

# Should We Pursue Green Economic Growth?



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Article

# Should We Pursue Green Economic Growth?

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**Abstract** Environmentalists have long claimed it is unjust for the state to prioritize economic interests over environmental ones by sacrificing ecosystem integrity and functioning to unsustainably expand the economy. Recently, mainstream environmentalists have moved to a more conciliatory approach highlighting the common ground between environmental and economic goals. They today claim processes of economic growth and development can be made just if they become *green*. This paper explores the question: should states pursue “green growth”? Although some critics claim green growth is impossible, I maintain it is. I theorize three conditions that must be met for an instance of growth to be truly considered green. That a development project is green, however, does not automatically ensure it is just. Justice considerations remain in adjudicating the competing interests of different groups of stakeholders. I then examine four reasonable approaches to resolving controversies over the pursuit of green growth: cost-benefit analysis, sufficientarianism, democracy, and pluralism. I conclude a liberal pluralist form of decision-making is best for ensuring fairness.

**Keywords** ecosystem services; indigenous rights; cost-benefit analysis; sufficientarianism; liberalism; eco-relational pluralism; democracy; green growth; ecocide; economic development

## 1. Introduction

In the aftermath of WWII, the idea states should aim to maximize economic growth rose to global political hegemony.<sup>1</sup> Environmentalist movements of the following decades challenged this view by arguing the ecological integrity and functioning of the natural world ought to instead be prioritized over economic accumulation. Today, environmentalists continue to problematize the ecological devastation wrought by industrial practices and the sacrifice of remaining wild spaces in the name of progress.<sup>2</sup> However, many mainstream environmentalists have recently moved to a have-your-cake-and-eat-too model permissive of economic growth so long as that growth is “green”. This paper will offer conceptual tools for this kind of environmental model rapidly mounting in popular, corporate, and political support, by exploring the question: Should states pursue *green* economic growth?

The paper will begin by addressing whether green economic growth is even possible. I theorize three conditions that must be met for economic growth to count as green. Special attention will be paid to renewable energy projects, e.g., erecting wind turbines and solar panels, building geothermal power plants and hydroelectric dams, and harvesting biofuels. The justification for this focus is that many theorists and policymakers believe transitioning economies away from reliance on fossil fuels toward renewable energy offers the best (or only) hope for lowering the negative ecological impact of industrial processes while still expanding the size of the overall economy. The transition in energy production infrastructure away from “dirty” energy sources to “clean” ones is conceived as both an instance of green growth and a prerequisite for it in other economic sectors. As Dunlap ([1], p. 83) surmises, “renewable energy...has emerged as the

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<sup>1</sup> In Harry Truman’s 1949 presidential inaugural address, he announced the U.S. aspiration to deliver a “fair deal” to the entire world aimed at “uplifting” the “underdeveloped areas” of the globe. Since then, world leaders have comprehensively recognized, accepted, and pursued the goal of integrating all communities into the global industrial system ([2], pp. 3–4). Barry ([3], p. 1) provides a complete history explaining how economic and growth and development rose to become regarded as a universally accepted good during the immediate post-WW2 period and the Cold War “as a key part of the U.S. led competition of the ‘free capitalist world’ against the Communist bloc”. He concludes “growth in this way achieves (almost) ‘full spectrum ideological domination’ within modern liberal capitalist politics” ([3], p. 13).

<sup>2</sup> There is recognition that current economic practices are annihilating the environment, resulting in pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, desertification, and ocean acidification. Eileen Crist vividly describes our situation as one in which “the richness of the living world is coming undone as the human juggernaut eclipses the stupendous diversity of our only cohort in the universe, turning the Earth into a biologically impoverished human colony” ([4], p. 12).

## Highlights of Science

protagonist of our times, positioned as a solution to our ever-increasing energy consumption and environmental issues”.

While opportunities for green economic growth via the construction of new energy production infrastructure are presented as “win-win” scenarios (for both the environment and the economy), it is crucial to point out that not all segments of society agree. For instance, those who will lose their jobs (coal miners or oil rig workers) or those who are stripped of their way of life (people following traditional subsistence practices displaced from their land) may be vehemently opposed to green development projects.

I contend that even under idealized conditions, being green does not automatically ensure such development projects will be *just*. Justice considerations remain in adjudicating the competing interests of different groups of stakeholders. Which claims ought to be prioritized? This paper examines what I take to be the most reasonable methods of settling disputes over the usage of natural spaces and their resources: Should resources be mobilized in pursuit of green economic growth? Dirty growth? Or no growth at all? The strengths and weaknesses of four methods of political decision-making will be assessed: (1) cost-benefit, (2) sufficientarian, (3) democratic, and (4) pluralist. I will ultimately recommend the pluralist method as the best means of ensuring fairness in controversies over green economic growth.

## 2. What is Green Economic Growth?

At least since the Industrial Revolution, economic growth has been achieved primarily at the expense of the natural world. The idea of green growth imagines there is a way to *decouple* economic gains from unsustainable ecological destruction. A transition in energy production infrastructure away from fossil fuels to green energy sources is understood as necessary for this decoupling. Many scholars such as Timothee Parrique, Jonathan Barth, Francois Briens, Christian Kerschner, Alejo Kraus-Polk, Anna Kuokkanen, and Joachim Spangenberg argue against the possibility of uniting the seemingly contradictory aims of economic growth and environmental preservation [5]. In this section, I will examine whether green economic growth is even possible. I argue that, yes, it is possible and can be truly regarded as green when meeting three conditions. Yet even under these idealized conditions, justice disputes will remain.

