INTRODUCTION

The „Ecosystem Service“ (ESS) concept has developed as a commonly applied assessment and communication tool, foremost in the scientific context. Although this concept is aimed at implementers in the practice and intended to be used as information tool for decision makers also in the water sector it is not clear which role this tool actually plays in policy and how it is perceived by the addressed actors. As these questions are also relevant for river management processes, this study aimed at (1) analysing perceptions, (2) detecting knowledge gaps and (3) identifying the practicability of the "ecosystem service concept" on the example of two case study rivers in Austria.

The Ecosystem Service Concept

According to the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Report (MEA, 2005) as an important milestone in the history of the Ecosystem Service concept, the term "ecosystem services" describes "benefits people obtain from ecosystems". These include provisioning services such as food and water. regulating services such as regulation of floods, drought, land degradation, and disease, supporting services such as soil formation and nutrient cycling and cultural services such as recreational, spiritual, religious, and other nonmaterial benefits."

Due to the fact that only a small part of society is aware of ecosystem services at rivers or is responsible for maintaining them, the value of these services and the benefits we derive from them are often underestimated or even overlooked (Aronson, Gidda et al. 2009).

METHODS

Study area

Two Alpine rivers in Austria were selected as case studies for the investigations.

Methodical approach

The methodical approach of the study is displayed in figure 4. About 100 qualitative interviews and 400 quantitative interviews were led with lay people and experts of different thematic fields using an interview guideline and a questionnaire.

The focus is on (1) the perception and awareness of the ecosystem service concept, (2) on the role of this concept in the interviewees' working life, and (3) its practicability. Furthermore, different forms of use of the "ecosystem river" that are in the foreground in Austrian river management as well as conflicts between them were discussed.

The qualitative interviews were recorded and transcribed using the software "F4". Subsequently they were analyzed thematically using the software "Atlas.ti". A deductive approach derived from the categories in the interview guidelines was chosen for building the framework for analysis.

REFERENCES

Ecosystem service-concept

The results indicate a need for further research on possible knowledge gaps between scientific theory and practical application of the ecosystem service concept. Further efforts, also from the field of research will be necessary to improve the concept with regard to traceability and practicability.

Perception of ecosystem services

The results suggest that a wide range of services has to be considered in water management. This applies in particular to cultural and supporting services as these forms of use often gain less consideration than the more easily, monetarily valued provisioning services. The fact, that different stakeholder groups do not only perceive their field of action as important but that they are aware of multiple values can be determined for building the framework for analysis.

CONCLUSION

Ecosystem service-concept

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