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On the Natural Wealth Theory of Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization

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Abstract. The natural wealth theory of Xi Jinping thought on ecological civilization achieves harmony between humanity and nature, comprehensively elaborates on the diverse wealth attributes of lucid waters and lush mountains, and strikes a balance between ecological health and economic prosperity. The natural wealth theory takes "humanity and nature are a community of life" as its logical starting point, and proposes a constellation of innovative perspectives along with corresponding judgments. This theory covers the core idea that natural ecosystems are natural and ecological wealth with inherent natural attributes, as well as social and economic assets with social attributes that yield economic benefits. It embodies the logic of ecological value transformation, which holds that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets. At the same time, it is oriented towards multiple value goals, including in tune with the natural environment, sustainability, equity, and broad-based welfare, and thereby breaks through the natural value theory and natural rights theory of Ecocentrism.

Keywords: Xi Jinping thought on ecological civilization, the natural wealth theory, lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets, Ecocentrism

1. Introduction

What is wealth? Marx and Engels noted that the forms of wealth are diverse, and they said, whatever the configuration of wealth in a given society, its material basis is invariably use value [1]. The material content of wealth is use-value. Thus, wealth can be classified into two major categories: wealth produced through labor and natural wealth. The former is the social wealth produced by labor, while the latter is the natural resources. Just as Marx said, wealth does not spring solely from labor. Nature, no less than labor, is a font of use value, and material wealth is nothing but use value embodied [2]. They clearly stated that nature is the source of wealth. Marx and Engels realized the fact that natural forces derived from natural space provide resources for the production and life of human society. They pointed out that natural wealth is the fundamental basis for people's survival. They also revealed the capitalist surplus value, abandoned the object-oriented ecological value orientation of capitalist society, and pointed out that the distribution of natural wealth should follow the principles of fairness and justice. They required each generation to have equal rights and obligations to utilize, protect natural resources, as well as to enjoy and create natural environments.

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Xi Jinping thought on ecological civilization, building upon the philosophy of harmony between humanity and nature from fine traditional Chinese culture and inheriting and developing Marx and Engels' ideas on natural wealth, proposes the natural wealth theory centered on the principle that lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets. It clearly affirms that "Lucid waters and lush mountains are not only examples of natural and ecological wealth, but they are also social and economic assets [3]." The natural wealth theory is different from the natural value theory and natural rights theory of Ecocentrism, which deny the development rights of the people from a value perspective and safeguard the vested interests of capital. The natural wealth theory adheres to the Marxist ecological justice ideology. When discussing the relationship between humanity and nature, it always centers on the people, emphasizing that environmental protection weighs heavily on the economy, as well as on social and political spheres. This theory emphasizes that efforts must be made to solve prominent environmental problems, supply extra superior eco-friendly goods, while consistent strides are taken to boost people's feelings about fulfillment, contentment, as well as safety.

As the concept of eco-civilization has gradually been integrated into the institutional framework, socialist modernization has made significant progress and achieved remarkable results. However, academia has yet to conduct a detailed and systematic study on the connotation of the natural wealth theory of Xi Jinping thought on ecological civilization. Currently, the development philosophy of lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets is often simplistically regarded as merely an ecological wealth perspective of Xi Jinping thought on ecological civilization, or the idea that safeguarding nature equates to conserving production capacity, while enhancing ecological conditions amounts to advancing economic potential [3], is taken as a specific assertion of Xi Jinping ecological productivity theory. This leads to theoretical misconceptions that downplay and weaken the true depth and significance of the natural wealth theory. It is necessary to ground ourselves in the worldview and methodology of Xi Jinping thought on ecological civilization, clarify the profound connotations of its natural wealth theory, and correctly understand and grasp the theoretical characteristics of this theory.

2. Lucid waters and lush mountains are natural wealth

The natural wealth theory first addresses the issue of how environmental endowments, in their fundamental and original state, serve as wealth that bears intrinsic value. Placing nature at the forefront is the primary principle of Marxist ecological thought and is the prerequisite for Marx's construction of the human–nature nexus. The natural wealth theory consistently adheres to the basic viewpoint of Marxism that nature is the inorganic body of human beings, innovatively proposing that lucid waters and lush mountains are natural wealth (henceforth referred to as "natural wealth"), clarifying that Earth's ecosystems provide a physical substrate for humans' existence and progress, affirming the essential worth inherent to natural bounty, and placing the relationship between humanity and nature in a mutually symbiotic and thriving context.

