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Applying the capabilities approach to ecosystems:

Resilience as ecosystem capability

Abstract

5 The capabilities approach has attracted broad interest in environmental ethics. One very
interesting application is the environmental or extended capabilities approach which
promotes the notion of environmental capabilities that contribute to the flourishing of
non-human beings and ecological systems. The approach however lacks any account of
the capabilities of ecological systems. This essay applies the environmental capabilities
10 approach at the ecosystem level and examines how the flourishing of an ecosystem can
be understood in terms of capabilities. Ecosystem flourishing presumes the ability of a
given system to maintain its characteristic functions, diversity and quality, and do so even
in the face of various disturbances. Resilience can be understood as a central capability of
ecosystems to maintain their characteristic functioning in disruptive circumstances,
15 which is particularly important with regard to human-induced environmental changes.
This argument evokes duties of ecological justice regarding ecosystems. The nature of
these duties is considered and linked with a discussion on how the environmental
capabilities approach can promote more holistic decision-making.

20 Keywords: extended capabilities approach, environmental capabilities, ecological justice,
resilience, ecosystems

Introduction

The capabilities approach, especially in the form of central capabilities approach established by
25 Martha Nussbaum¹, has become a prominent framework for theorising social justice (fairness in
the relations between society and the individuals) during the last decade. It has also inspired
several applications that go beyond the social sphere and apply the notion of capabilities to
environmental issues. These contributions deal with climate change adaptation², non-human
animals³, and environmental and ecological justice⁴ – to mention but a few of the contributions.

30 Environmental justice incorporates environmental matters into the social justice discourse by
making them an important ingredient of justice. Ecological justice, in contrast, makes the
nonhuman nature (or certain parts of it) a recipient of justice: it concerns the fairness in human-
nature relations, and theories of ecological justice aim to clarify how this fairness should be
understood.

35 Of particular interest here is the incorporation of the capabilities approach and ecological
justice that expands the sphere of justice to include the nonhuman realm as a recipient of justice.
This account was introduced by David Schlosberg⁵ as the extended/expanded capabilities
approach. While the extended capabilities approach adopts the core ideas from the central
capabilities approach of Nussbaum, it also differs in significant ways. Most importantly, the
40 community of ecological justice consists of not only humans but living entities, including non-
human beings as well as biotic systems (such as habitats and ecosystems)⁶. This shift from
humans to non-humans and the inclusion of systemic entities raises questions about how the
capabilities approach can be applied in such novel cases, a question to which I aim to provide a
partial answer.

45 The core idea of extended capabilities, as laid out by Schlosberg, can be considered as an
extensive and interesting opening but not a mature theory of ecological justice. Perhaps the most
pressing question is left unanswered: what are those environmental capabilities that ought to be
protected or promoted? This gap is also noted by Elizabeth Cripps⁷, who argues that Schlosberg
“owes us an account of the central capabilities of ecosystems which can avoid [...] dangers
50 whilst still maintaining the idea of fulfilling some positive duty to ecosystems”. The dangers
Cripps refers to are that: 1) securing ecosystem capabilities would lead to detrimental efforts to
“hold time still” and 2) all human interactions with the non-human world become in this view
morally unacceptable.

 Schlosberg himself distinguishes theoretical considerations from the capabilities list
55 itself, asserting that “[l]aying out a *theory* of capabilities as an element of ecological justice is
one thing; the details will take much more work—an interdisciplinary project of theorists,
ecologists, and a variety of other participants”⁸. Yet, justifying the extended capabilities approach
would require a more detailed discussion concerning the capabilities themselves. After all, many
advantages or problems of the approach can be thoroughly discussed only after there is some
60 idea about what kinds of capabilities there are. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary project for
defining the capabilities is unlikely to occur before the framework itself has achieved more
credibility.

 In this paper, my aim is to provide a partial answer to the lack of environmental
capabilities, keeping the focus on the ecosystems that were discussed in Cripps’s critique. This
65 task is divided into three main parts. In the first part, I introduce the key points of the extended
capabilities approach or the environmental capabilities approach as I shall call it, since this label
distinguishes the approach from a different account that has earlier been called the extended

capabilities approach⁹. After that, the notions of ecosystem wellbeing, functionings and capabilities are clarified to the extent that is necessary for the main argument of this paper. This discussion is conjoined with the ecological and biological sciences. In the third and final part, I shall link together ecosystem resilience, flourishing and capabilities, thereby constructing an argument for considering resilience a central ecosystem capability. To connect this with broader discussion and practice, the concluding remarks contain some suggestions on how the environmental capabilities approach could be applied at the policy level.

75

From human to environmental capabilities

The capabilities approach puts an emphasis on the question what each person is able to do and to be: in other words, their *capabilities*¹⁰. Capabilities enable access to various functionings (states of beings and doings), of which people choose those that are compatible with their own life plan, preferences and their own conception of the good life. The focus is on the range of opportunities and the capabilities framework does not entail an objective account of wellbeing. From these premises, Nussbaum has further developed her own capability-based theory of basic social justice, the central capabilities approach. Her account defends the idea of central capabilities, which are essential for the pursuing of any conception of the good life, and securing and promoting them is a necessary condition of social justice¹¹.

The list of central capabilities has been slightly revised during further developments of the approach. At present, the central capabilities include entitlement to 1) life (of normal length and worth living); 2) bodily health; 3) bodily integrity; 4) the use of senses, imagination, and thought; 5) feeling different emotions; 6) exercising practical reason and forming one's own conception of the good life; 7) affiliation with others and self-respect; 8) living with concern for

90

or in relation to other species and the natural world; 9) play; and 10) political and material control over one's environment¹².

