

The Logic of the 'Green Economy' or the Emergence of 'Fictitious Conservation'



Bram Büscher, Institute of Social Studies
TNI/RWE public talk – 3 December 2012

The big question behind the 'green economy' ...

Can you change the destructive impact of a system with the same logic that created it?

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05 December 2012



The logic of contemporary conservation

Major trends in conservation policy and practice:

1. Privatizing park management
2. Payments for environmental services (TEEB, etc)
3. Carbon credits (CDM) & REDD
4. Conservation marketing
5. New financial + ICT mechanisms:
 1. Conservation derivatives, Species banking (see www.speciesbanking.com), Sustainability enhancement investments, Wetland credits
 2. Web 2.0 / social media tools
6. Tourism
 - ➔ Many of these obviously in relation to protected areas and community-based conservation initiatives

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This Week in Biodiversity: Offset Action Down Under



How Should Congress Amend the Farm Bill?



Cap-and-Trade Beats Slash-and-Shirk Any Day



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Latest News

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New to the Market?

2011 Update: State of Biodiversity Markets

Video Tour of SpeciesBanking.com

State of Biodiversity Markets report

What is SpeciesBanking.com?

US Conservation Banking

Backgrounder

US Wetland Banking Backgrounder

Australian Market-Based Instruments

Backgrounder

View All Key Resources

Program Snapshot

Programs	40
Programs in development	20
Global payments per annum	US\$1.8-2.9 billion
Area protected or restored	>86,000 ha
Most recent program	12/2010

US Market Snapshot

US wetland & stream banks	717
US species banks	102
Area protected or restored - annual	26,622 acres
Area protected or restored - cumulative	481,629 acres
Credit Price Range (US\$)	\$1.5K - \$650K

Offset and Compensation Programs



BIODIVERSITY PES

Link to our dataset of 51 government mediated biodiversity PES schemes.

US Species Banks



US WETLAND & STREAM BANKS

Link to our dataset of 832 US wetland and stream banks.

Mitigation Mail

Don't miss a beat. Subscribe to Mitigation Mail, the Ecosystem Marketplace's eNewsletter on mitigation/conservation banking.

- [Mitigation Mail Archives](#)

What is SpeciesBanking.com?

Speciesbanking.com is a global information clearinghouse for a segment of biodiversity markets focusing on biodiversity offsetting, compensation and banking. Until now, there has been no centralized information resource to serve researchers, policy makers, buyers, sellers, and other market participants. This site aims to provide a succinct answer to the question "What is happening in biodiversity offset and compensation programs around the world?" SpeciesBanking.com provides information at two levels: at the Program level and at the level of individual biodiversity banks.



'Neoliberal conservation'



- 'Neoliberal conservation' has moved beyond opening up the natural realm to the logic of capital, and thus beyond the traditional Marxist political ecology emphasis that nature must be seen as a set of "radically different environments that have been created under several centuries of capitalism" (Harvey, 1998: 332);
- It is the idea that nature can *only* be 'saved' through its submission to capital and its subsequent revaluation in capitalist terms



