



The PES Conceit: Revisiting the Relationship between Payments for Environmental Services and Neoliberal Conservation



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ABSTRACT

Payments for Environmental Services (PES) has become a popular means to neoliberalize biodiversity conservation throughout the world. Yet research on PES is increasingly focused on debating exactly how neoliberal programmes really are, documenting complexities in PES implementation and concluding that few programmes are very market-based in practice. While we agree that ideal neoliberal implementation of PES does not and cannot exist, we argue that focusing (only) on micro-politics misunderstands the importance of analysing PES as a form of neoliberal conservation. The question is not just whether PES is *innately* neoliberal but how it functions within a broader neoliberal political economy. By focusing on the overarching governance and power structures that gave rise to PES in the first place, we more clearly see what we call 'the PES conceit', namely that the approach implicitly accepts neoliberal capitalism as both the problem *and* the solution to the ecological crisis. This strategy is not only contradictory but also commonly fails to achieve intended outcomes, falling far short of conservation objectives while also often exacerbating socioeconomic inequality. This problematic conceit, we conclude, cannot be addressed through only micro-oriented studies; it demands connecting micro- and macro political economic analyses to confront broader neoliberal power structures.

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1. Introduction

Neoliberal forms of environmental governance, in which state-centred 'command-and-control' policies are intended to be replaced by 'market-based instruments' (MBIs) seeking to incentivize sustainable resource management in the absence of direct regulation, have been increasingly promoted worldwide by a growing range of organizations across governmental, nongovernmental and private sectors (Heynen et al. 2007; Büscher et al. 2014). Payments for environmental services¹ (PES) programmes, more than 300 of which are now in operation around the globe (Pattanayak et al. 2010), have been described as a key component of this neoliberal agenda (McAfee 2012; Büscher 2012; Fletcher et al., 2016). Yet a growing body of research has documented the extent to which most 'actually existing' PES programs deviate substantially from the market-based model that inspired them, instead functioning much more as the state-directed subsidy structures they were usually intended to replace. Based on this, researchers have begun to conclude that

characterization of PES as an essentially neoliberal conservation approach is misguided and thus call for investigation of the particular ways in which PES is implemented. (See Table 1.)

In this intervention we seek to push back against this conclusion to a degree, contending that regardless of the specificities of PES implementation it is important to consider the approach as a whole still a neoliberal one. In doing so, we seek to clarify the meaning of the term 'neoliberalism' at the heart of this debate. While recent research, much of it published in *Ecological Economics*, has called for clarification of the terms 'markets,' 'market-based' and 'MBIs' in PES research, curiously 'neoliberalism' has not been subject to the same scrutiny, despite the fact that its meaning has been the source of substantial debate in related fields. Drawing on this discussion, we argue that a refined understanding of the multidimensional nature of neoliberalism can shed substantial light on the debate concerning the relationship between PES and neoliberalism. Based on this, we contend that even if on-the-ground implementation of PES often lacks substantial neoliberal mechanics the approach should still be considered an important element of a global program to spread neoliberalism as a particular rationality and mode of capital accumulation.

Our point in this is not to engage in wholly abstract theorization concerning the nature of neoliberalism or obsessive debate concerning how this should be identified in the complexities of real-world practice. Rather, we fear that detracting from the intimate links between PES and

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¹ While some researchers distinguish between *environmental* and *ecosystem* service payment programmes, respectively, in the overarching literature we address below these terms are commonly used interchangeably, a practice we follow in this analysis.

neoliberal dynamics more broadly risks obscuring these important dynamics and their consequences for the equitable management and distribution of natural resources. A growing body of research has documented the myriad ways in which neoliberal environmental governance is deeply problematic both in its flawed vision of the world and in its actual execution, where projects commonly both fail to achieve intended conservation outcomes and in the process contribute to the very social inequality and injustice they ostensibly seek to redress (see esp. Büscher et al. 2014; Corson et al. 2014). Hence, we conclude, recent calls for real-world PES to be ‘retrofitted’ to better incorporate concerns for equity and social justice are not just theoretically, but also empirically misguided since they risk reinforcing the problematic dimensions and entrenched power structures of the approach as a whole and hence work against effective resolution of these very concerns.

We begin by outlining the growing research concerning PES, charting the recent move from the approach’s framing as a quintessential MBI to increasing recognition that it rarely functions as such in practice. We then turn to an overview of literature probing the nature of neoliberalism, outlining a multidimensional understanding of this term. Based on this, we argue that the key question is not just whether PES is or is not *innately* neoliberal in its actual implementation, but rather how it functions within a broader neoliberal political economy and regime of environmental governance. This leads us to positing what we call ‘the PES conceit’, namely that the approach implicitly accepts that neoliberal capitalism is both the problem *and* the solution to the ecological crisis. This fundamentally contradictory and problematic conceit cannot be acknowledged or surpassed only through actor- or micro-oriented studies; it demands connecting micro- and macro political economic analyses with an aim to disrupt broader neoliberal power structures.

