ARTICLES

Dollars Making Sense
Understanding Nature in Capitalism

James G. Carrier

**ABSTRACT:** This article addresses the relationship between enterprises in capitalist systems and people’s understandings of activities concerning the environment. Two sorts activities are described, those intended to alleviate hunger and those intended to protect the environment. Both illustrate how the routine operation of those enterprises affects the ways that people perceive the world and problems in it, and how people are likely to evaluate activities that can address those problems. Such effects come about because normal commercial pressures make it likely that enterprises will present the surroundings and the problems that concern them in ways that stress certain aspects of and processes in the world, while slighting others. The result of those presentations is a simplified rendering of the surroundings that tends to encourage certain sorts of orientation and action rather than others. The relationship between these renderings and those orientations and actions is not, however, straightforward, and this article concludes with a consideration of the sorts of processes that can shape that relationship.

**KEYWORDS:** capitalism, environment, ethical consumption, Jamaica, legibility

The economic crisis that began in 2008 has led to a renewed interest, in both popular and scholarly media, in economic practices and institutions (for scholarly work see, e.g., Ho 2009; Ouroussoff 2010). In the popular media, much of this interest has centered on activities and individuals who can be cast as deviant or fraudulent, such as “rogue traders,” bank employees who make unauthorized trades, and companies that misrepresent the financial instruments and services that they sell. This focus on the deviant in the commercial world is not new (Eichenwald 1995) and can be revealing. However, it tends to divert attention from the norm, the routine pressures on and practices of conventional enterprise in capitalist systems.

The purpose of this article is to approach the title of this special issue, “Capitalism and the Environment,” in terms of those pressures and practices. In some ways, such an approach is familiar: we all know about the drive to profit and the ways that it can affect the surroundings, people’s relationships with those surroundings, and people’s lives. The commercial pressures that operate in the petroleum industry, for instance, can lead to changes in the procedures used for drilling and the places where that drilling occurs. If these changes are successful, they
become the innovations that competitive capitalism is said to encourage. Alternatively, they can fail spectacularly and result in things like the disaster of the Deepwater Horizon in 2010, the Bhopal Union Carbide disaster in 1984, and the wreck of the Torrey Canyon in 1967.

Pursuing those ordinary pressures and practices is worthwhile. For one thing, focusing on them balances the tendency for people's attention to be drawn by the spectacular, whether the rogue trader or the lethal drilling rig, and hence drawn away from the nature of the system in which these events occur. As well, such a focus makes it easier to ask certain questions. If we start with the nature and operation of the system of constraints and pressures in which enterprises operate, we can work out how these are likely to be manifest. This allows a perspective on the relationship between capitalism and the environment that is different from what we would have if we started with the failures and worked inward.

The mundane pressures and practices of concern here can be approached in different ways. Borrowing from Merton's (1968) idea of theories of the middle range, the approach here is a focus on processes of the middle range. That focus is on a level below the macroscopic, the realm of the broad structures of political economy and historical change that have been used to produce revealing models of contemporary renderings of people's understandings of and relationships with the natural surroundings (e.g., Argyrou 2005; Escobar 1999; Ingold 1988). Equally, however, it is above the level of the microscopic, the realm of the detailed processes and procedures that are the concern of fields like the social studies of finance (e.g., Lépinay 2011; Muniesa 2007; Zaloom 2006). Certainly the middle range is shaped by the macroscopic and the microscopic, but attending to it can help illuminate the ways that the pressures and practices that operate at that level can have a significant effect on people's relationships with their surroundings.

I pursue that topic in different ways in the three main sections of this article. In the first section I present the basic analytical approach that I use to discern the ways that dollars make sense, the ways that routine commercial concerns and practices shape the ways that people understand the natural world, in terms of the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as seed for staple grains. That presentation is normative and somewhat idealized, in Weber's sense, which makes it easier to discern the tendencies that inhere in the routine orientations of the sorts of people and companies I describe. The second section shifts from the idealized to the concrete, and takes cognizance of the contingencies that were ignored in the first section. It does so with a discussion of the ways that two national parks in Jamaica present the areas of coastal waters that they seek to protect. The third section qualifies the concern of the first two, which is the constructions of the world that people confront as a result of routine commercial constraints and practices. That qualification is necessary if we are to avoid two errors. One is the error of assuming that people accept and adopt those constructions in a straightforward way; the other is the error of assuming that when enterprises produce representations they do so without reference to the ways that they are likely to be perceived. To show how these assumptions are faulty, this third section points out the broader social and cultural factors that can affect the way that people interpret those constructions, and the routine commercial pressure on enterprises to take those factors into account.