Nussbaum has also extended the scope of the capabilities approach, suggesting a modified version of the list of capabilities applicable to sentient non-human animals¹³, yet
95 reminding that the composition of central capabilities may vary greatly depending on what constitutes the wellbeing and what are the distinctive characteristics of the individuals of a particular species. She has also discussed the ways in which the list could be practically applied to animal welfare, although the discussion is left somewhat open for later complements. Nussbaum's view on nonhuman animal capabilities has also received criticism, as it seems to
100 suggest some kind of 'sanitisation' of nature, demanding the control of, e.g., predator–prey relationships, which are usually considered to fall outside the moral sphere (and so do not need intervention) in environmental ethics¹⁴.

The capabilities approach is generally person-oriented and, similarly, Nussbaum's account adopts a plainly individualistic stance towards justice. What happens to a particular
105 species is not an issue of justice¹⁵. However, many environmental ethicists share the intuition that species matter as well, even in terms of justice¹⁶. In the case of species extinction caused by human action, “there seems to be something further going wrong [...] that is not captured by the harm to the individual: something to do with the fact that, as a result of human activity, the species polar bear and snow leopard are likely to become extinct.”¹⁷ Moreover, if an
110 environmentalist had to choose between saving three common red squirrels or one Amur leopard, there would probably be a broad agreement on saving the critically endangered Amur leopard although it would entail a greater amount of (killed or suffering) individuals. Ecological justice is concerned with such systemic entities; consequently, the capabilities approach is not of great

value for ecological justice unless it is significantly modified in these terms. However, it is
115 possible to develop and alter the approach to involve systemic entities as well.

This idea has been developed further in the environmental capabilities approach, a
capabilities-based approach to ecological (and environmental) justice coined by David
Schlosberg¹⁸. This approach adopts its core from the human capabilities approach, but the focus
on ecological justice brings about fundamental differences in two respects: non-sentient beings
120 as well as systemic entities like habitats are included in the community of justice. Ecological
justice is not a replacement but a complement for social and environmental justice. Conflicts
between different views and recipients of justice are inevitable, and resolving them can be
difficult. This problem is unavoidable in ecological justice more generally: it is not unique to the
environmental capabilities approach. Addressing these conflicts in a detailed manner goes
125 beyond the scope of this paper, and I do not intend to deny its significance; however, I will
shortly discuss how the environmental capabilities approach actually might provide a promising
framework for resolving these conflicts.

The environmental capabilities approach focuses on the wellbeing or flourishing of non-
human life. Defining this state of flourishing and the corresponding central capabilities enabling
130 it comprises the heart of this approach. At this point it can be noted that while capability and
functioning are important concepts here as in the capabilities approach, Schlosberg prefers to
speak about flourishing or integrity (of nature) instead of dignity which has been chosen as a
central term by Nussbaum¹⁹. The overall non-human flourishing is a broad idea, and in this paper
the scope will be restricted to ecosystems. Ecosystem capabilities make up one subset of
135 environmental capabilities; another subset would comprise, for example, the species-related
capabilities of certain animals and plants.

The flourishing of ecological systems is important for two reasons. Firstly, the flourishing of individuals is always closely related to the environment it inhabits: separating the two is impossible. Second, Schlosberg argues that systems are “living entities with their own integrity; atomizing nature into isolated animals devalues a form of life, and the way that this form of life flourishes”²⁰. Integrity is not an unproblematic concept and can be defined in different ways²¹, but despite the ambiguity I hold the main point to be viable: it is important to consider the flourishing of biotic systems as morally important and irreducible to individual flourishing.

In the capabilities approach, promoting ecosystem wellbeing means promoting the ecosystem capabilities, which often means “deconstructing the impediments to nature's own capabilities to fully and continually function”²². According to this conception of ecologically just action, injustice is done when nature's capability to reach its functioning is obstructed or eradicated. These considerations give rise to a follow-up question: What are these capabilities and functionings of a natural system or, in the case of this paper, an ecosystem? Although Schlosberg in most cases speaks about the capabilities of nature in a general sense, I deliberately take a more limited scope, discussing particular ecosystems in this paper.

There are several reasons why the environmental capabilities approach deserves more attention. Firstly, it binds the academic discussion together with views expressed by environmental and ecological justice movements. It also provides a common language that can be shared, to a certain extent, by both academics and environmental and ecological movements. Second, it is a multidimensional rather than a narrowly distributional approach: by integrating the elements of participation, recognition, and capabilities with distribution, it reaches beyond the distributional injustice and allows a deeper structural analysis of injustice. Third, the

environmental capabilities approach has potential to advance the transition from environmental
160 “sick-care” to “health-care” in politics or, in other words, the transition towards ecological
sustainability that aims to prevent problems beforehand rather than just fix them afterwards.

To grasp what the ecosystem capabilities could include, it is necessary to have an
understanding of what it means for an ecosystem to flourish and how that can be linked with the
functioning(s) of a particular ecosystem. Given that ecosystems represent a very different kind of
165 entity from human persons or even individual animal beings, how can we apply the core
concepts of the capabilities approach in the case of ecosystems?

Ecosystems: functioning and flourishing

In the capabilities approach, different states of being and doing are called functionings: reading,
170 eating, raising children, and being healthy, are examples of human functionings. They are results
of actualised capabilities²³ and contribute to the wellbeing of the being in question. The relation
between capabilities and functionings is asymmetrical: one capability usually enables a broad
variety of functionings, whereas some functionings presume several capabilities.

In the ecological sphere, there is a similar connection between functionings, capabilities,
175 and flourishing. As Schlosberg puts it, the central question for ecological justice is whether a
living system can transform “primary goods into capabilities, functionings, and the flourishing of
the whole system”²⁴. At certain points, Schlosberg refers to an “overall capability” (of an
ecological system) to fully function. Yet that overall capability consists of various other
capabilities that are central, or essential, to the full functioning of that particular system and its
180 flourishing. What is needed to make this theoretical constellation more applicable is the

definition of a flourishing life and the list of capabilities essential to that²⁵. This task starts by addressing ecosystem flourishing (or wellbeing, the terms being used here interchangeably). In this shift from social to ecological realms of wellbeing, the work done by philosophers or political theorists is insufficient. This is important because ecosystem flourishing is not always
185 identifiable for those who are laymen in the context of ecological knowledge: a primeval forest with an abundance of decaying material or a bare mire in its natural state may seem unattractive and perhaps “ill-being” for many, yet both habitats might be flourishing and maintaining their overall functioning in a great way. People with expertise in ecology, conservation biology or similar disciplines are better equipped to evaluate the condition of an ecosystem.

