

Response to Turnhout *et al.*'s Rethinking Biodiversity: From Goods and Services to "Living With"

David J. Abson¹ & Jan Hanspach²

¹ FuturES Research Center, Leuphana University Lüneburg, Scharnhorststr. 1 21335, Lüneburg, Germany

² Faculty of Sustainability, Leuphana University Lüneburg, Scharnhorststr. 1 21335, Lüneburg, Germany

Keywords

Biodiversity conservation; ecosystem services; nonmonetary valuation; value pluralism.

Correspondence

David J. Abson, FuturES Research Center,
Leuphana University Lüneburg, Scharnhorststr.
1, 21335 Lüneburg, Germany.
Tel: (0049) 4131 677-1975.
E-mail: abson@uni.leuphana.de

Received

27 June 2013

Accepted

28 July 2013

Editor

Andrew Knight

doi: 10.1111/conl.12059

Turnhout *et al.* (2013) identify some of the problems with the ecosystem services concept, including the potentially problematic "hierarchies of values" that may be created in decision-making processes. However, their characterization of the ecosystem services approach is misleadingly narrow. They state that "the Ecosystem Services discourse promotes a technocratic and economic perspective on biodiversity. In particular, it frames biodiversity in specific reductionist terms: as ecosystem services that can be represented with a single measure." There is no dictum fundamental to, or implied by, the ecosystem services concept that states that ecosystem services can or should be represented by a single measure. Many authors explicitly argue that multiple measures (value pluralism) are required to meaningfully express the values that humans ascribe to biodiversity and ecosystem services (Abson & Termansen 2011; Kenter *et al.* 2011; Morse-Jones *et al.* 2011; Wegner & Pascual 2011). The tools used to reveal these ascribed values are often implicitly tied to particular normative frameworks (i.e., utilitarian exchange values) regarding the nature of value (Kumar

& Kumar 2008). This does not mean that other normative valuation frameworks do not exist or cannot be applied to the ecosystem services concept (Wilson & Howarth 2002; Gomez-Baggethun *et al.* 2010). The ecosystem service concept does not "reduce" biodiversity to a single value, rather it expresses particular values that are ascribed to particular aspects of biodiversity by societies (Abson & Termansen 2011). There is, as Turnhout *et al.* suggest, a danger that a narrow, utilitarian perspective on biodiversity loss becomes the dominant normative discourse in conservation biology. A potential antidote to this narrow focus is to use the ecosystem services concept to emphasize problems with such a framing; many such critiques appear within the ecosystem services literature.

The assumed link that Turnhout *et al.* make between monetary valuations and the subsequent commodification of biodiversity is also problematic. They state that "when biodiversity is translated into a singular measure or currency that becomes the bearer of value, it may thereby enter into systems of banking and exchange." However, there is no direct, or inevitable, link between

such valuations and the commodification of nature. For a good to be traded on the market what is required is not an ascribed monetary value (this is provided by the market itself), but rather the assignment of property rights to that good. While there are theoretical problems in trying to ascribe exchange (monetary) values to public goods like biodiversity, doing so does not mean that those goods automatically become private good to be bought and sold.

Turnhout *et al.* imply that the ecosystem services concept represents a single discourse that seeks the commodification of nature. This is a misleading characterization of a field, which contains multiple discourses seeking to understand and express the various ways in which humans ascribe values to nature and how such values can be fed into decision processes. Indeed, the ecosystem services approach, at its best, seeks to embed biodiversity research within pluralistic understanding of social–natural relations that Turnhout *et al.* identify.

References

- Abson, D.J. & Termansen, M. (2011) Valuing ecosystem services in terms of ecological risks and returns. *Conserv. Biol.*, **25**, 250–258.
- Gomez-Baggethun, E., de Groot, R., Lomas, P.L. & Montes, C. (2010) The history of ecosystem services in economic theory and practice: from early notions to markets and payment schemes. *Ecol. Econ.*, **69**, 1209–1218.
- Kenter, J.O., Hyde, T., Christie, M. & Fazey, I. (2011) The importance of deliberation in valuing ecosystem services in developing countries-evidence from the Solomon Islands. *Global Environ. Change Hum Policy Dimens.*, **21**, 505–521.
- Kumar, M. & Kumar, P. (2008) Valuation of the ecosystem services: a psycho-cultural perspective. *Ecol. Econ.*, **64**, 808–819.
- Morse-Jones, S., Luisetti, T., Turner, R.K. & Fisher, B. (2011) Ecosystem valuation: some principles and a partial application. *Environmetrics*, **22**, 675–685.
- Turnhout, E., Waterton, C., Neves, K. & Buizer, M. (2013) Rethinking biodiversity: from goods and services to “living with”. *Conserv. Lett.*, **6**, 154–161.
- Wegner, G. & Pascual, U. (2011) Cost-benefit analysis in the context of ecosystem services for human well-being: a multidisciplinary critique. *Global Environ. Change*, **21**, 492–504.
- Wilson, M.A. & Howarth, R.B. (2002) Discourse-based valuation of ecosystem services: establishing fair outcomes through group deliberation. *Ecol. Econ.*, **41**, 431–443.