Outcome of the survey of the ESP8 conference in South Africa, 9-13 November 2015

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From 9-13 November we organised the 8th ESP World Conference in Stellenbosch, South Africa. The conference theme this year was “Ecosystem Services for Nature, People and Prosperity”. The conference was jointly organised by ESP and the department of Environmental Affairs, South Africa.

This was the first ESP conference held on the African continent. Next to this novelty, we used a new system for the conference website, registration and abstract submission. Also, we put effort in making the conference as sustainable as possible, and tried to involve participants in this mission.

Also, some program elements were revised, the field trip was moved from Thursday to Wednesday. We tried to actively involve participants to think along and comment by making use of live Twitter feeds. This idea was picked up along the week and led to around 1500 Tweets, reaching out to nearly 400.000 people.

We would like to thank the 78 respondents for their effort to complete the survey. Overall, the conference was highly appreciated. Most questions received a higher rate than the previous conference. Of course, room for improvement remains. Below a summary and synthesis is given of the survey results. Also, an attempt was made to formulate ‘lessons learned’ to be implemented for the next conference(s).
1. General Participant Information

Out of the 366 participants the survey was send to, a substantial number of 78 conference participants (21%) responded. 80 people responded to the previous conference (ESP7) survey, making the survey a reliable reflection of how the conference was perceived by its participants in comparison to the previous one. Many of the respondents were first or second time visitors (82%) to an ESP conference.

Out of the 372 registered participants, 120 persons (32,3%) were ESP member (either individual or institutional), 140 (37,6%) Non-ESP member, 83 (22,3%) student, 24 (6,5%) low-income country participant, and 5 (1,5%) ‘other’. Although nearly one third of the participants was indeed an ESP member, apparently and surprisingly for at least 37% of the participants the conference fee discount isn’t a sufficient trigger to become an ESP member. ESP therefore has a significant opportunity to increase its members within the target group. Of the survey respondents 47% indicated to be an ESP member, 46% were not a member, and almost 7% did not know. The engagement of ESP members to respond to the survey was relatively high (47% versus 32% of all participants).

ESP8 survey respondents represented the following fields; academic (50%), student (18,3%), NGO (13,4%), Government (12,2%), Other (4,9%), Private Sector (1,2%). One of the key challenges of upcoming ESP Conferences will be to engage more representatives of the Private Sector.

Presenting research/promoting work is for 28% the main reason to attend the conference. However, interaction with peers (25%), building a network within the community (24%) and knowledge building (20%) are also deemed relevant. From this we can conclude that the ESP Conference serves many purposes.

Of the survey respondent 94% indicated they would like to participate in future ESP conferences and 92% would recommend the conference to others.

2. Scores

For a large part of the survey questions we used the so-called Likert-scale, where people can give a score between 1 and 5 (whereby 5 represents the best and 1 the lowest score). An average of 2,5 would therefore be “OK” but we interpret outcomes for individual questions below 3 (good) as a sign of serious concern. However, the ESP Secretariat had set an ambitious internal target of a score of at least 4 (excellent) for each section as satisfactory.

Therefore we were pleased with an average score of 4 for the Conference overall. These are the other scores, ranked from high to low:

- Conference venue (average score 4.51) *(previous year 3.72)*
- Information prior and during conference (average score 4.28) *(previous year 3.83)*
- Conference organisation (average score 4.01) *(previous year 3.97)*
- Communication materials (website, program booklet, banners, etc.) (average score 4.01) *(previously not rated)*
- Workshops/Sessions (average score 3.82) *(previous year 3.81)*
- Conference program (average score 3.73) *(previous year 3.90)*
- Keynote speakers (average score 3.73) *(previous year 3.63)*
- The height of the conference fee in relation to the benefits was (average score 3.72) *(previous year 3.00)*
Abstract handling (average score 3.63) (previous year 3.82)
Poster Sessions (average score 2.94) (previous year 3.40)

Lessons Learned

We are happy that the conference venue and our efforts to provide information in due time were highly appreciated.

