

THE "PEOPLE TO PEOPLE" APPROACH FOR ECOSYSTEM SERVICES VALUATION IN THE GULF OF MEXICO

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A healthy and resilient Gulf of Mexico can provide continuous provision of ecosystem services and benefits to people, even when faced with changing human and environmental conditions. In order to develop informed conservation and restoration efforts, transition of research findings to application is critical.

Through initial funding from the Gulf of Mexico Sea Grant Consortium, NOAA, and EPA, we developed a sustained effort that would; (1) characterize Gulf of Mexico coastal resources, (2) quantify the ecosystem services they provide, and (3) incorporate their value into decision-making and planning. As the first step in this approach, we conducted monetary valuations for a suite of ecosystem services provided by salt marshes, mangroves, and oyster reefs in the entire Northern Gulf of Mexico. Secondly, results from valuations were transitioned to an online platform (Gulf of Mexico Ecosystem Services Viewer/ GecoView) that facilitated the dissemination of research findings among decision-makers at local, state, and regional levels. GecoView provides a visual representation of the three Gulf of Mexico coastal habitats, the ecosystem services they provide, and the potential monetary values they generate. Now, we are strengthening those initial findings by exploring community vulnerability to marine-related environmental degradation and their respective environmental and economic costs in the Galveston Bay region. With support from Houston Endowment, we are surveying the Greater Houston area to assess people's perceptions about the value of natural resources and how they might change given sea level rise. Information from this project is also included in GecoView and will provide knowledge to mitigate and adapt to higher sea level during the next 50 to 100 years and evaluate the impacts or risks of private and public land use decisions with greater precision and accuracy.