The Power of the Purse

I turn now to my first task, laying out in fairly idealized terms the analytical apparatus that allows us to see the ways that dollars make sense. I do so with an illustration that revolves around the power of the purse. That power is the appropriate place to start, for money is the crucial resource
for enterprises of all sorts in capitalist systems with extensive market economies. That illustration concerns genetically modified (GM) varieties of staple grains.

We are told regularly that the amount of food in the world is decreasingly adequate for human needs, perhaps because of rising population, perhaps because of climate change, perhaps because of changes in people's diet as they become wealthier. Whatever the cause, the result is dire: a global rise in the cost of food and a growing threat of hunger and civil disorder.

This vision of looming hunger often is invoked by those who advocate GMOs, and they argue that GM crops will allow an increase in our food supply (such arguments are considered in Stone and Glover 2011). In the words of a commentary in the *Telegraph* (Emmott 2008), “The longer we deny ourselves this technological way to increase food output …, the longer the current imbalance between food supply and demand will last.” The advocates’ argument can be challenged (famously by Sen 1981; for an overview, see Stone 2010), but my purpose here is to trace its implications, rather than assess its accuracy. In particular, I am concerned with the type of understanding, the sort of sense, that the argument of those advocates solidifies, and the type that it slights. I describe these types by means of another argument, also invoking straightforward aspects of food and of commercial life.

The problem that the advocates of GMOs point to is one of insufficient food. However, the problem of insufficient food is not as simple as it might appear at first glance. It can be taken to be the problem that the advocates identify, that is varieties of grain that are insufficiently fruitful. Equally, however, other things contribute to that fruitfulness. These include soil composition, water supply to the crops in the fields, and agricultural technique. As well, there is crop storage and transportation, and all the other steps between the point where the grain leaves the field and the point where it becomes the focus of concern, food that is in people's stomachs.

These different ways of rendering the problem of insufficient food point in different directions, and so encourage different understandings of the food supply and its uncertainties. For instance, it appears that a substantial amount of food is lost in storage and transportation between harvest and the market. The Food and Agriculture Organization (1989: n.p.) says: “Estimates of the post-harvest losses of food grains in the developing world from mishandling, spoilage and pest infestation are put at 25 percent,” while the African Post Harvest Losses Information System (n.d.) puts the figure for grain loss in sub-Saharan Africa at between 14 percent and 17 percent.

If these estimates are correct and these losses were reduced by about half, we would increase the food that could go into people's stomachs by about one-tenth, which is substantial. If a significant proportion of that loss is from vermin and spoilage, then measures such as ventilating grain stores to reduce spoilage and modifying them to keep vermin out would go some way toward addressing the problem of insufficient food. Further, it is likely that similar changes between planting and harvest also would help. In drier areas, for instance, it might be possible to improve irrigation systems by things like increasing the lining of irrigation ditches, thereby reducing the amount of water lost through seepage. Other such improvements will be apparent to those who are familiar with agriculture in different parts of the world (see Hillel 1997).

I have presented some of the ways that the problem of insufficient food could be addressed, ways that strengthen certain understandings of food and slight others. In focusing on one element in the long and complex process of food supply, they encourage an abstract and simplified understanding of the goal that they set themselves, getting food into people's stomachs. The argument for GM varieties, like the argument for IR8 rice in the Green Revolution and the argument for any other improved seed variety, stresses the initial link in the chain from seed to stomach, and in doing so it slights the others. Likewise, the argument for making grain stores more resistant to vermin stresses a different link and, again, slights others.
There are, then, a variety of perspectives on the problem of insufficient food, each of which renders that problem in its own terms. Given this variety, it is pertinent to ask why some appear more visible more often than others. In terms of my illustration, why is the advocacy of the expansion of GM crops so much more common than the advocacy of, say, increasing the production of clay to line irrigation ditches, of sheet metal to line grain stores, or of wire mesh to allow better ventilation? This question is important because the more visible advocacy is more likely than the less visible to influence general public understandings of things like “insufficient food” and how to correct it. In saying this, I treat the sheer repetition and visibility of the case for GM crops as an aspect of what Steven Lukes (1974) calls the third form of power, the power to define what the question is and what answers to it look like. It is the power to encourage people to make sense of things in certain ways rather than others, and hence to induce people to act in certain ways rather than others, including acts that are more favorable to the spread of GM crops than they would be otherwise.