Parrique *et al.* ([5], pp. 4–5) authoritatively document reasons to be skeptical regarding the possibility of green economic growth, including: (1) there will be rising resource/energy extractive costs because less intensive options are usually used first; (2) rebound effects of efficiency gains will lead to higher use of energy from changing consumer preferences and expectations and/or social structures (e.g., greater fuel efficiency means more roads constructed); (3) new technologies can accelerate existing and/or create novel problems (e.g., nuclear power generates problems of radioactive waste disposal), and (4) recycling rates are low and require significant energy/resource inputs. Despite these concerns, many theorists and policymakers maintain that transitioning economies away from reliance on fossil fuels towards renewable energy will lower the overall ecological impact of industrial processes while expanding the aggregate size of the economy.

Scholars like Alexander Dunlap have challenged the prevailing view that renewable energy infrastructure is environmentally friendly or sustainable [1]. Dunlap ([1], p. 89) convincingly argues that renewable energy infrastructure continues to require the “hydrocarbon fuel extraction necessary for mining, processing, manufacturing and transporting raw materials and manufactured components”. Due to these large expenditures of fossil fuels, he asserts “there is no such thing as ‘renewable energy’ plain and simple.” Rather it is best to think of them as “fossil fuel+ technologies” ([1], p. 94). The work of various scholars like Dunlap and “degrowth advocates” provide compelling reasons to doubt economic growth can be decoupled from environmental destruction. The construction and usage of green energy production infrastructure is clearly still ecologically destructive in that it involves ecocide and is dependent on inherently unsustainable mining projects [6].<sup>3</sup>

I therefore propose an alternative definition that conceives of green economic development not as “decoupled” from unsustainable ecological destruction, but as at least *less* destructive than economic endeavors that would have utilized only dirty sources of energy. Certain projects and policies can constitute green economic growth when three conditions are met: (1) they expand

<sup>3</sup> For instance, usage of new forms of hydroelectric, solar, geothermal, and wind energy are dependent on rechargeable lithium-ion batteries that must be mined in an environmentally harmful manner.

the economy; (2) they cause less environmental harm than prior or other proposed uses of the natural resources, and (3) the additional social resources or energy produced are be used to offline environmentally harmful activities or to pursue other pro-environmental ends (e.g., incubating endangered bird or reptile eggs or cleaning up superfund sites), thereby avoiding the additional efficiency gains producing rebound effects.<sup>4</sup> For instance, constructing a geothermal energy plant on a mountain previously approved for annihilation as a coal strip mine could count as green growth. So long as the geothermal plant: 1) produces more energy/resources than the coal mine (to count as growth); 2) its construction, operation, and maintenance are less environmentally harmful than the mine (to count as green);<sup>5</sup> and (3) the additional energy and resources produced are used to offline environmentally harmful activities or to pursue other pro-environmental ends. But as I will now discuss, even if these ideal conditions are met there may still be justice concerns.

New energy production infrastructure and the mining of necessary rare earth minerals must take up room somewhere. Unfortunately, the most economically attractive lands to claim for these industrial activities are often the very same places where they can do the most ecological harm, i.e., rural areas that serve as critical habitats for wildlife. It is not only wildlife that it is negatively impacted, but people whose vital interests are bound up with the functioning of local ecosystems, materially, culturally, and even spiritually.<sup>6</sup> Today, green energy infrastructure development typically involves claims on rural areas where land is cheap, and the existing users are socially marginal and have few formal land rights [7]. This includes people living off the land in a subsistence fashion and indigenous groups following their traditional ecological practices.<sup>7</sup>

Some energy development projects have thus been dubbed “green colonialism” for their disruption of traditional ways of life. Some of the Sami people of Norway, for example, are protesting the construction of wind turbines in the remote North because the turbines prevent them from engaging in their ancient practices of reindeer herding [8]. Further examples of current green colonialist controversies include: *Rio Tinto*’s proposed copper mine in Oak Flats (Chi’chil Bildagotee) on sacred Apache land; *Lithium Americas*’ plan to mine the Salinas Grandes salt flats at the expense of Kolla indigenous communities; the targeting of thousands of acres of Amazonian rainforest to be destroyed and converted into biofuel, which threatens the continued survival of hundreds of indigenous groups that call the region home; and China’s intended construction of the 250-megawatt Kaliwa Dam that will displace thousands of Filipino villagers.

In such cases, it is not enough to mollify groups of people opposing green development by telling them, “You should be grateful it’s not a coal mine.” From their perspective, the direct result of the project, whether “green” or not, is essentially the same. It immediately results in undermining the vital interests tied to their local ecosystems.

In the remaining sections, I will examine four approaches to fairly balancing competing interests in controversies over the pursuit of green economic growth: 1) cost-benefit analysis, which aims at maximizing total aggregate social utility; (2) sufficientarianism, which aims at maximizing the number of people in the society with enough social resources to lead a good life; (3) a democratic approach, which aims at involving the public in decision-making; and (4) a pluralist approach, which aims for the state to remain impartial in their treatment of various reasonable life plans.

