

# Features

## Making the Business Case for Ecosystems

By [WBCSD.org](http://WBCSD.org)

If anyone understands the business case for ecosystems, it is Madeline Brien, current Assistant to the CEO of [Det Norske Veritas](#) (DNV), the independent Norwegian technical inspection foundation whose core business is safeguarding life, property and the environment.

Madeline loves nature and enjoys being in the great outdoors, whether hiking in the mountains and fjords of Norway or exploring the plains of her native Texas on horseback. She values her surroundings and has made a strong personal commitment to reducing her environmental footprint in her day-to-day existence.

Now, thanks to her new membership in the WBCSD's Future Leaders Team (FLT), she is able to apply this commitment in her professional life as well. Madeline is a chemical engineer with a specialization in environmental engineering. She joined DNV in 2002 as a consultant to the oil and gas sector of its Energy Business Area, working specifically on health, safety and the environment.



Madeline Brien (photo courtesy DNV)

Through her work in different sectors of DNV, she has gained insight into the importance of sustainable development which she defines as "realizing that what we do needs to serve today's needs while protecting those of future generations."

From a corporate perspective she says, it "addresses environmental and societal demands and balances these with profits." Madeline has chosen to align herself with the WBCSD's brand new [Ecosystems focus area](#).

Ecosystems are a dynamic web of plants, animals and physical elements that interact and support one another. They include all the world's biomes: wetlands, marine environments, deserts, forests, grasslands and tundra. The services they provide -- habitats, freshwater, food, fiber and fuel, natural regulatory mechanisms, cultural resources -- underpin life itself.

They also supply the raw materials upon which many large corporations rely or which support their production processes. Ecological economists have calculated that the Earth provides some US\$16-54 trillion worth of "services" to humans every year.

Yet, the 2005 [Millennium Ecosystem Assessment](#) found that two-thirds of the assessed ecosystems and their services are being degraded or used unsustainably.

Current pressure on ecosystems resulting from demographic growth and the increasing demands of industrial and economic development is negatively impacting them and threatening their ability as providers. If measures are not taken to mitigate this, some ecosystems and their services may disappear altogether.

In light of this, the FLT has been given the task of making the business case for ecosystems. Madeline believes it is a strong one. To date, initiatives aimed at protecting ecosystems and their services have been largely government-led -- through legislation or taxation -- or voluntary -- through self-imposed sectoral certification schemes, for example.

Business-inspired initiatives, while gaining in currency, are still in their infancy and are not as yet widespread across industry sectors. Says, Madeline, "Once businesses are able to comprehend the risks inherent to ecosystem degradation and take measures to mitigate the impacts of their activities, there will be an opportunity to factor them into their operations and make gains. They will also provide an opportunity to develop new ideas. The challenge will be to bring ecosystems to global business."

Some ecosystem-based enterprises, such as the forest products or fisheries industries, have clearly understood the importance of ecosystems. This awareness is reflected, for example, in the [Forest Stewardship Council](#) and [Marine Stewardship Council](#) initiatives.

For others, however, the link is less clear. The FLT will be looking to develop innovative tools and messages to demonstrate to corporations everywhere the reciprocal impacts of their activities and ecosystems and their services on one another and to persuade them to reduce and mitigate them. It will also seek to show that there are economic gains to be made through the sustainable use of ecosystems.

The WBCSD and its members are already involved in efforts to promote the sustainable use of ecosystems. In collaboration with the [World Resources Institute](#) and [Meridian Institute](#), it has developed the Ecosystem Services Review tool, a mechanism to assess and measure impact.

This is currently being road-tested by WBCSD members. The FLT will build upon work already in progress. Specifically, it will seek to explore and promote options such as the development of alternatives to ecosystem products. It will also investigate the possibilities available for devising and implementing clean technologies to reduce detrimental effects on ecosystems.

An innovative approach to ecosystems, and one that is beginning to garner interest, notably among governments, civil society and business, is the concept of making payments for ecosystem services.

This implies taking market-based mechanisms and applying them to ecosystem services. For instance creating markets, similar to the current carbon trading initiative, for ecosystems services. This could include, for example, wetland banking, trading in damage mitigation credits, or even ecosystem or biodiversity offsets trading.

At present, these mechanisms are fairly new. Madeline, however, believes that the sustainable use of ecosystems and their services offers considerable potential to businesses in the form of new products and markets.

As a result, she is very excited to have joined the 2007 FLT. She is especially enthusiastic about the prospect of being involved with a Focus Area from its inception, and keen to begin work to help to shape the future direction of this key area.