

# Re-imagining the Commons as “The Green Economy”

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*The United Nations’ green economy programme radically re-imagines the commons as a space where ecosystems services will be quantified and managed by market based mechanisms. This paper will examine issues with this version of the green economy for environmental communicators. It will review the etymology of the concept, examine contested ideas on what a green economy would entail and situate these proposals in relation to different economic approaches to the environment. It will suggest strategies for communicating the contested nature of the proposals and exposing obfuscations. This paper will argue that in stark opposition to green economics with its focus on participation and democratic processes, the UN’s GEP will close deliberations on the commons by privatizing “ecosystem services” – thereby taking environmental decision-making out of a political sphere and into the marketplace.*

**Key words:** green economy, commons, ecological economics, natural capital, neoliberalism

## Re-imagining the Commons as “The Green Economy”

The United Nations Environment Programme’s (UNEP) (2011) flagship document titled “Towards a green economy: Pathways to sustainable development and poverty eradication” and accompanying UNEP reports at the Rio+20 in June 2012 launched the green economy project. The reports use strong environmental language as a means of presenting their version of green economy as a far-reaching programme of reform to address environmental problems on a global scale. While the rhetoric suggests that the UN is serious about addressing the biodiversity crisis, green economists and a wide variety of social movements are less convinced by the proposed policy mechanisms. Civil society responded at Rio+20 with a plethora of critical responses: condemning what they claimed amounted to the corporate capture of the United Nations (Joint Civil Society Statement, 2012); condemning the UN’s “Natural Capital Declaration” (Banktrack, 2012); condemning 20 years of Greenwash (Bruno, 2012); and indeed, condemning the entire green economy project (Nadal, 2012; Brand, 2012a; Patel & Crook, 2012). The Indigenous People’s Global Conference on Rio+20 and Mother Earth (2012) issued a strongly worded “Kari-Oca 2 Declaration” (2012) describing the UNEP’s green economy as “a continuation of colonialism” (p. 1) firmly rejecting market-based solutions, REDD, and intellectual property rights over genetic resources and traditional knowledge. In the wake of the polarized positions at Rio+20, the conference ended with both civil society and the United Nations unimpressed with the outcomes. *The New York Times* claimed Rio+20 “ended here as it began, under a shroud of withering criticism” (Romero & Broder, 2012); *The Guardian’s* headline read: “Rio+20 outcome a focal point for frustration among campaigners” (Ford, 2012); and London’s *Financial Times* announced “Rio+20 lacks ambition, says UN chief” (Clark, 2012). The conference failed to achieve binding targets, but more significantly the

conference launched the UNEP's green economy programme, which aims to redesign the processes through which the global commons will be managed. Clearly the green economy is a fiercely contested idea and the UNEP's version is strongly opposed by a wide variety social movements concerned with both ecological conservation and environmental justice.

In naming its programme the green economy, the UNEP implies a reframing of the entire economy along green lines. The language even suggests a connection to a particular school of economic thought concerned with the environment, that of green economics. However, the programme itself is largely concerned with attempting to protect the environment by establishing policies that will quantify and trade "ecosystem services". This will be done in ways that reflect specific policy prescriptions of different schools of economic thinking on the environment, namely environmental economics and ecological economics. Since green economics is a field with radically different policy prescriptions to what is proposed, the naming of the new project creates severe confusion with contested definitions of the "green economy". In this paper, the UNEP's green economy programme will be referred to as "UN's GEP" to avoid confusion with what green economists have been describing as "green economics" for over a decade.

The UN's GEP aims to protect nature by accounting for externalities of environmental damage. According to this logic, once nature's processes are given a financial value, prices of goods and services will reflect ecological costs and it will no longer make economic sense to produce ecologically harmful products. The assumption that nature's processes can be safely disaggregated and effectively managed using market-based mechanisms is embedded in this new project. This paper will focus on the market-making policy prescriptions of the UN's GEP due to problems and political tensions associated with this agenda. While there are other

elements of the UN's GEP, the financial valuation and marketisation policies are the most significant aspect of the programme, since other proposals will be subordinated to the economic logic of market-based modes of governance. The central dynamic in the UN's GEP is that it relies on the private sector for investment to fund the programme, and in exchange for capital investment; ownership and control over ecosystems services will be granted to private corporations. Expectations of profits will drive the new markets so other values will only exist as vague ideals and convenient green marketing and public relations messaging to conceal continued, and indeed amplified unsustainable development.

