The role of trade in resource use across levels of scale: Conceptual and methodological advances

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Trade plays a decisive role in mediating between production and consumption; 'distal drivers' are a highly productive analytical category in understanding the origins of environmental impact. The analysis of trade in monetary and physical terms depends on an understanding of the economy and of social metabolism as mutually linked and forms a central research field within Ecological Economics. The production of goods for export is often associated with detrimental environmental impacts, including deforestation, air pollution, resource depletion, and freshwater loss. If and to what extent importing countries ought to bear or share the responsibility for these impacts is currently being debated within academia as well as policy-making. Economies which export high amounts of primary commodities may be import-dependent for related secondary commodities. Their export-orientation is often associated with social consequences such as distributional issues with regard to the access to resources and the (economic) benefits generated by commodity exports. On the other hand, countries dependent on imports of specific resources run the risk of endangered supply security in a world of increasing resource demand and competition in the access to resources.

For Ecological Economics, the rising importance of trade in resource use across levels of scale poses both a conceptual and a methodological challenge. This session brings together representatives of various academic groups investigating the role of trade in global resource use. The session is open to conceptual contributions and case studies (e.g., on ecologically unequal exchange, extractivism, dematerialization/resource efficiency, trade as a distal driver of local change) as well as presentations discussing the underlying accounting methods for global resource use associated with traded products (e.g., energy, carbon, material, land or water footprints, raw material equivalents (RME)). Footprint-type indicators are currently under debate in the Ecological Economics community with regard to the methods on which they are based (environmentally extended input-output analysis, coefficient approaches, hybrid approaches). The implications that any choice of method has for the specific research questions which can be answered form an explicit focus of this session. Overall, this session seeks to foster exchange on concepts for the analysis of trade patterns and their analysis.