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Investigating preferences for soil-based ecosystem services

Bartosz Bartkowski [1,*], Julian R. Massenberg [1] and Nele Lienhoop [1,2]

[1] Helmholtz Centre for Environmental Research—UFZ, Department of Economics, Permoserstraße 15, 04318 Leipzig, Germany
[2] Bochum University of Applied Science, School of Management & Economics, Am Hochschulcampus 1, 44801 Bochum, Germany

*Corresponding author: Tel: +49 341 235 482402; E-mail: bartosz.bartkowski@ufz.de

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Abstract

Soil provides multiple benefits for human well-being that are largely invisible to most beneficiaries. Here, we present the results of a discrete choice experiment on the preferences of Germans for soil-based ecosystem services. In an attempt to reduce complexity for respondents, we express soil-based ecosystem service attributes relative to the site-specific potential of soils to provide them. We investigate how knowledge about soils, awareness of their contributions to human well-being, and experience with droughts and floods affect preferences. We find substantial yet heterogeneous preferences for soil-based ecosystem services. Only some measures of familiarity exhibit significant effects on preferences.

Keywords: Agriculture, Discrete choice experiment, Ecosystem services, Nonmarket valuation, Stated preferences, Soil functions, Willingness to pay

JEL codes:Q15, Q24, Q51, Q57

1. Introduction

Agricultural soil-based ecosystem services are challenging as a valuation object. Soils are a highly complex and multifunctional resource (Vogel et al. 2018). In addition to providing obvious private benefits, including biomass production and yield stability (Droste et al. 2020), soils also contribute to multiple public benefits, such as climate regulation, clean drinking water, drought protection, flood protection, and biodiversity (Dominati et al. 2010; Pascual et al. 2015). Laypeople are generally neither well aware of their complexity nor of the trade-offs involved in sustainable soil management (Schulte et al. 2019; Schröder et al. 2020). This lack of familiarity and experience is likely to impede the formation of preferences for soil-based ecosystem services (Czajkowski et al. 2015; Lienhoop and Völker, 2016), making their elicitation challenging as compared to more familiar and 'visible' ecosystem services (e.g. Huber and Finger 2020).

The majority of existing stated preference valuation studies of soils had a rather narrow focus with respect to soil-based ecosystem services (Bartkowski et al. 2020), particularly on climate regulation (Glenk and Colombo 2011; Rodríguez-Entrena et al. 2012) and erosion control (Colombo et al. 2005, 2006; Almansa et al. 2012). Recent exceptions are Dimal and Jetten (2020), who included three soil-based ecosystem services (water storage capacity, erosion and sediment yield control, and carbon sequestration capacity) in their discrete choice experiment, and Eusse-Villa et al. (2021) and Franceschinis et al. (2022), who incorporated four soil-based ecosystem services (carbon sequestration, earthworm density, rainfall water infiltration, and nitrogen in groundwater) in theirs.

In this context, the contribution of the study presented in this article is twofold. First, it provides insights into public preferences for multiple agricultural soil-based ecosystem services and their heterogeneity. Second, methodologically, we offer an alternative approach to addressing respondents' unfamiliarity with agricultural soils, which could also be used to address the spatial heterogeneity of soils. In our discrete choice experiment study, we build upon related work in soil science by Vogel et al. (2019) and express soil-based ecosystem service attributes relative to the site-specific potential of soils to provide them (for other index-based attribute approaches, see Johnston et al. 2011; Meyerhoff et al. 2015). We also investigate whether and how self-assessed knowledge about and previous consideration of soils' contributions to human well-being as well as experience-based salience of relevant events (droughts and floods) affect preferences for soil-based ecosystem services. To address these questions, we report on the results of an online discrete choice experiment conducted in 2021 across Germany on a sample of 1,500 respondents.

2. Methods

2.1 Study region

The focus of the study was on mineral soils in arable land in Germany. We excluded permanent grassland soils due to their substantially different characteristics, protection status, and the opportunity costs associated with their protection (Schmitt et al. 2021). For similar reasons, we also excluded organic soils[1] (including peatlands), which have a low share in arable land and whose protection is favored by a widespread political and societal consensus (Wüstemann et al. 2017). According to the Federal Statistical Office (destatis), 50.7 per cent of the area of Germany is used for agriculture, around two-thirds of which are classified as arable land. Even for mineral arable soils, the heterogeneity in terms of biogeochemical characteristics and the associated site-specific potential to provide soil-based ecosystem services is quite high (Vogel et al. 2019).

The current state of agricultural soil protection in Germany is deficient (Bartkowski et al. 2021). Soil organic carbon content, a common indicator of soil health, is expected to continue declining due to agricultural management and climate change (Riggers et al. 2021). Overall, the pressure on agricultural soil resources in Germany is high due to tillage practices, field traffic-related compaction, unbalanced nutrient inputs, short crop rotations, and pollution (e.g. pesticides); in the absence of a substantial policy shift, this will likely remain so (Techen and Helming 2017).

2.2 Discrete choice experiment

In order to properly take into account the multifunctionality of soils and the trade-offs among soil-based ecosystem services, we conducted a discrete choice experiment. Discrete choice experiments are a survey-based approach in which respondents are asked to indicate their preferences for hypothetical scenarios, in this case, soil management scenarios and associated different levels of soil-based ecosystem services. Each scenario is described by attributes (ecosystem services) and attribute levels (varying intensity of ecosystem service provision), following Lancasterian consumer theory (Lancaster 1966). The attribute levels vary between the options. Normally, one of the attributes is a monetary one that attaches a

