

# **Rethinking conservation through the lens of food sovereignty: implications for policy and practice**

**An Alliances Workshop at the IUCN World Parks Congress**

**Organised by Michel Pimbert, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), 8<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

## **Markets for biodiversity and ecosystems: reframing nature for capitalist expansion?**

### **Part 1. Sian Sullivan**

#### *Claiming landscapes for markets in ecosystems services*

We want to offer some thoughts on the emergence of international financial mechanisms and market-based approaches to biodiversity conservation as new forms of capitalist enclosure. We will focus in on the promotion and expansion of new international markets for what is being termed ‘ecosystems services’ (soil fixation, carbon absorption, climate regulation, biodiversity, water supply, plus aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values). As stated in a recent IUCN and UNEP pamphlet on ‘Developing International Payments for Ecosystem Services’,

‘By offering economic incentives for maintaining ecosystems services, Payments for Ecosystems Services operates on the basis that *market forces* can offer an *efficient* and effective means of supporting *sustainable development* objectives’<sup>1</sup>.

This would be through constructing market mechanisms whereby financial investments flow from areas *requiring* ecosystems services – including the maintenance of a diverse biodiversity – to areas *providing* these services. The predicted pattern of these flows is from urban to rural areas, and from the political and economic ‘core’ of the global ‘north’ to the

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<sup>1</sup> UNEP/IUCN 2007 *Developing international payments for ecosystem services: towards a greener world economy*, online [http://www.unep.ch/etb/areas/pdf/IPES\\_IUCNbrochure.pdf](http://www.unep.ch/etb/areas/pdf/IPES_IUCNbrochure.pdf), accessed 23 September 2008, p. 2, emphasis added.

‘periphery’ of the global ‘south’. In return, the logic goes, the financial benefits received by what are being termed as local ‘environmental communities’<sup>2</sup> - those people living in the landscapes providing these newly priced ecosystem services - will mean that they will restructure their own relationships with land so that these conform more closely with the landscapes now so valued globally.

An image on the front page of this document, reproduced below, makes the hope of this approach clear. Depicting banknotes of various currencies embedded as leaves in verdant forest foliage, it seems to suggest that it may indeed be possible for money to grow on trees. Nature *is* actually money, and it is only the correct attribution of financial value that stands between the conservation of desirable biodiversity and its conversion into undesirable alternatives.



Source: UNEP/IUCN (2007) *Developing international payments for ecosystem services: towards a greener world economy*, online, p. 1.

It is a progressive and radical step for economics and finance to be attempting to apply *value* to ecosystems and to the health of the earth’s interconnected dynamics. At the same time, the form that this value is taking is shaping reality in ways that beg engagement and critique. In

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

particular, we want to draw out what we think are some far-reaching implications of these schemes for the food production systems, livelihoods and lifeworlds present in landscapes that are becoming thought of as ‘marginal’ in terms of food production, but as profitable in terms of ecosystem protection.

To make these links between the expansion of new markets for *ecosystems services* and *food sovereignty* clear, I want to make reference to a document published last year by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Called *Livestock’s Long Shadow*<sup>3</sup>, this is an overview of the impacts globally of livestock production. It makes some startling suggestions regarding the extensive livestock production practices that are engaged in by pastoralists in so-called marginal lands, i.e. dryland and other highly variable environments, worldwide.

Considering it as almost a truism that these practices cause environmental degradation in these landscapes (‘large areas have become degraded as a result of poor management and grazing pressure’<sup>4</sup>), it states further that livestock production in so-called ‘developing countries’ is something that people are trapped into because they are poor<sup>5</sup>, i.e. implying that given the choice they would engage in other forms of production. It then proceeds to create an equation between peoples’ local demand for food products on the one hand, and a global demand for the environmental services located in these same landscapes on the other. A key element of its recommendations is that landscapes characterised, and arguably created, by extensive grazing practices need to be ‘re-oriented towards adding environmental service provision [‘including [b]iodiversity-related services’], rather than *mere* production and subsistence’<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> FAO 2007 *Livestock’s long shadow*, Rome, online <http://www.fao.org/docrep/010/a0701e/a0701e00.htm>, accessed 26 September 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 281. Once again this raises the spectre of ‘desertification’ in these lands, conventionally attributed to poor land management practices by indigenous and variously mobile pastoralists. Such perspectives are the subject of vigorous debate, both because they tend to overlook the implications extrapolating simple linear trends through livestock pressure in environments with high inter-annual variability in primary productivity; and also because they tend to displace the herding practices and knowledges of those living there (for overviews see Behnke, R.H., Scoones, I. and Kerven, C. (eds.) 1993 *Range ecology at disequilibrium: new models of natural variability and pastoral adaptation in African savannas*, London, Overseas Development Institute, IIED, Commonwealth Secretariat; Oba, G., Stenseth, N.C. and Lusigi, W.J. 2000 New perspectives on sustainable grazing management in arid zones of sub-Saharan Africa, *BioScience*, 50: 35-51; Sullivan, S. and Rohde, R. 2002 On non-equilibrium in arid and semi-arid grazing systems, *Journal of Biogeography*, 29: 1595-1618).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 268.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 280, emphasis added.

