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Tourism firms' attitudes and willingness to contribute to payments for ecosystem services in tourism

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the discussions of the role of tourism firms in maintaining important natural environments and cultural ecosystem services of a tourism destination. More precisely, this study explores the tourism firms' attitudes and willingness to participate in safeguarding and maintaining cultural ecosystem services in a destination through a tourism-related local payments model, Landscape and Recreation Value Trade (LRVT), developed in the Ruka-Kuusamo area in Finland. Five main themes illustrating tourism firms' attitudes towards LRVT and willingness to contribute to it were identified: benefits, concerns and challenges, implementation, characteristics of a firm, and need for raising awareness. Based on the findings many of the expressed benefits and challenges of LRVT originate from and are connected to evaluating the impacts on the competitiveness of the firm and the competitive advantages for the destination. The study brings insight into the planning, design, and implementation of voluntary tourism-related payment schemes for ecosystem services, and discusses their potential to enhance ecological conservation, support the local economy, and serve as an incentive for private firms to act in a more sustainable manner.

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
Introduction

Recently, countries with abundant nature areas have attracted growing numbers of tourists through a variety of nature-based activities and attractions. Globally, nature-based tourism (NBT) is heavily dependent on appealing nature environments and ecosystems to develop and maintain its business activities (Pueyo-Ros, 2018). At the same time, there is a growing demand and competition over natural resources, especially in multi-functional areas that face economic, social and environmental pressures (Reed & Stringer, 2016). In a destination context, this means that diverse livelihoods are using or competing for the same resources. In Finland, for example, forests and natural landscapes are important both for the forest industry and for expanding NBT. While NBT relies on appealing nature landscapes and biodiversity, the forest industry uses wood as the key raw material leading to large-scale forest cuttings. Therefore, new approaches to the reconciliation of land use and maintenance of diverse ecosystem services are increasingly being discussed (Winkel et al., 2022).

Ecosystem services (ES) provide diverse benefits for people ranging from provisioning services, such as food, to cultural services such as aesthetic, recreation and spiritual

values (e.g. MEA, 2005; Plieninger et al., 2013). The complexity of cultural ecosystem services (CES) provided by natural environments and resources emerges from the multiple benefits the services can bring such as recreation opportunities through various activities, health and enjoyment, spiritual experiences, and appreciation of scenic landscapes (e.g. Bachi et al., 2020; de Groot et al., 2010; Huynh et al., 2022). Although tourism has long been connected to the ES discourse, the literature on the role of ecosystem services in tourism has only recently emerged (e.g. Bachi et al., 2020; Ghermandi et al., 2020; Grilli et al., 2021; Margaryan et al., 2020; Pueyo-Ros, 2018; Ram & Smith, 2022). This is somewhat surprising given the fact that they attract customers and are often central to tourist satisfaction on site (e.g. Pueyo-Ros, 2018). Natural resources and the benefits the nature environment brings may profile a whole region or destination, and they act as the core of the tourism offering (see e.g. Daniel et al., 2012; Fish et al., 2016).

A few researchers (e.g. Daniel et al., 2012; Fish et al., 2016) have pointed out that the possibility of experiencing CES and biodiversity, engaging with them directly, and understanding their benefits may help to raise public awareness and support for protecting ecosystems.

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This, however, also requires a deeper understanding of the specific socio-ecological context, and the different stakeholders' perspectives on the value of ES (e.g. Ram & Smith, 2022). Some studies have examined the interest in contributing to the maintenance of ecosystem services at tourism destinations focusing mainly on the consumer perspective (e.g. Schuhmann et al., 2019) and examining tourists' willingness to pay for nature conservation and cultural ecosystem services, for instance, related to beaches, specific animal species and forested landscapes (e.g. Birdir et al., 2013; Enriquez-Acevedo et al., 2018; Grilli et al., 2021; Su et al., 2022; Tyrväinen et al., 2014), while the attitudes and willingness of tourism businesses have gained less attention. In fact, tourism firms are often not actively engaged in contributing to landscape or nature conservation targets (e.g. Aapala et al., 2017; Mäntymaa et al., 2021; Brink, 2011). This may be partly due to the tourism firms' somewhat limited understanding of or heterogeneous attitudes towards the benefits of (cultural) ecosystem services and the biodiversity for their businesses, and partly due to the lack of well-functioning payments for ecosystem services (PES) models lowering the threshold to contribute (Konu & Tyrväinen, 2020).

Payments for ecosystem services (PES) have been suggested as one tool to maintain and improve the quality of natural environments. PES policies compensate communities or individuals for taking actions that support and increase the provision of diverse ecosystem services (Jack et al., 2008). Previous PES and conservation payment programmes have targeted wildlife habitat restoration, water quality improvement and prevention of deforestation (e.g. Perevochtchikova & Rojo Negrete, 2015). Although the number of studies focusing on PES models has increased in the last decades (e.g. Wunder et al., 2018), the discussion of PES models within tourism has still been limited.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the discussions of the role of the tourism industry, and especially tourism firms, in maintaining the important natural environments and cultural ecosystem services of a tourism destination. More precisely, this study explores the tourism firms' attitudes and willingness to participate in safeguarding and maintaining cultural ecosystem services and the biodiversity in a destination through a tourism-related local PES model, Landscape and Recreation Value Trade, developed in the Ruka-Kuusamo area in Finland.

Literature review

Tourism-related payments for ecosystem services

The payments for ecosystem service approach has studied diverse market-like transactions around aspects such as watershed and biodiversity protection,

carbon sequestration, and landscape beauty and recreation (Landell-Mills & Porras, 2002; Thorsen et al., 2014). However, payment schemes aiming to enhance landscape beauty and recreation values are limited (e.g. Mäntymaa et al., 2021; Milder et al., 2010). The schemes have primarily focused on compensating low-income landowners or managers for their activities, as well as the protection of wildlife and landscapes with recreational or scenic value e.g. for fishers, recreationists and tourists (see e.g. Kalvelage et al., 2022; Milder et al., 2010; Osano et al., 2013). Many of these schemes have targeted developing countries, where local communities in and around protected areas may receive a portion of visitor fees to help maintain the recreation values (Milder et al., 2010). Moreover, some initiatives may include direct payments from tour operators to low-income landowners, for instance by leasing land for their tourism activities (Osano et al., 2013).

