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Short Communication

Balancing production and nature: Ecosystem service trade-offs under agricultural intensification and restoration

Nathaniel J. Bouskill*

Department of Ecology, Tropical Ecosystems Lab, Stanford University, USA

**Corresponding author E-mail: nbouskill@saod.edu*

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Agricultural intensification and ecological restoration present contrasting yet interconnected challenges for ecosystem service management. While intensification boosts crop yields and food security, it often compromises soil fertility, water quality, biodiversity and other regulating and supporting services. Conversely, ecological restoration enhances ecosystem resilience, biodiversity and carbon sequestration but may reduce immediate agricultural productivity. This article explores the trade-offs between provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural ecosystem services under varying land-use scenarios. Drawing on studies from agroecosystems, restored landscapes and riparian buffers, we examine how land management, biodiversity and landscape connectivity mediate these trade-offs. Strategies for integrating production and ecological objectives, including agroecology, multifunctional landscapes and adaptive management, are discussed. Understanding and managing these trade-offs is critical for sustainable agriculture, ecosystem resilience and climate adaptation.

Keywords: Ecosystem services, Agricultural intensification, Ecological restoration, Trade-offs, Biodiversity, Landscape management, Sustainable agriculture, Carbon sequestration.

Introduction

Agricultural systems worldwide are under pressure to meet rising food demands while minimizing environmental degradation. Intensified agricultural practices—monocultures, high fertilizer and pesticide use and irrigation—have dramatically increased food production. However, these practices often degrade soil structure, reduce biodiversity, pollute water resources and disrupt regulating ecosystem services. In contrast, ecological restoration, including reforestation, wetland rehabilitation and riparian buffer establishment, aims to recover ecosystem functionality, enhance carbon sequestration and improve biodiversity, but may limit short-term crop yields. Ecosystem services—provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural—are often in competition and land-use decisions create trade-offs between these services. Understanding these trade-offs is critical for developing sustainable land management strategies that balance agricultural production with ecological integrity. This article synthesizes research on ecosystem service trade-offs under agricultural intensification and restoration, highlighting mechanisms, spatial and temporal scales and strategies for sustainable multifunctional landscapes. Agricultural intensification enhances provisioning services, primarily food, fiber and bioenergy production. Monocultures, mechanization and chemical inputs increase yields per unit area, supporting local and global food security (Rust NA, et al. 2022). Crop selection and irrigation improve resilience to climate variability, while fertilizers and pesticides enhance short-term productivity. Intensification, however, often comes at the expense of other ecosystem services, creating a complex balance between production and ecological integrity.

Description

Intensive agriculture disrupts key regulating services, including water regulation, soil fertility, pollination and pest control. Fertilizer and pesticide runoff contribute to eutrophication and water contamination, while soil tillage increases erosion, reduces organic matter and impairs carbon storage. Habitat simplification reduces pollinator abundance and natural pest predators, undermining biological control services. These changes can create long-term vulnerabilities that compromise sustained productivity. Soil structure, microbial diversity and nutrient cycling are central to supporting ecosystem services. Agricultural intensification often reduces soil organic matter, microbial diversity and nutrient availability (Mommaerts V, et al. 2010). This degradation decreases resilience to drought, nutrient depletion and pathogen outbreaks. Loss of plant diversity further weakens functional redundancy, reducing ecosystem stability under environmental stress.

Ecological restoration increases plant and microbial diversity, enhancing resilience and ecosystem functionality. Reforestation, riparian buffer restoration and grassland rehabilitation improve habitat connectivity, support pollinators and stabilize soils. Biodiversity promotes complementary resource use, stabilizing primary productivity and mitigating the impacts of climate extremes. Restored landscapes regulate water flow, reduce flood risk, improve water quality and sequester carbon. Soil microbial communities recover, enhancing nutrient cycling, organic matter retention and soil fertility (Tschoeke PH, et al. 2019). These improvements support provisioning services indirectly by sustaining long-term productivity and ecosystem health. For example, restored wetlands and riparian zones filter nutrients and sediments, protecting downstream agriculture from contamination. Restoration can limit immediate agricultural output by converting productive land to natural vegetation. This trade-off is context-dependent: in marginal lands, restoration often enhances both biodiversity and productivity by improving soil fertility and water retention. In highly productive lands, short-term losses may be necessary for long-term sustainability and climate adaptation.

Trade-offs between ecosystem services occur when the enhancement of one service reduces another. For example, intensification maximizes provisioning services but reduces regulating and supporting services. Conversely, restoration maximizes regulating and supporting services but can reduce immediate crop yield (Yang S, et al. 2018). Identifying these trade-offs requires understanding spatial heterogeneity, land-use history and local socio-economic objectives. Synergies occur when management practices simultaneously enhance multiple services. Agroforestry, intercropping, cover cropping and riparian buffers provide habitat for pollinators, improve nutrient cycling and support soil carbon while maintaining production. Diversified landscapes, including mosaic patterns of crops, pastures and restored habitats, balance production and ecological objectives. Landscape connectivity allows species movement, enhancing resilience and ecosystem service delivery. Trade-offs and synergies are influenced by temporal scales (Walpole M, et al. 2009). Short-term production gains from intensification may lead to long-term declines in soil fertility, water quality and pollination. Restoration efforts may initially reduce yields but increase productivity over time by enhancing soil health and ecosystem resilience. Recognizing temporal dimensions is essential for adaptive management and sustainable land-use planning.

Conclusion

Balancing agricultural production with ecological integrity requires understanding and managing ecosystem service trade-offs. Intensification boosts immediate yields but often undermines regulating and supporting services, while restoration enhances ecosystem resilience, biodiversity and carbon sequestration but may reduce short-term productivity. Multifunctional landscapes, agroecological practices and adaptive management offer pathways to reconcile these objectives. Integrating restoration with sustainable agriculture supports long-term productivity, ecosystem service delivery and climate adaptation. Sustainable land management must account for spatial and temporal dimensions of trade-offs, biodiversity and ecosystem connectivity. By aligning agricultural practices with ecological principles, society can achieve a balance between production and nature, ensuring food security, environmental sustainability and resilience in the face of climate change. Continuous monitoring of soil health, biodiversity, water quality and crop yields supports adaptive management.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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