What then happens to all the food producers currently and historically using, managing and sustaining these landscapes remains unclear. As the FAO report states, ‘... a shift from current “extractive” grazing practices to environmental service-oriented grazing raises questions of paramount importance: ... [including] *how to deal with the poor who currently derive their livelihoods from extensive livestock*’<sup>7</sup>. This seems rather crass. ‘The poor’ in this context might include peoples as diverse as Maasai of East Africa, Raika pastoralists of India’s Rajasthan, and highland herders in Peru: a global fabric of rich and different cultures sustained through mixed farming practices of which livestock constitute a major part<sup>8</sup>. Importantly, such peoples may not define themselves and their land-entwined lifeworlds as ‘poor’<sup>9</sup>. Nevertheless, it seems as if they are (again) to become ‘extras’ (or even ‘disposable’<sup>10</sup>?), in a new global restructuring of values that (once again) frames them as poor, marginal, and environmentally problematic.

***Ecosystems + equity + economics = sustainable development?***<sup>11</sup>

ě **quity** *n.* **1.** fairness; recourse to principles of justice to correct or supplement law; system of justice supplementing or prevailing over common and statute law. ... **3.** (in *pl.*) stocks and shares not bearing fixed interest. **4.** value of shares issued by a company; net value of mortgaged property after deduction of charges.<sup>12</sup>

There is a further thread to this restructuring that is of immense significance. This is that the proposed shift in landscapes - from those that produce food for local contexts to those that provide ecosystem services for global urban contexts – also is framed in terms of a business *opportunity* in classic market economic terms. Thus valuing ecosystems services as

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 281, emphasis added.

<sup>8</sup> On the productive and health value of mixed farming including livestock on land unsuited to arable crops, also see Fairlie, S. 2008 The vital statistics of meat, *The Ecologist* 38(8): 16-20.

<sup>9</sup> As highlighted in the statement that ‘*The poor are not us*’, used as the title for an edited volume on poverty and pastoralism by Anderson, D.M and Broch-Due, V. 1999, Oxford, James Currey.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Giroux, H. 2006 *Stormy weather: Katrina and the politics of disposability*, Boulder Colorado, Paradigm Publishers; \*also something here re: Agamben and citizenship cf. *State of Exception?*

<sup>11</sup> This subtitle is the current ‘E<sup>3</sup>’ slogan of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD), a network of some 200 corporations whose mission is ‘to provide business leadership as a catalyst for change toward sustainable development, and to support the business license to operate, innovate and grow in a world increasingly shaped by sustainable development issues’, *Sustain* 30, p. 2. also see [www.wbcsd.org](http://www.wbcsd.org).

<sup>12</sup> Fowler, H.W. and Fowler, F.G. 1982 (1964) *The concise Oxford dictionary of current English*, 7<sup>th</sup> edn. Edited by Sykes, J.B. Oxford, Oxford University Press. p. 326.

marketable assets will provide ‘new trading opportunities’ with buyers and sellers trading environmental services to generate profit that ‘does not imply the loss of natural assets’<sup>13</sup>. ‘Environmental credits rewarded to businesses for improvement activities might be “banked” against future environmental liabilities’ or sold to other land developers ‘to compensate for the adverse environmental impacts of their projects’<sup>14</sup>. And new ‘commercial conservation asset managers’ will be required to manage these exchanges and revenues<sup>15</sup>.

