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Title: Blue Economy & sustainable development in the Great Lakes basin: a benchmark analysis

The emergence of economic policies for fostering regional development in coastal regions, often labelled Blue Economy (BE), offers new opportunities and challenges to rural and declining industrial regions, both in developed and in developing countries. Since the late 1970s, the U.S. Great Lakes basin (GLR) has searched for ways to reverse its economic decline, and the BE offers new opportunities to sustain the region’s economic development, within an ecologically sustainable framework. Building upon an expanded definition of what constitutes the BE, and utilizing secondary data aggregated by industry cluster, this work analyzes the current state of all BE industries, focusing on labor productivity, employment specialization, and regional levels of gross regional product. The use of existing industrial clusters within the region, and of an expanded definition of BE allows for a more immediate understanding of the contradiction, weaknesses, and opportunities within the GLR and the operative concept of BE at policy level.

Overall, the analysis identifies high levels of productivity across the GLR, although specialization is relatively low for most traditional and advanced BE clusters. Further, the analysis identifies differences among state-basins, and highlights the different characteristics that BE clusters have relative to other coastal regions, thus highlighting the regional character of defining BE. In addition, it emerges how using top-down, politically ‘neutral’ approaches to the BE increases the likelihood of conflict within coastal areas, as several clusters not only compete for resources (e.g. water space, ecological capital), but can generate negative spillovers affecting other BE sectors.

The results from this analysis are important to understand which sectors of the GLR require further investments, and what is their potential for sustaining a socially and ecologically equitable transition towards a new economic paradigm centered around the BE. To researchers, our results show the need to focus on stakeholders’-led definitions of BE. To policymakers, this analysis will provide a snapshot of the current state of the GLR based on its economic roots. Finally, this work questions the overall approach by federal authorities in their defining and funding ‘coastal/ocean economic sectors’.