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"Ecosystem Services and Sacred Natural Sites: Reconciling Material and Non-material Values in Nature Conservation"

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Ecosystems services are provisions that humans derive from nature. Ecologists trying to value ecosystems have proposed five categories of these services: preserving, supporting, provisioning, regulating and cultural. While this ecosystem services framework attributes 'material' value to nature, sacred natural sites are areas of 'non-material' spiritual significance to people. Can we reconcile the material and non-material values? Ancient classical traditions recognise five elements of nature: earth, water, air, fire and ether. This commentary demonstrates that the perceived properties of these elements correspond with the ecosystem services framework. Whilst the two can be reconciled, the 'elements of nature' framework is argued to be more suitable to make a case for conservation of sacred natural sites because it can be attractive to traditional societies whilst being acceptable to Western science.

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