



Why is it difficult to enlarge a protected area? Ecosystem services perspective on the conflict around the extension of the Białowieża National Park in Poland

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ABSTRACT

This study explains the difficulties with the enlargement of the Białowieża National Park in Poland through an ecosystem services perspective. We carried out a questionnaire survey among the local communities to investigate local use of ecosystem services and respondents' attitude towards the national park enlargement. The results indicate that local people are not as dependent on forest resources as often claimed. Firewood proved a crucial resource as the vast majority of the respondents depended on it for heating their houses. We also found that the local population has a rather low awareness of the national park territory and rules involved. The results suggest that previous enlargement attempts might have failed because decision makers did not adequately consider resources the local people depend on. Lack of clear information and transparent decision-making also amplified the conflict. Future enlargement initiatives should provide clear rules concerning the local use of ecosystem services and the access to firewood in particular. Furthermore, new policies should be developed in cooperation with local people and accompanied by an appropriate information campaign. It is argued that the ecosystem services perspective provides important data which can inform more effective conservation policy-making.

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Introduction

The last three decades brought changing perception of the role of protected areas worldwide (Phillips, 2003; Berkes, 2004; Wells and McShane, 2004; Lockwood et al., 2006). They are increasingly seen as important both for conservation and for pursuing social, economic and cultural objectives of communities living in their vicinity (Mose and Weixlbaumer, 2007). According to the new paradigm of protected areas, their management should be based on the cooperation between various groups of actors including the central government, local authorities, private companies and NGOs. Local communities are seen as important economic and cultural beneficiaries of protected areas. In order to facilitate cooperation between actors and compliance with conservation restrictions traditional management of protected areas, dominated by the natural

scientists and focused on technical conservation measures, should gradually be replaced by participatory processes requiring socio-political skills (Phillips, 2003). This new paradigm, despite some critical voices (e.g. Locke and Dearden, 2005), has been quickly implemented into policy-making. The Convention of Biological Diversity recognised the dependency of local communities on natural resources and their role in managing these resources (UN, 1992, article 8j). In 1995, the UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserves was re-conceptualised as a network of protected areas, which should not only reduce biodiversity loss, but also “improve livelihoods and enhance social economic and cultural conditions for environmental sustainability” (UNESCO, 2010). The 2003 IUCN World Park Congress acknowledged the new paradigm by recommending “empowering all stakeholders to fulfil their role in protected area management” and adopting “mechanisms to enable representation and participation of all protected area stakeholders at national, regional and local levels” (IUCN, 2003, p. 141).

For Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries, with their history of socialist central planning and top-down policy-making, implementation of the new paradigm of protected areas is particularly challenging. Protected area governance during socialism followed centralised, hierarchical and expert-based patterns of industrial production (Tickle and Clarke, 2000), while local land

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management practices were ignored (Lawrence, 2008). According to Tickle and Clarke (2000) and Kluvánková-Oravská et al. (2009), these arrangements largely survived the transition period and decision-making concerning protected areas is still dominated by central authorities with local consultations, accountability and conflict resolution mechanisms usually missing. The top-down thinking still dominates among policymakers and nature conservation professionals, few of whom have expertise and willingness to include local people into decision-making (Grodzińska-Jurczak and Cent, 2011; Blicharska et al., 2011). At the same time, democratisation makes communities living in the vicinity of protected areas increasingly interested in having their voice heard (Królikowska, 2007; Lawrence, 2008). The EU accession of the CEE countries in 2004 and 2007 contributed to increased opening up of nature conservation policy-making. However, the co-operative relations in the policy domain seem not sustainable due to still insufficient capacity of both state and non-state actors and the top-down, non-participatory way the EU rules, especially those related to the Natura 2000 network of protected areas, have been implemented (Börzel and Buzogány, 2010; Kluvánková-Oravská et al., 2009). Consequently, trying to attain their policy goals, conservation actors engage in more confrontational strategies rather than partner with the government. Thus, there is still a need to come up with new tools and perspectives which would facilitate a more collaborative, localised, bottom-up approach.

