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Making Nature Legible: The Social and Political Consequences of Economic Valuation of Tiger Reserves

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ABSTRACT

There have been a few recent attempts to estimate the economic value of ecosystem services from tiger reserves. Doing so, it is argued, will not only provide a justification for tiger reserves but also recognise the importance of ecosystem services to human well-being. We use a political ecology approach to argue that economic valuation is never a benign tool, but is very much situated in wider institutional contexts that favour certain actors over others. In India, protected areas are being valued even as people living within them are being evicted and their use of the forest restricted. We draw from fieldwork in the Biligiri Rangaswamy Temple Hills of Karnataka and conversations with Soligas. The questions we ask are how is nature made legible and who benefits from such legibility. We suggest that economic valuation can hide complex human-nature relationships and undermine different ways of knowing and 'valuing' landscapes.