2. Is PES Market-Based?

As Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian describe, ‘A large body of literature over the last decade has portrayed PES either as markets or MBIs’ (2015:220). Since Costanza et al.’ (1997) pioneering and controversial effort to quantify the Earth’s total economic value of ecosystem services (ES), scholarly research concerning ES and efforts to capture them in PES programmes has grown exponentially. Most initial discussions clearly positioned PES as an explicitly ‘market-based’ environmental governance instrument (Engel et al. 2008). Hence, Pagiola et al.’s (2002a) early treatment of the issue was tellingly titled *Selling Forest Environmental Services: Market-Based Mechanisms for Conservation and Development* and asserted:

The basic purpose of the market-based mechanisms examined in this book is to remedy market failure. By selling the services provided by forests, either individually or in bundles, these mechanisms aim to generate revenue that can then be used either: (i) to increase the private benefits of conservation to individual forest managers, and so to change their incentives; or (ii) to generate resources that can be used to finance conservation efforts by public or private conservation groups. (2002b:4)

Wunder’s subsequent definition, which quickly became a standard, continued this market-based emphasis and characterized PES as:

- (1) a voluntary transaction where
- (2) a well-defined service (or a land use likely to secure that service)
- (3) is being ‘bought’ by a (minimum one) ES buyer
- (4) from a (minimum one) ES provider
- (5) if and only if the ES provider secures ES provision (conditionality) (2005:3)

As a result of this explicit market framing by both policymakers and researchers, PES became increasingly included within a growing body of

literature exploring the rise of ‘neoliberal natures’ (Heynen et al. 2007) and ‘neoliberal conservation’ (Büscher et al. 2012; Büscher et al. 2014). These literatures examined how environmental governance around the world has increasingly adopted key neoliberal principles of privatization, marketization and commodification, among others, in challenging a previous emphasis on so-called ‘command-and-control’ mechanisms advocating direct state legislation and regulation of natural resource management (see McAfee and Shapiro 2010; Büscher 2012; McAfee 2012; Wynne-Jones 2012; Matulis 2013). McElwee et al. thus observe that ‘PES is often pointed to as an example of neoliberal environmental governance par excellence and is currently the most widespread land conservation policy using market-based approaches’ (2014:425).

Yet even in the initial framing of PES, as presented by Pagiola and colleagues above, there existed a tension between PES grounded in private enterprise and that directed by state agents, and hence the literature began to more clearly distinguish between these two modalities (Engel et al. 2008; Wunder et al. 2008). Meanwhile, increasing empirical scrutiny started to demonstrate that in practice few PES programmes neatly conformed to Wunder’s ideal model, leading him to admit that most existing programmes were at best ‘market-like’ (Wunder 2007). More detailed empirical case studies subsequently demonstrated that a number of prominent PES programmes, including in Cambodia (Milne and Adams 2012), Costa Rica (Fletcher and Breitling 2012), Mexico (McAfee and Shapiro 2010; Shapiro-Garza 2013), and Vietnam (McElwee 2012), contained little if any actual market exchange, instead relying almost entirely on state appropriation and redistribution of revenues and hence functioning more like the command-and-control subsidies they were often intended to replace. Studies also showed how this dynamic often resulted, in part, from how programmes are commonly ‘adapted and used for multiple purposes, and how they are attributed alternative meanings’ by local actors in the course of implementation (Van Hecken et al. 2015a:122; see McAfee and Shapiro 2010; McElwee 2012; Shapiro-Garza 2013; McElwee et al. 2014; Van Hecken et al. 2015b).

Induction from these and other cases increasingly confirmed this as a more general pattern (Milder et al. 2010; Vatn 2010). As a result, the emphasis in the overarching discussion shifted from assuming that PES was market-based to asserting that it is almost invariably not: Muradian et al. thus state that ‘in practice very few existing PES can be considered as pure markets’ (2013:3); Pirard and Lapeyre note that ‘most PES experiments have little to do with markets’ (2014:107); Wunder now concludes ‘that PES are only exceptionally being realized through markets’ (2015:240); and Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian relate that ‘the vast majority of PES activity as of today is run by states under public policy regulation frameworks’ (2015:220). Summing up, Vatn (2015:229) concludes:

a very large fraction of transactions between public intermediaries and ‘providers’ does not take the form of trade, but are better characterized as subsidies. Combining this with the Milder et al. (2010) data, we can therefore conclude that a substantial part of PES is non-market. Where markets exist, they are mainly of the incomplete kind.

