

Abstract

The relevance of ecosystem services has increased significantly over the past few years in scientific research. Armenia, as a biodiversity hotspot, provides great potential in this regard. This is especially true because ecosystem services are often not quantified and neglected in policy and decision-making processes there. Wild harvest is an activity that is widely acknowledged as an important benefit people obtain from natural ecosystems. However, it remains poorly researched and data availability is fairly limited. The aim of this study was to document wild harvest in rural Armenia and put it in the context of the ecosystem service framework.

For that, a total of 23 structured interviews were conducted in four rural Armenian communities. Questions aimed to identify the most important wild plant species and their uses. Further, they tried to capture the sustainability of wild harvest and document a possible decline of biodiversity. Finally, the study intended to record the socioeconomic and cultural dimensions of wild harvest.

The respondents listed a total of 68 species that they use for multiple purposes like medicine, cooking, spice, tea, preservation, and as ornamentals and it was consequently possible to capture the importance of wild harvest as a provisioning ecosystem service. However, the study was limited in documenting the overall sustainability of wild harvest and conclusions could only be drawn for specific species in certain communities. The sustainability of wild harvest is very context-specific and more detailed data is needed to fully capture whether wild harvest is sustainable or not in different locations. Lastly, the study was able to show a clear socioeconomic and cultural relevance of wild harvest. In the investigated communities, wild harvest is an important tool for people to uphold their traditions and strengthen their community bonds. Moreover, while the study only touched upon the economic dimension of wild harvest, it was still able to show that for some households wild plants are an important additional source of income.

Overall, the research proofed the importance of wild harvest as an ecosystem service in rural Armenia. While the study captured wild harvest broadly based on many factors, some of these characteristics could be investigated more thoroughly with more specific objectives. More research is needed in Armenia to allow comprehensive decision-making for wild harvest regulations. For the research on ecosystem services, this study is a good example on how one activity can incorporate not just one ecosystem service but be embedded holistically in the overall concept.