

# MA Conceptual Framework

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This chapter provides the summary of Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: A Framework for Assessment* (Island Press, 2003), pp. 1–25, which was prepared by an extended conceptual framework writing team of 51 authors and 10 contributing authors.

## Main Messages

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**Human well-being and progress toward sustainable development are vitally dependent upon improving the management of Earth's ecosystems to ensure their conservation and sustainable use.** But while demands for ecosystem services such as food and clean water are growing, human actions are at the same time diminishing the capability of many ecosystems to meet these demands.

**Sound policy and management interventions can often reverse ecosystem degradation and enhance the contributions of ecosystems to human well-being,** but knowing when and how to intervene requires substantial understanding of both the ecological and the social systems involved. Better information cannot guarantee improved decisions, but it is a prerequisite for sound decision-making.

**The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment was established to help provide the knowledge base for improved decisions and to build capacity for analyzing and supplying this information.**

**This chapter presents the conceptual and methodological approach that the MA used to assess options that can enhance the contribution of ecosystems to human well-being.** This same approach should provide a suitable basis for governments, the private sector, and civil society to factor considerations of ecosystems and ecosystem services into their own planning and actions.

### 1.1 Introduction

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Humanity has always depended on the services provided by the biosphere and its ecosystems. Further, the biosphere is itself the product of life on Earth. The composition of the atmosphere and soil, the cycling of elements through air and waterways, and many other ecological assets are all the result of living processes—and all are maintained and replenished by living ecosystems. The human species, while buffered against environmental immediacies by culture and technology, is ultimately fully dependent on the flow of ecosystem services.

In his April 2000 Millennium Report to the United Nations General Assembly, in recognition of the growing burden that degraded ecosystems are placing on human well-being and economic development and the opportunity that better managed ecosystems provide for meeting the goals of poverty eradication and sustainable development, United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated that:

*It is impossible to devise effective environmental policy unless it is based on sound scientific information. While major advances in data collection have been made in many areas, large gaps in our knowledge remain. In particular, there has never been a comprehensive global assessment of the world's major ecosystems. The planned Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, a major international collaborative effort to map the health of our planet, is a response to this need.*

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment was established with the involvement of governments, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations, and scientists to provide an integrated assessment of the consequences of ecosystem change for human well-being and to analyze options available to enhance the conservation of ecosystems and their contributions to meeting human needs. The Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention to Combat Desertification, the Convention on Migratory Species, and the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands plan to use the

findings of the MA, which will also help meet the needs of others in government, the private sector, and civil society. The MA should help to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goals and to carry out the Plan of Implementation of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development. It has mobilized hundreds of scientists from countries around the world to provide information and clarify science concerning issues of greatest relevance to decision-makers. The MA has identified areas of broad scientific agreement and also pointed to areas of continuing scientific debate.

The assessment framework developed for the MA offers decision-makers a mechanism to:

- **Identify options that can better achieve core human development and sustainability goals. All countries and communities are grappling with the challenge of meeting growing demands for food, clean water, health, and employment.** And decision-makers in the private and public sectors must also balance economic growth and social development with the need for environmental conservation. All of these concerns are linked directly or indirectly to the world's ecosystems. The MA process, at all scales, was designed to bring the best science to bear on the needs of decision-makers concerning these links between ecosystems, human development, and sustainability.
- **Better understand the trade-offs involved—across sectors and stakeholders—in decisions concerning the environment.** Ecosystem-related problems have historically been approached issue by issue, but rarely by pursuing multisectoral objectives. This approach has not withstood the test of time. Progress toward one objective such as increasing food production has often been at the cost of progress toward other objectives such as conserving biological diversity or improving water quality. The MA framework complements sectoral assessments with information on the full impact of potential policy choices across sectors and stakeholders.
- **Align response options with the level of governance where they can be most effective.** Effective management of ecosystems will require actions at all scales, from the local to the global. Human actions now directly or inadvertently affect virtually all of the world's ecosystems; actions required for the management of ecosystems refer to the steps that humans can take to modify their direct or indirect influences on ecosystems. The management and policy options available and the concerns of stakeholders differ greatly across these scales. The priority areas for biodiversity conservation in a country as defined based on “global” value, for example, would be very different from those as defined based on the value to local communities. The multiscale assessment framework developed for the MA provides a new approach for analyzing policy options at all scales—from local communities to international conventions.

### 1.2 What Is the Problem?

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Ecosystem services are the benefits people obtain from ecosystems, which the MA describes as provisioning, regulating, supporting, and cultural services. (See Box 1.1.) Ecosystem services include products such as food, fuel, and fiber; regulating services such as climate regulation and disease control; and nonmaterial benefits such as spiritual or aesthetic benefits. Changes in these services affect human well-being in many ways. (See Figure 1.1.)

The demand for ecosystem services is now so great that trade-offs among services have become the rule. A country can increase food supply by converting a forest to agriculture, for example, but

## BOX 1.1

**Key Definitions**

*Ecosystem.* An ecosystem is a dynamic complex of plant, animal, and microorganism communities and the nonliving environment interacting as a functional unit. Humans are an integral part of ecosystems. Ecosystems vary enormously in size; a temporary pond in a tree hollow and an ocean basin can both be ecosystems.

*Ecosystem services.* Ecosystem services are the benefits people obtain from ecosystems. These include provisioning services such as food and water; regulating services such as regulation of floods, drought, land degradation, and disease; supporting services such as soil formation and nutrient cycling; and cultural services such as recreational, spiritual, religious and other nonmaterial benefits.

*Well-being.* Human well-being has multiple constituents, including basic material for a good life, freedom of choice and action, health, good social relations, and security. Well-being is at the opposite end of a continuum from poverty, which has been defined as a “pronounced deprivation in well-being.” The constituents of well-being, as experienced and perceived by people, are situation-dependent, reflecting local geography, culture, and ecological circumstances.

in so doing it decreases the supply of services that may be of equal or greater importance, such as clean water, timber, ecotourism destinations, or flood regulation and drought control. There are many indications that human demands on ecosystems will grow still greater in the coming decades. Current estimates of 3 billion more people and a quadrupling of the world economy by 2050 imply a formidable increase in demand for and consumption of biological and physical resources, as well as escalating impacts on ecosystems and the services they provide.