For environmental communicators, the UN's GEP creates a condition of discursive confusion caused by opposing definitions of "green economy". This paper will examine contested ideas on what a green economy would entail, the etymology of the concept, and situate these new proposals in relation to different economic approaches to the environment. It will compare ideas of what "green economy" means and how the UN's GEP blurs these distinctions. In an attempt to clarify competing discourses, this paper will examine specific philosophical, methodological, and political issues in regards to the UN's GEP. The paper will end by reflecting on risks and suggesting strategies for communicating the contested nature of the proposals and exposing obfuscations. While the UN's GEP is quickly becoming hegemonic, "there is as yet no agreed definition of what constitutes a green economy" (Stakeholders Forum, 2012, paragraph 1). Since the green economy is still being defined, environmental communicators have a key role in drawing attention to power dynamics, motivations, and economic interests of institutional actors.

In stark opposition to what green economists have traditionally conceived of as the green economy (with its emphasis on democratic decision-making on

environmental issues), the UN's GEP will close deliberations on the commons by using market-based mechanisms to address environmental problems. These new processes will exclude those without financial capacities from decision-making regarding the management of nature – now “ecosystem services”. While scientists and environmentalists involved with this project aim to find a means of enabling political and economic policies to acknowledge the value of the environment, submitting nature to the logic of the market is an extraordinarily dangerous enterprise. Instead, green economic theory argues that the economic system must submit to the logic of the ecological systems that provides the geophysical context for economic systems to exist in the first place.

### **Etymology of the idea of a “green economy”**

The term “green economy” was first coined in the “Blueprint for a green economy” (1989) report by Pearce, Markandya, and Barbier (Allen & Clouth, 2012, p. 7). In a paper titled “Green economy – The next oxymoron? No lessons learned from failures of implementing sustainable development”, Brand (2012b) claims that “the concept of a green economy is, like sustainable development, rather an oxymoron which intends to bundle different, partly contradictory, interests and strategies and gives them a certain legitimacy and coherence” (p. 2). The project is an amalgamation of conflicting agendas. On one hand, it is a desperate attempt by scientists and environmentalists to convince industrialists and politicians to acknowledge environmental concerns. On the other, it is the recognition by business interests of opportunities for profit in the creation of new green markets. The first section of the UNEP's “Toward a green economy” report is titled “From crisis to opportunity”. Subsequently the word “opportunity” is used 86 times throughout the document. In the context of the UN's GEP, the notion of new business

“opportunities” refers to new profits derived, to a substantial degree, from a new model of private ownership of the commons.

The UN’s GEP project is the result of the development of the two foundational concepts: “natural capital” and “ecosystem services”. While “natural capital” emerged from environmental theory and “ecosystem services” from ecology, the way that each concept has been developed enables these ideas to function as significant “opportunities” for profitable activities by the financial and corporate sectors. These two ideas are examined briefly below.

### ***Natural capital***

The concept of natural capital was first used by Schumacher in his book *Small Is Beautiful* (1973, p. 2). Sullivan (2013b) describes the current meaning of the concept of natural capital as having its origins in the formation of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) at the first Rio United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) Earth Summit in 1992. The WBCSD was led by Maurice Strong who, in popular 1994 speech stated; “addressing the challenge of achieving global sustainability, we must apply the basic principles of business. This means running ‘Earth Incorporated’ with a depreciation, amortization and maintenance account” (Strong, paragraph 42). The concept of natural capital gained popularity in business circles as a way of thinking about environmental governance and was encouraged by environmentalists such as Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, Hunter Lovins and Jonathan Porritt. Now, four decades since the concept was first coined, the idea has metamorphosed. The notion of nature as natural capital, and as equivalent to capital in the bank, is being adopted by national governments. In 2011, UK Environment Minister Caroline Spelman launched the report “The natural choice: Securing the value of nature” with the

