



Evaluating sustainability and the SDGs: Moving Past Dominion and Institutional Capture

Presented to the panel on Evaluation Approaches for Assessing Integrated Environmental and Socio-economic Co-benefits

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- ▶ ARCeconomics
- ▶ Environment 4 session

Three phases on route to a Sustainability-Ready Evaluation Function



● Current - natural system absent, dominion and accountability prevail, SDGs separate

● Nexus - natural and human systems connected (approximate limits of current methods), can reach to sustainability, goes beyond narrow accountability, IEO layer cake approach to SDGs

● Goal - coupled human and natural systems, dominion receded, accountability adapted and shared, SDGs coupled, multiple scales, dynamic, thresholds and surprises, legacy effects



CES sustainability-ready stocktaking finding evaluation rarely addresses natural systems

SWG addresses
greening CES and
taking stock of the
sustainability-
readiness of evaluation
in Canada

Undertaken by
four leading
Canadian
evaluation firms
on pro bono
basis

Focusing on:
Federal government
evaluations
ENGO, Philanthropic
and Indigenous
evaluations,
International, and
Intellectual
infrastructure for
sustainability-ready
evaluation

Looking for
inclusion of
natural system
in any form
taken as
necessary but
not sufficient
element for
sustainability

And observing (to date)

- Natural system rarely included in evaluations by any Department (but Global Affairs Canada)
- Leading ENGOs based in US tend towards using natural sciences
- Some nexus work internationally
- Intellectual infrastructure weak to absent

The Task



Moving evaluation from this



To being useful for this

We could evaluate at the nexus But we don't



- ▶ We have the capacity to evaluate at the nexus with connected human and natural
- ▶ Currently employ system-origin methods and processes for each system
- ▶ But rarely both in the same evaluation
- ▶ Some do
 - ▶ GEF IEO
 - ▶ Others
- ▶ Some are thinking about it
- ▶ Most do not
- ▶ Need to require as a mandatory cross cutting element in all evaluations
- ▶ Need to change OECD/DAC, UNEG, national policies and VOPEs, standards and credentials
- ▶ It is ethically irresponsible for evaluators to conduct evaluations short of the nexus



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We will learn to evaluate coupled systems by evaluating at the nexus



- ▶ Human and natural systems differ

- ▶ Temporal and spatial scales
- ▶ Priority of questions
- ▶ Mechanisms of change
- ▶ Units of account
- ▶ Institutional settings

- ▶ Some characteristics of coupled:

- ▶ Reciprocal effects & feedback loops
- ▶ Nonlinear, threshold surprises
- ▶ Legacy effects and time lags
- ▶ Different resilience levels

- ▶ The task is urgent

- ▶ We can contribute at the nexus

- ▶ The only reasons for not doing so lies with us

- ▶ We need to be recognise why we are not already at the nexus



Why are we not at the nexus?



- Surely we are aware that
 - Important natural systems elements are not accorded value (e.g. air, most species)
 - Only recently have women, indigenous and colonised peoples been accorded value
 - Western social science is rooted in the dominion infused soil of Western European society
- Ignoring the natural system says the natural system does not have value, humans have full ascendancy
- Evaluation thereby contributes to extinction
- Alternatively you could be saying we ignore the natural system because it is not our job (outside our accountability frame)
- Accountability is a mechanism translating dominion to organisations

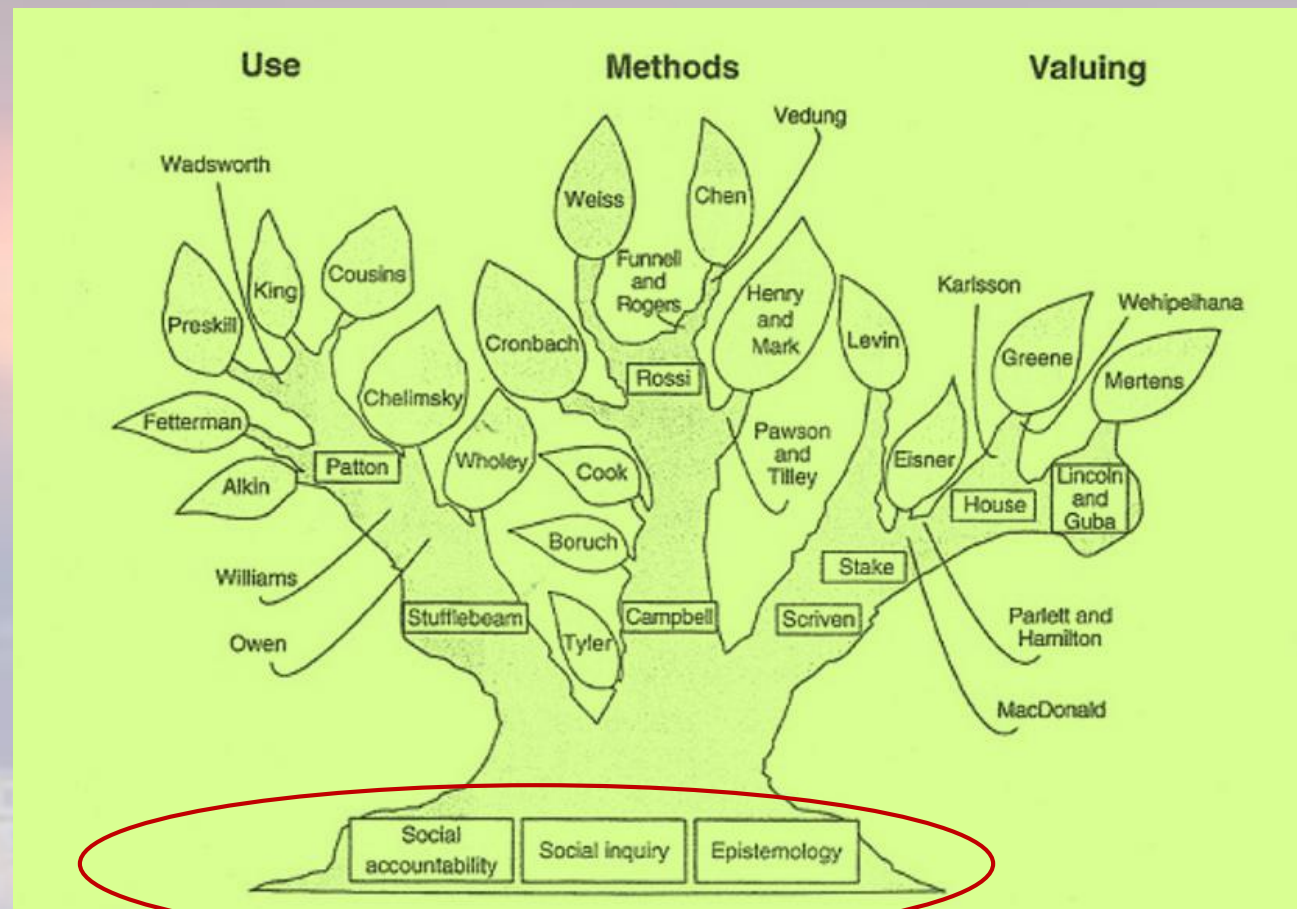
With rootstock in soil of dominion evaluation has the terroir of dominion



Sectarian promotion by evaluation of own interests contributes to extinction

- SDG capture by agencies
- Reinforced by evaluator stance
- Academic institution building
- Publishing
- Careers

Meanwhile extinction proceeds



Dominion-infused rootstock of evaluation

How will we prepare for a new sustainability-ready evaluation?



Business as usual

OR



All hands on deck

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