

Dasgupta Review Interim Report – Comments from NAAONB

The authors of the Dasgupta Review - Independent Review on the Economics of Biodiversity have invited comments on the interim report. This document forms the response of The National Association for Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (NAAONB).

NAAONB supports the UK's 46 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) to value and secure the natural beauty of the countryside. An AONB is a designated exceptional landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are precious enough to be safeguarded in the national interest. AONBs are protected and enhanced for nature, people, business and culture.

England, Wales and Northern Ireland have 46 AONBs, covering 18% of the countryside, over a fifth of the English coast, and including 12,000 miles of footpaths and bridleways.

The NAAONB is a charity with three primary objectives:

- 1. to promote the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty in and around AONBs and other similarly protected areas*
- 2. to advance the education, understanding and appreciation of the conservation and enhancement of the countryside*
- 3. to promote the efficiency and effectiveness of organisations promoting or representing Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty*

Questions:

1 - Are there aspects of the key concepts outlined in this interim report that are not logical, clearly explained or that you have questions about? Please explain.

The Review sets out to contribute to, “a unified framework for thinking about the economics in a way that fully accounts for Nature and the risks that emerge from loss of Nature” (p4).

The UK Treasury's commissioning of the Dasgupta Review is to be welcomed. This has long been recognized as a very important area for societal reflection and debateⁱ. By way of a contribution to this discourse, the report is logical and clearly explained.

The interim report is, however, very evidently geared towards its primary audience: “...economic and finance decision makers in the public and private sector” (p5). A certain level of economic literacy is understandably required to interpret the approaches outlined but this may limit the ability of non-economists to contribute to this consultation. Even with the welcome glossary of economic and ecological terminology and concepts in Annex B, it is possible that a disciplinary ‘echo chamber’ could develop, and the input of ecologists and conservationists could be marginalized or restricted to those with some background in economics. For a Review with a stated and laudable ambition of integrating economics and ecology this could pose a significant challenge.

2 - Are there any important issues or concepts not adequately considered? Please explain.

Concepts and issues are overall adequately considered. However, the field of environmental economics is one of vibrant debate, and there are areas where the report could draw on wider literature for critique of concepts.

For example, in common with many other studiesⁱⁱ, the Dasgupta Review has implicitly and explicitly endorsed Garrett Hardin's concept of 'The Tragedy of the Commons' as a theoretical and philosophical cornerstone of its approach. The Review appears to be promoting this hypothesis because of its explanative potential. In Hardin's own words:

"The [tragedy] develops in this way. Picture a pasture open to all. It is to be expected that each herdsman will try to keep as many cattle as possible on the commons. Such an arrangement may work reasonably satisfactorily for centuries because tribal wars, poaching and disease keep the numbers of both man and beast well below the carrying capacity of the land... Once social stability becomes a reality...the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy...each man [becomes] locked into a system that compels him to increase his herd without limit—in a world that is limited. Ruin is the destination toward which all men rush, each pursuing his own best interest in a society that believes in the freedom of the commons. Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all."ⁱⁱⁱ

The economic conclusions that flow from this hypothesis usually assert that biodiversity (and other elements of ecology) are 'free goods' – open to all – and that the 'prices' of degradation are thereby hidden or externalized. These important economic themes run through the report but uncritical support of Hardin's proposition may weaken their exploration. Although accepted within some branches of environmental economics, Hardin's central assumptions have been challenged^{iv}.

Perhaps most significantly, Hardin's 'tragedy' suffers weakness from the high level of abstraction used to justify hypothesis. In the real world of politics, economics, anthropology, and geography most of the Earth's biodiversity is subject to some form of 'property rights'. Where these may not be via the formal ownership of private individuals or corporations, they are effectively such through the actions of national states (e.g. the US' 62 National Parks), NGOs (e.g. RSPB^v), indigenous groups (e.g. the Unguu Indigenous Protected Area, Western Australia^{vi}) or international treaty (e.g. Antarctica).

