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Analysis

Discourses on Public Participation in Protected Areas Governance: Application of Q Methodology in Poland

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ABSTRACT

Effective public participation in decision-making concerning protected areas requires supportive legal provisions, practices and narratives. While there has been a wide interest in organisational aspects of participation in protected areas, discursive questions concerning the attitudes toward participation among stakeholder have received relatively little attention. Using Q methodology we investigated attitudes of 53 respondents, representing key stakeholder groups (local communities, NGOs, scientists, protected area staff, foresters, public officials, general public), toward the involvement of local communities in managing various forms of biodiversity conservation in Poland. We found three main discourses (1) positive toward participation and recognizing the conservation and development goals of protected areas; (2) sceptical toward participation and nature-centred; (3) cautiously open to participation and developmental goals of protected areas but highlighting organisational difficulties. There were diverse attitudes toward participation within stakeholder groups signalling potential for compromise among them. All three discourses opt for a mixed model of governance balancing central and local influence, which diverges from traditional centralized practices. They differ over barriers to participation, highlighting either insufficient capacity of administration or lack of knowledge and interests of local people. These differences indicate wider socio-political tensions that should be acknowledged during participation.

1. Introduction

People living close to protected areas often oppose them because they feel they face restrictions which are not matched by benefits from these areas (Wells, 1992). Opening planning and management of protected areas to local people can take many forms, such as consulting decisions, negotiations, referenda, public hearings, citizen panels, advisory committees or management of protected areas by communities themselves (Renn, 2006). Such local participation, understood as a process where local communities take an active role in making decisions that affect them (see Reed, 2008, p. 2419), helps to include their interests and values in decision-making and mitigate conflict (Borrini-Feyerabend, 1996; Stoll-Kleemann and O'Riordan, 2002). Furthermore, it might discontinue injustices that they could have been exposed to, such as displacement, restricted access to livelihood resources, and restriction of cultural practices (Mitchell and Brown, 2003). Also, local people, being closest to the ecosystem and coexisting with it for a long time may bring traditional knowledge and emotional bonds with the area, which might improve conservation. In contrast, when ignored, local communities may negatively affect the natural values of protected areas (ibid.). These considerations informed a new paradigm (Lockwood et al., 2006; Phillips, 2003) or a new narrative (Hutton et al., 2005) in protected areas, according to which they should be planned and managed with, for and sometimes by local communities. This paradigm, although not without its critics (Locke and Dearden, 2005; Wilshusen et al., 2002), became an established reference point for conservation strategies in different parts of the world, supported by international conservation organizations such as IUCN and UNESCO. The European Union also increasingly acknowledges the importance of public participation in biodiversity conservation, although its practical implementation is still assessed as unsatisfactory (Rauschmayer et al., 2009).

People's values related to biodiversity conservation and ways in which they can be explored and incorporated into policies has been a

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subject of research within ecological economics (Martinez-Alier, 2002). Informed by the concept of post-normal science (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1993), this strain of economics acknowledges that uncertainty in socio-ecological systems is unavoidable, the quality of decision-making is crucial and values concerning the environment can be diverse and incommensurable. Consequently, there are no technical, value-free, objective solutions to policy problems and public involvement in policy-making is required to include possibly wide range of public values (Dryzek, 2013). Tacconi (2000, p. 97) within his ecological economics framework for biodiversity conservation argued that "the decision-making process should be participatory" and "the appropriate degree of participation will be influenced by a combination of factors, such as the scale of the problem and the resources available for the planning and implementation phases". He also asserted that power and conflict at various levels need to be addressed as they influence ecosystem use and will not be automatically tackled by participation.

Understanding perspectives of stakeholders – those who are affected by or can affect a decision (Freeman, 1984) – is crucial for exploring effectiveness and justice of participation (Paloniemi et al., 2015). Barry and Proops (1999, p. 344) recommended Q methodology to elicit views on environmental issues and policies in ecological economics research "in a way that is responsive to the attitudes held by the respondents, rather than the researchers, while still having a rigorous statistical basis for the extraction of the discourses within the population". Furthermore, it can identify common and controversial issues and perspectives in the population, which is important because policies directed toward commonly shared concerns would be likely to enjoy social and political support, and be effective (ibid.). Alternatively, knowing which issues might be criticized and by whom may help to develop policies in a way most likely to achieve wide acceptance (Barry and Proops, 1999; Steelman and Maguire, 1999). In recent years, the number of papers investigating discourses relating to environmental policies by means of Q methodology has grown, addressing a range of policy interventions from fire management in Australia (Ockwell, 2008) to wildlife management in Norway (Bredin et al., 2015). However, participatory governance of protected areas remains under-researched. Among few Q studies touching upon this issue one can enumerate a paper by Cairns et al. (2014) investigating discourses on conservation of the Galapagos Islands, a study by Kamal and Grodzinska-Jurczak (2014) looking at the attitudes toward biodiversity conservation on private land, and a paper by Gall and Rodwell (2016), who included participation among important factors influencing social acceptance of marine protected areas. So far, however, there were no Q studies focusing on perceptions concerning the participation in protected areas governance. We aim at filling this gap by examining the case of Poland.