The problem posed by the growing demand for ecosystem services is compounded by increasingly serious degradation in the capability of ecosystems to provide these services. World fisheries are now declining due to overfishing, for instance, and a significant amount of agricultural land has been degraded in the past half-century by erosion, salinization, compaction, nutrient depletion, pollution, and urbanization. Other human-induced impacts on ecosystems include alteration of the nitrogen, phosphorous, sulfur, and carbon cycles, causing acid rain, algal blooms, and fish kills in rivers and coastal waters, along with contributions to climate change. In many parts of the world, this degradation of ecosystem services is exacerbated by the associated loss of the knowledge and understanding held by local communities—knowledge that sometimes could help to ensure the sustainable use of the ecosystem.

This combination of ever-growing demands being placed on increasingly degraded ecosystems seriously diminishes the prospects for sustainable development. Human well-being is affected not just by gaps between ecosystem service supply and demand but also by the increased vulnerability of individuals, communities, and nations. Productive ecosystems, with their array of services, provide people and communities with resources and options they can use as insurance in the face of natural catastrophes or social upheaval. While well-managed ecosystems reduce risks and vulnerability, poorly managed systems can exacerbate them by increasing risks of flood, drought, crop failure, or disease.

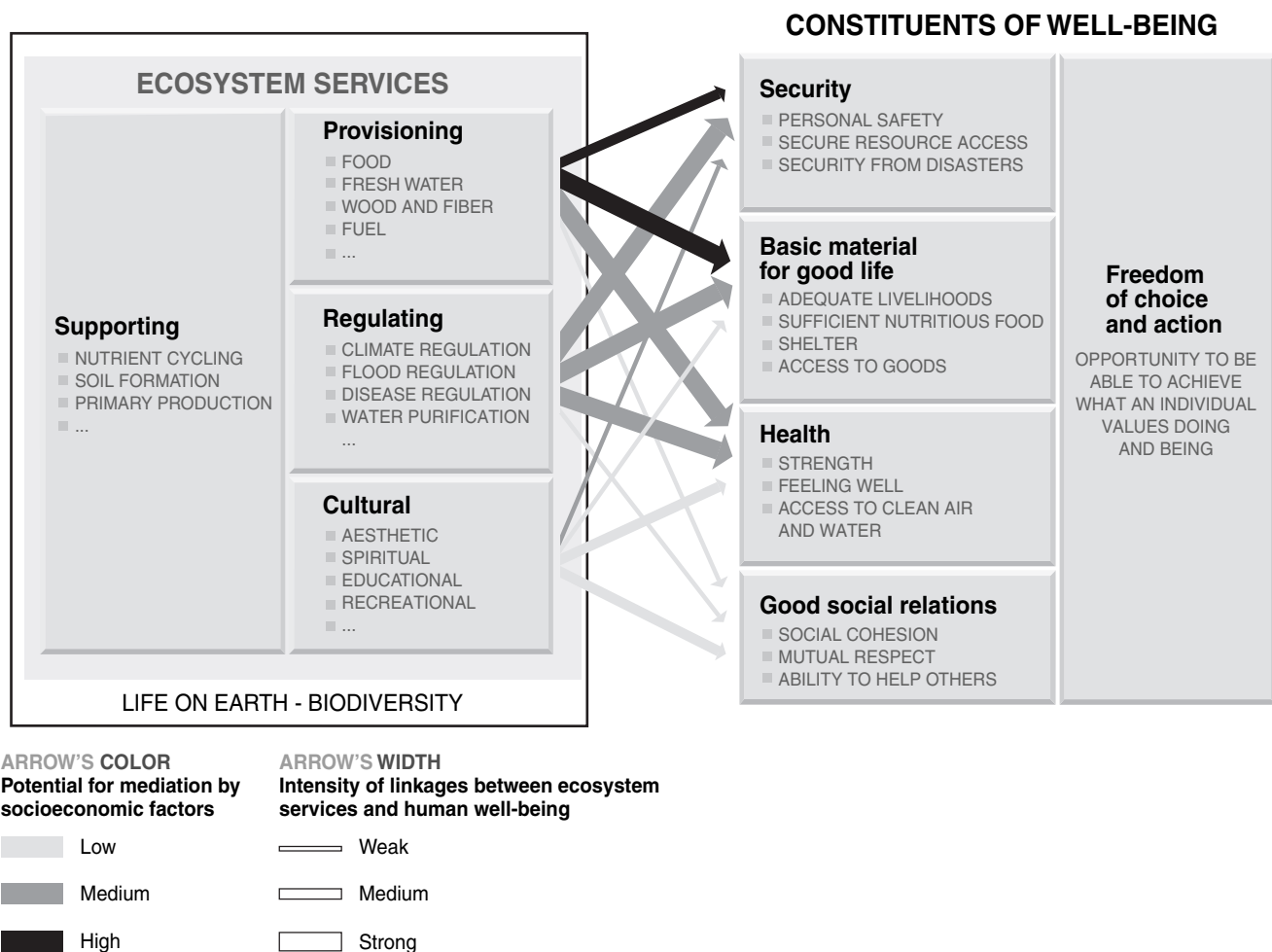
Ecosystem degradation tends to harm rural populations more directly than urban populations and has its most direct and severe impact on poor people. The wealthy control access to a greater share of ecosystem services, consume those services at a higher

per capita rate, and are buffered from changes in their availability (often at a substantial cost) through their ability to purchase scarce ecosystem services or substitutes. For example, even though a number of marine fisheries have been depleted in the past century, the supply of fish to wealthy consumers has not been disrupted since fishing fleets have been able to shift to previously underexploited stocks. In contrast, poor people often lack access to alternate services and are highly vulnerable to ecosystem changes that result in famine, drought, or floods. They frequently live in locations particularly sensitive to environmental threats, and they lack financial and institutional buffers against these dangers. Degradation of coastal fishery resources, for instance, results in a decline in protein consumed by the local community since fishers may not have access to alternate sources of fish and community members may not have enough income to purchase fish. Degradation affects their very survival.

Changes in ecosystems affect not just humans but countless other species as well. The management objectives that people set for ecosystems and the actions that they take are influenced not just by the consequences of ecosystem changes for humans but also by the importance people place on considerations of the intrinsic value of species and ecosystems. Intrinsic value is the value of something in and for itself, irrespective of its utility for someone else. For example, villages in India protect “spirit sanctuaries” in relatively natural states, even though a strict cost-benefit calculation might favor their conversion to agriculture. Similarly, many countries have passed laws protecting endangered species based on the view that these species have a right to exist, even if their protection results in net economic costs. Sound ecosystem management thus involves steps to address the utilitarian links of people to ecosystems as well as processes that allow considerations of the intrinsic value of ecosystems to be factored into decision-making.

