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## Research article

## Evaluation of participatory planning: Lessons from Hungarian Natura 2000 management planning processes



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## ABSTRACT

Stakeholder participation in nature conservation policies and especially in the management of protected areas has gained importance in the last decades. These changes are underlined by democratic principles and the perceived contribution of stakeholder involvement to the effectiveness of conservation management. Evaluating participatory processes is essential to learn about the past and thus increase the quality of future processes. The evaluation can be useful for the organisations responsible for planning and management, stakeholders and policy makers as well. The present paper shows the results of a systematic evaluation of 25 participatory processes related to the development of management plans for Natura 2000 sites in Hungary between 2007 and 2015. A conceptual framework was developed to evaluate the process and outcome of participatory management planning processes. Criteria were based on the scientific literature on public participation and tailored to conservation-related management planning and stakeholder involvement. Evaluated processes were grouped in three cases based on their time range and financial sources. Overall, the analysed processes scored at a medium level, showing better performance in the process criteria than in the outcome criteria. The best case scored significantly higher in four criteria compared to the other cases: representativeness, resource availability for facilitation, new, creative ideas and impact on the plan. The main factors behind the success were (1) embeddedness of the planning process in a larger project, where the plan was a tool for conservation, (2) carrying out only one process at a time, (3) previous experience of facilitators and planners with participatory planning and (4) the opportunity and capacity to propose a payment scheme as an incentive. But even this case received low scores in some criteria: conflict resolution, early involvement and well defined goals. Based on the results we suggest that more data is needed to evaluate the implementation of the plans and, in many cases, the impact of the process on the plan. Performance can be improved with the assistance of policy makers by further developing guidelines, harmonising payment schemes with the conservation measures of the plans and providing training on conflict resolution. The evaluation framework proved to be suitable for the assessment of a large set of conservation related management planning processes, but it also had some limitations, e.g. concerning the incorporation of stakeholders' views in the evaluation.

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## 1. Introduction

The participation of stakeholders in the planning and implementation of nature conservation policies and management of protected areas has been advocated in scientific and policy circles for decades (see e.g. [Borrini-Feyerabend, 1996](#); [Bagnoli et al., 2008](#); [Reed, 2008](#)). Arguments for participation are partly based on democratic principles, and partly on its contribution to the effectiveness of conservation management ([Dudley et al., 2005](#); [Chape et al., 2008](#); [Reed, 2008](#); [Jones-Walters and Çil, 2011](#); [Kiss, 2014](#)). According to the theory of deliberative democracy everyone, who is affected by a decision, has the right to take part in it. Participation aids decision-making by involving stakeholders and citizens in the decision-making process, bringing their opinions on the surface, giving room for discussions about the issues at stake (including values and moral commitments) and enabling consensus building. It also assists institutions and stakeholders in getting closer to each other and educates citizens and stakeholders in democratic principles ([Pateman, 1970](#); [Webler, 1995](#); [Webler and Renn, 1995](#); [Habermas, 1996](#)). Concerning the contribution of participation to increasing the effectiveness of conservation management, some scholars emphasise that involved stakeholders will be more dedicated to the implementation of the proposed measures, mutual learning can take place, conflicts can be revealed and steps can be taken toward resolving them ([Reed, 2008](#); [Evely et al., 2011](#); [Young et al., 2013](#)). Nevertheless, if participatory processes are not designed and implemented carefully, and sufficient time and resources are not provided, the advantages of participation remain marginal, leading to adverse effects (e.g. ‘participation fatigue’) ([Reed, 2008](#); [Rauschmayer et al., 2009](#); [Booth and Halseth, 2011](#); [Wesselink et al., 2011](#); [Diez et al., 2015](#)).

In this paper, we aim to evaluate participatory processes related to the development of management plans for Natura 2000 sites, located in Hungary. The Natura 2000 network of the European Union (EU) consisting of sites of community importance is considered one of the largest networks of protected areas in the world ([Kati et al., 2015](#)). Establishing and maintaining the network is guided by the Birds and Habitats Directives of the EU (Directive 2009/147/EC and Directive 92/43/EEC, respectively). They are transposed into national regulations, but the EU gives member states room to choose the most suitable means to achieve the main goals. According to the directives, the preparation of management plans for the Natura 2000 sites is not obligatory, but the Habitats Directive recommends their use as a means to secure the good conservation status of the sites. In spite of the soft regulation, the preparation of site-level management plans is promoted in most member states as the main tool to identify conservation measures at site level. Also, public or stakeholder participation in the process of management planning is not required by the directives, although guidelines emphasise the importance and advantages of such participation ([European Commission, 2014](#); [Souheil et al., 2011](#)). Thus, the nature and content of participatory planning processes vary across member states, and can take many forms: from written consultation through steering committees and advisory boards to discussion forums and workshops ([European Commission, 2014](#)). Evaluation of participatory processes related to the preparation of management plans for Natura 2000 sites can be useful for policy makers at both national and EU levels to develop guidelines for such participatory processes.

