

Acknowledgements

This paper was written thanks to the financial support from both the Fondation d'entreprise Hermès and the Agence nationale de la recherche (for INVALUABLE project) within the framework of Convention n° 2011-EBID-003-01.

Valuation without action? On the use of economic valuations of ecosystem services

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1. QUESTIONING THE PRAGMATISM OF ECOSYSTEM SERVICES VALUATIONS

Economic valuations have raised high expectations to influence policy and alleviate the accelerating degradation of the environment. This was reaffirmed by the publication of *The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity* (TEEB) report, during the Tenth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Nagoya in 2010. Decision IV/10 of COP 10¹ recognizes economic valuation as a key tool for a more effective mainstreaming of biodiversity-related considerations. In many scientific publications as well, the “measurement” of monetary values that reflect the social importance of ecosystem services is seen as a prerequisite for better management decisions (e.g. Daily *et al.*, 2009).

But heated debates have been ongoing for years. While ecologists Myers and Richert (1997) declared their faith in economics (“We don’t protect what we don’t value”), economist Heal (2000), in contrast, stated: “Valuation is neither necessary nor sufficient for conservation. We conserve much that we do not value, and do not conserve much that we value”. Balmford *et al.* (2011) even made it a positive statement: “[For many reasons] there is validity in calling for societal choices, especially in the domain of environmental decision-making, to be made without recourse to valuation or with the results of a cost-benefit analysis being a single component in a larger body of evidence”. Though the debate exists, it is undeniable that international discussions and publications are now massively promoting Ecosystem Services Economic Valuation (ESV) as a tool susceptible to make key contributions to biodiversity protection. Questioning the supposed pragmatism and influence of ESV, while standing clear from ideological statements, is thus both timely and vital.

ESV methods are now highly mature. They have been the subject of a large and growing literature since the beginning of the 1990s (e.g. Adamowicz, 2004). Yet, economic valuation is not sufficient in itself. The hope that it will become an efficient political lever to alleviate

1. <http://www.cbd.int/doc/quarterly/qr-10-en.pdf>