This acknowledgement has provoked a variety of responses. Some suggest introducing a distinction between programmes intended to provide a payment to incentivize preservation of ES that might not otherwise occur and those intended merely to ‘compensate’ providers for the services they already deliver anyway (CES rather than PES) (McAfee and Shapiro 2010; van Noordwijk et al. 2012; Muradian et al. 2013). Others have called for more precision in the use of the terms ‘market-based’ and particularly ‘market-based instruments’ (Pirard 2012; Corbera, 2015), given that in the overarching literature ‘the terms “economic instruments”, “market-based mechanisms”, “incentive-based instruments”, “environmental markets” and others overlap substantially’ (Pirard and Lapeyre 2014:108). Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian agree, arguing that “‘MBIs’ is a flawed and problematic

category due to the confusion that the term “market-based” has induced’ (2015:217) and explain that ‘the very notion of MBIs for ecosystem services has acted as a major source of confusion by collapsing into a single category economic instruments that range from actual markets (carbon trades), to mixes between regulatory and trade-based instruments (biodiversity offsets) to instruments where the trade component is not present at all (most PES schemes)’ (2015:222).

In order to redeem and refine the concept, Pirard (2012) distinguished six categories of MBIs – 1) *direct markets* (e.g. ecotourism); 2) *tradable permits* (e.g., cap-and-trade systems); 3) *reverse auctions* (in which landowners bid for specific land use rights); 4) *Coasean-type agreements* (e.g. in which price, supply and demand are negotiated through market engagement); 5) *regulatory price signals* (e.g. ecological taxation schemes); and 6) *voluntary price signals* (e.g., fair trade certification). In a similar spirit, Vatn (2015) creates his own 6-part typology depicted in the following diagram (See Table 1).

Taking a different tack, Hahn et al. build on Muradian et al.’s (2010) earlier efforts to distinguish six ‘degrees of commodification’ in ostensibly market-based mechanisms, defined as ‘the extent to which the value of biodiversity or an ecosystem service has become a tradable commodity’ (2015:75). Their first degree designates ‘the instrumental (or even economic) framing of nature, though without explicit efforts at valuation’ (2015:75) while the second ‘occurs when policy makers introduce “new” property rights and liabilities which involve measurements of biodiversity or ecosystem service units but without monetary valuation or price signals’ (2015:76). Third comes ‘deliberate efforts to express or “demonstrate” the value of nature in monetary terms’ (2015:76) and fourth the use of ‘taxes and subsidies ...to enhance ecosystem values’ (2015:77). Finally, the fifth and sixth degrees of commodification designate ‘market-traded biodiversity offsets and other markets for ecosystem services (MES) resembling cap-and-trade systems’ and ‘complete commodification’ in which ‘the traded commodity is re-packaged and re-sold as financial instruments’ (2015:78), respectively. Based on this typology Hahn et al. advocate replacing the MBI term with ‘economic instruments,’ of which actual MBIs would be a subcategory, to emphasize that ‘relying on the price signal is not the same thing as relying on the market’ (2015:74).

In consideration of this discussion, Wunder (2015) recently revised his seminal PES definition to accommodate the approach’s potential ‘disassociation from a market-like scheme’ (Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian 2015, 220). Hence, he now defines PES (with a number of qualifications elaborated in the article) as comprising:

- (1) voluntary transactions
- (2) between service users
- (3) and service providers
- (4) that are conditional on agreed rules of natural resource management
- (5) for generating offsite services’. (Wunder 2015:241)

3. Is PES Neoliberal?

All this is well and good and reflects growing insights into the actual workings of PES in empirical practice. However, based on assertions that PES implementation may not be very market-based or involve significant direct commodification, some researchers go on to contend that

such programmes should therefore not necessarily be characterized as expressions of neoliberal natures or conservation to a significant extent at all. Hahn et al., for instance, maintain that in their typology ‘only the two highest degrees can *properly* be associated with neoliberalisation of nature,’ excluding the majority of existing PES programmes which are instead ‘subsidy-like government compensations not based on monetary valuation of nature’ (2015:74, emphasis added). Dempsey and Robertson state: ‘While ES policy is often associated with market-based instruments, many ES policy tools with no connection to markets are being enacted. Clearly, to call such ES policies neoliberal in the conventional sense, or market-based, is misleading’ (2012:770-1). Muradian and Gómez-Baggethun suggest that some analyses of PES schemes may be ‘shooting a strawman by missing the point that in fact most of them are very far from following market rationales, and have an hybrid nature that can hardly be labelled as “neoliberal”’ (2013:1119-20). Van Hecken et al. (2015b:64) urge us to ‘be cautious not to brand all PES initiatives as deliberate neoliberal tools serving green capitalist expansion.’

More extensively, McElwee et al. assert that ‘seemingly neoliberal policies like PES are actually a mix of both market economic incentives and regulatory approaches, and thus should not be labelled solely “neoliberal”’ (2014:423) and that ‘PES plans should not be considered exclusively neoliberal per se, as they may in fact strengthen both state regulation and local participation and involvement in rural environmental management at the same time’ (2014:423). They conclude, ‘On each of the main outcomes associated with neoliberal environmental policy – namely commodification, privatization, and retreat of the state – we see a huge range of variation from different PES projects’ (2014:435). Echoing Hahn et al., the authors thus suggest that ‘there is a continuum of what we might term “degrees of neoliberalism and marketization” in PES plans’ (2014:428), which in turn leads them to call for ‘moving away from overly simplistic analysis of “neoliberal natures”’ (2014:436) in describing PES programmes and instead devoting ‘more attention to their particularities and outcomes rather than broadly characterizing them as “neoliberal”’ (2014:435).