Often these four methods work together and reinforce each other. For example, Elizabeth Anderson advocates for what she calls “democratic equalitarianism” which aims to “create a community in which people stand in relations of equality to others” [(9), p. 289]. Her theory endorses aspects of both sufficientarian and democratic approaches. Combining the approaches may sometimes effectively resolve environmental controversies. But what ought to be done when

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<sup>4</sup> Rebound effects occur when the use of resources or energy is not reduced, as expected, after an increase in efficiency in the use of the resource or energy source [10]. Jevons’ Paradox is the most famous example of a rebound effect in which technological advancements in the efficient use of coal, such as innovations in steam engines, instead of decreasing coal consumption, led to an increase in overall coal usage.

<sup>5</sup> This includes even secondary infrastructures necessary for building, operating, and maintaining the facility (e.g., transformers, transmission lines, and roads) and the energy and resources required for constructing, manufacturing, and transporting raw materials and manufactured components and parts.

<sup>6</sup> Barry defines vital interests as “certain objective requirements for human beings to be able to live healthy lives, raise families, work at full capacity, and take part in social and political life” ([11], p. 97).

<sup>7</sup> Those of us living in the so-called ‘developed world’ tend to underestimate the number of people included in this group. Albrecht estimates, “about half of the world’s population still lives in a small town or rural village and is mainly sustained by its hinterland. These people are already intensely local in their survival orientation and will be highly motivated to protect their patch should the need arise” ([12], p. 173).

the conclusions of different decision-making methods conflict? Which approach should be followed? To answer this question, it is helpful to consider the strengths and weaknesses of each method of public policy decision-making. In the paper's conclusion, I will recommend the pluralist approach for liberal societies attempting to realize the value of fairness in disputes over the usage of valuable natural resources.

### 3. Cost-benefit Analysis

I will begin with cost-benefit analysis because it is currently the dominant method of public policy decision-making.<sup>8</sup> This approach attempts to weigh the expected benefits of competing policies (including a policy of doing nothing) against their costs to determine the one that produces the most net benefits (or the least net costs). It maintains that every policy decision involves losses and gains, including inaction. The most reasonable and fair course of action involves implementing the policy that yields the most significant social profit.

Maximizing advantageous consequences undergirds one of the classic theories of ethical evaluation—utilitarianism. As such, the various criticisms against utilitarianism likewise apply to cost-benefit analysis. There are several practical issues with drawing up a cost-benefit list.<sup>9</sup> For one, there is always a fog of uncertainty surrounding predictions of the consequences of our actions, especially in the long term. Can all costs and benefits be taken into account? And how can they be expressed on a standard scale of comparison?

#### 3.1. Strengths of the Cost-benefit Approach

Many political and economic institutions are designed to use cost-benefit analysis and are well-versed in techniques for doing so. This method of determining whether or not states should pursue green growth promotes social stability by aligning with existing expectations and procedures. In times of social strife, there is value in maintaining modes of established decision-making to avoid disrupting already strained institutions and causing further upheaval in citizens' lives.

Another strength of the cost-benefit approach is that it provides a clear and orderly method for making decisions in the face of uncertainty. The expected value of a potential project/policy is calculated as follows. First, we list each possible outcome of the proposed action. Then we assign a probability and a value to each outcome, which we multiply together. Repeat this process for the other possible courses of action being considered. Finally, the action likely to yield the highest expected value is selected. This method is objective and transparent in that once measures of social advantage are accepted and the probabilities of various outcomes are determined, the expected value dictates which policy ought to be implemented. The cost-benefit approach has intuitive appeal in that it is structured according to the uncontroversial idea that policy decisions should aim to make society better. The method also provides a useful quantitative metric for tracking social progress.

#### 3.2. Weaknesses of Cost-benefit Analysis

A weakness of the cost-benefit approach to resolving environmental controversies lies in the difficulty of determining an adequate measure of value. There are several methods for quantifying social benefits. Monetary value is preferred in economics for quantifying the worth of goods to citizens according to how much they are willing to pay for them as consumers. This method can evaluate tradeoffs between environmental preservation and industrial energy production. Money is the principal measure of value in the prized public policy goal of maximizing Gross Domestic Product (GDP). States making decisions on environmental controversies according to the goal of maximizing GDP would analyze whether the proposed development project would increase or decrease the amount of total goods and services being produced, sold, and purchased throughout the country. Unfortunately, GDP is a poor metric for representing the value of

<sup>8</sup> The neoliberal shift in public policy in the 1980s, characterized by an overarching aim of maximizing economic growth and embodied in global institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization, is essentially an endorsement of cost-benefit analysis.

<sup>9</sup> This paper will refer to assessments from ecological economics of the total economic value provided by ecosystem services to provide a more accurate picture of the costs and benefits of proposed renewable energy projects. For a thorough discussion of the thousands of peer-reviewed academic journal articles documenting the value of ecosystem services, see Robert Costanza's "Twenty Years of Ecosystem Services: How Far Have We Come and How Far Do We Still Need to Go?" [13]. The most famous attempt at valuing ecosystem services is the U.N.'s Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, which led to the formation of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) in 2012.

natural entities and ecosystem services. For instance, a forest's oxygen production occurs without economic input, and the fresh air is neither bought nor sold. From the perspective of GDP, the forest's oxygen production contributes no value. Yet it is clearly absurd to think trees emitting life-sustaining oxygen necessary for human survival have no value.<sup>10</sup>

There have been recent attempts to measure natural capital (i.e., the value of ecosystem services and natural entities) more accurately. Costanza [14] explains:

Several methods can be used to estimate or measure benefits from ecosystems... Examples include production-oriented valuation that looks at changes in direct-use values from products actually extracted from the environment (e.g., fish trawled from the sea). This method may also be applicable to indirect-use values, such as the benefits forests provide to agricultural production by controlling soil erosion... Stated preference methods rely on individuals' responses to hypothetical scenarios involving ecosystem services and include contingent valuation and structured choice experiments... Choice experiments present respondents with scenarios that embody combinations of ecosystem services and monetary costs and ask for the most preferred scenarios to infer ecosystem service values.

