



Societal engagement in Natura 2000 sites. A comparative analysis of the policies in three areas in England, Denmark and Germany



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ABSTRACT

Several governments in Europe have explicit ambitions to increase societal engagement in the management of Natura 2000 areas. However, implementing this ambition in practice remains a challenge. This article reviews experiences in three Natura 2000 sites in countries in which local level policies exist to improve societal engagement. By defining the elements of the different policies employed in terms of storylines, instruments, organizational structure and style of interaction, and evaluating to what extent these address societal and governmental arguments for societal involvement, wider lessons are drawn on how governments might tackle this complex issue. The area cases show that a hierarchical governance mode is combined with governance modes that are based more on cooperation, market mechanisms or responsiveness to societal energy in order to achieve societal engagement that goes further than acceptance of nature designations.

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1. Introduction

Natura 2000 is a network of protected nature areas in the European Union that was established under the 1992 Habitats Directive (Council Directive 92/43/EEC¹). The designation of this network by EU Member States has been criticized for being an overly government-driven and top-down approach, with a lack of stimulus for stakeholder involvement (Crofts, 2014; Dimitrakopoulos et al., 2010; Hiedanpaa, 2002). In response, authorities have begun to invite landowners, entrepreneurs and communities to take a more active role in the planning, use and management of Natura 2000 sites (Young et al., 2013; Boller et al., 2013; Ferranti et al., 2014). Sociopolitical trends, such as increased citizen empowerment and the changing role of the public sector, have contributed to this development. Over the past decade, the influence of neo-liberal politics in many Western European countries has shifted the emphasis on citizen participation further towards the notion of active citizenship and coproduction of public goods and services (e.g. Pestoff, 2006; Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Bovaird, 2007). We have seen this, for instance, in the term 'big society' in the UK and in

the 'participation society' in the Netherlands (Cabinet office, 2010; Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, 2013). The expectation behind these concepts is that reducing the size and scope of the government will enable societal responsibility, local innovation and civic action (Kisby, 2010).

Even though the EU and Member States have made efforts to establish more societal engagement and a societal discourse in the process of implementing Natura 2000, the literature suggests that so far they have tended to take a regulatory and government-driven approach, in terms of both discourse and practice (see e.g. Apostolopoulou et al., 2012; Bouwma et al., 2010; Cent et al., 2014; Engel et al., 2014; Turnhout et al., 2015; Young et al., 2013). This article investigates, from a social science perspective, how policies to improve societal engagement are dealt with and reconciled with the regulatory character of Natura 2000, especially in practice.

Little research on Natura 2000 has taken a social science perspective; most studies have taken a natural science perspective (Popescu et al., 2014). The studies available on social science topics deal with a wide range of issues, but few studies focus on governance and the role of public participation (Blicharska et al., 2016). Blicharska et al. (2016) conclude from a systematic review of 664 studies that despite the widely recognized importance of stakeholder participation, few studies have evaluated in detail the policies for societal engagement. Four studies directly evaluated participation processes (Apostolopoulou et al., 2012; Cent et al., 2014; Engel et al., 2014; Young et al., 2013). The general picture is

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¹ In the Habitats Directive the term 'Natura 2000' is used for the first time. It also encompasses the special protection areas under the Birds Directive.

Table 1
Perspectives on societal engagement in Natura 2000 areas.

Societal engagement	Governmental perspective	Societal perspective
Normative (legitimacy)	Ensure acceptance of nature designations	Ensure active involvement of societal actors with initiatives
Instrumental (reaching goals)	Society contributes to finance and undertakes nature conservation management	Financial or other reward for societal contributions to the areas
Substantive (values)	Biodiversity goals central	Extend goals to include all societal values

a low prevalence of participatory practices in Natura 2000 and these were usually steered in a top-down manner with an asymmetric power distribution. The government decides who may participate and how, and it is usually about achieving legal requirements or other governmental needs (Blicharska et al., 2016). Blicharska et al. (2016) conclude that, in general, there is a need for more social science research on how the functioning of Natura 2000 can be improved, including societal engagement.

The literature overview in Section 2 illustrates that government interpretations of societal engagement in Natura 2000 reflect an overall regulatory character. We compare government and societal perspectives on societal engagement in Natura 2000 areas to determine whether or not government policies are responsive to societal motives to become involved. To explore how such societal engagement can be organized, we analyse the literature from a governance perspective to see how shifts in governance modes allow development of several modes of societal engagement, such as sharing responsibilities with societal actors, flexibility in goal setting and outsourcing (e.g. Reddel and Woolcock, 2004; Meuleman, 2008; Van der Steen et al., 2015). Section 3 sets out this analytical framework.

