



Factors influencing perception of protected areas—The case of Natura 2000 in Polish Carpathian communities

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 December 2011

Received in revised form 2 April 2012

Accepted 27 May 2012

Keywords:

Environmental attitudes

Local communities

Natura 2000

Poland

Protected areas

The Carpathians

ABSTRACT

Establishing protected areas has emerged as one of the key aims in global and EU conservation policy. In the EU, the particular role of providing biodiversity conservation was bestowed on the European Ecological Network Natura 2000. However, public perception of this initiative has been negative in most countries. In this manuscript, we present a representative description of knowledge and attitudes of inhabitants of Polish Carpathians' municipalities included into Natura 2000. The research was conducted in six municipalities among 906 respondents. Majority (92%) of respondents believe that it is a good measure to legally protect nature in their area. Additionally, we analysed how selected features of respondents influence their perception of protected areas. Level of education, the fact that respondents moved to their current place of residence in adulthood and that they are self-employed, are the characteristics that most significantly influence their knowledge of Natura 2000. Moreover, ownership of a business, familiarity with Natura 2000 and the respondents' age affect their level of satisfaction with a Natura 2000 site designated in their region. We focus on differences in awareness and acceptance of the programme among different municipalities' inhabitants – in the municipality fully covered by a Natura 2000 site, inhabitants are most knowledgeable about nature conservation issues but at the same time they opposed it most strongly. In a typical agricultural municipality, knowledge on nature conservation issues is low while in the touristic-type, the vast majority of residents have no opinion on designation of new protected areas at all. Based on the results of the following study we suggest that development of tools on how to manage the protected areas effectively should rely both on traditional ecological analysis and that of a social type.

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Introduction

The establishment of protected areas is one of the key aims of global conservation policy to achieve specific conservation objectives, particularly to preserve biodiversity and to maintain critical ecological processes and ecosystem services (CBD 1992; Chape et al. 2003; Dudley 2008; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment 2005). Networks of protected areas contribute significantly to the protection and maintenance of natural habitats (Bruner et al. 2000). However, both effectiveness of protection (Andam et al. 2008; Gaston et al. 2006; Hayes 2006) and of management are still widely discussed (Hockings et al. 2006; Stoll-Kleemann 2010; WWF 2004).

Within the last decades, attitudes towards designation and management of protected areas have considerably changed. For instance, the aims for which protected areas are established have

changed – from emphasis on the protection of natural resources to inclusion of inhabitants' wellbeing and better quality of their lives (Chape et al. 2008; Naughton-Treves et al. 2005). Subsequently, the perception of the role of inhabitants and other local stakeholders have changed, as their approval and knowledge are seen as crucial in the long term (Chape et al. 2008; Dudley et al. 2005). The importance of combining protection of natural heritage while taking into account social aspects, such as the needs and expectations of various groups, particularly local stakeholders, is increasingly being considered by scientists and policymakers (Harwood 2000; Henle et al. 2010; Lauber et al. 2008; Mascia 2003; Ostrom 1990; Pinton 2008). Dialogue with various stakeholders and indigenous people is thus not only recommended in the majority of documents and international strategies but is also seen as essential to provide sustainable development in protected areas and in their neighbourhood.

For many decades in Europe, the development of ecological networks has been a concept of crucial importance in nature conservation planning (Jongman 1995). In practice, establishing a

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network of protected areas in terms of the whole continent was possible when the EU Member States accepted the Birds Directive in 1979 and Habitats Directive in 1992, which provided a legal basis for establishing the European Ecological Network Natura 2000 throughout the whole territory of the EU. At present, Natura 2000 is a key instrument in conserving biodiversity in the EU, and increasing the effectiveness of protection in these areas is one of the main aims of EU nature conservation policy (COM (2006) 216; COM (2011) 244; EU Biodiversity Action Plan 2010).

The assumptions of the Natura 2000 programme illustrate the change of aims and methods to conserve biodiversity – above all by perceiving the role of traditional human activity in maintaining biodiversity (Alphandéry & Fortier 2001; EU Biodiversity Action Plan 2010) and promoting extensive agricultural practices in protected areas (Ostermann 1998). Despite such assumptions, implementation of the Natura 2000 programme in the EU Member States appeared to be another example, following other forms of area protection, of opposition by local community and stakeholders against designation of protected areas in their neighbourhood. The most visible opposition to the programme was expressed by farmers, fishermen, foresters and other local residents in most of the EU Member States (Keulartz 2009). In many countries there were groups that protested, mainly in defense of traditional methods of management and in defense of property rights (e.g. Björkell 2007; Charbonneau 1997; Hiedenpää 2002; McCauley 2008; Paloniemi & Tikka 2008). Among social problems that appeared during designation of Natura 2000 areas, the most frequently mentioned is the opposition of landowners and people who are directly managing the protected area (Björkell 2007; Krott 2000; Visser et al., 2007).

