

COMMENTARY

The interplay of land use change and ecosystem service sustainability

Buerkert Shang*

Department of Environmental Science, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou 730070, China

**Corresponding author E-mail: buerkertang.shng@wek.cn*

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The relationship between land use change and ecosystem service sustainability has become a crucial area of study in recent decades. Human-induced modifications to land cover through urbanization, agriculture, deforestation, and industrial development directly influence the functionality and sustainability of ecosystem services, which provide vital benefits to both humans and nature. This article explores the complex interplay between land use changes and the sustainability of ecosystem services, analyzing key drivers of land use change and their effects on the provision, regulation, and maintenance of ecosystem services. It highlights the role of ecosystem-based management approaches, policy interventions, and the integration of ecosystem service assessments into land use planning to maintain sustainable ecosystem service delivery. The findings suggest that while land use changes can degrade ecosystem services, strategic land management can mitigate these negative impacts and enhance the resilience of ecosystems.

Keywords: Land use change, Ecosystem services, Sustainability, Urbanization, Agriculture, Ecosystem-based management, Land use planning, Environmental policy.

Introduction

Land use changes have been one of the most significant drivers of environmental change over the past century. With the increasing global population and the demands for food, energy, and infrastructure, land use is rapidly shifting. Whether through urban expansion, agricultural intensification, deforestation, or the conversion of wetlands for development, human activities are modifying the earth's landscapes at an unprecedented rate. These changes, in turn, have profound impacts on the sustainability of ecosystem services, the critical natural processes that support life on Earth, including provisioning services like food and water, regulating services such as climate regulation and flood control, and cultural services like recreation and aesthetic value. Understanding the interplay between land use change and ecosystem service sustainability is essential for developing strategies that balance human development with environmental conservation. Ecosystem services underpin human well-being, and their degradation due to land use changes can result in severe ecological, economic, and social consequences. This paper seeks to explore how land use change affects the delivery of ecosystem services, the mechanisms behind these interactions, and the potential pathways toward achieving a sustainable relationship between land use and ecosystem service provision (Chen L, et al. 2024).

Ecosystem services are the direct and indirect benefits humans derive from ecosystems. Provisioning services provide tangible goods such as food, water, timber, fiber, and medicinal resources. Ecosystems regulate environmental conditions, including climate regulation, water purification, air quality maintenance, and flood control. Cultural services provide non-material benefits, including recreational, spiritual, aesthetic, and educational values.

Description

Land use change can have a range of impacts on ecosystem services, often degrading the services that are most essential to human well-being. Land use change typically impacts provisioning services by altering the availability and accessibility of resources such as food, water, and raw materials. For example, deforestation for agricultural expansion may initially increase the supply of crops but can reduce the availability of forest products such as timber and medicinal plants (Huang H, et al. 2024). Similarly, land drainage for urban development can alter hydrological cycles, impacting the availability of freshwater for local communities. Regulating services, such as climate regulation, air purification, and flood control, are particularly sensitive to land use changes. Deforestation, for example, contributes to carbon emissions and climate change by releasing stored carbon into the atmosphere. The conversion of wetlands for agriculture can disrupt natural flood mitigation processes, leading to an increased risk of flooding. Additionally, urbanization typically leads to an increase in air and water pollution, further disrupting these regulating services.

Cultural services are also highly impacted by land use changes. The conversion of natural landscapes for urban development, mining, or agriculture often leads to the loss of areas with high recreational, spiritual, or aesthetic value. Forests, wetlands, and natural parks provide opportunities for recreation, tourism, and cultural expression (Li M, et al. 2021). Their degradation or disappearance can reduce the quality of life for communities that depend on these spaces for both economic and non-economic reasons. Supporting services, which are essential for the maintenance of other ecosystem services, are often the most vulnerable to land use change. Soil fertility, nutrient cycling, and biodiversity all suffer when natural habitats are altered. The loss of biodiversity, in particular, can reduce the resilience of ecosystems to environmental changes and undermine the functioning of supporting services that sustain food production and other vital ecosystem processes. Given the critical role that ecosystem services play in human well-being, understanding how to manage land use changes to sustain these services is paramount. Several strategies can help balance the needs of development with environmental conservation. Ecosystem-based management is a holistic approach to managing land, water, and living resources that seeks to maintain ecosystem functions and services while supporting human development. EBM emphasizes the integration of ecological, social, and economic factors into land use decision-making. This approach aims to conserve biodiversity, protect ecosystem services, and promote the sustainable use of natural resources (Behboudian M, et al. 2023).

Integrated land use planning involves considering the multiple uses of land and the trade-offs between different land use practices. It emphasizes the need to incorporate ecological considerations into urban and rural planning to prevent land degradation and ensure the continued delivery of ecosystem services. This might involve zoning policies that protect critical ecosystems or the promotion of sustainable agricultural practices that minimize ecological harm. Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) is a mechanism that compensates landowners or communities for managing their land in ways that provide ecological benefits to society. By creating economic incentives for conservation, PES programs can help align private landowners' interests with public goals for ecosystem service protection. This approach has been used successfully in various regions to preserve forests, wetlands, and other critical ecosystems. Land restoration and conservation programs aim to reverse or mitigate the effects of land use change by restoring degraded ecosystems to their natural state. Reforestation, wetland restoration, and soil conservation practices can help restore ecosystem services that have been lost due to previous land use changes. These efforts can improve carbon sequestration, water quality, and biodiversity, thus enhancing the sustainability of ecosystem services (Escobedo FJ, et al. 2011).

Conclusion

The interplay between land use change and ecosystem service sustainability is a dynamic and multifaceted issue that requires integrated approaches for effective management. While land use changes driven by human activity can lead to the degradation of vital ecosystem services, there are numerous strategies available to mitigate these impacts and promote sustainable land management. By adopting ecosystem-based management, integrating ecological considerations into land use planning, incentivizing conservation efforts, and promoting land restoration, it is possible to balance human development with the preservation of the ecosystem services on which we depend. As the world continues to urbanize and agricultural demand grows, ensuring the sustainability of these services is crucial for the well-being of both current and future generations.

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Conflict of Interest


The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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