



# The world(s) we live in – Inter-agency collaboration in forest management

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## ABSTRACT

Academics and politicians alike have argued for greater inter-agency collaboration to address sector-crossing policy issues, such as health care, policing, or natural resource management. Nevertheless, in reality, it remains a rare occurrence. We examine local-level (street-level) collaboration in the context of public forest management in Germany where, historically, public forests were solely under the forest management agency's authority. With the establishment of a nature conservation agency and subsequent legislative changes, responsibilities and authorities were increasingly distributed among both agencies. Today, the two agencies are connected through a system of approval procedures and expected to collaborate to further nature conservation objectives. We aim to understand how the mandate to collaborate is put into practice, and find a diversity of local level agency relationships. While the literature suggests the benefits of inter-agency collaboration stems from including a diversity of disciplines and compensating for limited resources, we find these aspects to pose significant challenges in local level practices. Aside from actor-related factors, we also found systemic and societal actors to be a strong influence on inter-agency exchange.

## 1. Introduction

Demand for greater (inter-)agency collaboration in policy implementation is not a new phenomenon, though in recent years, government publications are abuzz with terms like cooperation, coordination and collaboration. Politicians and scientists alike have argued for the benefits of pooling resources and expertise in order to meet sector-spanning policy objectives (Agranoff and McGuire, 2004; Bardach, 1998; Bogumil et al., 2010; Hustedt and Veit, 2014; Sotirov and Winkel, 2016). Inter-agency collaboration has been examined at various levels, e.g. between cities and communities (Bogumil et al., 2010), among administrative entities of different European states (Busuic, 2016), and regarding issue areas ranging from social welfare (Bardach, 1998) to policing (Busuic, 2016). The field of natural resource management is no exception to this trend; in fact, inter-agency collaboration is considered crucial to achieving nature conservation objectives for a number of reasons. One relates to the nature of conservation issues: as a sector and discipline-crossing issue, input from different areas of expertise is deemed necessary but may result in contradicting yet scientifically justified viewpoints on an issue (Benz et al., 2008; Uggla et al., 2016). Second, a growing body of rules and regulations governing natural resource management contains ambiguous, non-specific language, e.g. 'close to nature forestry', (Haber, 2014; Winkel et al., 2005), and results in overlapping authorities

between agencies (Benz et al., 2008; Henle et al., 2008; Hubo and Krott, 2010; Schumacher, 2000; SRU, 2004; Uggla et al., 2016). Finally, administrative reforms following the principles of New Public Management have reduced individual agencies' resources in Germany and elsewhere (Benz et al., 2008; Henle et al., 2008; Hubo and Krott, 2010; Natori and Chenoweth, 2008). To sum up, perceptions and opinions concerning natural resource management are likely to vary, while the need to pool resources to achieve common objectives makes close exchange and collaboration pivotal (Benz et al., 2008; Uggla, 2010).

So far, research on agency collaboration in the context of natural resource management has tended to focus on either policy-level integration of environmental concerns (Sotirov and Winkel, 2016; Zingerli et al., 2004) or agency collaboration with non-state actors (O'Leary and Vij, 2012; Wondolleck and Yaffee, 2000; Yeboah-Assiamah et al., 2016; Zachrisson and Beland Lindahl, 2013) rather than the local level interaction between government agencies in the implementation of policies. This street-level implementation, however, is an integral part of the policy making process that shapes policy outcomes (Hupe and Hill, 2016; Lipsky, 1980). This study aims to fill this gap by examining the interaction between two German federal state natural resource management agencies at the local level (street-level) in the context of nature conservation policy implementation.

Within the German political-administrative structure, most decision-making authority concerning forests and nature conservation rests

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with the state-level ministries and their respective administrative organization. This study will focus on Baden-Württemberg in Southwestern Germany, who, in its 'Nature Conservation Strategy' (Naturschutzstrategie) and other documents, has repeatedly stated the demand its forest and nature conservation agencies to establish close, collaborative relationships in order to achieve nature conservation objectives (ForstBW, 2015; MLR, 2016, 2014). Yet these documents do not provide a more detailed outline of the type of interaction and exchange envisioned. Baden-Württemberg is the third largest federal state and about 38% of its landscape is forested, 24% of it is state-owned (BWI). Currently, forestry and nature conservation are housed in different ministries, though this can change depending on governing coalitions. More important for the purposes of this paper is the subordinate administrative body. It features a state forest management agency (hereafter FMA) which looks back at a 300 year tradition of not only managing state-owned forests, but also advising municipal and private forest owners, or managing their land for them.<sup>1</sup> The comparatively young nature conservation agency (hereafter NCA), established in 1975<sup>2</sup> (Ministerium für Umwelt, Klima und Energiewirtschaft Baden-Württemberg, 2018), is responsible for all nature conservation issues and over the past decades – in part due to EU legislation – has gained increasing influence and authority over forested land. Thus, even though the administrations are separate organizationally, increasingly overlapping competencies make more frequent inter-agency interaction inevitable. For example, the NCA is responsible for species listed under the Natura2000 framework, many of which occur in forests, which are subject to the state forest management authority. The state FMA also has to obtain the NCA's approval for management planning in nature reserves on state-owned forest land. Likewise, the NCA has to obtain approval e.g. to transform forested land into non-forested land to promote photophilic species protection.

