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What do conservationists think about markets?

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ABSTRACT

The recent history of biodiversity conservation practice has been characterised by the increasing use of market-based instruments. In seeking to understand this development, an emerging body of critical social science research tends to characterise conservationists as being ideologically in favour of markets in conservation. An alternative possibility is that conservationists pursue market solutions as a pragmatic response to prevailing political and economic circumstances. In this paper we seek to establish empirically what a sample of conservation professionals actually think about markets in conservation. We used Q-methodology, a tool for analysing structure and form within respondents' subjective positions. The results show that our respondents are circumspect about the growing use of markets in conservation. We identify two dominant discourses that we label 'outcome focused enthusiasm and 'ideological scepticism'. Neither of these perspectives indicates strong, or uncritical, support for market approaches, and the views of our respondents appear to recognise the limitations of markets both in theory and practice. While there is some difference in views between the two dominant discourses that we document in this paper, there is considerable convergence towards a position that we label 'cautious pragmatism'. We conclude that those studying conservation need to be cautious about over-generalising the perspectives and values held by conservation professionals, as there appears to be far less consensus about the adoption of market-led approaches in this sector than has been suggested. Further research could investigate the drivers of pro-market behaviour at the organisational level given the evident personal scepticism of our respondents.

1. Introduction

The recent history of biodiversity conservation practice has been characterised by the increasing use of 'Market-Based Instruments' (MBIs) (Büscher et al., 2012; Pirard, 2012). These instruments are diverse, ranging from long-standing approaches such as nature-based tourism through to newer innovations such as markets in carbon emissions permits. The precise definition of MBIs and the extent to which they are truly market-based remains contentious, but they are united by the common characteristic that "a price is attributed to nature" (Pirard, 2012; p.62). MBIs are expected to deliver a range of benefits for conservation, including: new sources of funding (e.g. Balmford and Whitten, 2003; Ferraro, 2001; Wunder, 2007); an expectation of efficiency achieved through the market by processes of commodification, trade and competition (Brockington and Duffy, 2011; Pirard, 2012); and the promotion of an economic rationale for conservation that decision makers will take seriously (Pearce and Barbier, 2000; Costanza et al., 1997; Daily, 1997).

The practice of market-based conservation has resulted in new, and in some cases radically altered, relationships between conservation actors, the private sector, governments and local people. For example, whereas until the late 20th century mainstream conservation NGOs were often actively hostile to corporate interests (MacDonald, 2010), partnerships between these actors are now very common, and indeed central to much conservation practice (MacDonald, 2011). Some even argue that market-based conservation has become so firmly embedded in the contemporary practice of conservation that it can be seen as a form of orthodoxy (e.g. Igoe et al., 2010).

The growing significance of market-based conservation has not gone unnoticed by scholars, and the last few years have seen a rapidly emerging body of critical social science research that seeks to understand this development (reviewed by Büscher et al., 2012). From this perspective, the rising prominence of market-based conservation can be understood as part of a broader political economic process of neoliberalisation, in which an ever-growing range of activities are brought within the sphere of markets (Castree, 2008; Igoe and Brockington, 2007). Scholars have identified a range

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of potential problems with 'neoliberal conservation'. These include the impacts of market-based conservation on less powerful actors such as local people (Dressler and Roth, 2011), the questionable logic of using markets to solve problems that are arguably of their own making and that MBIs might legitimise further exploitation of nature (Kosoy and Corbera, 2010), and the possibility that MBIs in conservation are 'anti-political', technical fixes to what are essentially political problems (Büscher, 2010). These views were clearly dominant at the recent Nature Inc. conference in the Hague (2011)[1] and captured in a special issue of *Development and Change* under the same title (Arsel and Büscher, 2012). They were also a prominent aspect of recent debate and controversy over 'The Green Economy' at the Rio + 20 summit in June 2012, with developing country and NGO critics of this approach articulating similar reservations, and expressing the risk that markets and economic mechanisms might undermine alternative ways of achieving sustainable development (Doran et al., 2012).

Whilst the growth in market-based conservation is undeniable, relatively little research attention has been given to what conservationists themselves actually think about this approach. On one hand, it has been suggested that conservationists (and specifically conservation biologists) have strongly embraced the market logic and are in general (perhaps unthinkingly) 'pro-markets' (Büscher, 2008). This view appears to be shared by many critical social scientists studying conservation. For example, Roth and Dressler (2012) in the introduction to a recent special issue of this journal on Market-Oriented Conservation Governance describe "the unquestioning faith an ever-growing number of agencies, organizations and people have come to place in valuing nature for the sake of financing conservation and supporting livelihoods." (p365). Likewise Büscher et al. (2012) claim that "neoliberal solutions in conservation appear as a consensus, and dissent is rarely visible" (p. 15). They argue that this is "because neoliberal conservation functions as an ideology, becoming socially (and ecologically) embedded through generating the hegemonic governance structures and practices through which it is reproduced" (p. 15).

