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The ‘Invisible Hands’ of Eco-systems Hybrids in Mediating Sustainability Discourse

Ian Thomson

University of Strathclyde

i.h.thomson@strath.ac.uk

Colin Dey

University of Stirling

colin.dey@stir.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

Within parts of sustainability policy arenas and the accounting literature, there is a faith in the self-organising properties of eco-systems and nature. This is translated into laissez-faire solutions that require no human governance, since nature has her own ‘invisible hand’ to rectify the follies of humanity. However, such conceptions of self-governance may represent little more than an equation within an abstract mathematical model, rather than behaviour based on observable phenomena. In this paper, we explore the impact of the nature and scientific origins of self-organising ‘eco-systems’ and their possible consequences for developing sustainable accounting. We consider the appropriateness of different eco-system hybrids as mediating instruments in the emergence of sustainability programmatic discourses and in changing local processes and practices. Our initial evaluatory framework makes visible some of the implicit assumptions with eco-systems. There is considerable diversity in the eco-system hybrids present in sustainability programmatic discourses, and the selection of any given eco-system hybrid as a mediating instrument can result in substantively different problematisations and solution templates. Understanding eco-system behaviour, and in particular understanding appropriate feedback mechanisms, is useful for sustainable accounting processes and practices. Eco-systems thinking can help identify appropriate sustainable entities, sustainable dynamics, different concepts of predicting behaviours and modelling social, ecological and power distribution consequences, appropriate regulatory mechanisms and the role of human agency. All of the above issues are central to the emergence of sustainable accounting and sustainable societies, but only if the underlying eco-systems are representative of ecological and social realities.

Keywords: sustainability, eco-systems, hybridisation, sustainability reporting.