2.1. Nature affords fundamental necessities essential to humans' existence, and progress

During the process of Western modernization, people regarded nature more as resources and tools, using it as an object to satisfy their desires. Although William Petty once pointed out that "Labor is the father of wealth, and land is the mother of wealth" [1], in this case, natural resources such as land can be regarded as wealth because they play an important role in the production process. Although nature has practical value, it does not mean that it only has practical value. The

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objectification of nature is obviously narrow, because the deeper meaning of nature lies in its broad mind that nurtures all things. In the view of Marx and Engels, human beings and nature have a dialectical and unified relationship. They noted that nature has an inherent nature for human beings, and environment constitutes the non-organic substance of humankind. Humankind needs to count upon Earth physically in order to live. Hence, Engels emphasized, "We, along with our physicality, vitality, cognition are components of the nature, remaining within it [4]". The viewpoint that "natural wealth" inherits and develops the dialectical relationship theory between humanity and nature proposed by Marxism, stating that "Humanity and nature are a community of life [3]," emphasizing the fundamental and original value of nature, and highlighting that nature affords fundamental necessities essential to humans' existence, progress [5], clarifying that humanity lives off nature, even factory output also relies entirely upon extraction and application from natural materials. Such a viewpoint also criticizes the binary opposition between humanity and nature, defending our reciprocal bond with the natural world from the philosophical perspective of life and the dimension of community, and prioritizes fostering the prosperity and progress of humanity based on the natural resources of environmental endowments.

2.2. Human development activities must respect nature, conform to nature, and protect nature

Under the temptation of capital expansion and profit growth, capital completely disregards the existence of sensible nature, and capitalists even engage in frenzied plundering of nature, resulting in a serious opposition or even confrontation between capital production and natural ecology, leading to tension in our interaction with the nature. Marx and Engels emphasized the initiative of human activities and the dominant position of humans. They pointed out that the ecological crisis of industrial civilization stems from the alienation of our interaction with the nature, and warned that humans must learn to recognize the impact of their own activities on the natural world, treat nature kindly, and cherish their own homeland. Nowadays, given that nature frequently experiences natural disasters that exceed its capacity and seriously affect human society, the issue of humans facing the limits of nature has become increasingly prominent. The natural wealth theory, based on the initiative of human towards nature, emphasizes that Adhering to natural principles alone enables humanity to sidestep expensive errors during resource utilization. Every injury dealt to the environment will ultimately circle back to trouble our existence. Such an inescapable truth demands our acknowledgment [3]. The view that "natural wealth" clarifies that nature is the source of human life, and is different from the Western ecologicalimperialism proposition. It denies the exploitative trend that human dominates or controls the relationship between humanity and nature, and requires that humans must stand on the height of fully heeding certain orders in nature, correctly resolve any matter concerning compatible survival for human beings within nature, and strives to build a civilized development model where humans, society, and nature coexist harmoniously.

3. Lucid waters and lush mountains are ecological wealth

General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that ecological systems form an integrated natural unit, a tightly interwoven continuum where all parts are interdependent [3]. A collective term for good natural ecosystems including woodlands, meadows, and marshes, which are crucial for maintaining ecosystem service functions such as ground and aquatic protection, climate regulation, and biodiversity. The natural wealth theory asserts that "Ecology is resources, wealth, and our treasure [6]," and emphasizes that lucid waters and lush mountains are ecological wealth (henceforth referred to as "ecological wealth"), which points to the integrity of the ecosystem's functions. This viewpoint

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underscores the functional integrity of ecosystems, that is, the service value that ecosystems provide for the continuation and progress of humankind, but also demands strenuous efforts to achieve integrated preservation and systematic restoration of ecosystems.

3.1. An emerald ecosystem ranks as our foremost resource, key edge, and principal hallmark

Human survival hinges on farmland, whose yield depends on water. Water availability rests on uplands, whose stability relies on the soil, and the soil's fertility comes from woodlands and meadows. This interconnected system forms the tangible cornerstone of human progress and well-being [3]. The damage to natural resource assets not only leads to a decrease in the quantity and quality of natural resources, but also reduces their ecological value and causes damage to environmental functions. The natural wealth theory emphasizes that an emerald ecosystem ranks as our foremost resource, key edge, and principal hallmark [7]. How to protect this wealth and transform it into economic advantages has become the key to ecological civilization construction. Regarding this, General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, provided that these natural assets are converted into revenue streams such as sustainable agriculture, clean industry, and ecological sightseeing, unpolluted streams and verdant peaks mean immense wealth [8]. On the one hand, the view that "ecological wealth" holds that lucid waters and lush mountains do not merely refer to the biological and physical environment as the biological and physical environment, but also include natural assets, ecological products, and ecological services, which are natural capital such as forests, minerals, and water resources. This view holds that natural capital not only provides basic raw materials for traditional industries, but also gives rise to green industries ranging from environmentally sound farming to green manufacturing and eco-friendly tourism. On the other hand, different from the traditional view that the economic value of nature is limited to one-time resource exploitation and primary product production, this view emphasizes that nature-derived potential is convertible into long-term economic prosperity.