But even with a more balanced assessment of all the natural assets that contribute to human material well-being and their interrelationships, non-material values such as spiritual, religious, and aesthetic values, and a sense of place and belonging are still challenging to quantify. Such values will vary according to each culture and stakeholder group. Plural values and multiple criteria fail to fit within a single metric that assumes all things are commensurable. A problem with applying cost-benefit analysis to environmental controversies is that such an approach will likely obscure and ignore values outside the society's dominant ideological construct. As Ellis et al. ([15], p. 87) argue:

There is a growing realization that conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems will often be at the losing end in such optimization efforts, for example, in policies oriented toward greenhouse gas abatement, as their implicit valuation framing, often associated with a utilitarian, transactional, ecosystem services framing (e.g., the more carbon that forests can sequester, the better), conflicts with a wide array of more complex and culturally contingent human–nature relations and associated values (e.g., forests as sacred; forests have rights; forests are habitats).

Another difficulty in applying cost-benefit analysis to environmental controversies is that when dealing with complex systems (e.g., ecosystems, the global climate, and the economy), there is uncertainty regarding which variables are critical for avoiding the system's collapse. Many natural entities (species and ecosystems) appear to have no material value in that their contributions to eco-integrity are unknowable until they disappear. Because of epistemic limitations, various life-support services may be opaque to detection, rendering accurate valuation impossible. Often, there may be considerable time lags between crossing a threshold and irreversibly flipping a complex system to a new regime [16]. As such, when trying to devise accurate probabilities, there is the potential for widespread and intractable uncertainty that can render cost-benefit analysis ineffective. A problem that only compounds in difficulty when we project the expected value of our decisions further into the future.<sup>11</sup> This problem is made even more difficult because social preferences are likely to change over time in unexpected ways.

A final criticism of the approach is that the act of calculating the aggregate costs and benefits is of secondary importance. Nussbaum ([17], p. 1032) criticizes, "All the work of evaluating has to be done beforehand. If the weightings are right, the analysis will give us good guidance concerning what we ought to choose. If the weightings are assigned badly, it will give us bad guidance". In other words, it is not the cost-benefit analysis that is doing the work of evaluating options but the underlying theory of value. "And that means that we really are not getting anything

<sup>10</sup> This is sometimes referred to as *the water and diamond paradox*. The total value of water by far exceeds that of diamonds. But the latter has a high price and the former a low one [18]. Another example highlighting the defectiveness of focusing on GDP for valuing natural entities and ecosystem services is that it would be beneficial (per the metric of expanding GDP) to kill local frogs who are ridding the community of malaria-carrying mosquitos for no cost and instead hire exterminators who use chemicals produced in domestic factories to exterminate the mosquitos. Killing helpful frogs that are ridding the community of malaria for free would be a win from a GDP standpoint.

<sup>11</sup> This problem is evident in speculations regarding the consequences of our decisions far into the future. Such speculations have resulted in strange conclusions such as William MacAskill's endorsement of biotechnology and mind-uploading in pursuit of immortality ([19], pp. 83–86) or space exploration and settlement ([19], pp. 28–29) to escape the death of the Earth and later the solar system in hope of benefiting trillions and trillions of people in the distant future [19]. While thinking long-term (*longtermism*) is an essential moral project, it must be recognized that the further we look into the future, the less confident we can be about our predictions and plans.



out of the cost-benefit analysis. It is just a crude and only partly adequate representation of what we have already figured out on our own” ([17], p. 1033). In Nussbaum’s view, what is instead crucial for evaluating competing interests is a well-thought-out theory of basic entitlements. The basic entitlements approach will be discussed in the following section.

#### 4. Sufficiencyarianism

One way of avoiding issues in cost-benefit analysis is by instead aiming to promote and protect citizens’ vital interests up to a minimum threshold level. Sufficiencyarianism aims to maximize the number of individuals provided with enough in a given situation ([20], p. 278).<sup>12</sup> Like cost-benefit analysis, the approach is outcome-oriented. But instead of maximizing the overall social pie, it aims to maximize the number of people provided adequate resources. A sufficiencyarian policy framework measures how individuals and groups are faring by tracking and projecting the advancement or retreat of minimum levels of welfare, i.e., analyzing whether universal access to guaranteed levels of social goods is being met. Sufficiencyarian ideals justify social policies such as universal healthcare and education.

In determining whether green economic growth ought to be pursued in a given situation, a sufficiencyarian framework of evaluation would examine all the available alternatives of action and pick the option that either lifts the greatest number of the worst-off members in society above the minimum threshold of wellbeing or pushes the fewest people below that threshold. The viability of the sufficiencyarian framework depends on the interpretation of the threshold designating what is ‘good enough.’ It is contentious for state governments to determine this and thereby dictate what should ultimately matter to individuals and communities, i.e., to determine which interests in which goods should be prioritized.

