Experiences of the Ecosystem Approach – what can we learn?
Experiencias del Enfoque Ecosistémico ¿qué podemos aprender?

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3rd Science for Biodiversity Forum

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I am a social scientist with a original training in ecology, working at an institute where we try to do actionable science to support SDGs.
I am generally interested in the challenges of adopting more participatory and systemic approaches.

I was invited to speak about the Ecosystem Approach, since, amongst other things, I have spent the last 5 years trying to understand more about its implementation, in response to interest by Scottish policy-makers about how they can better enable the Approach.

I want to note first that we haven't been saying much about the Ecosystem Approach in this meeting. Which is perhaps surprising given that it is a framework for action by the CBD. This is in itself interesting.

But just a check that we all on the same page.

I am referring to the concept as the 12 principles – the Malawi principles– as adopted by the CBD in 2000.

I don't have time to discuss all 12 principles – by itself that would be a talk of at least 12 minutes – but it is worth noting:

- Not the same as describing a system in terms of ESS – though doing so can support the EcA, that is a way of describing or understanding a system, whereas the principles are the basis for action – i.e. how you go about managing ecosystems
- It goes beyond EBA – many of its principles are about decentralisation, considering multiple knowledges, b-sharing, participation.
  It basically incorporates and connects all the best ideas and most ambitlous ideas we have about how to manage e.g. adaptive management.

Interesting, this reminds me of the principles for promoting resilience mentioning by Lily yesterday – very similar

Central concept if we want to mainstream biodiv – however, implementing has been difficult. Understanding can give insight into how and why we can do better.

There haven't been a great many initiatives reported that have convincingly tried to implement the CBD.
So I spent 5 years studying the progress of initiatives associated with the label in the UK.
In the UK there has been quite a bit of interest in trying to initiate and enable this concept, including some dedicated pilot projects.

Spent a lot of time discussing with project managers and policy makers to validate and elaborate their perceptions and experiences,
and also to facilitate cross-sectoral conversations with these and others (e.g. other academics, reprs of the private sector) about the consequences.

I won't say anything about the detail of these projects – you can find that via our website.
All projects made progress. However, none of them achieved all their aims, or look like a perfect example of holistic participatory ecosystem management.
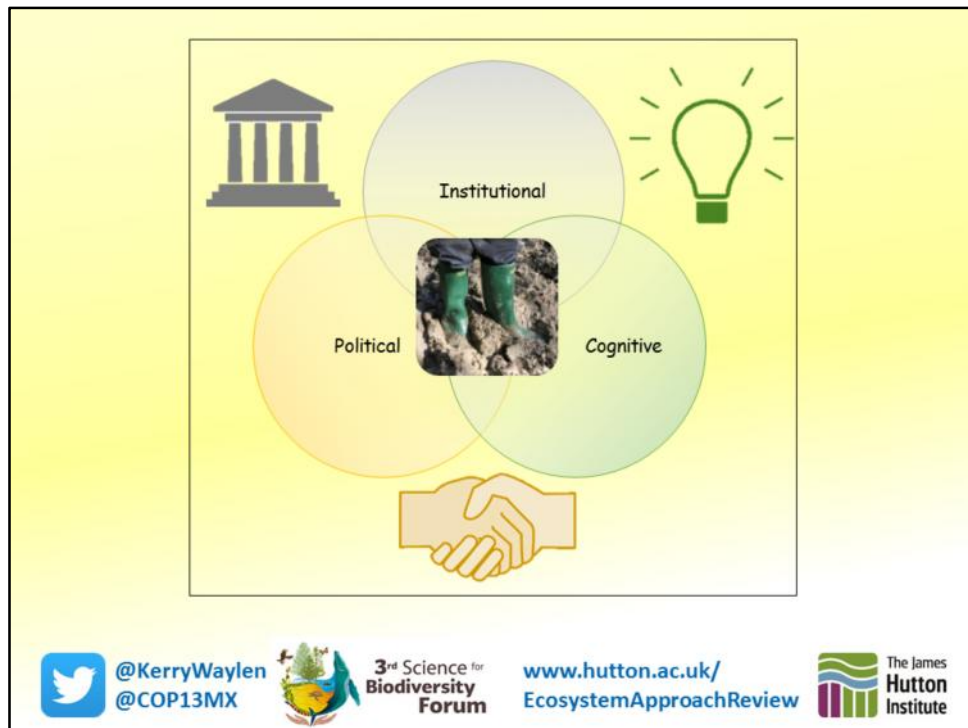
- Many difficulties arose precisely because the EcAp is different to what we trying to do before.
- This doesn't create a fixed path dependency, or completely stop us from doing anything new. However, it slows us down → it is what I call sticking points.

This echoes many of these points raised yesterday,
- Institutional sticking points – formal ways of organising and informal rules and ways of working e.g. managing for fixed species and habitats targets,
- Cognitive sticking points – ways of thinking about issues, reductionist ways of training, comfort zone and skills e.g. skills in habitat surveying, not in facilitating
- Political sticking points – by which I mean something related to the pre-existing power relations that Unai discussed yesterday. Interests and beneficiaries charged with env management, those who have power to influence them.
- These sticking points overlap. E.g. legacy of way of thinking about enviro shapes the targets we have now, which in turns shapes our K and monitoring base.

Conclusion: It's very simple, but derived from obs and academic theory, and in our discussions with non-academics they have found it a useful way to reflect on their practice.

Opportunities

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These projects give us ideas for good practices, and also help focus on the challenges that must be overcome.

1. Use principles

    e.g. to appraise individual projects or initiatives, and to assess and explain progress.

    X Not just about more money, or more info

    X Perhaps can follow with Elena's triangle to consider what we want to change v keep.

2. Doing so shows us that it is not just about projects

    e.g. Many constraints and challenges come from top down e.g. funding rules, what must be monitored & reported.

    X All levels and organisations need to consider what they can do and how they can.

    X Document it, discuss it, return to it (e.g. SNH use principles in job appraisal).

Future challenges – it all about making new connections
- Get non-env organisations leading – radical but help redress balance towards env actors doing. And we can learn from them.
- How best to connect bottom up with top-down leadership
- Need to learn more from diff places (e.g. US-UK, Global South to North) – help work out what works where and why.   [Good example PES – currently seeing more interest in Europe, pioneered in L.Am.]

Looking forward
But we shouldn't less this stop us from going forward.
Our experience of action-planning, shows it is useful:
(i) LT+ST   (ii) Self+Others   (iii) Formal+Informal   (iv)Topd+ Bottomup

Need to celebrate and build on success w/o becoming complacent + to learn from failure w/o becoming fatalistic.

For sources of further reading – everything from 2-page briefings through to academic papers, please visit this website.
Everything is open access.
Alternatively, you can email me.

I would be very interested to learn more about the experiences and reflections of other participants at this meeting and I hope there will be time to discuss in one of the knowledge café sessions.