190 Creating an exhaustive, universal definition of ecosystem flourishing would be an enormous task needing innumerable context-sensitive conditions and provisos. This is not surprising: even creating an all-encompassing definition of human wellbeing would be practically impossible (if such a definition respects a pluralist rather than an objective account of wellbeing), and ecosystems are even more complex entities – and less familiar to us – than
195 individual human persons. However, defining relevant capabilities does not require such an explicit account of ecosystem wellbeing: a description that captures the essential features of it suffices. This applies to Nussbaum’s central capabilities approach as well. It refrains from endorsing any objective account of wellbeing and emphasises opportunities. Having a capability means having options within a space of freedom and having enough capabilities enables
200 flourishing that still enables different ways of life²⁶. In that account, the defined central capabilities are those that, according to Nussbaum, are necessary for realising practically any conception of a good human life. In a similar way in our case, understanding what is *central* in ecosystem flourishing helps to understand what is central at the level of capabilities, and all-

encompassing definitions are not needed. Whereas the central capabilities approach aims to
205 promote human freedom, in the case of ecosystems and ecological justice a similar aim is to
leave the systems with an open future, one within which they have opportunities to function.

The essential constituents of ecosystem wellbeing have been perhaps most
comprehensively discussed in a broad work of Robert Prescott-Allen that proposes an ecosystem
wellbeing index (EWI) for measuring the overall state of ecosystems²⁷. Prescott-Allen defines
210 ecosystem wellbeing as “a condition in which the ecosystem maintains its diversity and quality –
and thus its capacity to support people and the rest of life – and its potential to adapt to change
and provide a wide range of choices and opportunities for the future”. Prescott-Allen's ecosystem
wellbeing indicator consists of five sub-indices: 1) land, 2) water, 3) air, 4) species and genes,
and 5) resource use, each having two factors (diversity and quality) that contribute to ecosystem
215 wellbeing²⁸. This definition of ecosystem wellbeing has been later cited and reviewed by many
researchers²⁹ and it provides an informed basis for discussing ecosystem capabilities, although
minor modifications make the notion fitter for the capabilities framework. In this paper,
ecosystem flourishing is defined as a condition where the ecosystem can perform and maintain
the functions characteristic of it, and exhibit and sustain its quality and diversity. A flourishing
220 ecosystem supports life processes that exist within or are connected with that system.

Prescott-Allen has further operationalised the sub-indices into ten measurable elements,
such as habitat and species diversity and the degree of soil degradation.³⁰ At least some of the
measurable constituents of ecosystem wellbeing could be considered as ecosystem functionings,
states of doing or being, in themselves: consider the land being undegraded or degraded, the
225 water being unpolluted or polluted, and so on. The ecosystem wellbeing index then offers
guidance in defining ecosystem capabilities: proposed capabilities should have an intelligible

role in enabling (at least some of) the aforementioned operationalised constituents of ecosystem wellbeing. Moreover, the ecosystem wellbeing lends general support to the idea that there are commonalities across the ecosystems that allow us to talk about ecosystems as things that have
230 functionings and capabilities.

Some ecosystem capability candidates may actually correspond rather directly to the functionings listed. In Nussbaum's central capabilities approach, the second central human capability was bodily health; it is arguable that soil health (sufficiently low level of degradation of soil) could be an ecosystem capability in the land ecosystems, resembling the human bodily
235 health capability. I am not going to make a decisive argument about whether this actually is the case, but the idea deserves consideration. However, many other listed elements seem to have a more complex relationship to the corresponding capabilities: what actually are the capabilities that enable species diversity, for instance? As the issue of diversity is repeated several times in the operationalised version of the ecosystem wellbeing index, it is crucially central for the whole
240 question of ecosystem capabilities. Hence, the rest of this paper will focus on a capacity that I propose as a capability central to various kinds of ecosystems, one that is strongly linked with the issues of diversity: resilience.³¹

245 **Ecosystem resilience**

Over the last decades, resilience has attracted broad and diverse discussion in social and environmental sciences. A common distinction is made between engineering resilience (the physical sense of resilience), ecological resilience, and evolutionary resilience. All these share the idea of the ability to move either back or forth to another preferred state (stability domain)

250 after disturbances; engineering resilience has only one such stability domain, whereas ecological
and evolutionary resilience may have several of them³². Social-ecological resilience is a newer
term that denotes the ‘ecological kind of resilience’ but addresses resilience at the level of
coupled social-ecological systems that include both ecological and social properties,
acknowledging that the social and ecological dimensions of our lifeworld cannot be separated.

255 Social-ecological resilience refers to the amount of disruption a system can absorb before
changing its structure, the system’s capacity of self-organization, and its ability to develop
capacities for learning and adaptation³³. In this paper, the focus is on the resilience of ecosystems
(including humans inhabiting them), which comprises one important constituent of the overall
social-ecological resilience. Interactions between the different constituents of social-ecological
260 resilience would deserve further scrutiny, and approaching them with the capabilities framework
might raise important questions about the relationship between environmental, collective, and
central human capabilities³⁴.

A resilient ecosystem can absorb disturbances if its ecological interactions reinforce and
support one another, for instance when there are several species with similar ecological
265 functions³⁵. Ecosystem resilience has been operationalised in various ways and relevant
indicators depend on the particular system in question. For example, the ecological resilience of
lake districts can be evaluated by measuring the soil phosphorous and the animal stock density,
whereas in the rangelands a proper indicator would be the shrub:wood ratio³⁶. Lance H.
Gunderson³⁷ has summarised the ongoing research on resilience and its indicators broadly. In
270 particular, much attention has been paid to the relationship between biodiversity and resilience:
biodiversity is suggested to provide cross-scale resilience. It is also often acknowledged that
human actions affect ecosystem resilience.

