

Ecological Economics Reviews

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ANNALS OF THE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Volume 1185

Ecological Economics Reviews

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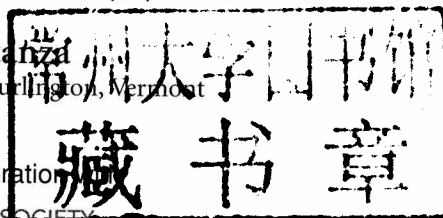
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Published in collaboration with



UNITED STATES SOCIETY
for ecological economics



The New York
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Boston, Massachusetts
2010

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Mailing: The *Annals* is mailed standard rate.

Postmaster: Send all address changes to *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, Journal Customer Services, John Wiley & Sons Inc., 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020.

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Printed in the USA.

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ISSN: 0077-8923 (print); 1749-6632 (online)

ISBN-10: 1-57331-766-7; **ISBN-13:** 978-1-57331-766-5

ANNALS OF THE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

Ecological Economics Reviews: An introduction to the inaugural volume

This inaugural volume of the *Ecological Economics Reviews* (EER) is the response to a growing need for authoritative syntheses of key topics in this rapidly expanding transdisciplinary field. EER provides in-depth reviews on the theory, policy, and implementation of sustainability and sustainable development, with a focus on the economic, social, and environmental challenges facing the world today. This first volume contains 16 papers by leading international experts in ecological economics: the science and management of sustainability.

While interest in creating an ecological economics dates back at least to the 1960s in the work of Kenneth Boulding and Herman Daly, the first formal efforts to bring ecologists and economists together occurred in the 1980s. The International Society for Ecological Economics (ISEE) and the journal *Ecological Economics* started in 1989. The journal has been a huge success, progressing from an initial 4 to 12 issues per year by 1992, with an impact factor now ranking it in the top quarter of all academic journals. The journal now publishes a large number of articles across a broad range of transdisciplinary topics. In 2007, it published 277 articles, ranking it number one among 191 economics journals in this category and number 12 in terms of total citations. Among 52 environmental studies journals, it ranked second in total articles and first in total citations. Among 116 ecology journals, it ranked 10th in total articles and 33rd in total citations, reflecting the generally higher publication and citation rates in the natural versus the social sciences.

This indicates the large and growing interest in ecological economics and the increasing amount of research and number of ideas being generated in this growing field. But the journal is devoted to new research and is not a proper venue for longer review articles—thus, the need for EER.

The idea to start EER arose at the U.S. Society for Ecological Economics (USSEE) meeting in New York City in the summer of 2007. At a reception during the meeting, we were discussing the status of ecological economics with a representative of the New York Academy of Sciences, who pointed out the Academy's interest in expanding their line of review volumes. The rest is history. We engaged a distinguished Editorial Advisory Board and convinced Ida Kubiszewski to take on the managing editor role. EER would not exist had Ida not agreed to do this. She has handled the complex task of getting EER off the ground with amazing grace and skill. She found appropriate reviewers, coaxed authors and reviewers to keep to their deadlines, and managed all the other details of getting the papers into print. We owe her a continuing debt of gratitude.

EER aims to be a trusted venue for comprehensive, authoritative reviews and syntheses of major topics in ecological economics. The 16 reviews in this volume present a broad sweep of ecological economics, from examining how the field “self-defines” through its journal (Luzadis *et al.*) to conceptual approaches, to case studies and emerging issues and perspectives. Glucina and Mayumi review thermodynamics and its application to ecological economics. Bruce Hannon reviews the history of input–output analysis, one of the key analytical tools in the field, and Heckbert *et al.* examine one of the newer modeling approaches: agent-based models. Liu *et al.* and Turner *et al.* tackle two of the specialties of the field, namely valuing ecosystems and their goods and services, but from different perspectives. Murphy and Hall take up the concept of

