
The Delhi Sands flower-loving fly holds the ignominious distinction of being the first fly listed on the US Federal Endangered Species list. In 2005, its protected status compelled San Bernardino County-based real estate developers to pay $100,000 to $150,000 per acre to purchase fly habitat offsets sold by Vulcan Materials, enabling developers to keep building on critical habitat in one of the fastest growing counties in the US. Such peculiar encounters are exactly the sort that Jessica Dempsey’s book, *Enterprising Nature*, deftly drops us into the midst of in order to make sense of the emergence – and foundering – of economic markets in biodiversity. Dempsey’s phrase “enterprising nature” has two interlinked referents: first, it glosses the prevalent representation of nonhuman ecological life as a producer of vast quantities of unrecognized economic value in order to justify its preservation; second, it refers to the work of making biodiversity “visible and economically legible” (p.12) such that it can become subject to calculation and investment within capitalist social relations.

Countless critiques of the economization of nature point out that attaching monetary value to non-human life – be it species like the Delhi Sands fly or sets of ecosystem services – does not necessarily promote and proliferate such life, but rather subjects it to a capitalist decision-calculus of rational maximization, where some life is identified as less valuable and thus expendable in the pursuit of continual growth. It also highlights the irony of property owners like Vulcan Materials, a sand and gravel company, “earning” the value of mitigation credits for the Delhi Sands fly. And while Dempsey certainly levels these critiques, *Enterprising Nature* is far from a book-length reiteration of the nearly 20-year scholarly conversation on the perils of “selling nature to save it” (see Büscher et al. 2012; McAfee 1999; Robertson 2012).

1* Enterprising Nature is part of the Antipode Book Series: https://antipodefoundation.org/antipode-book-series/
Instead, the book unpacks a paradox: despite the market-based logic that has appeared so conceptually dominant within biodiversity conservation, enterprising nature remains “substantively marginal” in practice (p.234).

Notwithstanding the cash exchanged for the Delhi Sands fly and the hundreds of billions to trillions of “natural capital” that economists calculate ecosystem services provide, the capital flows in markets linked to biodiversity are minuscule. The lion’s share of funding for biodiversity conservation projects still comes from bi- and multilateral donors and philanthropic capital. The “socioecological-economic utopia” pictured in the Economist illustration on the book’s cover – in which a businessman dispenses fat bags of cash to anthropomorphized trees and wildlife – remains commercially unrealized. Instead, it remains perpetually “promissory”, waiting to materialize (if only, according to its proponents, the right combination of tools, metrics, regulations, and investor profiles could be convened). This persistent absence of the “big money” in biodiversity is also the subject of Dempsey and Suarez’s (2016) recent study of for-profit biodiversity conservation investments, which finds that the existing market is small and marginal, underperforming in comparison to both the celebratory expectations of promoters and fears of skeptics (cf. Büscher et al. 2014). Other recent work suggests biodiversity markets are far from the only economizations of nature which sputter along in fragmented, partially realized, perpetually promissory states (Fletcher and Breitling 2012; Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian 2015).

Dempsey insists that enterprising nature is “not all about the -tions” – those ubiquitous nominalizations that critical scholars instinctively attach to neoliberal projects: privatization, commodification, accumulation, financialization, and so forth. She complicates broadly Marxian explanations of the commodification of nature’s “services” and problematizes the habit of presuming that economizations of nature actually function as accumulation strategies. Although enterprising nature is a fragmented project suffused with multiple and contradictory motivations, Dempsey’s careful account of its genealogy and contemporary operations suggests that by and
large the work of rendering biodiversity into an economic object should not be explained simply as an attempt to create new sources of profit for capitalist firms and investors. Instead, it is an effort to create a depoliticized “ecological-economic tribunal for non-human life” that establishes and evaluates quantitative differences in order to govern choices about nature’s preservation and/or exploitation (p.10). The work of this biopolitical apparatus is not primarily to produce “new commodifications” – in fact, there are relatively few extant examples of success in this regard. Rather, it performs a classic “God trick” to make diverse natures tractable for governance of many sorts, from strict command-and-control mechanisms to market-oriented ones. Dempsey presents compelling interview data suggesting that the move to economize biodiversity into the form of “ecosystem services” was a political-scientific strategy to create and enroll interests in the global South that avoided the politically toxic language of biodiversity conservation and provided a lingua franca that could appeal to both ministers of finance and environmental interests.

Chapters 3 through 5 cleverly unpack the design of several influential biodiversity metrics, tools, and models, demonstrating the perverse logic of rendering differential value from genetic difference and savability. These devices designate some species and zones as expendable to save others, attempting to construct a global grid of “go” and “no-go” zones for exploitation of non-human natures. Dempsey argues that these devices are not best understood as new ex ante levers for accumulation, but rather as ex post strategies to manage the excesses of capitalism and ruination – efforts to reproduce the conditions of production and protect conditions of profitability in the status quo.