As a work of ecological justice (or justice in human-nature relations), this paper focuses particularly on human-induced stresses and disruptions to the ecosystems. Often the origin of a particular disruption cannot be determined as completely anthropogenic. Still, the current course of human actions – emitting high levels of greenhouse gases, discharging pollutants and toxins such as heavy metals, using renewable resources faster than they regenerate, and so forth – evidently increases the amount of anthropogenic disturbances to ecosystems. Moreover, many of the current environmental problems are already overdetermined in the loosely used sense of the term: even a smaller amount of stress would have caused the problem.

Ecosystems have confronted disruptions already before the dawn of *Homo sapiens*. The main problem with current anthropogenic disruption is the extent and rate of interference, which leads to the degradation of the ecosystems in various ways. Our current knowledge suggests that short periods of abrupt and extensive changes have occurred five times in the course of history, causing an event or wave of mass extinction. Now, humans are possibly causing the sixth wave of extinction; and for the first time, it is being caused by moral agents. This invokes moral responsibilities to which I will return in the concluding discussion.

In these circumstances, the ability to withstand stresses and shocks is necessary for any ecosystem to maintain its key functionings that enable its flourishing. The importance of resilience (and management that aims to promote resilience) has been widely acknowledged both on the ecosystem and planetary levels, starting from the introduction of ecological resilience and continuing actively in the contemporary discussion³⁸. It can be argued that in such circumstances, ecological justice creates an obligation to protect and promote ecosystem resilience. Within the capabilities framework, this invokes a case for arguing that resilience is a central ecosystem capability that is closely linked with biodiversity, an important constituent of

ecosystem wellbeing. This argument deserves a closer inspection.

Linking ecosystem resilience, flourishing, and capabilities

Anthropogenic environmental degradation harms and places stress on the elements that were
300 earlier listed as constitutive to ecosystem wellbeing, such as diversity, nutrient cycles, and the air
and land quality. This encumbers the wellbeing of an ecosystem. In many cases, the harmful
actions have a negative effect also on the resilience of ecosystems³⁹. In addition, disturbances
continue to arise from non-human grounds as well, which increases the amount of total stress
faced by ecosystems.

305 Ecosystem flourishing and overall functioning requires proper functioning of various
elements that are captured, for example, in the environmental wellbeing index. These factors are
either in themselves, or closely linked to, the states of being and doing: the central functionings
of an ecosystem. These functionings that are essential constituents of ecosystem flourishing (a
condition where the ecosystem can perform and maintain the functions characteristic of it) are
310 threatened and harmed by anthropogenic disruptions.

However, a resilient ecosystem can absorb more such disturbances, leaving room for the
adaptation and dynamic reorganisation of key functionings. Ecosystems that lack resilience are
susceptible to non-linear and non-predictable changes and the breakdown of functionings
essential for the identity, integrity, and flourishing characteristic of them⁴⁰. This does not mean
315 that resilience is about maintaining a stable compilation of populations and processes that would
not change at all. Social-ecological resilience assumes multiple stability domains, and the
combination of populations in the system may vary⁴¹. What matters is the rate and nature of the
changes and whether the habitats have the chances for adaptation in a way that the ecosystem

can remain as the kind of system it has been – in other words, able to maintain its identity.

320 The close relationship between ecosystem resilience and functioning should be rather
 apparent now: resilience is necessary for the dynamic maintenance of the key ecosystem
 functionings in a world of unavoidable disruptions. Yet, this description could be made even
 without an appeal to the capabilities framework: it does not sufficiently justify the claim that
 resilience should have a role in the capabilities list. Thus, I will next discuss the reasons for
 325 considering resilience an ecosystem capability rather than a functioning or some other interesting
 feature of ecosystems. After that, I will show why resilience should be included in the list of
 central ecosystem capabilities.

 Human capabilities define what a person in question is able to do and to be⁴². Ecological
 capabilities, on the other hand, are elements in the chain where primary goods are transformed
 330 into capabilities and then into functionings that constitute the flourishing of the system⁴³.
 Combining these definitions, ecosystem capabilities answer the question of what an ecosystem is
 able to do and to be in terms of transforming its primary goods into functionings that contribute
 to ecosystem flourishing. Resilience indeed defines to a significant extent what a given
 ecosystem is able to do and to be in the world of unavoidable disruptions. When various
 335 disruptions threaten the processes in which primary goods are transformed into functionings (that
 constitute the ecosystem flourishing), resilience allows for alternative ways in which the
 transformation can be rearranged so that the functionings peculiar to that particular system can
 be maintained. This is illustrated in the finding that several species with similar ecological
 functions often make ecosystems more resilient⁴⁴. This can be now formulated in a language
 340 similar to Nussbaum's list of central human capabilities⁴⁵. Having the capability of ecosystem
 resilience means *being able to absorb disturbances so that the essential features and*

functionings characteristic of that ecosystem persist and continue to support flourishing of the system.

A distinction needs to be made between ecosystem resilience and integrity, two related
345 but not synonymous notions. Integrity is the “power” that makes natural systems autonomous
entities and that allows the realization of the potential of those systems⁴⁶. Integrity is a state in
which functioning remains: it is not a capacity or ability⁴⁷. A more detailed discussion of
integrity in the environmental capabilities approach is offered by Daniel Crescenzo who asserts
that integrity is best understood as loose integrity. It is defined as follows: “An ecosystem has
350 loose integrity so long as it retains its capacity to return, after disruption, to functioning as
substantially the same kind of system it was before disruption”⁴⁸. This is not to be confused with
resilience which, in turn, is the capacity of an ecosystem to maintain loose integrity; the
resilience of different ecosystems also informs how extensive human disruption is permissible in
different circumstances⁴⁹. The view that resilience contributes to ecological integrity has gained
355 support from other theorists as well⁵⁰. Crescenzo attaches great importance to ecosystem
resilience in defining the permissibility of anthropogenic disturbances. This indicates that
resilience is one of the conditions for ecological justice: if the subject of justice is below the
threshold on the resilience capability, that constitutes a failure of justice⁵¹.

