## Bridging Perspectives: A Social Assessment of Ecosystem Services in Idaho's Portneuf River Watershed

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"- In the same field, how can the two sides be so different? The guys over there are dead serious, while you guys are cheery and breezy."

In "Light and Free"; Wild Wise Weird [1]

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Understanding how people perceive and value nature is essential for guiding sustainable land management. A recent study by Greeves, McGovern, and Castro [2] introduces an innovative methodology for the social assessment of ecosystem services in Idaho's Portneuf River Watershed. By comparing expert and public perspectives, the study offers valuable insights into how different stakeholder groups recognize and prioritize the benefits that ecosystems provide.

Traditionally, ecosystem services have been assessed through biophysical and economic frameworks. While these approaches are important, they often neglect the social dimension—specifically, how communities understand, value, and interact with their local ecosystems [3]. To bridge this gap, the study applied a comparative stakeholder analysis across four dimensions: recognition of ecosystem services, perceived importance, observed changes over time, and the impacts of land-use practices.

The researchers conducted surveys with 28 experts and 471 public participants, examining perceptions of 11 key ecosystem services across provisioning, regulating, and cultural categories. The results revealed clear mismatches in recognition levels. Experts consistently identified a broader range of ecosystem services—particularly regulating services like water and climate regulation—compared to the general public. This divergence may be attributed to differences in environmental knowledge or political orientation, as the public sample leaned more conservative and, consistent with previous research, tended to deprioritize climate-related concerns [4].

Despite gaps in recognition, both expert and public groups showed broad agreement on the relative importance of ecosystem services when supported by visual tools such as photo-elicitation. This finding suggests that disparities in understanding may be more reflective of differences in familiarity with technical terminology than in underlying values.

Notably, while the two groups diverged in their perceptions of how certain services—such as recreation, water quality, and local identity—have changed over the past decade, they largely aligned in their views on the impacts of land use. Both experts and the public perceived urban development as having predominantly negative effects on ecosystem services, while natural forests were seen as key contributors to ecosystem health. Both groups recognized agricultural and rangeland uses as involving trade-offs [2].

In sum, this study highlights the value of social assessments in shaping effective, inclusive environmental policy. By uncovering both convergences and divergences in stakeholder perceptions, such assessments can inform more socially attuned communication and management strategies. Ultimately, the research underscores the importance of integrating human perspectives into ecological planning—reinforcing the idea that sustainable ecosystem management must be rooted not only in scientific expertise but also in a deep understanding of social context and community values [5].

## References

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