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In the face of decreasing biodiversity and ongoing global changes, maintaining ecosystem functioning is seen both as a means to preserve biological diversity and for safeguarding human well-being by securing the services ecosystems provide. The concept today is prominent in many fields of ecology and conservation biology, such as biodiversity research, ecosystem management or restoration ecology. Although the idea of ecosystem functioning is important, the concept itself remains rather vague and elusive. This book provides a novel analysis and integrated synthesis of different approaches to conceptualising and assessing ecosystem functioning. It links the natural sciences with methodologies from philosophy and the social sciences, and introduces a new methodology for a clearer and more efficient application of ecosystem functioning concepts in practice. Special emphasis is laid on the social dimensions of the concept and on the ways in which these influence research practice. Several case studies relate theoretical analyses to practical application.

Cover illustration: after the fierce eruption of Mount St Helens in 1980, parts of the blast area were replanted with trees, other parts (centre) were left to unaided succession. Photograph: Kurt Jax, August 2004.

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