

Conservation news

Guidance for the rapid assessment of cultural ecosystem services

Fauna & Flora International (FFI) recently implemented a 5-year project—Valuing Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—to increase knowledge and awareness of biodiversity and ecosystem service values in complex agricultural landscapes. The project was primarily funded through FFI's partnership with British American Tobacco and was implemented in collaboration with country teams, local partners and stakeholders at pilot sites in Nicaragua, Kenya, Romania and Bali, Indonesia.

As part of this project FFI has developed GRACE (Guidance for the Rapid Assessment of Cultural Ecosystem Services). Despite increasing attention to ecosystem services, cultural ecosystem services and the benefits they provide tend to be overlooked in decision making despite their fundamental contributions to human well-being. This is a result, in part, of the fact that cultural ecosystem services are complex and can be difficult to describe and measure.

Numerous definitions of cultural ecosystem services are available. In GRACE, FFI considers cultural ecosystem services to encompass the environmental spaces (e.g. forests, deserts, seascapes, farmlands, gardens) and cultural practices (e.g. creating and expressing, producing and caring, playing and praying) that together give rise to the experience of valued material and non-material benefits (Church et al., 2014, *UK National Ecosystem Assessment Follow-on. Work Package Report 5: Cultural ecosystem services and indicators*. UNEP–WCMC, LWEC, UK). Many cultural ecosystem services contribute to human well-being in complex ways and may be difficult for people to describe or articulate, or even to recognize. Such benefits, and the values that shape them, may be deeply held and people may not be experienced in talking about them. These services may also be highly personal and subjective in nature, shaped by an individual's views, needs and values. The perceived importance of cultural ecosystem services, and their contributions to well-being, can thus vary widely between individuals and groups. Cultural ecosystem service benefits can also reflect or include shared, social values that can differ from values held by individuals.

Central to GRACE are 3 key questions: (1) What aspects of nature do people benefit from? (2) How do these contribute to well-being, and to whose? (3) How might changes affect the delivery of these services and the well-being derived from them?

The approach recommended by GRACE includes a combination of in-depth interviews and group discussions supported by a number of methods widely used to facilitate participatory processes with local communities, particularly in developing countries. To address the three key questions, GRACE has adapted these participatory tools to provide

entry points for discussions with local women, men, youth and other groups. The tools are intended to facilitate exploration of the intangible values that are typically not captured within standard ecosystem service assessment approaches and to frame deliberative processes that help people appreciate the links between ecosystems and the cultural aspects of well-being. GRACE recommends starting with open questions regarding the benefits provided by ecosystems in general and then using more targeted questions to progressively focus on the specific benefits provided by cultural ecosystem services.

GRACE is based on years of collective experience and incorporates ideas and practices from the field and from literature. The current version of GRACE has been used in one of the Valuing Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services project sites—Bali's Subak rice terrace landscape (inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 2012), which is famous for its beauty, biodiversity, productivity and unique culture. GRACE helped local people identify the cultural ecosystem service benefits they consider most important for their well-being, and their recommendations for local, provincial and national government to protect these. The assessment provided information that can support the authorities to make informed decisions regarding the management of the World Heritage Site and consider the trade-offs between different ecosystem services and those interested in and benefiting from them. Future versions of GRACE will be informed by this and further field experience.

GRACE has been developed to help decision makers recognize and understand the cultural benefits provided by the natural world, and to take them into account in decisions about how to use and manage nature. The guidance is primarily aimed at conservation and development NGOs working with communities, but should also prove useful to government agencies and businesses. It is hoped that GRACE will be useful wherever a relatively rapid assessment of cultural ecosystem services is needed, and will contribute to improved decision-making.

To provide feedback on GRACE (http://www.fauna-flora.org/wp-content/uploads/grace_report_final.pdf) or for further information, contact Helen Anthem (see below). For information on FFI's work on ecosystem services valuation more generally, including the Valuing Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services project, contact Paul Herbertson (paul.herbertson@fauna-flora.org).

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