



Analysis

Ecosystem Services and Cultural Values as Building Blocks for ‘The Good life’. A Case Study in the Community of Røst, Lofoten Islands, Norway

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ABSTRACT

We examined the contribution of natural capital and social capital through the notion of cultural ecosystem services to shaping human well-being in the fishing community of Røst in the Lofoten Islands in Northern Norway. Through ethnographic observations, in-depth interviews, and a participatory scenario workshop we develop four narratives centering on the links of nature and ecosystem services. Benefits derived from ecosystem services are fundamental building blocks in the local vision of ‘the good life’ and emerge from a combination of satisfied preferences and struggle, hardships, and capabilities inflicted by a demanding environment and challenging work conditions. Beyond a certain level of meeting basic needs and provisioning of essential public services, simplicity in life and local control over resources and surroundings was preferred over a multitude of other opportunities and services. Well-being was strongly linked to maintenance of identity through traditional practices for harvesting of natural resources, nurturing of skills, social cohesion, and acting meaningfully in one’s local environment. In a relational perspective, cultural ecosystem services are constituted and given meaning through interaction with nature. The main policy implication is that contributions of natural and social capital to well-being proved to be hard to meaningfully separate.

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1. Introduction

Island communities are facing multiple challenges in a world of accelerated global environmental and socioeconomic change (Kelman, 2007; van der Velde et al., 2007; Guillotreau et al., 2012; Lazrus, 2012). Firstly, islands are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change (Lazrus, 2012). Secondly, the economies of many coastal communities on islands, which have historically been centered around the harvesting of marine resources, are increasingly pressured by a growing dependency on government support and income from tourism (Briguglio, 1995), since few communities can cover the required level of public services by means of local economies. However, environmental and socioeconomic change also opens opportunities for novel development paths (Kerr, 2005). Many coastal and island communities face a future where environmental resources and ecosystem services will continue to be pillars in the local economy, albeit in new ways (González et al., 2008).

Islands and island communities have been termed ‘paradoxical’ spaces (Stratford, 2003) in that they are local, confined environments with their own particularities, yet are nowadays strongly dependent on relationships and support from mainland policies and economies (Taglioni, 2011). They are physically isolated, but still intricately connected with the outside world through modern communication and infrastructure. As with all other spaces, they are subject to the forces of globalization; however, in many cases they are able to maintain a sense of local identity with respect to larger, more dominant neighbors (Vallega, 2007).

A major challenge for many island communities is how to blend the best of ‘old times’ (including traditions, culture, local knowledge and identity) with the challenges of centralization and changes in lifestyles (including increasing welfare costs and demands on public services, as well as aging and shrinking populations due to rural-urban migration) so that it remains possible and attractive to live in these places in a context of increased mobility. Islands sometimes attract artists, nature lovers, and persons seeking a ‘back-to-nature’ lifestyle, but seldom in sufficient numbers to counter declines in traditional professions and migration to urban areas. Although a satisfactory level of economic welfare may well be essential, a whole suite of drivers can influence individual

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decisions to remain in, move to, or move away from, rural areas. Research has identified many non-economic factors that combine to create a quality of life, which determines the willingness of people to live in remote areas (Fischer and Malmberg, 2001). A key question for local politicians and administrators is hence how to maintain or improve the quality of life for inhabitants (Zorondo-Rodriguez et al., 2016).

Island communities can be delimited more easily as discrete social-ecological systems than larger, more complex spaces, and hence lend themselves well to studying nature-society interactions (González et al., 2008). While there are certain forces of change on a general level that can be used to describe what island communities are experiencing, we would argue that precisely because islands are 'paradoxical' and idiosyncratic spaces, a qualitative, contextualized inquiry will in many cases be needed. This is largely because we think human-environment interactions are best framed through understanding the relational values people hold in specific places, i.e. what people consider appropriate in terms of how they interact with their surroundings, with other people and how local resources are managed, and to what extent this contributes to well-being (Chan et al., 2016). In this study, we develop narratives and interpret them through a cultural ecosystem services lens and discuss a localized representation of 'the good life'. We do not assume that the particular perception of well-being found in this research can be extrapolated to other islands and geographic contexts, but we believe that it contains some more systemic level insights that

shed light on how cultural ecosystem services are related to well-being among geographically isolated rural communities more broadly.