The degradation of ecosystem services has many causes, including excessive demand for ecosystem services stemming from economic growth, demographic changes, and individual choices. Market mechanisms do not always ensure the conservation of ecosystem services either because markets do not exist for services such as cultural or regulatory services or, where they do exist, because policies and institutions do not enable people living within the ecosystem to benefit from services it may provide to others who are far away. For example, institutions are now only beginning to be developed to enable those benefiting from carbon sequestration to provide local managers with an economic incentive to leave a forest uncut, while strong economic incentives often exist for managers to harvest the forest. Also, even if a market exists for an ecosystem service, the results obtained through the market may be socially or ecologically undesirable. Properly managed, the creation of ecotourism opportunities in a country can create strong economic incentives for the maintenance of the cultural services provided by ecosystems, but poorly managed ecotourism activities can degrade the very resource on which they depend. Finally, markets are often unable to address important intra- and intergenerational equity issues associated with managing ecosystems for this and future generations, given that some changes in ecosystem services are irreversible.

The world has witnessed in recent decades not just dramatic changes to ecosystems but equally profound changes to social systems that shape both the pressures on ecosystems and the opportunities to respond. The relative influence of individual nation-states has diminished with the growth of power and influence of a far more complex array of institutions, including regional



**Figure 1.1. Linkages between Ecosystem Services and Human Well-being.** This Figure depicts the strength of linkages between categories of ecosystem services and components of human well-being that are commonly encountered and includes indications of the extent to which it is possible for socioeconomic factors to mediate the linkage. (For example, if it is possible to purchase a substitute for a degraded ecosystem service, then there is a high potential for mediation.) The strength of the linkages and the potential for mediation differ in different ecosystems and regions. In addition to the influence of ecosystem services on human well-being depicted here, other factors—including other environmental factors as well as economic, social, technological, and cultural factors—influence human well-being, and ecosystems are in turn affected by changes in human well-being. (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment)

governments, multinational companies, the United Nations, and civil society organizations. Stakeholders have become more involved in decision-making. Given the multiple actors whose decisions now strongly influence ecosystems, the challenge of providing information to decision-makers has grown. At the same time, the new institutional landscape may provide an unprecedented opportunity for information concerning ecosystems to make a major difference. Improvements in ecosystem management to enhance human well-being will require new institutional and policy arrangements and changes in rights and access to resources that may be more possible today under these conditions of rapid social change than they have ever been before.

Like the benefits of increased education or improved governance, the protection, restoration, and enhancement of ecosystem services tends to have multiple and synergistic benefits. Already, many governments are beginning to recognize the need for more effective management of these basic life-support systems. Examples of significant progress toward sustainable management of biological resources can also be found in civil society, in indigenous and local communities, and in the private sector.

### 1.3 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the MA places human well-being as the central focus for assessment, while recognizing that biodiversity and ecosystems also have intrinsic value and that people take decisions concerning ecosystems based on considerations of well-being as well as intrinsic value. (See Box 1.2.) The MA conceptual framework assumes that a dynamic interaction exists between people and other parts of ecosystems, with the changing human condition serving to both directly and indirectly drive change in ecosystems and with changes in ecosystems causing changes in human well-being. At the same time, many other factors independent of the environment change the human condition, and many natural forces are influencing ecosystems.

The MA focuses particular attention on the linkages between ecosystem services and human well-being. The assessment deals with the full range of ecosystems—from those relatively undisturbed, such as natural forests, to landscapes with mixed patterns of human use and ecosystems intensively managed and modified by humans, such as agricultural land and urban areas.

A full assessment of the interactions between people and ecosystems requires a multiscale approach because it better reflects the multiscale nature of decision-making, allows the examination of driving forces that may be exogenous to particular regions, and provides a means of examining the differential impact of ecosystem changes and policy responses on different regions and groups within regions.

This section explains in greater detail the characteristics of each of the components of the MA conceptual framework, moving clockwise from the lower left corner of the Figure in Box 1.2.

### 1.3.1 Ecosystems and Their Services

An ecosystem is a dynamic complex of plant, animal, and micro-organism communities and the nonliving environment interacting as a functional unit. Humans are an integral part of ecosystems. Ecosystems provide a variety of benefits to people, including provisioning, regulating, cultural, and supporting services. Provisioning services are the products people obtain from ecosystems, such as food, fuel, fiber, fresh water, and genetic resources. Regulating services are the benefits people obtain from the regulation of ecosystem processes, including air quality maintenance, climate regulation, erosion control, regulation of human diseases, and water purification. Cultural services are the nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences. Supporting services are those that are necessary for the production of all other ecosystem services, such as primary production, production of oxygen, and soil formation.

Biodiversity and ecosystems are closely related concepts. Biodiversity is the variability among living organisms from all sources, including terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part. It includes diversity within and between species and diversity of ecosystems. Diversity is a structural feature of ecosystems, and the variability among ecosystems is an element of biodiversity. Products of biodiversity include many of the services produced by ecosystems (such as food and genetic resources), and changes in biodiversity can influence all the other services they provide. In addition to the important role of biodiversity in providing ecosystem services, the diversity of living species has intrinsic value independent of any human concern.

The concept of an ecosystem provides a valuable framework for analyzing and acting on the linkages between people and the environment. For that reason, the “ecosystem approach” has been endorsed by the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the MA conceptual framework is entirely consistent with this approach. The CBD states that the ecosystem approach is a strategy for the integrated management of land, water, and living resources that promotes conservation and sustainable use in an equitable way. This approach recognizes that humans, with their cultural diversity, are an integral component of many ecosystems.

In order to implement the ecosystem approach, decision-makers need to understand the multiple effects on an ecosystem of any management or policy change. By way of analogy, decision-makers would not make a decision about financial policy in a country without examining the condition of the economic system, since information on the economy of a single sector such as manufacturing would be insufficient. The same need to examine the consequences of changes for multiple sectors applies to ecosystems. For instance, subsidies for fertilizer use may increase food production, but sound decisions also require information on whether the potential reduction in the harvests of downstream

fisheries as a result of water quality degradation from the fertilizer runoff might outweigh those benefits.

For the purpose of analysis and assessment, a pragmatic view of ecosystem boundaries must be adopted, depending on the questions being asked. A well-defined ecosystem has strong interactions among its components and weak interactions across its boundaries. A useful choice of ecosystem boundary is one where a number of discontinuities coincide, such as in the distribution of organisms, soil types, drainage basins, and depth in a waterbody. At a larger scale, regional and even globally distributed ecosystems can be evaluated based on a commonality of basic structural units. The global assessment being undertaken by the MA reports on marine, coastal, inland water, forest, dryland, island, mountain, polar, cultivated, and urban regions. These regions are not ecosystems themselves, but each contains a number of ecosystems. (See Box 1.3.)

