

# Taking on the economic triangle!

The Ecological Society of America (ESA) is devoted to ensuring “the appropriate use of ecological science in environmental decision making by enhancing communication between the ecological community and policy makers”. I argue that ecological science is appropriately and importantly used when it instills ecological principles into macroeconomic policy making.

Economic growth is an increase in the production and consumption of goods and services. It requires increasing population or per capita consumption and is generally indicated by increasing real gross domestic product (GDP). It is a primary, perennial, bipartisan goal of the American public and polity. Most ecologists suspect economic growth occurs at the expense of ecological integrity and environmental protection. However, we tend to leave economics to the economists, who prescribe economic growth as the solution to environmental problems. Our reticence is inappropriate, because we are the “economists of nature”.

For example, ecologists are steeped in niche theory, including the principle of competitive exclusion. We know that one species does not proliferate except at the expense of others. Due to the tremendous breadth of the human niche, the human economy grows at the competitive exclusion of nonhuman species in the aggregate. Thus, the causes of species endangerment are a “Who’s Who” of the American economy. Yet economists tell us we need economic growth for the sake of biodiversity conservation.

Ecologists are also conversant with trophic theory. We know that increasing the biomass of consumers depends on increasing production in the plant kingdom. We also know that, given the laws of thermodynamics, there is a limit to the efficiency of converting producer biomass to consumer biomass and, ultimately, a limit to biomass production in the aggregate. We would do well to instill trophic theory into economic policy, which instead has been based on an ecologically ignorant theory that increasing productive efficiency will abrogate any limits to economic growth. To say there is no limit to economic growth on Earth is equivalent to saying that one may have a steady state economy on a perpetually diminishing land mass, but 63% of Americans believe there is no limit!

Ecologists should not lose hope, because a new movement is engaging ecologists in economic policy. At the 1998 conference of The Wildlife Society, a symposium on ecological economics led to the formation of the Working Group for the Steady State Economy, which advocates adoption by the Society of a position on economic growth. A study was commissioned by The Wildlife Society, and the resulting Technical Review 03-1 identified a “fundamental conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation”. At the 2004 conference, the Society’s Council will vote on adopting a position on economic growth. It will help that the US Society for Ecological Economics adopted a position in 2003 that identifies a “fundamental conflict between economic growth and ecosystem health” ([www.ussee.org/about](http://www.ussee.org/about)).

If a relatively conservative organization such as The Wildlife Society takes a position, it will be a snowball on a hilltop, for it will empower and embolden other societies to do likewise. The next most logical candidates for adopting a position are the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB), the American Fisheries Society (AFS), and ESA. Some steps have already been taken, especially in SCB and AFS.

How would adopting these positions help? Political scientists describe “iron triangles” that dominate policy arenas. An iron triangle consists of a special interest group, a political faction, and a professional society (usually manifest in a government agency). The economic growth iron triangle is formidable. The “special interest group” is essentially the entire corporate community, which benefits from a theory of perpetual growth and resulting policies. Given our campaign finance system, the entire political community is wedded to corporate interests. (Have you heard a politician mention the perils of economic growth?) The professional side of the iron triangle is neo-classical economics, whose practitioners run the Council of Economic Advisors, Federal Reserve System, and Department of Commerce.

The economic iron triangle has had carte blanche to boldly claim, “There is no conflict between economic growth and environmental protection!” If a critical mass of ecological societies adopts a position on economic growth, it will get media attention. Economic growth will be open to public scrutiny, as it briefly was in the 1970s without the support of professional societies.

I conclude by exhorting ESA members to engage in this effort. Together, the groups mentioned above would form a powerful core around which dozens of other professional societies would gather. The ESA, after careful deliberations, should adopt a position on economic growth. An ESA position on economic growth would help to ensure “the appropriate use of ecological science in environmental decision making by enhancing communication between the ecological community and policy makers”, and in a very important way.

For more information on economic growth and to sign a petition on this topic see <http://steadystate.org>



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