Understanding why the advocacy of GM crops is so visible means attending to the power of the purse. That power can be put simply: large commercial interests benefit from the increased use of GMOs, in a way that they do not with an increase in clay, sheet metal, and wire mesh. Because many people associate “large” with “bad,” I must stress that identifying these commercial interests as large does not mean that they are involved in deceit. They may be deceitful, but as I said, here I am concerned with a normative state of affairs, not one characterized by deceit or deviance. Companies like Monsanto invest substantial resources in developing new products, which include new varieties of grain that, when used in the appropriate ways, will produce significant increases in the amount of food harvested. However, these are large companies with substantial resources. The consequences help illustrate the power of the purse.

One of the consequences springs from the context in which those new varieties exist, a crucial aspect of which is patents. When a company like Monsanto develops a new variety of, say, rye, it will patent this variety, and the patent allows it to extract rent from it. This rent can be seen as a return on the resources spent developing that new rye, but the patent frees the company of competition from alternative suppliers and allows it to charge more than it could otherwise. Developing a new variety of rye is expensive, and rewarding and encouraging innovation is the reason given in the US Constitution (Art. 1, §8) for patent and copyright. More is involved, however, than rewarding the diligent inventor. For a large company like Monsanto, that reward is important because it allows the company to pay what it owes to its bankers and bond holders, pay dividends to its shareholders, and maintain a high price for its shares. As this indicates, the large commercial interests at issue extend beyond Monsanto itself, and at the more macroscopic level they extend, ultimately, to the reproduction of the capitalist institutions and relations of which Monsanto is a part. To secure that reward, we can expect that Monsanto will, naturally, identify and tout the valuable things that their rye can do, including combating world hunger.

The world of clay, sheet metal, and wire mesh is different. These technologies lack the allure of innovation; no one writes stories about them for newspapers. Rather, they are what those in business call “commodities,” fungible bunches of utility or use value: a square meter of galvanized iron 1.5-millimeter thick is pretty much the same as any other square meter of such galvanized iron. Companies do not want to have their products be commodities, for it reduces their potential profits by driving them to compete with other producers on price and quality. Of course companies that produce galvanized iron do so for a profit. However, such companies are in the relatively weak position of those who produce commodities. They cannot secure the formal rents that come with a patent, and because their products are fungible they find it difficult to encourage demand for their particular product through things like advertising, which would allow them to secure the informal rents that come with a popular brand name. The result is that there are few
powerful commercial interests around to advocate sheet metal as a solution to world hunger, and hence little encouragement for the public to make sense of things in the appropriate ways.

The purpose of this section was to lay out my basic approach, and I have done so by pointing to the sorts of processes that deserve attention if we are going to understand the role of dollars in making sense, the ways that the routine operation of companies in capitalist systems can influence people's understandings of their surroundings in general, and the environment in particular. In this case, the routine commercial interests of companies like Monsanto make it likely that they will seek to generate demand for their seed varieties, and the context of the United States Patent and Trademark Office makes it likely that those varieties will be patented. Because companies like Monsanto are powerful, and because the institutions that hold their stock and debt are likely to be powerful, they have access to the power of a very large purse to make the case for the virtues of those seeds. All that Monsanto and those holding their stock and debt need to seek is visibility, awareness among the public of the virtues of the GM rye. As I said, this visibility entails stressing a certain aspect of the problem of inadequate food, and a concomitant slighting of other aspects of the problem, and of other ways of dealing with it.

However, and to anticipate a point I consider at greater length later, the power of the purse to generate visibility is only the ability to send a message. It cannot dictate the way that people interpret that message. Other factors that are beyond the immediate control of companies like Monsanto are important, though here too they have an advantage over those producing galvanized iron, wire mesh, and clay. As James Scott (1998) describes, one aspect of Modernity is the tendency to see things independently of their context. In this, Scott points to the value placed on abstraction in Modern societies (Carrier 2001), and advocating GM grain as alleviating hunger abstracts the genetic constitution of the seed from the context by means of which it becomes food in people's stomachs. As well, the advocates of GM grains benefit from the fascination with the new, with innovation, that is important in many Western societies (e.g., Edgerton 2008), and perhaps even from the common assumption, also a part of Scott's Modernity, that substantial problems, which include world hunger, are best addressed by coordinated, substantial programs of the sort that, it seems, only large organizations can carry out, rather than by the piecemeal local, conventional efforts that would lead to a piece of sheet metal here, a square of wire mesh somewhere else, and so on.

