Culture inextricably entwined with nature: the importance of cultural environmental values and relationships to human wellbeing

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Abstract

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We argue that to understand social-ecological resilience and transformation towards ecosystem stewardship we need to deepen our understanding of the underlying and potentially deep connections between people and nature. Basic determinants of human well-being have been defined as including security; an adequate supply of basic materials for livelihood (e.g. food, shelter, etc.); personal freedoms; good social relations; and physical health within the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. We argue that such a limited interpretation of human well-being overlooks the holistic, subjective, and often non-visual (embodied) perceptions and interactions that communities may have with their natural landscape. We documented the emotions, meanings and values associated with natural landscape elements in the Eastern Cape. Respondents portrayed a strong, although not always easily articulated, appreciation for nature. The benefits of being in nature were ascribed not only to the physical experience of the forest environment and its biota, but also to the presence of ancestral spirits. Being in nature thus contributes significantly to physical, mental and spiritual well-being (impilo) of local people and is also integral to their sense of cultural identity (ubuntu). A household survey revealed that these values are prevalent even in an urban setting, although urban residents had fewer opportunities to engage in the practices that bring them into contact with nature. The study highlights that cultural identity, heritage, and spiritual meanings of nature are key components of local communities’ sense of well-being.

Keywords: Community engagement, Stewardship, Human wellbeing, Ecosystem services, Resilience, Transformation

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