



Towards a new model for the governance of the Weerribben-Wieden National Park

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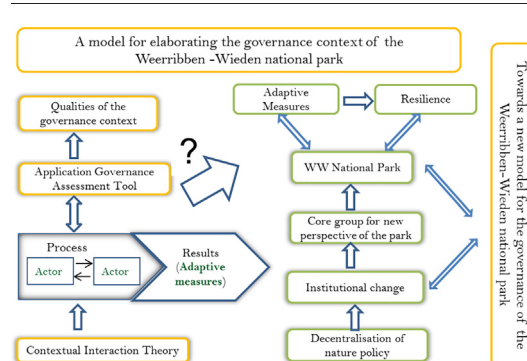
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HIGHLIGHTS

- Institutional context has a significant influence on the governance for resilience.
- Institutional change by decentralisation comes in a multi-form of layers and aspects.
- Decentralisation may lead to a lengthy transition process with uncertain outcomes.
- Institutional change restricted adaptiveness of the governance context towards resilience.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT



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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the governance of the Dutch national park Weerribben-Wieden and its ability to foster ecological resilience in the face of climate change and human disturbances. The study highlights the role of various characteristics of the institutional context of governance in which resilience-relevant decisions are prepared, taken and implemented as referenced by an assessment of the governance context. The relevance of such an assessment is found in the frequent institutional changes in nature policy. This paper examines how care for the resilience in an area is supported by the governance context, given the major recent restructurings. The drastic changes in nature policy in the Netherlands include national government withdrawing from their central role and decentralising the authority for nature tasks to the provinces. Subsequently, the province has also withdrawn itself in the Weerribben-Wieden case and decentralised nature tasks to the municipality. So, in our research case, the 'take home message' relates to the impacts of decentralisation in different 'sizes'. Institutional change by decentralisation does not come in 'one size', but rather in a multi-form phenomenon of layers and aspects. The governance assessment tool was used to analyze the consequences of this decentralisation for the processes in which resilience measures are implemented in various degrees and interactions. Decentralisation without balanced problem perspectives and goals, without an integral approach towards the park's resilience, and without adequate strategies and instruments, most likely leads to a lengthy transition process with uncertain outcomes. The study concludes that institutional changes in this case restricted adaptiveness of governance towards resilience and has diminished a sense of responsibility for the maintenance of the national park resources.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Trends in protected area governance

An emerging trend in biodiversity policies links ecological resilience to governance processes (Carpenter and Folke, 2006) creating resilience-based governance as a new approach in ecological knowledge. Governance is recognised as critical to effective conservation by the Convention on Biological Diversity (Dearden et al., 2005). It is a relatively new field of research for protected area resilience (Hannah, 2006; Lockwood, 2010; Eagles et al., 2013). This paper intends to illustrate the relationship between governance and resilience through an assessment of the governance of the Dutch national park Weerribben-Wieden to enhance ecosystem resilience. Fostering ecosystem resilience uses processes where decisions are prepared, taken and implemented. We refer to the institutional setting as the governance context.

Policy changes in nature conservation have influenced the governance of protected areas. The commonly applied protectionist model was challenged by new policy approaches that gave importance to economic consideration for nature conservation. Protected areas became seen as more complex in concept and more complicated in management (Dudley et al., 2014). Moreover, with the approval of the European Biodiversity Strategy 2020, the European Union encourages to develop markets that capture the economic value of biodiversity and develop partnerships for biodiversity with a wide variety of stakeholders (Kamphorst and Coninx, 2016: 1; European Commission, 2011). Thus, protected area governance has tended to become a more multi-level system, empowering and engaging a wider variety of participants (Lockwood, 2010).

1.2. Nature policy changes in the Netherlands

A comparable evolution is taking place in nature policy in the Netherlands. National government has implemented major changes in nature policy formerly associated with a strong top-down approach where national government led, while the provinces' role was implementation. For some decades this was a stable policy strategy based on the National Ecological Network concept which envisioned larger nature areas as being interconnected by ecological zones (Kamphorst and Coninx, 2016). Recently, national government has withdrawn from their central role, but still coordinates with European and international commitments in nature policy (Buijs et al., 2014). Authority for nature policy-making and implementation is now decentralised to the provinces, who have also faced severe budget cuts. The argument for decentralisation assumes that on a smaller scale, policies and actors can better take into account local circumstances and variations. This might have some truth but the political arguments varied as the reduced governmental role is built on a belief in a market-oriented approach and individual responsibility and involvement.