statement, "...if we withdraw something from Mother Nature's Bank, we've got to put something back to ensure that the environment has a healthy balance and a secure future" (2011, paragraph 8). By 2012, the UK established a Natural Capital Committee and economists began "preparing to include a value for 'natural capital' in Britain's GDP calculations by 2020, a move that promises to be the greatest change in national accounting practices since their creation 70 years ago" (Whipple 2012 online). Meanwhile, at an international level, the Bank of Natural Capital website was launched in 2011 by The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) project, a programme supported by the United Nations (UN) and European Union (EU). Within the Bank of Natural Capital, Sullivan explains that 'nature's stocks and flows are depicted such that they accord with the format of a standard online current bank account" (2013b, paragraph 13). Herein nature's processes are reduced to numbers that can be traded like other financial instruments.

This conceptualisation of the natural world as natural capital has deep reaching implications. Sullivan (2013b) describes natural capital as involving four types of shifts: a discursive shift, a material shift, a calculative and accounting shift and an institutional shift. Thus the concept of natural capital works at multiple levels simultaneously. This kind of comprehensive treatment would be commendable if the management of economic affairs was to be changed in keeping with the needs and logic of natural processes. Instead, the management of environmental issues will be conducted using economic logic and financial instruments.

### ***Ecosystem services***

While the concept of an ecosystem was first used in 1935 by Arthur Tansley, the theory of ecosystem services was formalised much later with the publication of the United Nations 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA). Today,

applications of the concept “include its use as a communication tool, for policy guidance and priority setting, and for designing economic instruments for conservation” (Luck et al., 2012, p.1020). There are four types of ecosystem services: provisioning services (producing food, fuel, and fibre), regulation services (the maintenance of the climate, regulation of floods and diseases, biological control of pest populations, pollination of crops, and filtration and purification of water), cultural services (benefits to science such as pharmaceutical products or spiritual, educational, and recreational benefits), and supporting services enabling all the above (nutrient cycling and the creation of soil, etc.) (DEFRA, 2007; Beecher, 2012). The concept of ecosystem services is a powerful idea that attempts to cover all kinds of natural processes.

While the idea can be a useful learning tool, its reduction of ecology into services that are helpful to humans instrumentalises ecological relations. This becomes a problem especially when ecosystem services are used as a component of market processes as opposed to the context in which markets are enabled to exist. For example, today's largest ecosystem services market is a cluster of climate services markets established under the Kyoto Protocol and the EU Emissions Trading Scheme (EU ETS). Lohmann (2011) describes how the ecosystem service concept has been used; “As with all ecosystem services markets, the first step was to simplify and quantify the ecological functions in question, so that standardized increments of ‘environmental improvement’ could be traded for standardized bits of ‘environmental destruction’” (p. 2). Gross carbon emissions have not been reduced by the project, although the scheme has worked to enable polluting industries to profit from selling permits (Gilbertson & Reyes, 2009). The concept of ecosystem services functions to facilitate the creation of markets for a wide variety of ecological



processes – but the example of the EU ETS does not bode well for the use of market mechanisms as a means of protecting the rest of the natural world.

## **Varieties of economic approaches to the environment**

A familiarity with the variety of economic approaches to dealing with the environment is necessary to understand the nature of the contested definitions of the green economy. Environmental economics, ecological economics, eco-socialist economics, and green economics are all distinct discourses with different conceptualizations of the relationship between the environment and the economy. They all have very different policy prescriptions that relate especially to the degree to which they believe market mechanisms can help with the management of environmental problems. The UN's GEP follows the theory of environmental economists such as David Pearce, and ecological economists such as Robert Costanza. It attempts to preserve biodiversity by factoring ecological externalities into economics and creating processes for valuation and trading of two particular externalities: destruction and pollution. Environmental economics uses market mechanisms and valuation as a corollary of “normal” economics and only values things in monetary terms. Ecological economics conceptualises the economy as within the ecology system and attempts to account for the geophysical context. Ecological economics uses economic mechanisms as a means of decision-making for the environment with the assumption that economic theories provide an adequate means of managing nature. Other schools of green economic thought see this commitment to allowing the marketplace to determine environmental priorities as deeply problematic.

