

## An Introduction to Behavioural Ecology, 4th Edition

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# The Role of Prices in Conserving Critical Natural Capital

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## Keywords:

critical natural capital; ecological thresholds; ecosystem services; marginal value; monetary valuation  
capital natural crítico; precios; servicios del ecosistema; valor marginal; valoración monetaria; umbral

**Abstract:** *Until recent decades, economic decision makers have largely ignored the nonmarket benefits provided by nature, resulting in unprecedented threats to ecological life-support functions. The economic challenge today is to decide how much ecosystem structure can be converted to economic production and how much must be conserved to provide essential ecosystem services. Many economists and a growing number of life scientists hope to address this challenge by estimating the marginal value of environmental benefits and then using this information to make economic decisions. I assessed this approach first by examining the role and effectiveness of the price mechanism in a well-functioning market economy, second by identifying the issues that prevent markets from pricing many ecological benefits, and third by focusing on problems inherent to valuing services generated by complex and poorly understood ecosystems subject to irreversible change. I then focus on critical natural capital (CNC), which generates benefits that are essential to human welfare and have few if any substitutes. When imminent ecological thresholds threaten CNC, conservation is essential and marginal valuation becomes inappropriate. Once conservation needs have been met, remaining ecosystem structure is potentially available for economic production. Demand for this available supply will determine prices. In other words, conservation needs should be price determining, not price determined. Conservation science must help identify CNC and the quantity and quality of ecosystem structure required to ensure its sustained provision.*

**Resumen:** *Hasta hace unas décadas, los tomadores de decisiones económicas han ignorado los beneficios no mercantiles proporcionados por la naturaleza, lo que ha resultado en amenazas sin precedentes a las funciones ecológicas básicas para la vida. El reto económico actual es decidir cuanto de la estructura económica puede ser convertido en producción económica y cuanto debe ser conservado para proporcionar los servicios esenciales del ecosistema. Muchos economistas y un creciente número de científicos esperan atender este reto mediante la estimación del valor marginal de los beneficios ambientales para luego usar esta información para tomar decisiones económicas. Evalué este método, primero examinando el papel y la efectividad del mecanismo de precios en una economía de mercado*

*sana; segundo mediante la identificación de temas que previenen que los mercados fijen precios a muchos beneficios ecológicos y tercero mediante el enfoque de problemas inherentes a los servicios de valoración generados por ecosistemas complejos y poco entendidos que están sujetos a cambios irreversibles. Posteriormente abordo el capital natural crítico, que genera beneficios que son esenciales para el bienestar humano y que tiene pocos sustitutos. Cuando los umbrales económicos inminentes amenazan al capital natural crítico, la conservación es esencial y la valoración marginal se vuelve inapropiada. Una vez que se han alcanzado las metas de conservación, la estructura del ecosistema restante está potencialmente disponible para la producción económica. La demanda por esta oferta disponible determinará los precios. En otras palabras, las necesidades de conservación deberían ser determinantes de los precios, no determinadas por los precios. La ciencia de la conservación debe ayudar a identificar el capital natural crítico y la cantidad y calidad de la estructura del ecosistema que se requiere para asegurar un abastecimiento sostenido.*

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