

# Ontario Network on Ecosystem Services

VALUING NATURE'S BENEFITS: THE STATE OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES SCIENCE  
AND PRACTICE IN ONTARIO. NOVEMBER 15, 2011.

[www.ONEcosystemServices.ca](http://www.ONEcosystemServices.ca)

A SYNTHESIS REPORT BY MARIA CHRISTOFOROU



## Introduction

This was the first forum and launch of the [Ontario Network on Ecosystem Services](#). **Mike Halferty** welcomed over 90 people to the forum, and thanked the organizers and hosts for their in-kind contributions. The purpose of the day was to connect with others who are seeking answers or formulating questions on the topic of “ecosystem services” which has received a lot of interest in Ontario. **Mike Puddister** introduced the mission and purpose of the network and the steering committee that was formed in 2010 with this vision. **Jo-Anne Rzdki** challenged participants to envision what success would look like for ecosystem services in Ontario.

## Panel #1: What do we know and what do we need to know?

***Tatiana Koveshnikova, Barbara Heidenreich and Owen Steele were speakers; Jeff Wilson was the moderator***

Tatiana discussed the ecological goods and services in the credit river watershed and research by the Credit Valley Conservation Authority on quantifying the links between human well-being and nature. The ultimate goal of this research is to improve well-being. A major finding of this research shows that 70% of research participants have identified being close to natural areas as a major contributor to their wellbeing and health.

Barbara Heidenreich from Ontario Heritage Trust discussed knowledge gaps with respect to grasslands and other Ontario ecosystems. She raised 3 key points on this topic. The first is the importance of the broader picture into which ecosystem services fits. The second is that the current numbers are, in her words, a “sort of mythology” as she stressed the amount of empirical work that needs to be done in this area. She noted that although the amount of information is extremely limited, it is still better than the alternative of not being able to value these landscapes at all. Finally, she warns of the dangers of commodifying ecosystem services. There is a lot of recent research on the dangers of commodification and she would be happy to share these sources with anyone interested.

Owen Steele from Ducks Unlimited discussed research priorities for wetlands. He drew attention to the significant wetland loss in Southern Ontario that has been occurring steadily since 1985. There is clearly a need to do something *different* to remedy this problem. He states the need to find new ways to motivate the public and to get the environment on the political agenda. Also he stressed the importance of clear communication and to look at all the tools in our tool kit and understand what *other* tools can be used to help save the wetlands. There are a broad range of tools where valuation is but one of them.

Some key comments and discussion from the audience to this panel:

- Baseline data on Natural Heritage is very important – it is necessary to have this information in advance of assessing its economic benefits.
- It is important to be able to understand the links between actions on natural heritage and outcomes of impacts upon wellbeing. Could the Canadian Index of Wellbeing benefit from this research?
- When research is produced, it is important to be able to access it; there is an “open data” movement that should inspire the Ecosystem Services research community to share and use each others’ work.
- It is important to appropriately communicate these values to people, to support the protection of ecosystem services in general but also specific types of ecosystems, such as grasslands. People need to be able to relate to the message, and the ecosystem, or they are going to dismiss it.

## Panel #2: What should be done with this Information and by whom?

*Michelle Molnar, Eric Miller and Noah Gates were speakers; Kathy Macpherson was the moderator*

Michelle shared an upcoming report by the David Suzuki Foundation that will be available electronically at the end of the month. The purpose of this report is to analyze the efficacy of existing policy options. The report found the lack of knowledge is crippling our ability to protect ecosystem services. There is a need for regional information, a set of natural capital accounts and indicators to track ecosystem services. There is a requirement for regional and municipal governments to collaborate and to collaborate to incorporate protected areas into urban areas. Finally, the report notes a need to mainstream ecosystem services, by calling upon decision makers to deliberately take into account how they will grow their communities.

Noah Gates discussed compensation with respect to ecosystem services and the initiatives being taken by the Toronto Region Conservation Authority. He sees a need for further upper level government direction and support for management of urban forests. An initiative by the TRCA is the Green Structure Ontario Coalition. This is an advocacy group that was established to address and perceive gaps from upper level government in terms of their support and direction. Finally Noah discussed the draft compensation protocol of the TRCA. He noted a gap in policy direction to help guide this discussion or the development of this discussion. The TRCA is trying to provide local direction and Noah identifies the lack of guidance from the government in terms of how this should be undertaken.

Eric Miller proposed elements of a general policy framework for ecosystem services, which could inform acts, plans, and approaches across levels of government and sectors in the economy. He proposed 8 key guiding principles: 1) a definition principle that distinguishes between the goods and services (not blending them together as EG&S); 2) an accounting principle favouring a sum-of-the-services approach rather than a "TEV" approach; 3) a valuation principle that both biophysical and monetary valuation are useful in complementary ways; 4) that conservation needs for sustainability should be price-determining not price determined; 5) use monetary valuation to inform business cases not to inform offsets; 6) use biophysical valuation to inform offsets not to inform business cases; 7) ecosystem services should be measured as a flow not as a discounted stock; 8) payments for actions that enhance ecosystem services are just as one tool to reward leadership, which suggests a few dos and don'ts when it comes to informing payment systems.