Anthropological critiques of Hardin's 'tragedy' have pointed out that Commons are not 'open to all' in any historic sense. Where natural resources are, or have been, managed as 'commons' they have been so via complex social and cultural practices that have regulated their use – whether for narrow interests (e.g. in the case of Feudal Europe) or the wider community (e.g. in the case of the traditional watersheds of Bali). Hardin's image of an anarchic free-for-all over the commons brings it perilously close to self-serving concepts such as *terra nullius* ("no man's land") that have historically been used to justify the dispossession of commons managed by indigenous cultures^{vii}. Today, such ideas are feeding the ecologically devastating processes of 'dispossession by accumulation' and 'land-grabbing'^{viii}.

'Property rights' in themselves are no panacea. Processes of commodification that evolve alongside 'property rights' create their own ecological difficulties through institutional failure and competing interests^{ix}. Indeed, one of the main strengths of the Dasgupta Review is the emphasis placed on 'institutional failure'. Biodiversity can be overexploited or displaced in the absence of the necessary (and resourced) legal and voluntary institutions. This important area of analysis could be further considered with respect to the development of effective regulatory frameworks.

3 - Are there any further suggestions you have for improving the Review's intellectual foundations on the economics of biodiversity?

The interim report is mainly concerned with outlining the methodologies and approaches of quantitative economic modelling. The topics of institutional failure and problems of mainstream approaches such as GDP are well explored in that context. However, some of the fundamental attitudinal issues that impact on social and individual appreciation and value of nature receive less weight. The report identifies the significance of this fundamental topic under subsection 2.84 "Developing an appreciation of Nature" (p54):

"[Appropriate integration of economics with ecology] will not be enough. The conception of Nature and our relationship with Nature has evolved over the centuries, perhaps as recently as decades, in step with the place of Nature in economic reasoning. Many view Nature almost entirely through an anthropocentric lens, even while our affection for Nature, and even our emotional attachment to it, declines. With growing urbanisation, that process of detachment can be expected to continue, perhaps even amplify. The Review concludes with a plea for a transformation of our education systems towards one where children from an early age are encouraged to try and understand the infinitely beautiful tapestry of processes and forms that is Nature. It is only when we appreciate that we are part of Nature and that Nature nurtures us that we will have fewer needs for reviews on the economics of biodiversity."

Appreciation of nature and biodiversity is a central remit for the AONB family, an essential component in our overarching duty of protecting and enhancing natural beauty and in turn safeguarding the special qualities of our AONB landscapes for the benefit of all who live, work and visit them. Concepts such as natural beauty, intrinsic worth, cultural significance and moral and ethical considerations form key parts of our work. Furthermore, as national bodies with statutory functions, we must attend to complex qualitative aspirations on behalf of the relevant sections of the UK population (England, Northern Ireland and Wales).

Consideration of economic livelihoods alongside such qualitative landscape aspirations is a complicated but necessary task. AONB Management Plans, for example, seek to balance quantitative factors such as the rural economy (especially agriculture) with qualitative cultural notions of natural beauty. Biodiversity conservation finds itself firmly at the heart of that quantitative-qualitative intersection. As such, we would encourage the Review's authors to broaden its discussion on the 'appreciation of nature'. Such an approach would improve the Review's intellectual foundations and sharpen its relevance for institutions that are actively trying to improve people's access to nature through education and other means.

The Covid-19 situation triggered a growing appreciation and value of nature, but also revealed inequalities in peoples' access to green space particularly in urban areas. The Dasgupta Review is being developed at a crucial time for biodiversity and society interrelations. It can play a major role in reconnecting people with nature and diffusing some of the resurgent rural-urban tensions that we have experienced during the Covid-19 lockdown. But to play this vital role, greater weight should be given to qualitative elements of nature appreciation and how these inform humans and their communities as the subjects of environmental economics.