People seek multiple services from ecosystems and thus perceive the condition of given ecosystems in relation to their ability to provide the services desired. Various methods can be used to assess the ability of ecosystems to deliver particular services. With those answers in hand, stakeholders have the information they need to decide on a mix of services best meeting their needs. The MA considers criteria and methods to provide an integrated view of the condition of ecosystems. The condition of each category of ecosystem services is evaluated in somewhat different ways, although in general a full assessment of any service requires considerations of stocks, flows, and resilience of the service.

### 1.3.2 Human Well-being and Poverty Reduction

Human well-being has multiple constituents, including the basic material for a good life, freedom of choice and action, health, good social relations, and security. Poverty is also multidimensional and has been defined as the pronounced deprivation of well-being. How well-being, ill-being, or poverty are experienced and expressed depends on context and situation, reflecting local physical, social, and personal factors such as geography, environment, age, gender, and culture. In all contexts, however, ecosystems are essential for human well-being through their provisioning, regulating, cultural, and supporting services.

Human intervention in ecosystems can amplify the benefits to human society. However, evidence in recent decades of escalating human impacts on ecological systems worldwide raises concerns about the spatial and temporal consequences of ecosystem changes detrimental to human well-being. Ecosystem changes affect human well-being in the following ways:

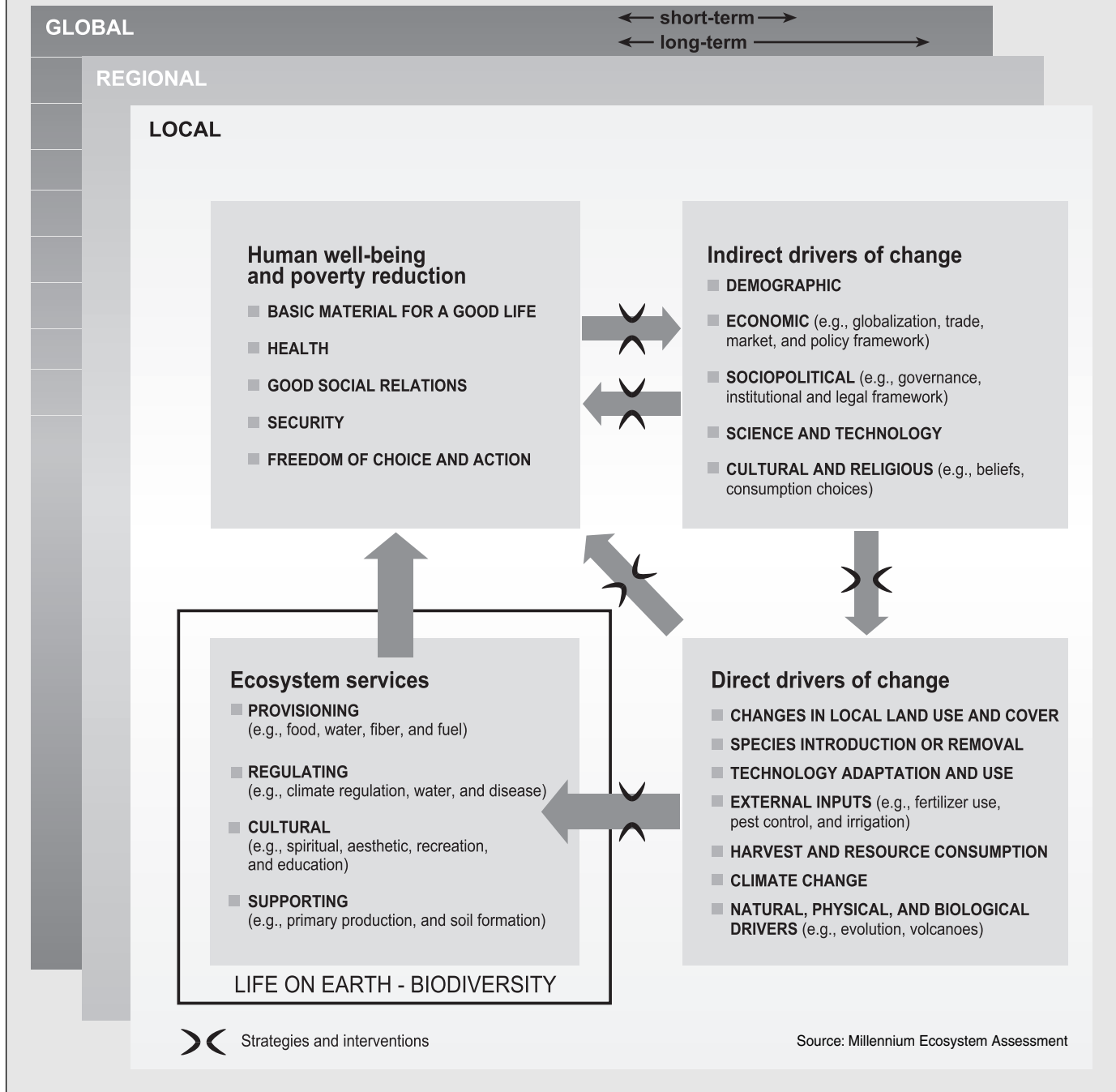
- **Security** is affected both by changes in provisioning services, which affect supplies of food and other goods and the likelihood of conflict over declining resources, and by changes in regulating services, which could influence the frequency and magnitude of floods, droughts, landslides, or other catastrophes. It can also be affected by changes in cultural services as, for example, when the loss of important ceremonial or spiritual attributes of ecosystems contributes to the weakening of social relations in a community. These changes in turn affect material well-being, health, freedom and choice, security, and good social relations.
- **Access to basic material for a good life** is strongly linked to both provisioning services such as food and fiber production and regulating services, including water purification.
- **Health** is strongly linked to both provisioning services such as food production and regulating services, including those that influence the distribution of disease-transmitting insects and of irritants and pathogens in water and air. Health can also be

**BOX 1.2**

**Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Conceptual Framework**

Changes in factors that indirectly affect ecosystems, such as population, technology, and lifestyle (upper right corner of figure), can lead to changes in factors directly affecting ecosystems, such as the catch of fisheries or the application of fertilizers to increase food production (lower right corner). The resulting changes in the ecosystem (lower left corner) cause the ecosystem services to change and thereby affect human well-being.

