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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Heritage and landscape narratives: how rural stereotypes are shaping UNESCO biosphere reserves

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ABSTRACT

Protected areas and other areas with well-known designations, such as national parks and UNESCO World Heritage Sites, respectively, are paramount to tourism. These designations offer a narrative through which visitors can interpret and experience the local landscape and culture. For many designation types, those narratives are clear: iconic landscapes and nature experiences in national parks and outstanding cultural value at world heritage sites, for example. But what about UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (BRs)? Which landscape narratives are shaping the discourse and perception of BRs, and how do they integrate their sometimes contradictory or contentious dual mandate of both conservation and sustainable development? To understand how BRs interpret and narrate their landscapes, we conducted a comparative analysis of the communication of nine European BRs located throughout Germany, Italy and Sweden. Using a constructivist concept of essentialization, we examined how the BRs define their characteristic features and signature experiences. Despite the cultural, ecological, and socio-economic diversity of the sites analyzed, we observed an overarching narrative of 'rurality', which repetitively over-simplified rural areas with stereotypical and nostalgic depictions. Considering this against the framework of UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, the findings of this research reveal a gap, as topics that are commonly associated with sustainable development, like innovation, technology, digitalization, renewable energy, transportation, sub-culture, and art are rarely ever addressed. By framing BRs as rural idylls, the processes of urbanization are largely overlooked, even though they are crucial for sustainability and should therefore have a firm place in the MAB programme, whose mandate is to design models for sustainable development. Moreover, prioritizing tourism as the primary development strategy, particularly when based on idealized rurality narratives, risks creating a path dependency that hinders alternative drivers for innovation that do not align with this narrative.

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1. Introduction: tourism and biosphere reserves

Landscape and heritage are important concepts for tourism (Garrod & Fyall, 2000; Meneghello, 2021; Terkenli, 2004). Both can justify a particular significance of a place and its attractiveness as a tourist destination (Harrison, 2010). Often in tourism marketing, not only are products advertised, but places (Pike & Page, 2014), landscapes (Kühne et al., 2013) and entire countries (Gienow-Hecht, 2012; Hao et al., 2019). As a result of marketing practices, places and landscapes are infused with meaning through narratives (Urry, 2009) so that they can represent a recognizable experience to visitors (Holt, 2014). Unlike products, however, the meaning of places is rarely determined by marketing alone. Rather, tourism commonly builds on and reinforces existing motifs, stories, stereotypes and social perceptions (MacCannell, 1999). Official landscape designations, such as national parks and world heritage sites, play an important role in creating or supporting these narratives as they amplify a spatial distinctiveness (Aschenbrand & Michler, 2021). Various national and international designations can be used to simultaneously define the significance of specific landscape and heritage values and protection (Lockwood et al., 2012). The official designation of a landscape, regardless of its specific designation type, is a process of *heritage-making* (Pettenati, 2023; Smith, 2006) and hence is typically relevant for regional development in general (West et al., 2006), and tourism development in particular (Mayer & Job, 2014; Snyman & Bricker, 2019), as such designated areas are widely perceived as a guarantee to secure tourists' interest and are often pursued for precisely this reason (Harrison, 2010). Thus, designated areas are commonly used to create what we label as 'heritage landscapes' - they interpret, define and narrate heritage values of landscapes. This is true for national parks, world heritage sites and also for a lesser-known category of designated areas: UNESCO biosphere reserves.

Biosphere reserves (BRs) aim to be learning sites and model regions for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2025) by striving to combine the conservation of biological and cultural diversity with sustainable economic development (Reed & Price, 2019). This multifunctionality of BRs is striking (Reed, 2019), especially when compared to other types of designated areas. While protected areas and heritage sites do contribute to economic development through the promotion and management of tourism (Harrison, 2010) their mandate usually prioritizes the preservation of a defined protected asset (Dudley & Stolton, 2020) requested in the widely used definition of protected areas by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) (Dudley, 2008). The development facilitated by national parks tends to occur in their surroundings (Harrison, 2010), where they have an impact but rarely an explicit mandate. BRs, in contrast, do have the explicit double mandate of conservation and sustainable development, which has proven difficult to implement in reality (Ishwaran et al., 2008), all the while receiving less recognition and resources than national parks (Aschenbrand & Michler, 2021).