The routine pressures on and practices of enterprises in capitalist systems, my concern in this section, affect the most conscientious and honorable. A company may develop a new variety of grain expressly in order to combat hunger; that variety may in fact be markedly more productive than the other varieties available; the resulting publicity may be justified. Even if all this is granted, three things remain important. First, the company that developed the grain needs the profit arising from sales if it is to survive and prosper. They are unlikely to spend their money to develop and market varieties of grain that they think will lose them money, or that will profit them materially less than the other possible ways that they could use their money. The second is that the more resources the company has, the more it is able to generate publicity for its products, and so secure those sales. The third is that its publicity encourages one definition of the problem rather than others. Dollars, then, affect how people make sense of their world (descriptions of some of the complexities of this process in pharmaceuticals are in Applbaum 2006, 2009).

**Ethicality**

In the preceding section I provided a fairly idealized sketch of the ways that dollars make sense, the ways that the routine operation of enterprises in capitalist systems can affect the ways that
people understand aspects of their surroundings. In this section I shift from an idealized to a concrete case, one concerned with much smaller issues and interests: two national parks in Jamaica and the bodies of water that they oversee. Moreover, my focus is not the words that people use to define particular aspects of the world, but the images that these parks use to portray the coastal waters. Those parks are broke, and they use the images as a way to generate resources.

Those parks are engaged in ethical consumption commerce, which develops as part of the emergence of a market demand by ethical consumers (Carrier 2012). It is the commercial activity intended to attract those consumers, who are concerned especially with the ethical aspects of what they purchase. Although much of that activity is carried out by companies, many charities and other organizations seek to appeal to ethical consumers of different sorts, and what motivates them is the same as what motivates companies: they need the money if they are to survive, much less prosper and achieve their goals. The two parks that concern me are in that situation.

Ethical consumption commerce is problematic, because it contains a contradiction. One aspect of this is that the organizations involved in it seek to appeal to people who are likely to be opposed to what they see as the heedless irresponsibility of many companies toward the natural (and social) environment, and to what they see as the calculative, impersonal rationality of the economic realm more generally, which includes the routine pressures and processes of commercial activity. The other aspect of this contradiction is that this appeal to ethical consumers relies on and expresses the logic of the economic realm that those ethical consumers distrust. In other words, those ethical consumers are being asked to express their disapproval of conventional economic practice by means of conventional economic institutions and relationships (see, e.g., Moberg and Lyon 2010). If the growing sales of ethical products is any indication, those ethical consumers are happy to do so.

This case is concerned with a particular consequence of that contradictory commercial activity, what I call “ethicality” (Carrier 2010, 2012), which I draw from aspects of the work of Scott (1998), especially as they have been elaborated by Errington and Gewertz (2001). Recall that one of the things that concerned Scott was what he called “legibility,” making one or another abstract entity visible and recognizable, whether it was the revenue potential of trees that was made legible by the practices of Prussian state foresters or the modernity of Brazil that was made legible by the construction of the new capital, Brasilia. Errington and Gewertz (2001) drew on Scott when they described how the courts in Papua New Guinea identified specific social practices as instances of the legal concept “traditional culture.” In other words, Errington and Gewertz were concerned with how the abstract entity “traditional culture” was made legible.

Ethicality resembles legibility, but the abstract entities that are made visible and recognizable are the ethical values that concern ethical consumers, such as “environmentally sound,” “not exploitative,” and “healthy environment.” To a degree this resembles what I described in the previous section. There, the abstract entity was something like “world food problem,” and it was made legible in terms of the fruitfulness of different varieties of seed. And just as the routine interests and activities of companies like Monsanto influenced the legibility of the world food problem, so the routine interests of firms involved in ethical consumption commerce influence ethicality, the legibility of those ethical values.

The Jamaican parks that I use to illustrate ethicality are in Negril and Montego Bay, which I studied intermittently from 1997 to 2005 (Carrier 2010). These parks received relatively little money from the Jamaican government, and sought to generate revenue through “user fees,” typically fees charged to businesses in the tourism sector that wanted to operate in park waters. Thus, even though they were national parks, they were in the same economic position as conventional companies, for they needed to attract customers. One important way that they sought
to do this was through their websites (for Montego Bay: www.mbmp.org; for Negril: http://negril.com/ncrps/), which presented information about the parks' histories and localities and the waters within their boundaries, and here I am concerned with the websites as they existed until about 2008, when these parks were some twenty years old.

Those sites included a number of images, typically underwater photographs of marine life. The accompanying text may have invoked concepts like "environmentally sound" and "healthy environment," but it was the images that represented those abstractions in concrete form, and so made them visible. Those who were knowledgeable about Jamaica's coastal waters could assess the validity of the way that these images represented those abstractions. However, as I describe below, the two parks were in resort towns that survived on mass tourism, so that the vast majority of the people for whom these images were intended were not likely to be very knowledgeable.

