

SESSION DESCRIPTION

ID: T17b

Advancing urban ecosystem accounting: co-developing a roadmap to bridge research, policy, and practice

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Abstract:

There is a growing interest in developing standardized ecosystem accounts for urban systems, moving beyond ad-hoc mapping and assessment of ecosystems and their services. In Europe, this interest is reflected not only in research but also in emerging policy developments, such as the recent amendment of the European environmental economic accounts, which introduces mandatory ecosystem accounts for urban areas. These policies pose new requirements for public officers in local and regional administrations, as well as for technical experts and private practitioners who support them in implementing ecosystem accounting. Such requirements may become even more complex as additional environmental policies, such as the EU Nature Restoration Regulation (including specific targets for urban areas) are introduced, prompting some countries to develop urban ecosystem accounts designed to serve multiple reporting purposes.

Nevertheless, the absence of a standardized, urban-specific framework, combined with current limitations in applying the SEEA-EA to urban systems, creates a tangible risk of multiple, potentially diverging implementations. Such divergence could impede knowledge sharing, lesson learning, and the comparison, benchmarking, and aggregation of data at national, European, and global levels. Ultimately, this may hinder the practical value of urban ecosystem accounting as a coherent tool to inform policy targets, track progress toward them, and support a broader sustainable urban transition across national to global governance levels.

At the same time, the IPBES Values Assessment highlights the need to balance the benefits of standardization in ecosystem accounting with local community needs to reflect plural values. While EU-level recommendations on standardization are important for compiling statistics and benchmarks, including ecosystem accounts, they must also respect the subsidiarity principle: local governments may require tailored urban ecosystem accounting systems to address their specific policy objectives, which can go beyond the minimum common denominator of EU-level targets.

This workshop-style session brings together researchers, practitioners, and public officers (including those from local, regional and national administrations) to exchange perspectives on SEEA-EA thematic urban ecosystem accounting and their implementation at local, regional or national levels. Participants will discuss current challenges, review approaches to addressing them and explore workable solutions for advancing a coherent framework suitable for multiple scales of implementation. The session will also inform future piloting exercises, helping to ensure they deliver practical outputs that contribute to the development and implementation of such a framework.

The session builds on previous discussions within sessions in the last two ESP Europe Conferences (Crete, Wageningen) and on findings from a recent publication on this topic. It will also draw on participants' experiences, particularly those of local, regional, and national public officers, technical experts, and supporting practitioners and researchers working on the development of individual urban ecosystem accounting implementations. Participants are expected to share their experiences, discuss and agree on key challenges, and identify suitable approaches to address them.

By emphasizing dialogue across research, policy and practice, the session aims to co-develop pathways for arriving at a more consistent, policy-relevant, and operational thematic urban ecosystem accounting framework, that translates into more coherent and comparable implementations of urban ecosystem accounts within Europe and beyond.

Goals and objectives of the session:

This session aims to build a shared understanding among public officers, practitioners, and researchers on thematic urban ecosystem accounting, focusing on both conceptual and practical challenges as well as promising approaches to address them. Building on previous work, it seeks to support the development of a coherent thematic urban ecosystem accounting framework within the SEEA-EA standard suitable for implementations at local, regional and national scales.

In practical terms, the session intends to initiate a dialogue that could lay the foundation for future collaboration across members of the ecosystem services community, spanning research, policy, and practice, working on urban ecosystem accounting from conceptual, methodological, and operational sides.

While the workshop will focus primarily on the European policy and practice context, perspectives from beyond Europe are also welcome.

The aim of this session is translated into five specific objectives:

1. Discuss and consolidate a list of key challenges hindering the development of a European standard for urban ecosystem accounts that respond to existing and emerging policy requirements at EU level while providing flexibility to follow local policy targets.
2. Discuss challenges between different stakeholder groups and identify bottlenecks, i.e. who require what kind of information to further develop, integrate and use urban accounts.
3. Prioritize these challenges and highlight key considerations for addressing them.
4. Discuss existing approaches to tackle the prioritized challenges, agree on the most promising, and highlight gaps requiring novel solutions.
5. Co-develop actionable recommendations for advancing urban ecosystem accounting from both conceptual, methodological operational perspectives.
6. Strengthen networking among participants to scatter collaboration and knowledge exchange to continue with a prospective ESP working subgroup on urban ecosystem accounting.

Planned output / Deliverables:

The session is expected to generate the following outputs:

- The foundation for developing a synthesis roadmap and key recommendations for private practitioners and public officers interested in developing pilot implementations of urban ecosystem accounts. The workshop will set the basis for working on this roadmap with interested participants.
- A prioritized list of topics for initial work within the prospective ESP working subgroup on urban ecosystem accounting, including members interested in contributing to each topic.

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- Identification of an initial list of opportunities for collaboration among attendees beyond the ESP working subgroup, such as pilot projects, joint publications, science-for-policy dialogues on urban ecosystem accounting. The long-term aim is to start building a strong science-policy-practice network on this topic.

Conference participants interested in this session are welcome to submit a paper to the Special Issue of the journal Ecosystem Services titled “Urban ecosystem accounting under the SEEA-EA framework: advancing concepts and applications” (submission deadline: January 31, 2026).

Session format:

The format of the session is a workshop with practitioners from the private sector, technical experts, and public officers from local municipal administrations, regional and national agencies and statistical offices, alongside ecosystem accounting researchers.

We expect to need a session of around 3-4 hours. Part of the work will be done in advance, and we expect to attract attendees not only from academia but from statistical offices, environmental agencies, local administrations and similar. Part of the work will be done in advance, but the session will represent the moment of discussion and of settling the basis for a posterior science-policy-practice collaboration in this topic.

Voluntary contributions accepted:

Yes, I allow any abstract to be submitted to my session for review

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