

At a glance: Ecosystem Services

Three major problems associated with our management of the world's ecosystems are already causing significant harm to some people, particularly the poor, and unless addressed will substantially diminish the long-term benefits we obtain from ecosystems:

■ First, approximately 60% (15 out of 24) of the ecosystem services examined during the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment are being degraded or used unsustainably, including fresh water, capture fisheries, air and water purification, and the regulation of regional and local climate, natural hazards, and pests. The full costs of the loss and degradation of these ecosystem services are difficult to measure, but the available evidence demonstrates that they are substantial and growing. Many ecosystem services have been degraded as a consequence of actions taken to increase the supply of other services, such as food. These trade-offs often shift the costs of degradation from one group to another or defer costs to future generations.

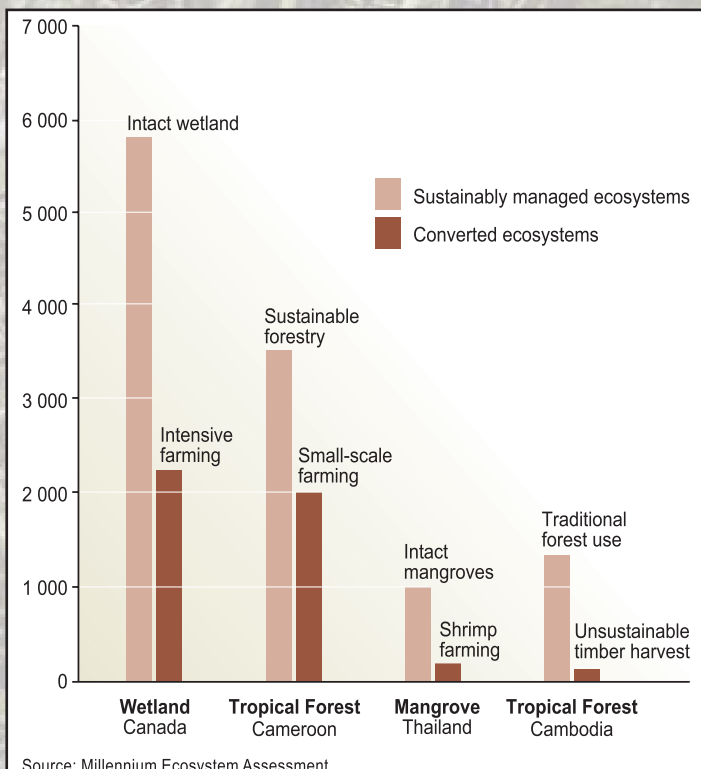
■ Second, there is established but incomplete evidence that changes being made in ecosystems are increasing the likelihood of nonlinear changes in ecosystems (including accelerating,

abrupt, and potentially irreversible changes) that have important consequences for human well-being. Examples of such changes include disease emergence, abrupt alternations in water quality, the creation of "dead zones" in coastal waters, the collapse of fisheries, and shifts in regional climate.

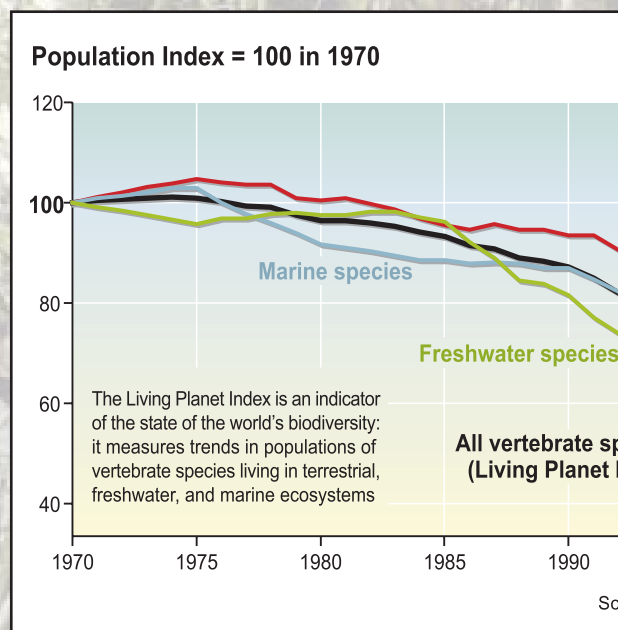
■ Third, the harmful effects of the degradation of ecosystem services (the persistent decrease in the capacity of an ecosystem to deliver services) are being borne disproportionately by the poor, are contributing to growing inequities and disparities across groups of people, and are sometimes the principal factor causing poverty and social conflict. This is not to say that ecosystem changes such as increased food production have not also helped to lift many people out of poverty or hunger, but these changes have harmed other individuals and communities and their plight has been largely overlooked. In all regions, and particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, the condition and management of ecosystem services is a dominant factor influencing prospects for reducing poverty.

