

The importance of deliberation in valuing ecosystem services in developing countries — Evidence from the Solomon Islands

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Abstract

Monetary valuation of ecosystem services enables more accurate accounting of the environmental costs and benefits of policies, but this has rarely been applied in developing countries. In such contexts, there are particular methodological and epistemological challenges that require novel valuation methodologies. This paper introduces a new participatory, deliberative choice experiment approach conducted in the Solomon Islands. The research aimed to determine the value people placed on ecosystem services and whether participatory interventions to elicit deeper held values influenced the preferences expressed. Results found that the initial willingness to pay for a number of tropical forest ecosystem services amounted to 30% of household income. Following deliberative intervention exercises, key ecosystem services effectively became priceless as participants were unwilling to trade them off in the choice experiment scenarios, regardless of financial cost. The group based deliberative approach, combined with participatory interventions, also resulted in significant learning for participants. This included a more sophisticated view of ecological-cultural linkages, greater recognition of deeper held values, and greater awareness of the consequences of human actions for the environment. The use of a group-based participatory approach instead of a conventional individual survey helped to overcome many of the practical difficulties associated with valuation in developing countries. Given the impact of learning on valuation outcomes, participation and deliberation should be integrated into valuation of any complex good, both in developing and developed economies. However, such a methodology raises questions about how valuation can deal with unwillingness to trade-off key ecosystem services, which results in the breakdown of monetary valuation methods. Evaluation of the appropriateness of valuation processes and methodologies for assessing deeper held values and use of mixed-method approaches will be essential to ensure policies take into account the extent to which human life is dependent on ecosystem services.