NC boosted after the Financial Crisis

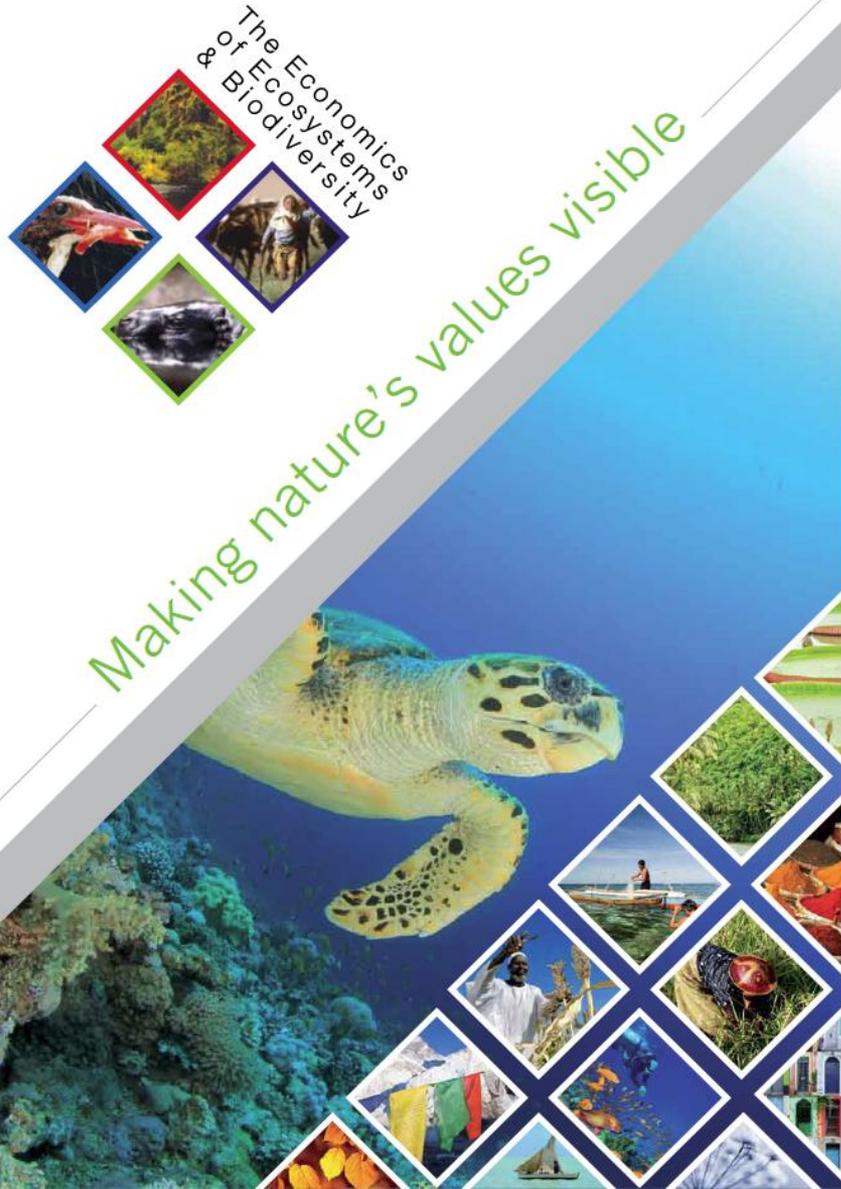
- Global green new deal or the ‘green economy’
- Tackles three crises for the price of one
- How? By going from money growing on trees...
- To trees growing on money



The need to 'value' nature...?

The Economics
of Ecosystems
& Biodiversity

Making nature's values visible



“The invisibility of biodiversity values has often encouraged inefficient use or even destruction of the natural capital that is the foundation of our economies.”

Pavan Sukhdev



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Need to 'value' nature...?



Economische instrumenten
voor biodiversiteit

Een uitwerking van TEEB-aanbevelingen ten
behoefte van de Taskforce Biodiversiteit en
Natuurlijke Hulpbronnen

Bouwstenenrapport
Delft, juli 2011

Opgesteld door:
M.D. (Marc) Davidson
G.C. (Geert) Bergsma
M.J. (Martijn) Blom



Some core questions in theorizing the current 'green economy'

- *How* does value-creation work in the 21st century global capitalist economy? *What* is (most) valuable in today's capitalist economy?
- What will happen when we try to make conservation 'valuable' according to the contemporary capitalist idea of value?
- And to what kind of 'nature' and 'conservation' does this lead?

Value in contemporary Capitalism



- Capital is ‘money in process’, ‘value in process’ (Marx)
- Central imperative: “to reduce the time and cost of circulation so that capital can be returned more quickly to the sphere of production and accumulation can proceed more rapidly” (Smith): importance of *circulation*
- Enhanced tremendously by ICT technologies
- Depends – vitally – on credit and fictitious capital: “money thrown into circulation as capital without any material basis in commodities or productive activity” (Harvey)

Value in contemporary Capitalism (2)

- Credit can function to stabilize circulation, but at the same time reinforces and enlarges contradictions, especially *overproduction* and *speculation*
- In the process, ‘ephemeral values’ emerge, based not on material commodities but on immaterial commodities: expertise, financial constructs, meaning-giving, brands, etc.
- Two major consequences
 - *the valorization of production is increasingly alienated from the act of production*
 - *Increasing reliance on continuous intensification of capital circulation lest fictitious capital loses its ‘value’*





SUBPRIME MORTGAGES

© MATSON
ST. LOUIS POST-DEMOCRAT
cagf.com/2008/03/02

" I THOUGHT WE WERE JUST BUYING A HOUSE! "



(SIGH)
I WISH
YOUR CRITICS
UNDERSTOOD YOU
THE WAY I DO,
BOY.