The green economy proposed by green economists is distinct from both environmental economics and ecological economics. Green economists such as

Molly Scott Cato, Mary Mellor, Hazel Henderson, Richard Douthwaite, James Robertson, and Andrew Simms take an integrated approach to environmental, social, and political issues. They treat the environment as the overarching system and one that is best understood as a commons. In *Green economics: An introduction to theory, policy and practice*, Cato (2009) explains that while "green economists accept many of the theoretical conclusions of the ecological economists, especially the importance of ending economic growth and developing a steady-state economy" (p. 206), they reject the neoclassical/environmental economics concept of an "externality". Green economics is committed to the primacy of intrinsic value and quality in organizing economic relations, where the primary objective is the meeting of need rather than generating profit. This holism and engagement with a broader range of perspectives than evident neo-classical economics contrasts sharply with the UN's GEP which promotes the expansion of markets-based mechanisms to manage the ecological commons.

### **Problems for environmental communicators**

These radically divergent definitions of "green economy" create a serious dilemma for environmental communicators. The task of communicating a set of policy initiatives proposed by the UNEP that is closely related to the neoliberal market liberalization agenda of the World Bank and other institutions under the banner of the "green economy" creates debilitating confusion within environmental discourse. For the general public, the terrain appears as confusing and inaccessible as the financial innovations that allowed the financial sector, with the blessing of neoliberal governments (who relaxed financial regulation), to develop financial mechanisms (largely outside of public scrutiny) resulting in rampant speculation and the financial crisis that began in 2007.

The confusion resulting from the obscuring rhetoric of UN's GEP serves the interests of those who want continued free-markets without the interference of environmental regulations or democratic processes to protect the ecological commons. The predicament for environmental communicators is profound. On one hand, there is a need to refer to the UN's GEP by its name – yet the name itself can be seen as appropriating the language of green economists, thereby establishing a discursive obfuscation of the actual policy agenda. Green economists aim to reclaim the concept of a green economy, but in doing so they face the challenge of appearing to support the UN's GEP. Meanwhile scientists and social scientists are busy helping develop the conceptual, scientific, and institutional infrastructure that will support the transition to the UN's GEP with research to build consensus on the legitimacy of this new agenda. This section will look at philosophical, methodological and political issues associated with the UN's GEP.

### ***Philosophical issues***

The UN's GEP re-imagines the global commons in a manner that betrays a misunderstanding of levels in ecological theory. While environmental and ecological economics hold that natural capital brings the environment onto the balance books of industry, there remains a fundamental error in this new conceptualization of the relationship between the environment and the economy. For environmental economists, “the environment's first role... is as a supplier of resources” (Hanley, Shogren & White, 2007, p. 3). Yet the environment is not only a supplier of resources, but it is the geophysical context that makes the idea of resources even possible. Ecological economists recognize this concept in theory, but in practice they reduce the environment to part of the economic system. This error is manifested throughout the new project. The global ecological commons are the source of life

and the basis for all activities – economic and non-economic. Economics is a human construct made possible by ecological processes. Ecological processes are simply too complex to be captured absolutely through financial valuation processes because they are the *context* of economics, not a *subsystem* of economics. The UN's GEP is premised on the epistemological error that assumes the economic system is of greater importance than the ecological system on which the economy depends. It is no small thing to bring nature into the space where everything must prove its financial worth (which is not possible for methodological and political reasons described below). Ecological systems are not fragmented, but are complex webs of interconnected and interdependent relations that cannot be effectively understood, much less managed in isolation. Reducing the value of nature to financial terms is an epistemological shift that facilitates exploitation in a material realm. Conceptions of the natural world as subject to the logic of the market are a prelude to the sale of those environments that are desired by industry for development.

