



# Conflict Management in Natura 2000

## CASE STUDY



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Conflicts in conservation often emerge as a result of disagreements over conservation objectives and they are present everywhere across the globe. They not only hinder effective conservation by being destructive and costly, but also prevent social equality, and resource sustainability (Redpath *et al.* 2013). The prevention of these conflicts is difficult and conservation professionals often have to mitigate the conflicts in order to minimise their destructive effects.

The establishment of the Natura 2000 network has been a challenging process and has caused a variety of conflicts, especially related to different stakeholder interests and perceptions: the parties representing conservation interests often feel threatened by the positions of those holding other views (farmers, fishermen, foresters, hunters) and vice versa. These conflicts likely arise also when conservation objectives are imposed on other stakeholders, e.g. when humans are excluded from protected areas, when species of conservation interest have an impact on humans (Redpath *et al.* 2013).

Participatory processes (PPs) play a key role in increasing the inclusiveness of Natura 2000 and its acceptance among land users, and, thus, in preventing further conflicts. They can lead to a greater acceptance of the Natura 2000 policy among private and public actors, which might result in changes in management practices (Maczka *et al.* 2021). However, when PPs do not involve local people properly in the research project's design and objectives or in the assessment of the research outcomes, stakeholder participation often fails or yields only a partial result, and it does not result in positive changes in management practices (Le Dé, Gaillard and Friesen 2015; Blondet *et al.* 2017).



## 2. FREQUENT ISSUES LEADING TO STAKEHOLDER CONFLICTS

Competing interests concerning resource use, unclear decision-making processes on the authorities' side and increased bureaucratic procedures, divergent perceptions on the purpose and use of protected area (e.g. recreation versus resource use), a lack of trust in public administrations, and a lack of complete information about Natura 2000 requirements are the most frequent issues leading to stakeholder conflicts in protected area management (Maczka *et al.* 2021).

PMs can help prevent or mitigate these conflicts, especially if the consultations or workshops are interesting and relevant for the stakeholders (measured by the number of participants), and if the overall impression of Natura 2000 management is not dominated by negative experiences due to rigid top-down policy making approaches and the lack of transparency and public dialogues. In many CEE countries the post-communist legacy of centralisation, combined with weak participatory traditions, continues to be a significant obstacle (Maczka *et al.* 2021).

## 3. PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES AND THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The Natura 2000 network should ensure the sustainable management of protected sites and it should provide multiple economic, social, and cultural benefits for the local populations (Louette *et al.* 2011). While developing the implementation procedures, responsible public authorities should keep in mind the various interests of all the affected stakeholders (Beunen and de Vries 2011).

As Gallo *et al.* (2018) summarises it, the “Habitats Directive indirectly recognises the importance of public participation and the need for stakeholders’



involvement in the establishment and management of protected sites,” but there are no regulatory standards about this process. Article 2.3 of the Habitats Directive states that measures shall consider economic, social, and cultural requirements, but “the site designation is based only on scientific criteria while social criteria are not even mentioned.” PPs, thus, were ignored in many EU Member Countries, which often resulted in a strong national or local opposition (Gallo *et al.* 2018).

#### **4. CASE STUDY: DRAFTING THE NATURA 2000 MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME (2015–2020) IN SLOVENIA (GALLO *ET AL.* 2018)**

The Natura 2000 network in Slovenia is composed by 354 sites representing more than 37 % of the national territory — being the highest rate in the EU. Forests cover 75 % of Slovenian Natura 2000 areas and these same areas represent 45 % of the forests of the country. The Slovenia Forest Service (SFS) is the public forestry service responsible for forest management — at a broad and at a detailed level. It is in charge of drawing up regional forest management and wildlife management plans.

##### **4.1. FIRST STAGE: THE DESIGNATION OF NATURA 2000 SITES (2002–2004)**

In the first stage, due to time constraints, all efforts were concentrated on the elaboration of a communication strategy aimed at key stakeholders about the network implementation. The main objectives of this stage were 1) to reduce the risk of potential resistance and new conflicts; 2) to change people's attitude towards nature conservation; and 3) to identify the interests to enable active participation in implementing conservation purposes.