For such viewers, these images not only made those abstract concepts visible, they made them recognizable and so, ultimately, defined them. They did so because they were images presented by what appeared to be fairly authoritative and disinterested bodies concerned with the protection of Jamaica's coastal environment. These were, after all, national parks with the oversight of areas of coastal waters, not amusement centers. The difficulty is that these parks could not afford to be disinterested, however much their staff would have wanted to be. Rather, as I said, they resembled conventional amusement centers in Jamaica because they needed the business, and the images that they used were thought likely to appeal to potential visitors. In a word, they were advertising. This has consequences for understanding the ways that dollars, or at least the need for dollars, can make sense. Two examples will illustrate this.

The first example is fairly straightforward, and concerns what sorts of living things are portrayed in these images and what sorts are not. Overwhelmingly, those images are of things that someone diving in the waters would want to see: attractive fish and coral growths. Healthy fish and coral are a sign of healthy coastal waters, but hardly the only ones, and some of the others are less attractive to potential visitors. Prime among these are beds of sea grasses, which are important for nutrient cycles in coastal waters and as food for some of the creatures that live there. Although they are important aspects of healthy coastal waters, they appear to repel significant numbers of people, which accounts for why the company building a beachfront hotel in Negril cleared the sea grasses from the shallow waters that were intended as a swimming area for guests.

It is important to remember that these attractions and repulsions are the result of a range of factors that have shaped the image of the hedonistic tourism and its surroundings that Jamaica's resorts sell. These range from the nature of work and life in the United States, which is the origin of the vast majority of tourists in Negril and Montego Bay, to the renderings of nature, its pleasure and dangers that circulate in that country, renderings that include these parks' websites and the advertising of Jamaica's all-inclusive hotels. Although such factors affect the tastes of potential tourists, as do the sorts of factors that I describe in the third section of this article, they are of little interest to those in charge of these parks and hotels. Those people are concerned with what those tastes are now, and as several people in the tourism sector put it, "People come to get away. They just want fun in the sun and the water … [they] don't want to know in depth" about Jamaica.

As I said, this example of fish, coral, and sea grass is fairly straightforward, as is what it indicates about the way that the concern to generate business can lead organizations to make a sound environment legible and, through that legibility, define it. In this case, commercial pressures lead to the use of images that include the attractive and exclude the unattractive, even though a sound coastal environment calls for both. The result resembles what I described of GM
grain: a complex abstraction, whether world hunger or healthy coastal waters, ends up being simplified when it is rendered in concrete form, whether improved seed constitution or striking fish and coral. In both cases, making these abstractions legible entails focusing on some of their aspects and ignoring others. Also in both cases, this selection is shaped by normal commercial pressures and concerns, whether the power of the purse or the need to generate user fees.

The second example concerns something more subtle than the difference between colorful parrot fish and sea grasses. Instead, and again like the case of GM grains, it concerns the ways that these images imply a certain view of the state of the coastal waters and how to secure it, and thereby slight others. The images on those park websites are not simply of colorful fish and coral, they are of individual fish and coral growths. This may seem unexceptionable given the medium of a web page and the nature of underwater photography. However, these images implicitly make “healthy coastal waters” legible in terms of the presence of those individuals, and so help to define ethicality, an ethically desirable coastal environment, in terms of them. That is, healthy coastal waters are those that contain those individuals and unhealthy coastal waters are those that do not. This focus on individuals has important implications.

By focusing on individual fish and coral growths, these images suggest that the pertinent threats to the coastal waters are things that harm those individuals, and that protection of those waters means preventing these threats. For tourist visitors to these waters, this means making sure that the boat you are on uses a mooring buoy rather than an anchor, which can harm coral, and making sure when you are in the water that you do not take a fish or step on a coral. The concern to avoid these threats helps explain the embrace by senior Montego Bay park staff of “catch and release” fishing as a useful venture. With this, they argued, the park could attract fee-paying visitors concerned with the state of the coastal waters. They could fish in protected waters, where fish were supposed to be bigger and more plentiful, and because the fish would be released back into the waters, they would not harm the environment.