energy return on invested energy and examine the effectiveness of various energy alternatives and their economic impacts. Barry D. Solomon looks at biofuels from the sustainability perspective. Equitability and fairness, important aspects of ecological economics and governance, are addressed by Jack P. Manno in his essay on commoditization and oppression and by Söderbaum and Brown in their call for pluralistic approaches. Joppa and Pfaff's case study of forest protection approaches suggests that not all protection is equal, and that normalization methods can be helpful to parse out differences; Jesper Stage reviews how developing countries may (or may not) be ready to adapt to climate change. Marjan van den Belt *et al.* describe mediated modeling as a useful tool in public sector administration. Three perspectives papers round out the volume: Turaga *et al.* examine the convergence of social psychology and rational choice into a new approach for ecological economics; Aronson *et al.* argue that the disconnect between knowledge and active movement toward sustainability is due to "great divides" of ideology, economic development, and information access; and Peter A. Victor concludes the volume with an essay exploring the relationship between ecological economics and economic growth.

There have been over 3000 papers published in the *Ecological Economics* journal since its inception in 1989. Important articles in the field have also been published in a wide range of other journals. This mass of literature now cries out for review and synthesis; that is the niche that EER hopes to fill. The reviews that appear in these pages will be the first stop for scholars wishing to get quickly up to speed on the history and status of various topics within the field, and to read about future directions. We hope you will enjoy and profit from the journey.

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Ecological Economics Reviews

Editors

Karin Limburg and Robert Costanza

Ecological Economics Reviews: An introduction to the inaugural volume

By Robert Costanza and Karin Limburg vii

Part I. Fundamentals

The science of ecological economics: A content analysis of *Ecological Economics*, 1989–2004

By Valerie A. Luzadis, Leandro Castello, Jaewon Choi, Eric Greenfield, Sung-kyun Kim, John Munsell, Erik Nordman, Carol Franco, and Flavien Olowabi 1

Connecting thermodynamics and economics: Well-lit roads and burned bridges

By Mark David Glucina and Kozo Mayumi 11

Part II. Approaches

The role of input–output analysis of energy and ecologic systems: In the early development of ecological economics—a personal perspective

By Bruce Hannon 30

Agent-based modeling in ecological economics

By Scott Heckbert, Tim Baynes, and Andrew Reeson 39

Valuing ecosystem services: Theory, practice, and the need for a transdisciplinary synthesis

By Shuang Liu, Robert Costanza, Stephen Farber, and Austin Troy 54

Ecosystem valuation: A sequential decision support system and quality assessment issues

By R. Kerry Turner, Sian Morse-Jones, and Brendan Fisher 79

Year in review—EROI or energy return on (energy) invested

By David J. Murphy and Charles A. S. Hall 102

Part III. Case studies

Biofuels and sustainability

By Barry D. Solomon 119

Reassessing the forest impacts of protection: The challenge of nonrandom location and a corrective method

By Lucas Joppa and Alexander Pfaff 135

Economic valuation of climate change adaptation in developing countries

By Jesper Stage 150

Part IV. Equitability and governance

Commoditization and oppression: A systems approach to understanding the economic dynamics of modes of oppression <i>By Jack P. Manno</i>	164
Democratizing economics: Pluralism as a path toward sustainability <i>By Peter Söderbaum and Judy Brown</i>	179
Public sector administration of ecological economics systems using mediated modeling <i>By Marjan van den Belt, Jennifer R. Kenyan, Elizabeth Krueger, Alison Maynard, Matthew Galen Roy, and Ian Raphael</i>	196

Part V. Emerging perspectives

Pro-environmental behavior: Rational choice meets moral motivation <i>By Rama Mohana R. Turaga, Richard B. Howarth, and Mark E. Borsuk</i>	211
The road to sustainability must bridge three great divides <i>By James Aronson, James N. Bignaut, Rudolf S. de Groot, Andre Clewell, Porter P. Lowry II, Paddy Woodworth, Richard M. Cowling, Daniel Renison, Joshua Farley, Christelle Fontaine, David Tongway, Samuel Levy, Suzanne J. Milton, Orlando Rangel, Bev Debrincat, and Chris Birkinshaw</i>	225
Ecological economics and economic growth <i>By Peter A. Victor</i>	237

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ANNALS OF THE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