1.3. The challenge addressed

The challenges in this paper relate to the addressed institutional changes in the governance of nature policy to protect and enhance the resilience of natural areas. These are particularly challenging for biodiversity and resilience that require coherent, multi-scale approaches. Local measures may well not harm, but must be coherent across a whole relevant ecosystem. Whether institutions are actually committed to biodiversity and resilience relies on the nature of their practices and procedures (McLean and Guha-Sapir, 2013). Moreover, a range of governance context conditions (such as available resources and finances) influence the feasibility of measures to improve resilience of nature areas.

Nowadays, the challenge for the Weerribben-Wieden is to maintain and improve the quality and resilience of the area characterised by its special nature values and cultural history, and to deal with the changing

governance of nature policy. A strengthened leisure economy is one future challenge. The argument to decentralise presents a double challenge: fostering resilience, and maintaining ecosystem services; two foci that in a perfect world would be highly related.

Currently, the park is transitioning towards a new style of organisation for governance and management involving local partners led by a local municipality. This major challenge is the focus of research for this study. The quality of the nature experience is a core idea of this new style. This follows on from the withdrawal of the national authorities and, later, the provincial authorities and their implications for the coordination, vision and resources for park management.

1.4. Objective and research question

The main objective is to assess the governance context of the concerned area and to highlight factors influencing enhanced resilience. The Weerribben-Wieden is a unique natural area of local, national and international importance for maintaining biodiversity, ecosystem functions and flow of those services. This stresses the importance of enhancing resilience here. We analyzed the factors using the governance assessment tool (GAT) (Bressers et al., 2016), with its basis in contextual interaction theory (CIT) (Bressers, 2004). The tool helps explore relationships between resilience and governance and the interactions among relevant governance features. Is the governance context still a part of the support system for resilience, or has it become the major challenge itself (given the governance context changes since 2011 with the two steps of decentralisation and withdrawal of governmental support)?

The research question addressed is: To what extent do governance factors support or hamper implementation of measures to foster resilience of the park? Implementation means “the processes that concern the application of relevant policy instruments, including the realization of projects to achieve physical changes” (Bressers, 2004: 284).

This research question will provide insights into the governance of the resilience of the studied area by exploring the processes and conditions that influence decision-making; demonstrating a connection between the conceptual governance tool and adaptive actions to achieve resilient results. This study will add to the literature in this relatively new field of study and the literature on decentralisation. In Section 2 main concepts for the study are defined. Section 3 presents the governance assessment framework. Section 4 describes the methodology. Section 5 presents the case of the Weerribben-Wieden National Park, observing the threats to the area and changes in the governance structure. Section 6 presents the application of the governance assessment framework, analyzing the governance context according to GAT. Finally, the conclusions are drawn in Section 7.

2. Defining the main concepts

2.1. Resilience

The meaning and the use of resilience is interpreted in different ways across disciplines (Holling, 1973; Carpenter et al., 2001; Folke, 2006; Béné et al., 2014). The exact definition of resilience remains a subject of discussion (De Bruijn et al., 2017). Our study defines it as: “the ability of ecosystems to absorb changes and still persist and adapt in the face of disruptions and maintain relationships within a system” (Holling, 1973; Adger, 2003, 1; Folke et al., 2010; Davoudi, 2012). This derives from understanding natural systems as being dynamic (Davidson et al., 2013) and incorporating positive adaptation within the context of human or natural threats (Folke et al., 2010). Next to absorptive and adaptive capacities of a system, transformability also is seen as an important characteristic of resilience thinking (Folke et al., 2010). It helps “to create a new system when ecological, economic, or social structures make the existing system untenable” (Walker et al., 2004: 5).

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