'Ecosystems and Human Well-Being', a Synthesis Report of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005, Summary for Decision-Makers, pp.1-2

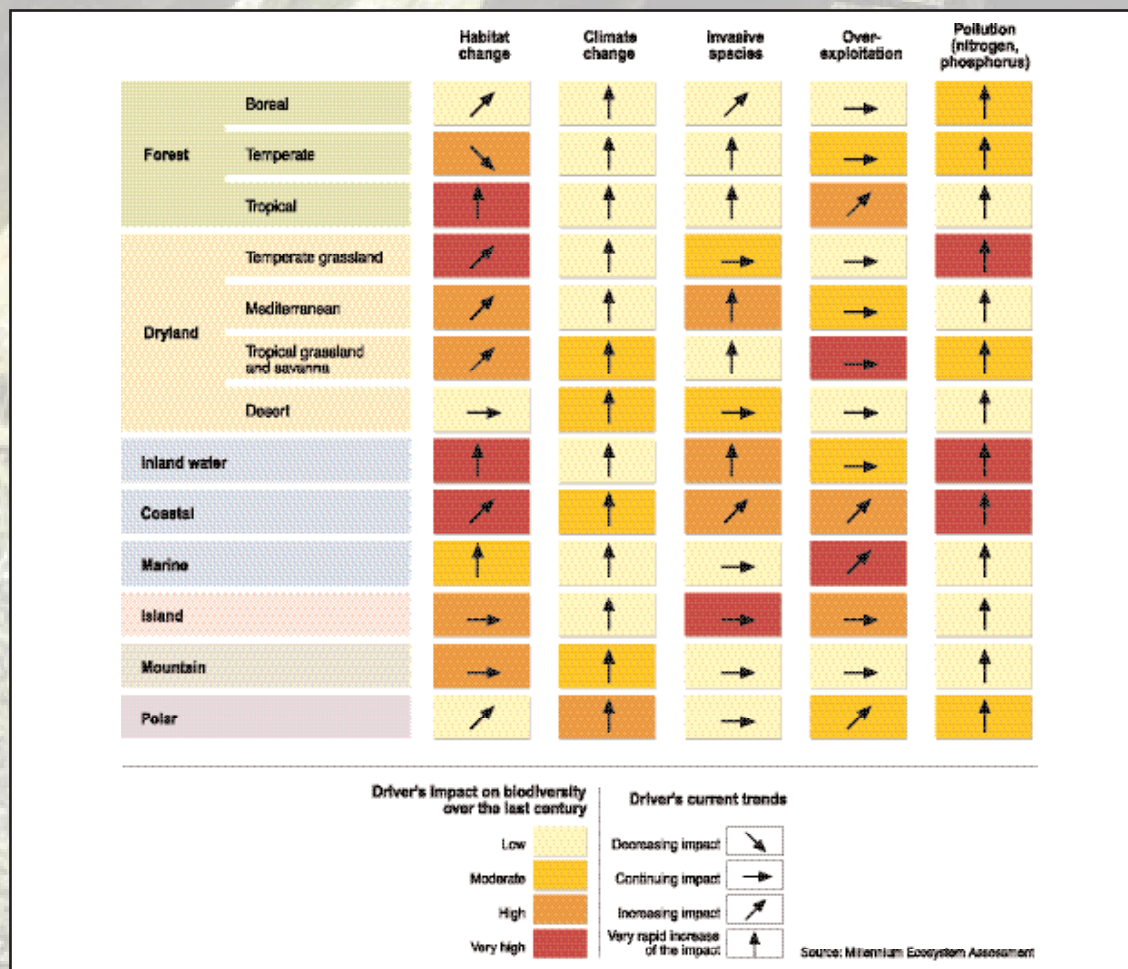
Economic Benefits under Alternate Management Practices



The Living Planet Index (incorporating data on the abundance of terrestrial, marine and freshwater species)

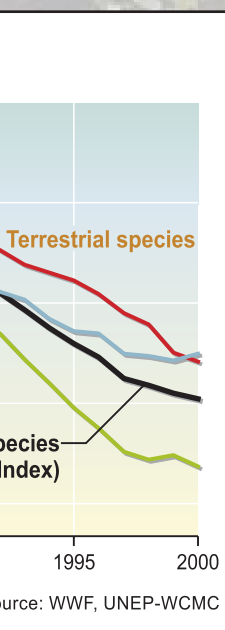


Main Direct Drivers of Change in Biodiversity and Ecosystems (global trends, based on expert opinion)



UNEP/Still Pictures

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Ecosystems and some of the Services they Provide

