

Ecosystem Services

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats: A SWOT analysis of the ecosystem services framework

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Abstract

The ecosystem services concept (ES) is becoming a cornerstone of contemporary sustainability thought. Challenges with this concept and its applications are well documented, but have not yet been systematically assessed alongside strengths and external factors that influence uptake. Such an assessment could form the basis for improving ES thinking, further embedding it into environmental decisions and management. The Young Ecosystem Services Specialists (YESS) completed a Strengths–Weaknesses–Opportunities–Threats (SWOT) analysis of ES through YESS member surveys. Strengths include the approach being interdisciplinary, and a useful communication tool. Weaknesses include an incomplete scientific basis, frameworks being inconsistently applied, and accounting for nature's intrinsic value. Opportunities include alignment with existing policies and established methodologies, and increasing environmental awareness. Threats include resistance to change, and difficulty with interdisciplinary collaboration. Consideration of SWOT themes suggested five strategic areas for developing and implementing ES. The ES concept could improve decision-making related to natural resource use, and interpretation of the complexities of human-nature interactions. It is contradictory – valued as a simple means of communicating the importance of conservation, whilst also considered an oversimplification characterised by ambiguous language. Nonetheless, given sufficient funding and political will, the ES framework could facilitate interdisciplinary research, ensuring decision-making that supports sustainable development.