Many of the PES studies are conducted to evaluate the PES for pro-poor benefits. However, PES models targeting landscape and recreation values have the potential in developed countries to support more diverse land uses and to help shift from a single usage of natural resources to multiple uses of nature areas. Although the economic evaluation of ES, and especially CES, in a tourism context can be challenging, bundling multiple ecosystem services within one PES scheme can be both economically efficient and provide multiple benefits (see e.g. Huynh et al., 2022). In consequence, the need for new PES instruments bundling diverse ES has already been suggested for securing and enhancing the quality of the environment for NBT (Mäntymaa et al., 2021; Tyrväinen et al., 2014).

As PES models can be implemented in diverse local contexts the implementation of the acceptability of the model features by key stakeholders is strongly linked to the outcome of its success (He, 2023; Perevochtchikova & Rojo Negrete, 2015). Therefore, understanding aspects such as national and local legislation, cultural and institutional practices, and resource ownership is needed (e.g. Rodríguez-Robayo & Merino-Perez, 2017). The cultural, social, institutional and historical factors all influence the decisions and perceptions of local actors in designing and implementing PES programmes (e.g. He, 2023; Rodríguez-Robayo & Merino-Perez, 2017).

On a wider scale, many of the earlier PES schemes have focused on the 'polluter pays principle' (see e.g. Schuhmann et al., 2019). In this study, however, the interest is on voluntary payments made by private sector buyers, such as tourism firms as they are one of the main beneficiaries of the local nature environment and CES in a destination. Moreover, nature provides an

environment for firms to facilitate nature-based tourism experiences for their customers and hence, acts as a resource for tourism products. In this case, the discussion should focus on the ‘beneficiary pays principle’ in which a beneficiary or user of an ecosystem service pays the provider of the service (Schuhmann et al., 2019).

Tourism firms and maintaining local nature environments and cultural ecosystem services

Recent studies show that tourism SMEs operating physically in a particular destination are more interested in sustainability activities that consider nature protection (e.g. Diaz et al., 2023), and tourism lifestyle entrepreneurs are more likely to behave in a sustainable way, which in turn contributes to maintaining and supporting local communities and natural environments (Diaz et al., 2023; Shrivastava & Kennelly, 2013). Cultural ecosystem services can also act as important motivators to own, use, manage, or conserve land for specific, frequently amenity-related goals (Chan et al., 2012), such as tourism (e.g. Plieninger et al., 2015).

It is noted that many individuals and firms who pay for ecosystem services do so for reasons of individual ethics and corporate social responsibility (e.g. Milder et al., 2010). Rodríguez-Robayo and Merino-Perez (2017) point out that one of the focal variables in examining the local context for PES is local actors’ pro-social and pro-environmental motivations and attitudes as the existence of these motivations and related behaviours influence the decision to be involved with conservation initiatives such as PES schemes (e.g. Leimona et al., 2015). In a tourism context, studies have examined the reasons for adapting proactive environmental strategies and sustainable practices at a more general level, including motivations for sustainable behaviour. For instance, Font et al. (2016) found that the three main reasons for tourism SMEs taking sustainable actions were protecting the environment, sustainability as a personal or lifestyle choice and improving society. Additionally, sustainability actions were motivated by more business-related reasons such as cost savings, marketing and image benefits, and customer demand (Baniya et al., 2019; Font et al., 2016). Previous studies also indicate that the size and type of a business influence firm’s capabilities, as well as the focus of sustainability actions and what type of activities they execute (e.g. Diaz et al., 2023; Kallmuenzer et al., 2018).

From a tourism firms’ perspective, several issues can influence taking sustainable actions and the adoption, involvement, and acceptance of PES schemes. Feelings of being efficacious have been found to be determined

by the level of awareness of the socio-environmental impacts of tourism, knowledge of alternatives, and acceptance of personal responsibility (Kornilaki et al., 2019). Nguyen et al. (2017) show one central issue is open communication and raising awareness of sustainable actions, PES, and its benefits. Additionally, the possibility of being involved and influencing the PES development and implementation is crucial for its acceptance (e.g. Thompson, 2019). It is also noted that firms’ good economic performance in terms of monetary turnover and the entrepreneur’s intention to develop new business positively influence the willingness to participate in PES activities (Kosenius et al., 2020). As tourism firms are one of the main beneficiaries of many ecosystem services of a destination, there is a need to gain more insight into tourism firms’ attitudes, and motivations towards maintaining nature environments, biodiversity and cultural ecosystem services in their operational environment.

Context

In Finland, the rapid growth of nature-based tourism has increased attention to ecological and social sustainability aspects such as multitarget use and management of forests or other natural amenities. The case area, the Ruka-Kuusamo, is a key nature-based tourism destination located in north-eastern Finland. In the region, both commercial forestry and nature-based tourism are important industries. In Kuusamo as much as 84% of the municipality’s total land area is forested, and 82% of the forest has non-industrial private ownership (National Forest Inventory 9, 2016). Forestry has long traditions in the region and commercial forestry practices have shaped the landscapes for decades. Although nature conservation areas such as Oulanka National Park and some smaller protected areas serve as high-quality operational environments for various NBT services, the main target for most forest areas is timber production. Therefore, forestry practices have been locally common and also relatively accepted as forestry and forest industry jobs are important, but the increasing number of tourism enterprises and related jobs have stressed the need to better manage and sustain the landscape and biodiversity values of forests.

