



Recreational cultural ecosystem services: How do people describe the value?



Stålhammar Sanna^{a,*}, Pedersen Eja^b

^a Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies, Lund University, Sweden

^b Environmental Psychology, Dep. of Architecture and Built Environment, Lund University, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 March 2017

Received in revised form 22 May 2017

Accepted 25 May 2017

Available online 7 June 2017

Keywords:

Cultural ecosystem services

Recreation

CES valuation

Intangible values

Ecosystem services framework

ABSTRACT

Different ways of viewing human-nature interactions affect the ways in which these are conceptualized and operationalized with regards to cultural ecosystem services (CES). To clarify if some conceptualizations provide more appropriate descriptions of benefits, these need to be discussed in relation to the lived experience. This paper addresses some aspects of the controversy around the use of the concept of CES and associated framing of 'values'. Our aim is to understand potential distinctions between individuals' expressions of values of their experiences and the language of value of ES. We use Swedish focus group material formed to understand how individuals perceive and express their values of the experiences of spending time in natural environments in their own words. We apply an interpretivist approach inspired by grounded theory and present our findings as the broader interpretative repertoire 'axiomatic value'. The interpretative repertoire informed three discourses that participants describe as valuable in relation to experiences in nature: 'indivisibility', 'incommensurability', and 'the goodness of perceived naturalness'. The latter comprised the underlying themes 'nature as authentic', 'nature as healing' and 'nature as beauty, magic and movement'. We discuss implications for conceptualizations of value and question the appropriateness of the non-contextual and categorical language of ES.

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1. Introduction

There is more than one way to explore, define and understand human-nature interaction. Alternative theories and analytical strategies start from different ontologies, adhere to different epistemologies and draw on different methods thus giving rise to a variety of framings of complex human-nature interaction (Moon and Blackman, 2014). An appreciation of this methodological variety implies, we argue, that we need to scrutinize available framings and discuss if some allow for more appropriate and useful conceptualizations of the benefits that society derives from nature. We seek to call attention to some aspects of the controversy around the use of the cultural ecosystem services (CES) concept and associated framing of 'values', based on individuals' own descriptions of the benefits of nature, captured empirically in a focus group study.

Ecosystem services (ES) is a contested framework (Schröter et al., 2014) that is intended to capture the benefits of nature to society and human wellbeing through assessing monetary and non-monetary values of ecosystem functions (MEA, 2005;

Pascual et al., 2010). Conceptualizing and operationalizing benefits of nature imply several normative choices making the application of ES fundamentally political (Kull et al., 2015). The subcategory of cultural ecosystem services defined as the nonmaterial benefits people obtain from ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation, and aesthetic experiences (MEA, 2005) is considered particularly difficult to operationalize because of its intangibility (Milcu et al., 2013). In applications of the ES concept, socio-cultural values are assumed to be quantifiable and correlational to ecological functions and structures, which hides unresolved conflicts about the conflation of 'nonmaterial' values with calculable benefits of CES (Fraser et al., 2016; Kull et al., 2015; Daniel et al., 2012). Fraser et al. (2016) point out that the conception of culture as a separate category from material values in nature is a Western, post-Enlightenment, Cartesian phenomenon that does not translate well to some indigenous ontologies. James (2015) argues that ES as assumed to be directly derivable from ecosystem properties cannot provide a satisfactory account of the cultural benefits that people derive from places, processes or events. The benefits of a place, for example, are often dependent on a *particular* place rather than a *type* of place and the service it gives rise to cannot be seen as a separate function.

* Corresponding author at: Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies, Lund University, Sölvegatan 10, 223 62 Lund, Sweden.

E-mail address: sanna.stalhammar@lucsus.lu.se (S. Stålhammar).

