

# Technocratic and Economic Ideals in the Ecosystem Services Discourse

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In response to Abson & Hanspach (2013), we take the opportunity to clarify our key messages (Turnhout *et al.* 2013). First of all, it is important to recognize that our critique of the ecosystem services (ES) discourse does not focus on *definitions* of the concept but on the articulation of a new *discourse* about biodiversity. This discourse inherits from other discourses of biodiversity a familiar technocratic model, which promotes the production of standardized knowledge about the relevant components of biodiversity and its use in decision making, and complements this with an economic dimension. Thus, our critique of the ES discourse lies not only in its promotion of commodification and monetization, but also in its technocratic ideals about knowledge, standardization, and science–society relations, and particularly in the way it combines the two. Specifically, we argue that the ES discourse offers new conceptions of biodiversity and the

categories it consists of—ecosystem services—with associated ideas about relevant knowledge and methodologies, and preferred strategies for conservation. In doing so, the ES discourse creates new alliances and affinities with implications for conservation practice. In our article, we have used the published literature to sketch these possible effects as they are starting to materialize as well as outline an alternative.

Discourses, particularly new and emerging ones like the ES discourse, translate in different ways in practice. In contrast to what Abson and Hanspach suggest, we recognize that ES approaches are implemented in a variety of ways that do not necessarily involve monetization or commodification. However, when compared to other discourses of biodiversity, it has to be recognized that economic value does take centre stage. Although ES approaches do not dictate monetization or

commodification, these attributes—or the potential to realize them by expressing value in ways amenable to exchange—are exactly how the ES concept has been marketed. We only need to look at the discourse in TEEB, IPBES, or PES projects, to find ample illustrations of this point. Nowhere in our article do we claim that the Ecosystem Services discourse *constitutes* the commodification of nature, but by alluding to these qualities and potentialities it most certainly *contributes* to it.

Our fundamental critique lies in the way in which the ES discourse makes different natures commensurable by expressing them in standardized measures. These measures figure as the bearers of value and have the potential to become objects of exchange. As Abson and Hanspach rightly point out, there can be more than one measure. However, this alone does not constitute value pluralism. We have seen little evidence of these approaches being able to effectively deal with incommensurabilities between different value systems and associated knowledges and beliefs. Quite the opposite, we would argue. In practice, those values that can be quantified or monetized often take precedence over other kinds of values that do not fit with dominant frameworks and do not so easily lend themselves to such techniques. In these cases, different kinds of knowledge systems are either paid lip service to or are co-opted and modified to fit with dominant technocratic and instrumental frameworks—often under the euphemism of “integration.”

As with all assessments that use proxies and indicators to express value, the inevitable risk is that the proxies and indicators come to stand for and substitute the thing that is actually valued. In that way, indicators and cate-

gories have the capacity to remake reality in their own image because they not only change the way we understand biodiversity but also how we treat it in conservation practice; a phenomenon that is widely recognized in the social science literature as convergence, performativity, or virtualization. In the case of the ES discourse and the powerful alliances it creates with discourses of economics, these substitution practices will only become more prominent. ES approaches such as wetland and offset banking or derivative trading usefully illustrate this argument. While these are not fully representative of the wide variety of ES approaches, they do serve as an example of a more “complete”—this adjective is not ours but it is one that features in the ES field—implementation of the ES discourse.

Finally, we are glad to agree with Abson and Hanspach that the conservation of biodiversity in practice requires multiple value—and knowledge systems, some of which are inevitably incommensurable. ES approaches can make a valuable contribution, but only when they respect and foster these incommensurabilities and resist the urges for standardization, integration, commensuration, and exchange that are embedded in the ES discourse.

## References

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