Dempsey guides us into the middle of things – from ecological metrics, to market-evangelizing PowerPoint presentations, to verbal diplomatic crossfire – to demonstrate the complex and contested terrain of rendering biodiversity economic. Enterprising Nature is a deftly executed multi-sited ethnography that should be required reading for scholars interrogating global circuits of power and knowledge (Roy 2012). The text weaves together
candid accounts from dozens of interviews with the chief designers and proponents of the “natural capital” approach, with dissection of ecological decision-support and pricing tools, and pithy ethnographic observations from the meeting rooms of industry conferences and multilateral negotiations. Dempsey’s wit, candor, and ethnographic presence make even some tedious intricacies – like the alphabet soup of biodiversity measurement tools – an engaging read.

*Emic Research and Neoliberal Nature*

*Enterprising Nature* exemplifies a growing wave of research on the economization of nature that engages deeply with the practices and inner workings of these fields, rather than analyzing surface discourses. Much of the earlier work on new markets in nature was concerned with crafting a critical foil to the public-facing claims of market promoters, stressing the deeply unequal political economic relations and circuits of knowledge and power that enabled the neoliberalization of nature in the first place and pointing to the dispossessions and other injustices that have, or could, result from market operations. This is critically important scholarship, and these concerns suffuse *Enterprising Nature*. Yet another, equally important concern in the new wave of “emic” research like Dempsey’s is to understand what market devices do *on their own terms*, and perhaps more importantly, what they do *not* manage to do – how and why they fail to realize their own ambitions (Bigger 2017; Fletcher 2013, Ouma et al. 2018). Ongoing failure, and the perpetual unrealized promissory nature of these market technologies, itself becomes an object of research and avenue for engagement.

Despite decades of attempts to enterprise nature by ecologists, economists, institutions and governments in the global North, the ecological-economic tribunal for non-human life is to this day *not* the dominant model used to identify priorities for biodiversity conservation or to fund them. Why not? Dempsey derives the answer by borrowing from social studies of economization, exploring both the work and simplifications of market devices (Muniesa et al.
2007), and the logistical challenges to stabilizing a coherent set of market practices (Berndt and Boeckler 2010).

The challenges are myriad. Both sophisticated and simplifying attempts at measurement have been unable to institute a standard definition and metric of biodiversity— as one participant astutely observes, biodiversity is “the world’s greatest anti-commodity where its value is in its diversity” (p.166). Chapter 6 enumerates the difficulties of enrolling different “species” of market participants around a shared understanding of what is being traded, how interchangeable different units of nature should be, and who has the right to decide. Underlying all of this is participants’ recognition that, without credible regulation from state authorities who assign value to nature, enterprising nature will remain a peripheral project, fragilely sutured together by “patient” capital and corporations that fear the reputational risk of bad publicity. As Dempsey wryly summarizes the sentiment: “the road to planetary ruin is paved with relatively powerless vice-presidents of sustainability” (p.171).

Yet even if the pragmatic challenges of economization could be resolved, two structural barriers block the road to fully enterprising nature. First, the opposition from social movements and Southern countries is staunch. Chapter 7 takes us on a fascinating ride through fraught negotiations between parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), illustrating how fierce resistance to commodification articulated by Third World women negotiators derailed attempts to incorporate language on “innovative financial mechanisms” within the CBD. Second, if all the world’s “natural capital” were indeed accounted for and corporations forced to pay for all of the “cheap nature” (Moore 2015) they exploit, exactly zero global corporations would be profitable (p.116). It is ultimately this reality that explains why the ecological-economic facts produced by calculative devices do not translate into reformatted political economic relations.

Despite this – and in part because of this – Dempsey sees more radical political possibilities in the calculative devices developed by ecosystem service science. Though she acknowledges their political risks and epistemological problems, she envisions them as potential
tools for scientists and experts to engage in “technoscientific solidarity” with social movements. Such solidarity – sketched out in Chapters 4 and 8 – could identify the winners and losers of global ecological change and call uneven power relations to account. She suggests that global circuits of biodiversity power and knowledge could become “stranger” (p.241), envisioning radical ecological alliances between the likes of Gretchen Daily, Donna Haraway, and Via Campesina. Despite the danger and allure of scientific God tricks to build tools for enterprising nature, Dempsey is careful to stress that the ecologists she studies are not corporate puppets, and indeed they often share a Haraway-ian view of nature as a “coding Trickster” – a dynamic agent rather than a static code to be read. They may thus be more receptive to calls for pluriversal science than we assume. These observations resonate with other work chronicling strategic technoscientific alliances between scientists, movements, and practitioners to substantiate climate justice demands of the self-identified “Vulnerable 20” countries in international fora (Johnson and Rampini 2017; Parker et al. 2015).

Nonetheless, we have few examples of what such technoscientific solidarity with movements could look like in practice. It is admittedly tough to envision how tools premised on the “ordering force of scarcity” (p.84) could be reworked to reject scarcity and instead prioritize abundance (though see Collard et al.’s [2015] “manifesto for abundant futures”). But rather than ask what is already a very capacious book to do more, I choose to read Dempsey’s conclusion as a provocation – in a similar vein to Ferguson (2015) – for scholars and activists to “increase the experiments” wherever possible (Foucault 2013: 165). Enterprising Nature is an indispensable field guide for multiplying such radical experiments.

References

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