NATIONAL SOCIO-ENVIRONMENTAL SYNTHESIS CENTER

*African Bush Elephants, Maasai Mara.*
*Photo via Wikimedia Commons.*

# Ecosystem Services Lesson, Part 3: Intrinsic and Relational Values of Nature

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**Overview:**

Assessments of ecosystem services have long been developed through the lens of economics or monetary value (as in Lesson 1), even when enhanced personal or socio-cultural value is a desired outcome of ecosystem management. It is important, however, to consider alternative perspectives to that economic or **instrumental value** approach, which is based on human use of nature's bounty. As Barnaud and Antona (2014) have argued, we should question the ideas, norms, and values that underpin that economic perspective because ecosystem services do not just exist per se but are socially constructed and thus reflect the views and desires of those producing the estimate of their value. While the ecosystem services framework provides a useful tool for raising awareness about human dependencies on the environment and for justifying protective policies, the framework represents a Western worldview, "involving specific actors, resources, and power relations" (Muradian and Gómez-Baggethun 2021). After all, how one views and interacts with nature is shaped by personal experiences, cultural values, and histories that involve skewed power relations among actors.

For many people, and for some whole societies, an alternate perspective to instrumental value is that nature has **intrinsic value**, meaning that ecosystems have the right to exist regardless of human needs and desires. In other words, based on a person's attitudes and judgment, they value a part of nature on its own, for what it is—and not because it can provide a service to humans that has economic value. Because that value is based on reasoning (judgment), it is referred to as conditional intrinsic value. Others believe intrinsic value exists on its own, not because humans confer intrinsic

value to something. This belief is called objective intrinsic value—nature's value is inherent; it precedes mechanisms of human valuation; humans can discover it but not create it. Some conservationists—who worry that without value to humans, nature can be destroyed with impunity—have promoted this strong reading of inherent value.

A third perspective on nature's value is based on human interactions with and responsibilities to nature. **Relational values** are not inherent in things but are derived from how one relates to and engages with nature. The most obvious example is how a farmer might view the value of soil beyond its ability to produce a crop of a given economic value. However, relational values can be recognized in many social contexts through history, including the indigenous Quechua peoples of the Andes who celebrate *Sumak Kasway*, which translates to "good life"and involves a living essence to nature that humans are part of. Additionally, we can find relational values among Buddhists whose lives are interdependent with *natura*—an inherently moral relationship.

### Assumed Prior Knowledge:

Appropriate for undergraduate, graduate, and higher-level learners.

### Learning Objectives:

- Explore the culturally driven assumptions we may bring to our perspectives on nature.
- Learn about diverse historical and contemporary perspectives on ways of living with nature that go beyond economic exchange value.

### Key Terms and Concepts:

normative value; instrumental value; subjective intrinsic value; objective intrinsic value; economic value; relational values; non-Western environmental ethics; Indigenous knowledge; anthropocentrism; biocentrism

### The "Hook" (suggestions for quickly engaging students):

View the below photos. At the left is a rare photo taken from a deep-sea submersible of organisms living above hydrothermal vents in the very deepest part of the Pacific Ocean. No light reaches the seafloor at these depths, but entire food webs exist, presumably getting their energy from heat and chemical transformations. On the right is a parasitic wasp that may be found on crops and in gardens—its value is viewed very differently among people. Do these organisms have intrinsic value? Consider what assumptions or forms of analysis you may bring to your response.

*Left: Giant Tube Worms. NOAA Photo library, open use. Right: The giant wasp,* Rhyssa persuasoria. *Colorado State University, photo by Boris Hrasovec.*

## Teaching Assignments:

1. Prior to the session, learners should read and take notes on the following: a) Intrinsic Value, Ecology, and Conservation by Sandler; b) Why protect nature? Rethinking values and the environment by Chan et al.

2. **(5 min.)** Slide 1 in the PowerPoint shows the two images that are in the Hook. Begin the session by showing this slide and having the learners write for 3 minutes in response to the photos and the question: Do these have intrinsic value? Then open up the session to all and ask the learners to share some of their responses and the logic or emotions they used/felt.

Ecosystem Services Lesson 3 Slides.pptx

3. **(12-15 min.)** Divide the learners into groups of three. Continuing with the PowerPoint and looking at slide 2, have each group spend 5 minutes coming up with a definition(s) of and at least one example for each of these three perspectives on how nature may be valued: instrumental, intrinsic (subjective and objective), and relational value. After the groups have chatted, bring all together, ask for input from groups, and move through slides 3-6 sequentially.

