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4-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Jacobs, Cheryl, "Community Capitals: Natural Capital" (2011). *Extension Extra*. Paper 518.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_extra/518

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Community Capitals: Natural Capital

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INTRODUCTION

Natural capital consists of all the natural resources available to a community. Examples include water, air, soil, biodiversity, and landscape. These natural resources may be scarce or they may be found in abundance in your community.

Natural capital adds to the richness of our communities. Depending on where you live, you may benefit from wildlife habitats, wind power, water resources, and fertile soil ideal for farming and ranching. Or you may have resources like minerals, timber, oil, and natural gas. In its purest form, natural capital is something that already exists and is not made by human hands.

These natural assets not only add to the beauty of where we live, but also affect the economy, as they attract visitors and new residents who increase sales revenue and create business opportunities. Remember, capital is defined as a resource that is capable of producing additional resources. It can be enhanced, changed, used, or used up.

WATER AS A NATURAL CAPITAL

As an example of natural capital, consider water (fig. 1). Water as a community capital can provide financial impact by fostering tourism, which increases the economy. But water also has other impacts that cannot necessarily be measured by dollars and cents, such as increasing the quality of life for people who

enjoy the outdoors and for families who may spend more time together because of the opportunity to engage in recreational water sports. This resource, water, adds to the overall value of the community.

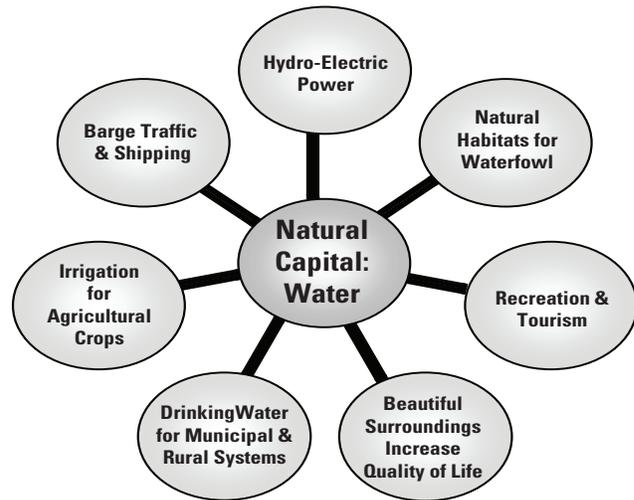


Figure 1. Natural capital aspects of water

If a river is used for recreation and tourism (*social capital*) that will increase the amount of money available in the economy (*financial capital*) to be used for community improvements. But tourism and recreation can take away land that birds and wildlife once occupied, potentially having a negative impact on the environment (*natural capital*). Each of the capitals are connected and impact each other based on their use, either positively or negatively.

A GREAT INVESTMENT TO PROTECT

Natural capital can also be affected by things that are beyond our control. For instance, droughts and floods impact our rivers and lakes, fires can wipe out entire sections of forest land, or humans can overuse natural resources until they are permanently depleted.

In a state that relies heavily on agriculture and tourism for economic well-being, South Dakota has a great investment to protect. Our soil, our rivers and lakes, and our mountains and prairies are all wonderfully unique, and communities need to recognize how best to use these resources.

BALANCING THE COMMUNITY CAPITALS

The use of natural capital may also depend on who owns it, or who has the rights to it. For instance, land use and land management may come under the jurisdiction of local, state, and/or federal entities. Zoning regulations and ordinances are often designed to both protect certain natural assets and take advantage of those assets when considering community growth.

Sometimes uses of the capitals can clash: for instance, when a company wants to establish a factory in a community and the community doesn't want it. The problem, popularly known as "NIMBY," or "not in my backyard," is an example of how communities choose to balance the uses of community capitals. While the addition of a factory can enhance financial capital and *built capital*, the community members may value the other capitals more, including land, air, and water quality (natural capital) or quality of life (social capital and *cultural capital*). This example further supports the fact that community capitals are a complex system.

State-park areas are good examples of the balance between using resources and conserving them. State parks provide ways to take advantage of the existence

of natural resources, while taking steps to ensure that these areas are kept intact for future users. The delicate balance of using natural capital for both public and private good while being aware of the need to preserve things for future generations is the challenge facing communities today.

What kind of natural capital exists in your community? What are the benefits? What is the potential? What are the concerns? What is the best use of these natural resources? These are questions that communities need to consider as they plan for their future, understanding that there is an interconnection between each of the community capitals.

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