##### 4.1. Strengths of Sufficiencyarianism

The sufficiencyarian approach to resolving controversies over the pursuit of green growth is appealing in that it prioritizes the interests of the needy and aims to maximize the number of people capable of leading contented lives. An advantage sufficiencyarianism has over cost-benefit analysis is that it focuses on maximizing the number of people who have an adequate distribution of social resources. The latter, by aiming to maximize total *aggregate* social welfare, does not. Unlike cost-benefit analysis, sufficiencyarianism takes seriously the idea that society should prioritize satisfying interests below some threshold (needs) over interests above that threshold (nonessential wants).

For sufficiencyarianism to serve as an effective means of policy decision-making, it must establish a minimum threshold that is neither too vague nor too arbitrary. Nussbaum provides a clear standard of basic entitlements with her list of ten Central Human Capabilities: 1) life; 2) bodily health; 3) bodily integrity; 4) senses, imagination, and thought; 5) emotions; 6) practical reason; 7) affiliation; 8) other species; 9) play; and 10) control over one’s environment. Nussbaum argues these ten capabilities are constitutive of a good life in that they are implicit in the idea of a life worthy of human dignity ([21], pp. 42–43; [22], pp. 70,78–81; [23], pp. 78–81). Nussbaum claims “a decent political order must secure to all citizens at least a threshold level of ... ten Central Capabilities” ([22], p. 176). This means that if any one of a citizen’s Central Human Capabilities goes unfilled, it qualifies as an injustice. In answering the question of whether green economic growth ought to be pursued in a given situation (as opposed to dirty growth or no growth at all), policymakers should choose the option that promotes the most satisfaction (or causes the least amount of deprivation) of the ten Central Human Capabilities.

##### 4.2. Weaknesses of Sufficiencyarianism

Several problems arise in the sufficiencyarian approach to navigating ecologically tragic situations. According to sufficiencyarian analysis, it would be acceptable to undertake a renewable energy industrial development project that deprives numerous people of many of their central human capabilities so long as the project, on aggregate, pushes *more* people over the threshold of a

<sup>12</sup> Sufficiencyarianism has been described as having a positive and negative thesis [24]. The positive thesis asserts “it is morally valuable to have enough,” while the negative thesis claims “once people have enough, no further distributive criteria apply” ([25], p. 299). In this paper, I am concerned with the positive thesis of sufficiencyarianism.

good enough life by affording them the opportunity to actualize their last missing central human capability.

For example, the framework might justify constructing a hydroelectric dam to provide multitudes of urban poor with abundant cheap electricity, allowing them access to air-conditioning and heating (control over their environment), even if the damming operation flooded the ancestral land of a small indigenous community, depriving members of the tribe most of their central human capabilities. Deciding to pursue the green economic growth of the damming project would satisfy the sufficientarian goal of maximizing threshold-crossing. Yet such an outcome seems at odds with *fairness*. Rawls ([26], p. 126), the quintessential proponent of justice as fairness, criticizes purely aggregative principles that place no limits on the sacrifices they demand of some individuals and so generate unreasonable “strains of commitment”. Rawls ([27], p. 317) asserts “Liberties do not depend upon conjectural calculations concerning the greatest net balance of social interests. In justice as fairness such calculations have no place”.

Sufficientarian theorists have attempted to avoid unsavory logical conclusions of this sort by instead arguing absolute priority should be given to the worst off, i.e., those with the least central capabilities fulfilled [28,29,30]. This *prioritarian* addendum (a distributive framework aimed at rationing social resources to provide for the *most* in need), while solving some problems, generates others. Per a prioritarian schema, any gain of capabilities to the smallest number of worst-off would trump any gains in capabilities, however large, to any but the worst-off, even the next worst-off. This requirement strikes many as absurd.

If sufficientarianism can be used to settle controversies over pursuing green economic growth, then it must provide a principled means of prioritizing the worse off while also considering the size of benefits at stake and the number of people who will benefit. A hybrid model is difficult to articulate within a sufficientarian framework in that “head counting” (maximizing the incidence of raising individuals above the minimum threshold) and prioritizing those at the lowest range of deficiency (considering the depth of insufficiency) are directly opposing aims.<sup>13</sup>

Nussbaum endorses recent scholarship by Jonathan Wolff and Avner De-Shalit that gestures toward a means of deciding which outcomes are preferable, i.e., which capability sets ought to be prioritized over others in deciding how contested natural resources are used ([23], p. 97). In summary, Wolff & De-Shalit propose that practitioners and theorists consider the “dynamic clustering” effect of promoting or discouraging a capability. This entails considering how gaining or losing a capability can cause accumulation and reproduction of (dis)advantage [31]. They argue social policy can benefit from indexing “fertile functionings,” which are capabilities that spread their good effects over several categories by reducing risk to the other functionings and “corrosive disadvantages,” which are capabilities that have adverse effects on other functionings ([31], pp. 121–122). Nussbaum endorses Wolff and De-Shalit’s conclusion that when two or more capabilities cannot be satisfied, the capabilities that promote fertile functionings and discourage corrosive disadvantages should be prioritized ([23], pp. 98–100). In deciding how to use precious and contested natural resources, decision-makers might evaluate which policy will generate greater fertile flourishing than corrosive disadvantages in the society writ large.

This evaluative framework, while appealing, is still aggregative in character and, as such, fails to limit the sacrifices it may demand from some individuals and groups in society. It may therefore be helpful to examine non-outcome-oriented approaches to adjudicating environmental controversies.