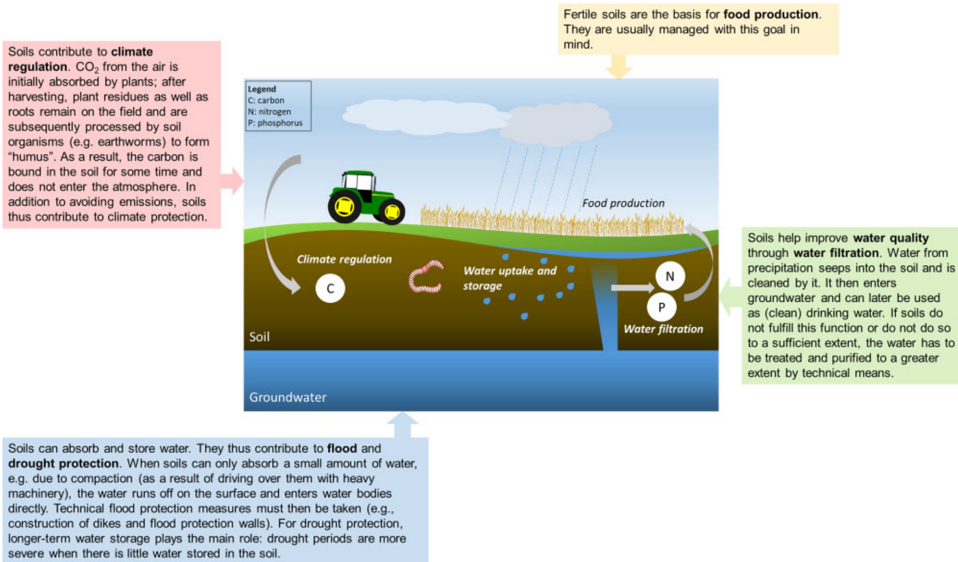

Figure 1. Description of soil-based ecosystem services as used in the survey.

price to each alternative option. This monetary attribute plays a central role in the analysis of respondents' marginal willingness to pay (WTP) for the other attributes (Louviere et al. 2000; Hensher et al. 2005). The econometric modeling of choice experiment results is based on random utility theory (Marschak 1960; McFadden 1974). Details of the study design and econometric approach of this study are described further below.

2.2.1 Attribute selection

Due to the pandemic-related restrictions at the time of our study, it was not possible to conduct focus groups to inform the attribute selection, as is usually suggested in stated preference guidelines (Johnston et al. 2017). Given this, the attributes were selected based on literature and expert opinion. The starting point was the five main soil functions (Helming et al. 2018; Vogel et al. 2018): biomass production, nutrient cycling, water storage, carbon storage, and habitat for biodiversity. A large number of ecosystem services can be linked to these soil functions, and an even larger number is affected by soil management (Bartkowski et al. 2020; Paul et al. 2021). Therefore, we decided to focus on ecosystem services that (i) could be directly linked to soil functions, (ii) are likely to be relevant for large parts of the German population, and (iii) can be defined and measured in a clear and understandable way. Biomass production was excluded as a private good; habitat for biodiversity was excluded due to the large challenges associated with its definition and measurement (Vogel et al. 2019; see also Pascual et al. 2015; Bartkowski 2017). Based on iterative consultations with soil scientists from the BonaRes project, in which the study was embedded, the following ecosystem services were identified as suitable attributes for the discrete choice experiment: climate regulation, flood protection, drought protection, and provision of clean drinking water. While these are related, they all can be linked to distinct soil processes and properties and thus vary largely independently of each other (Vogel et al. 2019). Figure 1 shows a diagram that was used to explain these ecosystem services to the survey respondents.

Following similar studies conducted in Germany (Rajmis et al. 2009; Lienhoop and Völker 2016; Schaak and Musshoff 2020), an increase in annual household expenditures

Table 1. Explanations of maximum potential for each soil-based ecosystem service for a representative German soil.

Attribute	Maximum potential	Explanation and sources
Climate regulation	0.5 Mg C ha^{-1} yr^{-1}, that is, equivalent of a weekly car drive of 250 km	Mean C sequestration rates of cover crops and optimal crop rotations OR organic farming OR agroforestry (Wiesmeier et al. 2020), combined with mean CO2 emissions of new cars in Germany in 2019 (http://co2cars.apps.eea.europa.eu/)
Flood protection	Infiltration of more than half of an extreme rain event	Infiltration rates on arable land (experiment in Mulde/Saxony) from Wahren et al. (2009) at 33–60 per cent (high to low pre-event soil moisture) given a 45 mm 2 h^{-1} (1 in 25 years) rainfall event
Drought protection	Temporary storage of half of typical annual precipitation	Assuming field capacity of 25 per cent in a 1.5 m soil profile (Ulrich Weller, personal communication) and mean yearly precipitation (1991–2020) in Germany of 791 mm (DWD 2021)
Clean drinking water	10 per cent reductions in nutrient load with appropriate soil management	4–10 per cent reductions in N, P, NO_3-N, and sediment load achievable through changes in tillage and crop rotations for Schleswig-Holstein (Lam et al. 2011)

due to taxes needed to finance additional agri-environmental payment schemes as well as due to increases in food prices was used as the payment vehicle.

2.2.2 Attribute levels and the definition of the status quo

In order to account for the spatial heterogeneity of soils and the likely unfamiliarity of respondents with agricultural soils, the attribute levels were expressed in relative terms—how much of a given ecosystem service is provided compared to the maximum site-specific potential provision possible (given optimal management). This approach is inspired by the biophysical soil function evaluation approach suggested by Vogel et al. (2019). Unfortunately, currently, no spatially explicit data on the status quo provision of soil functions/soil-based ecosystem services is available. Because of this, it was not possible to generate status quo values for each respondent's location. We, therefore, defined the attributes for a 'representative' German agricultural soil. In order to allow survey respondents to develop concrete preferences for changes in the ecosystem services described in such a way, we provided information about the maximum potential for such a representative German agricultural soil in the questionnaire (Table 1).

The status quo was defined based on the expert opinion of soil scientists from the BonaRes project: For a representative German agricultural soil, it was set at 50 per cent for climate regulation (implying that currently, only half of the potential to provide this ecosystem service is realized), 70 per cent for flood and drought protection, and 30 per cent for clean drinking water. Based on these values, a set of evenly distributed levels for the other alternatives was defined (Table 2).[2] The attribute levels for the price attribute were defined based on similar studies conducted in Germany (Wätzold et al. 2008; Meyerhoff et al. 2015; Lienhoop and Völker 2016). To support the interpretation of the relative values of attribute levels, we used pictograms (see example choice card in Fig. 2).

Table 2. Attribute levels.