This call for analysis of the particularities of actual PES implementation has been echoed by others (Dempsey and Robertson 2012; Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian 2015; Hahn et al. 2015; Van Hecken et al. 2015a, 2015b). Hahn et al., for instance, contend that ‘both proponents and critics to neoliberalism are making mistakes when they associate economic instruments with neoliberal frameworks, rather than assessing the actual institutions and performance’ (2015:79). In a similar spirit, some suggest that documentation of PES complexity means that programmes need not necessarily promote commodification and monetization of natural resources at all, contending, as a result, that there may be redemptive potential in the PES concept beyond the neoliberalization and capitalization of nature. For example, Farley and Costanza maintain that PES does not ‘require commodification’ (2010:2060) but may include services involving the ‘capacity of ecosystem structure to reproduce itself rather than merely instrumental services such as ‘food, fiber, fuel, and water’ (2010:2062). Such services, then, can be ‘based on reciprocity rather than conditional monetary incentives’ (2010:2063).

Similarly, the authors claim that PES ‘can *propertize* ecosystems and their services without privatizing them’ since property may be held collectively rather than individually (2010:2061, emphasis in original). In this same spirit, Dempsey and Robertson ask, given that ‘practices around ES significantly exceed conventional versions of neoliberalism

Table 1
A classification of markets for ecosystem services (Source: Vatn 2015).

	Market with intermediaries	
	Direct market	Incomplete (a combination of trade-based and non-trade-based transaction)
No liability defined (cost shifting allowed)	Complete (all trade-based transaction)	
Liability based (cost shifting restricted/ not allowed)		

both in the diversity of their empirical forms and in the polyphony of the theoretical justifications and foundational principles. . . whether ES can escape its own foundational commodity logic' (2012:773). They answer their own question by asserting, indeed, that 'there is room within ES policy dialogue for contributions which radically question the "full" deployment of neoliberal and market-led strategy' (2012:769).

Going furthest in this regard, Muniz and Cruz (2015) advocate using PES to 'make nature valuable, not profitable.' To accomplish this, they assert, 'PES should avoid monetary payment or the logic of such payments' (2015:10,911). Rather,

PES must expand their horizons and be thought of beyond the ES approach and, consequently, beyond services provision. They must recognize a plurality of values around nature and biodiversity in regard to conservation. Then, PES must abandon the logic of market and buyer/provider schemes to be able to promote a holistic perspective (in which social equity, environmental justice, livelihood context and socio-ecological context must be embedded). Next, PES should avoid monetary payments and focus on (non-monetary) incentives. Thus, PES should work as a mechanism that creates opportunities to foster a practice transition, leading to self-sufficient and resilient socio-ecological outcomes. (2015:10912)

To make PES function most effectively in this respect, commentators call for integration of concerns for social and environmental justice, equity, and poverty alleviation alongside the more traditional emphasis on programme efficiency and ecosystem function (Porrás et al. 2008; Muradian et al. 2013; Pascual et al., 2014; Van Hecken et al. 2015a). In sum, Van Hecken et al. (2015a:117) conclude that 'the debate has, to an extent, moved beyond "neoliberal" vs. "non-neoliberal," focusing instead on the variegated ways PES plays out in the field.'

Yet has this discussion really been so exhausted? As two researchers who have both previously addressed PES in the context of our ongoing research concerning neoliberal conservation more generally (see Büscher 2012; Fletcher and Breitling 2012), we would like to add our voices to this debate. In particular, we would like to push back against it to a degree by suggesting that the discussion concerning the extent to which particular PES programmes, as well as the approach as a whole, can be characterized as neoliberal is and should be far from closed. In fact, we contend that regardless of the extent to which particular programmes are grounded in market transactions or entails specific elements of commodification that there is an important sense in which the entire approach should still be considered paradigmatic of a more general neoliberal environmental governance approach writ large.

In substantial part, we propose, disagreement concerning whether PES is neoliberal or not results from a lack of specificity in how the term 'neoliberalism' is deployed in the literature. While complexity in the practical implementation of PES has provoked critical scrutiny of the terms 'market-based,' 'market-based instruments' and 'commodification,' as outlined earlier, curiously 'neoliberalism' has not been given the same attention. This is surprising given the fact that elsewhere the concept has been dissected extensively, giving rise to ongoing debate concerning its meaning and application. Undertaking a more detailed discussion of what we mean by 'neoliberalism' when asking whether PES conforms to this description, therefore, may help to clarify the debate tremendously. Again, our intention is not only to refine our understanding of how PES relates to neoliberalization in either conceptual or empirical dimensions but to highlight the implications of this understanding in terms of how we discuss the potentialities and consequences of PES interventions, in both on-the-ground implementation and higher-level policy roll-out.