These interactions can take place at more than one scale and can cross scales. For example, a global market may lead to regional loss of forest cover, which increases flood magnitude along a local stretch of a river. Similarly, the interactions can take place across different time scales. Actions can be taken either to respond to negative changes or to enhance positive changes at almost all points in this framework (black cross bars).



linked to cultural services through recreational and spiritual benefits.

- **Social relations** are affected by changes to cultural services, which affect the quality of human experience.
- **Freedom of choice and action** is largely predicated on the existence of the other components of well-being and are thus

influenced by changes in provisioning, regulating, or cultural services from ecosystems.

Human well-being can be enhanced through sustainable human interactions with ecosystems supported by necessary instruments, institutions, organizations, and technology. Creation of these through participation and transparency may contribute to

## BOX 1.3

**Reporting Categories Used in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment**

The MA used 10 categories of systems to report its global findings. (See Table.) These categories are not ecosystems themselves; each contains a number of ecosystems. The MA reporting categories are not mutually exclusive: their areas can and do overlap. Ecosystems within each category share a suite of biological, climatic, and social factors that tend to

differ across categories. Because these reporting categories overlap, any place on Earth may fall into more than one category. Thus, for example, a wetland ecosystem in a coastal region may be examined both in the MA analysis of “coastal systems” as well as in its analysis of “inland water systems.”

**Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Reporting Categories**

Category	Central Concept	Boundary Limits for Mapping
Marine	Ocean, with fishing typically a major driver of change	Marine areas where the sea is deeper than 50 meters.
Coastal	Interface between ocean and land, extending seawards to about the middle of the continental shelf and inland to include all areas strongly influenced by the proximity to the ocean	Area between 50 meters below mean sea level and 50 meters above the high tide level or extending landward to a distance 100 kilometers from shore. Includes coral reefs, intertidal zones, estuaries, coastal aquaculture, and seagrass communities.
Inland water	Permanent water bodies inland from the coastal zone, and areas whose ecology and use are dominated by the permanent, seasonal, or intermittent occurrence of flooded conditions	Rivers, lakes, floodplains, reservoirs, and wetlands; includes inland saline systems. Note that the Ramsar Convention considers “wetlands” to include both inland water and coastal categories.
Forest	Lands dominated by trees; often used for timber, fuelwood, and non-timber forest products	A canopy cover of at least 40% by woody plants taller than 5 meters. The existence of many other definitions is acknowledged, and other limits (such as crown cover greater than 10%, as used by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) are also reported. Includes temporarily cut-over forests and plantations; excludes orchards and agroforests where the main products are food crops.
Dryland	Lands where plant production is limited by water availability; the dominant uses are large mammal herbivory, including livestock grazing, and cultivation	Drylands as defined by the Convention to Combat Desertification, namely lands where annual precipitation is less than two thirds of potential evaporation, from dry subhumid areas (ratio ranges 0.50–0.65), through semiarid, arid, and hyper-arid (ratio <0.05), but excluding polar areas; drylands include cultivated lands, scrublands, shrublands, grasslands, semi-deserts, and true deserts.
Island	Lands isolated by surrounding water, with a high proportion of coast to hinterland	Islands of at least 1.5 hectares included in the ESRI ArcWorld Country Boundary dataset.
Mountain	Steep and high lands	As defined by Mountain Watch using criteria based on elevation alone, and at lower elevation, on a combination of elevation, slope, and local elevation range. Specifically, elevation >2,500 meters, elevation 1,500–2,500 meters and slope >2 degrees, elevation 1,000–1,500 meters and slope >5 degrees or local elevation range (7 kilometers radius) >300 meters, elevation 300–1,000 meters and local elevation range (7 kilometers radius) >300 meters, isolated inner basins and plateaus less than 25 square kilometers extent that are surrounded by mountains.
Polar	High-latitude systems frozen for most of the year	Includes ice caps, areas underlain by permafrost, tundra, polar deserts, and polar coastal areas. Excludes high-altitude cold systems in low latitudes.
Cultivated	Lands dominated by domesticated plant species, used for and substantially changed by crop, agroforestry, or aquaculture production	Areas in which at least 30% of the landscape comes under cultivation in any particular year. Includes orchards, agroforestry, and integrated agriculture-aquaculture systems.
Urban	Built environments with a high human density	Known human settlements with a population of 5,000 or more, with boundaries delineated by observing persistent night-time lights or by inferring areal extent in the cases where such observations are absent.

freedoms and choice as well as to increased economic, social, and ecological security. By ecological security, we mean the minimum level of ecological stock needed to ensure a sustainable flow of ecosystem services.

Yet the benefits conferred by institutions and technology are neither automatic nor equally shared. In particular, such opportunities are more readily grasped by richer than poorer countries and people; some institutions and technologies mask or exacerbate environmental problems; responsible governance, while essential, is not easily achieved; participation in decision-making, an essential element of responsible governance, is expensive in time and resources to maintain. Unequal access to ecosystem services has often elevated the well-being of small segments of the population at the expense of others.

Sometimes the consequences of the depletion and degradation of ecosystem services can be mitigated by the substitution of knowledge and of manufactured or human capital. For example, the addition of fertilizer in agricultural systems has been able to offset declining soil fertility in many regions of the world where people have sufficient economic resources to purchase these inputs, and water treatment facilities can sometimes substitute for the role of watersheds and wetlands in water purification. But ecosystems are complex and dynamic systems and there are limits to substitution possibilities, especially with regulating, cultural, and supporting services. No substitution is possible for the extinction of culturally important species such as tigers or whales, for instance, and substitutions may be economically impractical for the loss of services such as erosion control or climate regulation. Moreover, the scope for substitutions varies by social, economic, and cultural conditions. For some people, especially the poorest, substitutes and choices are very limited. For those who are better off, substitution may be possible through trade, investment, and technology.

Because of the inertia in both ecological and human systems, the consequences of ecosystem changes made today may not be felt for decades. Thus, sustaining ecosystem services, and thereby human well-being, requires a full understanding and wise management of the relationships between human activities, ecosystem change, and well-being over the short, medium, and long term. Excessive current use of ecosystem services compromises their future availability. This can be prevented by ensuring that the use is sustainable.

Achieving sustainable use requires effective and efficient institutions that can provide the mechanisms through which concepts of freedom, justice, fairness, basic capabilities, and equity govern the access to and use of ecosystem services. Such institutions may also need to mediate conflicts between individual and social interests that arise.