In this paper, we draw on data and experiences from the island of Røst in the Lofoten archipelago in northern Norway (Fig. 1). Our objective is to add to the growing field of research that examines relationships between ecosystem services and quality of life by including and considering context specific aspects of society and culture. Our focus is on cultural ecosystem services and values, which include a range of non-material benefits people obtain in their interaction with ecosystems through spiritual enrichment, cognitive development, reflection, recreation or aesthetic experience (MA, 2005; Chan et al., 2012a). Specifically we examine how important are environmental attributes (natural capital) and ecosystem services perceived to be relative to other societal factors (social and built capital) in shaping a desirable future for a small island community. Based on interviews, ethnographic observations and a participatory scenario workshop we outline four narratives about salient themes in the lives of Røst residents, and use these to schematize how 'the good life' is intertwined with ecosystem services and cultural values in the study area.

1.1. Concepts

Research on human experience is often compiled under the term 'quality of life' (QOL). Research on QOL bridges several disciplines

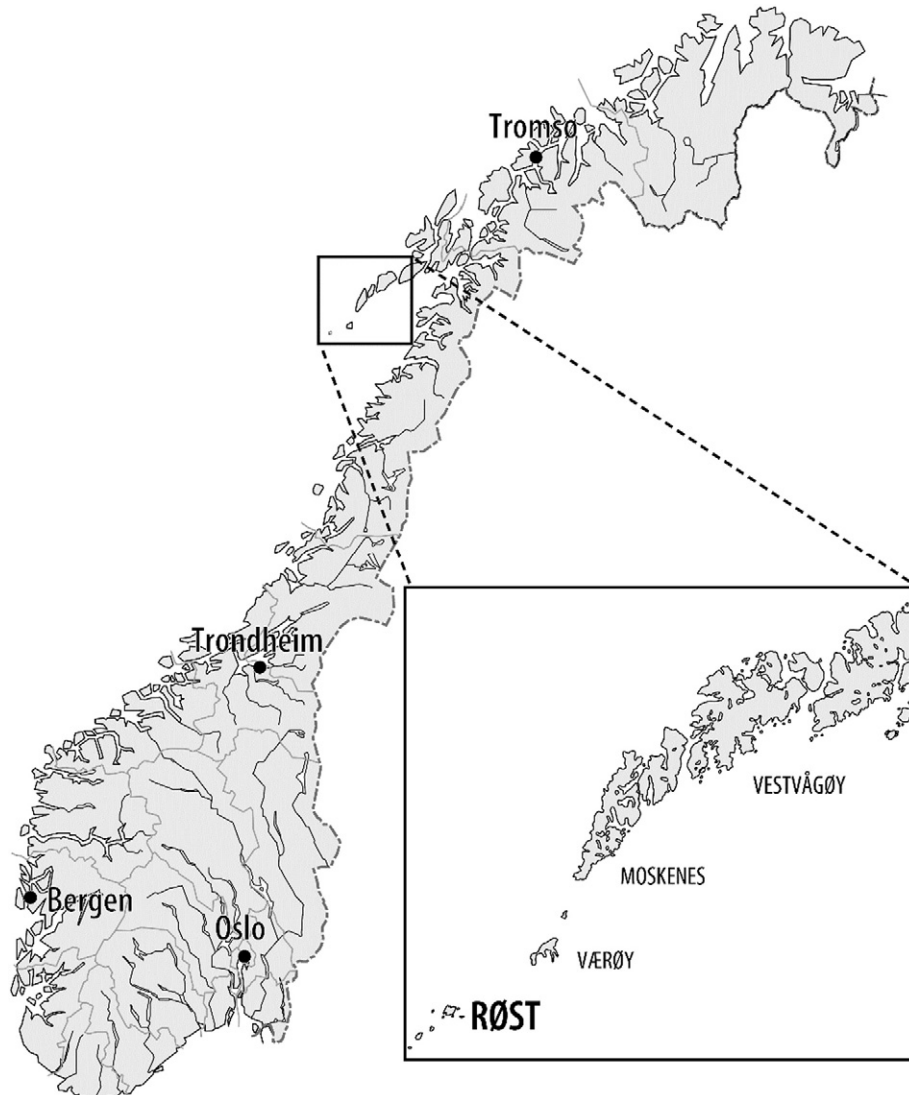


Fig. 1. Location of study area.

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