



Methodological and Ideological Options

Payments for ecosystem services and the gift paradigm: Sharing the burden and joy of environmental care



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ABSTRACT

In response to the limited success of command-and-control interventions to ensure environmental stewardship, policy makers and practitioners have turned to financial payments to incentivize conservation. Many scholars and practitioners, including ecological economists, have cautioned that market-based approaches might modify human ways of relating to nature that are counterproductive to long-term conservation goals. Moving beyond critique, this article invites attention to the reconceptualization of environmental care labor and human–environment relations using the ideas of gift, reciprocity, and affect. Using the case of forest conservation by rural communities in Odisha, India, I discuss how the paradigm of the gift helps us to rethink transactions in ecosystem services, which might lead to more equitable and empowering ways of sharing of the burden and joy of environmental care. I argue that instead of framing conservation as a burdensome activity that entails sacrifice and costs alone, we need to pay attention to the joyful and life-affirming aspects of conservation care labor and its transformative potential.

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1. Introduction

In response to the limited success of command-and-control interventions to ensure environmental stewardship, policy makers and practitioners have turned to financial payments to incentivize conservation. As a result, payments for ecosystem services (PES) has emerged as one of the dominant strategies to secure environmental conservation. Many scholars and practitioners, including ecological economists, have critiqued neoliberal approaches to environmental governance (Arsel and Büscher, 2012; Bakker, 2010; Büscher et al., 2012; Corson et al., 2013; Roth and Dressler, 2012) and have cautioned, in particular, that commodifying human ways of relating to nature can be counterproductive in the long run (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010; Kosoy and Corbera, 2010; Spash, 2008). They have emphasized the need to learn from indigenous ontologies to rework our modes of being and our ways of relating to nature (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2010; Sullivan, 2009, 2010). This article builds on the critiques of the PES framework and makes a case for reconceptualizing conservation care labor as affective labor and for sharing environmental care responsibility using the ideas of gift, reciprocity, and affect.

In the current framing of conservation challenges and environmental policy-making, conservation is seen as a burden that entails costs due to foregone land-use opportunities, and financial incentives are seen as critical to offsetting these costs. This framing has helped draw attention to the disproportionate costs of conservation to local people (Brockington et al., 2006; West et al., 2006) and has aided the transition

to more inclusive models of conservation and to financial incentives. But this perspective also marginalizes the joyful and life-affirming aspects of environmental care labor and its transformative potential.

Insights from multiple disciplines are challenging our understanding about the kinds of beings humans are – and the possibilities of becoming that are open to us. Among these, new theoretical approaches in the social sciences – relational ontology, posthumanism, and vital materialism – are dispelling the nature-culture, subject-object, mind-body, matter-meaning dualities of Enlightenment-era thinking by focusing on *relations* and *emergences* from interactions instead of on the *essence* of entities. While, these perspectives may be new to Western social science, for many indigenous and non-Western cultures, a view of the world as entangled, emergent, and deeply interdependent has long been integral to their cosmologies. Furthermore, the vast anthropological literature about diverse economic practices rooted in the logics of gift, reciprocity, and interdependence provides conceptual resources for alternate economic imaginaries.

I explore how these conceptual resources help us rethink market-based approaches to conservation, using the case of community forestry practices in Odisha, India, where several thousand villages have collectively protected state-owned forests without formal tenure rights or financial incentives. By investing their labor and love into protecting degraded forests, local people in rural Odisha have not only enriched their landscapes but have arrived at new subjectivities and new ways of relating to the environment and to each other. This example helps illustrate how conservation care can be conceptualized as affective labor

and as a gift, and how the human impulse to give, and to be valued as givers, can foster conservation action. It also allows me to explore the conceptual challenge of thinking about alternate ways of valuing nature through other-than-market logic. The gift paradigm, I argue, opens up possibilities for bringing people together not as buyers and sellers of ES but as reciprocal partners who share both the burden and joy of environmental care.

The paper draws from my academic research over several years and also from my twenty-year engagement with community forestry in Odisha as a practitioner. During this time, I have witnessed transformations in community forestry initiatives, struggles and advocacy for forest rights, efforts by the state to initially ignore and later co-opt these initiatives, and various social movements against extractive industries. While the empirical story is rich (Human and Pattanaik, 2000; Kant et al., 1991; Singh, 2013), the paper focuses on the *conceptual* lessons that may help us rethink the logic of PES.

I begin with a brief overview of the growing literature that critiques the PES framework. I then describe community initiatives to protect forests in Odisha and show how notions of “gift” and “gift giving” are articulated and invoked locally to assert moral claims over forests and to foster relations of reciprocity and interdependence. Finally I review some philosophical and anthropological literature on gift giving to illuminate how the paradigm of the gift helps animate a different politics of environmental care and stewardship — one that is respectful of the collective labor of nature and its “environmental caregivers”.

2. The PES framework: An Ontological Critique

In the past two decades, payments for ecosystem services (PES) has emerged as one of the dominant strategies to secure environmental conservation. The logic of PES is now being applied on a large scale through the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (UNFCCC)-approved mechanism of REDD+, which seeks to check forest degradation and deforestation and enhance forest stocks through financial payments to developing countries. McAfee (2012) has evocatively termed PES the “latest miracle crop” to be exported by developing countries. Considering the widespread faith in market-based or fund-driven mechanisms to achieve conservation, it is important to evaluate the experience of PES programs and the implications of PES logic for long-term conservation goals.