Moreover, this focus has implications for how people see not just the coastal waters themselves, but the people associated with them. That is because that focus indicates that those who take a fish or harm a coral are a threat to the health of the coastal waters, unlike those responsible tourists, and need to be stopped. In Jamaica’s coastal waters, it is the local, in-shore fishers who take fish and drop anchors that crush coral. The ethicality that these images encourage, then, is implicated in long-running strains that are part of the political economy of those coastal waters, the sort of intermediate context that, Jim Igoe (2010: 382) notes, is routinely absent in representations produced by conservation organizations (for Negril, see Garner 2009). The marine parks in Montego Bay and Negril were developed by those with close ties to the tourism sector (Carrier 2003: 11–18), and park managers shared that sector’s long opposition to those local fishers, though this is somewhat more true of those in Montego Bay than it is of those in Negril (Sommer and Carrier 2010). Whether intentionally or not, then, those images and that ethicality are part of a continuing fight over access to, the use of, and, hence, the shaping of a part of the natural environment that is an important economic resource, the coastal waters at Montego Bay and Negril.

There is a further set of implications that arises from those images. In constructing healthy coastal waters in terms of individuals and threats to them, those images and the resulting ethicality ignore populations. There are good practical reasons for this: populations are not easy to portray in the way that individuals or small groups of individuals are; the visitors who are the ultimate source of the revenue that the parks need are attracted by what they can see on a dive or on a cruise in a glass-bottom boat, which excludes abstract things like populations. Good practical reason or not, however, the ignoring of populations in these images and that ethicality have important consequences.
I have described how the focus on individuals implies that certain sorts of activities and cer-
tain sorts of people are a danger to the coastal waters. In ignoring populations, these images and
that ethicality do something else as well. They ignore the possibility that other sorts of activities
and other sorts of people are a danger. Just as populations are abstract concepts, so the threats
to them are abstract, but that does not mean that they are immaterial. In Negril and Montego
Bay they are material indeed, and here again the ethicality these images encourage is implicated
in the political economy of the coastal waters. That is because the activities at issue are those of
the tourism sector, and the people are the tourists the sector seeks to attract. Both Montego Bay
and Negril live off that tourism.

In the forty years before I studied it, Montego Bay grew from a port town of about 45,000
to a commercial and tourist city with a population in the metropolitan area of about 100,000.
It is the largest tourist destination on the island and its airport handled three-quarters of the
1.35 million tourists entering the country in 2003 (Bakker and Phillip 2005: fig. 18). Negril is
about 50 miles (80 km) to the west of Montego Bay at the western tip of Jamaica. In that same
forty years it went from being little more than the site of a fishing camp to a town of about
20,000, becoming the country’s third largest tourist destination, and containing almost a quarter
of Jamaica’s tourist accommodation. In 2003 the place attracted about 275,000 visitors and its
hotels employed almost 7,800 people (Bakker and Phillip 2005). The growth of the population
of these places, the result of their success as tourist destinations, placed strains on the coastal
ecosystems, made worse by the fact that basic municipal services like sewerage and rubbish col-
lection were not increased to keep pace. Further, tourists place exceptional demands on these
services: in 1994, three-fifths of the hotel waste-water in Jamaica was either untreated or treated
inadequately (Burke 2005: 11), and the average tourist in Jamaica produces almost four times
as much solid waste daily as the average resident (Thomas-Hope and Jardine-Comrie 2005: 3).
These land-based activities are the main environmental threat to the coastal waters that these
parks oversee.

Tourists, however, do not seem to worry about this, but instead worry about those Jamaican
in-shore fishers. The former head of the Negril park said that hotel managers would tell her that
guests were complaining about fishing boats that were in park waters. Even though fishers had
the right to be in those waters so long as they were not fishing in prohibited zones, the park’s
head needed the goodwill of the hotels, and so was under pressure to ban those boats from sub-
stantial parts of park waters. Tourists did not, however, appear to complain about the more sub-
stantial damage to the coastal environment caused by their own activities and the hotels where
they were staying. In focusing on their encounter with Jamaica’s coastal waters while ignoring
the relationships and institutions involved in generating that encounter, those tourists of course
illustrate Scott’s (1998) observation that one aspect of Modernity is the tendency to see things
independently of their context, which itself echoes what Marx said about the fetishism of com-
modities (see Carrier 2010).

My point about the focus on individuals in the images on park websites again echoes one that
I made about GM grains and world hunger: complex sets of activities and relationships are radi-
cally simplified, stressing one way of understanding the world and slighting others. In the case
of GM grains, everything from the seed going into the ground to food in people’s stomachs was
slighted in favor of the constitution of the seed. In the case of Jamaica’s coastal waters, the nature
and consequences of everything going on in regional ecosystems is slighted in favor of the pres-
ence of colorful fish and coral. The constitution of the seed is significant, as is the presence of the
fish and coral head. However, in focusing attention on these, other things are slighted, with the
result that the problems of world hunger and the health of Jamaica’s coastal waters are framed
in certain ways rather than others. And just as the framing that is associated with the advocacy
of GM grains illustrates the power of the purse, so does the framing that emerges from those images on park websites.

