

Economics and Conservation in the Tropics: A Strategic Dialogue

Conservation Strategy Fund,
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Discussion Questions

1. Often the very values that drive conservation interest in tropical ecosystems are the hardest and most expensive to value. Biodiversity and indigenous culture are good examples. Has the science of valuation reached its methodological limits for monetizing non-use values, or can we still expect breakthroughs that can be applied in the tropics?
2. One of the uses of valuation is to convince people that ecosystems are worth conserving. Do valuation results resonate among the general public and policy-makers developing countries?
3. Comparing financial – or even economic – benefits provided by the marginal intact hectare to the financial benefits derived from conversion often favors the latter, until natural areas have become scarce and fragmented (as in the case of the Brazilian Atlantic Forest). By then, any “wilderness” character and landscape ecological function may have been lost. Should we be valuing the marginal hectare, or the marginal wilderness/landscape?
4. Conservation is a long-term (permanent!) proposition, but discounting drives the present value of long-term benefits almost to zero. Are there innovations in discounting that both allow for such benefits to have value and also are accepted by policy-makers?
5. Site-specific data on environmental values has not been gathered for the vast majority of sites of conservation importance in the tropics. One response to this gap is to use GIS models to extrapolate from one research site to unstudied sites. What is promise and what are the pitfalls of this sort of benefits-transfer analysis? Can the ecosystem service production functions be transferred at a large geographic scale? What about their unit monetary values (prices)?
6. Societies place a higher value on conserving nature once they’ve attained a certain level of development, and some nature is lost on the way to that point. Some of those losses are irreversible, particularly where endemic species are concerned. How should conservation advocates address the threat of irreversible losses where nature isn’t yet highly valued in a particular developing society, but may be someday?

7. Some people say protected areas cut off people's access to resources and make them poorer. Others contend that protection brings government and NGO projects, prevents the consolidation of landholdings, and maintains subsistence resources, which all can improve living standards around parks. Is there convincing evidence that protected areas make their neighbors either richer or poorer (counting non-market benefits and costs)?
8. Much of nature outside of protected areas, and some that's within, risks being lost due to large scale infrastructure and other development projects. Is there evidence that conservationists can influence policy or development project outcomes using economic analysis?
9. Which threats lend themselves best to influence by technical NGO/academic input – energy, transportation, agriculture, hydrocarbons?
10. Since its early days the rainforest conservation movement has looked to sustainably-produced forest products to provide an incentive for conservation. What are the necessary conditions for markets for ecosystem goods – like wood, Brazil nuts and fish – to encourage conservation?
11. More recently, interest has focused on creating new markets for ecosystem services. What are the necessary conditions (institutional, informational, cultural, competitive, etc.) for markets for ecosystem services – like carbon storage and hydrological regulation – to emerge and function?
12. Why are there so few payment systems for ecosystem services in the United States? And what does that imply about PES in the developing world?
13. Which conservation policy tools are used most in high-biodiversity tropical countries (command and control, price-based instruments, tradable quota markets)? Why?
14. What are the necessary conditions for market-based environmental policies – like green taxes or subsidies or tradable development rights – to work? What can US experience in this area tell us about prospects in the tropics?
15. Who are the conservation audiences (Indigenous people, local NGOs, big international NGOs, government, etc.) for your research/analysis and what economic analysis/information do they want?
16. Are there cultural obstacles to mainstreaming economics in the practice of conservation?
17. Is conservation primarily driven by a science-based, religious, distributional or some other “message” apart from economics – and likely to stay that way?

18. How is local ecological knowledge being captured and applied? If local knowledge is not the source, where does it come from?
19. What biophysical data is most available in your experience, monitoring-generated data or model-generated data? What do you use?
20. What social and economic data is most available in your experience, monitoring-generated data or model-generated data? What do you use?
21. Is it most advantageous/appropriate to convey outcomes as purely biophysical results (hectares protected), ecosystem services provided (cubic meters of irrigation water), or monetary measures? And why?
22. What is the status of property rights to land, timber, water, fish, carbon and other important resources. How important are secure property rights to conservation outcomes?
23. Skilled people are needed to do economic research, implement market based policies and oversee markets for ecosystem goods and services. What are the human resources you've found to be most and least available in developing countries?