Especially the Poster Sessions will need special attention at coming conferences.

For the abstract handling we used a new system this year. We hope to optimise this system the coming year, in order to improve the abstract handling further.

The height of the conference fee remains a difficult issue. In order to welcome as many people as possible, we strive to keep the fees as low as possible and differentiate our fees. However, organising a conference is costly and we are very critical towards our expenses. In order to keep conference fees low, we will increase our efforts to find sponsors for ESP in general and the conferences in particular. ESP currently does not make profit with the conferences but is actually aiming at breaking even.

Noticeable is that the conference program scored slightly lower than last year (3.7 versus 3.9) which is a point of attention for the ESP Conference Design Commission.

We will address each topic in more detail in the next sections.

3. Scores in detail

Below an overview is provided of all answers to the survey questions.

3.1 Conference organisation

Registration (4.53) and payment process (4.44)
For the first time we used a new registration system. The system automatized much of the registration process, leading to less support time for the ESP secretariat. We are happy that participants were very satisfied with this system, and we will continue to use this system for the upcoming conferences.

Abstract submission/handling (3.65)
Also abstract submission was integrated in the new system. Both conference participants and ESP secretariat feel that there is still room for improvement within the system. We’ve discussed this issue, and will further adjust the system to our needs.

Sustainability (3.83)
Various efforts were put into making this conference sustainable. In selecting the venue we always take sustainability into account. Newly introduced was the ‘vegetarian menu’ default option in the registration form, the CO2 compensation project, and sustainable gifts.

Although, the vegetarian menu was set as a default, still 51% selected that they would like to eat meat & fish, 33% chose the vegetarian option. We don’t want to go as far as to make the conferences fully vegetarian, but we would like to stimulate this further.

Together we raised €1000 (R16500) for our Wildlands CO2 compensation project, allowing them to plant trees to offset the conference carbon use. We would like every conference to have such a local offset project with which we can stimulate sustainability and help communities locally.
Despite these efforts, organising a conference in itself is not sustainable, if you take all CO2 emissions by travelling into account. However, we do feel that hosting these conferences is very important to achieve the goals of the partnership, and we will continue to put efforts in making the conference as sustainable as possible. The regional ESP conferences will additionally help to reduce long-distance travel efforts.

**Shuttle service (2,97)**
Some perceived the shuttle service as very convenient, for others it wasn't. We apologise for any inconvenience. In future, we will improve communication about and organisation of this service. Unfortunately, as much as we would like to, we just can't influence the traffic, and will more strongly advise participants to find accommodation near to the venue.

**Lessons learned:**
- Internally, the new abstract submission system was of help already. We should improve the functionalities for users however.
- We should organise the shuttle service more carefully

### 3.2 Keynote speakers
- The question keynote speakers provided a good introduction to the overarching theme 'Ecosystem Services for Nature, People and Prosperity': 3,77.
- The overall quality of these presentations was excellent': 3,58.
- The keynotes provided me with useful insights which I can apply in my daily work: 3,38.

**Lessons learned:**
- Overall, quite a lot of feedback was given about the keynote speakers in the open questions section (see further). We put a lot of effort in the selection of the keynotes, but aim to select and brief them even better in the future. Maybe an explicit call for suggestions among the ESP members would be a possibility.

### 3.3 Workshops/sessions
- There was enough time to present and discuss research and new ideas during the workshops: 3,65.
- The content of the presentations in the workshops corresponded well to the workshop description: 3,97.
- ESP workshops are an important means to advance research: 3,92.
- Reporting from the Working group sessions on Friday was useful: 2,09.
- The ESP Working Group sessions were a good format for my presentation: 2,78.

**Lessons learned:**
- The format of working group reporting should be revised.
- The Working Group sessions are not valued as high as we would like to.

