

Business Owner Perceptions of Economic, Social and Environmental Vulnerability: The Case for Ecosystem Services in Coastal Communities

Morris, Priscilla and Sudipta Dasmohapatra
NC State University, Dept of Forest Biomaterials

Rural coastal regions are more vulnerable to changing environmental conditions than ever before, due to their location and dependence on their natural resources. Ecosystem service markets have the potential to improve the economy of rural coastal communities through sustainable utilization and protection of their natural resources. Despite this, there are very few prior studies that have assessed viability of ecosystem services and their valuation in coastal communities where forest products industries are prominent. This study evaluates the perceptions of business owners in selected North Carolina coastal communities about their region's economic, social and environmental vulnerability and its ability to support natural resource-based ecosystem services. The region of focus for this study is the coastal community in north-eastern North Carolina known as the Albemarle-Pamlico (AP) Peninsula. Approximately fifty-six percent of the region is covered in commercially harvestable timberland that sustains approximately 141 forest product based businesses. Semi-structured interviews (in-depth, 2-3 hours each) were conducted with business owners in this region in Nov/Dec 2015 to assess their perceptions of the region's economic conditions, forest-based ecosystem services and the viability of those services vs. other possible market options necessary for growth of this region and risks to climate change impacts. Among all business and market options, various types of ecosystem services were the most important options that respondents reported having the highest likelihood to succeed and sustain in this region. Respondents also indicated key barriers for ecosystem service-based businesses to thrive in the region, including location, infrastructure, region's capability to accommodate new markets, and risk of flooding. The key opportunity will be to value the services and their potential as well as to identify strategic solutions to overcome these barriers. The economic growth and sustainability that these markets could provide to the region, have the potential to reduce migration out of this region as well as provide ecologically sound solutions to the environmental risks perceived by respondents.