In this paper, we ask how nine designated UNESCO Biosphere Reserves are creating heritage landscapes in three European countries, Germany, Italy, and Sweden, with the following two research questions:

- **RQ1:** How do Biosphere Reserves conceptualize landscape and heritage in their communication?

- **RQ2:** What types of images, attractions, landscape elements, cultural practices and products do Biosphere Reserves use for self-characterization in their official communication?

By using a comparative analysis of landscape discourses and management actions implemented by the set of nine European UNESCO biosphere reserves, located along a north-south intercontinental transect, we examine the multiple ways in which they narrate, and therefore, (re)create their landscapes. We conclude by considering the implications of these narrations.

2. Landscape, heritage and rurality

The following analysis is based on a constructivist perspective on landscape (Gailing & Leibenath, 2015; Kühne, 2019) and heritage (Harrison, 2010). We would like to acknowledge the limitations of constructivist approaches, such as not adequately conceptualizing non-human actors (Castree & Braun, 2006). This disadvantage has led to further developments, for example, in the direction of actor-network theory (Latour, 2005) or non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008). For our purpose, however, a constructivist perspective is helpful, as the strength of constructivist research lies in questioning unreflected and taken-for-granted patterns of thought (Castree & Braun, 2006). We hypothesize that BR's communication on heritage and landscape is often strongly based on stereotypical motifs. A constructivist perspective could challenge the use of stereotypes and enrich thinking about landscape and heritage (Kühne, 2019). Finally, the choice of which aspects of landscape should be preserved and which can be changed is central to BRs, as it defines the relationship between conservation and development - their core task (UNESCO, 2025)

A constructivist perspective asks how the meaning of things (including landscape) is created (Kühne, 2019). It assumes that meanings arise in social processes and are therefore socially constructed (Burckhardt, 2021; Kühne, 2020). Considering the processes of landscape heritagization through the formation of an 'authorized landscape discourse,' Pettenati highlights how 'the representations of landscape that are produced during the heritage-making processes are highly performative, as they affect how landscape is perceived, managed, transformed, and practiced by local communities, tourists, and any other relevant stakeholders' (2023, p. 3).

The concept of essentialization is rooted in constructivist thought and is especially suitable for analyzing the role of landscape and heritage in tourism. Essentialization describes the (often unreflective) process of determining which aspects make up the essence of a place (Batel et al., 2015). What is regarded as the essential characteristics of a place is contingent, depending as much on the socially constructed attribution as on the materiality of the place itself (Kühne, 2020). This is evident in how the meanings of places not only change over historical periods (Paasi, 2003), but can even turn into their opposite. Burckhardt demonstrates this with the example of the Alps (Burckhardt, 2021), while Cronon describes how the shifting meaning of wilderness has reshaped our perceptions of certain types of places (Cronon, 1996). It is also always possible for different meanings of a place to exist simultaneously for different groups of people, and, in reality, this is often expressed in conflicts (Michler et al., 2019).

Because many BRs are concerned with rural development (Batisse, 1997; Kratzer & Ammering, 2019), an introductory characterization of the rural is necessary for the following analysis. The juxtaposition of rural and urban is omnipresent in everyday language, but also in social science. However, Brenner and Schmid, with their concept of extended urbanization, point to the inability to clearly separate spaces that we unquestioningly refer to as urban and rural (Brenner & Schmid, 2015). The term cultural urbanization (Cloke et al., 2006) takes the same direction by describing how urban lifestyles have reached most rural areas in the age of the internet. Consequently, clearly defining the division between urban and rural continues to be notoriously difficult. However, rural stereotypes, most notably the rural idyll, can be traced back to roman antiquity (Short, 2006).

The rural idyll-concept describes a composition of cultural and natural elements intended to symbolize a harmonious connection between people and their environment referring to former land use practices and traditions (Short, 2006). Products, customs (Ryan & Wollan, 2013), traditional clothing and architecture (Quaranta & Salvia, 2014) are depicted as cultural artefacts and markers of an idealized bygone era (Cloke et al., 2006). In this context, nature is often idealized as beautiful and lovely (Kühne, 2019), but can also be staged as sublime and wild (Gobster, 2008), especially since the Romantic period (Cronon, 1996). Less prominent as part of the rural idyll are individual species (aside from grazing animals) which have long played a key role in the motivational structure of nature conservation (Schama, 1996; Takacs, 1996) and also in the communication of protected areas (Home et al., 2009).