The science of ecological economics**A content analysis of *Ecological Economics*, 1989–2004**

Valerie A. Luzadis,¹ Leandro Castello,² Jaewon Choi,³ Eric Greenfield,⁴ Sung-kyun Kim,⁵ John Munsell,⁶ Erik Nordman,⁷ Carol Franco,⁸ and Flavien Olowabi⁹

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The *Ecological Economics* journal is a primary source for inquiry on ecological economics and sustainability. To explore the scholarly pursuit of ecological economics, we conducted a content analysis of 200 randomly sampled research, survey, and methodological articles published in *Ecological Economics* during the 15-year period of 1989–2004. Results of the analysis were used to investigate facets of transdisciplinarity within the journal. A robust qualitative approach was used to gather and examine data to identify themes representing substantive content found within the span of sampled journal papers. The extent to which each theme was represented was counted as well as additional data, such as author discipline, year published, etc. Four main categories were revealed: (1) foundations (self-reflexive themes stemming from direct discussions about ecological economics); (2) human systems, represented by the themes of values, social indicators of well-being, intergenerational distribution, and equity; (3) biophysical systems, including themes, such as carrying capacity and scarcity, energy, and resource use, relating directly to the biophysical aspects of systems; and (4) policy and management encompassing themes of development, growth, trade, accounting, and valuation, as well as institutional structures and management. The results provide empirical evidence for discussing the future direction of ecological economic efforts.

Keywords: ecological economics; content analysis; qualitative analysis; mixed-method research

Despite 20 years of development, the domain of ecological economics remains unsettled to many. In the first issue of *Ecological Economics*, the stated aim of the field was to explore “the relationships between ecosystems and economic systems”¹ and embrace transdisciplinarity as a key vehicle in this pursuit. While headway has been made in the past two decades, it is also true that much work remains. The quest for greater clarity about the content, practice, and transdisciplinarity of ecological economics prompted content analysis of randomly sampled articles from 1989 to 2004 in *Ecological Economics*. Our goal was to provide empirically based historical insights that will help in shaping future dialogue and strategies within the field.

During a doctoral-level course on the conceptual, theoretical, and philosophical foundations of ecological economics, the lack of clear disciplinary foci surfaced on numerous occasions, prompting students from a wide variety of backgrounds to pose questions about the practical elements of the field. These questions surfaced in spite of—and in many cases as a result of—their simultaneous exploration of theoretical literatures outlining the structure and function of ecological economics. References to the transdisciplinary nature of ecological economics^{1,2} further complicated the discussion, both in posing a challenge to understand transdisciplinarity itself, and in an attempt to identify its representation within the scholarly works of ecological economics.

Recent analyses of environmental and ecological economics citations³ and influential publications in ecological economics indicate the importance of *Ecological Economics* in communicating the results of sustainability science. We decided to investigate manuscript contributions to the journal as a means of pursuing the question: "What constitutes the scholarly pursuit of ecological economics?" We designed and implemented the study described herein to help answer this question.

Data source: the journal of *Ecological Economics*

The *Ecological Economics* journal published by Elsevier is a key resource for anyone interested in ecological economics and is a source of highly influential papers in the field.⁴ The International Society for Ecological Economics sponsors the journal, which has been published since 1989, following a 1987 meeting in Barcelona at which the organization was created.⁵ The name "Ecological Economics" was chosen because the founders felt it implied a "broad ecological, interdisciplinary, and holistic view of the problem of studying and managing our world."¹ The aims and scope of the journal⁶ state:

Ecological Economics is concerned with extending and integrating the study and management of "nature's household" (ecology) and "mankind's household" (economics). This integration is necessary because conceptual and professional isolation have led to economic and environmental policies which are mutually destructive rather than reinforcing in the long term. The journal is transdisciplinary in spirit and methodologically open.

Specific research areas covered include: valuation of natural resources, sustainable agriculture and development, ecologically integrated technology, integrated ecologic-economic modeling at scales from local to regional to global, implications of thermodynamics for economics and ecology, renewable resource management and conservation, critical assessments of the basic assumptions underlying current economic and ecological paradigms and the implications of alternative assumptions, economic and ecological consequences of genetically engineered organisms, and gene pool inventory and management (p. 1).