### ***Methodological issues***

Philosophical errors spawn further methodological problems in the quantification and marketisation of nature's processes. Methodological problems include the limits of scientific capacities to value nature's various processes, the issue of substitutability, and issues of motivation. Humankind simply does not have the scientific capacity to measure all of the life-sustaining services provided by nature but what is obvious (to those with even basic ecological literacy) is that there will be no financial system to create wealth without the benefit of a stable climate, clean water, and healthy local ecosystems. When scientists do fix a price for nature, these values are often absurdly low. "The economics of ecosystems and biodiversity

(TEEB)” (2010) report uses the estimate of €153 billion (\$205 USD) as the total economic value of insect pollination worldwide (p. 8). It is a high number, but does this number actually reflect the value of pollinating insects? Considering that our existence is entirely dependent on ecosystem services – and pollinating insects that are a vital part of these ecosystems – it follows that insects are worth more than a small percentage of the value of total production. Since our survival depends on their survival, it is illogical and even irrational to value pollinating insects with such a diminutive number. In the book *Risk*, Adams (1996) claims that environmental economists reduce reason to calculation despite the fact that there are good reasons to doubt that the numbers involved will ever be a sensible means of making decisions (p. 94). The numbers lend an aura of authority, but betray serious logical errors.

The low valuation of ecosystem services is endemic as can be seen in other prominent examples. The Prince’s Foundation Accounting for Sustainability Project (2011) published an image that inverts the hierarchy of the relationship between the economy and ecology in a particularly unhelpful manner (see Figure 1). Here the global gross domestic product (GGDP) is illustrated as \$63,000bn (\$63 trillion) and the value provided by the Earth to the global economy is \$50,800bn (\$50 trillion) (Accounting for Sustainability, 2012). These numbers misrepresent reality. We will not have an economy without stable ecological system in which the economy is based; therefore, it is illogical to value ecosystem services as less than the total GGDP.

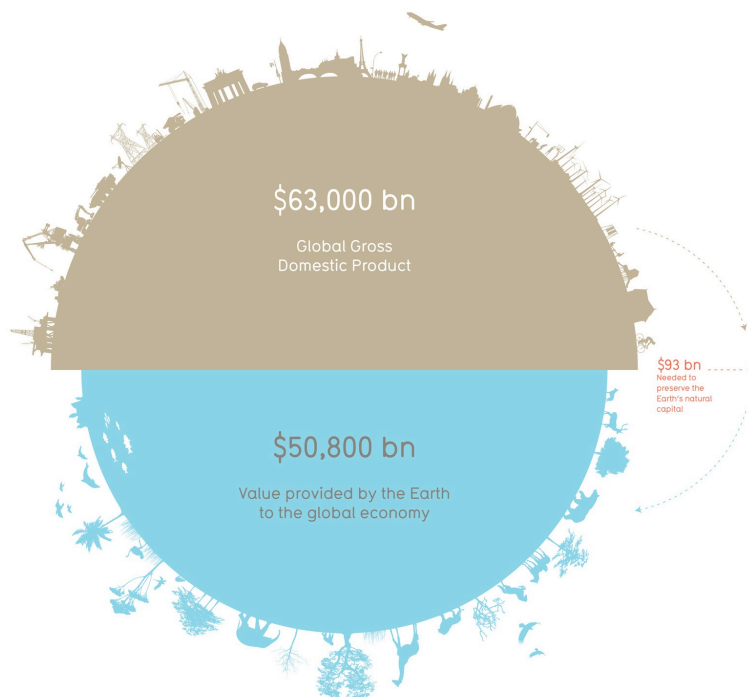


Figure 1. *Costing the Earth* by Information is Beautiful Studio (2011). London: The Prince's Accounting for Sustainability.

Similarly, when Friends of the Earth UK designed their campaign to protect bees, they used the figure of £1.8 billion (\$2.8 bn USD) as the financial value of bees in the UK. This amount referred specifically to how much it would cost the UK economy to replace the services bees provide with hand pollination (Bell & Golledge, 2012, p. 2). Again the numbers represent a reduction of complexity in complex ecosystems that depend on bees. The numbers fail to account for the fact that ecological systems have tipping points that trigger abrupt changes and even collapse; therefore, pollination for the food we eat is only one aspect of the value of bees. The low valuation exposes an over-reliance on abstract economic theory and the undervaluation of risk.