4. The Natures of Neoliberalism

As scholarly discussion of 'neoliberalism' has exploded in the last two decades (Boas and Gans-Moore 2009; Flew 2011) its use has

become increasingly diffuse, 'such that its appearance in any given article offers little clue as to what it actually means' (Boas and Gans-Moore 2009:139). At its worst, the term has become 'nothing more than a vehicle for academics who like to criticise things that they do not like' (Igoe and Brockington 2007:445), while at its broadest it is used 'as a sloppy synonym for capitalism itself, or as a kind of shorthand for the world economy and its inequalities' (Ferguson 2010:171). Yet most agree that there is something very significant to which the term is intended to point (Peck 2010; Steger and Roy 2010; McCarthy 2012), and that it is not 'a figment of the (critical) imagination' (Peck 2010:15). Hence a variety of recent efforts have sought to bring clarity to its discussion, both in terms of its academic usage and the phenomenon that is its referent. Most generally, of course, Brenner, Peck, and Theodore have been prolific in their advancement of a perspective exploring the 'variegated' nature of neoliberalization understood as a process (rather than a static phenomenon) that materializes in idiosyncratic ways in specific locations in syncretism with preexisting socioeconomic institutions (see esp. Brenner et al. 2010a, 2010b).

More particularly, there is a strong divide in scholarly research between Marxist- and Foucaultian-inspired analyses, with the former framing neoliberalism as a particular form of capitalism bent on 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey 2005; Castree 2008) and the latter as a particular 'governmentality' pursuing behavioral modification through construction and manipulation of the incentive structures in terms of which actors make decisions (Foucault 2008; Fletcher 2010). Even more specifically, McCarthy distinguishes five dimensions of neoliberal analysis: as 1) 'an economic doctrine and set of associated policies that purports to provide some rational alternative to Keynesian economic policy' (2012:182); 2) a class project of capital accumulation; 3) 'an ideology that sometimes motivates and sometimes 'makes sense' of the two political economic projects' previously outlined (2012:183); 4) a Foucaultian governmentality; and 5) a variegated process of neoliberalization that 'draws in some measure from each of the preceding conceptions' (2012:184).

Synthesizing (yet again) the growing literature of this topic, Castree (2010) distinguished what he terms the '3 p's' of neoliberalism as a constellation of an overarching *philosophy* or worldview; a general policy *programme*; and a set of specific *policies*. As a worldview, then, neoliberalism can be understood as 'a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade' (Harvey 2005: 2). As a general socioeconomic programme, neoliberalism is commonly described as pursuing a set of interrelated principles: 1) privatization; 2) marketization; 3) -deregulation and reregulation (both away from and through state actors); 4) commodification; 5) use of 'market proxies' in state processes; and 6) encouragement of civil society 'flanking mechanisms' (Harvey 2005; Castree 2010). Specific policies to operationalize these principles include the various MBIs categorized by Pirard (2012) and others.

Regardless of the position one takes on all this, it is clear from this discussion that in evaluating whether and to what extent PES is considered 'neoliberal' one's use of the term should be specified, just as others have called for precision in the definition of MBIs and related concepts on the basis of which recent assessments of the (non)neoliberal nature of PES have been made. Lack of clarity concerning the meaning of neoliberalism, we thus suggest, accounts for much of the current debate in the PES literature. In the literature, as the preceding review makes clear, most researchers simply equate neoliberalism with the twin principles of marketization and commodification. McElwee et al. are most explicit in this regard, defining neoliberalism, as quoted earlier, as promoting three main aims: 'commodification, privatization, and retreat of the state.'

Yet our outline of recent efforts to conceptualize and define neoliberalism generally demonstrates that, understood in terms of variegated

neoliberalization, this is not the only way the phenomenon can or should be conceptualized. For instance, while neoliberalism is commonly equated with the retreat of the state from economic affairs, as McElwee et al. (2014) state, in fact a substantial body of literature contests this characterization, showing that neoliberalism in fact generally entails – and indeed may require – not a wholesale withdrawal of state governance so much as a transformation in how states govern in relation to markets (Peck 2010). Foucault, for instance, asserted long ago that '[n]eoliberalism should not be identified with laissez-faire, but rather with permanent vigilance, activity and intervention' (2008:132) since key architects of neoliberal ideology, including Hayek and Friedman, did not assume that 'the market' was a natural entity but rather a social construct that had to be created and sustained through state oversight (see also Harvey, 2005; Castree 2008; Büscher 2010; Fletcher 2010). In highlighting this nuance, Foucault distinguishes between 'organizing' and 'regulatory' state actions, demonstrating that while neoliberalism seeks to minimize the latter, which entail direct intervention into market affairs to appropriate and allocate resources, it actually promotes the former, seeking to 'make the market possible' through shaping the overarching structures (e.g., education and legal systems) allowing markets to function (2008:146). Hence he characterizes neoliberalism as advocating 'a minimum of economic interventionism, and maximum legal interventionism' (2008:167).

