UK National Ecosystem Assessment Follow-on

Shared, plural and cultural values:
A handbook for decision-makers





Shared, plural and cultural values of ecosystems:
A handbook for decision-makers

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Suggested citation

Kenter, J.O., Reed, M. S., Everard, M., Irvine, K.N., O'Brien, E., Molloy, C., Bryce, R., Brady, E., Christie, M., Church, A., Collins, T., Cooper, N., Davies, A., Edwards, D., Evely, A., Fazey, I., Goto, R., Hockley, N., Jobstvogt, N., Orchard-Webb, J., Ravenscroft, N., Ryan, M., Watson, V. (2014) Shared, plural and cultural values: A handbook for decision-makers. UK National Ecosystem Assessment follow-on phase. Cambridge, UNEP-WCMC.

Reviewers

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Preface



Catalyzed by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the idea of seeing ecosystems as vital natural assets has spread across the world over the last decade. This idea appears in thinking about food, water, energy, health, fisheries, forestry, mining, cities, and the vast infrastructure supporting these and other sectors – and it increasingly appears in the ways local communities, corporations, governments, and other institutions frame decisions. Despite this rising awareness and energy, however, our planet remains besieged by massive degradation and mounting threats of catastrophic change.

The UK National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) and its follow-on (NEAFO) are a bold initiative designed to embed the values of ecosystems into decisions at all levels. The Ecosystem Approach is about shining a light on the many intimate, yet often hidden connections between people and nature, such as in the provision of drinking water, crop pollination, hydropower, climate stability, and cognitive and emotional well-being. In shining a light, we can see the implications of alternative choices and development pathways more clearly, and thereby reach for better outcomes for both people and nature.

No one person or entity can possibly achieve the aims of the NEA alone. To bring about a deep and lasting transformation in the way people interact with one another and with nature, we must come together around a shared understanding, a shared vision for the future, and a shared approach for getting there. Views on such matters are strongly shaped by values, yet many types of value – such as for intimate friendships, health and security, or connections with nature – may not be easy to express, becoming clear only after talking together with others about what matters most in life.

The NEAFO research on shared, plural and cultural values offers a beautiful and insightful framework for eliciting such values in a meaningful way. Shared values are those that people hold together as members of communities (local or even global), and they point to something different and much more powerful than the sum of individual values. Their elicitation requires a range of innovative combinations of methods. These are introduced here, and go far beyond what are useful, but limiting, economic methods.

In assessing and cultivating shared values, we lay the necessary foundation for effective action. The UK is in a very creative, yet highly dispersed phase of innovation, in co-development of ecosystems knowledge and real-world implementation; indeed, this is true across the world. This handbook explores how we can recognize the plurality of values people hold in relation to ecosystems, and how the tremendous potential energy in communities might be channeled and magnified to greatly accelerate the transformation we seek.

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The Black Wood at Rannoch.

7.5 Kinloch Rannoch, Forest Futures: Artistic engagement, interviews, deliberation and social learning to reveal hidden cultural values

This final case study examines a deliberative process of social discourse and learning intended to recover lost cultural values, create new meanings and imagine alternative futures for the Black Wood of Rannoch in Highland Perthshire. The Black Wood is the most significant remnant of ancient Caledonian pine forest in the Southern Highlands of Scotland, a product of hundreds of years of use and management; the forms of the dominant trees were shaped during the political upheaval of the 18th Century. In 1973 the Forestry Commission (FC) used conservation science to protect the forest from its own policies of intensive management; today the same logic of scientific conservation constrains public access and engagement, and effectively manages cultural values 'out of the system'.

Working with a wide range of partners representing diverse interests, including arts practitioners, humanities scholars, government agency and NGO representatives, and local residents, the physical and aesthetic condition of the forest and its historic management were critically reviewed. Site visits, workshops and residencies helped establish current ideas about ecology, landscape and culture, while interrogating preconceived ideas about 'appropriate' human-forest inter-relationships. The social and cultural domain was understood as a safe place to reconsider meaning and value, helping conflicting parties to find common ground in the protection of the Black Wood. Outcomes included concept plans that recognise a suite of shared values and a desire for future effort to resolve concerns about access and awareness.

Background

'FUTURE FOREST: The Forest is Moving' was funded by the Imagining Natural Scotland programme of Creative Scotland, and led by environmental artists at the Glasgow-based Collins and Goto Studio. The project sought to make a small contribution to the Black Wood, and the local communities that help define it, as part of a 'critical forest art practice' that also considered the Caledonian forest as a whole. Biodiversity preservation is the essential management focus within the forest, which was designated as a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) in 2005. The management plan limits facilitation of public interest and engagement that does not directly serve the conservation interest. As the project began, it became clear that many in the Rannoch community had a primary interest in renewed engagement and access to the forest in culturally meaningful ways, while making it clear they intended no harm.



