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At the crossroads between green economy and rights of nature

by Pablo Solón

Almost one thousand dolphins are lying dead on the beach. Another five thousand pelicans have also been found dead. What is the cause of this massacre? There are different explanations. Some argue that it was the offshore oil exploration while others say that these birds died because anchovy, their main food, has disappeared as a result of the sudden heating of coastal waters due to climate change. Whatever the explanation, the fact is that during the past months, the Peruvian coast has become the silent witness of what the capitalist system is doing to Nature.

In the period from 1970 to 2008, the Earth System has lost 30 percent of its biodiversity. In tropical areas, the loss has even been as high as 60 percent. This is not happening by accident. This is the result of an economic system that treats nature as a thing, as just a source of resources. For capitalists, nature is mainly an object to possess, exploit, transform and most specially profit out of it.

Green economy is about cheating nature while making profit out of it

Humanity is at the edge of a cliff. Instead of recognizing that nature is our home and that we must respect the rights of all beings of the Earth community, transnational corporations are promoting more capitalism under the ambiguous name of “green economy.”

According to proponents, the mistake of capitalism, which led us to these current multiple crises, is that the free market had not gone far enough. Thus, “green economy” capitalism is going to fully incorporate nature as part of its capital. They are identifying the specific functions of ecosystems and biodiversity that can be priced and then brought into a global market as “Natural Capital.”

In a report by Ecosystem Marketplace, we can read a brutally frank description of what is motivating Green Economy advocates:

“Given their enormous impact on our daily lives, it’s astounding that we don’t pay more attention, or dollars, to ecosystem services. Ecosystems provide trillions of dollars in clean water, flood protection, fertile lands, clean air, pollination, disease control - to mention just a few. These services are essential to maintaining livable conditions and are delivered by the world’s largest utilities. Far larger in value and scale than any electric, gas, or water utility could possibly dream of. And the infrastructure, or hard assets, that generate these services are simply: healthy ecosystems.

So how do we secure this enormously valuable infrastructure and its services? The same way we would electricity, potable water, or natural gas. We pay for it.”

The goal is not just to privatize material goods that can be taken from nature, such as wood from a forest, but also to privatize the *functions and processes of nature*, label them environmental services, set a price and then bring them into the market. In the same report, the contributors already have estimated annual values for these environmental services.

To illustrate, take a look at the leading example of “green economy,” the program REDD (Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation). REDD’s purpose is to isolate one of the functions of forests — its ability to capture and store carbon — and then measure how much CO₂ it can capture. Once the value of the potential carbon storage of the forest has been estimated, carbon credits are issued and sold to rich countries and big corporations who then use these to offset, or buy and sell, polluting permits in the carbon markets.

For example, if Indonesia, which has a deforestation rate of 1,700,000 hectares per year — only deforests 1,500,000 hectares next year, it will be able to sell in the REDD market, the carbon credits for the amount of CO₂ that is stored by the remaining 200,000 hectares.

In theory, REDD provides a monetary incentive for not deforesting. In actuality, corporations purchasing credits can release into the atmosphere the amount of CO₂ they paid for. In other words, carbon credits are polluting permits for the rich. Additionally, only countries that reduce their deforestation will be able to put carbon credits in the REDD market. So if a region has always preserved its forest, they will not be able to sell any carbon credits from reduction of deforestation. So what is happening now, for example, in some parts of Brazil, is that in order to be prepared for REDD, trees are being cut with the purpose of increasing the deforestation, so that, tomorrow, the reduction of the “deforestation” will be higher and the amount of carbon credits that can go into the market will be bigger.

REDD is just the face of “green economy” for forests. The whole system is about cheating nature while making profit from it.

Imagine if the same logic is applied to biodiversity, water, soil, agriculture, oceans, fishery and so on. Add to this the proposal to perform geo-engineering and other new technologies in order to further the exploitation, tampering and disruption of nature and creating a new speculative market.

In order to promote such an assault on nature, the capitalists have first labeled their greed economy as “green economy.” Cash strapped governments, are being told that that the only way to get the billions of dollars needed for the preservation of water, forests, biodiversity, agriculture and others is through private investment. But the private sector will not invest profits — accumulated through the exploitation of labor and material goods of nature — without an incentive. And so, governments need to offer them this new business of making profit from the processes and functions of nature.

Most promoters of “green economy” are very straightforward on this: if there is no pricing of some functions of nature, new market mechanisms and guarantees for their profit... the private sector will not invest in ecosystem services and biodiversity.

“We cannot command nature except by obeying her”

The “green economy” will be absolutely destructive because it is premised on the principle that the transfusion of the rules of the market will save nature. As the

philosopher Francis Bacon said: we cannot command nature except by obeying her.

Instead of putting a price on Nature, we need to recognize that humans are part of Nature and that Nature is not a thing to possess or a mere supplier of resources. The Earth is a living system, it is our home and it is a community of interdependent beings and parts of one whole system. Nature has its own rules that govern its integrity, interrelationships, reproduction and transformation, and these rules have worked for millions of years. States and society must respect and assure that rules of nature prevail and are not disrupted. This means we need to recognize that our Mother Earth has also rights.

Scientists have been telling us that we are all part of an Earth System that includes the atmosphere, the biosphere, the lithosphere, and the hydrosphere. We humans are just one element of the biosphere. So why would it be that only we humans have rights and all the rest are just materials for human life? To speak of equilibrium in our Earth system is to speak of rights for all parts of the system. These rights are not identical for all beings or parts of the Earth System, since not all the elements are identical. But to think that only humans should enjoy privileges while other living things are simply objects is the worst mistake.

Why should we only respect the laws of human beings and not those of nature? Why do we call the person who kills his neighbor a criminal, but not he who extinguishes a species or contaminates a river? Why do we judge the life of human beings with parameters different from those that guide the life of the system as a whole if all of us, absolutely all of us, rely on the life of the Earth System?

There is a contradiction in recognizing only rights of humans while all the rest of the Earth system is reduced to a business opportunity in the "green economy."

Decades ago, to talk about slaves having the same rights as everyone else seemed like the same heresy that it is now to talk about glaciers, or dolphins, or rivers, or trees, or orangutans having rights.

In an interdependent system in which human beings are only one component of the whole, it is not possible to only recognize the rights of the human part without instigating an imbalance in the system. To guarantee human rights and to restore harmony with nature, it is necessary to effectively recognize and apply the rights of Nature.

Nature cannot be submitted to the wills of markets or a laboratory. The answer for the future lies not in scientific inventions that try to cheat nature, but in our capacity to listen to nature. Science and technology are capable of many things, including destroying the existing world itself. It is time to stop geo-engineering and all artificial manipulation of the climate, biodiversity and seeds. Humans are not gods. The capitalist system has gone beyond control. Like a virus it's going to kill the body that feeds it... it's going to damage the Earth System, making life impossible for humans as we know it. We need to overthrow capitalism and develop a system that is based on the Community of the Earth.