That purse, however, is not so straightforward as it is with GM seeds: the Montego Bay Marine Park Trust and the Negril Coral Reef Preservation Society are no powerful corporations. Rather, a significant part of that purse is under the control of individual tourists. In aggregate they generate the user fees that can allow those parks to survive, which is the reason for the images on the websites. The other part of that purse is in the hands of the companies that make up the Jamaican tourism sector, and those within it say that tourists want the sparkling clear waters and striking fish and coral that the parks’ websites portray. Although these companies are no match for Monsanto, they operate in a much smaller political-economic realm, and within that realm they are powerful, both because of the size of their purse and because, since the country underwent structural adjustment in the 1980s (Bartilow 1997; Bloom et al. 2001), the Jamaican economy has relied on tourism to survive and the Jamaican government has supported the tourism sector.

The companies in that sector, and the Jamaican government, want coastal waters that will make Montego Bay and Negril attractive to tourists. Although their goals are different from the more modest desire of the two marine parks to generate user fees, they are like the parks in wanting appealing images of what a tourist might see in those coastal waters. All three, then, have simple commercial reasons to focus on colorful fish and coral, and all three end up encouraging the definition of “healthy environment” pretty much as one that attracts tourists (Sommer and Carrier 2010: 190–191).

This case of marine parks in Jamaica complements what I said about GM seeds, that different ways of approaching problems in the world entail different definitions of, and stress different aspects of, what that problem is. In the concrete case of the Negril and Montego Bay parks, I used the idea of ethicality to illustrate this process in more detail. I also showed how commercial interests very different from those I sketched in the GM case can be important in that process. In the next section I extend and complicate that argument, by considering some of the implications of the point that those images on park websites are intended to attract and persuade.

The Power of the Image

The people who view these Internet images are not likely to know much of coastal tropical ecosystems, any more than the viewer of images of a car in an advertisement is likely to know much of automobile design and manufacture. This does not mean that these viewers are tabula rasa, happily accepting and adopting those images and their implications. Rather, they come with a set of presuppositions and values, a cultural background that shapes their interpretation of those images, and thus the resulting ethicality. If those who decide what images to present are wise, they will take that background into account when they make their selection. If they are unwise, the images are unlikely to achieve the desired result and another selection will have to be made if the enterprise is to get the money that it needs.

Even though it is not directly about understandings of the natural world, I illustrate the importance of that cultural background with what Peter Luetchford (2012) says about images associated with a different sort of ethical concern, coffee that is produced in ways that are not exploitative. Like “healthy coastal waters,” “nonexploitative coffee” is an abstraction, and the images that are associated with it provide fairly concrete instances of that abstraction and so come to define it. Luetchford is concerned with the images on bags of “relationship coffees,”
which portray the growers and, thereby, seek to combine grower and coffee into a single ethical product. If this coffee is to sell, the images need to appeal to people in supermarket aisles. The sorts of people portrayed as growers in those images are self-reliant smallholders, working their own plots of land and tending their own trees. Such people are appealing to many of the Americans and Europeans who see those images. However, just as the images on those park websites select from, and hence simplify, a more complex reality, so too do those pictures of growers.

This simplification is clear from what Luetchford describes of the more complex reality of coffee production. The cooperatives he studied in Costa Rica that produce coffee certified as Fairtrade did have members who were self-reliant smallholders, but such people were not that common. Some growers were landless sharecroppers, a number used migrant workers from Nicaragua during the harvest, some were substantial landowners who devoted most of their land to cattle and set aside only a small part for coffee, and so on. Given what Luetchford describes, an image of a prosperous cattle rancher or half a dozen Nicaraguan migrant workers living in barracks would represent the production of Fairtrade coffee in that area as accurately as would the image of the sturdy smallholders. However, neither the rancher nor the Nicaraguans accord with the orientations and presuppositions of those the coffee company seeks to attract; their images are not used; the ethicality of nonexploitative coffee is shaped in certain ways rather than others.

Luetchford’s description of the images on bags of Fairtrade coffee complicates what I said in the two preceding sections about the representations that people confront and the way that those representations shape the way that people understand aspects of their world. People who perceive those representations interpret them in light of their values and presuppositions; those who project those representations select them in light of how they think they will be interpreted by the people they seek to attract. These complications are pertinent if we want to understand the emergence and content of ethicalities in particular, and more generally the ways that commercial pressures shape people’s understandings of their surroundings. They indicate that the pertinent values and presuppositions need not in any obvious way be about the substance of what is portrayed in those images or the abstractions that they are supposed to represent.