The best way to manage ecosystems to enhance human well-being will differ if the focus is on meeting needs of the poor and weak or the rich and powerful. For both groups, ensuring the long-term supply of ecosystem services is essential. But for the poor, an equally critical need is to provide more equitable and secure access to ecosystem services.

### 1.3.3 Drivers of Change

Understanding the factors that cause changes in ecosystems and ecosystem services is essential to designing interventions that capture positive impacts and minimize negative ones. In the MA, a “driver” is any factor that changes an aspect of an ecosystem. A direct driver unequivocally influences ecosystem processes and can therefore be identified and measured to differing degrees of accuracy. An indirect driver operates more diffusely, often by al-

tering one or more direct drivers, and its influence is established by understanding its effect on a direct driver. Both indirect and direct drivers often operate synergistically. Changes in land cover, for example, can increase the likelihood of introduction of alien invasive species. Similarly, technological advances can increase rates of economic growth.

The MA explicitly recognizes the role of decision-makers who affect ecosystems, ecosystem services, and human well-being. Decisions are made at three organizational levels, although the distinction between those levels is often diffuse and difficult to define:

- by individuals and small groups at the local level (such as a field or forest stand) who directly alter some part of the ecosystem;
- by public and private decision-makers at the municipal, provincial, and national levels; and
- by public and private decision-makers at the international level, such as through international conventions and multilateral agreements.

The decision-making process is complex and multidimensional. We refer to a driver that can be influenced by a decision-maker as an endogenous driver and one over which the decision-maker does not have control as an exogenous driver. The amount of fertilizer applied on a farm is an endogenous driver from the standpoint of the farmer, for example, while the price of the fertilizer is an exogenous driver, since the farmer’s decisions have little direct influence on price. The specific temporal, spatial, and organizational scale dependencies of endogenous and exogenous drivers and the specific linkages and interactions among drivers are assessed in the MA.

Whether a driver is exogenous or endogenous to a decision-maker is dependent upon the spatial and temporal scale. For example, a local decision-maker can directly influence the choice of technology, changes in land use, and external inputs (such as fertilizers or irrigation), but has little control over prices and markets, property rights, technology development, or the local climate. In contrast, a national or regional decision-maker has more control over many factors, such as macroeconomic policy, technology development, property rights, trade barriers, prices, and markets. But on the short time scale, that individual has little control over the climate or global population. On the longer time scale, drivers that are exogenous to a decision-maker in the short run, such as population, become endogenous since the decision-maker can influence them through, for instance, education, the advancement of women, and migration policies.

The indirect drivers of change are primarily:

- demographic (such as population size, age and gender structure, and spatial distribution);
- economic (such as national and per capita income, macroeconomic policies, international trade, and capital flows);
- sociopolitical (such as democratization, the roles of women, of civil society, and of the private sector, and international dispute mechanisms);
- scientific and technological (such as rates of investments in research and development and the rates of adoption of new technologies, including biotechnologies and information technologies); and
- cultural and religious (such as choices individuals make about what and how much to consume and what they value).

The interaction of several of these drivers, in turn, affects levels of resource consumption and differences in consumption both within and between countries. Clearly these drivers are changing—population and the world economy are growing, for instance, there are major advances in information technology and



biotechnology, and the world is becoming more interconnected. Changes in these drivers are projected to increase the demand for and consumption of food, fiber, clean water, and energy, which will in turn affect the direct drivers. The direct drivers are primarily physical, chemical, and biological—such as land cover change, climate change, air and water pollution, irrigation, use of fertilizers, harvesting, and the introduction of alien invasive species. Change is apparent here too: the climate is changing, species ranges are shifting, alien species are spreading, and land degradation continues.

An important point is that any decision can have consequences external to the decision framework. These consequences are called externalities because they are not part of the decision-making calculus. Externalities can have positive or negative effects. For example, a decision to subsidize fertilizers to increase crop production might result in substantial degradation of water quality from the added nutrients and degradation of downstream fisheries. But it is also possible to have positive externalities. A beekeeper might be motivated by the profits to be made from selling honey, for instance, but neighboring orchards could produce more apples because of enhanced pollination arising from the presence of the bees.

Multiple interacting drivers cause changes in ecosystem services. There are functional interdependencies between and among the indirect and direct drivers of change, and, in turn, changes in ecological services lead to feedbacks on the drivers of changes in ecological services. Synergetic driver combinations are common. The many processes of globalization lead to new forms of interactions between drivers of changes in ecosystem services.

### 1.3.4 Cross-scale Interactions and Assessment

An effective assessment of ecosystems and human well-being cannot be conducted at a single temporal or spatial scale. Thus the MA conceptual framework includes both of these dimensions. Ecosystem changes that may have little impact on human well-being over days or weeks (soil erosion, for instance) may have pronounced impacts over years or decades (declining agricultural productivity). Similarly, changes at a local scale may have little impact on some services at that scale (as in the local impact of forest loss on water availability) but major impacts at large scales (forest loss in a river basin changing the timing and magnitude of downstream flooding).

Ecosystem processes and services are typically most strongly expressed, are most easily observed, or have their dominant controls or consequences at particular spatial and temporal scales. They often exhibit a characteristic scale—the typical extent or duration over which processes have their impact. Spatial and temporal scales are often closely related. For instance, food production is a localized service of an ecosystem and changes on a weekly basis, water regulation is regional and changes on a monthly or seasonal basis, and climate regulation may take place at a global scale over decades.

Assessments need to be conducted at spatial and temporal scales appropriate to the process or phenomenon being examined. Those done over large areas generally use data at coarse resolutions, which may not detect fine-resolution processes. Even if data are collected at a fine level of detail, the process of averaging in order to present findings at the larger scale causes local patterns or anomalies to disappear. This is particularly problematic for processes exhibiting thresholds and nonlinearities. For example, even though a number of fish stocks exploited in a particular area might have collapsed due to overfishing, average catches across all stocks (including healthier stocks) would not reveal the extent of

the problem. Assessors, if they are aware of such thresholds and have access to high-resolution data, can incorporate such information even in a large-scale assessment. Yet an assessment done at smaller spatial scales can help identify important dynamics of the system that might otherwise be overlooked. Likewise, phenomena and processes that occur at much larger scales, although expressed locally, may go unnoticed in purely local-scale assessments. Increased carbon dioxide concentrations or decreased stratospheric ozone concentrations have local effects, for instance, but it would be difficult to trace the causality of the effects without an examination of the overall global process.