The concept of services provided by ecosystems has caught conservationists' attention since the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA, 2005). In simple terms, ecosystem services (ES) are benefits that humans obtain from ecosystems. They include provisioning, regulating, cultural and supporting services (MA, 2005). The ES concept has been utilised in conservation and contributed to the idea of payments for biodiversity conservation (Milne and Niesten, 2000; Ferraro and Kiss, 2002) and payments for ES in particular (Redford and Adams, 2009; Gómez-Baggethun et al., 2010), and explored especially in the context of developing countries. It is recognised that ES can provide many benefits to people living close to protected areas that could counterbalance the costs of the conservation (Adams and Hutton, 2007). Apart from tangible benefits from provisional services, such as wood or berries, also cultural services, particularly those supporting tourism industry may provide incentives for local conservation (Brooks, 2005; Nelson et al., 2010). However, different groups of stakeholders may identify different types of ES and attach different values to particular ES depending, for instance, on their proximity to the particular ecosystem, scale of ES provided, and socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the mix of stakeholders involved (Martín-López et al., 2012; Turner and Daily, 2008). Consequently, the question of which ES should be provided and what should be the distribution of benefits and burdens involved is often a matter of political dispute and environmental conflicts (Paavola, 2004). When considering which ES should be supported, trade-offs are often necessary (McShane et al., 2011; Seppelt et al., 2011). For example, Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (MA, 2005) has investigated trade-offs between different ES globally and concluded that during the last 50 years, increases in four particular ES (mostly provisioning) has caused a decrease in another fifteen ES (mainly regulating and supporting). By investigating ES as perceived by various groups of actors and the trade-offs connected with particular policy options, the ES approach potentially offers a convenient perspective for policy makers to understand, avoid and mitigate conflicts involved in the conservation and management of natural resources (Martín-López et al., 2012). However, studies, which directly look at the conflicts around protected areas through the perspective of local benefits and their users focus mainly on developing countries (e.g. Abbot et al., 2001; Schelhas et al., 2002; Hartter and Goldman, 2011; Allendorf and Yang, 2013).

To investigate the importance of the ES for understanding conflict related to protected areas in a relatively developed European country, this study focuses on the conflict over the conservation of the Białowieża Forest (BF) in Poland. This conflict has a special place among nature conservation conflicts in CEE because of its long history, its international importance from a biodiversity perspective, and finally its impact on the national legislation (Niedziałkowski et al., 2012). The BF is considered the last patch of the near-natural lowland forest in Europe (Jędrzejewska and Jędrzejewski, 1998; Maris, 2008). It provides a habitat for almost a complete assemblage of species dependent on the structure and dynamics of natural forests and is a unique reference area for forest biodiversity conservation (Peterken, 1996). The Polish part of the BF has been subject to a long-term conflict between those promoting an enlargement of the Białowieża National Park (BNP) over the whole Polish section of the BF, and those who want to keep the status quo (Blicharska and Angelstam, 2010; Franklin, 2002; Niedziałkowski et al., 2012). At the same time, the conflict represents a wider problem with designating national parks in Poland, where no new national parks have been established or enlarged since 2001 (GUS, 2010), despite repeated attempts to do so and availability of suitable areas (Symonides, 2008). ES used by local people seem to be at the heart of the discussion about the national park designations and the conflict over the BF transpired to be decisive for creating rules, which hindered enlargement or establishment of national parks in Poland. The legislative change of 2000 enabling local and regional authorities to formally veto the national park designation was promoted by a member of the Polish Parliament who referred to the BF case and stressed that “a narrow pressure group cannot endanger the livelihood of most of the local people, who depend solely on forestry in this very poor region” (Polish Parliament, 2000). The BF case therefore also exemplifies a conflict between local economic needs and higher level priorities in conservation (Noss, 2010) in a relatively less investigated context of a CEE country.

To investigate ES provided by the BF to the local inhabitants we carried out a questionnaire survey among the local communities of the BF concerning benefits they obtain from the BF, as well as their view on the potential impact of the BNP enlargement over the whole Polish part of the BF on these benefits. We focused on the provisioning and cultural services as they have so far been at the centre of the conflict (Adamczyk, 1994; Gliński, 2001). We discuss the results and their significance for the conservation and management of the BF and other protected areas in CEE, taking into account justice considerations and the new, more participatory paradigm of protected areas. We also provide broader recommendations for policy makers. The paper is concluded with a general discussion on the usefulness of ES approach for addressing conservation conflicts.

Materials and methods

Study site

The BF is divided between Poland (around 600 km²) and Belarus (around 900 km²) (Fig. 1). The whole Belarusian part is designated as a national park and divided into four zones with different levels of protection. The Polish part of the BF includes the BNP (105 km²) and three forest districts managed by a public forest agency – the State Forests Holding (SFH). The BNP includes 57.3 km² under strict protection (no management is carried out and only limited tourism and research activities are allowed), 44.4 km² under active protection (some management practices can be taken to maintain the natural values of the forest), and 3.5 km² under landscape protection (management is carried out but different restrictions apply) (BNP, 2012). Within the active and landscape protection areas there is an incidental harvesting of wood. In the part of the BF managed by

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