The main idea of the suggested Landscape and Recreation Value Trade (LRVT) programme is that the tourism industry compensates private forest owners for the loss of income from timber sales if they commit to sustaining biodiversity and landscape values in their forests (Mäntymaa et al., 2021; Tyrväinen et al., 2014). The model focuses on safeguarding older forests

typically along outdoor recreation routes and roads, as well as sensitive nature areas near cottages and viewpoints with high biodiversity and landscape values, with the main aim of avoiding clear-cutting at sites important for tourism. The funds would be collected from tourism firms and the tourists visiting the destination. A possible way of funding the mechanism could be, for example, NBT companies collecting a small environmental fee, e.g. 1–2 euro/night/person, for a specific fund for the implementation of LRVT. The funding could be also gathered from a combination of actors and sources, both from the public and private sectors in a way that works best locally. In this system, fixed-term contracts would be made by a trading agent between the landowners and the buyer for maintaining

or enhancing the key landscape and biodiversity values in their specific forest areas (Figure 1).

In the Ruka-Kuusamo area, the preconditions for launching the LRVT model and the attitudes of landowners and tourists have been studied (Tyrväinen et al., 2014, 2021; Kurttila et al., 2020; Mäntymaa et al., 2018). The studies show that tourists are willing to contribute to landscape and biodiversity values and landowners are relatively interested in joining the PES model if their economic losses from reduced timber sales are compensated for (Tyrväinen et al., 2014, 2021; Mäntymaa et al., 2018). A business study (Mäntymaa et al., 2021) conducted for the companies of the area found that although many entrepreneurs thought that improvement in landscape quality would benefit their business and the image

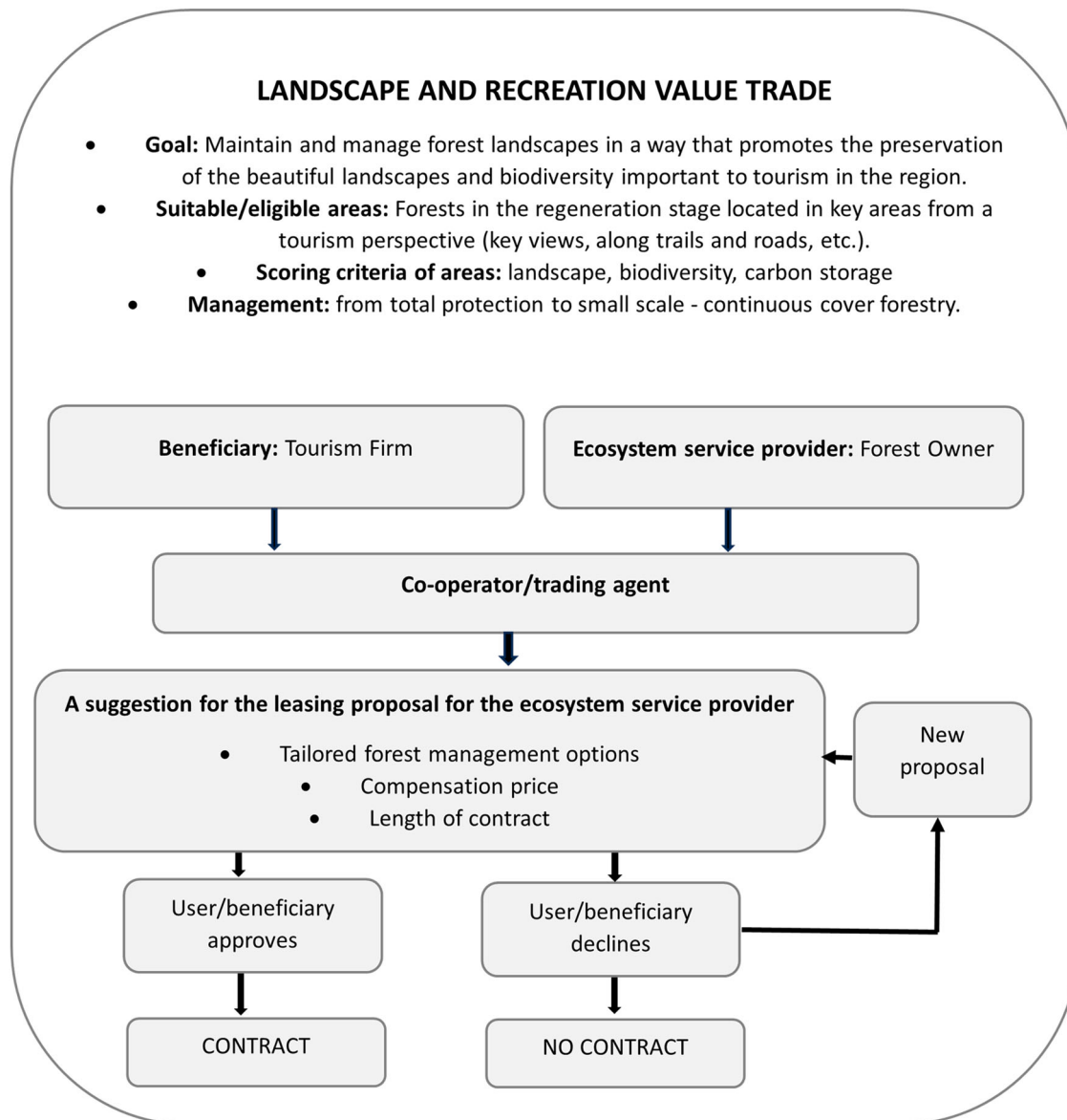


Figure 1. The suggested LRVT scheme (modified from Tyrväinen et al., 2014 by the authors).

of the area, the willingness to contribute to funding landscape conservation in privately-owned forests was still somewhat low. The target group in the study was 120 members of the local tourist association, including members that can be categorized other than tourism companies such as grocery stores at the destination. Mäntymaa et al. (2021) found that the tourism businesses ($n = 31$) were slightly more willing to collect money from tourists and give monetary contributions themselves to fund the LRV compared to businesses offering other services ($n = 13$). However, the data did not provide deeper insight, for instance, on issues influencing tourism firms' willingness to contribute. Hence, there is a need to increase the understanding of tourism firms' attitudes concerning maintaining important nature environments and their cultural ecosystem services in the tourism destination and how they think the LRV approach could support the goal.