Attribute	SQ level	Levels
Climate regulation	50 per cent	75 and 100 per cent
Flood protection	70 per cent	80, 90, and 100 per cent
Drought protection	70 per cent	80, 90, and 100 per cent
Clean drinking water	30 per cent	50, 75, and 100 per cent
Increase in household expenditure per year	0€	25€, 50€, 75€, 100€, 125€, and 150€

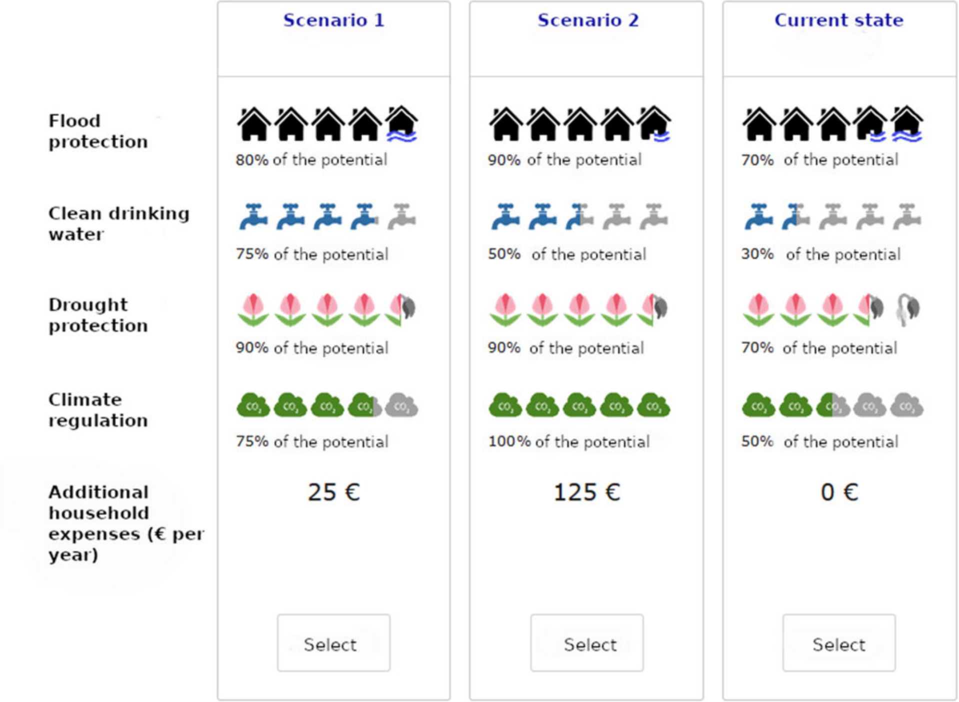

Figure 2. Translated example of a choice card as used in the online survey.

2.2.3 Experimental design

The experimental design was generated with the help of the Ngene software, version 1.2.1 (Rose et al. 2018). Given a large number of attribute combinations (a full factorial would have consisted of 324 distinct alternatives), we generated a Bayesian D-efficient design (Scarpa and Rose 2008) with eight two-alternative choice sets per respondent. The status quo option was added to each choice set afterward, which means that the final design was not fully optimal. For the pretest (see Section 2.2.3), minimal priors close to zero were set for all coefficients to create eight two-alternative choice sets, and a modified Fedorov algorithm (Cook and Nachtrheim 1980) was used. For the main survey, we used the coefficient estimates from the pretest as priors.[3] To increase the efficiency of the design in the main survey, we generated 30 blocks, which were randomly assigned to respondents. To each block, a constant choice set was added to allow for validation of simulation results, which resulted in nine choice sets per individual in the final design (the constant choice set was selected from the pretest design). For the main design, the modified Fedorov algorithm was used as well.

2.2.4 Pretest

The pretest was conducted in June 2021 on a non-representative sample of 50 respondents. It had two main purposes: (i) to test the comprehensiveness, complexity, and comprehensibility of the survey (measured by means of an open question at the end); and (ii) to provide priors to be used in the generation of the experimental design for the main study. Based on the positive responses to the open question, no substantial changes to the survey were necessary. A summary of the pretest results can be found in the Supplementary Material.

2.2.5 Econometric modeling

In line with basic random utility theory (McFadden 1974), we assume that respondent n in our choice experiment selects alternative i from choice set S if and only if she derives a higher utility from the chosen alternative than from the other alternatives in the choice set (j):

$$U_{ni} > U_{nj}, \ \forall j \neq i \text{ and } i, j \in S$$

with

$$U_{ni} = V_{ni} + e_{ni} = \beta_n x_{ni} + e_{ni},$$

where V is the observable utility component, e is the unobservable random utility component, x is the vector of observed characteristics of the alternative (attributes), and β is the vector of attribute coefficients. Furthermore, we assume that the coefficients of the ecosystem services attributes vary across individuals and can be explained by co-variates

$$\beta_{nk} = \beta_k + \pi_k z_n + \sigma_k \varepsilon_{kn},$$

where β_{nk} is the individual-specific coefficient of attribute k for individual n, β_k is the constant part of the coefficient, π_k is the vector of coefficients of individual characteristics z_n, σ_k is the constant component of the error term, and ε_{kn} is its individual-specific component. We assume normal distribution of the random parameters for all ecosystem services attributes and a lognormal distribution for the (negative of the) price parameter.

Based on this, we estimated three mixed logit models (McFadden and Train 2000), all based on maximum likelihood simulation with 1,000 Sobol draws—one without, one with interactions between the random parameters and selected individual-specific variables (related to experience and familiarity with the ecosystem services), as well as one with interactions between the alternative-specific constant of the status quo alternative and another set of individual-specific (mainly socio-demographic) variables. To derive marginal WTP estimates, we used the following formula (Daly et al. 2012b; Mariel et al. 2021, chap. 5.4):

$$WTP_{\text{es}} = \widehat{\beta_{\text{es}}}/\exp\left(\widehat{\beta_{\text{price}}} + \frac{\widehat{\sigma_{\text{price}}}^2}{2}\right),$$

where WTP_{es} is the WTP for an ecosystem service, $\widehat{\beta_{\text{es}}}$ is its estimated parameter, $\widehat{\beta_{\text{price}}}$ the estimated price parameter, and $\widehat{\sigma_{\text{price}}}$ the estimated standard deviation of the price parameter. Also, we additionally estimated the mixed logit model with status quo interactions in WTP space (Scarpa et al. 2008).

All analyses were conducted in the statistical programming language R, version 4.2.1 (R Core Team, 2022), using the package 'apollo' (Hess and Palma, 2019) as well as 'ggplot2' (Wickham, 2016) and 'HH' (Heiberger, 2020) for graphics.

2.3 Survey administration and sample

The survey was implemented online by a subcontracted company, Innofact AG (https://innofact-marktforschung.de/), using an existing non-random internet panel. In addition to the choice experiment itself, the survey included a battery of auxiliary questions designed

Table 3. Description of variables used in the analysis.

