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Conceptual gaps in the national strategy for the implementation of the European Natura 2000 conservation policy in Greece

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ABSTRACT

Greece responded to the Habitats Directive aims, maintaining biodiversity through sustainable natural resource use, by establishing a network of protected areas. In implementing the European conservation policy, 27 management agencies were established in 61 Natura sites. To assess the effectiveness of the Greek state's policy response we conducted 91 semi-structured interviews with state and non-state actors in the Greek conservation policy process. Following a grounded theory approach, we revealed national strategy as compromised by absence of conservation policy history, lack of state capacity, uncommunicated biological knowledge and lack of public participation. This strategy gap became apparent when appraising the decision making process in establishing a network of protected areas in terms of its interrelated activities. In particular, incomplete intelligence, ineffective promotion, irrational prescription and discontinued and non-independent appraisal led to a break down in implementation and to policy failure. Lack of clear goals, and divergences between stated and actual goals led to bureaucratic interpretations of conservation objectives and distortion of decision processes in favour of satisfying economic and development interests. Given the importance of Greek biodiversity and governmental failure to confront this policy hiatus, we argue for specific actions at both member state and European level and, in particular, the formulation of a conservation strategy as an official part of an integrated Greek conservation policy, and the establishment of independent institutions staffed by qualified reviewers to evaluate and monitor member states conservation policies.

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1. Introduction

The Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC) is the European Union's (EU) major policy response to the Convention on Biological Diversity, resulting in the establishment of the European Natura 2000 network of protected areas (EC, 2000). Natura 2000 includes Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), and Special Protection Areas (SPAs), based on the Habitats Directive and the Birds Directive, respectively. Member states have obli-

gations to protect Natura sites, even in the absence of explicit EU requirements (EC, 2000; Ledoux et al., 2000).

As designation of areas is nearly completed (EC, 2007), attention is turning towards management, particularly, to assessing whether the Natura 2000 network effectively protects species and habitats (see Martínez et al., 2006; EEA, 2007; Sánchez-Fernández et al., 2008). The Habitats Directive aims to preserve biodiversity through the sustainable use of natural resources and potentially revitalizes decision making

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processes for the establishment or improvement of national networks of protected areas (Maiorano et al., 2007). But at the same time European conservation policy is a highly politicized and complicated process whose effective implementation involves a diversity of contexts within different member states (Hiedanpää, 2002).

This complexity has been problematic despite the increase in the total area of Natura 2000 sites (EEA, 2007). The establishment procedure lags behind originally adopted deadlines (EC, 2004; EC, 2007) and the European Commission has already taken many member states (including Greece) to the European Court of Justice (Paavola, 2003/2004). These problems underline the need for strong strategies at member state level to make European conservation policy a national priority, resisting pressure from rapid development trends (Baldwin and Trombulak, 2007). In Greece, almost five years after the establishment of 27 management agencies for 61 Natura sites, and two years after the definition of the 359 Greek Sites of Community Importance (2006/613/EU), increasing evidence indicates a discrepancy between a facade of conservation commitment, and ecologically sustainable outcomes (WWF, 2007; 2007/C 315/04).

This implementation crisis concerns conservation planning as a whole (Knight et al., 2006) and its investigation and confrontation require both political understanding and will (Johns, 2007). Although conservation policy should be based on scientific knowledge and data, it is a political and social process as well (Brechin et al., 2002; Brosius et al., 2005); and can be characterized as a “tournament of value” with stakeholders competing to advance agendas and negotiate conservation goals (Robertson and Hull, 2001).

Systematic conservation policy research remains limited regarding the establishment procedure for Natura 2000 in member states: in Greece it is virtually neglected. Therefore, it remains to be investigated whether institutional changes driven by the Habitats Directive are sufficient for the conservation of Natura 2000 sites, without the implementation of strong strategies by the member states. We attempt to answer two questions: What factors are responsible for the absence of national strategy? And what effect does this absence have on the decision making process for establishing a Greek network of protected areas, the state’s primary strategy for managing Natura sites.

We used a qualitative methodology for in depth exploration (Fischer and Young, 2007) of critical, mostly non-quantifiable features of social processes (Hay, 2000). We adhered to the principles of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), an influential and widely used tool in qualitative research (Strauss and Corbin, 1997). Grounded theory rests on the analysis of data systematically collected through research, producing a close relationship between data collected, analysis, and the resulting theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

2. Greek governmental structure for conservation

The Ministry for the Environment, Physical Planning and Public Works (MEPPW) and the Ministry of Agriculture have been

principally responsible for the conservation and management of Greek natural areas since 1986. This dual authority is reflected in the coexistence of the forest (L.D. 86/1969 and L.D. 996/1971) and environmental legislation (law 1650/86) for the designation of protected areas. However, since the implementation of the Habitats Directive more powers have been given to the MEPPW, which bears primary responsibility for the Natura 2000 network.

Law 1650/86 followed Greece’s entry into the European Union and the incorporation of Directive 79/409 into national law requiring for the first time a Specific Environmental Study for the designation of protected areas. This study should lead to a Common Ministerial Decision signed by the competent Ministers, and finally to a Presidential Decree, validated by the Court of State and signed by the President of the Democracy. Common Ministerial Decisions are transitional instruments lacking the status of the Presidential Decree.

In 1998, the belated harmonization of Directive 92/43 linked the establishing of Natura 2000 with law 1650/86. Greece designated 371 Greek Natura sites, including 163 Special Protection Areas and 239 Special Areas of Conservation (31 sites are both SPAs and SACs), which add up to 3390147 ha. Since 1999 management agencies have been responsible for managing protected areas (Greek law 2742/99). These agencies are autonomous legal institutions accountable to the MEPPW and must consist of an advisory board of representatives of central and local administration, local stakeholders, NGOs and scientists, and have scientific, technical and administrative support. Representatives are proposed by the relevant institutions, but the minister influences their selection, and the overemphasis on political criteria has led to quite diverse management agencies. Whereas management agencies are responsible for planning, management, monitoring and research, the regulation of hunting, fishing, logging and law enforcement, especially for the areas designated under forest legislation, remains linked to the Forest District Offices, under the Ministry of Agriculture.

3. Methods

Grounded theory mainly concerns research questions for which no direct information from previous research is available and therefore does not start with specific theoretical hypotheses (Iosifides, 2006). The facts (i) that the appraisal of European Natura 2000 conservation policy awaits full exploration, and that (ii) in Greece this is a neglected research topic, led us to choose this methodological approach. Prior knowledge that strategy development is not an ongoing process in Greece ruled out the use of analyses based on established theory, such as SWOT analysis (see Dyson, 2004).

Grounded theory, although flexible, has specific procedures for data collection and analysis. The data collection phase involved studying archival material (Greek and European conservation laws, strategies and articles from the Press) and related articles from the scientific literature. Five preliminary in depth interviews were conducted with Greek conservation policy experts. All the information and recommendations gathered were used to develop the interview guide (Table 1). The sample was then selected according to

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