3. Materials and methods

To understand the self-positioning of UNESCO Biosphere Reserves landscapes, we combined a document analysis, interviews with BRs staff members and participant observations during university excursions in a variety of BRs and on a workshop with attendants from 18 European BRs at Eberswalde University for Sustainable Development in February 2024. The authors continuously cooperate with six of the nine BRs in their university teaching and research activities. These cooperations include excursions with students, joint research projects and the collaborative planning of events. The collection of material therefore covers a period from 2022 to 2025. We used ethnographic interviewing (Misoch, 2019; Spradley, 2016) as interviews were often conducted in informal situations e.g. during full day excursions to the respective BRs or during the BR workshop. In some cases, several follow-up interviews at different intervals and lengths were conducted. We also conducted participant observations during full day excursions with university students following Spradley (Spradley, 2016).

Included in the document analysis were communications with the general public, such as the official websites of all nine BRs, their social media channels and the websites of regional tourism marketing organizations, as well as available official strategies and management plans, which serve as a foundation for public-facing communication. Text, images and videos were coded thematically following (Brooks & Waters, 2015; Bryman, 2016; Harrison, 2010), focusing on the extent to which certain topics and motifs were mentioned and represented. Following the concept of essentialization (Batel et al., 2015; Kühne, 2019), we analyzed the descriptions that present something as characteristic to the BR. Essentializations are particularly expressed in mottos or guiding principles, which

is why we included these in the analysis wherever available. In the analysis, we distinguished between the broad categories of nature and culture and paid particular attention to the connections made between the two categories, as the vision of the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB) is to 'foster harmony between people and nature' (UNESCO, 2025). Lastly, we analyzed the collected coded material to understand any broad or common themes presented throughout the BRs (Figure 1).

4. Results

Rivers, lakes, forests, and mountains, whose untouched nature is often emphasized, recur in many variations throughout the analyzed material. They are accompanied by traditional regional products and the corresponding agricultural or fishing practices, traditional architecture and cultural events. In the following sections, we show how nature and tradition come together to form a specific narrative about rurality.



Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Map of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Case Studies.
Source: Authors. Basemap created with Datawrapper

4.1. Naturalness

Naturalness refers to landscape elements that appear not of human origin (Kühne, 2019), such as free-flowing rivers (e.g. absence of hydropower dams), old growth forests and natural dynamics in general. In communication, naturalness refers to the apparent absence of certain human uses and their infrastructure. Three aspects of naturalness can be clearly distinguished in the analyzed communication: wildness, beauty and rarity.

4.1.1. 'Wild' nature

Despite having been straightened and developed by humanity over the centuries for flood protection and easy navigation, the Elbe River is nevertheless considered the most natural among Germany's three largest rivers because its bank- and floodplain morphology is not as severely changed when compared to the Rhine or Danube (Aschenbrand, 2022; Lehmann & Rode, 2001). The Elbe River Landscape Biosphere Reserve stretches along the Elbe River and uses the motto 'Living on wild shores' (Biosphärenreservat Flusslandschaft Elbe-Brandenburg, 2024). With this motto, the BR defines the essential features of the landscape. In numerous ongoing restoration projects, the BR is dedicated to reestablishing a more natural floodplain, bank morphology and vegetation community. To experience the naturalness of the landscape, cycling infrastructure, including the Elbe Cycling Trail, one of the most frequented long-distance bicycle paths in Germany, is highly promoted (Biosphärenreservat Flusslandschaft Elbe-Brandenburg, 2024).

Similar in some respects, the Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka Biosphere Reserve is centered around one of Sweden's four national rivers, the Vindel River, which remains 'beautiful, wild' and undammed (Biosphere Area Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka, 2024). Prior to becoming a BR, its designation as a national river was the result from a national debate in the 1960s, when hydropower dams were being built along the rivers in northern Sweden (Gardeström et al., 2018). 'After the decision to keep the river flowing freely, the development of the Vindelälven for tourism and recreation began,' (Biosphere Area Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka, 2024).