Despite Natura 2000 sites being introduced in the EU-15 countries for almost 20 years, the problem of appropriate network management still exists. Its improvement is one of the main aims of the new European strategy of biodiversity protection (COM (2011) 244). In the case of new member countries, like Poland, who joined the EU in 2004, Natura 2000 is still a topic of current social conflicts (Cent et al. 2010; Grodzińska-Jurczak & Cent 2011a; Grodzińska-Jurczak & Cent 2011b).

One of the elements that can determine success in managing protected areas, besides involving the community in managing, is also the perceptions and attitudes of the local people and of protected area managers (Hirschnitz-Garbers & Stoll-Kleemann 2010). The attitude of local stakeholders towards protected areas, their perception and approval of designated areas are conditioned by many factors. While generally declared support for nature conservation and the establishment of protected areas is high (Dimitrakopoulos et al. 2010; Schenk et al. 2007; Wallner et al. 2007), level of knowledge and awareness of existence of protected areas is usually low (Booth et al. 2009; Pietrzyk et al. 2009). Opposition against protected areas by local inhabitants is usually observed as a result of lack of knowledge and information (Dimitrakopoulos et al. 2010; Schenk et al. 2007) or lack of trust in the managing institution (Stern 2008). Such opposition is also accompanied by a stronger sense of regional identity (Bonaiuto et al. 2002).

Additionally, factors such as level of education, economic situation of inhabitants and the local history of nature conservation were also observed to influence the level of acceptance of protected areas (Petrosillo et al. 2007; Wallner et al. 2007). Local differences in the level of knowledge about protected areas and attitude towards them have also been observed (Allendorf 2007; Dimitrakopoulos et al. 2010).

The majority of current publications regarding the social perception of nature conservation, especially the planning and functioning of protected areas, present results of qualitative research describing selected cases (e.g. Björkell 2007; Grodzińska-Jurczak & Cent 2011b; Hiedenpää 2002; Hovardas & Poirazidis 2007; Królikowska 2007; Méndez-Contreras et al. 2008; Stenseke 2006; Visser et al.

2007). Although qualitative research makes a valuable contribution in the description of conflicts and the significance of various social actors, it does not provide representative information on local communities and does not allow for the evaluation of significant factors that influence inhabitants' attitudes. In such cases, quantitative research is sometimes used to characterise local situations (e.g. Schindler et al. 2011). However, quantitative research is mainly the result of general surveys and rarely used to explain.

This paper summarises the results of quantitative research on opinion and level of knowledge of protected areas from residents of municipalities located in the alpine bioregion of Poland (the Polish Carpathians). In each municipality included in the research new Natura 2000 site(s) were designated in the past few years. Herein, we present a representative description of attitude and level of knowledge of local communities' inhabitants towards protected areas that have been recently designated and we identify factors that influence these traits, with special consideration to local specificity.

Research goal

The goal of this research was to define the level of knowledge and attitude of local communities to newly introduced protected areas within the Natura 2000 network, and the evaluation of the significance of local differences between municipalities that were selected for the research. We have also examined the local diversity of opinions and problems connected with implementation of the Natura 2000 programme – important from the point of view of research results being used by managers of these areas.

Coherent with the above goals, we chose six municipalities through purposive sampling. The selected municipalities are different in terms of history of nature conservation, social-economic and geographic conditions.

Specific research questions:

1. What is the impact of individual features (age, sex, education, residence in specific municipality since childhood) and economic activity (ownership of a business, being a farmer, landownership) on the level of inhabitants' knowledge about Natura 2000 areas?
2. What is the influence of individual features and economic activity on the attitude of inhabitants towards designation of Natura 2000 areas in the municipality area?
3. What are the dominant attitudes of inhabitants towards nature and its protection?
4. In what way does living in a specific municipality (that is various local factors) influence level of knowledge and attitude of inhabitants to the Natura 2000 programme and their attitude towards protected areas?

Methods

Research area

The research was conducted in six municipalities of the Polish part of the Carpathians (alpine bioregion), where Natura 2000 sites were designated (Fig. 1). The municipalities differ not only with respect to the type and extent of protected area coverage and number of inhabitants but also in history and current state of nature conservation in their area (Table 1).

The research was conducted in six Carpathian municipalities. Jabłonka and Lipnica Wielka are municipalities of agricultural character in which protected areas occupy a very small part of their territories. Szczyrk and Brenna are situated in an area with well-developed tourism infrastructure – focused mainly on skiing,

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