



# Why Should Ecosystem Services Be Governed to Support Poverty Alleviation? Philosophical Perspectives on Positions in the Empirical Literature

Ina Lehmann<sup>a,\*</sup>, Adrian Martin<sup>b</sup>, Janet A. Fisher<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *artec Sustainability Research Center, University of Bremen, Enrique-Schmidt-Str. 7, 28359 Bremen, Germany,*

<sup>b</sup> *Global Environmental Justice Group, School of International Development, University of East Anglia, Norwich Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK*

<sup>c</sup> *Geography and the Lived Environment, GeoSciences, University of Edinburgh, Drummond Street, Edinburgh EH89XP, UK*

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## ABSTRACT

In light of trade-offs related to the allocation of ecosystem services we investigate the prevalent norms that are drawn upon to justify why ecosystem governance should prioritise poverty alleviation. We are specifically concerned with poverty alleviation because we consider this an urgent problem of justice. We review empirical literature on social trade-offs in ecosystem services governance in order to identify the prevalent conceptions of justice that inform scholarly assessments of current practice. We find that empirical studies do present specific notions of justice as desirable benchmarks for ecosystem services governance but that they rarely attempt to spell out the precise meaning of these notions or what makes them desirable. For those notions of justice that we identify in this literature - sufficientarianism, egalitarianism and participatory approaches - we draw on philosophical justice literature in order to better articulate the normative arguments that could support them and to be more precise about the kind of actions and expectations that they invoke. Moreover, we point to some striking normative silences in the ecosystem services literature. We conclude that the ecosystem services justice discourse would benefit from more conceptual clarity and a broader examination of different aspects of justice.

## 1. Introduction

After the publication of the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* (2005), the idea of ecosystem services has become a key reference point in ecological economics and wider literatures that conceptualise the benefits that nature provides for humans (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010). Whilst this conceptualisation is intended to describe any benefit that people can derive from nature, it has particularly emphasised that the livelihoods and wellbeing of the poor are disproportionately dependent on access to ecosystem services. Ecosystem services provide and sustain crucial livelihood assets such as food and fibre and moreover represent an important income generating opportunity through the sale of nature-based products (*Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, 2005; see also Reardon and Vosti, 1995; Duraipappah, 1998).

Yet there is also a growing recognition in parts of the ecosystem services literature that ecosystem services are not simply available for everybody but that in one way or another, distribution among potential beneficiaries is being governed. In many instances such distributions involve social-ecological trade-offs, meaning that governing ecosystem services in favour of one group of stakeholders inevitably comes at the

expense of other groups (Rodríguez et al., 2006; Coulthard et al., 2011; Daw et al., 2011; Howe et al., 2014; Galafassi et al., 2017). Common trade-offs include human wellbeing versus non-human nature, current versus future generations and the interests of the poor versus the perceived greater good of all humans.

The ecosystem services framework is relatively recent and yet has rapidly gained traction in both research and mainstream environmental decision-making. In this paper we explore the moral reasoning that is apparent in empirical research applications of this highly influential framework. In particular we set out to identify and analyse the reasons the ecosystem services literature offers for why trade-offs should be resolved in favour of the poor. Underlying this research question are two core normative commitments of our own. Firstly, we propose that the resolution of trade-offs requires ethical judgement. If not everybody's needs and/or preferences can be met, sound reasons are required to justify to who or what priority is given. Secondly, we are particularly concerned with the poor because we share the widespread view that avoidable human suffering is unjustifiable. This belief gains particular urgency in situations where the poor are threatened by further marginalisation. Indeed, it has been found that policies designed without

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [ina.lehmann@uni-bremen.de](mailto:ina.lehmann@uni-bremen.de) (I. Lehmann), [adrian.martin@uea.ac.uk](mailto:adrian.martin@uea.ac.uk) (A. Martin), [janet.fisher@ed.ac.uk](mailto:janet.fisher@ed.ac.uk) (J.A. Fisher).

appropriate consideration of trade-offs are more likely to harm poor people (McShane et al., 2011).

We believe that careful attention to ethical reasoning might help the governance of ecosystem services tradeoffs, through the identification of an explicit and defensible case for why the poorest should take priority. In doing this, we do not seek to present our own pre-formed ideas about what such a case should be. Instead we set out to summarise the normative cases that ecosystem services scholars have employed in their empirical studies. We describe these (often implicit) normative cases and analyse them through comparison with established theories of justice. There are currently many calls for increasing attention to human wellbeing concerns in ecosystem services governance for what are ultimately ethical reasons (e.g. Pascual et al., 2014; Suich et al., 2015; Cruz-Garcia et al., 2016). However, our impression is that many of these papers remain vague about the normative principles they espouse. Moreover, we believe that a more precise discussion about different ethical principles and their respective justifications and implications is needed if we want to make a forceful case for the priority of poverty alleviation in the face of trade-offs. To this end, the primary aim of this paper is to clarify the dominant normative stances in the current ecosystem services literature. A secondary aim is to reflect on the limited scope of normative thinking that is found within this subset of academic literature. For example, the ecosystem services framing leans towards concerns with material goods and towards anthropocentrism – thus, it is to be expected that this literature will not reflect a full range of ethical viewpoints. This is important to clarify because conflicts over trade-offs could in large part be described as conflicts between different ethical cases about prioritisation.