It may be noteworthy to mention that the analyzed BRs make a clear distinction between wilderness and wildness. They do not describe themselves as wilderness (like many national parks), but rather some elements of their landscapes as wild. However, these wild elements certainly can be stylized as character-building features, as in the case of the Elbe River BR where the wild river dominates the area's motto as a key characteristic feature (Biosphärenreservat Flusslandschaft Elbe-Brandenburg, 2024). Examples of this approach and the notion of wildness can also be found in relation to forests in the communication of the Schorfheide-Chorin (Biosphärenreservat Schorfheide-Chorin, 2024b), Spreewald (Biosphärenreservat Spreewald, 2025) and all three Swedish BRs.

4.1.2. 'Beautiful' nature

An example for the omnipresent 'beautiful nature' theme can be found in Spreewald Biosphere Reserve (Biosphärenreservat Spreewald, 2025). In its motto, it describes a romantic scene where the forest sways in the reflection of the calm, mirror-smooth

water. This characteristic motif of calm water flowing through a forest is also repeatedly portrayed in photographs, and with various atmospheric conditions, for example, with fog or in golden sunlight (Biosphärenreservat Spreewald, 2025). Similar motifs recur in all examined Italian BRs (Riserva di Biosfera Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria, 2025b; Riserva di Biosfera Appennino tosco-emiliano, 2025a; Riserva di Biosfera Delta del Po, 2025a).

In its publication, *Attractive Hardwoods Strategy 2019* (Swedish Forest Agency, 2019), Blekinge Arkipelag Biosphere Reserve and its partners recognize the need to convey the Baltic Sea's regional landscape character through its communication with elements of 'authenticity' and 'atmosphere' to attract visitors (Swedish Forest Agency, 2019).

As expected, the 'beautiful nature' theme is very common in the communication of all BRs. These motifs often emphasize the harmony and peacefulness of the landscape.

4.1.3. 'Rare' nature

In contrast to the 'wild nature' and 'beautiful nature' motifs, this category highlights individual species and/or habitats, and presents them as particularly worthy of protection. Specific species are mentioned in the communication of all three German BRs, but are most clearly addressed in the Schorfheide-Chorin Biosphere Reserve, which describes itself as 'crane country' in its motto (Biosphärenreservat Schorfheide-Chorin, 2024b). The events offered to visitors also focus more strongly on specific species than in the other examined BRs, for example with events on bees, bats and the ecology of orchards. Observation towers with an ornithological focus are advertised as nature experience infrastructure (Biosphärenreservat Schorfheide-Chorin, 2024a).

Similarly, throughout all three Swedish BRs, species richness is repeatedly mentioned (Biosfärområde Blekinge Arkipelag, 2024b; Biosfärområde Nedre Dalälven, 2024c; Biosphere Area Vindelälven-Juhtatähkka, 2024) drawing special attention not only to charismatic megafauna, but also to specific red-listed species that include insects. This is slightly more pronounced in the Nedre Dalälven Biosphere Reserve being situated in a special bioclimatic zone, where Sweden's northern and southern species meet, providing rare opportunities for specialized plant communities and a hotspot for 'an unusually rich bird life that is unparalleled anywhere else in the country' (Biosfärområde Nedre Dalälven, 2024b).

In the case of the Italy's Biosphere Reserve Po Delta, references are made to landscapes devoid of human presence. Especially when describing the physical characteristics of the landscape (e.g. coastal dune systems, lagoons and salt marshes) and its inhabitants (mostly birds, shellfish and both resident and migratory fish), the delta is defined as one of the Italian 'hidden gems' (Riserva di Biosfera Delta del Po, 2025a).

Charismatic and endangered species are featured in the mountainous Italian BRs, such as the brown bear in the Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria Biosphere Reserve and the wolf in the Appennino Tosco Emiliano. Both are considered as characterizing elements and indicators of ecological well-being in the area (Riserva di Biosfera Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria - Fauna, 2024; Riserva di Biosfera Appennino tosco-emiliano, 2023).