Methods

As the aim of this study is to gain a new, deeper, and more nuanced understanding of previously unexplored phenomena, a qualitative case study approach was chosen (e.g. Boddy, 2016). The importance of participatory and interpretive research has been pointed out in Ecosystem services (ES) research as it emphasizes the complexity that underpins the personal and collective values associated with cultural ecosystem services and the benefits that arise as a result (Fish et al., 2016). This study takes a constructivist worldview as it recognizes that multiple realities exist (Lincoln et al., 2011), which helps to understand why individuals act and think in different ways (Fetterman, 2010). In this case, the focus is on the specific context and relies on the participants' views on the topic and situation being studied (Creswell, 2014). To gain more understanding of the phenomenon, semi-structured interviews of tourism firms' representatives were conducted in the Ruka-Kuusamo area to obtain somewhat systematic and comprehensive interview data related to the central themes, while at the same time maintaining flexibility in the wording of the questions as well as keeping the tone of the interviews informal and conversational (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2016) and giving the interviewees possibility to express themselves freely.

In this study, purposive sampling is used to gain insight from the informants who were seen as the most likely to provide appropriate and useful information related to the aims and objectives of the study (Campbell et al., 2020; Kelly, 2010). As there was some previous understanding of local businesses' willingness to contribute to landscape conservation (Mäntymaa

et al., 2021) but no deeper insight into the reasons that influenced it, the researchers pursued to gain information from those most likely to move understanding forward (e.g. Morse, 2015), that were in this case tourism firms at the destination. The selection of the interviewees was designed to represent the diverse types of tourism firms operating at the destination and profiting from nature environments. The interviewees – representatives of tourism firms – were selected from different-sized and different types of main business activities that could influence their attitudes towards LRV. Half of the interviewees were selected on the recommendation of the CEO of the local tourism association. The recommended interviewees were regarded as the central tourism actors in the area and their views were also seen as essential to the acceptance and successful launch of the new PES model. The suggested firms represented the biggest operators at the destination, and to gain versatile representatives in terms of size and services provided the other firms were selected to represent micro-sized firms that provide diversified services and use nature as their operational environment. The micro-sized firms were firms that have been active in destination development within the area e.g. in diverse tourism development projects. Their contact information was gained from the regional development company that manages diverse development projects in the region.

Altogether 12 tourism firms, six bigger firms and six micro-sized firms, were contacted and invited to participate in the interview. Of the six bigger firms one did not reply to any contacts and of the smaller ones two firms declined due to the changed situation in their business caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of nine interviews with 10 interviewees (both entrepreneurs of one firm took part in one interview) were conducted between December 2019 and May 2020. The interviewees were CEOs, managers, or owners of the firms. As the aim of the study was to explore different issues that influence tourism firms' attitudes towards maintaining important nature environments and their cultural ecosystem services, the sample was regarded as suitable and adequate for the context and purpose of this study (see e.g. Braun & Clarke, 2021). During the interviews, the researchers started to identify reoccurring issues, aspects, meanings and themes related to the issues examined. Six interviews in December 2019 and February 2020 were conducted on-site at the Ruka-Kuusamo, but the rest were conducted as telephone or online interviews later in the spring of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The profiles of the firms and the persons interviewed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewees.

ID	Type of main business (+ other main business if applicable)	Number of employees including the entrepreneur (shows seasonal variation)	Role of the interviewee(s)	Ownership structure	Established in
A	Activity provider	27	CEO	Family-owned company	2013 (ownership bought)
B	Hotel, restaurant	27–40 + outsourced personnel	General manager	Hotel chain	Built 1963 (since 2018 part of the current chain)
C	Spa resort	50 + outsourced personnel (top season approx. 120)	Resort manager	Chain resort	1990 (last 6 years part of the current chain)
D	Accommodation, activity provider, restaurant, catering	14–32	CEO	Family-owned company	1988
E	Activity provider, hotel, restaurant, DMC	25–60	Marketing and sales manager	Family-owned company	1987
F	Activity provider	1	Entrepreneur	Private entrepreneur	2016
G&H	Activity provider	2	Entrepreneurs	Family-owned company	2006 (changed to Ltd in 2015)
I	Activity provider	12	Entrepreneur	Family-owned company	1998 (owners changed in 2017)
J	Activity provider	1	Entrepreneur	Private entrepreneur	2019

The interview included five main themes: basic information about the firm, the main products and customer groups, collaboration, sustainability and natural environments of the destination and the role of the tourism sector in keeping the destination appealing, and the LRV. This study focuses on the latter themes of the interviews in which the questions were focused on the values of nature environments and cultural ecosystem services for the tourism industry at the destination, the tourism sector's role in preserving the central nature environments, and attitudes towards the LRV as well as interviewees' opinions about how the LRV should be implemented in the area. At the beginning of the theme on the LRV, the interviewees were asked if the issue was familiar to them, and after their response, an explanation and description of the model (following the description given in the context section) were provided before further questions.

Social desirability bias aimed to be avoided by carefully planning and preparing the interview process and script. The interviews were conducted on the premises of the firm when possible, and when the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown started, the interviews were conducted based on the interviewees' wishes regarding interview times and platforms (Teams or phone) to allow interviewees to relax, be comfortable, and gain confidence (see e.g. Bispo Júnior, 2022). The researchers contacted the interviewees beforehand to agree on the interview times. The interviewees were also provided with the general interview themes before the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, the interviewees were informed that it is voluntary to participate in the research and they withdraw their consent to participation at any time, by following the guidelines of the Finnish National Advisory Board on Research Ethics

(Finnish National Board on Research Integrity TENK, 2019). The interviewees were encouraged to express themselves freely without emphasizing the provider-recipient relationship that is underlined in the ecosystem services framework (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Therefore, the language and terms of ES were not used in the interviews, following the lead of Gould et al. (2014). Instead, open-ended questions were used to discuss values related to nature environments and biodiversity, cultural ecosystem services, and tourism as well as attitudes towards the LRV. It was highlighted that the aim was to gain interviewees' perspectives on the topics and there are no right or wrong answers.

