



Negotiating Indigenous benefits from payment for ecosystem service (PES) schemes



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ABSTRACT

This paper draws on research conducted with Aboriginal land managers across Northern Australia to show how and why payments for ecosystem service (PES) schemes should be framed around Indigenous rights to and relationships with their traditional estates. PES schemes offer opportunities to recognize and support Aboriginal communities' land and sea management knowledge and practices, and there is strong evidence that Indigenous communities are seeking to engage with such schemes. We focus on Aboriginal savanna landscape management, particularly traditional burning practices, to extend the ecosystem services framework to recognize Indigenous values and interactions with their lands as a critical service for Indigenous well-being. Drawing on case-study analysis of PES projects negotiated to support Aboriginal fire management programs across Northern Australia, we show how cultural ecosystem services can be applied to represent the active, dynamic and often interdependent relationships inherent in Indigenous human-environment relationships.

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1. Introduction

Sustainable development has been defined as a quest to deliver ecosystem services while enhancing human well-being (MEA, 2005). Recognising that well-being is determined by more than economic benefits (Costanza et al., 2014), conservation and sustainable development policy agendas are being reshaped to acknowledge and safeguard the cultural and social benefits that environments provide (Díaz et al., 2015), and to enhance local community rights and decision-making authority in environmental management (Daniel et al., 2012; Robinson et al., 2014). The direct links between cultural and natural services identified by Indigenous people globally—coupled with recognition of the human rights implications of damaging those links—have highlighted the importance of ensuring that sustainable development efforts acknowledge and protect Indigenous peoples' rights and authority, and reflect their values and priorities (Díaz et al., 2015).¹

However, effectively incorporating Indigenous peoples' rights and benefits into sustainable development goals and programs remains a critical planning and management challenge (UNEP, 2014). Indigenous livelihoods often depend on the direct use of local environments, and protecting the capacity of lands to maintain outputs of biophysical services is therefore a necessary commitment. In addition, less tangible but nonetheless critical aspects of well-being depend on meeting customary obligations to care for lands and resources using traditional methods. One's ability to discharge these obligations is obviously affected by conditions of access to lands and possession of decision-making powers (rights) (e.g. Poe et al., 2014; Satz et al., 2013; Stevens, 2014; Jackson and Palmer, 2015; Bark et al., 2015). Respecting human rights while responding to the needs of ecosystems requires ecosystem management tools capable of protecting such relationships.

Financial incentives for land owners and managers to maintain biophysical services from well-managed ecosystems have become powerful tools internationally. Payment for ecosystem services (PES) schemes, defined by Tacconi (2012, p. 29) as 'transparent system(s) for the additional provision of environmental services through conditional payments to voluntary providers,' have become a key feature of natural resource management markets and programs (Costanza et al., 2014). Although these schemes are considered one of the most effective means of securing ecosystem

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¹ In this paper, the term 'Indigenous' is used to describe people who have specific rights based on their historical and cultural ties to a particular territory. The term 'Aboriginal' refers to the Indigenous people of Northern Australia.

services on a global scale, they may not reliably offer ‘win-win’ solutions for global buyers and local suppliers (Muradian et al., 2013). Demonstrating that cultural services are not damaged when the delivery of biophysical environmental services is driven by strong financial incentives remains a key challenge (e.g. Fitzsimons et al., 2012; Russell-Smith et al., 2009).

In a number of locations, Indigenous communities are using payment for ecosystem service (PES) agreements to negotiate support for their environmental management activities and livelihoods. A relatively narrow range of provisioning services (*sensu* MEA, 2005) has been targeted. Maintaining or improving water availability and quality, protecting or restoring forests and woodlands to restore other ecological functions and store carbon, and enhancing biodiversity conservation are common objectives. Where cultural services are addressed, they may relate to visual amenity or recreational values (Corbera and Pascual, 2012; Whitehead et al., 2009).

A growing number of studies focus on the extent to which such schemes align with the needs and aspirations of providers. Recurring questions include: what factors influence participation (Robinson et al., 2014); do PES schemes infringe the political and other autonomy of local people (Jackson and Palmer, 2015); do net benefits actually reach participants (e.g. Kaczan et al., 2013); are benefits accessed equitably (McDermott et al., 2012); are other livelihoods displaced (Ritchie, 2009); and does participation strengthen or weaken Indigenous cultural heritage (Petty et al., 2015a)?