Some key comments and discussion from the audience to this panel:

- What specifically should we look for in official plans and the Provincial Policy Statement? Uptake in the planning community will be critical to success. Apparently Lower Vancouver has shown leadership in integrating the concept of ecosystem services into planning.
- Clear communication is important. The groups that need to participate are not just politicians and municipalities it's the citizens. But the language to use will vary as a function of the audience. The idea of 'dumbing' down this language for the average citizen was raised by a number of people in the conference.
- How can (and should) we recognize good stewardship practices from the past? The panel was in agreement that although good past practices should be recognized, incentives should be designed to be forward looking.

### Panel #3: What are the right tools for our ES toolkit?

*Brandon Schaufele, Anne Loeffler and Christine Schmalz were speakers; Shashi Kant was the moderator*

Brandon from Sustainable Prosperity provided an economic overview of instruments and policy mechanisms from an economist's perspective. He stated that command and control mechanisms are not cost-effective. He gave examples of people taking advantage of toxic algae in Lake Winnipeg. He supports the advancement of economics of ecosystems and biodiversity in Canada. He does also acknowledge that economic instruments are not cure all's and require a trade-off.

Anne shared her experience with the Grand River Conservation Authority working with farmers using the grant system. She discussed the operating principles they used and states that the cost of improving the environment must be shared. It cannot be paid by society with no cost to the farmer, because the farmer would then have no ownership. This program was tough to sell so they decided to pay farmers \$250 per acre per year to transform some of their land to woodlots. After three years they would no longer receive payment because the farmer would then understand the value of the land conversion. This project was incredibly successful based on three years of payments. She stressed the importance in programs like these of language, the long-term and again of simplicity and clarity.

Christine discussed the Environ MERIT project of the Ontario Soil and Crop Improvement Association that provides funding for environmental restoration projects. A key part of the success of this program is that farmers are involved. The farmers tell the funding agent how much they should get paid for a certain action. Farmers get to help develop ideal solutions for their property. The program selects projects to fund based on their cost and based on the environmental sensitiveness of the land. This program does not look at opportunity costs but rather focuses on establishment costs.

Some key comments and discussion from the audience to this panel:

- How should (or should?) people be rewarded who have already undertaken voluntary action? Finite budgets should be used to focus on gains to ecosystem services, even though this might be perceived negatively by people who have already undertaken voluntary action.
- Many of these types of programs represent a shift in thinking about the notion of private property rights in Canada. These financial incentive systems are often communicated as "compensation" for people when they do something for the public interest whereas in the past the government had field staff enforcing regulation.
- It is best to think broadly about instruments, including financial and non-financial tools, regulatory approaches and incentives for actions that go beyond regulatory requirements.

## Panel #4: Who do we engage, and how do we do it?

*Jode Roberts, David Reid and Nic Shulz were speakers; Chris Lemieux was the moderator*

Jode from the David Suzuki Foundation discussed the need for effective outreach in order for natural capital to become a household name. He discussed the development of the foundation's Natural Capital Ambassadors. There is no silver bullet with respect to ecosystem services. We should strive to bring everyone on side by communicating more effectively to the general public than we typically do.

David spoke about the Alternative Land Use Services (ALUS) pilot project. This program involves the community by having community leadership on the governments of the program. They make frequent presentations at annual general meetings, invite local media, do demonstrations and regular farm tours etc. They first establish trust with the farmer and community and then they are able to grow the projects. With respect to communication, they found it helpful to use social media like YouTube videos etc..

Nic from Socially and Environmentally Responsible Aggregates focused on the importance of engaging industry in the acceptance of ecosystem services into the mainstream. He drew attention to the previously discussed dangers of commodification and states that although this is a risk, it is important to speak in the terms of industry which is typically dollars and cents. Communicating in the industry is a lot about using the dialogue they will understand.

Some key comments and discussion from the audience to this panel:

- Who the primary audience for this communication? Polling suggests that the majority of people think that humanity could live without nature. How do we engage them, or do we write them off?
- To influence and engage organizations, connect with their people directly, find internal champions.
- Perhaps a model of distributed leadership works well for engaging others. Leadership is more likely to succeed when it embodies the ethic of respect.
- For ecosystem service mindfulness, tell the story of the services, not of their monetary value.
- There seems to be a 'fear of the unknown' in our society, which contributes to the disconnection between people and nature. Ravines are feared rather than treasured as places to enjoy and loiter.
- Are there different approaches to engaging different demographics of people? Now that the majority of the population lives in urban areas, reaching these people on the importance of the environment can be challenging.

## Closing Remarks

On behalf of the Steering Committee, **Eric Miller** closed the workshop with thanks to the panellists, moderators, and organizers. He also thanked the Latornell conference for the facilities and allowing the network to host this event as a pre-Latornell session.

Expect the network to take an ongoing interest in each of the themes raised in this workshop: research priorities, policy applications, tools, and communications. These aspects are interdependent: applications benefit from research, successful communications help to create a mandate for investing in research, tools benefit will benefit from policy, and so on. Progress is needed on all these themes, concurrently.