



Transformative agenda, or lost in the translation? A review of top-cited articles in the first four years of *Ecosystem Services*



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ABSTRACT

"Ecosystem services" (ES) has been described both as a trans-disciplinary bridging concept and as a boundary object for sustainability, indicating ES sutures discourses in ways that are bound to be in tension. Given the international attention that has been accorded to ES, it is subject to considerable pressure from growth-oriented economic thinking and practices. Our concern for a co-opted agenda prompted a qualitative discourse analysis of those articles published during the first four years of *Ecosystem Services* that have had the most influence on the development of the journal's discourse, which we operationalized as top-cited articles. We assessed the extent to which these have delivered on the journal's inaugural, transformative agenda and/or the extent to which this agenda has been lost in translation. Our analysis indicates that the normative goals of strong sustainable development are indeed being served by many (though not all) publications within the journal. There are, however, important research gaps, for example, in the welfare of future generations and ecological thresholds. There is also evidence of a positive trend toward in-context research and outcomes assessment that warrants further development.

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Contents

1.	Introduction.....	61
2.	Methods.....	61
2.1.	Discourse analysis.....	61
2.2.	The use of boundary objects in qualitative discourse analysis.....	62
2.3.	Revealing our pre-analytical bias.....	62
2.4.	Defining our sample articles for analysis.....	62
2.5.	Our specific research questions.....	62
3.	Results and discussion.....	63
3.1.	Assessing legal and institutional dimensions of development and how these affect the sustainable management of natural capital and ecosystem services.....	64
3.2.	Integrating the value of nature (equated with human well-being) within economic activity as a normal part of planning and decision-making.....	64
3.3.	Improving our understanding of the physical characteristics of ecosystem services and the best institutional arrangements for their protection and restoration.....	65
3.4.	Identifying the features of planning contexts that require economic valuation (including features such as non-marginal change, radical uncertainty, or tipping points); identifying the form that valuation can most usefully take in these contexts.....	65
3.5.	Taking the welfare of future generations seriously, for example through using economic tools such as zero and negative discount rates.....	66
3.6.	Transparent national accounting for decision-making.....	66
3.7.	Examining ES implications for the WTO, World Bank, and IMF.....	67
3.8.	Developing tools to make the principles of 'No Net Loss' and 'Net Positive Impact' normal business practice.....	67
3.9.	Examining the contribution of 'polluter pays,' 'beneficiary pays,' or 'full-cost-recovery' principles.....	67

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3.10. Involving stakeholders in ES management.....	68
4. Conclusions	68
References	69

1. Introduction

One current critique of the ecosystem services (ES) framework is that it has become inextricably caught up in neoliberal discourse, policy, and practice. Neoliberalism has many definitions (Bakker, 2010), including “a political ideology that aims to subject political, social, and ecological affairs to capitalist market dynamics” (Büscher et al., 2012), or, more precisely, as “a political and economic philosophy that seeks the de-regulation of markets and the privatisation of all possible goods and services” (Silvertown, 2015, p. 642). In general terms, neoliberalism can be recognised in policies that aim to improve market function by bringing in externalities, by upholding comprehensive property rights, by emphasising exchange (as opposed to use) values, by handing governance decisions to corporations and large firms, and by fostering growth-dependent economies (Coffey, 2016).