For the most of the 20th century, governments of then socialist countries from Central and Eastern Europe took almost all decisions concerning biodiversity conservation, which created a path persisting even in the new democratic context after 1989 (Petrova, 2014). In Poland, since the 1990s nature conservation legislation has increasingly included participatory provisions (Niedziałkowski et al., 2015), but their practical implementation remained challenging (Cent et al., 2010). As suggested by Lowndes and Roberts (2013), to be effective, new rules should be supplemented by narratives and practices that support them. Therefore, to explore the discursive background of protected areas governance in Poland we investigated perceptions of 53 stakeholders using Q methodology (Brown, 1980). We were interested if there are signs of ideas supporting the new paradigm of protected areas, open to participation and oriented both at natural and social goals of protected areas, as represented by key groups of stakeholders (local people, NGOs, scientists, foresters, protected area staff, public officials), which have been usually involved in discussions around protected areas in Poland (Grodzińska-Jurczak and Cent, 2011; Niedziałkowski et al., 2012; Pietrzyk-Kaszyńska et al., 2012). We also wanted to explore perceived barriers to implementing participatory practices into protected areas governance in Poland.

2. Background to Q Methodology

Q methodology is a research method proposed by William Stephenson (1935) to quantitatively study individuals' subjectivity. It enables a structured approach to identifying people's understandings of particular issues by describing significant differences in respondents' attitudes (Brown, 1993). A key tenet of Q is that subjectivity is communicable and can be systematically analysed. Q methodology can identify and characterize ways of thinking about an issue but it cannot quantify the prevalence of those ways of thinking (Brown, 1980). Results of a Q study describe a population of viewpoints, not a population of people (Risdon et al., 2003; Van Exel and De Graaf, 2005). Q method requires a relatively small number of possibly diverse respondents but the sample does not have to be representative of the population (Neff, 2011). Consequently, results cannot be generalised. The Q methodology has been extensively covered by Brown (1980, 1993), McKeown and Thomas (1988), Van Exel and De Graaf (2005), and Watts and Stenner (2005) and its application of the methodology to environmental research discussed by Webler et al. (2009). Therefore, in this paper we provide only the basic tenets of this method.

The Q methodology involves following phases: (1) Building the concourse – collecting of statements about the subject from a wide range of sources; (2) Constructing the Q-set – selecting a subset of statements from the concourse which represents all existing opinions; usually the Q-set includes 40–50 statements (Van Exel and De Graaf, 2005), but may vary from 15 (Carr and Heyman, 2012) to 60 (Visser et al., 2007); statements are randomly assigned a number and presented to respondents on separate cards – the Q deck – in the form of sentences, pictures or objects; (3) Constructing the P set – selecting respondents, usually decision-makers and opinion leaders (Webler et al., 2001) to represent anticipated viewpoints of key stakeholder groups (e.g. local people, public officials, scientists); (4) Q sorting procedure – respondents arrange statements into a forced quasi-normal distribution with x axis from "most disagree" to "most agree"; usually the range covers from −4 to +4 or from −5 to +5; (5) Post Q sorting interview – carried out to clarify opinions of the respondents and facilitate interpretation of the results; (6) Factor analysis – revealing key ideal viewpoints in the community; usually conducted by software (e.g. PCQ, PQMethod) which examines correlation matrix of all Q sorts to identify factors (discourses) that capture the main dimensions of similarity between the Q sorts; factors are extracted based on their eigenvalues and then rotated (typically using varimax orthogonal rotation) to indicate how well participant's ideas are depicted by each of the factor descriptions (Neff, 2011); (7) Factor interpretation – proceeds primarily based on factor scores, i.e. the score for a statement representing the average of the scores attributed to that statement by all of the Q sorts associated with the factor (Brown, 1993). All scores of a factor constitute a composite Q sort of a factor showing how a hypothetical person with a 100% loading on that factor would have arrange all the statements of the Q-set (Van Exel and De Graaf, 2005). The interpretation of the factors may be facilitated by information from the post-sorting interview.

3. Methodology

In our study, the concourse, defined as "statements related to the participation of various groups of actors in decision-making regarding protected areas" was gathered based on a comprehensive review of scientific literature, nature conservation journals and magazines, conferences and workshop reports, and minutes of parliamentary meetings. We also used material from participant observation during focus groups with local people and experts organized in five different locations in Poland within the project LINKAGE ("Linking systems, perspectives and disciplines for active biodiversity governance") as well as data gathered during the meetings of the Natura 2000 local cooperation group "Białowieża Forest". Finally, we analysed 70 interviews with