The interviews lasted from 51 minutes to 1 hour 39 minutes, and they were recorded with the permission of the interviewees. Eight of the interviews were conducted in Finnish and one in English. The study adopts a reflexive thematic analysis approach as it aims to identify and describe patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2021). First, the interviews were transcribed, and a pre-understanding of the data was gained by reading the transcripts several times while making notes during the process. To identify the interviewees' attitudes the analysis not only focused on words but also explored how the interviewees described their experiences and views (e.g. Brinkmann, 2013). In the next stage of the analysis, the interesting features of the data were coded inductively and systematically into initial codes and after which the codes were grouped into potential themes following the next phases of the thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). The themes were then reviewed based on the original data and initial codes, and eventually, five main themes illustrating tourism firms' attitudes

Table 2. Example of the data analysis.

Excerpt	Codes	Sub-themes	Main theme
It is always just that all actors should be involved, that surely there is a challenge in that, you can't get everyone to get involved, and the free-riding will probably present its own challenges. If some [companies] pay for it and others include it in their customer prices and others [companies] then go there as a free rider, so to speak ... But yes, on a thought level, it's a really good idea, but then you don't know what those costs are, you can't tell what the costs for a company are, like ours, and for the travel industry in general. And if those [costs] start to be reflected in customer prices and stuff, we don't know to whom [to which competitors] we lose again, because that price is really important to customers these days ...	stakeholder involvement, dealing with the costs, customer payments, firm payments, free-riding, increased costs/prices	Issues related on diversified opinions of the payer	Concerns and perceived challenges

towards LRVT and willingness to contribute to it were identified, namely benefits of LRVT, concerns and challenges of LRVT, implementation of LRVT, characteristics of a firm, and raising awareness. Table 2 gives an example of the data analysis process.

Quotes from the data are included in the description of the themes to bring forth the voices of the interviewees. The quotes from the Finnish interviews were translated into English by the authors. To guarantee the correct translation of the quotes one of the researchers translated the quote first into English and the other researcher translated it back to Finnish (when needed) to ensure that the meaning was not changed during the translation process. To increase trustworthiness and ensure that the analysis is not biased by a single person's perspective, researcher triangulation was applied in the data analysis to increase dependability and confirmability (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by having two researchers coding the data and developing the themes. The themes were then reviewed with all the researchers involved in the study. Additionally, the findings were presented to and discussed with the local stakeholders in an LRVT-related online workshop in June 2020.

Findings

Identified benefits linked to LRVT

Maintaining the cultural ecosystem services in the destination

The importance of biodiversity and cultural ecosystem services was acknowledged by most of the interviewees. They identified the benefits for the environment and the local ecosystems, and how the LRVT would support their operational environment and maintain it appealing. The interviewees especially recognized the recreational, landscape, and biodiversity values for tourism and locals. The importance of the cultural ecosystem services linked to nature, flora, and fauna was seen as meaningful

not only from the tourism business perspective but also for the cultural and social capital of the region, as one of the interviewees explained:

If certain animal and plant species are lost, also a part of our culture will disappear. This is because all of them are linked to certain stories, prophecies, and beliefs that are authentic content, and compose stories [for tourism] that don't need to be scripted ... These have so much content. And if these disappear, one could say that also our cultural and social capital will deteriorate. (Interviewee E)

Linking the LRVT to broader development activities and collaboration in the destination

Several interviewees felt that the tourism sector has a key role and responsibility in keeping the region attractive. The attractiveness included both taking care of the local resources that act as a pull factor for the destination, as well as enabling tourists to have experiences in the destination by providing tourism services for the visitors. LRVT was seen to support the image and the brand of the area as a sustainable destination. It was also mentioned that adopting the model would increase the value of the region and show that the local actors are paying attention to sustainability issues and are willing to take responsibility. Hence, the LRVT was linked to the wider sustainability discussion as the goal of the Ruka-Kuusamo destination is to be recognized with the national Sustainable Travel Finland label.

Most interviewees understood also forest owners' view and their need to get other income from the forests than selling wood. They thought that the LRVT model would bring an additional way to gain income and thus, motivate forest owners to maintain landscapes that are important also for tourism. The LRVT model was also seen as one way to enhance cooperation between tourism and forestry in the region and, the paid compensations for forest owners could also help to decrease discrepancies between the two sectors. There were also hopes that the model could make greater structural

changes in forestry and make forest owners more tourism-oriented and therefore, enable more tourism activities in the privately-owned forests in the long run.

Business opportunities

Some interviewees felt that LRVT could bring new business opportunities between tourism and the forest sector. It was pointed out that the model could motivate tourism firms and forest owners to engage in closer collaboration, and for instance to develop services together for tourists. The model also inspired one firm to plan a new tourism product that would include the story of a sustainable forest owner, linking the local livelihoods and experiences of CES to the developed services. This was explained by one of the respondents as follows:

Well, I personally like stories, and this would really be a perfect opportunity to tell the story of the forest-owner. Talk about the forest-owners' views on forest management and how they take care of the forest. It could be similar to when we talk about reindeer husbandry. It has been made a tourism product in which the reindeer owners talk gladly about how they take care of the reindeer and how reindeer husbandry works in practice. So, similarly, we could design forest management as a tourism product. (Interviewee G)

Additionally, it was pointed out that the tourism products could be organized with a forest owner in such a way that the customer would have a possibility to be involved in some forestry-related activities. These kinds of products and services would also bring customers closer to the local culture and everyday life of the local people. Connecting the customer experience to local settings and meetings and interactions with local people was seen as something that the tourists are valuing more and more during their trips. It was pointed out that the products can also include planting trees that would as such support the forest owners but also contribute to the environment. However, not all the interviewees saw a direct linkage between LRVT and their business activities, even though they recognized the importance of the maintenance of the landscapes and natural values in the region.

Positive impact on customer experiences

Some of the interviewees saw that there is clear customer demand for the model because customers place more emphasis on nature experiences and the sustainability of the travel destination than before. Customers are looking more and more for a place to relax, silence and solitude, and pure nature, and they are increasingly interested in nature activities. The LRVT was seen to support the maintenance of the operational

environment for the activities as well as the other natural values that customers appreciate.

