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Implementing nature conservation through integrated forest management: A street-level bureaucracy perspective on the German public forest sector

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ABSTRACT

Integrated forest management—pursuing multiple management objectives on the same area—is one important approach to reconciling conflicting demands towards forests. While a few studies have examined its implementation at a local level, the literature is thus far lacking detailed analyses of how forestry professionals perceive and implement the integration of multiple demands towards public forests, as well as what factors are influencing local level decision-making. This study attempts to fill this gap. Focusing on nature conservation aspects and their integration into public forest management, where a primary objective is timber production, we examine the implementation of integrated forest management in five German *Länder* (German federal states) as perceived by state forest enterprise rangers (*Revierleiter*). Our findings indicate a great willingness and commitment among forest rangers to implement integrative nature conservation approaches through integrated forest management. However, there are also a number of factors that hinder their implementation. In particular there is a mismatch between the demands placed on rangers and the support provided to them regarding time, more flexible timber targets, and financial as well as personnel resources. We argue that the practical implementation of integrative nature conservation requires more favorable conditions which can actually facilitate the balancing of multiple demands through integrated forest management.

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1. Introduction

Integrated forest management approaches, which pursue multiple objectives on the same forest area (also referred to as ‘integrative forest management’ (Krumm et al., 2013)) are on the rise both in forest science literature (Kraus and Krumm, 2013) and government forest policy programs (Schulz et al., 2014; Sotirov et al., 2013). The increasing use of terms such as ‘retention forestry’ and ‘ecosystem services oriented forestry’ mirrors older concepts such as ‘multiple use’, ‘multifunctional forestry’ or ‘close-to-nature forest management’ and reflect these developments (Gustafsson et al., 2012; Messier et al., 2013; Wagner et al., 2013), as do the many resulting forest policy and management concepts relating to multi-purpose and/or integrated forest management particularly in public forests. Yet, few studies have examined the implementation of such concepts at the level of practical forest management, including their perception by local forest managers. Most of these studies originate from the US (e.g. Cramer et al., 1993; Kennedy and Quigley, 1998). Looking more broadly at challenges of multiple goal oriented agencies, Biber (2009) emphasizes the difficulty associated with trade-offs between different goals. He concludes that agencies “are

most likely to underperform on ‘secondary goals’ that both interfere with the completion of what are perceived to be the forest enterprise’s¹ primary goals, and are not easily measured or monitored by outside parties” (p.4).

In this study, we focus on Germany where forest management is driven by a paradigm of ‘multifunctional forestry’ (Borrass et al., 2016). Public forests management is expected to serve the public interest in particular, by emphasizing non-timber-production functions such as nature conservation or recreation. At the same time, timber production and economic efficiency remain of great importance, and thus local managers are faced with decisions about potential trade-offs between different the demands towards forests.

So far, not much has been published specifically on German public forest rangers and their perception of forest management issues in general, or of nature conservation in particular. However, a few studies on state forest enterprises in Germany (*Forstverwaltung*) do shed some light on relevant aspects of the organizations that rangers are a part of, such as agency-internal values, or common perceptions about forest management objectives among members of the state forest enterprise. Fischbach-Einhoff (2005) and Winkel (2006) each created a typology of forest enterprise personnel – though neither of the authors’ fieldwork directly included forest rangers – while Kenntner (2016) examined the

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¹ The terms ‘state forest enterprise’ and ‘forest enterprise’ are used synonymously in this article

forest enterprise's organizational culture as a whole in the state of Baden-Württemberg. All three authors found that lower administrative levels are characterized by a closed, inward-oriented culture that is not particularly conducive for accommodating changing societal expectations towards public forests.

A couple of studies that have collected empirical data at the local level have considered the role of local forest rangers in the implementation of Natura 2000, a component of the EU's biodiversity policy. Winter et al. (2014) found that the vagueness of Natura 2000 management plans and targets left their interpretation to the implementing rangers and provided them a lot of discretion. Overall, the authors found the policy did not change forest management practices on the ground. Borrass (2014) emphasized the diversity of implementation practices developed as a result of the existing discretion, as well as the effect of resource constraints and conflict between different administrative entities on biodiversity conservation policy implementation. Similarly, Sauer et al. (2005) point to different implementation practices of Natura 2000 measures due to varying communication strategies and contextual conditions of the different actors involved. However, neither Winter et al. (2014) nor Borrass (2014) analyzed the role of forest rangers' perceptions of integrated nature conservation policies and integrated forest management more broadly.

As this brief overview shows, some studies have touched on aspects relevant to understanding the implementation of conservation policies in the context of integrated forest management. However, none have combined the empirical data and in-depth analysis necessary to better comprehend the role of local level forest rangers, their perception of integrated forest management, and other influences on how nature conservation policies are implemented on the ground. This study attempts to fill this gap by analyzing the local-level implementation of integrative nature conservation policies and programs in the context of multifunctional forest management in Germany.