In other words, a growing scarcity of environmental resources is seen as increasing the demand for the ecosystem services provided by these resources; and both of these factors increase the market value of these services, in ways that out-compete other forms and practices of value for the landscapes providing them<sup>16</sup>. For this market value to be captured through pricing mechanisms, what is needed is the creation of new commodities or currencies that putatively symbolise the value of nature in her new guise as service-provider. As with any commodity or currency, these can then be traded on global markets, and brought into speculative practices that permit the addition of more financial value to these new commodities/currencies, thereby increasing desire for the profits they might generate. Something similar has happened with the growing global trade in carbon credits which was worth over US\$ 30 billion in 2006<sup>17</sup>. In this case a new currency (carbon credits) has been created from the prior creation of carbon as a tradeable commodity. This has enabled the emergence of a speculative trade that, in the frenetic spell of finance markets, is released from material realities such that it bears scant relationship with the ‘real world’ of emissions and forests, and arguably has done little to reduce carbon emissions globally<sup>18</sup>.

Further, and as the FAO report referred to above notes, the process of capturing this value ‘is easier where land is under private property’<sup>19</sup>. This works well for major companies with clear title to their appropriated land: as for the mining conglomerate Rio Tinto who, with IUCN, are ‘exploring opportunities to generate marketable ecosystems services on land owned or managed by the company’, including ‘potential biodiversity banks in Africa, as well

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<sup>13</sup> García-Orcóyen, C. 2008 Natural assets: conservation instruments or instruments for change? *Sustain* 30: 6-7, p. 6.

<sup>14</sup> Bishop, J. 2008 Building biodiversity business: notes from the cutting edge, *Sustain* 30: 10-11, p. 10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., FAO *Livestock's long shadow*, p. 280.

<sup>17</sup> IUCN & WBCSD 2008 \$? Markets and ecosystems, *Sustain* 30: 22-23, p. 23.

<sup>18</sup> See the excellent work done in this regard by [www.carbontradewatch.org](http://www.carbontradewatch.org), e.g. Smith, K. 2007 *The carbon neutral myth: offset indulgences for your climate change sins*, Amsterdam, Transnational Institute.

<sup>19</sup> *Livestock's long shadow*, p. 280.

as the opportunity to generate marketable carbon credits by restoring soils and natural vegetation or by preventing emissions from deforestation and degradation'<sup>20</sup>. The implications for the collective land and resource management practices linked with landscapes and diverse cultures worldwide are less clear (although history may provide some hints).

**Or *Ecosystems + equity + economics = enclosure?***

What we are seeing here is a major new wave of capture and enclosure of Nature by capital – via the construction of new ‘green’ commodities and currencies that can be traded, and therefore speculated on, internationally. It is fuelled by a crisis of accumulation in investment, whereby investors are seeking new commodities to sustain the returns on their investment portfolios<sup>21</sup>, and is facilitated by the release of capital from material realities in speculative finance markets (although perhaps current disturbances to global finance markets are indicative of a coming down to earth of these speculative practices – ‘the force of nature that the credit crisis has become’<sup>22</sup>).

We know that past ‘revolutions’ in capital investment – the European agricultural and industrial revolutions and their extension worldwide through the colonial enterprise – also had major implications: both in terms of structuring people as labour (and as service-providers) for capital; and in terms of the shattering of peoples’ relationships with landscapes that was required in the process.

It seems important to think through some of the possibly similar implications of this new *revolution* of green market expansion, particularly in the areas of food production and alternative choices for autonomy and self-sufficiency. This powerful and globalising growth of ‘market environmentalism’ has set in motion a significant renaming and claiming: of Nature as global service-provider; of those living on the land as caretakers of these services; and of scientists, economists and stock-brokers as creators and mediators of value for both. The circle in its entirety has profound cultural and psychological implications for everyone.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., Bishop, Building biodiversity business, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Something here on crisis of accumulation *aka* tutorial with Jim!

<sup>22</sup> O’Grady, S. 2008 Shares dive at record rates around the world, *The Independent* 7 October, p. 2.

By capturing the discourse on what Nature is, and by claiming a ‘unifying language’<sup>23</sup> based on economics for mediating relationships with the non-human world, it creates an abstract space of transactions that are lifted away from material, embodied and emplaced realities, but that also has far-reaching impacts on these realities.



Source: WBCSD display at the IUCN World Parks Congress, Barcelona, 5-12 October 2008, personal archive.

## Part 2. Jim Igoe

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., UNEP/IUCN 2007 *Developing international payments*, p. 2.