In other words, it is not state intervention per se that makes a particular policy neoliberal or not – it is a specific *type* of intervention. From this perspective, the common tendency to dichotomize markets and states in discussions of neoliberalism is misplaced. This supports Vatn's (2015) critique of this tendency within PES research in particular when he states, 'I find the distinction between command and control and market-based instruments (MBIs) confusing. The basis for any market is the legal definition of rights. Hence, MBIs are in this sense based on command' (2015:228). This is precisely how Foucault (2008) characterizes neoliberal governance as well. Based on this assessment Vatn concludes, 'A core message is that while markets may function differently dependent on which actors are involved, it is the form of interaction between them – the trading – that defines whether we are faced with a market or not. Hence, states may command. They may, however, also trade' (2015:231). In terms of the distinction between organizing and regulatory actions outlined above, to the extent that states assume a commanding role in PES programming the mechanism can still be considered neoliberal.

Given this distinction, it is clear that many PES programmes entail direct regulatory actions, which according to McElwee et al. and others would be contrary to neoliberal logic. Yet a nuanced analysis challenges this common conflation of neoliberalism with markets, commodification, and the retreat of the state in PES literature. Neoliberal policies need not require the retreat of the state as a whole but merely a certain form of state action. Likewise, neoliberalism understood as a form of governmentality need not entail commodification per se but may promote other forms of incentivization as well (Foucault 2008; Fletcher 2010). By the same token, neoliberalism does not necessitate construction of actual markets but rather 'involves extending and disseminating market values to all institutions and social action' (Brown 2003:3). The very fact that we are speaking about *environmental services* at all, testifies to the merit of this point.

Hence there is a danger that in reducing neoliberalism *theoretically* to merely two or three specific principles and a collection of MBIs we may lose sight of the more general *empirical* dimensions of neoliberalization that may operate irrespective of the extent to which a particular PES programme succeeds in creating market transactions or 'liquid nature' (Bücher 2013). Even if PES does not necessarily promote substantial market trade or successfully commodify resources as the basis for this trade, the approach's promotion as a global strategy by a relatively small and coherent body of actors and organizations can still be seen as a component of an overarching effort to advance a more general programme of neoliberal environmental governance with important

consequences that are in danger of being minimized or neglected by insistence on attention to the particularity or variegation of PES implementation in specific places.

This is a point that Fletcher and Breitling (2012) indeed sought to clarify in their case study of Costa Rica's pioneering national PES programme, one of the main studies now used to pronounce the non-market/non-neoliberal nature of PES more generally. Following Foucault (2008), Fletcher and Breitling (2012) argued that even if PES does entail *anti*-neoliberal forms of intervention in practice it may still in its overarching aim adhere to Muradian and coauthors' (2010:1205) characterization of the approach as 'a transfer of resources between social actors, which aims to create incentives to align individual and/or collective land use decisions with the social interest in the management of natural resources.' This is precisely the neoliberal governmentality that Foucault (2008) describes (Fletcher 2010; Fletcher and Breitling 2012).

Hence, Fletcher and Breitling conclude that while PES implementation can contradict specific neoliberal policies, it may remain 'faithful to a neoliberal approach to governance in general in its continued emphasis on motivating proper stakeholder behavior through providing external incentives—even if, as we have shown, this effort has itself often failed to perform as intended' (2012:409). In reference to Farley and Costanza's (2010) contention that PES need not include neoliberal mechanisms, Fletcher and Breitling therefore contend:

Despite their questioning of many of the specific markets mechanisms commonly prescribed for PES, the authors' overall approach to PES governance remains squarely within a neoliberal paradigm that seeks to make the market the model for human relations in general, advocating motivation through incentives not only within private, self-regulating, commodity markets but in those government-directed, collectivized, and valuing non-economic services as well. (2012:409).

In this way, 'non-market mechanisms appear to be advocated in the service of a neoliberal project writ large' (2012:409). In the uptake of this study into subsequent literature, however, this nuanced discussion of the nature of neoliberalism was overlooked and the case used to support the growing consensus concerning PES's extra- or even anti-neoliberal character.

Similar conclusions have been reached by several other PES studies. Büscher (2012), for instance, observes a similar discrepancy between the neoliberal vision guiding formulation of a PES programme in the Drakensberg in South Africa and the fact that this case was commonly pointed to as a success story even though the project had *never actually been implemented*. Based on their own analysis of the 'market masquerade' in a community PES project in Cambodia, Milne and Adams contend that 'the significance of the PES policy model lies in the political and social effects of its design and implementation, not in its functioning as a market per se' (2012:136), while Matulis warns of 'the implications that engaging such mechanisms has in the progression of capitalist ideals and mentalities regardless of the *immediate* material outcomes' (2015:1, emphasis in original).

