



Original research article

Ecosystems and indigenous well-being: An integrated framework



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ABSTRACT

In Australia, role of natural resources in Indigenous well-being is completely ignored to date which further leads to inappropriate and ineffective well-being policies. This research addresses the need to develop an appropriate indigenous well-being approach that incorporates indigenous values in relation to natural systems. It focuses on Indigenous people in Australia and examines the available well-being frameworks from global as well as from local (i.e. Australian and Indigenous), perspectives. It applies a holistic approach to assess the role of natural systems in indigenous well-being demonstrating how people's social, economic and cultural worlds, and how people's capabilities relate to their natural systems. It integrates various social, economic and ecological values through the application of Capability Approach and the Millennium Assessment Approach. The study proposes an integrated framework that focuses on people's belongingness to nature i.e. people's values and capabilities that link to well-being. It emphasises the importance of each connection that people may have with their country in terms of people's capabilities. The proposed framework can contribute to improved and better-informed policies on indigenous well-being as well as on the use, value and management of natural systems.

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1. Introduction

It is well known that many Indigenous people are well connected to their natural systems for various socio-cultural and economic values that benefit their well-being (Posey and Oxford Centre for the Environment, Ethics and Society, 1999; Maffi, 2001; Altman et al., 2011; Grieves, 2009 and others). Despite this, current well-being measures fail to incorporate nature-related attributes when measuring indigenous well-being (Sangha et al., 2011). Even at global scale, our human development measures also neglect nature-related attributes (Costanza et al., 2014).

This paper provides a socio-economic-ecological perspective on indigenous well-being for incorporating nature related values, that may also apply to many of us. We review and analyse the basic concepts of human well-being, ecosystems and their ecosystem services (ES) from indigenous perspectives, and the available well-being frameworks on how to reflect and measure people's connections with nature to appropriately reflect indigenous well-being. Indigenous communities in

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Australia are the focus for this study given that several these communities largely depend on natural resources for various cultural, identity and spiritual values (Rose, 1995; Sangha et al., 2011 and many others). The Australian Bureau of Statistics ABS (2009–2010) reported that 72% of Indigenous people have connections with their country or homeland. Based upon people's values in relation to country (i.e. natural systems), this research proposes an integrated framework that could be applicable for broader human well-being. This paper also reports recent global initiatives where attempts have been made to develop economic welfare measures that incorporate ES (i.e. services and benefits that people receive from ecosystems). It further critically analyses such approaches, and suggest the advantages of indigenous approach for developing future human well-being measures.

Indigenous value systems can provide a fresh perspective on human well-being for an inclusive view of nature's values in our living as Indigenous people' socio-economic lives are well linked with nature (Altman et al., 2011; Sangha et al., 2011). Applying an indigenous perspective to evaluate links: ecosystems – indigenous values and capabilities – indigenous well-being, indeed provides much-needed in-depth knowledge to guide future policy decisions on well-being as well on use and management of natural resources. The proposed integrated framework can help comprehend the importance of ES/ecosystems ('country'—a commonly used indigenous term for land/area) in indigenous well-being for future policy decisions both, on well-being and natural resource management. The main objectives for this study are:

- To analyse the role of natural resources (and their ES) in indigenous well-being.
- To develop an integrated framework including socio-economic-ecological aspects of well-being.
- To provide a holistic perspective of well-being for the general public and policy decision-makers.

This study, while integrating social–economic and natural resource sciences, provides a holistic perspective on wellbeing that is equally applicable to all human beings. This approach could benefit both, natural resource sciences for linking people's values and capabilities to use and value of ecosystems, and socio-economic sciences to appropriately comprehend indigenous well-being for future policy decision-making.

Current global and local measures used to measure well-being, and indigenous values in relation to natural resources and their ecosystem services, are examined below and an integrated framework is proposed.

2. Methods

This study is based on thorough literature review (as analysed in various sections below), 10–15 years of research experience with Indigenous communities including numerous focus group meetings in north and south Queensland, apart from informal/formal interactions with the indigenous elders and professionals. We reviewed various natural resource management plans prepared/co-prepared/co-contributed by the Indigenous people, natural resource values and people's well-being perspectives from local and regional resources, and various international initiatives on well-being perspectives using various resources (papers, reports etc.). This paper synthesises the ideas to present an integrated view of indigenous well-being by promoting understanding of 'country' from social, economic and natural resource sciences perspective. It minimises the gap between indigenous perspectives, socio-economics and ecological disciplines. For example, the common terms – country is equivalent to various ecosystems on land, ecological knowledge of bush food and medicine includes economic significance, caring for land involves social obligations – suggesting an overlap of various socio-economic-ecological values that are often missed in the related social, economic or ecological disciplines. We further apply the ES and the Capability approaches (discussed in the next section) to comprehend indigenous wellbeing. We extend the current indigenous values concept to people's capabilities that are rather vital to live in indigenous ways for enhancing indigenous well-being.

3. Human well-being: basic concepts and current measures

Well-being literally means living happily or leading a satisfying life. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2001) defines well-being as 'a state of health or sufficiency in all aspects of life'. Well-being is widely researched, mostly from social perspectives (Millennium Assessment (MA), 2003; Prescott-Allen, 2001), giving rise to various definitions and conceptualisations of well-being (as reviewed by Alkire, 2002a). As OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011) states, there is no single definition of human well-being because the term includes several facets with complex interactions and the respective importance of each aspect is difficult to identify. Despite this, there is a basic agreement that "well-being" includes the satisfaction of material needs, the experience of freedom, health, personal security, good social relations and healthy natural environment (Alkire, 2002b; Sen, 1993, 1999a).

There are three main philosophical approaches to assess well-being according to Diener and Suh (1997):

- Economics (choice utility) approach considers that people select things and activities that enhance their utility within the constraints of resources they possess (utilitarianism). This approach is based upon levels of satisfaction that a person achieves from consuming a good/service.
- Sociological (normative ideal) approach is based upon cultural, religious, philosophical or other norms and ideals considered important for well-being. Wellbeing is reflected from conformance with the cultural/religious practices, and having optimal levels of health, income and other economic resources.

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