4.2. Traditional land use & regional products

As a result of the BRs' focus on traditional and sustainable land use practices, regional products play a major role in communication for all examined BRs, which is consistent

with the UNESCO MAB programme as a whole. Regional traditions, customs, clothing and music play a visible role and are therefore discussed below.

4.2.1. *Harmony between humans and nature*

In the case of the Po Delta Biosphere Reserve, a centuries-old symbiosis between man, land and water is placed at the center of the informative and promotional material (Riserva di Biosfera Delta del Po, 2025b). 'The great resource of this land is man who has transformed it over the centuries' (Riserva di Biosfera Delta del Po, 2025a). This narrative emphasizes how human efforts have a long history of controlling the changing dynamics between land and water, and to ensure favorable economic conditions. The special character of this landscape is promoted precisely emphasizing the effectiveness of these transformations.

Also, the Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria Biosphere Reserve is mainly described by highlighting the balance that has been created between man and nature over the centuries (Riserva di Biosfera Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria, 2013). The main reference is the collective use of resources, in the form of 'usi civici' (the commons), characterizing land management today and in the past.

In the Italian BRs, the idea that biodiversity is cared for and nurtured by people seems to be central, a concept highlighted for example through the 'I care Appennino' brand label (Riserva della Biosfera Appennino tosco-emiliano, 2025), granted to companies and associations that implement or support projects whose purpose is to care for the territory, biodiversity and communities within the BR. This brand is also viewed as a celebration of local pride by the inhabitants, doubling as a counter-narrative against the depopulation trend that is often emphasized in other media (Riserva di Biosfera Appennino tosco-emiliano, 2025a).

While human-nature harmony is less of a prominent message communicated from the analyzed Swedish BRs, it is still present. For example, the Nedre Dalälven Biosphere Reserve describes itself as 'the interplay between humankind and the environment' (Biosfärområde Nedre Dalälven, 2024a), and in one of its highlighted ecotourism offers, living in a symbiosis with nature is mentioned again. Here, specific examples of circular and sustainable daily business practices stress the importance of caring for nature, rather than just utilizing it for profit (Biosfärområde Nedre Dalälven, 2024c).

Harmony between humans and the landscape is not a prominent topic in the communication of the German BRs. In fact, the influence of humans is described rather critically in visitor centers of Elbe River Biosphere Reserve (Biosphärenreservat Mittelbe, 2024). For example, river restoration measures are being implemented in an attempt to reduce excessive human impact on the landscape inherited from the past.

Interestingly, the theme of harmony and coexistence between humans and nature, a cornerstone of the UNESCO MAB programme, is not uniformly conveyed in the analyzed BRs.

4.2.2. *Regional products*

Regional products are particularly important in tourism (Aschenbrand, 2017) and also in the communication of BRs, allowing tourists to 'taste the landscape' and bring a piece of it home in the form of edible souvenirs. This idea has been featured in countless travel reports, documentaries and tourism advertising (Aschenbrand, 2017).

The Spreewald Biosphere Reserve is the most notable of the three German case studies in terms of tourism and regional products, primarily because it is commonly associated with one single product (Spreewald Cucumbers) (Lehmann, 2009) and one signature experience (boat ride in traditional wooden bark) (Biosphärenreservat Spreewald, 2025). Regional products and organic farming are two of the major themes for the Schorfheide-Chorin BR, although there is no one signature product here. German BRs participate in a so-called 'partner program' that promotes businesses meeting specific sustainability criteria (Nationale Naturlandschaften, 2024). These partner businesses are usually small and connected to nature conservation, usually found in the tourism and agricultural sectors as well as regional suppliers, such as fruit juice producers.

The Po Delta Biosphere Reserve enthusiastically promotes its participation in the Upvivium event (Riserva di Biosfera Delta del Po, 2022) a zero-kilometer food competition between the Italian BRs. The initiative highlights the close link between rurality and conservation of the landscape and biodiversity by increasing the value of zero-kilometer products and promoting visibility to those who offer them through traditional, but also innovative and experimental, recipes (Riserva di Biosfera Delta del Po, 2024).