Indeed, a number of the same researchers who question PES's neoliberal character, paradoxically, point to similar dynamics in their own analyses. Van Hecken et al. observe that 'the framing of ecological problems in terms of market-inspired metaphors directs interventions towards standardised solutions and practical applications that ignore the social-political context, resulting in a circle of 'PES fetishism'' (2015b:60); Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian (2015:222), finally, qualify that while 'PES and some other economic instruments traditionally labeled as MBIs do not qualify as markets, and thus cannot be seen to represent any complete or even advanced form of commodification' they may still facilitate:

the extension of market-oriented values, logic, and language into novel environmental domains may drive the symbolic and

discursive changes that characterize early stages of commodification processes. That is, market reasoning has frame-shifting effects that can erode the conceptions, norms, and taboos that act as cultural barriers to the extension of markets and market values to domains traditionally governed by non-market norms. (2015:222)

The fact that researchers may implicitly highlight neoliberal tendencies in overall PES programming while questioning these same tendencies in practical implementation, we believe, leads support to our overarching conclusion concerning the essentially neoliberal character of the PES strategy writ large. A similar tension, indeed, can be observed in [Dempsey and Suarez's \(2016\)](#) recent review of the neoliberal conservation literature more generally. In line with the latest wave of PES literature outlined earlier, they again aim to demonstrate that despite widespread promotion of neoliberal conservation in general around the world over the past several decades, in reality very little actual market exchange has taken place thus far and that the majority of trade that does occur has been directed by states. Hence, they describe 'free' market transactions among private parties as 'slivers of slivers of slivers' of the activities actually occurring ([Dempsey and Suarez 2016:654](#)). Yet the authors conclude that despite programmes' failure to actually function as market mechanisms these may still have important effects in continuing 'to re-affirm narrowed, antipolitical explanations of biodiversity loss, to reinforce neoliberal political rationalities among conservationists, and to foreclose alternative and progressive possibilities' (2016:655).

5. PES's Neoliberal Conceit

The preceding discussion shows that PES studies that aim to close the debate on whether and to what extent PES is neoliberal may be premature, since the nuanced dynamics they themselves observe in empirical practice may actually embody neoliberal elements, or should – even more bluntly – simply be described as 'neoliberal' as a whole – an ambiguity at least implicitly recognized by some authors within this camp themselves. Indeed, our argument here is that it is important to explicitly address these larger dynamics so as to clarify what is fundamentally at stake in PES schemes, namely to 'secure ecosystem conservation and restoration' ([Wunder 2005: 1](#)). Crucially, the whole point of PES – the reason it emerged in the first place – follows from the conviction that conservation will only work if the logics and mechanisms of nature's destruction can be harnessed for nature's conservation. In other words, PES is built on the idea that the logic that got us into the ecological crisis can and must also be the logic that gets us out. The acknowledgement that neoliberal logics get messy when implemented is important. But it is always already a secondary consideration after the central assumption of the PES approach that neoliberalism, as an overarching rationality and mode of accumulation, is and will likely remain hegemonic and therefore needs to be harnessed in order to make any practical difference to 'secure ecosystem conservation and restoration'.

This argument fundamentally shifts the focus of the discussion away from the term *payments* (or *compensation*) to the concept of 'environmental services'. Hence, whether biodiversity is conserved through payments or compensation, through functioning or missing markets or through direct, indirect or no state intervention, matters less than the very fact that nature needs to be rendered a set of 'environmental services' in order for conservation to make sense in a neoliberal world in the first place. Why, otherwise, would people want to conserve nature in neoliberal times? This is basically what [Wunder \(2005:22\)](#) asserted at the end of his seminal PES essay where he argued that 'the main take-home lesson is that if PES does not deliver the service, buyers will not continue to support it, and thus PES will also not benefit the poor. Well-meant targeting efforts should be careful not to jeopardize the basic functionality of PES'. Thus, again, the 'basic functionality' of PES is *not* whether it works through payments or compensation,

through the market or the state, but *whether nature is allowed to 'deliver the service'*. If this 'functionality' is compromised, PES conservation will ostensibly not work and the poor will not benefit.

This is the crucial epistemological implication of PES, above and beyond spreading neoliberal rationalities in its messy empirical practices: it forces us to see the world in an essentially neoliberal way even as we acknowledge that neoliberal practice is messy. This, we believe, is the principal (neoliberal) conceit of the PES paradigm, and also part of why it is dangerous.² It implies that conservation is and needs to be tied to the very forces and logics that degrade and destroy nature in the first place ([Büscher 2012](#); [Fletcher et al. 2016](#)). These, after all, are the private sector sources that PES proponents often look to for new funding for conservation in the face of dwindling public sector sources. Wunder, again, foresaw this with great precision. He closed his essay warning not to 'burden' PES with a whole host of public concerns around 'poverty alleviation, gender, indigenous people, human rights, and other noble causes', which he termed 'side objectives', since this would mean that:

the outreach to the private sector would be much more limited, thus losing new financing options. Eventually, PES would become 'old wine in new bottles', subsumed into the generic family of altruistic development projects to which they were actually meant to be an alternative (2005:22).