The Guide for Authors from the journal in 1995 and again in 2000 reveals generally the same list of research areas, with the addition in 1995 of "alternative principles for valuing natural wealth, integrating natural resources and environmental services into national income and wealth accounts, methods of implementing efficient environmental policies, case studies of economic-ecologic conflict or harmony, etc."⁷

A review of the first 10 years of *Ecological Economics* looked primarily at the number and types of articles published by journal category (analysis, commentary, methods, survey, news and views) and authorship, with a brief accounting of papers by topic by title.⁸ More recent citation analyses of influential publications in ecological economics reveal the importance of the *Ecological Economics* journal as a venue for broader discourse about the relationships between ecology and economics.^{3,4}

Methods

This study constitutes a content analysis of the first 15 years of the *Ecological Economics* journal. The focus was limited to the 1077 research, survey, and methodological articles published in *Ecological Economics* during the 15-year period of 1989–2004. A random sample of 200 papers was taken to ensure a 90% confidence interval with a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$ that the selected articles would be representative of all articles published during that period.

Babbie⁹ describes content analysis as "the study of recorded human communications," including those found in books, magazines, web pages, and peer-reviewed journals. Underpinning this content analysis is the question of describing what is included in *Ecological Economics*. Of critical importance in content analysis is the unit of analysis and the methods for choosing sub-samples within the unit.⁹ The primary unit of analysis for the qualitative, descriptive analysis of content in this study was the individual article. A secondary analysis used the full data set (representing the articles in the journal from 1989–2004) to reflect on the transdisciplinary nature of ecological economics.

The first phase of data collection followed a constructivist approach that required reading the abstract, introduction, and conclusion sections of each selected paper to identify essential words and

phrases that reflect the main content of each paragraph read within each article. This is a much more robust approach than a simple analysis of titles to reveal topics—a common approach for quick content analyses. Each critical phrase or word is considered a “code”—the raw data of the content analysis and will be noted as such throughout this manuscript. Codes are the embodiment of the substantive content of each paper.

Analysis of the codes is a systematic process of conceptualization that groups raw data within a standardized framework.⁹ Analysis of the 200 articles in our sample was completed by a team of four coders. Reliability of codes was achieved through training prior to data collection that required all team members to independently code the same articles. The codes were reviewed by the coordinator, an experienced qualitative researcher, and the full group met to discuss the codes, how they were determined, and resolve any differences. This training period continued using additional articles until agreement among coders was reached without any discussion. By the end of this training, a clear link was noted between the range of number of codes and the number of pages in the article. This baseline was used by the coordinator to monitor the average number of codes per page turned in by each coder as an additional check on coding reliability.

Each of the four team members coded 50 of the 200 articles in the sample. About 2500 codes were collected and subsequently analyzed into categories. This grouping process involved the team of four coders and the coordinator. Each code was typed along with identification of its source paper, and these small snippets carried the data for consideration by the group as a whole. In a 2-day-long process, the group jointly considered each code, proceeding through an iterative process, physically grouping and regrouping the typed codes until logical categories were agreed upon by the full team. Validity of the results was enhanced by requiring agreement among all coders and the coordinator. This effort resulted in 64 categories averaging roughly 39 codes each. These categories were then discussed to identify an emergent set of themes that comprehensively encompassed the codes and categories. The codes, categories, and themes were then identified with a more comprehensive list of 43 essential phrases and words that represented the topical substance of the articles for use in the second phase of

data collection to determine the proportional representation of each main idea in the full sample.

The second phase of data collection was conducted by a second team of four researchers, each searching 50 of the 200 articles in the sample for occurrence of the following items:

- Essential phrases and words as identified in phase one data collection
- Author's country of origin (collected for first three authors, three or more authors noted)
- Author's disciplinary base (as identified by departmental affiliation when possible; collected for first three authors)
- Type of article (empirical, conceptual, theoretical, epistemological)
- Primary methods used.

