

Developing consistent theory for social ecological economics – where do we stand?

Special session(s) organizer and chairs: Elke Pirgmaier and Tone Smith

In line with the overall conference theme, this series of three sessions aims to reflect on the achievements and impacts of ecological economics in terms of theory building. The analytical starting point of ecological economics was a new preanalytic vision that overcomes the shortcomings of traditional economic ontology. However, after two decades of scholarly work and community building, ecological economics has become a bazaar of different disciplines and scholars concerned with social ecological challenges rather than a consistent body of knowledge. As a result, ecological economics still fails to provide a fully developed alternative to the mainstream along heterodox lines. Of particular concern is the fact that much of what is called ecological economics today neglects the social dimension. A biophysical analysis of economic processes often prevails at the expense of addressing the intertwined nature of social ecological systems. We therefore suggest the wording 'social ecological economics' to stress the original intention of socio-economists¹ who contributed to the formation of our field, to study social and environmental relations together.

This session aims to revive the theory building spirit of ecological economics. Key questions raised are: What concepts and elements need to be combined for a consistent explanatory and emancipatory theory of social ecological economics? What exists already, and what is missing? How can we build more bridges between heterodox traditions and progressive ecological economics to collectively establish a new economics that is supportive of socially just sustainability transitions?

The session offers a platform for collectively thinking about constructive efforts on how to move forward on this agenda. We propose a special session that comprehends 3 sessions. The first two are planned as conventional special/thematic sessions. The third is a 'problem-solving session' in a workshop format that builds on the previous 2 sessions.

1 In her historical articles about the formation of the field of ecological economics, Röpke (2004, 2005) uses the term 'socio-economist' for economists coming from non-mainstream fields such as institutional, evolutionary and Marxian economics, political economy, economic sociology, etc.