### 3.4 Poster sessions
- The format of the poster sessions was excellent to present my poster: 3,54.
- The format of poster awards triggered me to join the poster sessions: 2,68.
- The sponsored wine triggered me to join the poster sessions: 2,9.

**Lessons learned:**
- It remains challenging to organise these sessions well and to find the right incentive for participants to join the poster sessions.
3.5 ESP member meeting

- The presentations gave a good overview of ESP's current situation: 4,14.
- There was ample opportunity to discuss ESP issues I thought were important: 3,97.
- The ESP member meeting made me feel engaged as an ESP member: 3,74.

Lessons learned:

- The ESP member meeting was highly appreciated and seems a valuable element to inform ESP members and make them engaged.

3.6 Fieldtrips

- The field trip programs were appealing and related to the conference theme well: 4,5.
- The field trip was good value for money: 4,43.
- The field trip was a good way to experience what happens in the field of Ecosystem Services at a local level: 4,11.

Lessons learned:

Although the field trips were rated positively, quite some comments were given about the amount of information provided previous of the field trip. Also, some felt that guidance during the field trip was poor. These are things we will try to improve.

3.7 Conference venue

- The catering during lunches and breaks at the conference was excellent: 4,51.
- The conference venue was conductive for encouraging information exchange, networking and collaboration: 4,47.
- With regard to sustainability, the conference venue was well selected: 4,0.
- I feel ESP should offer fully vegetarian catering at conferences: 3,28.

Lessons learned:

- It is good to see that the conference venue was highly appreciated and offered a conductive environment.
- We will leave the vegetarian option as a default option, but won’t organise fully vegetarian conference for now. We do feel that as an organisation related to sustainability, we should set an example to venues and partner organisations.

3.8 Pre-conference trainings

- The training session I attended met my expectations: 3,91.

3.9 Answers to open questions

Below you find the answers to the open questions.

a) What were your main needs and expectations prior to your ESP8 visit?

Networking

- Foundation and establishment of networking, of international contacts, comparison and exchange of experiences and involvement into the global ES community.
- To expand my knowledge on ecosystem services and policies and also create networks.
- Build my network.
- To meet some people I had email contacts with them.
- To extend my professional network.
- To be part of ESP and start up networking with researchers
- Interaction ES professionals.
- Networking and assessing where and how my research work fits into the bigger picture.
- This was a great conference. My expectations were exceeded and I found a strong network of potential collaborators.
- Good science and excellent presentations. Networking opportunities.
- Network.

**Professional discussions**

- Having good discussions within our WG and with new people interested in our WG.
- Reconnect with colleagues.
- Discuss my research and that of my colleagues.
- To learn and discuss ideas and practical questions.
- Expectations: meeting peers and presenting and discussing my work.
- To draw lessons and learn from experiences of different people.

**Knowledge sharing, learning and inspiration**

- To learn more about areas relevant to my own field of research and to engage with peers to find state-of-the-art knowledge in presentations contact with current and potential contributors to the journal.
- Present own work to others in same research field.
- Present my work.
- To showcase our research in South Africa, to network and become more involved with Ecosystem services and to learn more about the dynamic field which has been lacking the marine environment in South Africa.
- To present research results and to meet people. Unfortunately, location for poster presentations was not good at all.
- Inspiration new research ideas and collaborations.
- Get a clear idea of how ES concepts are being implemented around the world.
- Exchange, update of ES-related research.
- To see how the field has developed in science and in application.
- Having been at 2 other ESP conferences, I had low expectations for an innovative or thought provoking conference. It is just a good opportunity to catch up with people and share my work.
- I was highly tempted to attend most of the presentations, but of course that is not possible due to overlaps. Nevertheless, I got many things from workshops I attended.
- Meet key People, update on Progress in ES Research and practical application.
- Excellent conference in terms of meeting expectations to learn from other parts of the world
- I wanted an opportunity to present and inspire scientists to engage with Aboriginal peoples.
- Learn about the work of others and build new partnerships.
- To meet people and to get know what is up in ES all over the world.
- Needs before conference, very practical: information- which was good!