Over a decade later, we can conclude that in practice PES has indeed become 'old wine in new bottles' since substantial private financing has not been forthcoming and in any event does not work according to the ideal(ized) market model ([Dempsey and Suarez 2016](#); [Fletcher et al. 2016](#)). Yet PES has effectively worked to keep broader *public* concerns (such as those around 'poverty alleviation, gender, indigenous people, human rights, and other noble causes') as 'side objectives' that can only be considered once basic neoliberal 'functionalities' are in place. And since these are currently 'not in order' (in fact, far from it, and arguably never will be), the social 'side objectives' and principal PES concerns around 'conservation and ecosystem restoration' stand little chance of becoming substantial enough to offset those accumulation strategies that benefit from ongoing ecosystem degradation and destruction. For this to happen, 'environmental services' must become more profitable to 'the private sector' (and other actors) than ongoing environmental degradation, destruction and free-riding. This is a logical impossibility ([Fletcher et al. 2016](#)), something that we cannot see if we only or mostly focus on the 'particularities and outcomes' of PES implementation ([Hahn et al. 2015](#)) rather than on how and why it emerged and became popular in the first place.

6. Conclusion

So how do we move beyond PES's neoliberal conceit? In this brief conclusion we can only but point to some nascent directions based on the analysis presented. Importantly, the first conclusion we draw from the evidence presented is not that PES is relatively non-neoliberal but that there are, as [Fletcher and Breiting \(2012\)](#) earlier suggested, inherent deficiencies in neoliberal conservation approaches such as PES that keep it from being able to achieve its intended vision and that therefore necessitate the introduction of mechanisms contrary to this vision. This dynamic, we have shown, is obscured if we simply interpret the latter as evidence that description of PES as innately neoliberal is 'overly simplistic.' Moreover, we lose focus on the ways in which capitalist and neoliberal rationalities, ways of seeing and modes of being are diffused and potentially internalized in the course of programme implementation even if such programmes do not perform as intended. Advocating a

² By 'dangerous', we follow Foucault in contending: 'My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism' ([Foucault 1984: 343](#)).

strongly 'actor-oriented' approach in studies of both PES (Van Hecken et al., 2015a, b) and neoliberal conservation generally (Brock 2015), therefore, risks obscuring the overarching structural dynamics that influence actors' decisions and shape the outcomes of their actions in often profound and problematic ways.

Secondly, in opposition to recent calls to emphasize the particularity of PES implementation, we contend that it is equally, if not more important to investigate the common elements in PES design across cases and the ways in which it may continue to promote aspects of neoliberalization regardless of how it is actually implemented. Rather than simply dichotomizing neoliberalism and command-and-control or, alternatively, describing shades of variegation in a processual neoliberalization, we advocate attention to the different dimensions of neoliberalization as simultaneously an overarching mode of accumulation, a particular governmentality and set of specific policy measures. This will afford us both a fine-grained understanding of how neoliberalization plays out in on-the-ground practice and the more general patterns in its roll-out as a global programme, thus effectively integrating micro and macro scales of analysis in ways that transcend the limitations of either approach pursued in isolation and allowing us to pursue, as Van Hecken et al. (2015a) advise, a balance between structure and agency in our analyses.

Third, and finally, we conclude that it is important to emphasize that PES is neoliberal because the approach as a whole claims that neoliberal capitalism is both the problem and the solution to the issues it confronts (Büscher 2012). This is the most basic neoliberal conceit of the PES mechanism. Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that this strategy is not only contradictory in its essential vision but that it is also falling far short of intended outcomes in practice, widely failing to compete with far more lucrative extractive industry to define land use in many places (Fletcher et al. 2016) while often exacerbating socioeconomic inequality as well (Fletcher 2012), among numerous other negative consequences (see Büscher et al. 2014).

We use the term 'conceit' here intentionally, then, and not because we want to somehow 'keep the monster alive' as the subject of our critique (a legitimate trap of critical research). The conceit is that PES constrains our imagination from being able to constructively address what we are seeing in the mechanism's evolution in practice: that 'public concerns' can and should never be relegated to 'side objectives' but should always already be inherently integrated in our diverse relations to nature and its conservation. In the neoliberal world whose foundations the 'environmental services' paradigm took for granted, this is ultimately not possible. However, if our prime concern is to promote forms of resource management that are truly sustainable in environmental, economic and social dimensions simultaneously then we agree with Farley (who also seems now to have reversed his earlier position on PES) and colleagues that we need to move away from MBIs, even poorly-functioning ones, altogether and instead pursue forms of environmental management that 'promote cooperation' (2015:244), are guided 'by the logic of gift, reciprocity, and affect' and that celebrate 'the joyful and life-affirming aspects of conservation care labor' (Singh 2015:59, 53).

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