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Analysis of stakeholders' involvement in the implementation of the Natura 2000 network in Slovakia

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ABSTRACT

Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas aiming at ensure the protection of European habitats and species biodiversity. The national governments of European Union member countries have delegated the responsibility to manage the Natura 2000 sites at sub-national/regional level. The responsible for the Natura 2000 sites management must organise stakeholders' involvement in the decision-making process to balance the objectives of nature conservation with the social and economic interests. The aim of this paper is to investigate public participation process in the implementation of Natura 2000 network in Slovakia. After a stakeholder analysis, 16 stakeholders participated in the survey. The data were collected through the administration of face-to-face questionnaire. The stakeholders' involvement was assessed considering: obstacles and opportunities of Natura 2000 for human activities and level of participation. The results show that Natura 2000 network is considered an opportunity for human activities by the stakeholders because it could be an economic support for the private owners, a marketing tool to promote eco-tourism, and an instrument to improve the ecosystem services. Conversely, some stakeholders consider Natura 2000 network an obstacle due to the potential restrictions for agricultural and forestry activities.

Concerning the participatory process, the results point out that public actors have been involved through the co-decision, while the other categories of stakeholders have been involved at different levels (collaboration or information), demonstrating in any case the willingness to follow a participative approach. According to the surveyed stakeholders, the short time of implementation of the Habitats Directive after the accession of Slovakia to the EU precluded from more thoughtful communication and participation strategies.

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1. Introduction

According to the European Union (EU) Directive 92/43/EEC (also known as the Habitats Directive), Natura 2000 is a network of protected areas whose purpose is to ensure the long-term protection of European habitats and species biodiversity (EC, 2000). The Natura 2000 network includes Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Special Protection Areas (SPAs) defined by the European Council Directive 79/409/EEC (known as the Birds Directive). The EU member countries implemented the Natura 2000 network through the application of specific programs. The policy process through which Natura 2000 is implemented comprises of three steps (Ferranti et al., 2010): designation of sites, management of those sites and evaluation of the impacts. National authorities - e.g. Ministry of the Environment - are responsible for the designation of Natura 2000 sites and for the management of the protected sites identified during the Biogeographic Seminars held in 1996–2000 (Ferranti et

al., 2014). In several cases, depending on the political structure of the country (centralized or federal system), national governments have delegated the management of Natura 2000 sites to local and regional authorities (Beunen and de Vries, 2011).

According to the El Teide Declaration (2002), the Habitats Directive currently envisages that the authorities responsible for the management of Natura 2000 sites involve the stakeholders - especially local people and landowners - in the planning process in order to balance the objectives of nature conservation with the socio-economic interests (Koppenjan and Klijn, 2004). Consequently, the traditional command-and-control approach is no longer appropriate within the new EU nature conservation policy (Apostolopoulou and Pantis, 2009). This recent trend towards a bottom-up approach in nature conservation policy is based on the subsidiarity principle which is summarized as follows (Berkes, 2004): "as much local as possible and only so much government regulation as necessary". The definition of subsidiarity in the context of nature conservation provided by Berkes (2004) is different to the European Union (EU) subsidiarity principle definition. In many European member countries, the management of Natura 2000 sites is conducted

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by local or regional authorities according to the EU subsidiarity principle but without a strong role of the local/regional government ruling.

In the bottom-up approach, various groups of stakeholders can influence the policy outcomes in several ways (Ferranti et al., 2010).

2. Public participation in Natura 2000 network implementation

One of the key success factor in the implementation process of Natura 2000 network is the stakeholders' involvement in the decision-making process (Shenk et al., 2007; Stringer and Paavola, 2013; Winter et al., 2014; Jones et al., 2015). As previous scholars have found, cooperation and information sharing strongly influences the social acceptance of nature conservation measures and actions (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001a; Suškevičs and Külvik, 2007). The Habitats Directive highlights that the implementation process of the Natura 2000 network should simultaneously take into account the ecological, economic and social aspects (art.2). Moreover, it states that educational and informational activities on the importance of protecting species and habitats should be encouraged and promoted (art.22). Although the Habitats Directive recognizes the importance of public participation in the implementation process, the designation of Natura 2000 sites has encountered strong national and/or local opposition in many EU member countries (Welp et al., 2002; Metera et al., 2005; Bouwma et al., 2010). It has met negative opinions from different groups of stakeholders for various reasons, such as forestry constraints and weakness of landowners rights (Pouta et al., 2000; Alphandery and Fortier, 2001; Stoll-Kleemann, 2001b; Hiedanpää, 2002; Milligan et al., 2009).

