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The microbial economy



By [Tim Sandle](#)
Jan 23, 2014 in [Science](#)

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Microbial behavior matches that of economic markets, according to a new paper. Here microbes are said to 'trade' with each other. Sounds a little farfetched? Possibly not, although the idea is certainly radical.

In a paper, scientists have posed the question of whether pure economic market behavior (in the full [classical liberal](#) concept of markets developed by [Adam Smith](#)), can be translated for the interpretation of the behavior of microorganisms. For example, they consider whether such theories can be

used to describe the exchange of commodities between organisms without any cognitive ability, such as microbes.

According to the [research brief](#), the authors state:



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"Could think of instances where single-celled organisms had been shown to avoid bad trading partners, build local business ties, diversify or specialize in a particular commodity, save for a rainy day, eliminate the competition and otherwise behave in ways that seem to follow market-based principles.

They concluded not only that microbes are economic actors, but also that microbial markets can be useful systems for testing questions about biological markets in general, such as the evolution of partner choice, responses to price fluctuations and the identification of market conditions that drive diversification or specialization."

According to the authors, their radical idea was inspired by a workshop they attended on biological markets (transactions in which partners, typically animals, exchange

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commodities for their mutual benefit). From this event, they drew up the basis of their paper. They are of the view that studying microbial exchange systems as miniature markets will give them insight into the many collaborative behaviors of microbes, helping to generate new hypotheses and approaches in the field of social microbiology.

[Biological market theory](#) has been around for about twenty years. The basis of this approach is that whenever organisms interact in a way that allows scientists to recognize different classes of 'traders' that exchange commodities, such as goods (for example, food, shelter, gametes) or services (such as warning calls, pollination, protection, cleaning) then scientists can formalize such an interaction system as a "biological market". The basic tenet of the biological market concept is that like in human trading systems shifts in supply and demand cause changes in the exchange value of the commodities traded. Characteristics of biological markets can be found in mating markets, mutualisms between members of different species and cooperation among individuals.

It should be noted that this represents a narrow stream of biology and the ideas do not have majority support among biologists.

The paper has been [published in](#) the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS), in an article titled "Evolution of microbial markets".

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