The Appennino tosco emiliano Biosphere Reserve claims to be characterized by a climatic border (Riserva della Biosfera Appennino tosco-emiliano, 2015). This peculiarity has generated unique relationships between Euro-Mediterranean flora, fauna and people, which have shaped the landscape over the millennia and favored the genesis of some world-famous agricultural and food products. The production of Parmigiano Reggiano cheese is a central recurring image here. Like other agricultural products, it is described as a result of the excellence of the territory and a symbol of the union between man and nature (Riserva di Biosfera Appennino tosco-emiliano, 2025b).

In Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria Biosphere Reserve, the communities have developed traditional products and recipes over the centuries that have become, as stated in the official website, 'a gastronomic heritage' (Riserva di Biosfera Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria, 2025a). One example is the recent project 'a taste of Tenno' which proposes walks, guided tours and tastings of typical products for residents and tourists (Riserva di Biosfera Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria, 2024). Similarly, the Swedish BRs promote local gastronomy, such as 'The Taste the Vindelälven,' which 'elevates the meal as a reason for travel to the area and strengthens the conditions for the actors who operate in the industry' (Biosfärområde Vindelälven-Juhttátahkka, 2022).

Regional products certainly play an especially prominent role in the communication of all the BRs studied. As model regions for sustainable development, BRs strive to have an impact on the economy (UNESCO, 2025). In the cases studied, they do this through networking and cooperating with local companies. It is noticeable that these are generally small companies with a connection to traditional land use or the processing of products, and that tourism-related products and experiences play a major role in the partner cooperations.

4.2.3. Cultural traditions

In Vindelälven-Juhttátahkka BR, the presence of the Sami people is an important aspect, and subsequently their historic reindeer-grazing districts are a culturally important land use within the Vindel River valley. As a result, 'Successful Reindeer Husbandry' and 'Diversity

of Cultural Expressions' are two of the BR's six focal areas (Biosfärområde Vindelälven-Juhtátahkka, 2025). The name itself, 'Juhtátahkka', translates roughly to 'migration route,' honoring the long Sami tradition of moving thousands of reindeer bi-annually along the 150-kilometer-long river, which continues today (Gardeström et al., 2018).

In the Blekinge Arkipelag BR, traditional wooden boat building is still done in Hästholmen and serves as a cultural attraction (Biosfärområde Blekinge Arkipelag, 2024b). Otherwise, their website and media offer a balanced counter-narrative by not relying too heavily on conveying 'pristine nature' or antiquated notions of culture. Instead, media representations include a wide variety of contemporary activities, in a range of different settings, with the targeted message centered on the 'quasi-experimental process' of creating sustainable tourism (Biosfärområde Blekinge Arkipelag, 2024a).

The Spreewald Biosphere Reserve is strongly associated with a national minority, of which Germany has only four officially recognized (Federal Ministry of the Interior & Community, 2025): the Sorbs, or Lusatian Sorbs, a West Slavic ethnic group. During medieval Germanization, the German-Slavic language border shifted further east, and today the Sorbs are the only persistent Slavic-speaking community living in Germany (Šatava, 2016). The traditional Sorbian clothing and customs play a visible role in the communication (Biosphärenreservat Spreewald, 2025).

According to the Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria Biosphere Reserve's objectives, valuing the gastronomic heritage (Riserva di Biosfera Alpi Ledrensi e Judicaria, 2025a) through local events means safeguarding the set of traditions linked to the profound relationship of communities with the land, seasons, and customs.

Some of the studied BRs paint a rather folkloristic picture of local culture with the depiction of traditional clothing, while others attempt to express a contemporary picture of culture and society.

5. Discussion: rural imaginations and their outcomes

Two key findings of our work are highlighted and contextualized in the discussion: first, the focus on rurality in BR narratives; and second, the outcomes of this narrowed focus, namely the neglect of innovation, technology, subculture, and the almost complete exclusion of the urban.

