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Subject: Nothing has yet been lost in our Planet

Comment to the Article:

**“The value of the World’s Ecosystem Services and Natural Capital” R.Costanza,
R.d’Arge, R.de Groot et.al. Nature, 15 May 1997**

Sir.

Nothing has yet been lost in our planet. The welfare of its tenants can be achieved and sustained at a cost which amounts to little more than twice the US GNP without bringing any dramatic changes to the present course of natural progress. If it is true, we don’t really have much to worry about except making sure that those who tend to be careful with their money start lavishing it generously. It is, however, a fact that, especially in this period, the inhabitants of old Europe, are used to saving on everything and, consequently, tend to place their trust only in those projects that promise real changes or are bound to deviate from the present trend, acting upon cultural and behavioural levers. Those who, like myself, have taken the time to read the paper written by Costanza and his collaborators could not but appreciate the detailed report on their findings; I am, however, rather disappointed at the lack of corrective proposals, even though the careful reader will most probably conclude that such corrective process might very well follow, not as a consequence of what is stated in the article, but as a result of the debate opened by the participating list. This is perhaps the great merit that can be attributed to Costanza and his collaborators. It certainly is interesting to notice that a great number of Organizations, Centers and Universities Departments have participated in the writing of this paper as to certify, in a synergic effort, the reliability of the findings. This event may be considered as a good omen for a larger, future participation and a deeper commitment on the part of international organizations, an interesting perspective indeed, if we envisage a more effective, planet wide awareness. But let’s have a closer look at the matter of our concern: “The Value of the World’s Ecosystem Services and the Natural Capital”. This work is a daring and at the same time questionable attempt at assigning the globalization of ecosystem services a real, world-wide, economic value; and it is quite obvious that the sum of ecosystem services may be considered an economic power in virtue of the fact that in theory this may be conceived. Quite another story is to treat ecosystem services as we would any disposable product by resorting to accounting artifices and fainful formulas which appear to be no more than subjective hypothesis. It would be like sticking a price

tag on your wife's greating smile on your back from a nasty day at work, or trying to establish a cost for an act of common courtesy or demanding payment for the scents that gratify your nostrils while walking through the woods; all that would be presumptuous and questionable at best and down right oppressive at worst. However, criticism aside, I do welcome the opportunity to add my two cents worth to the opinions and considerations that blaze my computer screen with my personal brand of near-philosophical thoughts that stem from a 35 year experience as biologist in a microcosm that embodies many of the "biomes" mentioned in Costanza's work. Can a "minimalism", that ecological niche, have presumptuousness to represent the analytic globality of a whole planet? The reverse question may be: Can a "maximalism" be as premtuous as to want to represent the microcosm series? Both questions are to be considered "imperfect" in that they could give rise to speculative thinking and produce two artificial answer.

My intention, instead is to provide Costanza "et al." with an example of substantial contribution as I have been astonished by the way the writers have underestimated the importance of waste treatment (table 1, n.9) where the radioactive waste disposal has not even been mentioned. I belive that one of the most serious commitments that advanced countries will have to face in the next two centuries is the dismantling of nuclear equipment and old plants and the safe disposal of the waste. If this is true, I would be tempted to modify Table 1 and would correct its economic value in Table 2(n.9). This is particularly hard to estimate because not all countries in the past have clearly expressed their position on this type of ecological choices. At the moment I am not in a position to calculate its value, but a gross estimate tells me that by determining the parameters of environmental and social impact (checking sites) with the help of advanced technology, genetics and research, this might excede by 20 times the present estimate (45.4 rather than 2.27). Let me close by expressing my hope that Costanza's work will constitute the premises for a "permanent observatory" on problems connected with ecosystem services and natural capital, by getting Asian countries such as China involved in the project, while they are gradually coming to grips with their industrialization process.

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I wish to declare that the opinions expressed on this article as strictly personal and do not necessarily reflect the views of the CISAM institution.