Even if the financial valuation processes were to give ecosystem services high monetary value, market-making processes remains inherently problematic due to the assumption of substitutability. In permitting ecosystem services to be traded, the

UN's GEP assumes the substitutability of one ecosystem service for another. The act of creating markets generates the conditions for development and ruin individual ecosystem services (i.e. species and spaces) as a pretext to conserve other spaces. With this formulation, the UN's GEP assumes that forests, species, stable climates, etc. are somehow replaceable by the wizardry of financial markets. This new conceptualization of the natural world creates sets of financial commodities that will be conserved in order in order to provide ecosystem services, or traded (i.e. sold) to enable development (and ensuing ecological degradation). This project will undoubtedly create opportunities for business at first, but one destroyed ecosystem cannot be saved by other preserved ecosystems elsewhere. Market processes give the "impression that humankind can control nature as 'assets' so as to have the possibility to 'bail out' earth systems when they break down" (Fioramonti, 2013, p. 118), but once ecological thresholds are past, money cannot fix extinct species, collapsed ecosystems, climate change, etc.. While proponents of the UN's GEP with environmental concerns expect the programme to conserve nature, instead it will simply serve priorities and interests of those with greater capacity to pay for the maintenance, or destruction, of various ecosystem services. Adams (1996) explains that the financial valuation processes reward ignorance on issues of risk since knowledge and value have a corollary relationship – the higher the level of knowledge of the risks of ecologically damaging activity, the higher the value assigned in cost-benefit analysis (p.108). Thus financial valuation methodology actually encourages greater ecologically illiteracy as it rewards the denial of risks. Ultimately, the numbers have far more to do with politics than the intrinsic value of a particular ecosystem service.

Beyond the absurdly low valuation and the problems of substitutability, another set of methodological problems emerges from communication in regards to identity

and psychological motivations. Motivational crowding out theory (Vatn, 2000, 2010) describes how motivations for environmental conservation are impacted by utilitarian logic and are at “risk of eroding noneconomic incentives for environmental stewardship” (Luck et al., 2012, p. 1024). Similarly, Crompton and Kasser’s (2009) and Crompton’s (2010) work on values and motivation in strategies for change is significant for its description of the ways in which human identity and values are encouraged or discouraged through social practices and communication. Crompton and Kasser (2009) describe how recent psychological research has demonstrated that practices that encourage extrinsic values negatively impact intrinsic values (p. 35). This research suggests that the financial valuation of nature will encourage extrinsic ways of understanding the natural world, resulting in a simultaneous erosion of intrinsic valuation. Cognitive scientists, including George Lakoff (2009), have demonstrated the limitation of quantitative, utilitarian, and exclusively rational modes of reasoning in motivation on politicized issues. This research on campaigning strategies suggests the utilitarian mindset established by quantification processes pushes out more intrinsic values and strong attachments to nature which have traditionally driven pro-environmental behaviour.

### ***Political issues***

The political problems with the UN’s GEP are its ruin of democratic participation in environmental decision-making, its denial of historical context, and its failure to recognize the expansive dynamics of capitalism. Social movements at Rio+20 objected to the exclusion of their voices from the UN’s GEP policy-making processes. With new ecosystem services markets, democratic control of development agendas will be even more difficult (if not impossible) as markets become the spaces where environmental decisions are made. Those making



decisions will be those with the financial capacities to participate (i.e. corporations and the financial sector). The creation of ecosystem services markets is tantamount to a privatization of the commons, wherein the conservation of nature moves from a political sphere to the market place. Nadal (2012) explains the error in this approach:

...the notion of “global commons” is synonymous of the *res nullius* property regime of Classical Roman law. *Res nullius* means that a thing has no owner and, therefore, if a thing is *res nullius*, anyone can appropriate it. But if a thing is part of the commons, then it is under the regime of *res communis*. And as such, it cannot be the object of private appropriation. (p. 27)

The ecological commons provide livelihood for all of humanity for free. The UN’s GEP threatens to transform our relationship to the natural world by asserting that clean air, water, and habitats for endangered species are “privileges for which people are expected to pay out of limited budgets” (Adams, 1996, p.100). Obviously, once ecosystem services are transformed into commodities that can be sold, this provides significant opportunities for those who are able to convince the rest of us that they own the global commons.

