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"A Rhetorical Critique of 'Nonmarket' Economic Valuations for Natural Resources"

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Various "nonmarket" economic valuation methods have been used to compute "total" value of nonmarketed natural resources and related recreation. We first outline the history of these valuation techniques and use the Exxon Valdez disaster response and the valuation of whooping cranes, an endangered species, as examples of how these tools can constrain policy. We then explain how, by excluding non-economic social spheres, economic valuation techniques produce a terministic screen that deforms policy makers' vision of the ecological problems faced by society. Using Luhmann's functionalist social theory, we demonstrate that when natural resource managers privilege economic motives, they trivialize other social functions such as education, politics, religion and law. This process presents a significant ethical dilemma for democracies by first naturalizing, then ethicizing, existing patterns of domination.

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