## 5. Democratic Approach

In contrast to an outcome-oriented conception of justice, one might appeal to a *procedural* conception of justice. One procedural justice method of fairly determining what ought to be done with valuable natural resources is democratic decision-making. Democratic critics of outcome-oriented conceptions of justice argue that pre-political cataloging of vital interests (*a la* Nussbaum’s list of Central Human Capabilities) undermines individuals’ and communities’ right to be heard and respected in social decision-making processes ([32], pp. 241–243). Sen ([32], p. 326) claims “the demands of justice can be assessed *only* with the help of public reason”. Defenders of democracy aver it ought to be up to the people themselves to determine how to proceed in challenging circumstances [32].

<sup>13</sup> For a developed discussion on this topic, see [25].



There are many questions regarding the democratic adjudication of environmental controversies. Who should be involved in the decision-making process? The public, those impacted, experts? How might persistent minorities be protected from the tyranny of the majority? How might the concerns of the voiceless be included and represented, including non-human animals, future generations, and ancestral stewards of the land?

### 5.1. Strengths of the Democratic Approach

There are many reasons why scholars have championed the usage of democratic processes for making difficult social decisions. Some have defended the inherent value of democratic decision-making as embodying liberty, equality, and social solidarity. Others have defended the instrumental epistemic value of democracy as being more reliable than alternative methods, such as authoritarian dictatorship or oligarchical rule by the elite.<sup>14</sup> Some argue democracy tends to cultivate citizens' moral virtues by encouraging them to listen to others, justify themselves to others, and consider the common good.

When facing controversies over the usage of precious natural resources (regarding whether green growth ought to be pursued, dirty growth, or no growth at all), it is imperative that those whose vital interests are at stake have a chance to be heard and are allowed to participate in decision-making processes. As Dewey ([33], pp. 154–155) explains, one of the greatest strengths of democracy involves its role in promoting “consultation and discussion which uncovers social needs and troubles”. Those who will be negatively affected are often most informed about the potential harms they will suffer; they therefore should be provided platforms to disseminate this information, which can be achieved through democratic institutions, procedures, and norms.

Like cost-benefit analysis, democratic decision-making offers a straightforward procedure. All it requires is: (1) collecting the votes of interested parties, (2) treating all parties' preferences equally, and (3) pursuing the option on the table with the most collective support. There are compelling reasons for environmental controversies to be left to public deliberation and democratic procedures.

### 5.2. Weaknesses of the Democratic Approach

The potential for “tyranny of the majority” and oppression of persistent minorities (groups of persons who find themselves constantly losing in majority decisions) presents a vexing worry for reliance on democratic decision-making in environmental controversies.<sup>15</sup> This concern is particularly germane to disputes over the pursuit of green economic growth. Often, the underlying conflict of the situation pits the interests of the broader society against the interests of a local community. For example, the construction of massive solar farms to provide energy to an entire region might do so at the cost of destroying the ancestral hunting ground of an indigenous community.

Disputes over green colonialism are typically conflicts between urban citizens and rural citizens. These disputes beset many societies, particularly (post)industrialized societies that nonetheless include groups of indigenous peoples attempting to follow their traditional subsistence practices [34]. It is often the case that such citizens' low numbers, geographic and epistemic isolation, and a lack of adequate social resources (e.g., access to media outlets, the legal system, or high-priced advocacy groups) make it difficult for their interests to win out, or even be heard, in disputes over green development.<sup>16</sup>

Negative consequences of green colonialism may occur even in cases where the majority attempts to treat the minority well in accordance with a majoritarian conception of good treatment,

<sup>14</sup> Landemore discusses the “diversity-trumps-ability” studies showing that a random collection of agents drawn from a large set of limited-ability agents typically outperforms a collection of the very best agents from that same set. She draws on these studies to argue democracy can be expected to produce better decisions than rule by experts [35].

<sup>15</sup> Volmert ([36], p. 55) explains, the “compelling justification for majority rules” rests on the idea that “the greater the number of people whose wills are embodied in decisions, the fewer the number of people who are forced to obey the wills of others”.

<sup>16</sup> Some scholars, such as Iris Marion Young, have developed theories of democratic decision-making that aim to prioritize minority positions [37]. Young [37] argues fairness and inclusion generally require taking special measures to encourage the representation of marginalized groups in decision-making processes. For instance, she advocates for providing groups greater representation and input in decision-making processes by moving beyond “one person, one vote” election schemas and instead allocating seats, leadership roles, and/or veto powers to historically marginalized voices ([38], pp. 187–189). However, such inclusion-promoting mechanisms may be more closely aligned with promoting respect for pluralism (the approach discussed in the next section) than democracy.

such as by providing them monetary compensation for their loss. Unfortunately, it is typically the case that the minority disagrees on what constitutes proper treatment, such as preferring to continue their traditional way of life over being provided money, which cannot compensate for their loss of culture and sense of personal/communal identity. Consequently, being a persistent minority can be highly oppressive even when the majority tries to not act oppressively.