Variable	Description	Coding
Age	Respondents' age	Continuous
Gender	Respondents' gender	0 = male 1 = female 2 = diverse
Abi	Highest educational attainment	binary 0 = below Abitur 1 = Abitur or higher
Income	Monthly net household income (calculated based on a seven-category scale)	Continuous
Member	Membership in environmental association	0 = no 1 = yes
Donation	Donations to environmental associations/organizations in last 12 months	0 = no 1 = yes
Urban	Urban/rural residence based on postcode	0 = rural 1 = urban
No_ag	Neither respondent nor a family member active in farming or livestock husbandry	0 = no 1 = yes
Awareness	Frequency of thinking about the importance of soils for own well-being	Five-point scale 5 = very often 4 = rather often 3 = sometimes 2 = rather seldom 1 = not at all
Knowledge	Self-assessed knowledge about condition of soils in respondent's region	Five-point scale 5 = no knowledge 4 = little knowledge 3 = average knowledge 2 = much knowledge 1 = expert knowledge
Exp_drought	Respondent, family or friends directly affected by drought	Four-point scale 3 = within last 5 years 2 = within last 6–10 years 1 = longer ago than 10 years 0 = never
Exp_flood	Respondent, family or friends directly affected by flood	Four-point scale 3 = within last 5 years 2 = within last 6–10 years 1 = longer ago than 10 years 0 = never

to better understand the respondents' choices. The full questionnaire can be found in the Supplementary Material (the German original as well as an English translation). In this article, we focus on questions related to the respondents' experience with the analyzed soil-based ecosystem services. Variables included in the analyses are presented in Table 3.

The target sample of the survey was 1,500 respondents from across Germany. Representativeness quotas were required for gender, age, education, and location of residence (at federal states, i.e. NUTS2 level as well as in urban and rural areas; identified via postal codes).

Table 4. Basic sample characterizing statistics.

Variable	Sample
Age	
Mean	44.6
Median	46.0
Gender	
Female	732 (49 per cent)
Male	744 (50 per cent)
Diverse	5 (0 per cent)
Residence	
Urban	1210 (82 per cent)
Rural	271 (18 per cent)
Education	
Below Abitur	966 (65 per cent)
Abitur or equivalent	308 (21 per cent)
Higher education	207 (14 per cent)
Household monthly income	
Below 1,000€	165 (11 per cent)
1,000–1,500€	196 (13 per cent)
1,500–2,000€	210 (14 per cent)
2,000–2,500€	227 (15 per cent)
2,500–3,500€	303 (20 per cent)
3,500–5,000€	263 (18 per cent)
Above 5,000€	117 (8 per cent)
Environmental organizations	
Members	153 (10 per cent)
Donated last 12 months	354 (24 per cent)
Activity in agriculture (self or close others)	
Farming	173 (12 per cent)
Animal husbandry	109 (7 per cent)

3. Results

The main study was conducted in late June and early July 2021 on a representative sample of 1,500 respondents. A total of 19 respondents were excluded as protest votes. To be interpreted as protest votes, three criteria needed to be fulfilled: (i) status quo alternative chosen in all nine choice sets; (ii) response time for each choice set (except the first) below the lowest median response time for any choice set (10 s); and (iii) 'Very high' choice experiment decision influence score for at least one among five questions related to the payment scenario (items 1–5, Q10 in the questionnaire; see Supplementary Material). The final sample analyzed here was therefore 1481 respondents.

3.1 Descriptive statistics

Table 4 provides the summary statistics of the sample. A more detailed description of the dataset can be found in Bartkowski et al. (2022).

3.2 Auxiliary questions

In order to shed light on the unfamiliarity of respondents regarding the importance of soils, we asked questions related to respondents' knowledge about and attitudes toward soils. These questions also served as preparation for the choice experiment part of the survey. Figure 3 shows the distribution of responses to scale-based questions about the awareness of soils' importance for one's own well-being (left panel) and about the self-assessed knowledge about the state of soils in one's region (right panel). The Pearson correlation

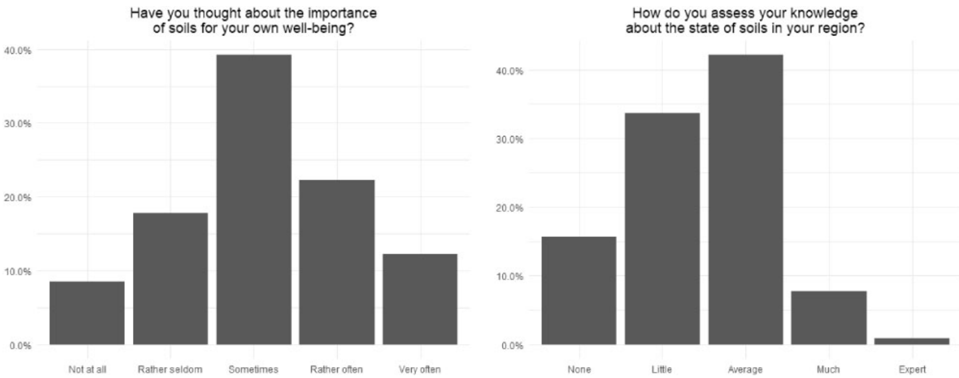

Figure 3. Awareness of importance of soils for well-being and knowledge about state of soils in the region.

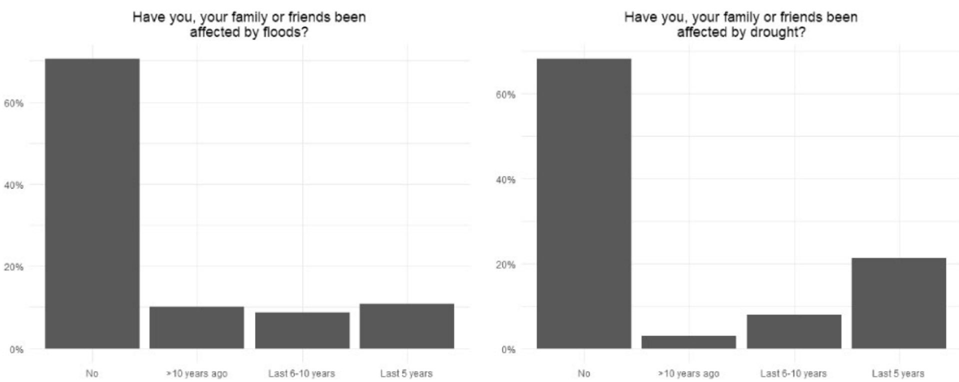

Figure 4. Experience with floods and drought.

between the two is 0.581, meaning that respondents who have thought about the importance of soils for their own well-being also tend to have a higher degree of knowledge about soils in their region.