In a market driven system, the market-creating work of ecological and environmental economists creates opportunities to extract greater profit from the management of nature. This is especially true in situations where governance processes that are weaker than market forces. Profit-seeking corporations and financial institutions support the establishment of new financial markets to extract the remaining wealth from of the natural world because it is a financial opportunity. The act of creating markets establishes conditions for natural spaces and species to be sold. The basic provisions of the natural world will be quantified, financialised, and traded. Adams (1996) explains that the cost-benefit analysis is used, in most cases, “to justify decisions that have already been made” (p. 107). The work of environmental scientists supporting the UN’s GEP will give scientific authority to the project, but the important decisions will have already been made.

The project is a deepening commitment to neoliberal markets liberalization policies. On a macroeconomic level, “the subordination of social and environmental considerations to macroeconomic policy imperatives” (Nadal, 2012, p.15) is the fundamental basis of neoliberalism. Once “macroeconomic objectives are determined, every other policy target is chiseled in accordance” (*Ibid.*, p. 15). The lessons of the recent economic crisis in regards to the fallibility of the financial sector are entirely ignored. Despite claims by the UNEP, the UN’s GEP is not policy neutral (*Ibid.*, p. 23). The relationships and parallels between the on-going global economic and financial crisis and the emerging UN’s GEP have been described in depth by Lohmann (2011), Sullivan (2012), and Nadal (2012). According to these authors, the UN’s GEP is supported by the financial and corporate sectors because they recognize the programme as a continuation of the neoliberal model, an expansion of the scope of market, and also an exceptional opportunity to create entirely new financial instruments. Similarly to the financial deregulation that set up conditions for the dramatic plunder of public wealth during the recent economic crisis, the UN’s GEP establishes new markets that will lead to new avenues for financial speculation. The speculative bubble during the 2008-2009 period has been estimated to cost governments globally at least \$12 trillion, leaving several bankrupt national governments and severe economic austerity in its wake (Conway, 2009). This is the context in which the UN’s GEP is operating. The designers of the project have closely aligned themselves to the same financial institutions that played leading roles in the economic crisis.

Meanwhile, scientific institutions, environmental NGOs, and government agencies are working to build institutional infrastructure to give scientific authority to the UN’s GEP. These communities must extend the scope of their political analysis and recognize the obfuscations that are taking place. The historical critique of

capitalism presented by Foster (2002) and others describe the appropriation of the commons as an integral aspect of capitalism. Capitalism is always looking for new means of producing profit from activities that were otherwise not managed through commodity relationships. Klein's (2008) theory of disaster capitalism describes a situation wherein state and corporate powers have merged to the extent that the two sectors now use crisis conditions to develop policies that appropriate public wealth and increase the political and economic power of corporate and financial elites. The dynamics of the UN's GEP can only be effectively understood by examining the political context in which it is situated.

## **Strategies for Environmental Communicators**

Green economist Cato (2012) calls on environmental movements to resist the appropriation and redefinition of the term "green economy". The problem then becomes: how do environmental communicators even describe the UN's GEP project? The United Nations is attempting to define a financial valuation and market-making programme as the green economy. Clearly the UN has greater resources to establish cultural legitimacy than relatively marginalized green economists without such significant institutional support. The confusion is already leading to incoherent public discourses. An example of this misunderstanding can be seen in a recent blog by Cato (2012) referring to a report by the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation critiquing the green economy of the UNEP. The rhetorical devices environmental communicators have at their disposal have now become contaminated with contradictory meanings. The results are very confusing even for seasoned professionals. It is difficult to talk about a green economy when this expression is used to refer to two entirely different types of deliberations on the commons and projects with contradictory policy proposals. This paper has tactically refused to call the UN's GEP the green economy

as a means of differentiating two different discourses. Environmental communicators in sympathy with the green economists can clumsily deal with this problem by adding “false” or “so-called” in front of every instance of the term UN’s G.E.P – but this is a defensive tactic rather than a long-term strategy.