Particularly, local stakeholders' opposition towards Natura 2000 sites is the result of the restrictions imposed on landowners and local communities and of the perceived unequal distribution of costs and benefits between the social actors (Doremus, 2003). Evaluating local stakeholders' opinions and perceptions regarding the implications for human activities in the protected areas is, therefore, a preliminary aspect that must be considered in order to facilitate the social acceptance of nature conservation policies and the potential restrictions on economic activities. In the recent international literature, there are many examples of successful and unsuccessful participatory processes in the designation of protected areas, both Natura 2000 sites and national parks. In the United Kingdom, Finland and France a consultation process with stakeholder groups resulted in the removal of some sites from the list of the Natura 2000 network because of the opposition by the local communities (Welp et al., 2002). In Germany, the designation process of Natura 2000 sites has mainly been carried out according to a top-down approach but some *Bundesländer* (e.g., Bavaria) have gradually adopted a more inclusive approach in order to overcome strong resistance to sites' designation (Eben, 2006). In Slovenia, the consultation with stakeholders (e.g., landowners and forest users) was foreseen only during the preparation of Natura 2000 management plans and it did not take place during the sites' designation step (Ferlin et al., 2006). In Slovakia, the designation of Tatra National Park as a Natura 2000 site was conducted in form of a public consultation with a focus on public awareness (Švajda, 2008). Since 1990, the designation of national parks and other protected areas in Poland has been characterized by an increased level of influence of local communities on the decision-making process, due to a increased awareness by the Ministry of Environment (Niedzialkowski et al., 2012). With special regard to the Natura 2000 sites the Polish Minister of Environment and the government submitted a network proposal of SACs and SPAs, to the EU Commission in 2004. The proposed list of Natura 2000 sites was considered to be incomplete by the experts and NGOs that have prepared the "Natura 2000 Shadow List in Poland" (Logmani et al., 2017). These examples demonstrate an increased sensitivity of policy makers and stakeholders towards this issue.

3. Objective of the study

The present research is based on the idea that the consultation of the stakeholders - including landowners and forest users - together with

public information activities are two key "ingredients" for the success of the Natura 2000 network. This idea is confirmed by some other studies conducted in Slovenia, Croatia, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Romania (Ferlin et al., 2006; Beunen et al., 2013; Stringer and Paavola, 2013; Underwood et al., 2014). Starting from this consideration, the objective of the paper is to investigate the way in which the public participation process in the implementation of Natura 2000 network in Slovakia was conducted, giving special attention to stakeholders' involvement in the decision-making process. In order to analyse public participation, two main variables are considered: i) the level of stakeholders' participation in the process and ii) stakeholders' opinions regarding the obstacles and opportunities that the Natura 2000 network can represent for human activities. This last variable offers an idea of the risk of potential conflicts among stakeholders and is a key aspect in analyzing the social acceptance of Natura 2000 implementation.

The innovative aspect of the paper is represented by its analysis of the participatory process through the views of the different interest groups (i.e. public authorities, environmental non-governmental organizations, and forest owners associations) involved.

4. Materials and methods

4.1. Theoretical-analytical framework

The implementation of Natura 2000 is a case of multi-level governance as it requires a multi-sector regulatory approach. Multi-level governance, intended as an analytical model, is characterized by a decision-making process that takes place at different territorial levels and that acknowledges the important role played by non-governmental actors, such as landowners, environmental groups and communities, in the decision-making process (Bache and Flinders, 2004). In a multi-level governance context, the participation of stakeholder groups is complex to arrange because of the high number of key stakeholders involved and the multiple interests at stake (Paavola, 2004; Newig and Fritsch, 2009). A first classification of key stakeholders distinguishes between governmental and non-governmental actors (Weber and Christophersen, 2002). The category of governmental actors includes both national (Ministries and national public agencies) and local authorities. The category of non-governmental actors includes several different stakeholders such as environmental NGOs, interest groups and lobbies, and citizens (Herwig, 2008). Furthermore, in order to assess stakeholders' involvement in a multilevel governance context, it is important to distinguish the key stakeholders according to the different levels of jurisdiction (Keulartz, 2008): European level, national level and regional/local levels.

The literature on how to evaluate participatory processes within a multi-level governance framework is abundant (Abelson and Gauvin, 2006; Newig and Fritsch, 2009; Rist and Stame, 2006) and there are many sets of criteria for assessing good governance (Knill and Lenschow, 2004; Treib et al., 2007). According to the European Commission, good governance is based on five principles: accountability, openness, participation, effectiveness and coherence (EC, 2001). Among these principles, the participation of all key stakeholders in the decision-making process is an important element to ensure a good management of natural resources. In order to assess good governance practices, different approaches have been investigated in the international literature with the goal of analyzing and evaluating participatory processes in the nature conservation policy and in the management of natural resources (Beierle, 1999; Tuler and Webler, 1999; Buchy and Hoverman, 2000; Webler et al., 2001). In the present study, an approach based on the theory of public involvement in the social sciences was applied. This approach focuses on the benefits which are provided by public participation in the decision-making process, such as the prevention of environmental conflicts, the promotion of learning processes and the representation of a wide range of interests and points of view (Buchy

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