Time scale is also very important in conducting assessments. Humans tend not to think beyond one or two generations. If an assessment covers a shorter time period than the characteristic temporal scale, it may not adequately capture variability associated with long-term cycles, such as glaciation. Slow changes are often harder to measure, as is the case with the impact of climate change on the geographic distribution of species or populations. Moreover, both ecological and human systems have substantial inertia, and the impact of changes occurring today may not be seen for years or decades. For example, some fisheries' catches may increase for several years even after they have reached unsustainable levels because of the large number of juvenile fish produced before that level was reached.

Social, political, and economic processes also have characteristic scales, which may vary widely in duration and extent. Those of ecological and sociopolitical processes often do not match. Many environmental problems originate from this mismatch between the scale at which the ecological process occurs, the scale at which decisions are made, and the scale of institutions for decision-making. A purely local-scale assessment, for instance, may discover that the most effective societal response requires action that can occur only at a national scale (such as the removal of a subsidy or the establishment of a regulation). Moreover, it may lack the relevance and credibility necessary to stimulate and inform national or regional changes. On the other hand, a purely global assessment may lack both the relevance and the credibility necessary to lead to changes in ecosystem management at the local scale where action is needed. Outcomes at a given scale are often heavily influenced by interactions of ecological, socioeconomic, and political factors emanating from other scales. Thus focusing solely on a single scale is likely to miss interactions with other scales that are critically important in understanding ecosystem determinants and their implications for human well-being.

The choice of the spatial or temporal scale for an assessment is politically laden, since it may intentionally or unintentionally privilege certain groups. The selection of assessment scale with its associated level of detail implicitly favors particular systems of knowledge, types of information, and modes of expression over others. For example, non-codified information or knowledge systems of minority populations are often missed when assessments are undertaken at larger spatial scales or higher levels of aggregation. Reflecting on the political consequences of scale and boundary choices is an important prerequisite to exploring what multi- and cross-scale analysis in the MA might contribute to decision-making and public policy processes at various scales.

## 1.4 Values Associated with Ecosystems

Current decision-making processes often ignore or underestimate the value of ecosystem services. Decision-making concerning ecosystems and their services can be particularly challenging because different disciplines, philosophical views, and schools of

thought assess the value of ecosystems differently. One paradigm of value, known as the utilitarian (anthropocentric) concept, is based on the principle of humans' preference satisfaction (well-being). In this case, ecosystems and the services they provide have value to human societies because people derive utility from their use, either directly or indirectly (use values). Within this utilitarian concept of value, people also give value to ecosystem services that they are not currently using (non-use values). Non-use values, usually known as existence values, involve the case where humans ascribe value to knowing that a resource exists even if they never use that resource directly. These often involve the deeply held historical, national, ethical, religious, and spiritual values people ascribe to ecosystems—the values that the MA recognizes as cultural services of ecosystems.

A different, non-utilitarian value paradigm holds that something can have intrinsic value—that is, it can be of value in and for itself—irrespective of its utility for someone else. From the perspective of many ethical, religious, and cultural points of view, ecosystems may have intrinsic value, independent of their contribution to human well-being.

The utilitarian and non-utilitarian value paradigms overlap and interact in many ways, but they use different metrics, with no common denominator, and cannot usually be aggregated, although both paradigms of value are used in decision-making processes.

Under the utilitarian approach, a wide range of methodologies has been developed to attempt to quantify the benefits of different ecosystem services. These methods are particularly well developed for provisioning services, but recent work has also improved the ability to value regulating and other services. The choice of valuation technique in any given instance is dictated by the characteristics of the case and by data availability. (See Box 1.4.)

Non-utilitarian value proceeds from a variety of ethical, cultural, religious, and philosophical bases. These differ in the specific entities that are deemed to have intrinsic value and in the interpretation of what having intrinsic value means. Intrinsic value may complement or counterbalance considerations of utilitarian value. For example, if the aggregate utility of the services provided by an ecosystem (as measured by its utilitarian value) outweighs the value of converting it to another use, its intrinsic value may then be complementary and provide an additional impetus for conserving the ecosystem. If, however, economic valuation indicates that the value of converting the ecosystem outweighs the aggregate value of its services, its ascribed intrinsic value may be deemed great enough to warrant a social decision to conserve it anyway. Such decisions are essentially political, not economic. In contemporary democracies these decisions are made by parliaments or legislatures or by regulatory agencies mandated to do so by law. The sanctions for violating laws recognizing an entity's intrinsic value may be regarded as a measure of the degree of intrinsic value ascribed to them. The decisions taken by businesses, local communities, and individuals also can involve considerations of both utilitarian and non-utilitarian values.

The mere act of quantifying the value of ecosystem services cannot by itself change the incentives affecting their use or misuse. Several changes in current practice may be required to take better account of these values. The MA assesses the use of information on ecosystem service values in decision-making. The goal is to improve decision-making processes and tools and to provide feedback regarding the kinds of information that can have the most influence.

## 1.5 Assessment Tools

The information base exists in any country to undertake an assessment within the framework of the MA. That said, although new

### BOX 1.4

#### Valuation of Ecosystem Services

Valuation can be used in many ways: to assess the total contribution that ecosystems make to human well-being, to understand the incentives that individual decision-makers face in managing ecosystems in different ways, and to evaluate the consequences of alternative courses of action. The MA uses valuation primarily in the latter sense: as a tool that enhances the ability of decision-makers to evaluate trade-offs between alternative ecosystem management regimes and courses of social actions that alter the use of ecosystems and the multiple services they provide. This usually requires assessing the change in the mix (the value) of services provided by an ecosystem resulting from a given change in its management.

Most of the work involved in estimating the change in the value of the flow of benefits provided by an ecosystem involves estimating the change in the physical flow of benefits (quantifying biophysical relations) and tracing through and quantifying a chain of causality between changes in ecosystem condition and human welfare. A common problem in valuation is that information is only available on some of the links in the chain and often in incompatible units. The MA can make a major contribution by making various disciplines better aware of what is needed to ensure that their work can be combined with that of others to allow a full assessment of the consequences of altering ecosystem state and function.

The ecosystem values in this sense are only one of the bases on which decisions on ecosystem management are and should be made. Many other factors, including notions of intrinsic value and other objectives that society might have (such as equity among different groups or generations), will also feed into the decision framework. Even when decisions are made on other bases, however, estimates of changes in utilitarian value provide invaluable information.

data sets (for example, from remote sensing) providing globally consistent information make a global assessment like the MA more rigorous, there are still many challenges that must be dealt with in using these data at global or local scales. Among these challenges are biases in the geographic and temporal coverage of the data and in the types of data collected. Data availability for industrial countries is greater than that for developing ones, and data for certain resources such as crop production are more readily available than data for fisheries, fuelwood, or biodiversity. The MA makes extensive use of both biophysical and socioeconomic indicators, which combine data into policy-relevant measures that provide the basis for assessment and decision-making.