Methods

Over a one-year period, partnerships were established by the artists with key stakeholders, and consolidated through residencies at the Perth Museum and Art Gallery, Forest Research near Edinburgh, and in the Kinloch Rannoch community and forest itself. The artists worked closely with local Forestry Commission (FC) staff, and the Perth and Kinross Countryside Trust who seek to (re) establish historic core trails across South Rannoch. These relationships kept the work grounded in specific, relevant issues while ensuring a broader understanding of the policy and decision-making context.

> "A collective 'walk and talk' in the forest revealed overt tensions, but also a sense of unacknowledged common ground"

The first attempt at a collective 'walk and talk' in the forest revealed overt tensions, but also a sense of unacknowledged common ground. Plans for a 'future forest' workshop evolved from this initial encounter. The artists worked with partners to agree overarching questions, the breadth of interests that should be invited, and a programme that included forest walks accompanied by FC staff, a public discussion, and the core workshop itself which ran over two days.

Around 30 participants attended. The workshop presentations began with local stakeholder perspectives, then ecological perspectives, a broad set of cultural perspectives, and followed by two intensive in-depth 'Future Forest' break-out groups, focusing respectively on 'community' and 'planning and management'. Maps and management plans of the Black Wood and wider region helped participants locate aesthetic and cultural interest (including an undeveloped portfolio of cultural heritage sites) and access opportunities within the forest.

Results

During the workshop, new ideas were introduced, helping participants talk about and reframe problems and imagine solutions. It was suggested that cultural values could be objectified (as artifacts within a landscape), but also institutionalised (through language, stories, art, music or literature). Alternatively they may be considered as ephemeral values that are embodied in users or practices, memories that occur in a place or in some aesthetic relationship or condition within the forest itself. It was argued that cultural values were an essential compliment to the facts and data of science: the open-ended nature of the 'cultural question' made it useful as a framing device that challenged the linearity of ecosystem services assessment. Scholarly presentations on environmental aesthetics, the descriptive qualities of the Gaelic language, and the aesthetics, ethics and politics of walking in Scotland surprised some participants with their relevance to a more nuanced understanding the Black Wood and its historic landscape.

Much of the project involved building bridges – both socially and conceptually – between the exclusionary principles and agents of conservation science and the potentially inclusive domain of art and culture. Participants approached consensus on the transcendental values and value to society associated with the Black Wood. Transcendental values were seen to be embedded in the aesthetic experience and scientific understanding of the forest as well as the respect for the complexity and fragility of its ecosystem. The partners shared a sense of the forest as a cultural symbol: an idea and an image with great social value, although it was not agreed where that value to society was accrued. The workshop largely focused upon tensions between divergent cultural and communal values held by the stakeholders.



A multi-screen installation of time-based artworks by Tim Collins and Reiko Goto, exploring the experience and the social context that shapes both the experience and the changing form and meaning of the Black Wood of Rannoch. Presented at the Perth and Kinross Museum and Art Gallery in 2013.

Where there was common ground on the non-human aspects ofother regarding values, there was mutual distrust about the ethical intent of other stakeholder groups. But this had largely dissipated by the end of the workshop. The cultural values that remained in tension focused on exclusion to support biodiversity, the renewed interest in centuries old core paths in the region, and the idea

that the forest (as a place) has essential cultural import for all of Scotland. These conflicting ideas align with the Rannoch community's communal values associated with improvement to public awareness and access to the forest as an element of their tourist economy. But they remain opposed to government agencies' own set of communal values, that constrained access based on their own ideas about future forest well-being.

> "Much of the project involved building bridges – both socially and conceptually"

Through the breakout groups there was recognition of the desire to promote a wider understanding of the Black Wood, and efforts to restore the Caledonian forest, and agreement that to change the character of the Black Wood would be wrong: the forest should be managed for aesthetic form and a culturally-meaningful ecological outcome. Further planning exercises with the 'forest community' are much desired as a means to address the conflict around awareness, access and branding.

More Information

To access a blog about the project, the workshop programme, video clips of the presentations and the final report to the partners see http://eden3.net/future-forest/.



Workshop participants on a site visit to Black Wood.

Published in 2011, the National Ecosystem Assessment (NEA) was the first comprehensive analysis of the state of the UK's natural environment in terms of the benefits it provides to society. This handbook is based on the findings of research conducted as part of the Shared, Plural and Cultural Values work package of the UK NEA Follow-on. The project was conducted between 2012-14, involved 21 researchers from eleven different Universities and research institutes and was led by the University of Aberdeen and Birmingham City University. To find out more about the research that this handbook is based upon, visit: www.lwec.org.uk/sharedvalues.

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