**Lessons learned:**

- Networking is listed often as the main expectation to participate in the ESP conference.
- To be part of a big international network is appreciated greatly.
- Knowledge sharing is important to conference participants.

**b) What was the key strength of the ESP8 conference according to you?**

**Participants**

- The diversity of people attending and the fact that it took place in a beautiful country in which ecosystem services have already played a role for decades.
- The participants.
- Interaction was very well possible, thanks!
- Great people attending, good diversity, practitioners as well as researchers
- The diversity of interests and perspectives reflected by participants
- A lot of young people, good sessions.
- Diversity of participants and topics
- The key note speakers were particularly fantastic.
- I think there were probably lots of people I would have liked to have heard and met outside of my direct area of expertise.
- People.

**Knowledge exchange**

- Good overview of ES-related research.
- Exchange.
- The key strength is to learn about different mapping and modelling tools and for connecting with people that I may only see once a year and meeting new people.
- It tried to bring scientists, practitioners and policy makers together to discuss matters related to ecosystem services.
- The highly interactive format of the various workshops.
- Diverse knowledge and different experiences.
- To congregate researchers from all around the world.
- The high level of technical knowledge.
- Broad range of topics and levels (policy/governance, science, nature conservation, development cooperation etc.) as well as nationalities. One felt to participate in a really important, significant and influential event, to have an impact together and to talk about the most crucial problems and challenges of today's humanity.
- Bring forth the African work.
- Organisation and workshop structure of the presentations.
- An opportunity to present my research and receive feedback.

**Networking**

- The ability to network.
- Good networking opportunity and present own work.
- Networking opportunities.
- The network, but needs more social scientists

**Venue and organization**

- Venue!
- Good overall organisation and clarity on overall program. The venue and setting (good weather and venue proximity to outside and outside lunch) of the conference enabled open, positive atmosphere, facilitating meeting new people and cheerful conversations.

**Lessons learned:**

- As networking is an important reason to attend the conference, it is good to see that many praise the networking possibilities during the conference.
- Diversity and knowledge exchange within the network is what we can stimulate even more.

**c) What would be the most important thing to improve for future ESP conferences according to you?**

**Workshops/(poster) sessions**

- Time management, especially of the workshops. In both workshops I joined on Tuesday and Thursday (Tuesday with presentation), time management was lacking, and I've heard this was the case in some other workshops as well. Therefore it was not possible to switch
between sessions to really make your own agenda, but for me even more important, there
was no time for discussion, which was a pity, as I was really looking forward to the panel
discussions and regular discussion, also because I think that is the most useful part, not
20min of presentation for 10 persons. I think that setting the example regarding time
management in the plenary sessions (being really strict) will set the tone for the rest of the
separate workshop sessions, also lowering the threshold to cut people off. When this does
not happen in plenary sessions (as I think was the case on Monday morning at the start), I
can imagine this might be more difficult for the moderators to do in the workshop sessions.

- Furthermore, I attended a workshop on Thursday, a decision based on in particular 3
  presentations (abstracts). However, it became clear (in the moment) none of these
  speakers were present (and a few more for this session). Again, I thought that there was a
  lot of room for improvement regarding the organisation and moderation of the workshops
  (based on the separate workshops I visited of course).
- The overall organization of the sessions. There were several that I attended where
  speakers didn’t pitch or they moved the speakers around so I’d aim to go to a particular
talk and then get there only to find the whole session had been reorganized and I’d missed
  the talk I was hoping to attend. I understand that sometimes there are speakers who can’t
  make it at the last minute (due to visa issues, etc.) but there were really a lot at the ESP. I
  attended another conference (PECS) the week before, in the same venue, and it was
  noticeably better organized. I also think that many conferences these days have too many
  parallel sessions so you attend sessions where there are only a few people in the audience.
  I would rather have fewer, better attended sessions. To prepare a presentation and only
  have 5 people pitch up, becomes discouraging. Although I’m interesting in engaging with
  the ESP members in the future, I’m not sure the conference was worth attending.
- Poster sessions. Poster boards need to be spread more openly and not to have 2 posters on
  the same board. Illumination of posters was extremely poor.
- Improve on attention to poster sessions.