WALL ST.

DERIVATIVES

... WE NOW TURN TO AN EXPERT ON THIS SUBJECT, WHO DOESN'T ACTUALLY KNOW ANY MORE THAN WE DO. BUT HE LOOKS SINCERE, SOUNDS CONVINCING AND HAS 'DR.' IN FRONT OF HIS NAME.



*Nespresso. What else?**



NESPRESSO.

Le café corps et âme.

So...



When nature becomes 'Natural Capital'?

- First: a need to assign quantitatively comparable values to qualitatively incommensurable conditions and relationships
- Quantification problematic and inherently anti-ecological:
 - 1) “unlike money, ‘nature cannot be disaggregated into discrete and homogenous value units’”;
 - 2) a reliance on money leads to “inadequate accounting for the irreversible character of many natural processes”;
 - 3) monetization involves an absolute “tension between money’s quantitative limitlessness and the limits to natural wealth of any given material qualities”;
 - 4) the price of a resource stock determined not only by absolute size, but by many other aspects of how markets work, meaning price may not rise as depletion occurs; and
 - 5) “higher resource prices may actually accelerate a resource’s depletion”



Nature becomes 'Natural Capital'

- Second: *Material natures* need to be refashioned / reconceptualized such that they enable the circulation of *ephemeral values*
- In order for natural capital markets to work, they must make those markets 'liquid'
- Problematic for markets of 'environmental services', as their liquidity is usually circumscribed in space and time
- Hence: necessity to go beyond simple 'payments for ecosystem services' systems, as these are not 'liquid' enough
- PES overtaken by many other initiatives to turn nature into circulating capital

The emergence of fictitious conservation

— CER — NSW — RGGI — EUA

- Fundamental contradiction in the link between material environment and monetized service
- Distinct natures need to be standardized and utterly abstracted in order to be exchangeable, leading to a profoundly ‘new face of nature’
- Creating systematic speculation, risks and the (ultimate) separation of nature from the material and social conditions that produced them
- But that is exactly the point!

\$23.86
\$21.69
\$19.52
\$17.35
\$15.18
\$13.01
\$10.84
\$8.68
\$6.51
\$4.34
\$2.17
\$0.00

Feb 28

Mar 11

Mar 23

Apr 4

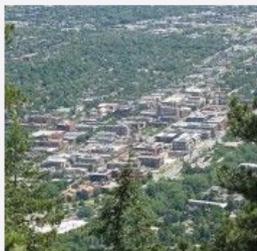
Apr 16

Apr 28

May 10

May 22

TOP STORY



Boulderites Vote To Keep Carbon Tax

Boulder, Colorado is home to roughly 100,000 people, and most of them believe we should dig into our own pockets to fight climate change. On Tuesday, they once again put their money where their mouths have long been when 82% of those participating in a referendum decided to keep the city's landmark carbon tax for another five years. [\[Go To Article \]](#)



CARBON HOMEPAGE

State of the Forest Carbon Markets 2012
[Carbon Markets Homepage](#)

WATER HOMEPAGE

State of Watershed Payments
[Water Markets Homepage](#)

BIODIVERSITY HOMEPAGE

State of Biodiversity Markets
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GETTING STARTED

Want to learn more about the basics of environmental markets? Read our market backgrounder for a crash course.
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PODCAST

Kerry Ten Kate and Patrick Magui

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 Billions of dollars flow into conservation every year, but that's a mere trickle compared to the tsunami of investment flowing into ... [Read More...](#)

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 Brazil's Paiter-Surui, who created the first-ever indigenous-led REDD project, have documented illegal logging, fishing, and cattle grazing on their territory. The ... [Read More...](#)

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 Ghanaian businessman John Addaquay believes REDD+ can jump-start sustainable agriculture across central Ghana, and scores of experts agree. Private investors, however, ... [Read More...](#)