Although the UNESCO MAB programme speaks of development at the administrative level (UNESCO, 2025) citing innovation for a more sustainable future (UNESCO, 2022), the analysis shows that this innovative aspect is scarcely reflected in the communication. Rather, in the communication of all nine BRs examined, the content emphasizes the value of traditions and pre-industrial land use, resulting in an overarching theme of rurality. This may be because rurality can easily encompass both nature and culture, particularly in traditional forms of land-use and the products produced. In doing so, we find that the analyzed Biosphere Reserves tend to limit themselves by depicting variations of the rural idyll. In this respect, much of their communication resembles tourism advertising, critically missing an opportunity to communicate their innovative aspirations for sustainable development (Figure 2).

In most rural areas, an ever-declining proportion of the population earns its living in the primary economic sector and nature-related knowledge while traditional skills are often becoming less important (Aschenbrand, 2024). Cultural urbanization

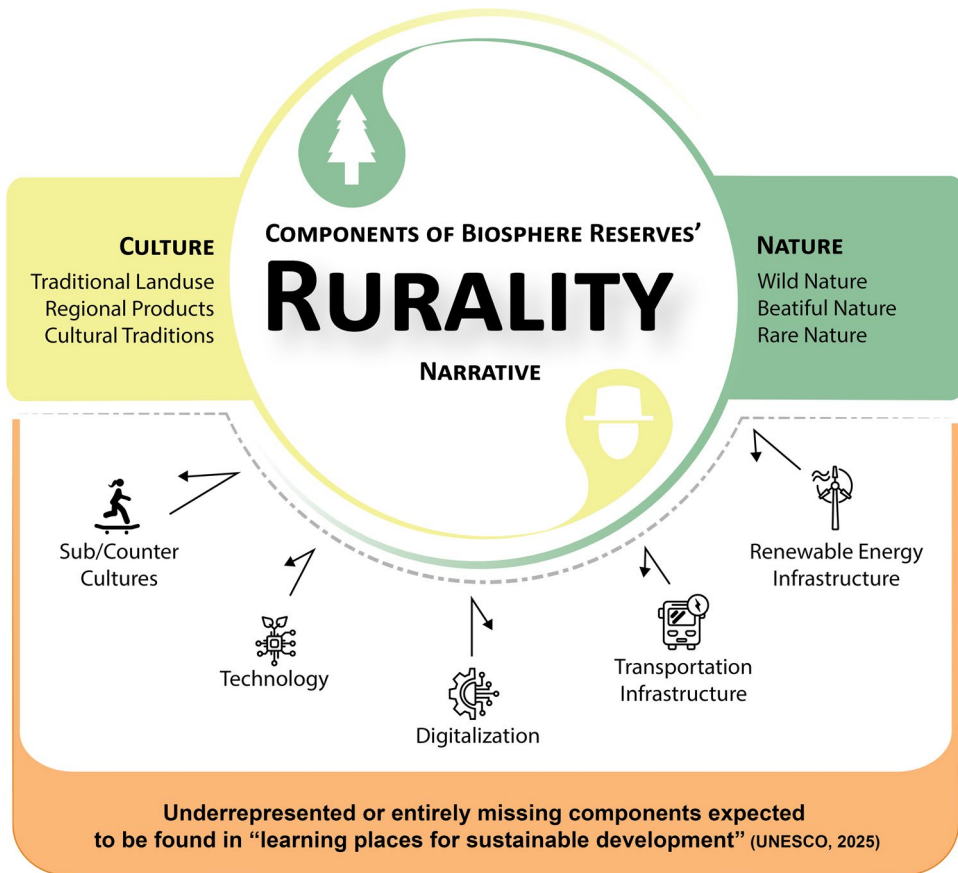


Figure 2. Components of Biosphere Reserves' narrative. Source: Authors.

(Cloke et al., 2006) of rural places, together with agricultural intensification and rural-out migration, are blamed for the loss of cultural heritage as well as the loss of nature and biodiversity (Antrop, 2004; Elmqvist, 2013; Folke et al., 2021; McDonald et al., 2008).

BRs strive to counter these trends as well as the prejudice of the backwardness of rural regions (Nora et al., 2005) by emphasizing the remaining natural and cultural heritage in their communication. Their narratives seem to be based on the idea that the respective region is particularly valuable because it still contains aspects of nature and culture that may have already been degraded elsewhere.

It remains questionable to what extent this self-description corresponds to the needs of the local population and their understanding of future development, especially as they are disproportionately often depicted exoticized in local attire, while topics that are commonly associated with innovation (technology, digitalization, renewable energy, transportation, but also subculture and art) are hardly ever addressed or promoted.