The process has been characterised by a low level of politicisation, relatively little controversies, and the inclusion of different NGOs almost exclusively for the purpose of acquiring the scientific knowledge needed to designate areas. On one hand, **personal approach and early communication with selected stakeholders contributed to a better understanding of the network function and to the reduction of opposition.** On the other hand, **the lack of early communication in some areas caused mistrust and bigger problems in the implementation of the next stages.** Communities were allowed a period of six days for expressing their opinion, before the final admission of the areas, but because of the short time available, broader interests were not expressed and contra interests were not clearly articulated.

#### **4.2. PREPARATION OF THE NATURA 2000 MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME (2007–2013)**

In the next stage, the PPs were facilitated by the concurrence of two LIFE projects. The main purposes were 1) to raise awareness on nature conservation and Natura 2000 among the general public, and 2) to communicate measures of Natura 2000 to different stakeholders and target groups, raise their awareness of Natura 2000 and the importance of the network.

Involvement of all stakeholders was sought only on a small scale. In the five sites taking part in the LIFE projects, information boards were assembled, brochures and articles were published, workshops and lectures were held for landowners, local communities, and primary schools. Conversely, in the process of drafting the Natura 2000 Management Programme (2007–2013) for Slovenia, only environmental experts and representatives of public services from the sectors of nature conservation, forestry, hunting, fishery, water management, and agriculture were actively involved. A first draft was presented to an audience of researchers and professionals for consultation, and the final draft was presented



in two workshops to local authorities, NGOs and public services before the official adoption by the Government.

### 4.3. PREPARATION OF THE NATURA 2000 MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME (2015–2020)

In the elaboration of the new programme, even though the adopted approach was still a top-down approach, there was a switch from mere information/communication with stakeholders in the past experience to consultation with key stakeholders. The **Natura 2000 Management Programme (2015–2020) draft was prepared during 77 workshops**, held to determine conservation measures and objectives in cooperation with associated beneficiaries, 25 biologists, researchers, and experts on plant and animal species from different institutions and NGOs. The draft was discussed with key stakeholders and target groups during the workshops, alongside representatives of specific sectors (i.e. forestry, agriculture, fisheries, water sector), both public and private. The methodology was based on consultation, collection of contributions, and elaboration of a final draft. Following the adoption of the management programme in April 2015, six round tables aimed at spreading information were held for beneficiaries of the LIFE project and other target audiences. Workshops about the management of cross-border Natura 2000 sites were also organized with representatives from Hungary, Croatia, Austria, and Italy — namely, from the public sector, businesses, and NGOs.

### 4.4. LESSONS LEARNT

The results of an extensive stakeholder analysis and a semi-structured questionnaire sent out to key stakeholders show **an increase in the level of trust in public administrations and a simultaneous decrease in the level of trust in other stakeholders**. The majority of respondents highlight the presence of four types of conflicts: **conflicts due to restrictions to human activities; conflicts determined by an increase of bureaucratic procedures; conflicts caused by a not**



fully accepted definition of institutional roles; and conflicts due to a lack of complete information about Natura 2000 requirements.

The results of the study by Gallo *et al.* (2018) indicate that in Slovenia conflicts between groups of interest concerning the Natura 2000 Management Programme have been only partially solved by the implementation of PPs. The main reasons for this are related to the fact that the PP was not successful in increasing the mutual level of trust — in fact, only the institutional trust increased thanks to the PP. Instead, the level of trust shows a decrease over the PP period for the other stakeholders — namely, universities and research institutes, environmental NGOs, farmers, forest owners associations, and hunting associations.

Probably some of the elements limiting the success of PPs in increasing the level of trust are 1) the different interests of groups of actors at stake during the process; 2) the inadequate inclusion of certain stakeholders in the process; and 3) the difficulties in finding shared priorities. Furthermore, the majority of respondents reported conflicts between stakeholder groups deriving from the restrictions and the increase of bureaucratic procedures imposed by Natura 2000 legislation.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The El Teide Declaration (European Commission 2002) recognises the conflicts arising from Natura 2000 implementation. The Declaration states that “[...] **the success of Natura 2000 will require the support of European citizens, [...] their participation in the decisions on the implementation of the conservation and management of the areas involved.**”

Efficient management of protected areas depends on a successful collaboration among civil society organizations, and private and public actors, which requires knowing each other's points of view and finding mutual interests.



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