Attempting to implement the Ecosystem Approach in the UK: Achieving innovative change or hopelessly constrained?

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Overview

- EcA versus “Business as Normal”
  Our study
- Progress of projects
  Approaches to tradeoffs
- Explanations & Implications – Can we achieve more?

https://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/ecosystem-approach-review
The Ecosystem Approach (EcA)

- “a strategy for the integrated management of land, water and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way”

- 12 Malawi Principles
  - www.cbd.int/ecosystem
EcA versus ‘business as usual’

- Established approaches in UK
  - Technocratic - expert led
  - Reliance on rules and regulation
  - Single /narrow issues e.g. protect endangered species

- EcA entails “opening up”
  - Stakeholder participation and knowledges
  - Systems perspectives
  - Flexibility in tools, goals
Our study

- EcA in Scotland’s Land Use Strategy

- Government unsure how to support
  - How can we implement it?
  - How can we communicate it?
  - How could we evaluate it?
Our study

Empirical studies of Env management
Environmental governance
Institutional analysis

Health warning – data collection in 2013 – albeit discussions, workshops and related research since then...
Our study

- 24 projects (often labelled retrospectively)
- Varied set
  - Scale: 21 – 1000s of ha
  - Domain: marine, catchment, terrestrial
  - All multiple objectives...
    - 1+ ecological changes, plus social or economic (but latter not monitored)
  - ... but usually a main focal issue.
    - e.g. reduce water pollution
Achievements

- Build on pre-existing initiatives, issues and leads
  - Pre-existing focal problem: e.g. water quality
  - Pre-existing boundaries: e.g. protected sites
  - Pre-existing lead agencies: e.g. Environment Agencies

- Only 1 project with ‘fresh start’
Achievements

- Rarely try to implement all 12 ‘Malawi’ principles

- Most challenging:
  #1 Societal choice of objectives
  #2 Decentralisation
  #3 Consider effects on adjacent systems
  #10 Balance conservation and use
Approaches to tradeoffs

- All projects involve tradeoffs

- All balance different benefits derived from nature e.g. “there’s quite a lot of different issues in there around carbon in soils, about flooding, around woodland expansion, about communities…” Carse of Stirling

- Most but not all frame it in terms of ecosystem services: not necessarily financially valued
Approaches to tradeoffs

- Compensation, winners & losers
  - “Compensation” rarely mentioned
- More positive framings?
  - Themes of collaboration and partnership were more common
  - Quantification or valuation of ecosystem services – never primary basis for decision-making
Approaches to tradeoffs

- Less positively...
  - Difficult to explicitly discuss power imbalances
    - no challenge to existing rights and interests
  - No mechanisms for compensation
    - only existing subsidies or resources (e.g. via CAP)
  - Some of the empowered (agencies) are at the same time disempowered (limited resources)?
Achievements

- Progress?
  - Lots of plans
  - Steps to involve stakeholder group(s)
  - Efforts to track ecosystem services
  - Monitoring mostly in terms of biological indicators
Achievements

- Innovative change or hopelessly constrained?

- Positive change but piecemeal efforts - no revolution (yet)
Explanations & Implications

- Positive - ethos of holistic thinking and collaboration

- Existing initiatives not enough to completely overcome legacy of ‘Business as Usual’
  - Relatively little time, most <5 years
  - Focus on “the project”
  - Limited scope of change
  - Temptation to retrofit labels
Explanations & Implications

“Sticking points” from legacy effects
Explanations & Implications

- Not enough just to rely on project managers

- Higher-level institutions and processes critical
  - Evaluation criteria
  - Budget allocation processes, etc.
  - Organizational structures
  - Mandates for knowledge collection
Implications (& Ponderings)

- Need systemic change in order to achieve systemic change
- Where to start?
Implications (& Ponderings)

- Leverage points?

- Donnella Meadows:
  "Tendency to focus on highly tangible, but essentially weak leverage points (i.e., interventions that are easy to make, but have limited potential for transformative change)"

Implications (& Ponderings)

- Leverage points for sustainability
  - To find the best ways to focus efforts:
    - https://leveragepoints.org
  - Can this uncover new ideas about how to enable EcA and related approaches?
Implications (& Ponderings)

Abson et al 2016, Ambio

Meadows' (1999) place to intervene in a system

Parameters
- 12. Parameters (such as subsidies, taxes, standards)
- 11. The size of buffers, stocks, relative to their flows
- 10. The structure of material stocks and flows
- 9. The length of delays, relative to the rate of system change
- 8. The strength of negative feedback loops
- 7. The gain around driving positive feedback loops

Feedbacks
- 6. The structure of information flows (access to information)
- 5. The rules of the system (such as incentives & constraints)
- 4. The power to add, change or self-organize system structure
- 3. The goals of the system
- 2. The mindset/paradigm out of which the system arises
- 1. The power to transcend paradigms

System characteristics
- The relatively mechanistic characteristics typically targeted by policy makers
- The interactions between elements within a system of interest that drive internal dynamics
- The social structures and institutions that manage feedbacks and parameters
- The underpinning values, goals, and world views of actors that shape the emergent direction to which a system is oriented

Increasing effectiveness (to create system-wide changes)

Shallow leverage points

Deep leverage points

Intent

The four system characteristics represent a nested hierarchy of, tightly interacting, realms of leverage within which interventions in a given system of interest may be made. Deeper system characteristics constrain the types of interventions possible at shallower realms of leverage.

(Another 12 principles!)
Implications (& Ponderings)

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Conclusion

- Ecosystem Approach is a ‘big idea’
  ...however, implementation not matching the ideal

- Different initiatives offer promise & learning...
  ...however we may need to think ‘big’ and step outside our comfort zones to find ways of studying and enabling this.
Postscript

- Administrative restructuring
- Interest in integration
- Initiatives for decentralization
- Focus on use of Natural Capital and ESS by private sector actors

Slow systemic change... or capture?
http://www.hutton.ac.uk/research/projects/ecosystem-approach-review