A glaring problem with the democratic approach to resolving disputes over green development is that it often promotes the dominant culture's interests to the exclusion of others. This is the essence of the imperialist element in green colonialism. If the dominant culture's interests are continuously prioritized over the legitimate concerns of minority groups, then the minority could be construed as receiving unfair treatment. It appears that fair treatment requires certain institutions to ensure the critical interests of the minority are adequately respected. Otherwise, the society fails to live up to the democratic ideal of rule by citizens who are themselves free and equal.<sup>17</sup> How can this equality be achieved in a culturally diverse society among citizens ascribing to a plurality of conceptions of the good life? How can citizens who endorse a minority conception of the good that is nonetheless reasonable be afforded equal treatment in the form of equal opportunity to actualize their life plans? It seems it is necessary to consider what respecting pluralism entails in settling controversies over green economic growth.<sup>18</sup>

## 6. Pluralist Approach

The final approach to navigating disputes over green development emphasizes a central tenet of liberalism, that societies should remain neutral in their treatment of various reasonable life plans.<sup>19</sup> State neutrality seeks to ensure societies are structured in a non-oppressive way that demonstrates respect for citizens' liberties. States must avoid undermining citizen's self-conception and autonomy by compelling observance and performance of values they could reasonably choose to not endorse.

In recent work, I have defended the view that state neutrality should extend to tolerating and respecting citizens' desire to sustain intimate bonds with specific habitats and natural entities [6,39,40]. This condition is often unmet, as modern states readily prioritize *developmentalism* (i.e., the idea that more mining, drilling, building, and manufacturing are indubitably socially beneficial) over other ways of relating to the natural world. Liberal pluralism demands the state maintain neutrality of aim by refraining from explicitly and purposefully promoting one conception of the good (developmentalism) at the direct expense of other reasonable conceptions of the good (other relationships with the natural world).<sup>20</sup> This constitutes respect for *ecorelational pluralism*.

Respect for ecorelational pluralism does not invalidate the reasonableness of exploitative and destructive relationships with the natural world (e.g., viewing nature as a stock of resources to be depleted and destroyed for economic gain). It does, however, restrict the state from pervasively privileging and facilitating such relationships in the way it does currently. In disputes over green development projects, respect for liberal pluralism would demand prioritization of ecological interests that have been historically disregarded, marginalized, and disrespected.

One might worry that it is illiberal for the state to actively promote marginalized ecological interests because such a proposal conflicts with the demand for state neutrality. However, it is essential to recognize that there is a long history in liberal thought that endorses proactive state intervention to correct past injustices. As Kymlicka ([41], p. 109) states, "Some minority rights eliminate, rather than create, inequalities. Some groups are unfairly disadvantaged in the cultural-marketplace, and political recognition and support rectify this disadvantage". Legacies of

<sup>17</sup> Volmert claims "members of indigenous groups are, in a substantive sense, regularly subject to the rule of non-indigenous groups because the wills of non-indigenous citizens are consistently imposed on indigenous citizens" ([36], p. 58). Under such conditions, "fears about the subjection of internal minorities are warranted, but respect for indigenous authority requires deference to indigenous communities' interpretations of their members' rights" ([36], p. 58).

<sup>18</sup> This is setting aside the issue of how a democratic approach ought to include the interests of *silent voices*, such as future generations, deceased ancestors, and the more than human in environmental controversies.

<sup>19</sup> In Rawlsian terms, the state ought to remain neutral such that its policies do not explicitly aim to promote one reasonable comprehensive doctrine or conception of the good at the expense of another [27].

<sup>20</sup> Defining what life plans or conceptions of the good are reasonable is one of the most difficult challenges for liberal political thought. For our purposes, we will rely on Rawls's view and hold that a reasonable life plan is one that draws upon a relatively stable, consistent, and coherent tradition ([27], p. 59). One might object that developmentalism should not be considered reasonable because it is ecologically unsustainable and, therefore, unstable. However, we will include it within the family of reasonable conceptions of the good as it has lasted across generations and is the dominant worldview today. Nevertheless, I can imagine future scholars challenging its inclusions.

past mistreatment and historical injustice change the terms of liberal neutrality. Consequently, respecting ecorelational pluralism may require societies to grant special privileges to historically marginalized ecological interests as a form of corrective action, e.g., prioritizing their interests in environmental controversies or granting these citizens special control and decision-making power (sovereignty) over the use of their land or resources.

This framework has far-reaching implications for projects and policies that build up renewable energy capacity by way of degrading and destroying natural habitats. As societies struggle to conserve biodiversity, wilderness, and protect ecosystem functioning, radically departing from the status quo is perhaps necessary. It is essential for fairness that efforts to transition energy production infrastructure to green sources are prohibited from further eroding and erasing the wide array of complex and heterogeneous ways of relating to and valuing the natural world.

### 6.1. Strengths of the Pluralist Approach

A significant strength of the liberal pluralist approach, which maintains that states ought to respect a plurality of ways of relating to the natural world, is that it is a powerful bulwark against homogenous developmentalism and green colonialism. At present, policymakers often discuss green economic growth as if it were a universally affirmed good. This is far from the truth. Increasing energy production to spur green economic growth (expanding the goods and services available in a society) has been widely regarded as a morally beneficial and uncontroversial means of increasing social well-being. This fails to account for those citizens who are not dependent upon, nor interested in being integrated into, the global industrial system. Such peoples' culture, values, and way of life undermine the justification for continually sacrificing local ecosystems and disrupting the natural world to maintain and expand industrial society. Repeatedly approving and promoting renewable energy projects that undermine local communities' way of life (i.e., green colonialism) constitutes an abdication of states' responsibility to remain neutral toward various reasonable life plans.

