



SCIENCE FOR ENVIRONMENT POLICY

Stakeholder participation and conflict in Natura 2000 site management, Poland



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The **EU's Natura 2000** network aims to conserve biodiversity while continuing provision of essential ecosystem services (ES). However, conflicts arise between different stakeholder groups over the management of Natura 2000 protected areas. A study now explores the relationship between specific ES and different types of conflict, to aid understanding of the barriers facing effective biodiversity conservation management.

The Natura 2000 network is the world's largest network of protected areas, covering 18% of the EU's land area and 8% of its marine territory. Alongside their value in biodiversity conservation, such areas provide a wide array of ecosystem services (ES) essential for societal wellbeing, from provisioning (e.g. wood and food) to regulating and supporting (e.g. climate regulation, pest control) to cultural (e.g. recreation and aesthetic enjoyment). The Natura 2000 network complements the EU's [Biodiversity](#), [Birds](#) and [Habitats Directives](#) in its efforts to provide a safe haven for Europe's most valuable and threatened species and habitats.

However, the variety of services offered by Natura 2000 areas can lead to conflict over how such sites are managed, and in the interest of whom. This study aims to better understand these conflicts.

Stakeholder participation is prevalent in biodiversity conservation management and integral to Natura 2000 site identification, designation and management. Research indicates that conflict avoidance requires public participation from the early stages of planning, and that relying mainly on external expertise is insufficient in devising and implementing nature-protection policies. However, the use of participatory mechanisms requires considerable effort; standardised organisational and reporting protocols; adjustment to suit local contexts, communities, and social, economic, and environmental conditions; and it can be difficult to choose the right participatory method to galvanise stakeholder engagement. Understanding the most effective route to participation is therefore important in achieving long-term success.

The researchers examine the case of Poland, of which roughly 20% is covered by the Natura 2000 network. They analyse public documents generated from consultations about Natura



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2000 management held in Poland from 2010–2015 and examine the interests of, and conflicts between, various stakeholder groups through the lens of ES delivery by Polish Natura 2000 sites. Stakeholders included farmers, landowners, local entrepreneurs, area managers, scientists, non-governmental organisations and local municipality officers.

Notes from the meetings provided a unique dataset and enabled the researchers to analyse a participatory process in 15 of a total of 16 Polish provinces, using qualitative and quantitative content analysis. Their analysis only concerned Natura 2000 areas situated on land, and included nine land cover types: urban; cropland; grassland; woodland and forested land; heathland and scrub; sparsely vegetated habitats; mires, bogs and fens (wetlands); lakes and rivers; and mixed.

The researchers suggest that conflict over conservation planning is linked to stakeholders' perspectives on loss of access to, and use of, particular ES types. Cultural and provisioning ES generate more conflict, with disputes over cultural ES dominating discussions. Discord over the value of conservation itself was less common, indicating a general agreement about the need for conservation planning, while conflicts deemed 'relationship' disputes, for example holding illegal barbecues in a forest or driving quad bikes in sand dunes, were prevalent. Of the different stakeholder groups, scientists and plan managers were the most vocal.

The researchers conclude that Natura 2000 management approaches should recognise how site designation may affect ES. They posit that negative experiences with prior Natura 2000 implementation in Poland, which they suggest is often top-down in style and characterised by a lack of public dialogue, have disadvantaged Natura 2000 policy, as has the lack of financial incentives. They also highlight the potential contributions from a persisting 'legacy of distrust' between Polish society and state as a result of post-Communist centralisation policy. They state that, while conflict is an inevitable part of policymaking, the lack of standardised procedures for reporting on the public consultation process has limited opportunities for learning lessons from past mistakes and good practices.

1. Economic water scarcity (EWS) is defined in this study as “a situation in which technical and institutional capacities or financial resources are insufficient to supply adequate water quantities for human use”.

2. For crops, the unit water footprint (uWF) is the ratio between the water consumed by the crop during the growing season and lost through evapotranspiration (in mm), and the crop yield (in tons per hectare). It is an inverse measure of efficiency: the lower the value, the more efficient the use of water resources in crop production. Water can originate from rainfall (green water) or irrigation, surface or groundwater (blue water). This study considers the sum of both.