It is not my purpose to provide a comprehensive review of PES and its critiques, but to briefly summarize the assumptions underpinning it, and their implications. These include a simplistic construction of PES as markets (Vatn, 2010); a conception of peasants and indigenous ecosystem service (ES) providers as “benefit-maximizing individuals” (McAfee, 2012); the “crowding out” effect of payments, which can dampen the intrinsic motivation for conservation or undermine existing pro-social behavior (Fisher, 2012; Kerr et al., 2012; Narloch et al., 2012); and an oversimplification of the complex social, political, and biophysical relationships between humans and their environments (Kosoy and Corbera, 2010; Norgaard, 2010; Van Hecken and Bastiaensen, 2010; Van Noordwijk et al., 2012). From institutional and governance perspectives, PES initiatives ignore the institutional settings in which human interactions take place and rely heavily on markets to overcome the problems of collective action (Muradian et al., 2010; Van Hecken and Bastiaensen, 2010; Vatn, 2010). PES also ushers in what Vatn (2010) terms a conflict between local and market-induced values — for example, between water being seen as “living and divine” and a “common good” versus water being seen as a commodity. The literature critiquing PES also illustrates how payments sometimes disrupt existing relations (Vatn, 2010), accentuate conflicts over access and control over resources (Corbera et al., 2007), and make local ecological resources more valuable and thus prone to grabbing by the rich (To et al., 2012), potentially leading to increased privatization and the disruption of existing communal arrangements. More fundamentally, market-based approaches to conservation are seen as new frontiers of capitalist

accumulation (Büscher and Fletcher, 2014) and as extending the *zeitgeist* of (neo)liberal individualism and competitive entrepreneurialism deeper into the socio-nature realm (Sullivan, 2013). Broadly put, the problems related to PES can be seen as arising from erroneous assumptions relating to 1) ecology and ecological functions; 2) human ontology and drivers of human action; 3) the nature of environmental problems and of human–nature relationality; and 4) the nature of markets and economic relations.

2.1. PES and Assumptions About the Nature of “Nature”

The framing of nature's benefits or ecosystem functions as services for humankind started in the 1970s to raise public awareness about the economic value of these functions (Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010), and ecosystem services came to refer to those benefits obtained from nature that are useful to humans (MEA, 2005). Over time, the stock-flow framework has become a “complexity blinder” that hinders our engaging in meaningful ways with the ecological, economic, and political complexities of environmental governance (Norgaard, 2010). Furthermore, much of the ecology that we know does not support the stock-flow model, and current ecological knowledge is insufficient to characterize environmental services or monitor their flow (Norgaard, 2010). In the process of framing an ecological function as a service and rendering it a commodity, single ecological functions such as water-flow or carbon-stored are privileged and dis-embedded from their complex ecosystems (Kosoy and Corbera, 2010). This simplification creates artificial boundaries that are difficult to enforce and can lead to absurd, sub-optimal environmental consequences; for example, favoring monoculture plantations of fast-growing trees to maximize carbon sequestration with negative effects on water availability in a watershed.

2.2. PES and the Assumptions About Human Nature

PES, like other market-based interventions, is based on the *homo economicus* model of humans that has been largely discredited in multiple disciplines (Gintis, 2000; Henrich et al., 2001). From experimental games, in diverse cultural settings, economists report that participants display fairness, cooperation, and “strong reciprocity”, that is, a tendency to sacrifice their own payoffs by rewarding or punishing others even in non-repetitive games (Falk and Fischbacher, 2006). Further, Fehr and Falk (2002) show that humans are motivated by a number of non-pecuniary motives that interact in interesting and often unpredictable ways with economic motives — and that neglecting these interactions can lead to a distorted view of the relative performance of different incentives. Also, evidence from social psychology and behavioral economics shows that monetary rewards for performing a task may actually *decrease* the effort that is put into the task, due to the “crowding out” of intrinsic motives (Fehr and Falk, 2002), or it can lead to an erosion of existing pro-social norms (Kerr et al., 2012). Moreover, payments that are perceived to be unfair or low can have worse outcomes than no payments at all (Ariely, 2009; Gneezy and Rustichini, 2000).

In the context of PES, several studies show that payments provided are often insufficient to compensate for income and opportunities forgone and that conservation behavior is driven by other non-monetary, personal, and collective motives (Kosoy et al., 2007; McAfee, 2012) including “sacred values and intergenerational concerns” (Kosoy et al., 2008). There are also many examples of local communities undertaking conservation with no ES payments. Extensive afforestation efforts undertaken by indigenous communes in Nochixtlan, Oaxaca, for example, have been driven by various material benefits and “above all, by their determination to maintain farm productivity in a verdant setting so that at least some of their children would remain on the land” (McAfee, 2012: 120). Clearly, people do not calculate the utility of ecosystem services only in economic terms, and their choices are driven by issues of identity, conceptions of the self, and by pro-social beliefs and preferences, all of which must be taken into account in the

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