Furthermore, after the choice experiment, respondents were asked about their experience with floods and droughts (measured as respondents or their friends or family members being affected by either) in order to capture the influence of (the salience of) these experiences on the preferences for the respective soil-based ecosystem services (Fig. 4).

Note that the study was conducted following three consecutive heavy drought years in Germany (2018, 2019, and 2020) (de Brito et al. 2020), but shortly before a series of extreme-rainfall–related floods in western and southern Germany in late July 2021. For both floods and drought, about two-thirds of all respondents did not report having been affected directly (themselves or family or friends). However, ca. 45 per cent of the sample have been affected by at least one of both; 17 per cent have been affected by both flood and drought. The correlation between the two experience variables is 0.296, suggesting an intermediate level of 'double exposure' to these extreme weather events (Ward et al. 2020).

Lastly, to activate respondents' thinking about the importance of soil-based ecosystem services (i) against other ecosystem services provided by agricultural landscapes, (ii) for society, (iii) and for themselves, respondents were asked before the choice experiment to indicate their preferences on a five-point scale. The results can be seen in Figs 5 and 6.

All three questions led to similar rankings of soil-based ecosystem services. The two non-soil ecosystem services in the general question (recreation and aesthetics) scored lowest.

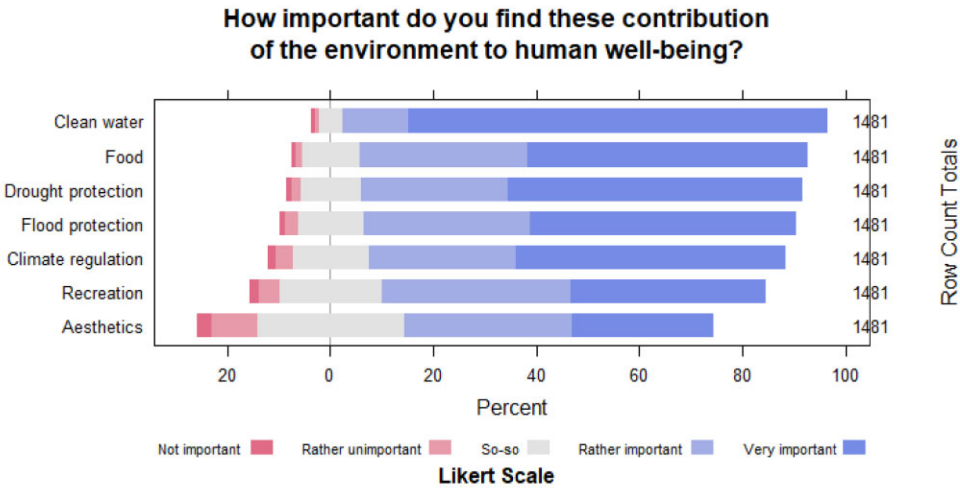

Figure 5. Importance of ecosystem services provided by agricultural landscapes.

The main difference at the aggregate level is the shift in the relative ranking of climate regulation and flood protection when scored in a general framing versus when scored in the explicit context of soils. However, at the individual level, the correlation between the importance scores from the perspective of society versus from own perspective is less strong than suggested by the aggregate scores (Table 5), which implies that many respondents perceive the importance of individual soil-based ecosystem services for themselves and for society at large differently.

Furthermore, we examined the correlation between perceived importance of soil-based ecosystem services for oneself and for society with the self-assessed knowledge about soils as well as general awareness of their importance for human well-being. In all cases, the correlation was also significantly positive, but rather weak (0.320 for knowledge and importance for society, 0.176 for knowledge and importance for oneself, 0.244 for awareness and importance for society, 0.096 for awareness and importance for oneself).

3.3 Choice modeling

The results of the estimated models can be found in Table 6. We started by estimating a simple multinomial logit model. Mixed Logit 1 includes only random attribute parameters. Mixed Logit 2 additionally includes interactions between the ecosystem services attributes and selected individual-specific variables related to respondents' experience with agriculture, soils as well as with droughts and floods. Mixed Logit 3 includes interactions between the status quo choice and a somewhat broader set of individual-specific variables. For readability, we refrain from reporting confidence intervals or exact p-values.

The goodness-of-fit measures indicate a strong increase in the model fit between the multinomial logit and both mixed logit models, implying that there is indeed large preference heterogeneity. Therefore, we focus on the mixed logit models in the following. Interestingly, the Akaike information criterion (AIC) and the Bayesian information criterion (BIC) are in disagreement with respect to the relative fit of the three mixed logit models. Overall, the inclusion of interactions does not seem to improve model performance substantially. In the model without interactions, all five choice experiment attributes are highly significant and have the expected signs. The same holds for their standard deviations as a measure of preference heterogeneity.