In response to the problems described in this paper, environmental communicators should attempt to clarify the competing discourses, support democratic processes, and expose ill-informed marketing and public relations that misrepresent proposed policies and the associated risks. Recommended short-term strategies are listed below:

- clarify the different policy agendas of the UN’s GEP and those of green economics
- expose the dangers of prioritizing economic profit over environmental conservation
- expose mechanisms which create opportunities for profit, but have ecological risks
- expose closures of deliberations and encourage democratic processes
- expose obfuscation tactics and challenge greenwashing
- expose the appropriation of the language of environmental movements
- engage with a critical political analysis of neoliberalism in regard to the environment
- support social movements in their work to build a viable alternatives
- support ecological literacy in formal and informal education

While these communication responses can be taken presently, we must also work towards longer-term strategies.

Building capacity for greater critical ecological literacy will enable more profound analysis of environmental problems and the politics that perpetuate weak approaches to sustainable development. Communicators can ask questions that enable analysis of some of the assumptions that reproduce the status quo. Solón (2012) asks these types of questions in “At the crossroads between green economy and rights of nature”, published for Rio+20. He asks: “Why do we judge the life of

human beings with parameters different from those that guide the life of the system as a whole if all of us, absolutely all of us, rely on the life of the Earth System?” (p.12) Dialogue exploring human/nature relations opens possibilities for deeper ecological learning. Critical thinking in regard to the environment enables a better understanding of the political systems that enable ecological destructive political systems and activities.

Sullivan (2013b) advises that we must create new “world-making myths...in contrast to the transcendental disembedding abstractions favoured by the Natural Capital Myth Machine” (paragraph 35). There are many other ways of conceiving of our relationship with the natural world and managing the ecological commons evident in the traditions of other cultures and described in the work of green economists and social movements. The BankTrack (2012) statement released at Rio+20 proposed:

instead of expanding the scope of markets to every domain of nature, creating a true green economy would start from the opposite; reversing the tide of commodification and financialisation, reducing the role of markets and the financial sector, acknowledging the limits of business versus other spheres of life, and recognizing the collective responsibility of all people for, and strengthening the democratic control over the worlds' ecological commons. (p.1)

The UN's GEP suits the priorities of neoliberal institutions – but there are alternatives. Environmental communicators have an important role in clarifying the competing discourses and describing effective measures for protecting the ecological commons.

## **Conclusion**

None of the above should be read to imply that scientists, ecological economists, or even environmental economists and those working at or collaboration with the UN are anything but sincere in their intentions use the UN's GEP to protect the environment. Unfortunately, their analysis is flawed. The UN's GEP is an

intensification of neoliberalism. It is a new phase in the long trajectory of the enclosures of the commons. New markets in ecosystem services will not create effective mechanisms to protect biodiversity or other ecological spaces, but they will serve the financial sector in creating new opportunities for profit. The project will also serve industrialists by closing deliberations on the commons, making unsustainable development easier than ever by excluding most everyone from the decision-making processes. The Indigenous People's Kari-Oca 2 Declaration (2012) describes the UN's GEP as a "continuation of colonialism... a perverse attempt by corporations, extractive industries and governments to cash in on Creation by privatizing, commodifying and selling off the Sacred and all forms of life and the sky" (p.1-2). The programme of re-envisioning the commons as sets of commodities ripe for exploitation is diametrically contrary to the environmental rhetoric used to sell the project.

The man who first coined the idea of natural capital had strong ideas in regards to the use of financial valuation approaches to protect nature. Forty years ago, in the same book where the term natural capital was first published, Schumacher (1973) wrote:

To press non-economic values into the framework of the economic Calculus... it is a procedure by which the higher is reduced to the level of the lower and the priceless is given a price. It can therefore never serve to clarify the situation and lead to an enlightened decision. All it can do is lead to self-deception or the deception of others; for to undertake to measure the immeasurable is absurd and constitutes but an elaborate method of moving from preconceived notions to foregone conclusions...The logical absurdity, however, is not the greatest fault of the undertaking: what is worse, and destructive of civilisation, is the pretence that everything has a price or, in other words, that money is the highest of all values. (p. 27)

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