Various value-typologies to help classify social value of ES have been suggested within the ES literature as for example [Chan et al. \(2012\)](#) who outlined eight binary and non-mutually exclusive dimensions and [Kenter et al. \(2015\)](#) who distinguished shared/social values into transcendental, cultural and societal, communal, group, deliberated, other-regarding values and value to society. It is acknowledged that socio-cultural values are ill-suited for commodity metaphors and cannot be captured by conventional monetary valuation in meaningful ways ([Milcu et al., 2013](#)), thus various non-monetary valuation methods have been recommended ([Kenter et al., 2015](#); [Kelemen et al., 2014](#); [Kenter, 2014](#)). Given that the application of the ES concept is situated within mainstream economics and policy, it initially adopted a utilitarian framing of value building on preferences ([Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010](#)). Even some non-monetary valuation methods are similar to the neoclassical monetary valuation approach in their assumptions of quantification and aggregation of individually perceived values ([Raymond et al., 2014](#)). However, recent and ongoing developments of theory and method in relation to shared, plural and cultural values using deliberate techniques such as demonstrated by [Irvine et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Kenter et al. \(2016b\)](#) shows the determination to fundamentally challenge the utilitarian framing and the analytical aggregation of individual values based on consequentialist assumptions. The discussion on deliberated values includes the important recognition of value formation, which is the idea that preferences and values are not pre-formed but influenced by the valuation process and method ([Kenter et al., 2016a](#)). [Chan et al. \(2016\)](#) call for a third category of relational ES values alongside instrumental and intrinsic values. The launch of the new conceptual framework from the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) shifted their discussions from ES values to nature's gifts, and opened up for multiple knowledge systems such as that of western science, indigenous and locals, and practitioners ([Díaz et al., 2015](#)). Adhering to the critique of value monism (e.g. [Norton, 2015](#)), they emphasize the importance of a pluralistic value approach which allows for "diverse valuation" of instrumental, intrinsic and relational value. [Fish et al. \(2016\)](#) have also developed a framework aligned with the new IPBES approach, which presents CES as a relational interaction between environmental spaces and cultural practices, dependent on the biophysical domain and generating benefits in terms of experiences, identities and capabilities.

Regardless of conceptual development of novel frameworks and valuation methodologies, various ontological and epistemological questions regarding the foundation of people's values of nature remain ([Kenter et al., 2016c, Table 1](#)). Moreover, it should be recognized that there is no consensus regarding what constitutes 'value' of nature for individuals. There is thus a potential distinction between how individuals experience and express their values of nature and the language of value of ecosystem services. In order to understand to what extent ES valuation can be seen as represen-

tative of individuals ontological accounts of value, we need to explore how benefits of natural environments are expressed by individuals independent of ready-made frameworks of value. Of special interest here are the benefits lay people allocate to nature experiences in their daily life as this is often the focus of recreational CES assessments. Interpretative methods can help us develop an in-depth understanding of the meanings of values of ecosystems that lay people describe and the reasons they are valued in certain ways, through understanding the individual and communal narratives of places ([Kenter, 2016](#)).

The aim of this study is to understand individuals' expressions of values from an interpretative perspective and how this can inform the language of value of ecosystem services. We address the following questions:

1. How do local inhabitants perceive and describe how they value their experiences in nearby ecosystem?
2. What are the implications of these descriptions for valuation of CES?

Our analysis uses empirical material from focus groups that were initially formed and designed to answer the first research question of how individuals perceive and in their own words express how they value their experiences of spending time in natural environments. In the qualitative analysis, a second research question emerged to form the basis for developing the main argument in this paper. In using an interpretative approach, we follow the call from IPBES and [Chan et al. \(2016\)](#) to diversify the perspective of how values of ES can be analyzed, and explore the plurality of values individuals assign to ecosystems in a specific geographical context. We evaluate how our findings can inform the current debates on conceptualizations of value.

2. Method

2.1. Mode of inquiry

Following [Charmaz \(2006\)](#) we applied the constructivist version of grounded theory. This approach was found suitable since categories and themes are supposed to emerge from data without any interference from preconceived ideas and interpretations associated with, in our case, categories of values of cultural ecosystem services. Constructivist grounded theory is rooted in symbolic interactionism according to which individuals construct reality and create meaning based on symbols and social interaction ([Cutcliffe, 2000](#)). We borrowed the concept of interpretative repertoires from discursive psychology ([Wetherell et al., 2001](#)), also rooted in symbolic interactionism, to identify which ideas, notions, and metaphors participants drew on to articulate their experiences and express their values of nature. Interpretative repertoires can be thought of as coherent ways of speaking about something as well as a framework that is drawn from for conversations and construction of discourse ([Edley, 2001](#)). The concept can be employed to reveal how attitudes are motivated, justified and resisted by discourses displayed in talk ([Potter and Hepburn, 2007](#)). It was here used to conceptualize the general construction of participants' ideas of values of nature in conversation. The process of articulation of values of nature was seen as constructed directly through interactions of talk and not through examining mental processes or through expressing ethical standpoints that are hidden in the conversation. The combination of these approaches were presumed to be useful in this study since they align with what could be considered a relational approach to value, with interaction being the basis for interpretation, and where the distinction between subjective and objective is seen as a discursive construction. This combined

Table 1

Scheme of focus group interviews. Order in which the interviews were carried out (Order), number of participants in each group (N), characteristics of the host (Host), and venue of the focus group interview (Location).

Order	N	Host	Location
1	7	Small town dweller	Home of the host
2	6	Member of a dog owner club	Clubhouse
3	6	Environmental NGO-member	Home of the host
4	6	Member of an outdoor club	Home of the host
5	6	Secondary school student	School
6	5	Young city dweller, no children	Home of the host
7	7	Culturally active person	Home of the host
8	11	Church member	Church
Total	54		

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