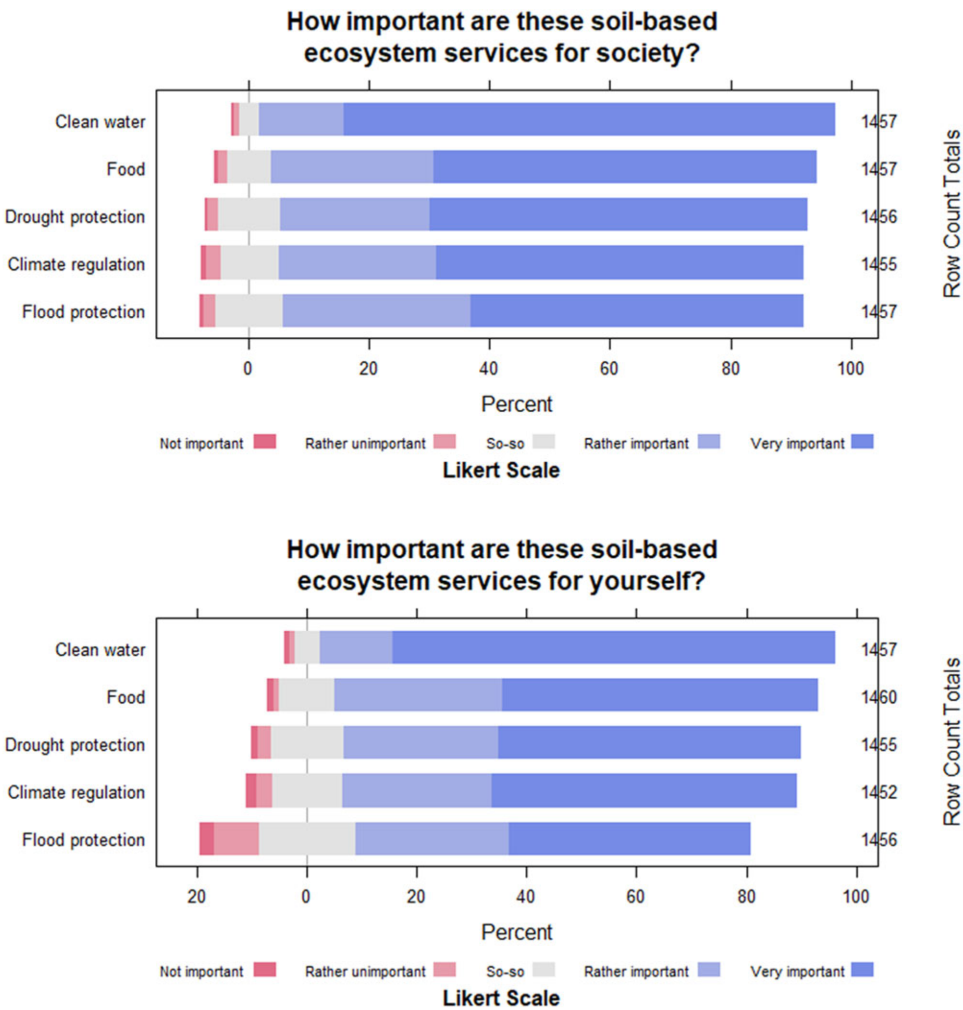

Figure 6. Perception of importance of soil-based ecosystem services in agricultural landscapes for society and for oneself.

In the model with interactions with random parameters of the attributes, only the water quality and price attributes remain significant according to the usual cut-off levels. However, the standard deviations remain highly significant. As for the interactions, which explain the heterogeneity in the random parameters, only a few are significant. Somewhat surprisingly, no relationship to agriculture (*no_ag*) has a positive influence on the preferences for drought protection, climate regulation, and clean water provision. Living in an urban area only has a very weak effect on the preferences for flood protection. Self-assessed *awareness* of the importance of soils for human well-being has a positive interaction with the preference for clean water provision. Self-assessed *knowledge* about agricultural soils does not have a significant effect on the preferences for any of the ecosystem services. Surprisingly, experience with floods does not affect the preferences for the corresponding ecosystem service attribute, while experience with droughts does affect preferences for drought protection in the expected positive way.

Table 5. Correlation between ecosystem service importance scores for society and for oneself.

Ecosystem service	Pearson correlation coefficient
Clean water	0.645
Food production	0.672
Drought protection	0.664
Flood protection	0.544
Climate regulation	0.696

The third mixed logit model, which uses interactions with individual-specific variables to explain the tendency to status quo choices, follows the no-interactions model closely in terms of preference coefficients and their standard deviations. Regarding the factors that influence a tendency to choose the status quo alternative, four of the included interactions have been found to be insignificant: living in an area identified as urban; self-assessed knowledge about agricultural soils in one's region; donating to environmental organizations; and membership in an environmental organization. Conversely, the tendency to choose the status quo alternative is significantly lower for female respondents, older respondents, respondents with relatively higher formal education, respondents with a higher self-assessed awareness of the importance of soils for human well-being, respondents with higher incomes, and respondents with no direct relationship to agriculture.

Table 7 reports the marginal WTP estimates calculated in two ways: (i) from mixed logit 3 (as one of the two better-performing models) using the formula introduced in Section 2.2.5, with the standard errors being calculated using the Delta method (Daly et al. 2012a); and (ii) from the same model estimated in WTP space (full output of the latter can be found in the Supplementary Material). The high standard deviations estimated from the latter demonstrate the high heterogeneity of WTP. In line with previous literature (e.g. Hole and Kolstad, 2012; Scarpa et al. 2012), the results from the alternative model specifications differ, though they are qualitatively compatible.

Note that the marginal WTP is per percentage point increase in the provision of a given soil-based ecosystem service relative to its maximum potential provision; that is, they indicate how much respondents are willing to pay for a change from X per cent realized maximum potential to $(X + 1)$ per cent. As such, the WTPs are directly comparable across ecosystem services. WTP is highest for increases in clean water provision and lowest for flood protection. These results imply that the household WTP for a hypothetical increase from the status quo (70 per cent realized potential for drought protection, 70 per cent realized potential for flood protection, 50 per cent realized potential for climate regulation, and 30 per cent realized potential for clean water) to 90 per cent realized potential for all four soil-based ecosystem services[4] is 54.80€ per year (using the more conservative estimates from the preference-space model).[5] However, it should be kept in mind that the unobserved preference heterogeneity is high, as demonstrated by the standard deviations of the parameter distributions across estimated models.

4 Discussion

The main objective of this study has been to explore the importance of soil-based ecosystem service enhancement in terms of public preferences using a choice experiment in Germany. Since soil-based ecosystem services are a particularly challenging valuation object due to respondents' unfamiliarity with them, we further explored the influence of respondents' knowledge and experience on preferences as well as determinants of a general preference for improvements in the selected ecosystem services.

Table 6. Model results.