Versions of the counter-neoliberal critique raise concerns that ES, at its worst, is nothing more than greenwash for socio-ecologically damaging policy (Bakker, 2010). In this critique, ES is seen as part of a more general realignment of conservation organisations with neoliberal capitalism (MacDonald, 2010) involving an over-reliance on markets, including an accompanying bias toward incremental or marginal economic adjustments in the face of environmental problems (Norgaard, 2010). ES is understood to contribute to the ‘commodification of nature’ (Robertson, 2006; Monbiot, 2012; McAfee, 2015) and to rely too heavily on linear metaphors such as ‘stocks and flows’ (Norgaard, 2010) and market-oriented discourse such as ‘natural capital’ (Monbiot, 2012). ES is further critiqued for aiming to reduce complex and interconnected problems, for example, the use of monetisation as a technocratic tool for management decisions, the reliance on make-believe markets to value conservation, and an underlying tendency to assess ecosystems according to their exchange value (Silvertown, 2015; Robertson, 2006). As part of this perceived over-emphasis on marketable ES, there is often a regrettable priority given to easily commodified provisioning ES (Turnhout et al., 2013). There is additional concern that ES frameworks render the intrinsic value of biodiversity overly vulnerable to substitution (Fisher and Brown, 2014; Kronenburg, 2015; Boeraeve et al., 2015). This is in part because ecological discourses, which are better oriented toward representing non-human nature in itself and for itself, have been inadequately integrated into the ES research framework (Quintessence Consortium, 2016) and into accompanying policy and management instruments (Naeem et al., 2015).

Such critiques have underlined how some uses of an ES framework are at odds with, or at least in tension with, the authorising intention of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2003, 2005) to support the conservation and enhancement of biodiversity and ecosystems together with and for the purpose of human well-being. However, MEA defines ES as the ‘benefits people derive from ecosystems’, leaving a door open to a utilitarian interpretation. Multiple other ES frameworks have also been articulated, including those presented in Costanza et al. (1997), Daily (1997), TEEB (2010), and ESP (<http://http://es-partnership.org/>, accessed 16 August 2016). Because the aim of this article is to better understand the discursive choices made by other researchers, along with the implications of those choices, this article does not adhere to a particular approach

to ES.

Because we have overshot planetary carrying capacity from arguably as early as the 1980s (Wackernagel et al., 2002), exceeding our planetary boundaries in many ways (Rockström et al., 2009), and the early months of 2016 are rapidly confirming or exceeding the worst scenarios of climate scientists (<https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/sotc/global/201603>, accessed 26 April 2016), it has become imperative and urgent that we, as a species, reverse our ever-increasing rate of resource consumption and ecosystem degradation. To curb these trends, policy and management frameworks are required that drive beyond slight modifications to business as usual. It requires, in our view, a radical shift (i.e. affecting the fundamental nature) beyond incremental adjustments within a predominantly neoliberal framework toward strong sustainability (Dietz and Neumayer, 2007; Pelenc and Ballet, 2015) as recently set out in the 2030 agenda for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015).

A quantitative discourse analysis by Abson et al. (2014) highlighted that the growing field of ES will need to take a bolder transformative approach, incorporating on-the-ground outcomes assessment, if it is to deliver as a tool for strong sustainability. Strong sustainability is defined as an “explicitly normative concept that encompasses notions of system persistence, as well as the just allocation of resources for the fulfilment of long-term human and non-human welfare” (Abson et al., 2014, pp. 29–30). The need for transformative science is being increasingly recognised, for example in the reworked 2015 publication criteria of *International Journal of Biodiversity Science, Ecosystem Services and Management*, which was first launched in 2005. The new criteria require all future publications to be relevant for decision-making and management, with a preference for articles that discuss biodiversity and ecosystem services jointly and that promote conservation (Schröter et al., 2015). Our goal is to assess to what extent contributors to the journal *Ecosystem Services* (hereafter *ESJ*) have already embarked boldly on a transformative journey, and where there are gaps that elicit further attention.

2. Methods

2.1. Discourse analysis

Our methodological approach is a qualitative discourse analysis, which has been identified as particularly useful for understanding contested concepts and the politics of meaning (Feindt and Oels, 2005). Discourse analysis considers how language (e.g. metaphors, phrases), information (e.g. data or data categories), identities (e.g. stakeholders, beneficiaries), and/or social practices (e.g. research practices, policies, and practical actions) take on varying and consequential meanings within particular contexts (e.g. disciplinary, institutional, and management contexts). Our method is a synthesis of approaches put forth in multiple sources (e.g. Hajer, 1995; Cooper, 1996; Fischer and Hajer, 1999; Waddell, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; Coffey, 2016). This qualitative discourse analysis complements the quantitative approach of Abson et al. (2014).

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