It is in this context that we aim to address the following questions:

1. How is the mandate to collaborate put into practice at the local level?
2. What factors are influencing inter-agency relationships?
3. What is the perceived impact of inter-agency relationships on forest management?

While the local-level relationship between the two government agencies has not been the subject of academic interest, past research on the relationship between forest and nature conservation interests in Germany does provide some relevant insights. Generally speaking, they are portrayed as two coalitions pursuing opposing interests (Cappelmann et al., 2011; Fischbach-Einhoff, 2005; Winkel and Sotirov, 2011), (though, there are also notable differences in opinion within both groups (Reif et al., 2010; Winkel, 2007). The so-called forestry coalition, including state and federal forest agencies, industry and forestry associations, is primarily associated with economic interest in forest management, as well the objective to avoid further regulation of the sector's activities (Giessen and Krott, 2009; Winkel, 2007). According to Krott (2001), state forest management agencies have tried to minimize the influence of non-forestry actors on policy and management by pointing to their official mandate, which includes nature conservation, the integrated approach to nature conservation and its consideration in forest management (*ordnungsgemäße Waldwirtschaft*). The nature conservation coalition on the other hand,

<sup>1</sup> In the wake of court decisions, the state FMA will not be able to provide the full suite of services to private forest owners in the future due to antitrust law concerns.

<sup>2</sup> The state ministry for the environment was established only in 1987. At this point, the nature conservation agency (originally 'Landesanstalt für Umwelt') became the ministry's administrative body (Ministerium für Umwelt, Klima und Energiewirtschaft Baden-Württemberg, 2018).

consisting state and federal agencies, and conservation associations, is concerned with the impact of forest management practices on biodiversity, and aims for further regulation (Winkel, 2008). Areas of disagreement concerning forest management include, for example, the accumulation of old and decaying wood, the proportion of deciduous and coniferous species, non-indigenous tree species, the length of production cycles, or management practices in protected areas. In addition, rivalries over competences and authorities are viewed as drivers of conflict between forest and nature conservation sectors (Cappelmann et al., 2011; Winkel, 2008; Winkel, 2007).

At the policy level, cooperation between forestry and nature conservation coalitions have been found to be strategically motivated, temporary and issue-dependent; cooperation based on shared belief systems rarely occurred (Sotirov et al., 2017; Sotirov and Winkel, 2016). At the local level, recent research on both state agencies also points to various collaboration barriers; studies on the state FMA have identified several features that may hinder close collaboration with external actors. For example a self-perception as the sole expert for forest related issues, a general inward orientation, and a resistance to criticism from outside actors (Fischbach-Einhoff, 2005; Kenntner, 2016; Winkel, 2007). Similarly, research on NCAs in several German federal states found a strong personal and collective identification among agency staff with the "ecology first" approach, which prioritizes species and habitat protection over other demands on natural resources. Among the reasons this top-down conservationist perspective is upheld is the perception of nature conservation as a "battle against local opposition for the survival of nature" (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001, p. 39). The public is thought to be too far removed from nature to even recognize the importance of nature conservation, while other stakeholders, such as "foresters, hunters, and anglers" are considered opponents of nature conservation. Involving stakeholders in nature conservation through participatory approaches is thus deemed a threat to as it would further weaken nature conservation, which is already perceived to be systematically disadvantaged compared to other land uses (forestry, agriculture) by the political and administrative system. As a result, nature conservation agencies rely on "professionalized management sciences" rooted in the staff's educational background in biology, ecology, or landscape planning to legitimize their mission and avoid more inclusive approaches (Stoll-Kleemann, 2001). A more recent study on the state NCA in Baden-Württemberg confirms the political and administrative weakness discussed above; it finds the agency strongly constrained by limited financial and personnel resources, an increasing set of tasks, and complex and continuously changing legislation. The resulting prioritization and lack of monitoring point to an implementation deficit (Bogumil et al., 2017).

## 2. Theoretical background

In 1973, Aron Wildawski referred to 'coordination' as „one of the golden words of our time“ (Wildawski 1973 in Hustedt and Veit, 2014). Likewise, Hustedt and Veit (2014) identify different 'waves' in policy discussions in Germany which emphasized agency collaboration starting as early as 1960. Clearly, the idea of government agencies working together or with non-government stakeholders is not new. In the past, the emphasis was on collaboration as a remedy for policy implementation failure. In the current 'wave', debates tend to portray agency-collaboration as a response to the consequences of New Public Management style reforms, which furthered specialization of individual administrative units, and increasing complexities, with new policy fields emerging that ignore traditional sector boundaries. Such efforts to integrate policy frequently demand greater coordination and collaboration at lower administrative levels as well (Ansell and Gash, 2008; Bogumil et al., 2010; Hansen and Steen, 2010; Hustedt and Veit, 2014).

Despite widespread interest and research on the subject, no overarching theory or analytical approach for researching inter-agency collaboration, or collaborative public management more broadly has

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