Models can be used to illuminate interactions among systems and drivers, as well as to make up for data deficiencies—for instance, by providing estimates where observations are lacking. The MA makes use of environmental system models that can be used, for example, to measure the consequences of land cover change for river flow or the consequences of climate change for the distribution of species. It also uses human system models that can examine, for instance, the impact of changes in ecosystems on production, consumption, and investment decisions by households or that allow the economy-wide impacts of a change in production in a particular sector like agriculture to be evaluated. Finally, integrated models, combining both the environmental and human systems linkages, can increasingly be used at both global and sub-global scales.

The MA incorporates both formal scientific information and traditional or local knowledge. Traditional societies have nurtured

and refined systems of knowledge of direct value to those societies but also of considerable value to assessments undertaken at regional and global scales. This information often is unknown to science and can be an expression of other relationships between society and nature in general and of sustainable ways of managing natural resources in particular. To be credible and useful to decision-makers, all sources of information, whether scientific, traditional, or practitioner knowledge, must be critically assessed and validated as part of the assessment process through procedures relevant to the form of knowledge.

Since policies for dealing with the deterioration of ecosystem services are concerned with the future consequences of current actions, the development of scenarios of medium- to long-term changes in ecosystems, services, and drivers can be particularly helpful for decision-makers. Scenarios are typically developed through the joint involvement of decision-makers and scientific experts, and they represent a promising mechanism for linking scientific information to decision-making processes. They do not attempt to predict the future but instead are designed to indicate what science can and cannot say about the future consequences of alternative plausible choices that might be taken in the coming years.

The MA uses scenarios to summarize and communicate the diverse trajectories that the world's ecosystems may take in future decades. Scenarios are plausible alternative futures, each an example of what might happen under particular assumptions. They can be used as a systematic method for thinking creatively about complex, uncertain futures. In this way, they help us understand the upcoming choices that need to be made and highlight developments in the present. The MA developed scenarios that connect possible changes in drivers (which may be unpredictable or uncontrollable) with human demands for ecosystem services. The scenarios link these demands, in turn, to the futures of the services themselves and the aspects of human welfare that depend on them. The scenario building exercise breaks new ground in several areas:

- development of scenarios for global futures linked explicitly to ecosystem services and the human consequences of ecosystem change,
- consideration of trade-offs among individual ecosystem services within the “bundle” of benefits that any particular ecosystem potentially provides to society,
- assessment of modeling capabilities for linking socioeconomic drivers and ecosystem services, and
- consideration of ambiguous futures as well as quantifiable uncertainties.

The credibility of assessments is closely linked to how they address what is not known in addition to what is known. The consistent treatment of uncertainty is therefore essential for the clarity and utility of assessment reports. As part of any assessment process, it is crucial to estimate the uncertainty of findings even if a detailed quantitative appraisal of uncertainty is unavailable.

## 1.6 Strategies and Interventions

The MA assesses the use and effectiveness of a wide range of options for responding to the need to sustainably use, conserve, and restore ecosystems and the services they provide. These options include incorporating the value of ecosystems in decisions, channeling diffuse ecosystem benefits to decision-makers with focused local interests, creating markets and property rights, educating and dispersing knowledge, and investing to improve ecosystems and the services they provide. As seen in Box 1.2 on

the MA conceptual framework, different types of response options can affect the relationships of indirect to direct drivers, the influence of direct drivers on ecosystems, the human demand for ecosystem services, or the impact of changes in human well-being on indirect drivers. An effective strategy for managing ecosystems will involve a mix of interventions at all points in this conceptual framework.

Mechanisms for accomplishing these interventions include laws, regulations, and enforcement schemes; partnerships and collaborations; the sharing of information and knowledge; and public and private action. The choice of options to be considered will be greatly influenced by both the temporal and the physical scale influenced by decisions, the uncertainty of outcomes, cultural context, and the implications for equity and trade-offs. Institutions at different levels have different response options available to them, and special care is required to ensure policy coherence.

Decision-making processes are value-based and combine political and technical elements to varying degrees. Where technical input can play a role, a range of tools is available to help decision-makers choose among strategies and interventions, including cost-benefit analysis, game theory, and policy exercises. The selection of analytical tools should be determined by the context of the decision, key characteristics of the decision problem, and the criteria considered to be important by the decision-makers. Information from these analytical frameworks is always combined with the intuition, experience, and interests of the decision-maker in shaping the final decisions.

Risk assessment, including ecological risk assessment, is an established discipline and has a significant potential for informing the decision process. Finding thresholds and identifying the potential for irreversible change are important for the decision-making process. Similarly, environmental impact assessments designed to evaluate the impact of particular projects and strategic environmental assessments designed to evaluate the impact of policies both represent important mechanisms for incorporating the findings of an ecosystem assessment into decision-making processes.

Changes also may be required in decision-making processes themselves. Experience to date suggests that a number of mechanisms can improve the process of making decisions about ecosystem services. Broadly accepted norms for decision-making process include the following characteristics. Did the process:

- bring the best available information to bear?
- function transparently, use locally grounded knowledge, and involve all those with an interest in a decision?
- pay special attention to equity and to the most vulnerable populations?
- use decision analytical frameworks that take account of the strengths and limits of individual, group, and organizational information processing and action?
- consider whether an intervention or its outcome is irreversible and incorporate procedures to evaluate the outcomes of actions and learn from them?
- ensure that those making the decisions are accountable?
- strive for efficiency in choosing among interventions?
- take account of thresholds, irreversibility, and cumulative, cross-scale, and marginal effects and of local, regional, and global costs, risk, and benefits?

The policy or management changes made to address problems and opportunities related to ecosystems and their services, whether at local scales or national or international scales, need to be adaptive and flexible in order to benefit from past experience, to hedge against risk, and to consider uncertainty. The understanding of ecosystem dynamics will always be limited, socioeconomic systems will continue to change, and outside determinants

can never be fully anticipated. Decision-makers should consider whether a course of action is reversible and should incorporate, whenever possible, procedures to evaluate the outcomes of actions and learn from them. Debate about exactly how to do this continues in discussions of adaptive management, social learning,

safe minimum standards, and the precautionary principle. But the core message of all approaches is the same: acknowledge the limits of human understanding, give special consideration to irreversible changes, and evaluate the impacts of decisions as they unfold.