4. **(20 min.)** Have the learners return to their groups of three. Distribute the below pdf "Diverse Peoples, Cultures, Cultural Traditions." Each group should select (or the instructor should assign them to ensure coverage across as many as possible) one of the peoples, cultures, or cultural traditions to explore online and consider how they do or do not fit clearly into the values scheme as described in this lesson (instrumental, intrinsic, relational). Learning groups should focus on: What are the particular valuation perspectives toward nature? How do the people/cultures interact with natural systems? Is there evidence that historic perspectives for the people/cultures have changed over time? Has an intrinsic or relational approach supported the long-term stability and sustainable use of these environments? Each group should prepare a short PowerPoint presentation or plan to give an informal report-out that provides an overview of their interpretation.
   *Note to instructor: Please tell the learners that the below is not meant to stereotype a group or people or cultures; for some of the groups, there are actually diverse views. The potential references are to help groups get started, but learners should explore information widely. Many of the references require access to institutional libraries, so let the learners know up front to first log in to their library.*

Diverse Peoples, Cultures, & Cultural Traditions.pdf

## Background Information for the Instructor:

1. **Deconstructing ecosystem services: Uncertainties and controversies around a socially constructed concept**
   - The usefulness of this paper for the instructor is its exploration of the social construction of Western views (i.e., economic) on ecosystem services. It also explores other aspects of that view and the general concept of ecosystem services that may be problematic—including uncertainties in causal relationships and controversies over policies driven by the concept.
   - Barnaud, C., & Antona, M. (2014). Deconstructing ecosystem services: Uncertainties and controversies around a socially constructed concept. *Geoforum, 56*, 113-123. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.07.003

2. **Beyond ecosystem services and nature's contributions: Is it time to leave utilitarian environmentalism behind?**
    - This paper is useful in that it discusses and critiques the Nature's Contributions to People (NCP) approach to ecosystem services, which is how the United Nations' Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) committee has framed ecosystem services. The authors argue that the NCP framing is too dualistic, anthropocentric, and utilitarian.
    - Muradian, R., & Gómez-Baggethun, E. (2021). Beyond ecosystem services and nature's contributions: Is it time to leave utilitarian environmentalism behind? *Ecological Economics, 185*, 107038. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecolecon.2021.107038

3. **Relational values: the key to pluralistic valuation of ecosystem services**
    - This paper proposes a new way to conceptualize the differences between relational, instrumental, and intrinsic (inherent moral) values. Like others, they argue that their conceptualization of relational values is more useful because it avoids an intrinsic-instrumental dichotomy.
    - Himes, A., & Muraca, B. (2018). Relational values: the key to pluralistic valuation of ecosystem services. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 35*, 1-7. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1877343517302634

## Related SESYNC Content:

- Palmer, M.A. (2023, March 31). *Ecosystem Services Lesson, Part 1: Defining and Valuing Nature*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/ecosystem-services-part-1-defining-and-valuing-nature
- Palmer, M.A. (2023, March 30). *Ecosystem Services Lesson, Part 2: Linking Ecosystems & Their Processes to What People Value and to Human Actions*. SESYNC. https://www.sesync.org/resources/ecosystem-services-part-2-linking-ecosystems-their-processes-what-people-value-and-human
- Jackson, S., Piland, N.C., Carriere, S. et al. (2022). River rhythmicity: A conceptual means of understanding and leveraging the relational values of rivers. *People and Nature, 4*(4), 949-962. https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.10335
- Jones, K., & Tobin, D. (2018). Reciprocity, redistribution and relational values: Organizing and motivating sustainable agriculture. *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability, 35,* 69-74. https://doi.org/10.1016/J.COSUST.2018.11.001
- Baudron, F., Schultner, J., Duriaux, J-Y. et al. (2019). Agriculturally productive yet biodiverse: human benefits and conservation values along a forest-agriculture gradient in Southern Ethiopia. *Landscape Ecology, 34*, 341-356. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10980-019-00770-6
- Jardine, T.D., Olden, J.D., Cheng, L. et al. (2019). Understanding rivers and their social relations: A critical step to advance environmental water management. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Water, 6*(6), e1381. https://doi.org/10.1002/wat2.1381

This work was supported by the National Socio-Environmental Synthesis Center (SESYNC) under funding received from the National Science Foundation DBI-1639145.