Conceptually, then, resilience fits well with the group of candidates for ecosystem
360 capabilities. But does it deserve the place in the list of central capabilities? In the central
capabilities approach, the central capabilities are distinguished from other capabilities by their
essentiality for any human life with dignity and wellbeing⁵². Another important point is that for
Nussbaum the central capabilities approach is a political project and a question of social justice
and just societies. Protecting and promoting central capabilities is the task of a society⁵³:

365 consequently, capabilities should be something that can be promoted by political actions,
independently of more or less lucky states of affair.

These conditions for a capability to count as central, necessity and governability, are applicable in the case of non-human central capabilities as well. There are various factors that can increase the wellbeing of a given organism or system, yet remain unnecessary for it.

370 Governability is a condition that is particularly important in the case of non-human capabilities. While it is possible to regulate for instance man-made greenhouse gas emissions, there are non-anthropogenic factors that affect the atmosphere as well. Even if we agree with Holland⁵⁴ that a stable climate system is a part of the environmental meta-capability necessary for other human capabilities, society's success or failure in protecting this part of the meta-capability can be
375 judged only in terms of regulation of the anthropogenic emissions. It is possible that the stable climate system may collapse at some point even if society succeeded in its responsibility to protect it. Similarly, it is possible that a habitat or population may be seriously harmed or even perish due to a non-human disaster such as a volcanic eruption or an earthquake.

The necessity of resilience for ecosystem wellbeing should be rather apparent by now,
380 based on the evidence from resilience research presented earlier in this text, as well as in the conceptual framework. Resilience enables the systems to remain the kind of systems they essentially are, for example mires or primeval forests, in circumstances where different (internal and external) disruptions threaten this state. If human actions destroy the conditions that are necessary for a primeval forest to survive and the area is turned into a young coppice forest, it
385 may flourish as a coppice but not anymore as the kind of ecosystem it was earlier.

Ecosystem resilience also meets the condition of governability. Granted, there are ecological qualities that cannot be promoted by society, such as genetic diversity of a particular

species (the genetically modified diversification of wildlife, for instance, is disregarded here).

Yet, the research literature on resilience suggests that ecological (or social-ecological) resilience

390 can be decreased, maintained or increased – even if not fully managed – through policies and management strategies⁵⁵.

If resilience fits well with the conceptual framework of capabilities and meets the necessary conditions for having a central role among ecosystem capabilities, are there any further reasons to abstain from proposing it as a central ecosystem capability? There are two

395 points of criticism that require addressing⁵⁶. The first concerns the borders of an ecosystem. It

can be argued that as we can always redraw the ecosystem borders, the idea of ecosystem capabilities is very problematic. While I agree that the limits of certain ecosystems are not ontologically unequivocal, this problem arises mostly out of the attempt to come up with a universal political definition of an ecosystem without interdisciplinary reference. Many

400 environmental scientists talk meaningfully about the different states such as health, wellbeing, vulnerability, and integrity of ecosystems. The boundaries of an ecosystem are context-sensitive, yet environmental policy is overall context-sensitive. The moral status of ecological objects has

been discussed by Christopher H. Eliot⁵⁷ who points out that addressing the question involves two interlinked projects. The moral project examines whether and why we should treat certain

405 ecological objects as morally considerable, and the ecological project identifies what kinds of ecological objects exist in a sense that is sufficient for making them objects for such

considerations. From the viewpoint of the ecological project, Eliot suggests that ecological

objects (including ecosystems) are sufficiently real for moral scrutiny. Therefore the criticism on the ambiguity of ecosystem boundaries does not, in my view, pose an issue here.

410 Another problem concerns the responsibilities of ecological justice evoked by the idea of

ecosystem capabilities. The capabilities framework is an approach to justice, and therefore the idea of ecosystem capabilities appears to give rise to related responsibilities of justice. Cripps⁵⁸ is worried that securing ecosystem capabilities leads to detrimental efforts to “hold time still” and makes all human interactions with the non-human world morally unacceptable. As these

415 questions are essentially connected to the ecosystem capabilities themselves and related responsibilities, they are best addressed with regard to actual capability candidates, here ecosystem resilience. While Cripps’s worry cannot be here comprehensively ruled out concerning other capability candidates that might emerge in future discussion, promoting and protecting ecosystem resilience would not yield the feared consequences. For one thing, the

420 ecological type of resilience⁵⁹ is not about holding things unchanged. Systems may change in time but still maintain their functioning, diversity, and essential identity⁶⁰. Nevertheless, one might ask whether there is a risk that responsibilities of ecological justice make all human interference with the non-human world impermissible. However, this appears not to be the case. Resilience as an ecosystem capability might evoke two types of duties of ecological justice

425 among humans: negative duties not to harm ecosystem resilience and positive duties to promote it. Negative duties are relatively unproblematic here. A great deal of human-non-human interaction has no significant effect on resilience (remember that utilising ecosystems is not impermissible in this sense as far as they can adapt to changes and maintain their essential functionings), and I find it unlikely that protecting the central human capabilities would

430 necessitate undermining ecosystem resilience, for many human functionings can be secured in various ways. Positive duties might be more problematic. As the sixth wave of extinction illustrates, the amount of anthropogenic harm already done is significant: hence it can be argued that we also have a positive duty to support the resilience of ecosystems in the face of ongoing

and forthcoming global environmental change. Regarding this duty, the problem is not the
435 incompatibility of resilience-building measures with human wellbeing but the risk that our
responsibilities become too demanding. This question of our duties to ecosystems and their
demandingness requires scrutiny that goes beyond this paper and requires the analysis of policy
impacts as well. An important reminder is, however, that ecosystem resilience essentially
contributes to the overall social-ecological resilience that is a precondition for the sustainable
440 functioning of societies: securing ecosystem resilience is in many cases a prerequisite for human
flourishing. To sum up, I find no reasons to argue that it would be impossible to promote central
human capabilities and ecosystem resilience in parallel – although doing so would certainly
require significant changes in our current practices.

