

Asking the Right Questions: Policy Analysis and Environmental Services at Different Scales

Abstract

Plausible (albeit dire) scenarios for the future in Southeast Asia include increasing conflict over land and water resources and degradation of hydrological, ecological, and other environmental services, which could undermine the stability of national economies, urban centres, and national food security. But do we really know enough about these complex relationships to build a consensus for action? How big are the effects of land use change (for better or worse) on stability of production systems at the local, regional, and national level? How well do these forest-derived land uses substitute for natural forests from the perspective of local people and national objectives? What scientific evidence is available to answer these questions? Are scientists even asking the right questions? From a policy perspective, at least three sets of questions are crucial:

- (1) Who cares? How are people affected? Are the effects big?
- (2) So what? Would action serve one or more public policy objectives?
- (3) What can be done? Will it work?

After pausing to consider why intervention often is both necessary and difficult regarding environmental services, in the main part of the paper these 3 basic sets of policy questions are applied to each of three 'meso-level' environmental concerns: smoke, biodiversity loss, and degradation of watershed functions. In the last sections, the paper turns to another set of questions: assuming measurement of environmental impacts is possible, is it useful? The answer offered is twofold. First, impact measurement can help clarify whether policy action is desirable. Second, impact measurement also can reveal insights about incentives faced by different groups, thereby guiding design of interventions that may have some hope for successful implementation. Finally, we discuss how data needs and uses may change with evolution of understanding of a policy problem.