One interviewee stated that LRVT is an example of pioneer thinking that appeals to customers and would proudly market it for their own customers. Some interviewees suggested that the activities related to the model need to be clearly presented also for the customers and there could be, for example, a common certificate or a label that would prove that the firm or a certain tourism product promotes the LRVT. Hence, the activity could also be utilized in sustainability communication, and it could bring additional value for services among certain customer groups.

Concerns and challenges related to LRVT

Worries related to the reactions of other industry representatives and forest owners in the area

Even though the LRVT was seen to have the potential to reduce tensions between tourism and the forest sector, some of the interviewees felt uncertain about being involved with LRVT as they were not sure about how forest owners would react to this kind of activity due to the previous tensions at the area. As one interviewee noted, it would be important to avoid juxtaposition between tourism and forestry:

I think it is an important issue that forest owners would be involved, so that they would not see it [LRVT] as a threat to their livelihood. If they feel that this is a threat to their livelihood, then that confrontation should be avoided. (Interviewee B)

Some of the interviewees pointed out that the relationship between tourism actors and the forest sector has had some challenges and this still influences attitudes towards the LRVT. Indeed, some firms were concerned about forest owners' attitudes towards the model and whether it could lead to conflicts or disagreements in the area.

Issues related to diversified opinions on payments

The interviewees had diverse views on how the model should be financed. Some of the interviewees thought that the payment for the LRVT should be collected just from customers, others thought that payments should be collected from firms, and some interviewees suggested that the funds should be collected from both. The different perceptions had diversified reasonings that linked e.g. to the customer profile of the firm, and efforts to collect the money.

One of the identified challenges was linked to the concern of whether customers would be willing to pay

for this kind of activity, and what would happen if the costs were included in product prices. Some of the firms were unsure or a bit sceptical about the realizability of the model as they compared it to other initiatives that were not very successful in collecting funding to e.g. maintain routes collectively. As one interviewee pointed out there have been challenges in trying to collect voluntary payments from customers for other purposes:

Uh, if you think in concrete terms, you need to collect that money, of course it kind of depends on what the amount will be, but maybe I'd push the matter through the tourism association, and that's it, tied to the membership fee of the tourism association ... A voluntary fee charged to customers is a doomed solution. It has been tried all over Lapland, where there has been talk of [collecting funds for] cross-country skiing and snowmobiling and doing things for the general good. (Interviewee C)

Some interviewees were concerned about possible free-riders, meaning that some firms are participating in the LRVT, but also those firms that are not contributing to it will get the benefits. Hence, several interviewees supposed that compulsory payments either from customers or firms or from both would be better than voluntary payments as it would decrease possible freeriding. Interviewees who suggested collecting the funds from tourism firms pointed out that the contribution for the model could be included in the annual fee of the local tourist association. Suggestions for collecting funds from customers included voluntary payments during the trip, and compulsory environmental fees that could be e.g. in the customer prices.

Nevertheless, many of the interviewees pointed out that from a tourism perspective, in terms of improving the quality of nature-based tourism experiences, tourism firms and tourists are the main beneficiaries of the LRVT in Ruka-Kuusamo. Hence, most of the interviewees agreed that they should be ones also contributing to the model.

Implementation of the LRVT

Practical implementation of the LRVT

The practical implementation, including collecting and managing the payments and making the contracts, was regarded as the biggest challenge for the LRVT. The economic aspects and the costs of the LRVT came up when the willingness to participate in the LRVT was discussed. Some interviewees stated that the collected fees either for firms or for customers should be reasonable, and unnecessary expenses should be avoided. The model should be designed in a way that would cause as few operational expenses as possible and

would have a minimal number of middlemen. The interviewees had diverse opinions about who should be responsible for managing the practicalities of LRVT. Some felt that the local tourism association would be the most suitable organization for this, but also the municipality and the actors from the forest sector were mentioned.

Ways to support LRVT

It was noted that all tourism firms have a role in promoting the model. The interviewees suggested that there could be different possibilities for how firms could support LRVT ranging from marketing the model to financial contributions. Marketing the LRVT includes spreading information to customers and telling them how it is possible to contribute. Some firms were more willing to pay a certain amount themselves instead of promoting the model as such. The size of the firm also influenced the aspect of how they can contribute, usually the smaller firms were more interested in promoting the LRVT and the bigger ones preferred financial contributions. As one entrepreneur stated:

Yeah, I can't help financially, because of my tight financial situation with the starting [the new business]. But I might be able to help, maybe in a marketing way ... I'd be willing to actually tell all my customers about it. (Interviewee J)

In addition, some interviewees pointed out alternative possibilities for businesses to contribute to maintaining the landscape with some voluntary landscaping activity, such as planting trees.

Characteristics of tourism firms

Type of a firm

Firms that act as activity providers using nature actively in their services were more open and willing to participate in the model as they saw the concrete benefits it might bring to their business. On the other hand, firms that provided mainly accommodation services also saw that the natural elements and landscapes are important for the image of the region, and they felt that any degradation of it might partly influence the experiences of their customers. However, they did not see a direct link with the LRVT activities for their business as such as they do not operate in nature.

The firm's previous emphasis on sustainability issues

The firm's attitudes towards the LRVT varied depending on how much the firm has paid attention to

sustainability in its operations. Some of the interviewees showed innate motivation for sustainability and sustainable development has been one of the company's priorities. Interviewees who considered social sustainability as an important aspect of their business, especially family firms, were more willing to support local forest owners and participate in the LRVT model. Regardless of their size, some firms also tried to act actively to enhance sustainability in the region to the limits of their capabilities and resources. One entrepreneur described their pursuit to promote sustainability practices within their collaboration network as follows:

I'll try to give small suggestions that could you make some small change like this, and this would probably be also more reasonable from the economic aspect too. With these small things I try to encourage it [sustainability for other firms] without being judgmental But usually, if there is some kind of carrot that shows economic benefits coming from the change, they start to get interested in But I think that this kind of activity is very handy, and you start to push little by little those kind of sustainable practices into business activities one firm at the time. (Interviewee J)

Some of the interviewees also felt that it is part of responsible business activity to support LRVT. One interviewee emphasized that she would have a moral obligation to participate in the model, even though it is voluntary because her firm would benefit so much from it.

