

The Natural Choice

Schools Factsheet: Spot the ecosystem services

What are ecosystem services?

'Ecosystem services' is a name for the benefits we all get from nature. These include things we need to stay alive, like the food we grow in the countryside, fresh water to drink and fresh air to breathe. They also include things we enjoy, like parks and green spaces.

Some of these benefits already have a financial value and can be bought and sold, like wood from trees or fruit and vegetables grown on a farm. Others, like the work done by bees to pollinate crops or the action of trees in reducing pollution or providing shade don't have a financial value but would cost a lot to replace. And others, like the enjoyment of playing outdoors or going for a walk in the park, are hard to put a price on but are 'valuable' to lots of people.

Thinking about the different kinds of value we place on these different benefits helps us to think about how we should care for our environment. If we understood the value of bees pollinating crops or trees reducing pollution, would it give everyone a better reason to look after them?

Types of ecosystems services

Provisioning services – ecosystems provide us with many things:

We get food from crops: (like grain to make bread), orchards (apples, cherries, plums), allotments (fruit, vegetables and flowers), rivers and seas (fish). We get water (from rivers, ponds and lakes). We get fibre from plants (like trees, which make paper) and animals (like sheep, which produce wool). We can also make fuel from trees and plants

(bio-fuels) and benefit from renewable energy (wind turbines).

Regulating services - ecosystems regulate the world around us:

These are the result of natural processes, like the actions of bees and other insects which pollinate the plants in our gardens, wild flowers and the crops we need for food. Wetlands clean our water by acting like a giant sponge and filtering out pollution. Trees keep the climate regulated through cooling the local area and storing up carbon. Trees and other plants also reduce noise and air pollution and help prevent floods by soaking up water.

Cultural services – ecosystems form an important part of our culture:

Local green spaces give people somewhere to get exercise and have fun, which is good for their health and helps them get to know other people where they live. Many people enjoy walking in the countryside and spotting wild birds and animals. Cultural benefits also include things which are harder to define, like the history that you can see in the landscape or people finding nature beautiful and spiritually uplifting.

Supporting services – ecosystems support us in many hidden ways:

Invisible benefits provided by tiny bugs, fungi and insects that support healthy soil formation. Or plants trapping the sunlight and turning it into food for us and other animals. These processes support all the other ecosystem services.