Focusing on public forest management and the perceptions of forest rangers, we aim to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do local forest managers perceive their role and performance in the implementation of integrative nature conservation policies?
- (2) To what extent are local management decisions related to nature conservation influenced by individual, contextual, organizational or political factors, or external actors?
- (3) What general conclusions can be drawn for the implementation of integrated nature conservation policies in forests primarily managed for timber production?

2. Theoretical perspective

This paper draws on the concept of 'street-level bureaucracy' (SLB) first developed by Lipsky (1980). SLB evolved in response to observed variations in policy outcomes across space ('policy divergence'), indicating differences in the implementation of the same policy in different places. It highlights the role of local level bureaucrats – 'street-level bureaucrats' – in explaining these phenomena and focuses on behavioral aspects rather than the institutional setting, as was traditionally the case (Gofen, 2014; Winter, 2003). Lipsky (1980) was the first to view policy divergence not as a result of bureaucrats' unwillingness but of coping mechanisms and routines they develop in their daily work. He portrays public administration as a bottom-up system in which bureaucrats link government and civil society, as de-facto policy makers (Hill and Hupe, 2005; Lipsky, 1980). At the center of Lipsky's approach is the discretion which street-level bureaucrats have in their daily work to interpret and adapt policies to different contexts: "*the nature of service calls for human judgment that cannot be programmed and for which machines cannot substitute*" Lipsky (1980, p. 161). Discretion also

accommodates coping mechanisms street-level bureaucrats develop in response to limited time and other resources and a diverse clientele.

Since the idea of street-level bureaucracy was first published in 1980, a number of scientific studies have expanded the approach and in particular have taken a closer look at factors that might be influencing street-level bureaucrats in their efforts to implement policy (Gofen, 2014; Hill, 2003; Lin, 2002; May and Winter, 2007; Tummers et al., 2012; Winter, 2002). The literature distinguishes five types of influences, though in reality they are often difficult to differentiate between:

- (1) Individual factors or characteristics, such as the street-level bureaucrat's attitude and knowledge. These are considered by some to be the strongest influence on street-level bureaucrats' actions (Meyers and Vorsanger, 2003; Tummers et al., 2012). Winter (2002) assumes that in particular the perceived work load, the personal attitude towards the target population as well as the perception of the policy's effectiveness (or of the instruments used to implement it) determines the level of policy divergence. Trusty and Cervený (2012) find that personal values shape the behaviors of individual bureaucrats and the extent to which they make use of discretion. Similarly, Tummers et al. (2012) determine that the content of a policy is among the most influential factors in policy implementation. Street-level bureaucrats who do not perceive a policy as meaningful for either themselves personally, the target population or society at large are less willing to implement it.
- (2) Contextual factors, including the behavior and opinion of the target population, public opinion at large, socio-economic conditions as well as institutional arrangements (Hill, 2003; May and Winter, 2007; Meyers and Vorsanger, 2003). For example, the implementation of regulatory policies targeting a well-educated, politically influential part of the population differs from the implementation of welfare policy targeted at a population of low socio-economic status (Meyers and Vorsanger, 2003; Winter, 2002). Institutional arrangements refer to e.g. a country's political structure such as federal or central, the socio-economic system (liberal or conservative), different political cultures, social norms and values (Hill and Hupe, 2005).
- (3) External actors who may influence the policy implementation process, including scientists, consultants or non-governmental organizations. According to Hill (2003) these entities are often not given sufficient consideration despite their potentially significant role via 'implementation resources', such as technical support, as well as practical or scientific knowledge.
- (4) Organizational factors, such as internal structures, values and norms within the implementing government agency. Lin (2002) and Gofen (2014) emphasize the importance of agency-internal values and find that agreement between these values and the policy to be implemented leads to more successful implementation. Available time and financial resources also influence street-level bureaucrats' implementation behavior, e.g. by streamlining program delivery or being more selective in the service provision (Meyers and Vorsanger, 2003). In addition, the involvement of street-level bureaucrats during the policy development processes (Tummers (2008), the management's ability to communicate policy goals clearly as well as the opportunities for further training related to a policy's implementation (Ricucci et al., 2004) can positively incentivize the behavior of street-level bureaucrats.
- (5) Political factors, such as policy design or the policy process. Depending on the complexity of the issue to be regulated, available methods for implementation, and the level of conflict during the political process, resulting policies can vary in their specificity and level of detail, thus influencing the amount of discretion available to street-level bureaucrats during the implementation. Conflict during the policy making process is generally associated

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