In Hungary, the designation of Natura 2000 sites was a requirement for accession to the EU, so the vast majority of sites had been designated by 2004. Preparing management plans for the Natura 2000 sites is not obligatory according to Hungarian state regulation, and the measures of the plan, beyond those listed in regulatory documents, are also voluntary. Nevertheless, the

development of management plans is encouraged by the ministry responsible for nature conservation (the Ministry of Agriculture and its predecessors in relation to nature conservation), with the provision of EU co-financed financial sources (e.g. Transition Facility, European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: EAFRD, LIFE) and the national budget. Plans are approved by the ministry responsible for nature conservation. According to Hungarian state regulation, if plans are prepared, consultation is required with the main stakeholders (275/2004 Governmental decree). This regulation also determines the content of the plans. Guidance for the preparation of management plans was issued by the responsible ministry in 2013. It only contains general recommendations for documenting the communication process, and does not provide comprehensive advice for the preparation process or stakeholder involvement ([Vidékfejlesztési Minisztérium, 2013](#)). There is also a set of compulsory requirements – in line with the requirements of the Governmental Decree – for communication during the management planning processes, co-financed by the EAFRD (Decree No. 4/2012 of the Ministry of Rural Development). In spite of these requirements and recommendations, participatory planning processes can be realised in many ways. Therefore, the evaluation of earlier experiences has an added value for carrying out planning processes more effectively in the future.

Evaluating the participatory processes is useful for informing the organisations responsible for planning and management, stakeholders and policy makers about strengths and weaknesses, and thus increasing the quality of future processes ([Rossi et al., 2004](#)). Evaluation can be based on different sets of criteria connected both to the process and to its outcomes ([Rauschmayer et al., 2009](#); [Bottrill and Pressey, 2012](#); [Dyer et al., 2014](#)). Studies describing public or stakeholder participation in nature conservation are widely available, even from Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries where public participation has a considerably shorter history than in other parts of Europe (see e.g. [Anthony and Moldovan, 2008](#); [Rodela and Udovč, 2008](#); [Lawrence, 2008](#); [Švajda, 2008](#); [Malatinszky et al., 2013](#); [Cent et al., 2014](#); [Molnár et al., 2016](#)). Most studies, however, fail to systematically evaluate the process along criteria predefined in the scientific literature on public participation. There are also a number of examples of evaluating certain conservation-related participatory processes, including community-based management ([Dyer et al., 2014](#)), and the designation or management of Natura 2000 sites ([Rauschmayer et al., 2009](#); [Diez et al., 2015](#); [Kovács et al., 2016](#)). Some studies even concentrate on the comparative analysis of participatory processes with a conservation focus which includes planning processes (see e.g. [Brody, 2003](#); [Koontz, 2005](#); [Sultana and Abeyasekera, 2007](#); [Apostolopoulou et al., 2012](#)). However, it is still rare to find any comparative evaluation related to the participatory management planning of Natura 2000 sites (see e.g. [Young et al., 2013](#); [Blondet et al., 2017](#)). We lack studies with this special focus that compare a larger set of processes, and there are no such studies from the CEE countries so far.

To fill the above mentioned gaps, this paper aims to critically analyse 25 participatory processes accompanying the preparation of Natura 2000 management plans in Hungary between 2007 and 2015. To ease their comparison we group the 25 processes into three cases. A conceptual framework is developed to evaluate the process and outcome of the planning processes along a set of criteria derived from the scientific literature on public participation. The criteria are chosen and defined considering the specificities of nature conservation and especially the management planning processes related to Natura 2000 sites. Based on the results of the evaluation the three cases are compared, and key factors contributing to success of the ‘best practice’ case are identified. Shortcomings of the evaluated participatory processes are also

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