Experience of having an opportunity to influence destination development

A proactive attitude, the experience of being heard, and the opportunity to influence the development of the region positively affected how firms approached the LRVT and how they saw the possibility to promote the model at the destination. On the other hand, some firms brought up situational conditions that influence the ways they can contribute to the model implementation, such as hotel chain policies, but they nevertheless felt that they could have some impact through the local tourism association:

I believe we have an influence through the local tourism association. I don't feel that we can have an influence alone as a hotel. Oh well, I cannot say how much our chain could do, but we are a big chain and act in many towns, so issues from one location don't come up strongly [in the general administration]. But I really feel that the most important actor in here is the tourism association, through which we can act in collaboration at the local level, and it also makes lines about the direction in which we are heading. (Interviewee B)

Increasing discussion and raising awareness

Lack of discussions on safeguarding cultural ecosystem services

Based on the interviews, the general discussion about the local nature environments and their maintenance to support tourism activities has not been very active. For instance, one interviewee claimed that there had not been much conversation among tourism stakeholders concerning landscape preservation and biodiversity. The discussion about the landscape has often focused on national parks without a broader discussion linked to other areas. However, recently, there has been a greater focus on the impact of other industries on the local environment and tourism, and there were some concerns about how the activities of diverse industry sectors would impact the environment. This discussion related mainly to the mining activities planned in the municipality, but some interviewees also mentioned the impact of clear-cutting forests and their impact on the landscape.

Raising awareness

A central issue that the interviewees brought forth was raising awareness of the LRVT in the region and among diverse stakeholder groups. This was seen as essential to make the model approved and supported by the tourism sector. Some of the interviewees pointed out that the benefits of the LRVT are not clear for tourism firms and there was uncertainty about how other stakeholder groups such as tourists and land-owners feel about the model. It was highlighted that insight into diverse stakeholder groups' opinions and perceptions towards the model should be provided and discussing them transparently would help to find and identify win-win solutions. The model should be promoted in a way that highlights the benefits both for the tourism and forest sectors. To do this, the messages used should be considered carefully. This applies also to promoting the LRVT activities in a way that does not feel like greenwashing.

Some of the interviewees stated that in addition to giving information about the positive influence of the LRVT, there should also be discussions about what kind of consequences there might be if attention is not paid to safeguarding the landscapes and biodiversity. One efficient way to increase awareness of the LRVT was seen to use pioneer firms that would act as active influencers in promoting it and inducing others to join.

Changing attitudes

Interviewees also noted that there needs to be some change in attitudinal level among the stakeholders involved, which might take some time. It was felt that

the younger generation of entrepreneurs may be readier to adopt the LRVT as a part of their business activities, as they might have a wider and more tolerant worldview that helps to enhance the sustainability activities in the region in collaboration with others. As one interviewee mentioned, there might have been some disagreements in the region that roots way back, but the younger generation might bring a 'new beginning' for collaboration:

Yes, I feel that it is important that the tourism sector is involved in this kind of activity [LRVT model] and this project is good in that sense that it facilitates discussions and so on. We really should be able to work together. And I feel that now when the generations are changing ... it has now been shaken on and agreed that we'll forget our fathers' grudges and move forward. I think this also applies to the forest owners, that when the generations change there, I also believe that they let bygones be bygones which in the end makes it easier to operate. (Interviewee C).

Discussions

The findings show that the interviewees' attitudes towards the LRVT were generally positive and solution-focused. The issues the LRVT represents – maintaining biodiversity and landscapes, contributing to the local economy, and enhancing collaboration – were seen as important for the tourism firms and the destination. The positive attitudes were connected to the identified benefits of LRVT for the destination, such as maintaining the appealing nature and related cultural ecosystem services, contributing to the sustainable tourism development goals of the destination and an image of a sustainable destination, and decreasing tensions between tourism and forest sectors. Furthermore, the firms discussed the possible benefits from the business perspective and identified new opportunities in tourism product development. They also brought forth the importance of communication of sustainability measures to relevant stakeholders.

In addition to the benefits, there were concerns about free-riding behaviour and the concrete implementation of LRVT at the destination. The distribution of costs and management issues of LRVT came up also when the willingness to contribute was discussed. Nevertheless, from a tourism perspective, tourism firms and tourists were seen typically as the main beneficiaries of the LRVT and most of the interviewees agreed that they should also contribute to the model, which corresponds to the beneficiary pays principle in PES (Schuhmann et al., 2019). This also led the interviewees to look for solutions for tackling the identified challenges, e.g. by providing suggestions for concrete implementation.

Based on the findings many of the expressed benefits and challenges originate from and are connected to evaluating the impacts on the competitiveness of the firm and the competitive advantages for the destination. The LRVT was seen to support the maintenance of the natural landscapes that are one of the main competitive advantages of the area, and on which the branding of the area is also based. The well-maintained nature environment and the cultural ecosystem services provided are also the core resources for tourism services. Hence, from the perspective of maintaining the core resources, the LRVT was seen as positive for competitiveness. On the one hand, the costs of the LRVT (including its management and implementation) and whether they were to be included in customer prices concerned some of the firms in terms of evaluating the competitiveness of the product prices compared to competitors. On the other hand, LRVT was also seen to increase the appeal of the tourism products and the destination in the eyes of customers and tour operators who value responsible actions, which eventually could increase revenue. These findings are in line with the findings of Font et al. (2016) on tourism firms' motivations for taking sustainable actions. Even if many of the identified benefits linked to CES were connected to firms' competitiveness, some of the tourism firms' representatives had also more altruistic motivations such as safeguarding natural, cultural and social capital.