	Multinomial logit coefficient (std. error)	Mixed logit 1 coefficient (std. error)	Mixed logit 2 coefficient (std. error)	Mixed logit 3 coefficient (std. error)
ASC_2	−0.020 (0.021)	−0.011 (0.028)	−0.031 (0.030)	−0.011 (0.028)
ASC_3 (SQ)	−0.419 (0.071)***	−2.779 (0.123)***	−2.868 (0.127)***	0.734 (0.527)+
Preference parameters				
Drought	0.006 (0.002)***	0.012 (0.002)***	−0.012 (0.010)	0.012 (0.002)***
Flood	0.002 (0.001)+	0.008 (0.002)***	−0.006 (0.011)	0.008 (0.002)***
Climate	0.009 (0.001)***	0.017 (0.002)***	−0.011 (0.007)+	0.017 (0.002)***
Water	0.024 (0.001)***	0.043 (0.002)***	0.022 (0.007)**	0.043 (0.002)***
Price	−0.010 (0.000)***	−4.300 (0.066)***	−3.525 (0.097)***	−4.317 (0.065)***
Distributions of random parameters				
sd.drought		0.026 (0.005)***	0.026 (0.005)***	0.016 (0.003)***
sd.flood		0.021 (0.006)***	0.022 (0.005)***	0.008 (0.003)**
sd.climate		0.035 (0.002)***	0.035 (0.002)***	0.014 (0.002)***
sd.water		0.042 (0.002)***	0.045 (0.002)***	0.039 (0.002)***
sd.price		1.758 (0.064)***	1.114 (0.095)***	1.789 (0.064)***
Interactions				
Drought: exp_drought			0.002 (0.002)+	
Drought: awareness			0.002 (0.002)	
Drought: knowledge			−0.001 (0.003)	
Drought: urban			−0.001 (0.005)	
Drought: no_ag			0.021 (0.006)**	
Flood: exp_flood			−0.001 (0.002)	
Flood: awareness			0.002 (0.002)	
Flood: knowledge			0.001 (0.003)	
Flood: urban			0.008 (0.006)+	
Flood: no_ag			−0.000 (0.006)	
Climate: awareness			0.002 (0.002)	
Climate: knowledge			0.002 (0.002)	
Climate: urban			0.003 (0.004)	
Climate: no_ag			0.018 (0.004)***	

Table 6. Continued

	Multinomial logit coefficient (std. error)	Mixed logit 1 coefficient (std. error)	Mixed logit 2 coefficient (std. error)	Mixed logit 3 coefficient (std. error)
Water: awareness			0.004 (0.002)*	
Water: knowledge			−0.002 (0.002)	
Water: urban			−0.002 (0.004)	
Water: no_ag			0.020 (0.004)***	
Price: awareness			0.003 (0.001)***	
Price: knowledge			0.002 (0.001)**	
Price: urban			0.001 (0.002)	
Price: no_ag			−0.004 (0.002)**	
ASC_3:				
:gender				−0.564 (0.183)**
:age				−0.034 (0.007)***
:urban				−0.046 (0.245)
:abi				−0.510 (0.229)*
:income				−0.000 (0.000)***
:awareness				−0.230 (0.100)*
:knowledge				−0.060 (0.123)
:no_ag				−0.656 (0.234)**
:donation				0.298 (0.259)
:member				0.011 (0.319)
N (observations)	13,329	13,329	13,329	13,329
N (respondents)	1,481	1,481	1,481	1,481
AIC	24,171.0	17,699.1	17,517.8	17,605.6
BIC	24,223.5	17,789.1	17,772.7	17,770.6
Log-likelihood	−12,078.52	−8,837.57	−8,724.91	−8,780.81

Significance codes: '***': $p < 0.001$; '**': $p < 0.01$; '*': $p < 0.05$; '+': $p < 0.1$.

Table 7. Marginal WTP estimates (€ per annum) for soil-based ecosystem services.

	Mixed logit 3 in preference space (Delta method) Mean (standard error)	Mixed logit in WTP space Mean (standard deviation)
Drought	0.18 (0.04)	0.22 (0.65)
Flood	0.12 (0.03)	0.19 (0.71)
Climate	0.26 (0.03)	0.37 (0.72)
Water	0.64 (0.05)	1.72 (2.64)

More than 70 per cent of respondents regard the provision of soil-based ecosystem services as important for themselves or society (see Fig. 5). The choice experiment underlines this finding: In around 87 per cent of cases, respondents were willing to trade off an increase in household expenditures for increases in the provision of soil-based ecosystem services. These findings show a strong preference for (public support of) agricultural management that enhances ecosystem service provision. They thus support calls for more explicit consideration of soil protection in agri-environmental policy (e.g. Bartkowski et al. 2021; Montanarella and Panagos, 2021; Köninger et al. 2022).

Both the price attribute and the non-monetary attributes (i.e. flood, drought and climate protection, and water quality) affect the choice of non-status quo management scenarios. Although all four ecosystem services have a significant influence on choice, water quality seems to be particularly relevant to respondents (see the coefficient in the mixed logit results and marginal WTP estimates). This is interesting insofar as water quality improvements are actually considered the 'weakest' contribution of soils to human well-being, as was also implicit in the description of soils' potential to provide the studied ecosystem services (see Table 1; note that respondents were able to see this information while working with the choice cards, by hovering over an icon). We can only speculate about this somewhat counter-intuitive result. Possible explanations include the salience and long tradition of public debates concerning agriculture-related nitrate pollution of water bodies in Germany (Conrad, 1988); the widespread geographical relevance (compared to flood and water protection, which are relevant only in selected areas) and high 'relatability' (compared especially to the more abstract climate change regulation); and the exceptionally low status quo value of this attribute and thus the largest improvement potential for water quality (compared to the other attributes). Against the last interpretation speaks the fact that 'clean water' scored highest already in the general question presented in Fig. 5, which was asked before the status quo was explained. Further investigations that are beyond the scope of this article are needed, for example, to test whether living in areas with high nitrate loads can explain preference heterogeneity for this ecosystem service.

In general, participants in valuation studies often cannot be expected to have complete knowledge about the goods to be valued due to their unfamiliarity (Czajkowski et al. 2015). This is especially the case for complex environmental goods, such as soil-based ecosystem services. A limited amount of knowledge about complex and unfamiliar goods can be problematic due to the undervaluation of (future) benefits and may result in lower robustness of the results. This is further aggravated by the fact that respondents are usually surveyed only once and do not get time to learn, reflect, and/or construct preferences throughout the survey (Burney, 2000; Lienhoop and Völker, 2016). As discussed above, in this study, respondents' unfamiliarity with their exact contributions to human well-being was addressed by the use of indices to express attribute changes. For each soil-based ecosystem service, the current or hypothetically improved provision was compared to the maximum provision potential (explained for each ecosystem service in Table 1). To ensure that the information provided was not overly complex, this difference between actual and potential provision was expressed in relative terms. This provided a middle road between difficult-to-understand quantitative indicators of ecosystem services and qualitatively expressed attributes (Johnston et al. 2017). The small number of protest votes (19 out of 1,500) and status quo choices (less than 14 per cent of all choices) as well as the highly significant soil-based ecosystem services attribute coefficients indirectly suggest that the chosen approach was successful in reducing complexity and in easing the answering of the survey, although direct testing (e.g. by using a split-sample approach with a more traditional attribute definition) would be required to corroborate this. However, the issues associated with preference formation can be addressed only limitedly in online surveys; their proper consideration would require the inclusion of a time- and cost-intensive process of deliberation (Schaafsma et al. 2018). At the same time, deliberative monetary valuation might offer a way to include soil biodiversity as a particularly challenging good (Pascual et al. 2015; Bartkowski, 2017; Paul et al. 2020).

