
LINK ONLINE

Short webinars for environmental policy-makers and practitioners

Well-being Indicators for New Zealand's People and Nature

The following questions were asked during our live webinar with Alison Collins and Anne-Gaelle Ausseil but due to time restrictions, we were unable to answer these in the session.

The drinking water example seemed over-simplified in that most reticulated is treated 'raw water' as mandated by legislation, so technology is part of the complexity of linking nature and people. Can you comment on how trade-offs such as technological improvement versus scarcity of basic natural resources can be addressed in such a framework (or can they not?)

I know the drinking water example was probably too simplistic but was just there to convey the ideas. We are thinking about the technological vs natural resources in terms of the substitutability attribute. Note that we're developing indicators, and as such, it will be important to have indicators reflecting the trade-offs between natural/human substitutes.

I struggle with Treasury's wellbeing framework and the concept of 'natural capital' because it is based on a worldview that 'man is the measure of all things'. I.e. we can put a price on natural systems and make trade-offs in order to maximise the benefit to people. Most societies recognise the inherent value of natural systems regardless of their economic utility - e.g. Māori see them as tupuna. What do you think of values-based economic frameworks - such as 'doughnut economics' from Kate Raworth?

We took the living standards framework as an example of a wellbeing framework. I agree there are many others, and in effect, the IPBES is attempting to look at other worldviews (especially other indigenous and local knowledge frameworks) that do not talk about nature as a capital. Economic valuation is one tool to measure value, although there is a lot of debate on the uncertainties and validity of putting monetary value on incommensurable things. I recommend a paper from Unai Pascual (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2016.12.006>) recommending plurality of values to investigate trade-offs.

Is this intended to be complementary or in addition to the Treasury framework?

Definitely complementary. We're actively working across central government agencies, including Treasury and StatsNZ to improve on the "natural capital" and "environmental quality" indicators

Have you already partnered with Maori entities to glean an appropriate Maori perspective? If so, which entities?

This is a next step we'd like to consider in this research, we recognise there are many other lenses and other projects.

Have you considered the unique impact of nature's impact on indigenous populations and how that might differ from other populations?

The first step of this project was simply to explore the different initiatives and understand how central government can look into better measuring the connection between nature and people through fit-for-purpose indicators. Our work very rapidly raised the question of the different worldviews and different ways people may value nature. We will explore this further in the next step, and welcome discussions on how best to consider different population viewpoints.

What about well-being as related to wild urban places and the effect on mental health and well-being? Not so much related to hazards?

In the Living Standards Framework, well-being has a "health" domain that not only relates to physical health but also mental health. This is where the discussion needs to continue: there is a plurality of indicators that will need to be considered for different components of wellbeing.

Could you comment on scenarios where 'nature' per se can be problematic or impinge on wellbeing for humans or environments (i.e. biosecurity)?

Issues around biosecurity is ultimately a human-induced pressure through what IPBES would call "invasive alien species". So, I would start by a narrative seeking causal links (with evidence) between the pressure (distribution of pests/disease for example), to state (how does it affect nature?) to impact (how does it affect us?). This helps to look at how a change could affect different parts of people's wellbeing. You could then run scenarios of pest invasion or control to see how it could impact on people. In broader terms, the concept of nature's contributions to people is looking at both positive and negative contributions to wellbeing.

We are Nature, Nature is us. Why is science looking at humans as a separate organism? The wellbeing of all animals (including humans) has always been directly connected with nature. All people living in close connection with the land know that. Native Americans, Māori and all other indigenous people should lead us back to reconnect with our natural state of being.

There are many ways of framing well-being of nature and people. What Treasury is doing is one way, but it doesn't reflect the interconnections very well which is why we're proposing a better way of embedding nature into their framework. It would be interesting to explore other worldviews. This is something we will investigate in another research project. The principles of reciprocity for instance is worth looking at: not only nature contributes to people, but people also contribute back to nature.

Are there any plans to work with other government agencies such as the Department of Conservation?

Yes, we're connecting with DOC at the moment.

You mentioned measuring, valuing and communicating. Would you be able to account for estimates of non-market environmental value? For example, willingness to pay for avoided erosion and flood mitigation.

At this stage, we're investigating indicators to monitor changes in state of nature and how it impacts on our well-being. Because there are many ways of evaluating the benefits we get from nature, willingness to pay could be one of the tools. Have a look at Pascual's paper on plurality of values, this is a very challenging area: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2016.12.006>

How did people's wellbeing ever get separated from the environment? It is madness. All this energy trying to put them back together.

Indeed. Unfortunately, disconnections from nature means that we need to find ways to measure and capture what matters to people and how they affect nature through their activities.

Does the framework address equality? Just like a beach may not be accessible due to location, some ESs may not be accessible to sectors of society due to socio-economic inequality, e.g. ability to afford transport to a beach.

We think of indicators in terms of supply (how much is provided and accessible) as well as benefit to people. So, it is important to consider equality such as access to natural resources. We are considering separating different communities as well, as they will have different personal values.

Why have you not engaged with a Te Ao Māori framework before now? That seems to be a major oversight.

We have to start somewhere, for now, this was about bringing in international insights into NZ frameworks (for all Nzers). Māori frameworks exist elsewhere and are being developed by Māori for Māori (TPK and others). We'll connect in the next step.

Regional councils do not necessarily follow the living standards framework, and the same SOE framework. Have you thought about the useability of the framework for regional councils?

The LSF is just one way of conceptualising well-being and doesn't have to be the only one. It would indeed be interesting to see how regional councils could use the concepts with other frameworks. We've engaged with Waikato Regional Council to look at their well-being progress indicators for instance