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Sustainable Conservation: Pushing the Envelope on Ecosystem Services

 By [Deborah Fleischer](#) | May 21st, 2010 [View Comments](#)

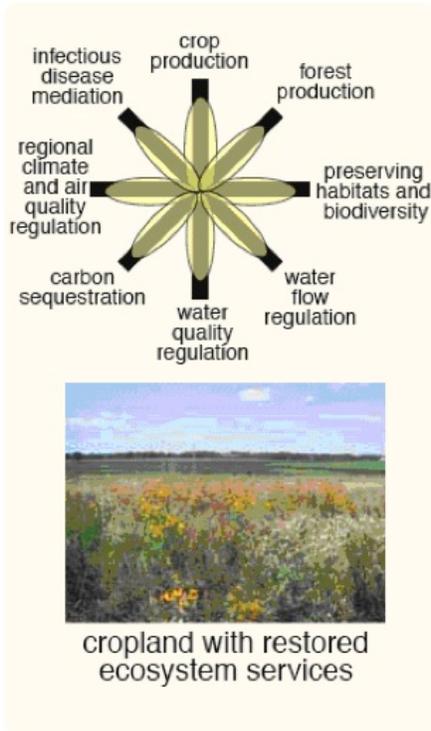
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At the [Bay Area Open Space Council's](#) 11th Annual Regional Conference yesterday, Ashley Boren, executive director of [Sustainable Conservation](#), presented to a sold out conference about one of its new program areas: [ecosystem services](#).



I actually worked for Sustainable Conservation in its early days. It has grown from a start-up to an effective organization that "advances the stewardship of natural resources using innovative, pragmatic strategies that actively engage businesses and private landowners in conservation." Its trademark approach is that protecting the environment can also be good for business. The organization's climate, air, water and biodiversity initiatives promote practical solutions that produce tangible, lasting benefits for California. Its effectiveness lies in its ability to build strong partnerships with business, agriculture and government—and establishing models for environmental and economic sustainability that can be replicated across California and beyond.

Ecosystem services is an emerging solution to environmental concerns that leverages the restorative power of nature. It involves cultivating the benefits of healthy ecosystems, including those found on California farms, ranches and forests. According to Boren, the Earth's ecosystems produce nearly twice the value of global GNP, but most of these benefits are not captured by existing economic systems. Ecosystem services creates a system where the people and companies producing such benefits as flood mitigation, groundwater recharge, carbon sequestration and wetland restoration are compensated for these benefits.



Funding Framework

Of course, the million dollar question is where does the money come from to pay for the benefit. Sustainable Conservation is exploring a framework for payments that includes:

- Government payments
- Municipal needs (i.e., NYC and Santa Fe water users pay for upper watershed protection and restoration)
- Regulations
- Voluntary actions (including corporate social responsibility)

Demonstration Project

Sustainable Conservation is starting at the local level to implement some demonstration projects to measure the actual performance of restoration actions and to work with stakeholders to monetize services. It is about unifying economics, restoration ecology and stewardship.

Boren explained, "There is a lot of uncertainty out there, but we have got to try. We think it is the best way to make the case for ecosystem services and we are going to learn as we go along."

Deborah Fleischer is President of [Green Impact](#), a strategic environmental consulting practice that helps companies walk the green talk. Green Impact designs and implements new green initiatives and develops