A genuinely liberal approach to the question of whether green growth ought to be pursued bars state governments from implementing policies that aim to promote one reasonable comprehensive doctrine at the expense of another (except when taking corrective action to confront past wrongs) ([27], pp. 190–194). Adopting a pluralist approach does not ensure that the interests of those opposing green economic growth in favor of environmental preservation will always win out. And although it would not invalidate the reasonability of investment in green economic growth, it would prevent the state from pervasively privileging these goals if they persistently undermine other ways of relating to the natural world. Citizens' desire to preserve their habitat should be included in deliberations over what ought to be done since their worldview also constitutes a reasonable conception of the good (a reasonableness that is only becoming more apparent as our environmental crises worsen).

If it is found to be the case that the same decisions are made time and again, sacrificing traditional cultures in the name of progress, a compelling *de facto* case can be made that states are failing to respect a plurality of values. Accordingly, when the next environmental controversy presents itself, authorities should prioritize claimants whose ecological interests have been pervasively and historically marginalized or grant them greater control or input regarding the use of their land or resources.

A further advantage of this approach is that respecting ecorelational pluralism does not require states to actively invest in environmentalist projects. It only requires states to desist enacting, authorizing, subsidizing, and tolerating environmentally destructive activity that expresses contempt for citizens' desire to preserve their traditional/sustainable relationships with their habitats.

### 6.2. Weaknesses of the Pluralist Approach

One of the central weaknesses of adopting a pluralist approach is how it can be anathema to the status quo. At present, it is so normalized and taken for granted that green economic growth is a desirable social goal, in that it will more efficiently and sustainably use natural capital, create jobs, lower prices, or "raise the standard of living" that dislodging this embedded assumption requires radically restructuring some of the state's political institutions. Even supposedly well-ordered societies such as the United States, Canada, Norway, or Australia may have an obligation to take steps to reform their societies' basic structure or risk illiberally prioritizing certain

reasonable conceptions of the good over others. Although this is a radical break from business as usual, it may be precisely what is called for to adequately confront and mitigate present ecological crises, including climate change, by forcing society to consider degrowth policies.<sup>21</sup> This weakness, however, is a strategic concern more so than a principled one.

How confident can we be that the state will take steps to respect ecorelational pluralism when they have already neglected to implement reforms that could avoid sacrificing vital interests in the past? What reason do we have to believe that they will be interested in maintaining neutrality and promoting fairness when it comes to settling disputes over the use of valuable natural resources? These are essential questions from a practical strategy standpoint. But they fall outside the scope of this paper, which is interested in articulating what justice requires in settling disputes regarding the pursuit of green economic growth rather than the strategic question of how to effectively petition and compel governments to act justly.

Another problem with the pluralist approach is that it offers limited guidance on mitigating past violations of citizens' vital interests in preserving sustainable/traditional relationships with their habitat.<sup>22</sup> How should policymakers respond to the fact that their state has failed to respect ecorelational pluralism since its inception?<sup>23</sup>

Lastly, while pluralism may help prevent future forms of dispossession in marginalized communities, it is likely too limited in scope to confront the full extent of our present ecological crisis. For one, it cannot justify restoring previously degraded or destroyed ecosystems unless the restorative activity serves as a corrective measure to repair marginalized group's lost interests. Nor can it offer a means of preventing environmental destruction that does not conflict with marginalized groups' vital interests. Due to these limitations, it is unlikely that respecting ecorelational pluralism, on its own, can overcome our present ecological crisis, and additional principles are needed. Nonetheless, invoking the ideal of ecorelational pluralism can protect different views and practices that reimagine our relationships with the natural world. It is these opportunities for reimagining that may help generate and disseminate novel, environmentally friendly principles.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper has explored the strengths and weaknesses of four reasonable approaches for adjudicating clashes of interests in the pursuit of green economic growth: 1) cost-benefit analysis, 2) sufficientarianism, 3) democracy, and 4) respect for ecorelational pluralism. There are different underlying rationales for each of the four approaches. If policymakers prioritize acting within existing institutional structures, then cost-benefit analysis is perhaps most appropriate. If policymakers prioritize maximizing the number of people capable of leading a good life, then the sufficientarian approach is preferable. Perhaps they instead prefer to leave the vexing political disputes over green development up to public deliberation. If policymakers in a liberal political system are most concerned with securing *fairness* in settling controversies over the construction of green growth projects and policies, then the pluralist approach is most appropriate.

It is essential to recognize that climate change is not the only pressing environmental crisis we face today. Moreover, investing in green energy is not the only, nor necessarily the most effective, means of mitigating climate change. The rapid construction of new energy infrastructure, although beneficial in some ways, does not serve the interests of all segments of the population equally. This diversity of interests must be more widely recognized and discussed. To ensure fairness in imminent political decisions over the environment, it is imperative that this diversity be articulated and afforded due consideration. If states wish to live up to core liberal values and ideals, it demands they demonstrate adequate respect for the ecorelational pluralism of their citizenry.

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<sup>21</sup> Respecting ecorelational pluralism can help address climate change. It is easy to imagine how prohibitions against committing ecocide in various situations (whether green or not green) can help reduce carbon emissions and promote carbon sequestration.

<sup>22</sup> In recent work, I analyze the kinds of reparative, reconciliatory, and transformative practices and policies suitable for justly responding to illiberal violations of ecorelational pluralism [6].

<sup>23</sup> Being recognized as an independent nation-state often entails accepting binding commitments with international development organizations (e.g., the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) to promote economic interests (free trade and open markets). As Prashad ([42], p. 24) emphasizes, "the *rules of the world order* were established when the majority of humanity struggled under colonial and post-colonial domination" in that colonial and newly independent states were required to do whatever was necessary to integrate local markets and societies into the expanding global system.

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The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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