

Perception of Cultural Ecosystem Services for Entrepreneurship

Anda Mežgaile

Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences, Valmiera, Latvia

This paper builds upon the growing body of research exploring cultural ecosystem services (CES) and how individuals responsible for fostering the business environment in these areas perceive them. CES are non-material benefits that people obtain from nature (for example: recreation and ecotourism, aesthetic values, sense of place, spiritual and religious values, inspiration, cultural heritage). The intangible nature of CES complicates their economic valuation, yet they play a crucial role in overall economic development decision-making and investment planning. The economic valuation of CES can highlight the tangible benefits of nature for society, such as through inspirational processes, outcomes, and a sense of place. However, it is necessary to be careful to avoid ethical and practical concerns, such as the commodification of nature.

The primary objective of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere (MAB) program for biosphere reserves is to integrate human values and activities with nature, while preserving the economic, ecological, ethical, and socio-cultural benefits associated with sustainable natural processes. These functions should serve the stakeholders involved in their production and management. Research on the economic value of CES in biosphere reserves highlights their significant contribution to human well-being and sustainable development (Bernadett & Melanie, 2021). It is recognized that ecosystem service values vary across different zones within biosphere reserves based on each zone's objectives; however, cultural and regulating services tend to be significantly higher in core zones (Cusens, Barraclough & Måren, 2022).

The aim of this study was to explore the perception of cultural ecosystem services in relation to entrepreneurship within the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve (NVBR). The study approached this from two perspectives: business support specialists in municipalities and entrepreneurs whose businesses are based on CES. The NVBR, located in North Latvia, is the only biosphere reserve in the country, covering an area of 457,708 hectares. It aims to promote interdisciplinary collaboration for sustainable social and economic development in the region, which encompasses three municipalities: Limbaži, Valmiera, and Valka. The reserve stretches along the 60-kilometer-long Vidzeme coastline of the Gulf of Riga and includes the Livonian Cultural Space. The study was conducted in three steps. Secondary data were sourced from the Latvian Central Statistical Office regarding entrepreneurship, as well as a survey conducted by the Latvian Society in 2021 and 2024 on nature conservation in Latvia. Primary data were gathered through interviews with experts and focus group discussions with municipal business development specialists and entrepreneurs focused on CES. Additionally, interviews were conducted with stakeholders who received small grants as part of the project "Biodiversity Protection in the North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve" (2005-2008). Focus group participants completed a task aimed at assessing various territories within the NVBR and their potential for business development. They evaluated natural habitats on a scale of 0 to 3, with 3 indicating the highest potential for entrepreneurial activity. The results were then compared between municipal business development specialists and entrepreneurs. The results of the Latvian Society survey indicated that people frequently utilize cultural ecosystem services in diverse ways, including entrepreneurship, inspiration, and cultural activities. Latvia's natural resources offer opportunities for developing unique and niche products based on CES. The key lies in identifying opportunities and leveraging the unique vision, skills, and knowledge of each entrepreneur. Local business development

grants provide vital support for developing and testing ideas, with each municipality offering its own small grant programs that entrepreneurs can apply for one or two times a year. While studies on the assessment of CES in Latvia and the NVBR exist, they primarily focus on the experiences of residents and visitors. This study provides insights into how existing CES and cultural ecosystem services are valued and utilized in entrepreneurship, as well as the benefits they offer to entrepreneurs, territorial development, and the biosphere reserve itself.

Acknowledgements

The study was conducted with the support of Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences Research Grant 2024/13

Keywords

biosphere reserve, entrepreneurship, cultural ecosystem services