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Ecosystem Services in Southwest China: Local Stakeholders’ Priorities

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Abstract

Land management can only be sustainable if the needs and interests of various stakeholder groups are incorporated in land use planning. As direct participation in such planning is often limited, there is an urgent need for more transparency of other stakeholders’ priorities amongst decision-makers. In a biodiversity hotspot such as Xishuangbanna, Southwest China, where strong economic forces favour cash crop monocultures such as banana and rubber with the consequence of heavy degradation, knowledge about stakeholders’ perception and valuation of (non-economic) ecosystem services (ESS) is of utmost importance.

This raises methodological questions, particularly in a situation where decision and power structures are nontransparent and cleartop-down-hierarchies in practice are overlaid by highly informal decision structures which are based on personal relations, such as in China.

The SURUMER project, aiming at the development and at least partial implementation of sustainable rubber cultivation strategies, has carried out sociological studies on these issues. The main research questions in this context are:

- What are local stakeholders’ priorities of ESS?
- How to identify and value these?
- And how to communicate the findings with decision-makers?

This paper discusses the methods which have been developed for the specific context, preliminary results as well as consequences for future research.

In general, the approach is a triangulation: Qualitative information has been acquired amongst two main groups of actors (village heads and regional bureaus) during informal talks, semi-structured in-depth interviews, meetings and workshops. Quantitative data has been collected in a ranking exercise. The ladder has been adapted stepwise: As a pure list has brought only vague results and problems with ranking such abstract issues came up, later on the ESS have been visualised more clearly and participants were asked to value the importance of each ESS.

The results show that data collected from various sources not only provides an integrated view of the future land-use scenarios, but also increase the credibility of information by means of triangulation. For further analysis it is seen as very important to know and explain the differences between the various local stakeholder groups.

Keywords: China, ecosystem services, priority, stakeholder, sustainable land-use