frequently made by planning boards, zoning boards, conservation commissions, and similar groups often comprised of volunteer citizens. These local planning units are faced with the very difficult task of making the on-the-ground decisions to balance a host of competing public and private resource use and protection decisions, yet generally have few technical expertise or resources. The goal of this town hall is to explore the opportunities and challenges associated with making the ecosystem services framework accessible to decision-makers without scientific training and at the scale of municipal planning, as well as assess interest in building a community of practice among local planning organizations and natural resources professionals. We aim to gather feedback on which ecosystem services are most relevant for smaller municipalities, and what type of tools, training, and information would allow local land-use planning groups to incorporate ecosystem services into their planning process.

Town Hall Recap

Participants were from a variety of backgrounds, and included researchers, managers, and planners. Several participants had served or are currently serving on local planning boards. Discussion was lively, and much discussion centered around the first question: "What is the general level of understanding of and interest in ecosystem services among these groups?" A second theme emerged during this discussion, which was the practicality of using the ecosystem services approach at a very local level. There were several recurring points during this part of the discussion:

- The term ecosystem services does not resonate with the public or within the planning community. Multiple participants made this point and cited examples. There have been research surveys that show that the concept resonates but the term does not engage planners or the public. There were many examples given where communities were including ecosystem services in their planning processes, but were not using the term. The overwhelming consensus was that the terminology matters when engaging communities and decision-makers, and that the term ecosystem services should be avoided and specific examples of services and benefits should be used. It was also stated that maps are often a useful way in which to deliver information about ecosystem services.
- The American Planning Association, which is the primary professional organization for planners, is not promoting or discussing an ecosystem services approach within its membership. The primary academic text on planning includes one chapter on ecosystem services. The reasons for this lack of an ecosystem services dialogue among professional planners was not discussed, however. Recommendations were made by participants to infuse planning coursework with an ecosystem services approach.
- There are legislative barriers to implementing ecosystem services at a local level. This was raised by multiple participants. In many communities the focus of planning is on economic benefits, and there is often no way to include the value of ecosystem services unless there is a change in the ordinances.

There are cases of local boards who want to include ecosystem services in the planning process, but are challenged to find the legal authority to do so within local planning regulations. Thus, several participants highlighted the value and need to engage lawyers in the community of ecosystem services practices so they can assist in crafting legislation that supports and recognizes planning processes that can accommodate ecosystem services.

- When making a case of ecosystem services, it is critical to provide specific examples of benefits and quantify those benefits whenever possible.

Participants appeared to be in agreement when responding to the second question posed of, 'which ecosystem services are the most appropriate to address at the local planning level.'

- Water is often a unifying ecosystem service – from supplies of clean water to floodwater management, this is an area where communities are likely to engage and one that can be more readily tied to economic costs and benefits (e.g., flood insurance premiums).
- There was also support among participants for framing and leveraging the ecosystem services approach as a defense against natural hazards.
- Scale matters. That is, participants noted that tools, data, approaches, methods, and actions in the name of ecosystem services must be tailored to and appropriate for the scale of decision-making.

Participants were next asked to discuss the 'degree to which ecosystem services, particularly green infrastructure, are considered in the municipal planning process.'

- Several participants noted the need to have an ecosystem services champion or intermediary to support and/or educate planning boards.
- Participants noted the need to distinguish between planners, who have formal training in the art and discipline of the planning process, and planning commissioners and board members who may well be the individuals making decisions in small towns. It is the latter group that is in great need of assistance and tools and frameworks for addressing ecosystem services.
- Puget Sound and its Regional Open Space Strategy was highlighted as a good example of how ecosystem services can be addressed at a regional level.

On the topic of 'tools that are available to quantify and value ecosystem services',

- One participation noted that ecosystem service quantification and valuation tools are currently a barrier because they are simply too wonky to be practical to local planning organizations, and too reliant on technical language.

Another popular topic was the question of how to engage community members. Key points raised were:

- There is a need to provide specific examples of benefits that residents connect with. People tend to become engaged when there is a threat to something that is important to them, or when there is a clear benefit. Need to address the question of "what's in it for me?"
- While community leaders and members may understand ecosystem services, the primary concern is generally the ability to earn a living and maintaining a tax base. It is important to provide honest valuations of ecosystem services, which don't necessarily need to be monetized.

- Regional commission may be able to provide support and engage communities. The ability to work in a community is greatly facilitated by the presence of a college or university and its staff and students.

Key Messages/Points of Agreement

- Language matters! The term ecosystem services should be avoided; we need to use examples of services that communities can connect with, and provide valuations wherever possible. Maps are a good tool to deliver data.
- Legal assistance and engagement in the Community of Ecosystem Services is needed. Boards and commissions may want to include ecosystem services in planning, but may lack the legal authority to do so. Legal advice and model ordinances are greatly needed to facilitate the consideration of ecosystem services in the planning process.
- Partnerships are key! Find organizations with common goals, locate allies and champions in government, academia, industry.
- Water is often a unifying ecosystem service – from supplies of clean water to floodwater management, this is an area where communities are likely to engage. Watershed management is familiar territory for many communities and one in which an ecosystem services framework may readily fit.

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Organizer Qualifications:

Coeli M. Hoover is a Research Ecologist with experience conducting research and training on forest carbon sequestration, engaging audiences ranging from local Audubon chapters to international resource managers. Stephanie A. Snyder is a Social Scientist with the U.S. Forest Service with expertise in the development of decision support models that assist land managers, planners and land owners in making more efficient, effective and equitable resource planning decisions.