Strengthening resilience in wetland social ecological systems: Exploring the potential role of adaptive co-management

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Abstract

Wetlands provide a wide variety of ecosystem services, from provisioning to cultural and regulating services. The appropriate management of wetlands, however, has not been explored extensively from the perspective of social-ecological systems thinking, and particularly not in the context of privately owned forestry land. The national land reform process in South Africa is likely to have strong implications for large commercial forestry land, on which a large proportion of the country’s wetlands can be found. This calls for research that looks at ecosystem service management on wetland social-ecological systems across the complex continuum of land rights. Changes in land ownership linked to the national land reform process means that companies will have to deal with new land owners on what was previously its own land, and ensure that the natural resources on their land are managed sustainably or the timber grown on their land will not comply to international standards. The continued provision of valued ecosystem services may either be supported or threatened by shifts in land ownership. Through a multi-scale and comparative case study approach, this research used key informant interviews and document analysis to explore the following questions: to what extent is adaptive co-management is at play or not in these contexts? To what extent are managers working adaptively? To what extent are managers supporting or learning from the adaptive capacity of the resource users that they are working with? What institutional barriers/challenges prevent the emergence of these ways of working? We use this analysis to identify opportunities and barriers for a shift toward adaptive co-management within private companies confronted with wetland social-ecological system management.

Keywords: Adaptive Co-management, Social, ecological systems, resilience, ecosystem services

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