On the other hand, critical views of market-based conservation can also be found outside the community of scholars represented at the Nature Inc. event, including among those who might consider themselves conservationists. McCauley (2006) wrote of the danger that "selling out on nature" (p27) by turning it into tradable commodities would undermine ethical and moral arguments for conservation.[2] Ehrlich and Pringle consider that subjecting ecosystems to market conditions in capitalist economies would "ensure their eventual diminution and demise" (2008; p. 11583). Likewise the ecological economist Richard Norgaard (2010) argues that market metaphors around ecosystem services are useful heuristic tools to make the case for conservation, but that mobilising the metaphor into actual market instruments is deeply problematic. These examples suggest that a range of views on market-based conservation are likely to exist within the conservation community, which is itself highly heterogeneous in terms of values (Sandbrook et al., 2010).

So what is going on here? Is there a pro-market consensus among conservationists as suggested by the critical social science discourse, or, as Redford (2011) has suggested, is this view an example of the "generalisations made by social scientists about conservation that are incorrect or incomplete" (p. 326)? Our aim in this paper is to shed some empirical light on this question by analysing the views held by a range of 'mainstream' conservationists on the role of market based instruments in conservation. We carried out this study using Q-methodology, a tool for analysing structure and form within respondents' subjective positions (Dryzek and Berejikian, 1993; McKeown and Thomas, 1998). We begin the paper with a more detailed literature review of the role of markets in conservation, discussing elements of rationale and practice. We then explain Q-methodology, and its application to delegates at the Society for Conservation Biology annual congress in 2011. The results demonstrate that although a cautiously pragmatic 'pro-markets' perspective is clearly shared by our respondents, they also hold other more critical perspectives, suggesting that they have not unquestioningly and universally embraced the logic of markets.

2. Debates about markets in conservation

2.1. Markets in theory

Arguments are often made for market instruments using a logic based on the following sequence. Neoclassical economics starts by suggesting that environmental problems arise due to a divergence between the private and social costs and benefits of particular activities, characterised as externalities. This results in an inefficient allocation of resources, as exchange and prices reflect private costs and benefits, and therefore fail to reflect social values and scarcity (Coase, 1960; Pigou, 1920). Solutions to the externality problem include regulation, the use of taxation, or market-based instruments, but economists have shown that market instruments can be the least cost way of achieving desired environmental goals (Baumol and Oates, 1988; Pearce and Turner, 1990).

A special case of the externality problem is where resources are not controlled by private owners, and are managed as (non-rival and non-excludable) public goods, resulting in degradation and undersupply (Myers, 1996; Pearce and Barbier, 2000). In order to better reflect social values in decision making about public goods, economic valuation of the non-market values of environmental goods and services is advocated, to balance them against other policy objectives (Costanza et al., 1997; Daily, 1997; MEA, 2005; Myers, 1996; Pearce and Barbier, 2000; Turner et al., 2003), and ultimately, to secure their supply. The logic follows that, if not economically valued, environmental goods and services will be assigned a default value of zero (Pearce and Barbier, 2000; Sukhdev, 2008). While valuation need not be associated with trading and the use of markets (Costanza, 2006; Reid et al., 2006), MBIs are often advocated following the logic laid out above, as the means for capturing non-market values in order to ensure the supply of environmental goods and services.

Yet, critical scholars commonly do not subscribe to this logic, instead attributing environmental problems to the spread of market norms and mechanisms, particularly through the process of neoliberalisation (O'Neill, 2007; Sullivan, 2006). David Harvey characterises neoliberalism as a political project to restore, renew and expand conditions for capital accumulation, maintaining the power of economic elites (in Heynen et al., 2007; cf. O'Neill, 2007). In this framing, markets in conservation could be seen as a way of developing novel commodities as new vehicles for facilitating the process of capital accumulation (Robertson, 2006).

As well as these generalised concerns about their philosophical basis and underlying worldview, strong resistance to the use of MBIs in conservation stems from fundamental concerns about the processes of valuation and commodification (Büscher et al., 2012; Global Forest Coalition, 2006; Sullivan, 2006). While proponents of valuation distinguish valuation from commodification (e.g. Costanza, 2006; Reid et al., 2006), opponents tend to equate these processes. As regards valuation, critics question whether value in the environment can be adequately expressed in monetary terms, or whether these are incommensurable. Vatn (2000) suggests that the environment has previously escaped pricing because

[1] This conference was attended by two of the authors of this paper (CS & JF).

[2] The philosopher Michael Sandel (2012) makes a similar argument, albeit not from an environmental perspective.