We used self-reported measures of familiarity with soil-based ecosystem services, which may give rise to concerns about endogeneity bias. We assumed that experience, knowledge, and awareness are potentially important sources of preference heterogeneity and that the error term is independent from these variables. Thus, we followed Grebitus et al. (2015) and incorporated self-reported variables directly into the mixed logit models (see also Mariel et al. 2015). We also estimated hybrid choice model alternatives (Ben-Akiva et al. 1999, 2002) to qualitatively test this assumption—given the general consistency of the results across specifications (see Supplementary Material), we decided to here report only the mixed logit results due to their higher interpretability.

The use of indices to express ecosystem service changes relative to their site-specific maximum provision potential may offer an opportunity to more easily combine preference information with model-based estimates of an ecosystem biophysical potential to provide ecosystem services (Polasky et al. 2008; Kaim et al. 2021). Thus, site-specific trade-offs among (soil-based) ecosystem services can be illuminated and analyzed explicitly. Ideally, this would require spatially explicit information about the current status quo provision of the ecosystem services, thus allowing to dynamically adapt the experimental design of the choice experiment survey based on a status quo that is adapted to a respondent's specific location. Unfortunately, this kind of data are not yet available for soil-based ecosystem services in Germany, so we had to use a generic 'representative' status quo. It should be noted that using site-specific status quo and maximum potential implies that the absolute value of a given change in the attribute (e.g. an increase from 60 to 70 per cent climate regulation) will mean different things in different locations. For instance, the maximum potential carbon storage is higher in soils with high clay content than in sandy soils, so the 10 per cent points increase in clay-rich soils will translate into more tons of carbon stored per hectare than a corresponding 10 per cent points increase in sandy soils. In such cases, it would make sense to plug in absolute values (here: *t*C/ha) before estimating preferences. Furthermore, such an approach to combine biophysical and preference information would be particularly policy-relevant if it allowed to consider the heterogeneity of preferences between different societal groups (Cavender-Bares et al. 2015), including the 'supply side', that is, farmers.

One of the more surprising findings from our choice experiment is the lack of an effect of experience (or affectedness) with floods on the preference for the respective ecosystem service. Also, the other indirect measures of familiarity and experience had ambivalent effects. The location of residence (urban/rural) had no effect in either of the two models with interactions. Self-assessed knowledge of the soil condition in one's region did not have any effect on preferences. However, one should also note that the share of respondents who assessed their soil-related knowledge as 'high' was very low (see Fig. 3). Self-assessed awareness of soils' contribution to human well-being affected the probability of choosing the status quo alternative but did not affect the preferences of any specific ecosystem services. The only variable related to familiarity and experience (though indirectly) with a rather consistent effect was the lack of relationship to agriculture, which had a positive interaction with all ecosystem service attributes except for flood protection and also significantly reduced the probability of choosing the status quo alternative. Taken together, especially in combination with the relatively low self-assessed soil-related knowledge, these findings suggest that there is a need to further examine the heterogeneity of preferences for soil-based ecosystem services, including possibly their spatial heterogeneity and its interaction with the availability of substitutes and complements (Glenk et al. 2020; Eusse-Villa et al. 2021). Also, it would have been highly instructive to repeat the choice experiment about a month later, that is, following the widely discussed and therefore highly salient floods in parts of Germany that occurred shortly after the present survey had been implemented. Brouwer (2006) argues that extreme events may change people's risk perception and, as a consequence, WTP, though he did not find evidence that the occurrence of extreme events (extremely hot and dry weather) over a 9-month period influences the WTP for bathing water quality (reduction of associated health risks). For our study, our expectation would be a substantial increase in the size and significance of the flood protection coefficient in the choice experiment due to a kind of availability bias (Tversky and Kahneman 1973).

5. Conclusion

Despite the importance of soil-based ecosystem services to human well-being, management, and incentives to improve soil quality and enhance the respective services are very limited in the EU. At the same time, little knowledge is available about the demand for ecosystem services provided by soils. Against this background, discrete choice experiments are a useful tool to elicit and understand public preferences for soil-based ecosystem services. However, the valuation of complex, spatially heterogeneous, unfamiliar, and multifunctional natural resources poses several methodological and practical challenges, as described above.

The study presented here focuses on addressing unfamiliarity while also suggesting a potential approach for dealing with spatial heterogeneity (in the presence of spatially explicit data on the potential and status of ecosystem services provision) by using index-based attributes to express ecosystem service provision relative to the site-specific maximum potential. Furthermore, we have shown that a majority of respondents considered the provision of soil-based ecosystem services as important for society and themselves, and that most were willing to pay for an increase in the provision of soil-based ecosystem services, especially with regard to water quality. This illustrates that a strong public support of agricultural management that enhances ecosystem service provision exists, emphasizing the need to address the environmental challenge of soil degradation.

Supplementary material

Supplementary data are available at *Q Open* online.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article is available in the Bonares Repository at https://doi.org/10.20387/bonares-77fb-p034.

End Notes

1 According to the European Commission, organic soils are defined as soils with more than 20 per cent carbon content in dry weight (EC, 2021).
2 Given the status quo level for clean drinking water, perfectly even distribution of levels including 100 per cent was not possible.
3 All data are available from the BonaRes repository: https://doi.org/10.20387/bonares-77fb-p034; code is available at https://github.com/BartoszBartk/soil-ce.
4 Given trade-offs among the ecosystem services, an increase to 100 per cent across the board is highly unlikely.
5 For comparison, the median sum of annual donations estimated by the Federal Statistical Office was 120€ per taxpayer (in many cases, largely equivalent to a household) (Gerber and Kann, 2019).

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