3.2. Coordinating the systematic approach to the improvement of mountains, waters, forests, farmlands, grasslands, and deserts

Protecting nature means protecting humanity itself; treating nature well means treating ourselves well. If forests are excessively cut down, it will lead to the loss of biodiversity. If mineral resources are exploited without restraint, it will cause resource depletion and a decline in the sustainability of the ecological environment. If land is polluted, it will result in severe pollution of water resources, which not only affects people's potable supply security but also damages the aquatic ecosystem. "We must effectively implement environmental preservation alongside rehabilitation projects, strengthen ecosystem protection, and enhance ecosystem stability and sustainability" [7]. The concept that "ecological wealth" highlights that a sound ecological structure promotes the appreciation of ecological capital and improves ecosystem services. Therefore, it holds that economic growth should never come at the cost of environmental degradation. In order to bridge the gap between lucid waters and lush mountains and invaluable assets, this view emphasizes that we must persistently wage efforts to improve the quality of air, water and soil, foster coordinated protection across mountains, streams, forests, fields, grasslands, and deserts, sensibly allocate productive, habitable, and wild areas, and set aside broader terrain for nature's own healing [7]. By linking the ecological value of natural endowments like peaks, rivers, timberlands, tillable fields, pasturelands, and sandy wastes with human wealth, we can effectively integrate environment with socioeconomic

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development, build high-quality ecological systems, and make a healthy environment our greatest asset and most vital capital.

4. Lucid waters and lush mountains are social assets

Ecocentrism adheres to the value orientation of safeguarding the vested interests of capital and the middle class. Under the guise of achieving ecological justice, it elevates the value and rights of nature above those of humans, denies technological progress and economic growth, and in fact, it neglects and denies the environmental rights and development rights of the people. The natural wealth theory inherits and develops Marx's ecological justice thought. This theory elevates the environmental issues to a political level for understanding and grasping, and emphasizes that "A sound environment is an important manifestation of building a moderately prosperous society in all respects way and is the common wealth of the people" [7]. Therefore, it indicates that lucid waters and lush mountains are social assets (henceforth referred to as "social assets"), requiring us to focus on improving and developing people's livelihoods in ecological construction, while also regarding the ecological functions and social functions such as health benefits, aesthetic benefits, and happiness experiences contained in natural endowments as the core components of social assets. This viewpoint fully demonstrates the value orientation of the natural wealth theory regarding ecological livelihood.

4.1. Lucid waters and lush mountains are not only invaluable assets, but also a crucial guarantee for people's health

Engels observed that when major cities such as London, Manchester, and Liverpool suffered severe industrial pollution, "Residents' lungs could not obtain sufficient oxygen, resulting in physical fatigue, mental lethargy, and diminished vitality [9]." His remark indicates that a sound environment forms the natural foundation and safeguard for workers' lives. To improve workers' living conditions, it is necessary not only to increase their wages economically, but also to enhance the environments in which they work and live, thus achieving ecological justice. In order to achieve the social justice dimension of ecological justice, the Communist Party of China has always prioritized people's livelihood needs. General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out, "A sound ecosystem serves as bedrock for human survival and health.…How can people have healthy bodies if they breathe polluted air for long periods, consume contaminated agricultural products, and drink unclean water [7]?" Therefore, the idea that "social assets" anchors lucid waters and lush mountains to the fundamental goal of safeguarding and enhancing people health. This perspective requires continuously improving social security systems, promoting fair distribution of resources, and strengthening ecological civilization construction. Deeply rooted among the people, it emphasizes that "It is obligatory that ecological benefits be delivered to, and for the benefit of, the populace, with a focus on urgently addressing salient environmental hazards that endanger public health" [3]. It holds that we should strive to steadily satisfy people's increasing demands for pleasant surroundings, ensuring that everyone can live and thrive in a safe, healthy, equitable, and green environment, and working toward achieving social fairness and justice within environmental preservation domain.

