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# Valuing Nature

by Jessica Cattelino

This article is part of the series [Generating Capitalism \(/fieldsights/650-generating-capitalism\)](#)

The question of how to value nature presses at this historical moment, when environmental degradation simultaneously grows out of and challenges contemporary capitalism. One increasingly common answer among policymakers, environmentalists, and scholars is ecosystems services valuation (ESV). Ecosystems services are understood as the beneficial outcomes to humans of ecosystem functions such as carbon cycling, wildlife habitat provision, and nutrient trapping. Services include drinking water, food provision, flood control, and difficult-to-measure “cultural services” such as aesthetic enjoyment, spiritual value, and recreation.

The use of cost-benefit analysis to measure the environmental impact of projects rose to prominence in response to guidelines set forth in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. In subsequent years, environmentalists complained that economic benefits like job creation and agricultural or industrial production prevailed in planning because the benefits of ecosystem functions were not explicitly weighed. Accounting for ecosystem services can be consequential: it can scuttle a development project thereby deemed too costly, create market incentives for conservation, and reorient people to new ways of understanding and managing their environments. A brief glimpse at recent Everglades restoration affords the opportunity to address a basic question too rarely posed in debates about ESV, which typically focus instead on the dangers of commodification or the risk of market failure; that is, which generative processes do the work of “converting nature to other forms of value in contemporary capitalism?”

## "A Good Investment"

The world’s most expensive ecological restoration effort is currently underway in the Florida Everglades, a subtropical wetland reduced to half its historic size by drainage for residential, commercial, and agricultural development. In 2012, a dozen years after the federal [Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Program \(http://www.evergladesrestoration.gov/\)](#), passed at an estimated cost of \$13.5 billion, the White House published an important [Everglades restoration report \(https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/page/files/everglades\\_report\\_13\\_july\\_2012.pdf\)](#). It declared that “The Everglades is a good investment,” citing a study that employed ESV to measure the economic benefits of restoration at four times its cost. The report created buzz at that year’s [Everglades Coalition conference \(http://www.evergladescoalition.org/PDF/2012EvergladesCoalitionBrochure.pdf\)](#), titled “Everglades Restoration: Worth Every Penny.” The conference logo (below) featured a penny surrounded by Everglades flora and fauna and a normative family enjoying recreation; many panels addressed ESV.



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Cover of the Everglades Coalition 2012 conference brochure. Source: No credit given for the creator of the image.

A set of telling images also decorated the cover of the White House report. It included two predictable photographs of South Florida flora, but between them was an atypical image of a rancher and, presumably, his daughter. In the Everglades, environment and agriculture often face off, as restoration advocates blame growers and ranchers for wetland pollution, farmers blame environmentalists for increased taxation and regulation, and these groups battle over water supply. Understanding the visual centrality of the intergenerational ranchers in the report redirects analysis of how ecological value is generated in contemporary capitalism.



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Images on the cover of “Restoring America’s Everglades.” Source: Carlton Ward, Jr. / CarltonWard.com.

## Culture and Kinship

Among ecosystems services, “cultural services” are the most challenging to quantify. As ESV methods mature, the domain of cultural services expands and confounds. It is one thing to quantify recreational value but quite another to tackle spiritual value. Furthermore, who counts as cultural tracks predictable categories: indigenous peoples figure prominently as, in Florida, do ranchers (note, for example, the images on the sixth slide of a recent [conference presentation](http://www.conference.ifas.ufl.edu/aces12/presentations/2%20Tuesday/G-H/Session%201G/YES/0135%20Swain.pdf) [Swain, Gray, and Pickert 2012]).

An ESV initiative, the South Florida Water Management District’s (SFWMD) [Northern Everglades Dispersed Water Management Program](http://my.sfwmd.gov/portal/page/portal/xweb%20protecting%20and%20restoring/water%20storage%20programs) offers government and nonprofit payments to farmers who dedicate land to water retention and filtration. The program’s 200,000 plus acres of “water farming,” as some call it, have removed tons of Everglades-destroying phosphorus. The program focuses on the “preservation of the cattle industry,” which is recognized as both an economic and a cultural benefit. Annette Weiner (1980, 71), in “Reproduction: A Replacement for Reciprocity,” advocates for a “reproductive perspective” that concerns the often long-term regeneration and production of elements of value, which for Weiner includes social relations, land, and more. Like ecosystem services more generally, the reproductive cultural benefits of ranching preservation are returned on a longer timescale than the payments.

Still, why would growers take land out of production—a cultural scandal—in return for money from the same state agencies and environmental nonprofits they often oppose? One answer is that these payments help ranchers regenerate value not only through, but also despite relations of kinship. I first considered this while watching a recent [Audubon film](http://fl.audubon.org/videos/audubon-florida-ranches-and-water-everglades-headwaters-working-toward-partnership) about the program, in which rancher Bud Adams explained that liquidity from payments allows ranchers not only to hold onto land but also to settle with family members who do not want to remain in the business. In this, ranches resemble the Italian family firms studied by Sylvia Yanigasako (2002, 77), wherein “kinship sentiments operate both as forces for the continuity of family firms and forces for their demise.”

Watching the film, I thought of John Ward and Gretchen Kokomor, spouses who manage the 5800-acre J-7 Ranch. John’s father founded the stunning ranch south of Lake Okeechobee near the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation and labored to make the Everglades land agriculturally productive. In 1978, after he passed, three sons incorporated the ranch, and, after a subsequent dispute, two daughters joined. The siblings are shareholders, and the corporation pays John and Gretchen to manage and operate the enterprise. Ward ponders whether to take advantage of various financial instruments that generate revenue through conservation, although the SFWMD program mentioned above is not available south of the lake. During my first visit, Ward began by saying that he and Kokomor “enjoy the lifestyle we have here” and would like for the ranch to stay in the family despite having no clear succession plan. In South Florida, the palatability of payments for ecological services relies on the language of culture, even as the very substance of ranching culture—kinship—is a force both of production and of splintering.



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John Ward and Jessica Cattelino on the J-7 Ranch during the 2012 Big “O” Birding Festival. Photo by Rhonda Roff.

Ecosystems services valuation in the Everglades could be interpreted as a tool to align the preexisting interests of agriculture and environment, or as a measurement of the preexisting value of nature. Instead, ESV here and elsewhere must be understood as a mechanism by which interests and value are produced. <https://www.twitter.com/cuamr> new lines of inquiry. The task is to trace those generative forces (like kinship) that make nature’s valuation, in cultural and economic terms—palatable and possible in contemporary capitalism.

This point is illustrated by Carlton Ward, a well-known Florida photographer, who took the photograph of the ranchers that appears on the White House report. Ward also co-founded the [Florida Wildlife Corridor](http://floridawildlifecorridor.org) project, which promotes conservation easements and related methods to preserve ecological connectivity. In comments I heard him deliver at the Big Cypress Seminole Reservation during his inaugural journey up the proposed corridor, Ward explained to supporters and reporters that a ranch's conservation easement "helps protect the culture of people who have been stewards of the land" for generations (fieldnotes, February 5, 2012). With an eye on generative forces in the valuation of nature under/as capitalism, it is also worth noting that the photographer and wildlife corridor advocate is, indeed, the nephew of rancher John Ward.

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