The core of the article is a qualitative research of three government policies for societal engagement in three Natura 2000 areas. We address the following questions: What types of policies for societal engagement do the authorities develop? How do these relate to the regulatory framework of Natura 2000? and How do the policies balance government perspectives for societal engagement with the arguments of social actors to get involved in these areas? The areas are Exmoor National Park (England, UK), Lille Vildmose (Denmark) and Nature Park Aukrug (in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany). Each have Natura 2000 sites within their boundaries and take different approaches to societal engagement. The methods and case selection are explained in Section 4 and Section 5 presents the results of the analysis. Section 6 contains a comparative analysis of the policies and practices. Section 7 contains the discussion and conclusions.

2. Societal engagement in Natura 2000 from two perspectives

In this section we compare arguments for societal engagement in Natura 2000 from governmental and societal perspectives. We show that the EU and Member States have invested in a more participatory approach to Natura 2000, but that government arguments for and interpretation of societal engagement in Natura 2000 reflect a regulatory and government-driven approach.

Arguments for stakeholder participation and co-management can be categorized as normative, substantive and instrumental (e.g. Young et al., 2013; Rauschmayer et al., 2009). *Normative* arguments relate to strengthening democratic processes, such as conflict resolution or avoidance, and strengthening the legitimacy of policies. Legitimacy is defined as having the support of those affected by the outcomes of binding collective decision making (Keulartz and Leistra, 2008). In all Member States the designation of the Natura 2000 sites led to conflicts with private landowners and other concerned actors (e.g. Beunen, 2006; Dimitrakopoulos et al., 2010; Hiedanpaa, 2002; Geitzenauer et al., 2016; Grodzinska-Jurczak and Cent, 2011; Rauschmayer et al., 2009). In general, conflicts over

the designation processes of Natura 2000 sites in many Member States are related to democratic values, such as a perceived lack of information and consultation, and not being able to influence decisions (Bouwma et al., 2010; Hiedanpaa, 2002). To remediate the negative effects of the designation processes of the Natura 2000 sites, both the EU and Member States take efforts to increase societal engagement in the implementation phase through workshops, guidelines and interaction. This discourse is more participatory, but is still largely directed at education and information on Natura 2000 (Turnhout et al., 2015) and seeks to gain the acceptance of nature designations by societal actors (Ferranti et al., 2014). This may be explained by the fact that the designations are legally binding and cannot easily be changed. However, societal support for policies in general is no longer merely expressed by passive acceptance, but increasing through citizen action and initiative (e.g. Hajer, 2011; Van der Steen et al., 2015). Societal actors may want to take a proactive role in shaping their own living environment, express their support for nature areas actively and take responsibility, which is known as environmental citizenship (e.g. Buijs et al., 2012; Dobson and Bell, 2006). From a societal perspective, this means that policies for Natura 2000 should encompass the potential for societal actors to come forward with their own ideas and initiatives for the management of these areas.

Instrumental arguments for societal participation take a rational choice perspective, which assumes that actors make choices on the basis of rational deliberations on how best to achieve a certain end (Bevir and Rhodes, 2001). From this perspective, societal engagement for Natura 2000 can be understood as an effort to find the most efficient way to realize the Natura 2000 obligations. Instrumental arguments are among the core arguments used by governments to increase societal engagement in Natura 2000 areas. An important government argument for societal engagement is ensuring adequate management of the Natura 2000 areas through the active involvement of landowners and farmers. Besides, EU regulations oblige Member States to take adequate measures to protect the species and habitats the sites were designated for, and to do this they need the cooperation of private landowners. After all, most of the Natura 2000 sites in Europe are privately owned (Gallais, 2015). Agricultural management is particularly important as 63 habitat types depend on or can benefit from agricultural activities (Halada et al., 2011). From the perspective of social actors, instrumental arguments are about reaching their own goals in the most effective way. Landowners and farmers who want recognition of their ownership and land use rights in the designated areas may argue that becoming involved provides opportunities to demand sufficient compensation for possible income losses that they fear will result from Natura 2000 designations. Societal actors may also have other interests that they want to pursue. Often, financial instruments to compensate landowners and efforts to balance interests are needed to ensure societal involvement. This poses a challenge to governments that are trying to reduce public spending.

Substantive arguments for societal engagement are based on the local knowledge and values of the actors involved (Young et al., 2013), which may add quality to the Natura 2000 areas. Member States are bound to the EU objectives to protect particular species and habitats in a specific site and their first responsibility is to ensure the conservation status of the species and habitats in

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