[Menelaos C. Stavrinides1, Ioannis Vogiatzakis2, Vassilis Litskas3]
[m.stavrinides@cut.ac.cy]
[1Cyprus University of Technology, Department of Agricultural Sciences, Biotechnology and Food Science, Limassol,
2Open University of Cyprus, School of Pure and Applied Sciences, Nicosia,
3Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, School of Veterinary Science, Thessaloniki], [Cyprus, Greece]
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Prioritizing abandoned agricultural land for re-cultivation based on the potential for ecosystem services delivery

Mountain agriculture is in decline. The inherent difficulties of cultivating the land on extreme slopes, the distance from consumption centers, as well as the movement of population to urban centers are some of the reasons driving the abandonment of agriculture. Mediterranean islands, such as Cyprus, are especially prone to land abandonment on mountainous regions, as there has been a major shift of population from the mountains to urban centers where opportunities for work in the services and tourism sector are better. Competition from cheap imports of agricultural products from abroad is another major cause for abandonment of agricultural activity. As an example, the vineyard area on the island dropped by more than 80% in the last 50 years, with vineyards covering ca. 6000 ha today. The loss of agricultural land on the mountains is a cause for concern, as abandoned land reverts back to natural vegetation following ecological succession over several decades. The homogenization of the landscape comes at a price, as diverse landscapes are associated with higher biodiversity, and a more stable and diverse supply of ecosystem services, including provisioning services such as food as well as cultural services. Restoring the agricultural landscape to its pre- 70s state is practically impossible under the current circumstances, and therefore reclamation efforts must prioritize areas of high ecosystem service value potential, focusing on food provisioning services. In the current work we propose a conceptual model for prioritizing abandoned areas for re-cultivation based on the potential value for ecosystem services delivery.