The analysis of tourism practices promoted by BRs presented in the previous section, shows their contribution to the sustainable development of tourism. The many partnerships with companies that the BR administrations establish and maintain are a promising approach. The cooperations, however, often seem to be rather limited

and the selection of companies clearly has a bias towards companies that fit into the narrative of the rural idyll. Large industrial companies or technology companies, which also exist in some of the BRs studied, may have a greater ecological impact, but are usually not part of the partner structure. It seems that the selection of companies mainly follows a self-narrative as a rural idyll, and companies that participate are also interested in such a narrative of their region.

While the UNESCO MAB concept of a model region for sustainable development does not exclude urban areas at a conceptual level, when looking at the World Network of Biosphere Reserves, it is noticeable that an overwhelming majority of the designated BRs occur in rural areas. However, it is widely recognized that urbanization is an all-encompassing change process and crucial to sustainable development (Adger et al., 2020; Elmqvist et al., 2021; McDonald et al., 2008; Seto et al., 2013). Why does the UNESCO MAB program and its Biosphere Reserves seem to have little to say on the subject of urbanization (Aschenbrand & Michler, 2021), although there have been various attempts in the past to deal with the subject more intensively (Dogsé, 2004)? Our analysis of BR's communication and their dedication to rurality can help explain why the MAB programme finds it so difficult to fully embrace urbanization as a topic worthy of receiving dedicated resources and attention. By focusing on stereotypical images of rurality, natural beauty and local products produced with traditional land uses get repeated and reinforced. Such conservative self-descriptions may be justified (e.g. in tourism marketing) when characterizing BRs, but they tend to exclude developments (technological, cultural) and spaces (urban, industrial) that do not correspond to stereotypical images of rural idylls, even if they are essential for sustainable development.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzed the ways in which UNESCO biosphere reserves create landscape narratives and characterize regions. We studied nine BRs located in Germany, Italy, and Sweden in order to explore how they narrate their landscapes and communicate their associated values to visitors. By selecting and communicating which aspects of the landscape need to be preserved and which aspects can be changed, BRs define a relation between conservation and development (Aschenbrand, 2022).

For their self-descriptions, the nine European UNESCO biosphere reserves chose parts of their landscape that correspond to the themes of nature and culture, largely represented through notions of rurality. In doing so, they describe the relationship between landscape and heritage (RQ1) primarily as rural idylls with a focus on aspects of rurality that need to be preserved and promoted. This rurality is characterized by a blend of natural and cultural elements, with a particular emphasis on the scenic beauty of nature and the unique aspects of local traditions and products (RQ1).

Despite aiming to create regional models and learning spaces for sustainable development, this explains why urbanization is neglected by the UNESCO MAB programme. Are BRs rural idylls where traditions are preserved or are they pioneers of the transformation to sustainable development? These two narratives, which the MAB programme unites on a conceptual level (UNESCO, 2025), are difficult to unite on a landscape level, as there seems to be no widespread landscape stereotypes yet that create such a union and on which BRs' communication could be based. This difficulty

is further evidenced by the varied narratives about the harmony between people and nature in the BR that were analyzed.

While tourism is viewed as a key asset for development, it seems to depend on the narrative of the rural idyll rather than on a more innovative landscape narrative around sustainable development. This potentially creates a cycle where tourism, if conceived as the primary development strategy, hinders or conceals other potential drivers for innovation that could transform the landscape, as these innovations do not align with the rural narrative on which tourism is based (RQ2). This research demonstrates that tourism significantly contributes to solidifying and perpetuating landscape stereotypes. These stereotypes can profoundly shape the perception of places and drive or prevent landscape changes, even in contexts like UNESCO biosphere reserves, where the emphasis is on combining conservation and sustainable development.

The role of UNESCO biosphere reserves for sustainable development in tourism should not be underestimated, though. As this paper has shown, they strengthen regional value chains through partner programs, work for the preservation of attractions by developing sustainable tourism practices, preserve traditional land uses, create promotional opportunities for local products and promote international and local awareness and visibility.

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Author contributions

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