Each article was obtained from the online journal, through ScienceDirect, as a PDF. Searches for essential phrases and words were completed using a search function to detect their presence or absence within each document. The article was examined to determine if the essential phrase or word represented the same meaning as identified by the qualitative data team and was counted if it did. Other data were found in the front material and in the methods sections of the articles.

The secondary analysis to capture the transdisciplinary nature of ecological economics involved creating a list of expected elements from a wide reading of the ecological economics literature well beyond the journal (see Box 1 for further background). This list was sent to key ecological economics scholars for review and comment, generating a good deal of commentary, and ultimately a final list:

- Covers topics that interface ecological and human systems
- Includes issues of scale and distribution, not only allocation
- Covers a wide range of temporal and spatial scales
- Draws on a wide range of disciplinary bases for theories and methods
- Acknowledges biophysical constraints, especially the Laws of Thermodynamics
- Richly interprets to reflect complexity, systems approaches, and the concept of evolution rather reductionist or mechanistic.

Box 1. Measuring transdisciplinarity

The challenging nature of the concept of transdisciplinarity involved deliberations of how to measure this aspect of ecological economics using the data from our content analysis. These discussions led to an empirical and visceral understanding of “transdisciplinarity” that we felt was valuable to share here rather than simply presenting the final approach used. Based in part on conversations with key leaders in ecological economics who reviewed the list of key elements, the research team began with the notion that the papers published in the journal could be assigned a score for how many of the key ecological economics elements they reflected as a means of measuring transdisciplinarity at the paper level.

While the list of key elements was agreed to reflect the body of scholarly work identified as ecological economics, by attempting to find these elements in individual manuscripts it quickly became clear that any individual paper was not likely to have all of them or even, sometimes, many of them. Yet we were beginning to get a collective picture as we gathered the data and we could see the elements of a transdisciplinary ecological economics revealing themselves across the various papers. The lesson was in finding that the appropriate unit of analysis to determine the presence or absence of these elements was the collective rather than individual paper level. As a meta-level construct reaching beyond disciplinary boundaries for both theories and methods, integrating knowledge from expert and non-expert sources, transdisciplinarity is better reflected at the collective level.

Using the entire data set from the two phases of data collection as described above, we assessed transdisciplinarity as a reflection of key elements in ecological economics at the meta-scale by looking collectively at the topics, methods, and disciplines identified through the qualitative and quantitative methods as described.

Using the aggregated dataset from the two phases of data collection as described above, the research team determined the presence or absence of the elements, and when possible, the extent to which they were present within the representative sample of articles. The results presented are descriptive in nature, based on simple tabulation and summary.

Results

The wide range of topics in the pages of *Ecological Economics* from 1989–2004 are summarized below in two ways. First we present the topical summary from the qualitative data collection and analysis that includes a list of 25 themes that are organized into four main groups (one with two sub-groups) to describe the main content of the journal (see Table 1). The four main groups include foundation of ecological economics, human systems, biophysical systems, and policy and management and are described below.

The foundations of ecological economics group included self-reflexive themes stemming from direct discussions about ecological economics as an

Table 1. Qualitative data themes and groupings

Group	Theme
Foundation	Communications
<i>Self-reflexive</i>	Direct mention of ecological economics
	Interdisciplinarity
	Transdisciplinarity
<i>Theory</i>	Economic theory
<i>Methods</i>	Methods
Humans Systems	Values
	Social indicators
	Intergenerational distribution
	Equity
Biophysical Systems	Resource use
	Technology
	Carrying capacity
	Scarcity
	Systems, thermodynamic
	Energy
	Space and time scales
Policy and Management	Economic development
	Economic growth
	Institutional structures, management, and development
	Trade
	Environmental degradation related to economics
	Environmental accounting
	Valuation
	General policy

