

*One number – absent from mainstream economics for some unknown reason
– could inform us of the health of the economy, our ecosystem, even our future.*

FOREWORD

A NATION'S NATURE – WORTH COUNTING

Get your facts first, then you can distort them as you please.

– Mark Twain, humorist, author, proto-geonomist

BE FOREWARNED

Got it all. Beauty. Wealth. Intelligence. That's our planet, Earth. A pinup, a model for calendars. And worth so many trillions, how *could* anyone count them all?

Why would anyone – outside of idle curiosity – count them? For several good reasons. The worth of Earth in America is a statistic you could put to excellent use:

1st: Earth's worth can indicate the economy's health. Our overall spending for parts of never-produced nature – locations primarily – is a surplus. The bigger the surplus, the better the economy is performing, like a field in bloom.

2nd: Across space, sub-sectors vary in value. You could compare regions, see the value of where pollution is high versus where it is low. You'd have another way to tell how much wrecking the ecosystem is costing you, and how big the payoff would be by producing goods and services cleanly, efficiently.

3rd: Over time, the total rises and falls. By tracking the flow, you can tell where the economy is headed. Indeed, while no big-name economist predicted the most recent recession, several who focus on the value of land (and resources) – “geonomists” – did (Ch 28). Savers and investors (just about all of us) would appreciate knowing what phase comes next.

A possible fourth reason is that, were paradigms to shift, society could redirect natural value into universally beneficial projects. For instance, Alaska uses a portion of oil revenue to pay residents a dividend; anyone have bills to pay? Aspen, Colorado uses a slice to make housing affordable; otherwise, even doctors can't afford to live in that ritzy ski resort (Ch 40).

TABOO TABULATION

Given the insights that a figure for the worth of Earth can yield, why is it not already known? Or easily found? Or the stuff of ballads? Would those failings have anything to do with that fourth reason, the possibility of redirecting those values away from present recipients? Wouldn't be the first time that power influenced research (Ch 2).

While some of us want the value of land, others want land to lack a price. Lovers of nature, the outdoors, wildlife, natural sciences and science in general consider Earth to be priceless. Those folks, understandably, don't want to see land as a commodity. Yet beware of what you wish for. Where land lacks a price tag, people take more than they need and use that recklessly, as in the Brazilian rainforest.

Others are fine with nature as commodity, even if indifferent to knowing its aggregate value. Our public agencies calculate the returns to those providing labor and those investing capital but not those owning land. Why? And why don't conventional economists demand to know how much we all spend for the nature we use? Or work such concepts into their theories since people paid for never-produced land respond differently from people paid for supplying their labor or capital?

BUT WHAT IT'S DONE FOR US LATELY?

Seeking to know land value does have an honorable lineage. Long ago, measuring the annual output – i.e., value – of one's territory paid off for all humanity. In the agrarian society of ancient Sumer in the Fertile Crescent, rulers wanted to assign the best lands to the best farmers, or to rotate the families so everyone got a shot at the most fertile fields. And later, to take a cut. So they *counted* their harvests.

For humanity, the payoff from keeping those first accounts was huge. People learned to turn their little pictures into letters and eventually became literate. Further, their accurate accounts of output enabled them to create and exchange tokens of value; *they invented money*. Money and literacy went on to shape much of civilization as we know it. Once again, knowing the worth of Earth could pay off big.

We're now off on an intellectual quest, going where mainstream economists fear to tread. We'll wade into the torrential flow of payments for locations like those in Manhattan and into the crawling creek of payments for land in Death Valley. As Carl Sagan said, "*Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.*"