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Ecosystem Services

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Conference report

The Ecosystem Services Partnership (ESP) 5th Annual Conference

The Ecosystem Services Partnership (ESP) is a global organization aimed at fostering collaboration among the thousands of individuals and groups currently working on various aspects of ecosystem services. On July 30–Aug 3, 2012, the ESP held its 5th annual meeting in Portland, Oregon on the theme: “Ecosystem Services Come of Age: Linking Science, Policy and Participation for Sustainable Human Well-Being.” Approximately 400 people from 49 countries attended (Fig. 1 map).

The conference had a unique format whose goal was to give participants ample opportunity to interact and exchange ideas with practitioners, educators, policy-makers, researchers, and others about ecosystem services, and also to work together on solving problems in the field. Unlike most academic conferences, we did not fill the entire program with 20-minute parallel talks. Instead, we limited contributed talks to 5 min each, had fewer parallel sessions which allowed larger audiences, and used only the first day for these sessions. This took some getting used to for many participants, but overall the discipline of condensing one’s message to 5 min worked well to concisely deliver a lot of information in a short time. It also opened up more space in the conference agenda for face-to-face, small group interactions.

Often the most valuable part of the conference experience, and a major reason for physically coming together in the Internet age, is to directly and interactively exchange ideas and solve problems.

An opening reception was held on the evening of July 30th on the roof terrace of the Jean Vollum Natural Capital Center building owned by Ecotrust in downtown Portland. This unique building was one of the first LEED certified retrofits in the US. This was followed by a Global Policy Forum hosted by the USGS on reactions to the [President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology \(PCAST\), 2011](#) report on Ecosystem Services. This forum provided participants from academia, NGO’s, and government an opportunity to discuss needs for a trends assessment and to identify critical questions that it should address.

The first full day was made up of plenaries, parallel oral sessions, and poster presentations. After opening presentations by Robert Costanza and Rudolf de Groot, Harold Mooney, Glen-Marie Lang, and Alvaro Umaña gave plenary talks, followed by a substantial discussion period with these three speakers. Following that, as noted above, there were only 5 parallel oral sessions, each containing short (5 min) talks. There were a total of 177 talks delivered on a broad range of topics. The oral presentations were followed by a poster session and a reception, with 73 posters presented.

The second part of the conference (days two and three) included a second plenary session with Steve Polasky, Pushpam Kumar, and



Fig. 1. Participants from 49 countries and 210 cities.

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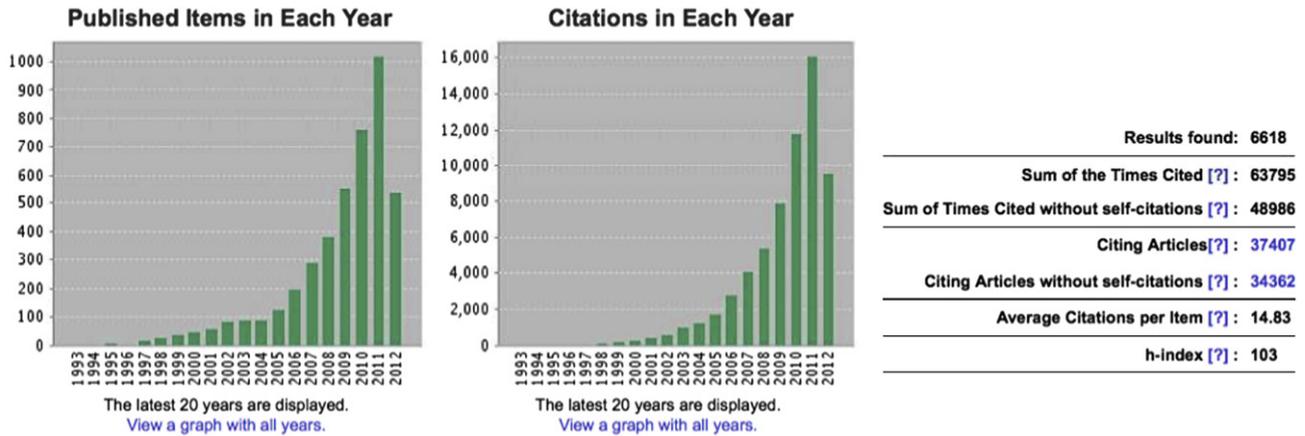


Fig. 2.

Michel Masozera, on the morning of day three. The remainder of the time was devoted to Working Groups. This allowed participants to interactively work on products and solutions—for example peer-reviewed papers, book chapters, databases, websites, reports, or whatever made sense for each group. Thirty-four working groups self-organized during a kick-off “open-space” session on the morning of day 2. These ranged in size from 2 to 56 participants. Several of the products coming out of these working groups will appear as collaborative papers in this journal and other journals, or as project proposals, and ideas for further collaboration.

The third part of the conference (day 4) consisted of each working group summarizing their outcomes in plenary, followed by a plenary synthesis panel, which summarized the main findings of the conference.

There has been a huge increase in academic research on ecosystem services over the last two decades (Fig. 2). This increase has also corresponded with an increase in interest in using this concept to better manage human behavior relative to the rest of nature. Acknowledging that human economies and societies depend on ecological systems at multiple scales to support sustainable well-being—the essence of the ecosystem services concept—does not conflict with other reasons for preserving and restoring ecosystems. But it does add a missing dimension that can often prove critical in building consensus and effective social decision-making.

There are several misconceptions about ecosystem services that this conference and the ongoing work of the ESP are helping to clarify. For example, some believe that expressing the benefits provided by ecosystems in monetary or other units implies that these systems or services can or should be privatized or commoditized. This is certainly not the case and there is growing consensus that we need new common property institutions to effectively manage human behavior concerning ecosystems.

The ESP conference, the work of the entire ESP, and the papers appearing in this journal are helping to further the consensus-building process and the broader networking and collaboration that will be needed to effectively utilize the ecosystem services concept. Building this new collaborative approach to social problem solving is the key challenge that the EPS hopes to address in the coming years.

Reference

President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology (PCAST), 2011. Report to the president: Sustaining Environmental Capital: Protecting Society and The Economy. Washington DC.

Robert Costanza, Ida Kubiszewski
Australian National University (ANU), Canberra, ACT, Australia