To address these aims, we first undertake an audit of the normative pro-poor principles invoked in the literature on poverty and ecosystem services trade-offs. In particular, we identify which are the main arguments used to justify the allocation of ecosystem services in a pro-poor way. As predicted, our review finds wide support for governing ecosystem services for poverty alleviation. However, most of this literature contains little explicit normative reasoning about why this should be the case or about what this means more precisely. For this reason, we draw on theories of justice to identify and discuss the more precise arguments that could be used to bolster the often vague and implicit reasoning that we find in the empirical literature. That is, we put a ‘philosophical mirror’ up to empirical research and show which more systematic arguments these researchers could draw on to support the principles they espouse. By doing this we hope to illuminate what is behind different justice positions and what requirements for just ecosystem governance they entail.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows: First we present our method for identifying and analysing the relevant empirical ecosystem services literature. Second, we present the main principles we identify in the literature – a strong focus on sufficientarian and egalitarian outcome oriented principles and a strong emphasis on participation of the poor in determining distributions – and explore these in terms of philosophical underpinnings. Third, we point out some blind spots in the literature, in terms of the limited range of justice thinking that it reflects. We conclude by drawing these findings together and situating our approach in a broader debate about whether it is feasible or appropriate to seek universal standards of justice to shape decisions about ecosystem governance.

## 2. Methods

The body of work selected for our analysis is composed of peer-reviewed journal articles that address the basic normative challenge set out in the introduction. We limited our material in this way for reasons of feasibility and because peer-reviewed journal articles currently represent the mainstream and most influential sections of the academic discourse. Since our analysis is exclusively based in the Anglophone literature it clearly cannot be fully representative of the discourse

**Table 1**  
Search terms for the analysis.

Ecosystem Service*	AND	Trade-off*	AND	Poor*
Environmental Service*				Poverty
				Just*
				Ethic*
				Fair*
				Wellbeing
				Basic Right*
				Basic Need*
				Capabilit*
				Equit*
				Equal*
				Accountab*
				Responsib*
				Compensat*
				Reward*

around justice and ecosystem services governance. However, we are confident that our analysis provides an insight into a very influential segment of this discourse.

We carried out a Web of Science search in late June 2017, using all possible combinations of search terms from each of the three columns of Table 1 below.<sup>1</sup> The search was by “topic” so it would find all articles where the respective search term occurs in the title, abstract or key words.

The choice of search terms is in line with our research question and the three columns in Table 1 reflect the different components we are interested in. First, the field we are interested in is the governance of ecosystem service(s); for this we also include the term environmental service(s) as a recurrent synonym in the discourse. Second, the kinds of situations we are interested in are characterised by trade-off(s) in the allocation of (the proceeds from) ecosystem services. The term ‘trade-offs’ became prominent after popularisation of the ecosystem services discourse by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (e.g. Foley et al., 2005; Rodríguez et al., 2006; Bennett et al., 2009; McShane et al., 2011). Whilst the wider literature on environmental governance continues to employ a range of terms to refer to inter-stakeholder conflicts of interests, trade-offs soon became the standard term used within the literature upon which we focus.

The terms in the third column are intended to capture the normative content we are interested in and this requires a more diverse set of terms to capture the relevant literature. First, the terms poor and poverty reflect the core normative interest of our research question. We add a number of justice-related terms in order to include papers that do not contain poverty-related terms in the title, key words or abstract and in order to capture the normative reasons given by the papers for their stance on ecosystem services trade-offs. In this spirit, we first include terms that refer to the concept of justice in a very general sense (just\*, ethic\*, fair\*, wellbeing). We then add terms that refer to key conceptual questions which theories of justice typically address. Thus, many justice conceptions say something about persons’ entitlements, notably whether these draw in a more basic sense on basic needs or basic rights or capabilities or are oriented towards equity or equality. Many justice theories also take into account how distributive outcomes came about and hence include considerations of accountability and responsibility or they reason on the basis of past action who deserves compensation or reward for the current state of affairs. Our overall list of search terms is certainly not conclusive but we are confident that by including key terms associated with a variety of perspectives we are able to provide a reasonably good overview over the state of the focal literature.

This search identified an initial list of 630 papers. We reduced this list in three steps. First, we removed all duplicated papers (because they contained several of the search terms in the first and third column).

<sup>1</sup> The asterisks were included in order to capture different variants of the same root word; e.g. “equit\*” would turn out the term “equitable” as well as “equity”.

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