445 **Discussion**

Although this paper is essentially theoretical, I wish to conclude with some more practical
remarks. After all, the environmental capabilities project should be able to provide something for
the practice as well, at least if it wishes to justify itself as an approach that bridges the theoretical
ideas and practical movements like Schlosberg suggests. But how could one apply the idea of
450 resilience as a central ecosystem capability in practice?

Ecosystem resilience is a feature that has already been operationalised to a certain extent,
albeit slowly: it is measurable. Measurability makes resilience more applicable for
environmental planning and policy making as well: it is something whose progress or decline
can be tracked. This has several implications. First, using resilience as a policy benchmark helps
455 make prioritisations when the needs of environmental protection exceed the allocated resources:
if we cannot protect everything, the focus on resilience helps targeting those systems that are

most susceptible to losing their essential functionings due to disturbances and human-induced stress. Second, promoting resilience is a valuable approach when the consequences of human actions are uncertain. For instance, predicting the precise impact of climate change on non-
460 human nature is in many cases impossible. Increasing the resilience of (particularly vulnerable) ecosystems is often the most effective way to protect non-human nature in such circumstances. Third, resilience measurement can also advance more holistic policies: combined with the tools currently used in environmental impact assessment, resilience evaluation would enhance the assessment's ability to take into account indirect effects⁶¹.

465 The reasons listed above suggest resilience as a promising concept in environmental policy making, yet resilience evaluation can be used in policy making as such without any reference to capabilities. What surplus does the capabilities approach offer, then? The case might indeed be that in practical applications the idea of capabilities is not necessary, just like the Human Development Index has roots in the capabilities framework but remains nowadays rather
470 detached from its theoretical origins. However, the applicability of resilience shows that theorising ecosystem capabilities has a potential to produce something practically useful, and this provides one more reason why the environmental capabilities approach deserves more attention. The most important reasons for this concern the general challenge of conflicting human and non-human interests, the demandingness objection, and the importance of bridging
475 holistic theories with practice.

Conflicts between human and non-human interests are unavoidable for any theory of ecological justice. When the non-human systemic entities including ecosystems, habitats and species are included in the community of justice, the amount of possible conflicts within the community of justice increases. A theory of ecological justice needs to address these conflicts

480 and make them overall less weighty, without ending up vastly complex or over-demanding. Erasing the conflicts cannot be demanded from a non-ideal theory of ecological justice: rather, the purpose of such theories is to offer tools in which these conflicts can be evaluated and solutions negotiated⁶². It is here that the environmental capabilities approach has potential to outperform many other approaches.

485 Now, there is a crucial difference between minimal and non-minimal accounts of justice, and the capabilities approach represents the former pole of this distinction⁶³. As the conditions of (minimal) justice require equality in terms of exceeding the threshold related to central capabilities, rather than equality in more extensive terms, its demands are modest compared to those theories that extend the demand for equality further. The conflicts of interest that do not
490 jeopardise the central capabilities of any party are not issues of justice: this also involves the ‘functioning conflicts’ that are not essentially linked to diminished central capabilities. This significantly reduces the amount of conflicts relevant to justice and makes the approach less demanding than non-minimal counterparts. Admittedly, there are also other minimal accounts of ecological justice, most notably Baxter’s theory in which “ecological justice consists of the
495 environmental resources needed for populations of species to survive and flourish after their kind”⁶⁴. That account can, however, be criticised for being already too narrow in disregarding important elements of justice that cannot be captured by the distributional orientation.⁶⁵ Furthermore, by dismissing the question what an ecosystem is actually able to do and to be, there is a risk that due to differences in conversion factor the equal distribution of resources cannot
500 guarantee threshold equality to all populations or habitats (due, for instance, to greater vulnerability to changes in climatic conditions, something that cannot be addressed by resource distribution alone). The environmental capabilities approach adopts a position that is more

relevant for the wellbeing of those non-human entities, but as it is a minimal account of justice, it can avoid a great deal of the problems related to conflict situations and demandingness. This is also illustrated in the notion of loose integrity that leaves enough space for basic human activities such as energy production and agriculture⁶⁶ that are often considered to conflict with ecological justice.

The capability framework also advances introducing more holistic approaches in environmental policy making, an idea that has been endorsed by many environmental philosophers and political theorists.⁶⁷ Consider a case of a flourishing but vulnerable and atypical forest in the middle of two cities. Policy makers want to make a road directly through the forest, claiming that 98 per cent of the forest would still remain intact. From a non-holistic (and perhaps even distribution-oriented) perspective, the amount of disturbance remains very low while constructing the short cut might entail great economic benefits for human society. From the capabilities viewpoint, there is much more than percentages at stake: the road would disconnect the vulnerable forest areas, preventing the populations from moving between the areas. By making both habitats less resilient, the road would significantly impede the central capabilities of the ecosystem and various populations inhabiting it. This more holistic reasoning implies that the damage done by the road would actually be far greater than two per cent and diminish the resilience of the affected ecosystems: such a policy would fail to meet the duty to protect the ecosystem resilience in given areas. On the other hand, if the forest system in question is of a common and robust type, or sufficient green corridors would be secured, harming the central capabilities of that system would perhaps not be an issue. Moreover, the effect of the road project on human central capabilities should be evaluated: if building the road harms central ecological capabilities and not building it does not harm the central human ones (of the people living in

both cities), there is an argument for not building the road. Less holistic views focusing on the population sizes or total forest area are poorly equipped to take these contextual factors into account. The capabilities framework provides tools for applying the holistic perspective both at the theoretical and practical levels. This promise for practical applicability of a theory, in
 530 combination with the other advantages discussed earlier, makes the environmental capabilities approach deserving of more attention among theorists of ecological justice.