The willingness and stated modes to contribute to the LRVT also differed among the tourism firms in terms of resources in use, how the firms saw the impact of LRVT on their competitiveness, and what the identified values of the firm or entrepreneur were. Hence, the size and type of the firm, and resources available influenced how they felt about the possibilities to contribute to the LRVT. Findings showed that some firms, regardless of their size, tried to be active in enhancing sustainability in the region within the limits of their capabilities and resources. Especially representatives of micro and small firms pointed out that the LRVT model represents and reflects the same sustainability-related values that they have in their businesses. These findings support the notion by Kornilaki et al. (2019) by showing that the interviewee's self-efficacy, attitude, and experiences in general related to sustainability seem to influence their willingness to participate in LRVT activities. A proactive attitude, the experience of being heard, and the opportunity to influence the development of the region also affected how they approached the model. The findings support previous studies which indicate that personal and lifestyle choices are one of the main reasons for being sustainable (Diaz et al., 2023; Font et al., 2016) and that individual ethics and corporate social responsibility influence

positive behaviour towards PES (Milder et al., 2010). The findings also support and expand the results by Mäntymaa et al. (2021) and Kosenius et al. (2020) by showing that tourism firms have different perspectives on payments for forest ecosystem services depending on the type of business.

Additionally, the findings suggest that tourism firms' representatives were concerned about the acceptance of the PES model among diverse stakeholder groups as they were unsure of the reactions and opinions of other central stakeholder groups. This points out that the tourism sector representatives were not yet familiar with the results of the previous studies (e.g. Tyrväinen et al., 2014) conducted among the forest owners and tourists in the Ruka-Kuusamo area. This indicates that the insight from the previous studies is not distributed efficiently enough among the diverse stakeholders in the destination. This study suggests that raising awareness is one of the key issues in increasing tourism firms' positive attitudes, willingness, and motivation to contribute to LRVT, which also supports the findings by Nguyen et al. (2017).

Conclusions

The growing use of nature and demands to meet sustainability targets have put pressure on the tourism sector to be involved or contribute more actively to maintaining local nature environments and cultural ecosystem services. This study contributes to the tourism-focused ecosystem services discussion by increasing the understanding of tourism firms' attitudes and willingness to safeguard nature and the related cultural ecosystem services in their operational environment through a tourism-related PES model, Landscape and Recreation Value Trade.

Most of the previous tourism studies that have examined voluntary contributions to nature conservation have been carried out for tourists (e.g. Birdir et al., 2013; Enriquez-Acevedo et al., 2018; Schuhmann et al., 2019; Tyrväinen et al., 2014) who are one of the beneficiaries of the cultural ecosystem services, but insight from the tourism firms' perspective has been limited even though their benefits from the nature and related CES at the destination level are widely acknowledged. The findings of this study show that tourism firms recognize the importance of maintaining nature and related CES at the destination but have diversified motivations and willingness to do so. The willingness to contribute is strongly linked to the identified benefits for the firms' competitiveness, their customers, and the destination. The local payments for ecosystem services model, LRVT, was seen as a potential tool to maintain landscape and biodiversity values, support the local economy, and

act as an incentive that would provide the possibility for private businesses to act more sustainably. The study shows that LRVT was seen to enhance the diverse sustainability dimensions at a destination level. For instance, collaboration between tourism and forest sectors also contributes to economic sustainability and supports socio-cultural sustainability with a wider impact at the local level. Even if the LRVT has been designed also to meet the needs of the tourism sector, it foremost benefits the local nature and biodiversity as well as the cultural ecosystem services attached to them.

From a management standpoint, this research contributes to the development of a PES model for cultural ecosystem services. The study brings insight into planning, design, and implementation issues concerning a voluntary tourism-related PES scheme in forests from the perspective of tourism firms. The findings of the study were utilized in designing an acceptable PES model and for planning an awareness-raising campaign and piloting the scheme in the area. The findings also helped to develop further the practical solutions for LRVT management and processes identified in previous studies (e.g. Kurttila et al., 2020). LRVT was piloted at the destination in the autumn of 2020 as a voluntary scheme. The funds were collected by the local tourism association from volunteer participants. A marketing campaign was designed for visitors to the area but also tourism firms were encouraged to participate. The pilot study took place during COVID-19 travel restrictions, so it only reached domestic customers. The pilot study gave valuable information about the challenges of the implementation and, for example, what kind of payment modes could work in practice. The funds collected enabled the establishment of the first forest stands and LRVT contract with the willing landowners qualified for the scheme.

LRVT emphasizes the landscape, recreation, and biodiversity values. Currently, such non-governmental funded tourism-related PES initiatives are rare. Local initiatives may increase sustainability awareness among diverse stakeholder groups and local tourism stakeholders can act as advocates. Due to the growing interest and demand for this kind of activity, local PES models combining diverse ecosystem services should be recognized more actively in sustainable tourism and land-use policies.

As this is a qualitative case study, our aim is not to make any generalizations based on the data but to increase the understanding of the phenomenon. It also needs to be noted that social desirability bias cannot be fully excluded in this study. However, the interviewees were encouraged to speak freely, and the tone of the semi-structured interviews was conversational. It also seemed that interviewees were able to express differing, and also critical opinions, on the topics discussed.

This study brings forth attitudes and willingness of tourism firms to support nature environments and cultural ecosystem services at a destination level through the LRV. As the previous studies (e.g. He, 2023; Perevochtchikova & Rojo Negrete, 2015) have pointed out, the local context and its particularities have a strong influence on the acceptability of a PES. These local situational conditions, cultural practices, historical factors, and ownership issues were also identified in the findings as they were broadly embedded in the interviewees' attitudes and discussions of nature and resource usage. In the Ruka-Kuusamo area especially the relationship between the traditional livelihoods, forestry and tourism has been challenging, but it seems that new solutions are being sought to reduce tensions and to identify possibilities for collaboration. Hence, insight into diverse stakeholder attitudes and communicating them is essential to find the hoped win-win solutions that could support diverse sustainability dimensions at the destination level. These similar issues may be found also when conducting studies in other areas and with other PES development cases. In that way, some of the insights of this study may be useful and transferrable to other cases. Future studies could focus on exploring diverse ways and approaches to encourage and support more active participation of the tourism sector in maintaining its operational environment by safeguarding nature environments and biodiversity, and cultural ecosystem services at the destinations.

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