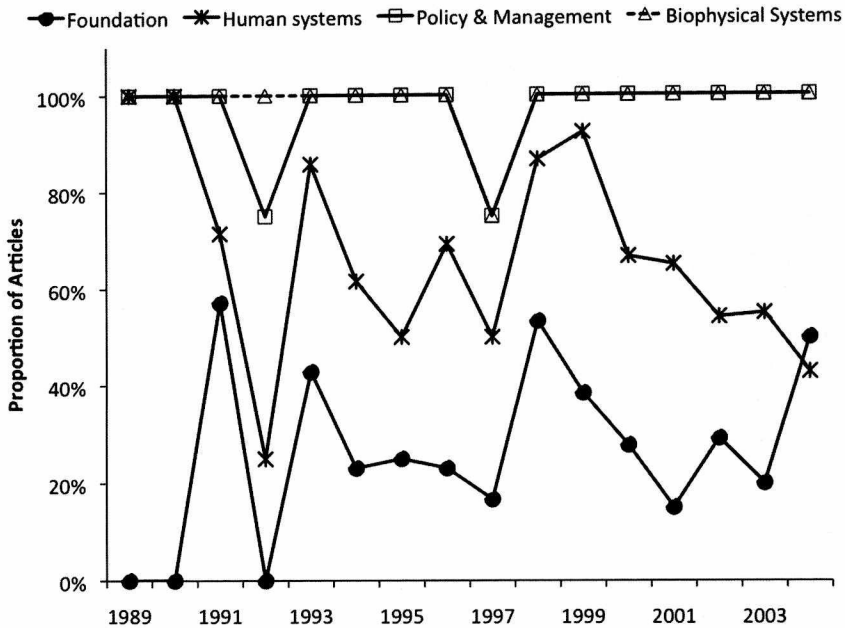


Figure 1. Proportion of articles in each category, 1989–2004.

area of research and communication among and between scientists, practitioners, and stakeholders from varied backgrounds. The foundations group also includes theory and methods associated with ecological economics.

The second main grouping, human systems, is represented by the themes of values (i.e., held values, beliefs, norms, morals, and ethics), social indicators of well-being, intergenerational distribution, and equity. The biophysical systems group of topics includes themes, such as carrying capacity and scarcity, energy, and resource use, relating directly to the biophysical aspects of systems. The policy and management group encompasses themes of development, growth, trade, accounting, and valuation, as well as institutional structures and management, essentially representing a problem-solving approach of moving toward sustainability. The full list of themes and groups is presented in Table 1.

The second presentation of topical content of the journal as identified in our study is the proportional analyses of articles representing each main group (Figs. 1 and 2). Figure 1 shows general trends over time for presence of the main groups as presented in Table 1. Policy and management and biophysical systems were almost always present in the sampled articles, revealing at least a multidisciplinary effort,

if not interdisciplinary. Interestingly, the number of papers primarily addressing human systems has gone down over time. Figure 2 shows the proportions of occurrence of the wide range of topics represented in the pages of *Ecological Economics*. In agreement with the general topic trends, we see that natural systems are a primary base for studies in *Ecological Economics*. Policy topics were present in nearly two-thirds of the articles, with technology occurring in 45%. Biophysical systems and natural resources of all sorts, including water, land, pollution, forests, and energy, were among the 10 most commonly represented critical words (Fig. 2). Economic growth was a topic in about one-third of the articles.

The articles in the journal were also described by type: empirical, conceptual or theoretical, and epistemological. Figure 3 shows that slightly more than half of the articles were empirical in nature, followed by a large proportion (42%) of conceptual and theoretical articles. A scant 3% were epistemological in nature, in keeping with the general trends shown above.

A wide variety of methodological approaches were employed by authors of *Ecological Economics* articles. Using the same basic categories, methods were grouped by primary approach. Modeling was