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4.2. Lucid waters and lush mountains are essential components of people's happy lives

Against the backdrop of profound changes in Chinese society principal conflict, a beautiful environment has become a key driver of well-being as basic material needs have been largely met. The viewpoint that "social assets" underscores the principle that ecological stability guarantees public subsistence, reflecting deep humanistic values and care. The natural wealth theory emphasizes that "Sound ecosystems constitute the bedrock of societal well-being; verdant mountains are a vision of beauty, and clear blue skies are a source of happiness [3]." This point not only reveals the public goods nature of ecosystems but also clarifies that accelerating the green transition of economic development and preserving and bettering the ecosystem are essential to fulfilling people's aspirations for a better life. The concept of "social assets" expands the understanding of human welfare from the traditional focus on per capita GDP to a multidimensional framework, that encompasses the environment, ecological products, and ecological services. It promotes the organic unity of prosperity for the people and beauty of the environment. As a result, General Secretary Xi Jinping stressed that we should treat a high-quality environment as a fundamental public service by establishing mechanisms that mobilize all sectors to improve environmental quality, safeguard public health, and enhance the habitability of both city and countryside settings, while also enriching the satisfaction of residents' daily existence [7]. This means we should pursue spiritual and aesthetic satisfaction alongside material wealth, achieve an intrinsic integration of the residential, economic, and aesthetic values of pristine ecological resources and scenic splendor, and thereby advance ecological quality and the people's happiness index simultaneously.

5. Lucid waters and lush mountains are economic assets

Unlike the "either-or" binary constraints of Western Ecologism, the natural wealth theory holds the principle of balanced integration of industrial expansion with environmental conservation. It emphasizes that "Lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets [3]," and points out that "A sound environment inherently contains infinite economic assets and can continuously create comprehensive benefits, enabling sustainable economic and social development [3]." Such assertions demonstrate how safeguarding nature and advancing economy mutually reinforce one another, and the lucid waters and lush mountains can be transformed into invaluable assets. Therefore, pristine rivers and verdant hills are not only the happy and healthy mountains for people's lives, but also the economic assets (henceforth referred to as "economic assets").

5.1. Protecting the environment means protecting productive forces, and improving the environment means developing productive forces

General Secretary Xi Jinping closely focused on the actual situation of Chinese productive forces development and abandoned the outdated practice of "discharging contaminants first and then treating them," which adopted by Western capitalist countries during their modernization process. From the ecological perspective, he clearly put forward the important assertion that safeguarding nature equates to conserving production capacity, while enhancing ecological conditions amounts to advancing economic potential [3], and emphasized that "New quality productive forces are themselves green productive forces" [10]. Creatively, he combined unleashing and boosting productive potential with the protection and improvement of the environment, profoundly revealing that environment is an inherent element of productive forces. Hence, liberating productive forces necessarily means liberating ecological productive forces, and developing productive forces

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necessarily means developing green productive forces. Compared with the capital productivity that exchanges a huge waste of resources for a large amount of social wealth, the new quality productivity, as green productivity, embeds the correct wealth view that "A thriving natural setting offers both environmental riches and economic assets" [11]. As a result, the view that "economic assets" creatively regards the environment as a potential element for economic development, and believes that humans should develop and utilize the natural world, while generating monetary, collective, and ecological benefits on the basis of scientific protection of the environment.

5.2. The foundation of high-quality development lies in the environment

With the Chinese economy transitioning into a new stage, the traditional growth model of high investment, high consumption, and low efficiency is no longer sustainable. The demand for energy, land, and water resources continues to increase, while the environmental absorptive limits and ecological regenerative thresholds are becoming increasingly strained. The environment has become a prominent shortcoming in high-quality development. Consequently, General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that "We must place the environment in a prominent position in the evaluation system for economic and social development [12]," and that "The old way of development, recklessly sacrificing long-term gains for short-term benefits, has reached its end. A green future depends on coexisting with the nature and the protection of our ecosystems [3]." These reveal the dialectical unity relationship between excellence in advancement and robustness in preservation. "Green" is the color of nature and the symbol of life. "Development" is the driving force of social progress, the way for humans to create value, and the foundation of a good life. The view that "Green development is the background color of high-quality development [10]" advocates the use of green governance methods to enhance the quality of green growth in economic development, improve green welfare in social development, and accumulate green wealth by safeguarding our natural ecosystem. Ultimately, it seeks to transform the external constraints on ecological environment protection into an internal requirement for high-quality development. The report to the 20th national congress of the Communist Party of China emphasizes that "Our efforts should harmonize the industrial upgrading, pollution control, ecosystem protection, and climate adaptation, while simultaneously advancing carbon reduction, environmental remediation, and economic growth" [5], fully demonstrating the core essence of promoting high-quality development through high-level protection of the environment.

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