This Week In Water: When Risk Becomes Reality
 Forest Trends is participating in The Peruvian Ministry of Environment's Peru Watershed Services Incubator's clinic this week to discuss hydrology, economics ... [Read More...](#)

TODAY'S NEWS

- UN Carbon Offset Daily Supply Rises Most in More Than a Year
- Biodiversity neglected in countdown to Doha
- Large emissions gap by 2020, Unep warns
- Doha climate talks live chat: what's at stake for poor countries?
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- FAO Releases Global Spatial Database on Water and Agriculture

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The emergence of fictitious conservation (2)

- The upshot is the full-fledged conversion of conserved nature into capital, so enabling its ultimate purpose: becoming a new vehicle for money in process, or value in process
- Conservation, becomes fictitious capital, leading to ‘fictitious conservation’: the severing of conservation action and material natures
- The limits of fictitious conservation: obviously intertwined with other forms of conservation

Concluding thoughts

- Current (capitalist!) green economy is part of the *intensification* of capitalism
- To believe that nature can be conserved by increasing the intensity, reach and depth of the logic of capital is arguably one of the biggest contradictions of our times
- The simultaneous production of believe systems (Jim Igoe) and understanding circulation in alternative economies (Sian Sullivan)

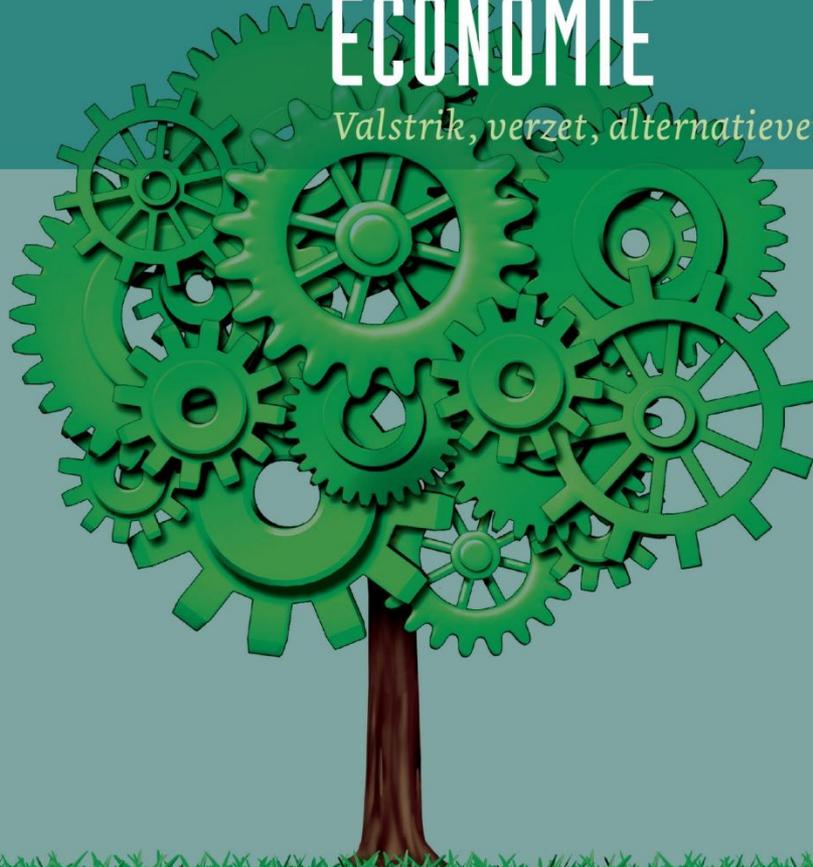
Where to go from here?

- Be critical of solutions based on the same logic that created the problem in the first place
- Important is to focus on ‘systemic’ features: we must confront the logic behind the ecological crisis
- Two-step strategy:
 - Short term: truly ‘green’ production processes, cut subsidies, redirect public spending, tax CO₂, financial transactions, defuse competitive pressure, slow down trade, etc
 - Medium to longer term: conceptualizing and building ‘alternative economic spaces’, based not on capital as ‘value in process’ and economic growth but on equality and democratic values rooted in people and nature

Anneleen Kenis
& Matthias Lievens

DE MYTHE VAN DE GROENE ECONOMIE

Valstrik, verzet, alternatieven



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05 December

Thanks!



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