Natural capital (an anthropocentric framing based on the understanding that aspects of nature, in certain forms and functions, underpin human wellbeing and are therefore a central concern for sustainable development) approaches to decision making consider the stocks of natural assets, and not just the flows of services they produce, and therefore when used to inform appraisals of spending options can secure benefits for people beyond those immediately affected, including future generations (Bierkens & Wada, 2019; Bateman & Mace, 2020). Moreover, they can support options that favour natural capital regeneration that result in further enhancing the ability of ecosystems to produce services, by demonstrating their positive socioecological effects (Blignaut, 2019). They highlight the potential of economic growth through decisions that influence the properties of the system towards thrivability (Du Plessis, 2012; Hes & du Plessis, 2014; Gibbons, 2019). This is promising particularly considering that most research concerned with the relationship between economic development and environmental degradation often disregards the regenerative ability of nature (Bertinelli, Strobl & Zou, 2008). Research suggests that (assisted) natural regeneration of degraded ecosystems is able to sequester significant amounts of CO₂ (Brown et al., 2011), protect against flooding (Kelly et al., 2016) and increase resilience against the effects of climate change among other benefits (Chausson et al., 2020). Natural capital can increase through deliberate investments in replenishing habitats for species and restoration of ecosystems (Segura & Boyce, 1994; Hinterberger, Luks & Schmidt-Bleek, 1997). New approaches such as nature-based solutions (NbS) (Singhvi et al., 2022), for example, have the potential to provide additional economic and social benefits besides those directly related to reducing environmental impacts. NbS loosely defined as interventions that operationalize the functioning of nature to reduce pressures on the environment, by protecting, restoring and managing existing ecosystems or creating new ones to maintain biodiversity and its functioning and/or enhancement to alleviate negative impacts on the environment (Cohen-Shacham et al., 2016; Rodriguez-Gonzalez et al., 2020) while addressing social and economic challenges (Faiivre et al., 2017), have been shown to be cost-effective (Souliotis & Voulvoulis, 2022) and have the potential to attract private investments (Loiseau et al., 2016; Sutton-Grier et al., 2018; Kok et al., 2021).

The emergence and widespread recognition of the significance of NbS offers the opportunity for research to assess the extent to which economic growth (green growth) can be aligned with environmental protection. Shifting from reductionist to systems worldviews and thinking, allows justice-based perspectives of humans as embedded in the wider web of life and nature, with the hope for emancipatory and alternative sustainabilities to emerge. Instead of asking “what is the optimal level of growth that does not lead to environmental degradation?”, managing complex environmental interactions through systems thinking would pose the question “what interventions could we undertake to influence the interactions among the society, economy and nature in such a way to reach sustainability."