**Program**

- There were too many parallel workshops in each session, it was hard to choose between
  several interesting ones. It is better to have more sessions with fewer parallel workshops.
- Maybe the number of different workshops per day could be reduced, to allow the
  participation in a higher number of sessions (not to perform so many sessions
  simultaneously), as the choice between the different sessions was often difficult and it was
  sad to miss so many interesting talks. The final day appeared to be a bit lengthy with
  plenary panel discussions, here another workshop session in the morning would have been
  more refreshing.
- Make it even more interactive, learn from the ateliers experience and expect all workshop
  organizers to come up with innovative facilitation techniques. You must avoid the
  conventional linear conference model. Collaboration and participation are key.
- Less parallel sessions; so group the presentations in larger (2 day) sessions; distinguish
  between a few well developed full and a larger # of short presentations.
- Less and restructured parallel sessions.
- Fewer parallel sessions. I didn’t get to see most of the talks I would have liked to see.
  Shorter sessions, but more of them, less in parallel.
- Perhaps fewer parallel sessions so that we can have bigger discussions in each for the
  working groups and by default engage more.
- Having less dense sessions with fewer talks would be a huge improvement. Letting the
  sessions have more say over who speaks and how many talks there are in their session
  would make for more coherent session themes.
- I recommend tailor-made sessions to practitioners and business those who are not
  interested to listen scientific jargons and methods that couldn’t be easily grasped by them.
- Less parallel sessions! E.g. Modelling and mapping sessions address similar community. I
  missed a lot of talks because these were parallel.
• Allocation of talks to sessions was not too focussed. Better more specified session Topics and shorter sessions!
• I think the sessions were too silo-ed. I attended marine sessions which meant I didn’t meet others working in other specialities. Unfortunately the marine sessions didn’t attract such a large number.
• To minimize number of parallel sessions - although I realize it's impossible.
• A suitable location, time and organization for poster presentations.

Keynotes/ plenary

• For next conferences, more representatives and even keynote speakers from policy / government level as well as the private sector might provide another point of view and different opinions, as this time mostly convinced conservationists and "ecologists" dominated the programme.
• The keynotes need to be perhaps fewer and better targeted. It is not only for this conference but a comment to all I have attended.
• As everyone will say: the keynotes. We don't need that many, and if you invite speakers then please check their presentation abilities well in advance, to avoid embarrassment.
• Less and better keynotes (except the last one).
• The Friday was dull, long, unneeded and only saved by Lorenzo. The sharing part never happened, and the happiest people were the ones meeting informally outside the main hall. Give more time to the workshop sessions please!
• Inspiration and topic orientation in plenary, no mumbling about the publication rates.

Other

• Academic quality of conference could be improved greatly (I was very disappointed with the low quality).
• Location, according with the majority of members.
• Less time for presentations, more time for interaction.
• Add (half) a conference day.
• Welcome reception on Sunday.
• Let the younger stars shine and lead the way during these meetings with full spirit.
• Let go of the manually made program templates and buy a conferencing service extension on top of that used for the abstract submission.
• Hard to do, but meeting spaces need to be improved. In many cases, there was not ample space to accommodate all participants. Increase room size.
• The quality of presentations. There should be screening for quality (also level of English is critical).
• Branch out to social scientists and economists.
• Too many presentations squeezed into just 2 days.
• Related topics need to be presented in a row and not in parallel to avoid being able to participate in just 1 instead of several of interest.
• More breaks are needed for (informal) discussions.
• N/A
• I really don’t know.

