

TITLE: Ecosystem Services: An Interdisciplinary Conversation and More

HOSTS: Steven Wolf and Alex Flecker

DATE: September 17, 12-1pm, 300 Rice Hall

Abstract: The concept of ecosystem services, or the notion that natural systems generate valuable goods and services of importance to human well-being, is a central theme in environmental conservation and policy. Nevertheless, the utility and implications of the ecosystem services concept are contested. On one hand, expressing the significance of ecosystems in terms of their contributions to human security and wellbeing is viewed with optimism by those who perceive a chance to place environmental conservation within an economic context in order to correct for market and policy failures. On the other hand, others interpret ecosystem services as a losing proposition that at best is ineffective and at worst results in a set of values and prices attached to the environment that can constitute a legitimization of processes of ecological destruction. Thus, ecosystem services represents an area ripe for discussion and debate, with the potential to engage different disciplines and perspectives in environmental conservation.

In the early fall of 2013, we will host an Atkinson Center for a Sustainable Future Topical Lunch on the general issue of ecosystem services. We define this as an explicitly interdisciplinary topic within which a wide variety of people might find their interests. In order to focus the discussion on this broad topic, we propose to initiate conversation around the question of specification of the contexts in which ecosystem services can be a productive framework for research and policy. We perceive that the idea has diffused very rapidly around the world, and many differently positioned actors are advancing varied applications of the concept. Has the ecosystem services concept been over-sold or at least under-specified? What is the class of problems for which the concept has promise, and how is this class to be defined?

We would like to start discussion based on this kernel and see where it takes us. Our expectation is that this will be a useful opportunity to learn about broader interest and engagement in ecosystem services among members of the Cornell community. In addition to the value of intellectual exchange, we perceive medium and long-term opportunities to advance education, research and partnerships with non-academics around the interdisciplinary concept of ecosystem services. Specifying points of entry that allow us to build on our strengths and shared interests is the immediate challenge.