
Perspectives

A Global Partnership for Ecosystem Services

by Rudolf de Groot, Robert Costanza, Dieter van den Broeck, James Aronson, Benjamin Burkhard, Erik Gomez-Baggethun, Roy Haines-Young, Ida Kubiszewski, Felix Müller, Irene Petrosillo, Marion Potschin, Sander van der Ploeg, and Giovanni Zurlini



Bas Verschuuren

Contractors with the South African public works program Working for Woodlands plant native trees in the Baviaanskloof Nature Reserve to help restore the land and sequester carbon.

Interest in both the science and practice of ecosystem services is on the rise. Many studies have confirmed the economic value of investing in the conservation, restoration, and sustainable use of ecosystem services.¹⁻⁵ This burgeoning world is now in need of institutions capable of managing the thousands of projects currently devoted to these issues. One such project can be found at the Baviaanskloof Mega Reserve in South Africa. The Mega Reserve is a World Heritage site and nature reserve and includes private and community land. Over several decades, areas across the reserve have been subjected to severe

ecological degradation, largely a result of regional overgrazing by domestic livestock, large-scale crop irrigation, and invasive species. The impacts include riverbank erosion, a lowering of the groundwater table, and a decline of water supply to the downstream nature reserve. This loss of natural capital and decline of derived ecosystem services is causing great socioeconomic strain on the area and its people.

In recent years, however, a transformation has been taking place. In 2008, the Mega Reserve joined the Ecosystem Services Partnership (ESP), a network of organizations launched

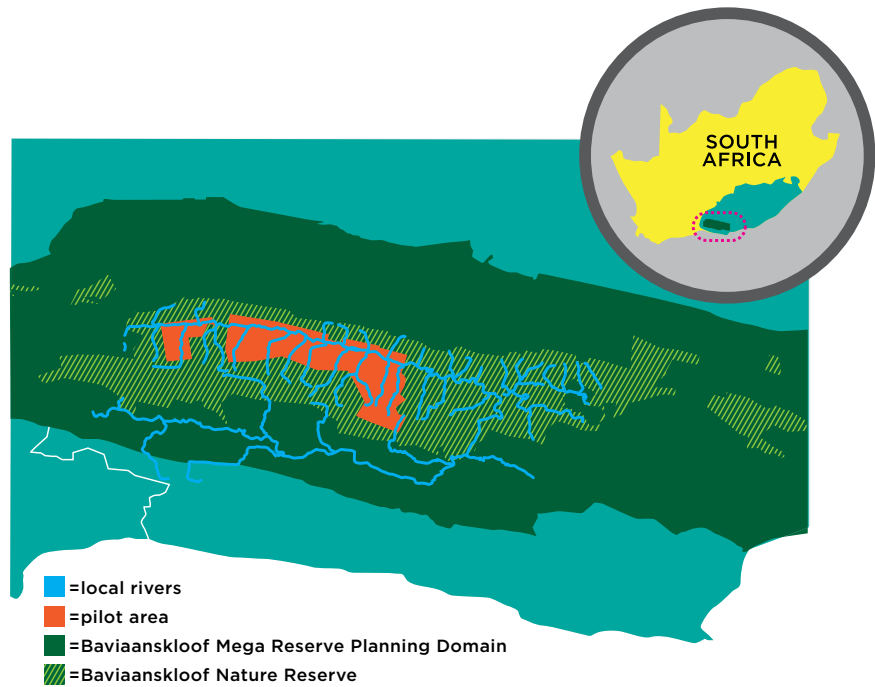
in that year to connect researchers, decision makers, and end users such as NGOs, land and resource managers, and the general public. The partnership is intended to coordinate efforts to manage ecosystem services at all scales, global to local. It supports projects on the ground by educating resource managers about best practices in different contexts while also avoiding unnecessary duplication of efforts. Through the ESP website (www.es-partnership.org), participants that include nature reserves, university groups, NGOs, and many others have easy

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access to the latest information and discussions on ecosystem services assessment tools, data, and policy-support instruments.

In the Baviaanskloof Mega Reserve, an active group of young scientists has been working with the ESP and the local people to restore the area through the PRESENCE learning network (www.livinglandscapes.co.za). They use ecosystem services as the main conceptual framework for their community-based program, which aims to recover a sustainable water flow, enhance carbon-sequestration potential, and provide tourism and other livelihood opportunities through restoration of degraded ecosystems. The group combines a tree nursery that specializes in indigenous species with a "learning village" to raise awareness of the project within the local community.

But the goals of the ESP go beyond localized information sharing in places like the Baviaanskloof Mega Reserve. The network has also developed an interactive web-accessible database that now contains over 1,350 records on monetary values for specific ecosystem services, organized by biome and with many descriptors. To further develop the database, the ESP is setting up biome expert groups to collect, screen, and publish data on the ecosystem services and values of the main biomes (e.g., tropical forests, grasslands, wetlands, coral reefs). Eventually, the collective output of these biome expert groups should lead to guidelines that will enable authoritative assessment of the services and values of particular ecosystems. The ESP also stimulates and coordinates the development of a worldwide network of best-practices case studies ("show cases") on ecosystem services assessment and applications in actual management, such as at the Mega Reserve in South Africa.



Silvia Weel and Richard Morin/Solutions

One of the goals of the ESP is to provide a forum for communication between scientists and policymakers. Government officials and business leaders can use the network as a guide in developing more effective and efficient solutions to environmental

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management problems. In addition, the partnership will seek to foster collaborative research projects between researchers around the world through conferences and working groups and a new academic journal, *Ecosystem Services: Science, Policy, Practice*, due to be launched by Elsevier in January 2012.

The ESP is relatively new; current membership is about 50 institutional

members and 200 individual members. But as our world becomes increasingly full and interconnected, the need for more cooperative ways of solving problems is increasing. The ESP is one example of a global partnership organization aimed at utilizing our resources more effectively to achieve our shared goal of a sustainable human presence on earth. **S**

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