

Environmental valuation involves political choices that must be justified

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Environmental valuation is increasingly used to understand how changes in the environment affect the things people care about, and is promoted as a way to improve decision-making. For valuation to be a tool for improving justice and sustainability, it is also important to consider *whose interests valuation serves*.

We originally set out to learn: what do stakeholders and decision makers want in a valuation process, and what would 'best practice' valuation look like? In New Zealand's Marlborough Sounds region, we interviewed indigenous Māori custodians and local environmental and commercial stakeholders, as well as local and central government officials involved in marine decision making. While government officials desired a prescription for 'best practice' valuation that was comprehensive and transparent, local Māori and stakeholders were more concerned with how valuation exercises had the effect of promoting some interests over others. In particular, they were concerned with how valuation 1) is subject to influence from vested actors and interests, 2) is constrained by legal interpretations, 3) gives weight to 'experts' over local knowledge, and 4) excludes locals from the decision-making table.

Through the research, we found ourselves unable to say "here's a prescription for best practice valuation", because so much depends upon how valuation effectively chooses sides within the power-laden context of local environmental decisions. This problem cannot be avoided by simply deferring to best practice, because there is no universal prescription that

results in sustainable and just outcomes in all places; choices still need to be made by those performing the valuation. The four propositions that emerged from the research can help identify these choices so that valuation researchers and practitioners can take responsibility for these choices as they design and conduct valuation to inform decision making.

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