I mentioned that representations are likely to be selected in light of suppositions about the sorts of people that those who project them want to attract. Not every potential viewer is, after all, equally desirable, and that desirability can itself be complex. What Kathy Rettie (2009) says of Parks Canada, the Canadian national park authority, illustrates this. Like those marine parks in Jamaica, Canada’s parks need the visitors (Eagles 2002), and they seek to attract visitors who will approach the national parks in a way that the authority wants, as preserving Canada’s distinctive natural endowment and its past. Such visitors will walk the trails and view the interpretative displays and reenactments that present the place and its wildlife, as well as the indigenous people and early settlers who lived there and the ways that they used and appreciated what they found there. As distinct from such people, Rettie says, the parks do not want visitors who seek only to eat in the restaurants and drink in the bars, even though such visitors erode no land, disturb no wildlife, never stray from the paved roads. The images these parks produce are selected, and Canada’s natural heritage is made legible, appropriately.

It is likely that the sort of concerned Canadian lover of nature that the authority wants would not find those partygoers any more attractive than Parks Canada does. In associating certain sorts of activities with certain sorts of people, those concerned Canadians exhibit what Jean Baudrillard (1981) describes as assessing things (like going for a drink or a meal in a park restaurant) not simply in terms of the desirability of those things themselves, but also in terms of the desirability of those associated with them (like the sort of people who go to the park...
only for a drink or a meal). Such assessments may reflect the social distinction that concerned Bourdieu (1984) more than they reflect, say, the elements of Jamaica’s coastal waters and their interactions. Even so, because they are likely to affect the ways that those waters are represented, they will affect the ways that aspects of them are made legible. This will shape the ethicality of “healthy ecosystem”, and in turn shape the ways that people deal with those waters, and so shape the waters themselves.

A less obvious instance of that shaping, and of its links with social distinction, is found among those interested in authentic foods, produced in traditional ways that respect and reflect the environment. Many different people value such food, and they do so for many different reasons, but social distinction can be an important aspect of these reasons (see, e.g., West 2010). The Slow Food movement is an example of this, for it espouses such respect for local environments and the people who produce food there and is, at the same time, associated with discriminating tastes and the sort of people who can afford to cultivate them. That movement is another instance of ethical consumption commerce, and as Cristina Grasseni (2012) shows, the pressures of that commerce influence the ways that local environments and producers are understood, while also shaping the ways that those producers act and, thereby, influence that environment.

Conclusion

As the other articles in this special issue describe, there are many aspects of the relationship of capitalism and nature, and many ways to approach it. My purpose here, however, has been a simple one. It is to focus on commercial and economic processes of the middle range, in order to show how the routine and unexceptionable aspects of honest commercial practice in capitalist systems can affect the ways that people understand their world, including nature and the natural environment. As I have described them, the companies that make GMO seeds, the marine parks in Jamaica and the companies in the tourism sector there, those who grow and those who sell Fairtrade coffee, have been mundane and unexceptionable in their orientations and activities. In this article I have attended to that mundane and unexceptionable, to show how what goes on there shapes the ways that people understand their world.

Although my approach relies on a fairly simple analytical frame, the implications that I have drawn from that frame make at least certain aspects of what we study appear more complex. Those implications arise from the way that the straightforward operations of ethical consumption commerce affect ethicality, the ways that people understand abstract notions like “healthy coastal waters.” As I have argued, the way such commerce works means that those understandings are likely to be shaped by commercial considerations, however unrecognized, unintended, or even unconscious that shaping may be. At the same time, I have shown how those shapings themselves are likely to be more complex than they appear at first glance. That is so because the information and especially the images that people receive are not absorbed naively. Rather, they are likely to be interpreted in complex ways that reflect concerns and interests that need have little or nothing to do with their overt content. Moreover, because that information and those images are intended to serve a commercial purpose, there is pressure on those who produce them to take those concerns and interests into account.

Although the fundamental processes described in this article are straightforward, they are one aspect of the relationship between capitalism and nature that can have important and unexpected effects on the ways that people understand the world around them, and hence on the ways that they act on and shape that world.
JAMES G. CARRIER has taught and done research on aspects of economy in Papua New Guinea, the United States, and Great Britain, as well as studying environmental conservation in Jamaica. He is Hon Research Associate in anthropology at Oxford Brookes University, adjunct professor of anthropology at the University of Indiana, and Associate at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology. His publications include the edited volumes Meanings of the Market (1997), Virtualism, Governance and Practice (2009, with P. West) and Ethical Consumption (2012, with P. Luetchford).

REFERENCES