4 - What else should the Review consider in developing the options for change?

The Review should consider the emerging economic approaches that go beyond neo-classical and neoliberal frameworks. Amidst the devastating social and economic consequences of Covid-19 there has been a surge in discussions and debates over a ‘new normal’ based on meaningful sustainable development – the core concern of the Dasgupta Review in relation to biodiversity conservation.

Several innovative ideas and paradigms have been developed over the last few decades on how to move society towards a truly *systemic transformation* – a need highlighted by IPBES if mass extinction is to be avoided. These alternatives include concepts such as Doughnut Economics, Green New Deals, degrowth, deglobalization, food sovereignty, and “Buen Vivir” or “Living Well”. These socio-economic concepts go beyond the mainstream schools of economics – neo-classical economics, technocratic Keynesianism and neoliberal globalization – that have failed to address sustainability and the biodiversity crisis. The Dasgupta Review would benefit from exploration of these alternatives when considering options for change. Flowing from such alternative approaches there are useful case studies to be explored for biodiversity promotion in a post-Covid19 world (e.g. the Welsh Government’s Well Being of Future Generations Act and its associated Well Being of Future Generations Commissioner^x).

The Dasgupta Review deserves as wide an audience as possible. Engagement with qualitative factors such as intrinsic worth and natural beauty, and an exploration of the widening range of ecological economic thought, will ensure greater engagement from conservationists and ecologists who are drawn towards biodiversity and nature appreciation on the basis of David Harvey’s truism: “We have loaded upon nature, often without knowing it, in our science as in our poetry, much of the alternative desire for value to that implied by money.”^{xii}

ⁱ The cultural theorist Raymond Williams argued in his discussion of human-nature relationships, *“It will be ironic if one of the last forms of the separation between abstracted Man and abstracted Nature is an intellectual separation between economics and ecology. It will be a sign that we are beginning to think in some necessary ways when we can conceive these becoming, as they ought to become, a single discipline”*. Williams, Raymond, 2005, **Culture and Materialism** (Verso Books)

ⁱⁱ TEEB, 2010, **The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity: Ecological and Economic Foundations** (Earthscan) and Helm, Dieter, 2016, **Natural Capital: Valuing the Earth** (Yale University Press).

ⁱⁱⁱ Hardin, Garrett, 1976 [1968], “The Tragedy of the Commons”, in Phillip Appleman (ed), **An Essay on the Principle of Population, Thomas Robert Malthus** (Norton).

^{iv} Hasan, Lubna, 2014, **Fifty Years of Debate on the Hardin’s Tragedy of the Commons - A Reflection** <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3315183> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3315183>

^v <https://www.rspb.org.uk/about-the-rspb/about-us/our-mission/>

^{vi} Schuster, Richard, Ryan R. Germain, Joseph R. Bennett, Nicholas J. Reo and Peter Arcese, 2019, “Vertebrate biodiversity on indigenous-managed lands in Australia, Brazil, and Canada equals that in protected areas”, **Environmental Science and Policy**, 101:1-6 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2019.07.002>

^{vii} Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), 2014, **Guaranteeing Indigenous People’s Rights in Latin America: Progress in the Past Decade and Remaining Challenges** https://repositorio.cepal.org/bitstream/handle/11362/37051/4/S1420782_en.pdf (United Nations)

^{viii} Harvey, David, 2006, **Spaces of Global Capitalism: Towards a Theory of Uneven Geographical Development** (Verso Books) and Pearce, Fred, 2013, **The Landgrabbers: The New Fight Over Who Owns the Earth** (Penguin Books)

^{ix} Longo, Stefano B, Rebecca Clausen and Brett Clark, 2015, **The Tragedy of the Commodity: Oceans, Fisheries and Aquaculture** (Rutgers University Press).

^x <https://futuregenerations.wales/>

^{xi} Harvey, David, 2016, p174, **The Ways of the World** (Profile Books).