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## Ecologists and Economists Unite

David Suzuki

Recipient of the 2012 Inamori Ethics Prize

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The words *ecology* and *economics* derive from the same Greek word, *oikos*, meaning “household” or “home.” So ecology (*logos* meaning “study”) is the study of home, and economics (*nomics* meaning “management”) is home management. These two fields should be companion disciplines, and yet with few exceptions there is little communication between them.

Even though the fundamental capital that all countries depend on is the natural world, modern economics makes no ecological sense. When a businessperson evaluates a forest, for example, that ecosystem is transformed into “board feet” or “cubic meters” that can then be plugged into the proper equations. Other factors—costs of surveying and road and bridge building, labor, reforestation, market demand, and profit—are weighed before deciding whether a forest is worth logging. But considerations of the worth of not touching the forest are dismissed as “externalities” to economic calculations.

For most of human existence, we could get away with thoughtless extraction of “resources” from the environment because of the abundance and diversity within the natural world. Our numbers were small and technology simple and powered by human and animal muscle power. (That was still enough to build the pyramids and the Great Wall of China and to transform a number of forests into deserts.)

The invention of machines and exploitation of cheap, plentiful fossil fuels created a sudden and massive increase in technological muscle power that has had enormous ecological repercussions. Today, our species alone has the power to affect the other thirty million on the planet. Almost overnight, we can destroy entire ecosystems. But conditioned by the longstanding resilience of nature, we’ve continued to act as if it is virtually limitless, and this behavior is reflected in economic systems.

The planet is being ravaged for economic returns. But any farsighted economist must recognize that there are “services” performed by nature itself that have to be factored into the economic equations. So let’s start by remembering that we are animals. As biological beings, we must have clean air,

water, and food for our sustenance and health. The biological world around us has assured us of that. In the past, pollution by our fires, leftovers, and body wastes were recycled by other organisms. Today, the sheer magnitude, variety, and novelty of our technological excreta preclude that.

The great forests of the world have served to modulate the water cycles of the planet, absorbing rain and transpiring it into the air or releasing it into the ground. Thus, groundwater, erosion, flooding, landslides, and weather are directly affected by forests. Forests also absorb carbon dioxide while releasing oxygen, thereby conditioning the air we breathe and the upper atmosphere that affects climate. Old-growth forests maintain a high degree of biodiversity on which long-term ecological stability depends. All these “services” continue to be performed as long as the trees are left standing, yet none of them is cost-accounted before a forest is cut down.

There are other benefits of natural systems for humans that are seldom assessed economically. The most obvious is the enormous human capacity to discover and then exploit other species. Many of our most powerful medicines still are biologically based. The vast pharmacopeia of traditional medicines and yet-to-be discovered plants in tropical rain forests promise far greater returns than the much-ballyhooed biotechnology.

Throughout history, people have used perhaps 7,000 kinds of plants for food, yet there are at least 75,000 edible plants, many superior to ones we currently use. Only about 150 have been grown commercially, but human nutrition today is based on only 20 or so major crops. (Of these, 3 grass species, rice, corn, and wheat, are the most important.) There are also very real esthetic, spiritual, and philosophical values for nature that are never reckoned in any economic model. If the forest industry can be compensated when forests are preserved for parks, why shouldn't society be compensated for the potential lost when trees are logged?

The late American economist Julian Simon complained that ecological critiques perpetuate a myth of scarcity and dwindling resources. Simon clearly states the absurd faith held by most economists: “There is no reason why human resourcefulness and enterprise cannot forever continue to respond to impending shortages and existing problems with new expedients that, after an adjustment period, leave us better off than before the problem arose.”

Lester Brown, president of the Worldwatch Institute, countered: “The lack of ecological awareness has contributed to some of the shortcomings in economic analysis and policy formulations.” Brown points to fisheries, forests, grasslands, and croplands as key areas for the global economy:

The condition of the economy and these biological systems cannot be separated. As the global economy expands, pressures on the earth's biological systems are mounting. In large areas of the world, human claims on these systems are reaching an unsustainable level, a point where their productivity is being impaired. When that happens, fisheries collapse, forests disappear, grasslands are converted into barren wastelands, and croplands deteriorate along with quality of air, water, and other life-support resources.

Economists cannot afford any longer to ignore their companion discipline of ecology.

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