In part, this work tracks growing recognition of the importance of the ‘human dimension’ of global environmental change research, which investigates the political and cultural complexity of apparently universal concepts and protocols concerning the state of the planet and its future (Díaz et al., 2015). At the heart of this work is an acknowledgement that different socio-geographies define and value ecosystems in divergent ways (Corbera and Pascual, 2012; Zander and Garnett, 2011), and that these definitions and evaluations are influenced by dynamic political and social values and commitments (Costanza et al., 2014).

In this paper, we report perspectives from existing and potential Indigenous participants in PES schemes in Australia. We then adapt the cultural ecosystem service framework of Chan et al. (2012) to conceptualise and categorise Indigenous benefits that can be negotiated from PES agreements. We begin by considering the intersection of ecosystem services with the practices and ethics associated with Indigenous–environment relationships, before focusing on programs for abatement of greenhouse gas emissions through fire management projects in Northern Australia. We regard such projects as particularly relevant to the important questions raised above because they operate over very large areas and involve multiple clans collectively managing an activity (fire use) that is integral to Aboriginal culture and requires the participation of many individuals. Consequently, performance in reducing emissions depends on high levels of collaboration among Indigenous groups and support from the wider community.

1.1. Caring for country and PES fire agreements in Northern Australia

Australia’s Aboriginal people have a long tradition of systematically and purposefully using fire to manage the landscape. The effects of Aboriginal landscape burning can be seen in the defining features and health of Australia’s terrestrial biodiversity and ecosystems. Bowman (1998) and Rose (1996) highlight explicit links between ecological structures and functions and the Aboriginal values and benefits achieved through landscape burning, applying practices supported by Aboriginal legal frameworks and land ethics. As Senior Aboriginal Elder Dean Yibarbuk

explains, the well-being of Indigenous people is intimately linked to use and non-use values associated with landscape burning:

“... as they grow, young people learn that fire is more than just something for cooking and hunting—that it has deeper meaning in our culture. As they attend ceremonies with their parents they see and learn to respect the sacred fires that are central physical parts of the most sacred of ceremonies. Importantly these fires sit between the ceremony grounds where children and women stay and the more spiritually dangerous ceremony grounds where only senior initiated men go” (Yibarbuk, 1998, p. 2).

National law for a Carbon Farming Initiative (CFI) has established methods for reducing volumes of greenhouse gases (nitrous oxide and methane) released in the burning of grassy fuels, leaf litter and fine woody fuels. While the legally accepted methods acknowledge the role of fire in maintaining savanna systems, they seek to change the timing of the burning and reducing the total area burned, re-establishing fire regimes closer to traditional practice than prevailing regimes dominated by wildfire (Russell-Smith et al., 2009). Aboriginal communities and their organisations have taken up opportunities to earn carbon credits with some enthusiasm. By the end of 2015, ten projects working over several million hectares of mostly Indigenous land had sought to deliver credits to government under formal contracts that include substantial penalties for under-delivery.

Aboriginal customary land owners share an ontological connection to familial land estates and a commitment to care for their ‘country.’ ‘Caring for country’ is a phrase that describes a range of Aboriginal land and sea management practices, ancestral connection and obligations to country and culture-based enterprises that sustain landscape and community values important to Aboriginal people (Yibarbuk, 1998). The Indigenous land ethic that underpins these activities challenges the dominant ecosystem service paradigm because it is driven by the notion of reciprocal relationships between people and country (Garnett et al., 2009)—in essence, the notion that ‘if you look after country, the country will look after you’ (Griffiths and Kinnane, 2010). As Altman et al. (2007, p. 27) explain, ‘caring for country’ amounts to ‘more than the physical management of geographical areas—it encompasses looking after all of the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area, as well as associated processes of spiritual revival, connecting with ancestors, food provision and maintaining kin relations.’

Indigenous communities are pragmatic in their efforts to create what Morphy and Morphy (2013) describe as an ‘intercultural space’ with PES partners, provided such partnerships maintain Indigenous peoples’ autonomy over the ways in which human–ecosystem interactions and benefits are understood and valued. Mechanisms such as participatory approaches to evaluating Indigenous benefits from PES agreements (e.g. Fitzsimons et al., 2012) and the development of a ‘recognition space’ (Taylor, 2008) between Aboriginal and program reporting frameworks (which creates indicators particularly for Aboriginal people) have been highlighted as possible ways to address some of these issues. Yet these mechanisms can struggle to overcome the fundamental challenges associated with aligning the aspirations of local Indigenous communities and land managers with commercial purposes and providing valuation categories that are meaningful to Indigenous people (Díaz et al., 2015). As a result, PES frameworks can remain focused on addressing undesirable global environmental change without considering the issues that are significant to local communities and contexts (Veland et al., 2013) and that motivate those communities to participate in delivering global-scale environmental targets.

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