Lessons learned:

• Program is perceived as too full. We will look more critically at program format.
• Number of parallel sessions (especially addressing related topics) needs to be reconsidered.
• Stimulate innovation within the workshops.
**d) Other comments and suggestions**

**Things to improve:**

- Reduce registration fee and encourage conference attendance of people from developing countries all over the world.
- Book next venue so that participants can come a few days earlier and stay longer!!
- It was really a nuisance that the hotel had no room for that.
- 'Cross-pollination' between sessions was practically impossible, because of the focus on the working groups, which are too many. The Monday and Friday could have been more useful - there was time there for some groups. Too many sessions were merged that couldn't be merged and I had to 'cancel' several sessions because I simply couldn't attend them!
- Coffee should be available all the time during the conference.
- Many sessions were organized collaboratively. Just showing one name of the Host in the program, does not properly reflect the co-work that was done. I would give session organizers the opportunity to list up to 3 names. Because of an overload of session abstracts, many session leaders were asked to join efforts; this should be represented in the program (i.e. the Partnership).
- Let other ESP members host the plenary
- More diversity in the ESP board (not just white men)
- Less presentations, more discussion or working groups.
- 10 sessions in parallel is way too many. Instead of having only 2 full days of presentations, have one more and have fewer sessions in parallel. Too much plenary, could have been replaced by sessions.
- It would be nice if the keynotes were more thought provoking, really pushing people to think. It isn't that interesting to just listen to 'big names' discuss what they have written a million papers about. The ESP conference needs a little enthusiasm and a lot of time management.
- As was observed and mentioned by organizers, participants from developing countries were not to the level expected. I wish this be improved in the future.
- "Our field trip (Agulhas) was not ideally organized: too long driving (3.5 hrs to get there!), no Information was given on the programme (e.g. lunch packs were eaten and later we arrive at a place to have lunch). The actual interaction with the Alien Clearing Project was too little. Easy to imagine how such Clearing works but additional insights + more Information would have been nice. I liked it in total because of the landscape but Information both on subject and Programme was very poor. Sorry to say, but I have heard the same from the field trips at ESP7.
- I think we were just unlucky, but only once in 4 days did we have a shuttle that turned up at a time we were expecting, so we spent a lot of money in taxis.
- I would suggest prizes for presentations as well.
- I thought that the way that abstracts were grouped was terrible. I think the "workshop" approach still has validity, but there should be some flexibility built in to account for what abstracts are submitted each year. They should not be forced into a pre-existing mould, but rather grouped according to what is submitted each year. This is perhaps slightly more work, but would be far more rewarding for people attending.
- This could also potentially solve the problem of clashes, as many people interested in modelling, mapping (the research/science part) had some days with several parallel sessions that they wanted to be in and then days where there was nothing much of interest.
- To my mind (excepting for the mapping/modelling studies) there was very little 'science' presented, many more "'proposals" or "'projects/models" being advertised. I would love to see more application/research or science. Perhaps abstracts can be screened more carefully for 'point of completion'.


Things that went well:

- In general, it was a great idea to have the main social event - the welcome reception - already on the 1st day, to know each other better right from the start. Also, it was a very good decision to perform the field trips in the middle of the week for some change, recovery and outdoor activity.
- Overall a fantastic conference, one of the best I ever attended!
- Thanks for organizing another very good conference
- I thought it was very well organised conference, and well put together with a great structure. I thoroughly enjoyed it and would definitely like to attend in the future.
- thank you for a good conference
- It’s an important and growing forum, let it grow and prosper!
- Looking forward to the next one.
- I think the conference organisers did a great job and worked really hard to make this experience good for everyone.
- It was great to be there. Thank you.

Lessons learned:

Good to read that many of you were satisfied with the conference and we will do our very best to make the next conferences even better taking due account of your comments and suggestions.