Further development of this approach will be needed in order to address the challenges that still remain, in particular with regard to interest conflicts as well as the need for defining other central capabilities of nonhuman individuals and systems. Applying the environmental
 535 capabilities approach in practice will also require interdisciplinary cooperation, connecting the best knowledge from philosophy and environmental social sciences with ecological and biological sciences. Yet I believe that precisely this kind of cooperation will be needed in the future if humans wish to make a transition towards more sustainable ways to inhabit the Earth, ways that embrace the whole community of justice.

540

¹ The capabilities approach to social justice focuses on what each person is able to do and to be, or her opportunities and freedoms. This is a remarkable difference to distributional approaches that focus on the distribution of goods or bads. The central capabilities approach is a particular version of the capabilities approach. It maintains that there are certain central capabilities which are essential for any conception of (human or sentient) wellbeing; these capabilities and their relation to justice will be introduced later in this article. Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice. Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), are among Nussbaum's most central works in this respect.

² Kenneth Shockley and Andrew Light, "Sourcing Stability in a Time of Climate Change," *Environmental Values* 23 (2014): 199–217.

³ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*; Ramona Ilea, “Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach and Nonhuman Animals: Theory and Public Policy,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 39 (2008): 547–63; and Christine M. Reed, “Enriching the Lives of Wild Horses: Designing Opportunities for Them to Flourish,” *Environmental Values* 21 (2012): 317–29. For criticism on Nussbaum’s account, see Daniel L. Crescenzo, “The Problem of Predator-Prey Relations and Predator Flourishing in Nussbaum’s Capabilities Approach to Justice,” *Environmental Ethics* 34 (2012): 177–97.

⁴ David Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); David Schlosberg, “Climate Justice and Capabilities: A Framework for Adaptation Policy,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 26 (2012): 445–61; Breena Holland, “Justice and the Environment in Nussbaum’s ‘Capabilities Approach’: Why Sustainable Ecological Capacity Is a Meta-Capability,” *Political Research Quarterly* 61 (2008): 319–32; and Breena Holland, “Environment as Meta-capability: Why a Dignified Human Life Requires a Stable Climate System,” in *Ethical Adaptation to Climate Change: Human Virtues of the Future*, ed. A. Thompson and J. Bendik-Keymer, 145–164. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012.

⁵ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 147–151.

⁷ Elizabeth Cripps, “Saving the Polar Bear, Saving the World: Can the Capabilities Approach Do Justice to Humans, Animals and Ecosystems?,” *Res Publica* 16 (2010), p. 13.

⁸ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, p. 157.

⁹ Holland, “Justice and the Environment,” discusses this approach. The extension concerns environmental sustainability that should be added into central human capabilities as a type of ‘meta-capability’ that is a precondition for enabling other capabilities.

¹⁰ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, pp. x; 17–18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 33–34.

¹³ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, pp. 325–405.

¹⁴ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, pp. 151–152; Crescenzo, “The Problem of Predator-Prey Relations”.

¹⁵ Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 357.

¹⁶ See Brian Baxter, *A Theory of Ecological Justice* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹⁷ Cripps, “Saving the Polar Bear”, p. 16.

¹⁸ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice* offers the first broad discussion on these topics. Rather than a complete theory in itself, Schlosberg’s treatment offers a “blueprint” and conceptual framework for theorising ecological and environmental justice.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 145–147.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 148.

²¹ See Laura Westra, *Living in Integrity: A Global Ethic to Restore a Fragmented Earth* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998) for the discussion on defining and measuring integrity. An interpretation of the notion of integrity in the environmental capabilities context has been offered in Daniel L. Crescenzo, "Loose Integrity and Ecosystem Justice on Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach," *Environmental Philosophy* 10 (2013): 53–74.

²² Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, p. 150.

²³ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, pp. 24–25.

²⁴ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, p. 149.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 143.

²⁶ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, pp. 39; 109–10. This does not entail that enabling all possible capabilities is preferable: there are capabilities and functionings that are harmful to others, such as the ability to use physical control over one's family.

²⁷ Robert Prescott-Allen, *The Wellbeing of Nations: A Country-by-country Index of Quality of Life and the Environment* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2001), pp. 5; 59.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 7; 59.

²⁹ See for example T. M. Parris and R. W. Kates, "Characterizing and Measuring Sustainable Development," *Annual Review of Environment and Resources* 28 (2003): 559–86; J. Wilson, P. Tyedmers and R. Pelot, "Contrasting and Comparing Sustainable Development Indicator Metrics," *Ecological Indicators* 7 (2007): 299–314; and R. K. Singh, H. Murty, S. K. Gupta and A. K. Dikshit, "An Overview of Sustainability Assessment Methodologies," *Ecological Indicators* 9 (2012): 281–99.

³⁰ Land assessment measures both the diversity of the habitats and (species) communities and the degree of soil degradation. Water indices contain the factors of community and habitat diversity and the amount of pollutants. Air and atmosphere quality depend on the amount of pollutants and the chemical balance in the global atmosphere. The species and genes dimension refers to the amount of both wild and domesticated species. The resource use is measured by the energy and material consumption and the resource extraction exercised by humans. (Prescott-Allen, *The Wellbeing of Nations*, pp. 60; 67–93.)

³¹ While proposing a complete ecosystem capabilities list would be a more impressive accomplishment, the extent of such a task greatly exceeds the length of an article because Nussbaum's human capabilities list does not provide much backbone for an ecosystem capabilities list. This is due to differences between human persons and ecosystem entities.

³² S. Davoudi, K. Shaw, L. J. Haider, A. E. Quinlan, G. D. Peterson, C. Wilkinson, H. Fünfgeld, D. McEvoy and L. Porter, "Resilience: A Bridging Concept or a Dead End?," *Planning Theory & Practice* 13 (2012): 299–307.