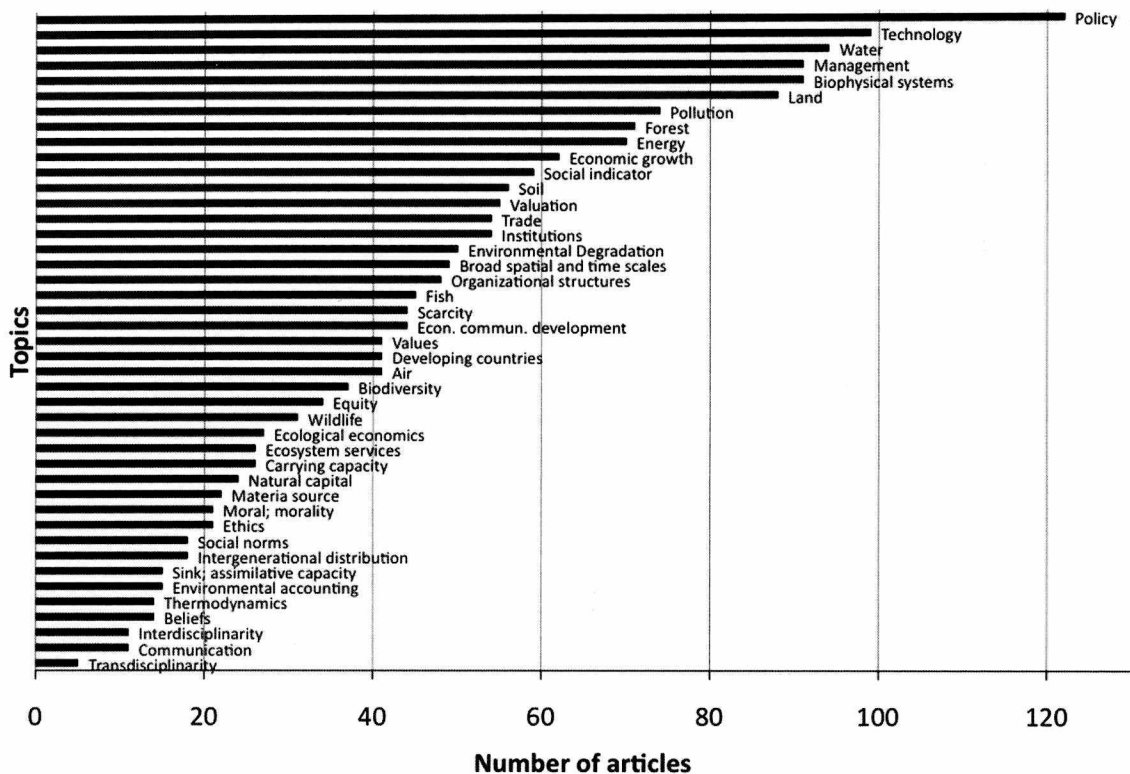


Figure 2. Topics as represented by critical words, with proportion of articles representing each.

the most frequent method, contained in 27.8% of all articles (Fig. 4). Modeling included a wide variety of applications, including economic, biophysical, and integrated social-biophysical models. Social methods, including surveys, case studies, historical analysis, risk analysis, and general comparative analyses, collectively were represented in 23.5% of articles. Valuation was the next most common methodology, showing up in 20.9% of the articles. Other economic methods, including environmental accounting, net present value, price and market analyses, input-output matrices, and economic production functions, among others, were found in 20% of the articles. Biophysical methods, including environmental footprint, physical geography, and energy and material flow analyses, were found in 7.8% of the articles. More than one distinct method or methodology was used in 17.4% of the articles reviewed.

As with methods, a broad range of theories provided the foundation of articles in the journal. The single largest group was classified as economic in nature (56%) (Fig. 5). Theories that specifically

link biophysical and economic concepts were separately identified and were found in 6% of the articles. Other theories represented included biophysical (16%), policy and management (10%), social (8%), and foundation theories, such as philosophy of science, in 4% of the articles.

Given the multidisciplinary approaches and the transdisciplinary hopes of ecological economics, the number of authors and the number of disciplines as

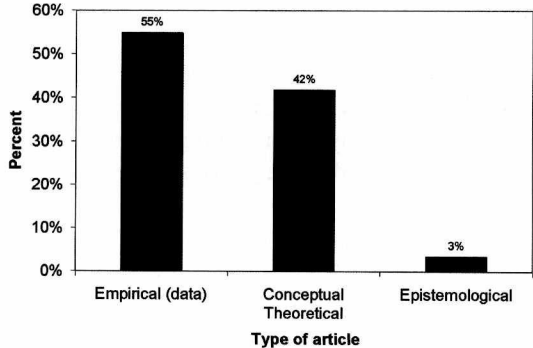


Figure 3. Types of articles published.

