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Using of Photovoice to Elicit Socio-Cultural Values of Ecosystem Services in a Rural Community, Namibia

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Abstract

Economic valuation of ecosystem services has been criticised as inadequate to advise decision-making, as it fails to reflect the plural socio-cultural values that people attribute to nature. Efforts are ongoing to better capture the socio-cultural values (SCV) of ecosystem services. Consequently, this study contributes to the improvement of the socio-cultural assessment and valuation of ecosystem services, using the photovoice approach. Photovoice is a participatory approach whereby members of local communities personally take photos and use them to generate narratives. In this study, this methodology is used to communicate the social and cultural reality which characterises people’s relationship with nature.

The Kavango West region in Northern Namibia, until recently a subsistence economy, is undergoing changes including the intensified use of natural resource. We hypothesise that a change in SCV is related to the change in practices, and investigated the SCV in two villages near Nkurenkuru. Prior to eliciting SCVs, we examined the historical socio-cultural elements characterising the relationship between the smallholders and their ecosystem services.

The data consists of 165 photos and 170 narratives. MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis tool was applied to classify SCV, and thematic analysis was used to construct meanings of the identified SCV. Findings from 20 photovoice participants revealed multiple myths, taboos and practices related to use of river and forest ecosystems. For example, some participants photographed landscapes and told narratives about the Ekongoro, a mythical figure (or supernatural snake) which is believed to be the provider and the ruler of water and water resources, such as fishes. Ekongoro is valued but feared for its role in governing and managing water resources. This example shows that Ekongoro is a belief system that influences how people use their ecosystems.

Overall, the SCVs identified provide insight on the valuation and management of all MEA ecosystem services categories. Photovoice proved excellent in eliciting deep cultural elements which explain what nature means to people. The study highlights that assessment of SCV of ecosystem services should understand and include people’s cultural belief systems. This is essential in rural subsistence societies where cultural belief systems still have an influence on people’s action and decisions.

Keywords: Ecosystem services, Kavango, photovoice, socio-cultural values, subsistence communities