³³ F. Berkes, J. Colding and C. Folke, *Navigating social-ecological systems: Building resilience for complexity and change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 13. For the relations between social and ecological properties and their interactions, see F.S. Ill Chapin, G.P. Kofinas and C. Folke

(Eds.), *Principles of ecosystem stewardship: resilience based natural resource management in a changing world* (New York: Springer, 2009).

³⁴ On collective or community capabilities, see Peter Evans, "Collective capabilities, culture, and Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom," *Studies in comparative international development*, 37 (2002): 54–60; S. S. Ibrahim, "From individual to collective capabilities: the capability approach as a conceptual framework for self-help," *Journal of Human Development* 7 (2006): 397–416; and David Schlosberg and David Carruthers, "Indigenous struggles, environmental justice, and community capabilities," *Global Environmental Politics* 10(2010): 12–35.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Steve Carpenter, Brian Walker, J.Marty Anderies and Nick Abel. 2001. "From Metaphor to Measurement: Resilience of What to What?," *Ecosystems* 4 (2001): 765–81.

³⁷ Lance H. Gunderson, "Ecological Resilience – In Theory and Application," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 31 (2000): 425–39.

³⁸ Originally, resilience was introduced in ecological studies in C. S. Holling, "Resilience and Stability of Ecological Systems," *Annual Review of Ecology and Systematics* 4 (1973): 1–23. Among the most cited pieces in the contemporary discussion are Peterson et al., "Ecological Resilience" and Gunderson, "Ecological Resilience". A pioneering work in the field of social and ecological resilience is Neil W. Adger, "Social and Ecological Resilience: Are They Related?," *Progress in Human Geography* 24 (2000): 347–64.

³⁹ C. S. Holling and G. K. Meffe, "Command and Control and the Pathology of Natural Resource Management." *Conservation Biology* 10 (1996): 328–37. See also Peterson et al, "Ecological Resilience", and Gunderson, "Ecological Resilience".

⁴⁰ For resilience and identity, see G. S. Cumming, G. Barnes, S. Perz, M. Schmink, K. E. Sieving, J. Southworth, M. Binford, R. D. Holt, C. Stickler and T. Van Holt, "An Exploratory Framework for the Empirical Measurement of Resilience," *Ecosystems* 8 (2005): 975–87.

⁴¹ Adger, "Social and Ecological Resilience", p. 349.

⁴² Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, p. 20.

⁴³ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, pp. 148–51.

⁴⁴ Peterson et al., "Ecological Resilience".

⁴⁵ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, pp. 33–34 formulates most of the central capabilities as being able to do or be X, followed by more detailed clarifications of what it means in practice to have that particular capability.

⁴⁶ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, pp. 136–37.

⁴⁷ David Schlosberg, "Ecological Justice for the Anthropocene," in *Political Animals and Animal Politics*, ed. Marcel Wissenburg and David Schlosberg, 75–89. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

⁴⁸ Crescenzo, "Loose Integrity", p. 53.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 63.

⁵⁰ See David Pimentel, Laura Westra and Reed F. Noss, *Ecological Integrity: Integrating Environment, Conservation, and Health* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000) for a multidisciplinary example on this.

⁵¹ On the relation between capability provision and failures of justice, see Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*, p. 167.

⁵² Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, pp. 31–32.

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 28; 77.

⁵⁴ Holland, “Justice and the Environment”.

⁵⁵ F. C. Berkes and J. Colding, eds., *Linking Social and Ecological Systems: Management Practices and Social Mechanisms for Building Resilience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). See also C. Folke, S. Carpenter, T. Elmqvist, L. Gunderson, C. S. Holling and B. Walker, “Resilience and Sustainable Development: Building Adaptive Capacity in a World of Transformations,” *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 31 (2002), 437–40; and B. Walker, S. Carpenter, J. Anderies, N. Abel, G. Cumming, M. Janssen, L. Lebel, J. Norberg, G. D. Peterson and R. Pritchard, “Resilience Management in Social-Ecological Systems: A Working Hypothesis for a Participatory Approach,” *Conservation Ecology* 6 (2002): 14. These are among the most cited resources on the topic.

⁵⁶ These points have been made by Cripps, “Saving the Polar Bear”, pp. 12–13.

⁵⁷ Christopher H. Eliot, “Ecological Objects for Environmental Ethics,” in *Linking Ecology and Ethics for a Changing World: Values, Philosophy, and Action*, eds. R. Rozzi, S.T.A. Pickett, C. Palmer, J.J. Arnesto & J.B. Callicott, 219-229. Dordrecht: Springer, 2013.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵⁹ It must be repeated here that this notion captures both ecological and social-ecological resilience.

⁶⁰ More generally, the capabilities approach is essentially not a framework that would lead to holding time still. Such a risk is carried by functioning-oriented theories and frameworks, and in this sense capability-oriented accounts are indeed less likely to result in any normative judgments that would involve avoiding any change.

⁶¹ On environmental impact assessment (EIA) see M. Lenzen, S. A. Murray, B. Korte and C. J. Dey, “Environmental Impact Assessment Including Indirect Effects – A Case Study Using Input–Output Analysis,” *Environmental Impact Assessment Review* 23 (2003): 263–82. The importance of the notion of resilience in natural resource management has also been noted in earlier literature that integrates ecological sciences with ethics (R. Rozzi et al., *Earth Stewardship*, and Chapin et al., *Principles of ecosystem stewardship*).

⁶² Schlosberg, “Ecological Justice for the Anthropocene”, pp. 83–84.

⁶³ Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*, p. 71.

⁶⁴ Baxter, *A Theory of Ecological Justice*, p. 139.

⁶⁵ Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice*, 121–26.

⁶⁶ Crescenzo, “Loose Integrity”, p. 62.

⁶⁷ See for example Schlosberg, *Defining Environmental Justice* and Bryan G. Norton, *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005) on this.