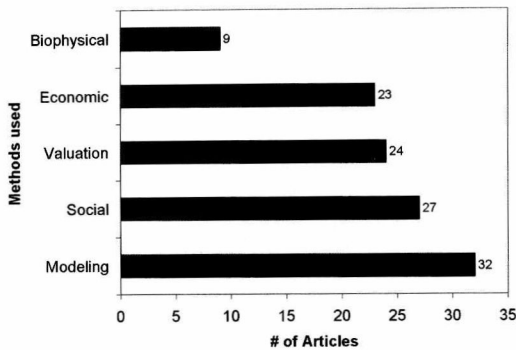


Figure 4. Variety of methods used in articles.

represented by departmental affiliations of authors over the first 15 years of publication of the journal were evaluated. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the articles represented a single discipline, and 27% have two disciplines, leaving 8% with three or more disciplines. Of the full sample of papers, 45% had single authors. More than half of the articles (55%) had two or more authors, including 29% having three or more authors. However, papers with two or more authors did not necessarily involve two or more disciplines (see Fig. 6).

Figure 7 shows the proportion and change over time of the main discipline of the first author of each article. First authors from economics show a slight downward trend over time, and social science authors appear to be rising in number over time. No other clear authorship patterns emerge from this analysis.

The secondary analysis found that all six major concepts of ecological economics identified prior to data collection were present in the content of the journal. These include: (1) topics that interface ecological and human systems; (2) issues of scale and distribution; (3) attention to broad temporal and spatial scales; (4) draws on a wide range of disciplinary bases for theories and methods; (5) acknowledges biophysical constraints, especially the Laws of Thermodynamics; and (6) richly interprets results to reflect complexity, systems approaches, and the concept of evolution.

Discussion

These data provide an empirical foundation from which to reflect on the scholarly pursuit of ecological economics. We clearly see expression of the ecological economics worldview as described both

in the Aims and Scope of the journal, and outlined in the broader debate on the topic of ecological economics.^{2,10–13} In particular, we see the foundational ideas of systems thinking and evolutionary concepts reflected in the journal’s content (Table 1). Notions, such as the relationship between the Laws of Thermodynamics and economic systems, and human and biophysical systems as complex coevolving systems are implicit in most of the published manuscripts. Many of the themes identified by the qualitative research were stated in the original and subsequent Aims and Scope,^{6,7} reflecting successful editorial management of manuscript selection to meet the goals. It may also suggest a more general level of agreement that these broad topics are fruitful areas of and/or approaches to research. The variation of foundational, self-reflexive papers over time, as shown in Figure 1, reflects the ebb and flow of debate regarding what constitutes ecological economics, both practically and theoretically. Debate of this sort is integral to the direction of further intellectual development in ecological economics.

The predominance of policy, management, and economic themes was not surprising given the focus of ecological economics on sustainability. We note that while the word policy occurs with greatest frequency, few articles (~10%) use a policy theory base. This indicates the applied nature of *Ecological Economics* articles as they relate to policy. They inform policy but rarely analyze it in a theoretical sense. The clear inclusion of policy, management, and economic considerations linked with biophysical systems in nearly all studies also supports the secondary analysis results that the main concepts of ecological economics are found within the

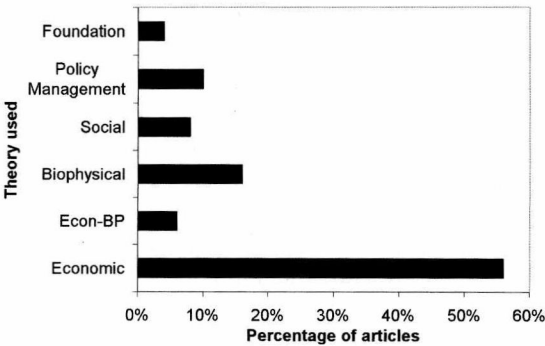


Figure 5. Proportion of articles using various theories.