

Literature review on ecological economics: paradigm or perspective

Ecological economics as a discipline carries a value-commitment to study environmental issues and to contribute constructively to a more sustainable development path. Unlike environmental economics this subject is in a transitional stage, and emphasises more on values and ideology relating to the environment. Hence, this study examines the proposition that ecological economics offer an alternative paradigm to that represented by environmental economists. The literature review indicates subtle differences of emphasis within environmental economics. But the diversity of viewpoints within ecological economics is much more pronounced. Accordingly, the notion that ecological economics offers a new paradigm is easier to understand if the extreme views are compared. Thus the economic growth-oriented technological optimism of environmental economics may be contrasted with the steady-state oriented technological pessimism of ecological economics. The latter position implies the need for a body of environmental ethics to guide individual action and public policy. Environmental economists contend that in the long run, it would not be feasible to separate economic growth, trade expansion, and environmental protection. For example empirical work draws the inference that increasing per capita income would help to reduce the potential damage that an individual could do to the environment. Ecological economists on the other hand, contend that continuous economic growth is neither feasible nor desirable. They hold that technological innovation is less important than the capacity of ecological processes to adapt, and that focus of policy in ecological economics should be to strike a balance between technological and institutional measures to reduce overall damage. It seems that neither of these polar viewpoints are strongly supported by most findings in both social and natural sciences. Nor do they adequately qualify the major differences between environmental economics and ecological economics. The study does not see ecological economics as an alternative paradigm but as a potentially fruitful field of joint interdisciplinary inquiry.