

A Human Wellbeing Evaluation Framework for Ecosystem Restoration

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Ecosystem restoration—meant to remove pollution or improve conditions for wildlife—typically only measures for water quality, wildlife population, or plant cover to determine success. However, with growing interest in how restoration efforts affect people and communities, researchers have documented positive connections between restoration and property value, reduced flood risk, outdoor recreation, and happiness. Further, researchers demonstrate that these benefits for people are much more likely to lead to public support for restoration efforts. Nonetheless, many restoration funding programs still do not prioritize people and the adoption of new paradigms has been slow.

To promote socio-ecological systems thinking in restoration—we set out to explore how many projects are designed to directly benefit people, as opposed to solely the environment. Therefore, to document current levels of interest and to encourage more considerations for people and communities, we developed a socio-ecological framework for evaluating restoration projects. Then, we surveyed over 400 project managers who do actual restoration work by drawing from the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI) as a case study. The federally funded GLRI has provided over \$3.5 billion to more than 5,300 projects in the midwestern United States since 2010.

Through the application of our framework, we found that almost half of the project managers set goals to improve the lives of people and communities, and more than 70% of those who did believe they achieved it. In comparison, 90% of project managers believed they met their environmental goals. These results indicate that restoration efforts already have positive impacts for both people and nature, and the level of human wellbeing considerations are higher than expected given that they are not required. To build on these findings, our framework can be applied or adapted to other restoration contexts across the globe.

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