What a forest? Whose forest? Struggles over concepts and meanings in the debate about the conservation of the Białowieża Forest in Poland

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the long-standing debate over the conservation and management of the Białowieża Forest in North-eastern Poland, frequently referred to as the last, large, close-to-natural, temperate, lowland forest in Europe. With the present research we aim to document how particular conceptualisations of "forest" shaped the debate and the fate of the Białowieża Forest. Based on our reconstruction and analysis of argumentation, three dominant discourses could be distinguished, each offering different concepts of forest and people–forest relationships: 1. 'managerial' — with foresters presented as stewards of the forest, actively managing it for sustainable outcomes; 2. 'livelihood' — considering the forest as local heritage and underlining its role in fulfilling people's needs; and 3. 'primaeval' — highlighting the forest's intrinsic value and natural processes, being an international concern. The three discourses remained remarkably stable over the past two decades, but their status of institutionalisation evolved, which in turn influenced their hegemony and power. Importantly, our study demonstrates the active role of parties involved in the debate as they used particular concepts (their own, those of others or new ones) for strategic purposes. We conclude that both the achieved hegemony of a discourse and the particular ways by which its concepts are mobilised by actors may play a decisive role in shaping debate and its policy outcomes. We suggest that future research should focus more on the role of actors in strategically using particular forest-related concepts in concrete situations and to what effects.

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1. Introduction

This paper addresses the long-standing debate over the conservation and management of the Białowieża Forest in north-eastern Poland, frequently referred to as the last large close-to-natural temperate lowland forest in Europe. This debate started with a broad campaign by environmentalists and scientists in the 1990s to better protect the Białowieża Forest by enlarging the existing National Park to cover the whole forest area. The campaign was opposed by local communities and state foresters, and the situation developed into a conflict that remained unsettled. Key phases of the debate were associated with amendments to the Polish Conservation Act in 2000, the emergence of new arguments following Polish accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004, and government decisions taken for the sake of biodiversity conservation in 2013, which constrained timber harvesting to one third of previous levels. During these episodes, and concurrent shifts in socioeconomic and political contexts, the fundamental question of

how best to conserve and manage the Białowieża Forest for the future was debated from different perspectives by particular stakeholder groups.

The political struggles and processes surrounding the conservation and management of the Białowieża Forest have received scholarly attention, in particular with respect to the influence and power of local actors in the process (Franklin, 2002; Niedziałkowski et al., 2012). The issue of reconciling local interests with wider goals of forest governance is also a central policy challenge across Europe (and beyond). According to Werland (2009), who addressed the internationalisation of forest politics, the concept of "forest" is increasingly understood and placed within the broader context of global environmental and development concerns. As a consequence, the traditional focus on forests providing national resources and local services is now complemented by the concept that forests are part of the global ecological system and of common concern to mankind (Werland, 2009). However, such shifts in forest conceptualisation have not gone unchallenged. The creation of protected forest areas for biodiversity is often associated with costs and loss of revenue for local communities – i.e. arising from issues of resource distribution – and may lead to acute conflicts, as shown in a European-wide study by Niemelä et al. (2005). Furthermore, the pursuit of generalised ecological goals and centrally defined concepts can leave little room for local autonomy, deliberation and initiative

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(Pinto-Correia et al., 2006; Buizer and Van Herzele, 2012; Beunen et al., 2013).

It is now widely recognised that struggles about concepts and meaning are an essential part of the governance of natural resources (Feindt and Oels, 2005). A good example is "sustainable forest management", an influential concept in forest governance, which has been challenged and changed over time (Werland, 2009; Winkel et al., 2011). Clearly, it matters for policy whether forests are conceptualised as, e.g., models of "sustainable management", "sources of renewable energy", "carbon sinks", "ecological networks" or "providers of ecosystem services". For example, for a long time the concept of "multifunctional forest" formed the cornerstone of Flanders' afforestation strategy and also enabled the "urban forest" concept to be developed, resulting in the creation of forests near cities, at least on plans (Van Herzele, 2006, 2015). Where such concepts are imposed in a top-down fashion, their meaning and implementation are likely to be contested (Sharp and Richardson, 2001; Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). In this respect, local conflicts arising from policy-making may be shaped by wider struggles between competing economic, social and environmental discourses (Mazza and Rydin, 1997; Sharp and Richardson, 2001).

In this paper, we reconstruct the evolution of the debate surrounding the governance of the Białowieża Forest over the last two decades. We apply a discourse-analytic approach to document the vital role that different forest-related concepts have played in the processes of debate and subsequent decision-making. Overall, the Białowieża Forest debate provides an interesting window into the way these concepts are used and played out in real-life situations and to what effect. As such, this paper contributes empirically to the analysis of forest governance discourse, which is a recently active area of research (e.g. Van Herzele, 2006; Medina et al., 2009; Arts et al., 2010; Winkel et al., 2011; Buizer and Van Herzele, 2012; de Koning et al., 2014; Pecurul-Botines et al., 2014; Winkel, 2014).

2. Theoretical orientation and methodology

This study joins an increasing body of forest policy research drawing on discourse theory (for reviews and reflections, see Arts and Buizer, 2009; Buizer and Van Herzele, 2012; Winkel, 2012; Leipold, 2014). Despite there being no single model or exact method for applying discourse theory to empirical research topics, a number of possible styles or strategies of discourse analysis have been identified. In the present study, we apply what Howarth (2000) called a problematisation strategy. In doing so, we explore the different ways that problems or issues are conceptualised and how such conceptualisations are linked to the powerful discourses present (Mazza and Rydin, 1997). Importantly, this includes how particular conceptualisations and representations influence the policy process. As Hajer states that, "determining the way a phenomenon is linguistically represented has repercussions for politically essential questions, such as, 'Who is responsible?', 'What can be done?', 'What should be done?' (Hajer, 2002). Thus, discourses delimit the range of what are considered "reasonable" policy options and thereby serve as precursors to policy outcomes (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005).

From a discourse theory perspective there are no fixed rules and procedures of social science investigation. This implies that, in each instance of real-life research, discourse researchers have to modulate and articulate their theoretical concepts to suit the particular problems they are addressing (Howarth, 2000). In this study, we make use of a broad definition of discourse that embraces not only text and communication but also practices (Sharp and Richardson, 2001); "… a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (Hajer, 1995).

Various researchers in environmental policy make an analytical distinction between discourse and communicative exchanges, such as a conversation, discussion or debate; "A discourse refers to a set of concepts that structure the contributions of participants to a discussion" (Hajer, 2005). For example, afforestation might be discussed in terms of multi-functionality by foresters and spatial structure and connections by planning professionals (Van Herzele, 2006, 2015). Methodologically, the communicative or argumentative exchange is the object of analysis: "discourse analysis sets out to trace a particular linguistic regularity that can be found in discussions or debates" (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). Furthermore, discourses are understood to be manifested in policy rhetoric, but also in institutional structures, practices and events (Sharp and Richardson, 2001). To have a real effect on policy action, discourses not only need to structure policy rhetoric, they must penetrate into the institutional realm, i.e. the rules, laws and regulations, organisational structures and the routines of policy practice (Hajer, 1993; Newing, 2009).

Whereas discourses and the concepts that constitute them – e.g. representations of forest that emerge from disciplinary practices, such as forestry – may inform and shape the debate, it does not mean that the debaters do not play an important role. Various empirical studies have shown how particular actors exercise power through trying to impose a particular discourse onto a discussion and to actively "position" each other in such a context (Hajer and Versteeg, 2005). The power then is not only in the discourse but also in particular ways in which actors mobilise discourses in their argumentation. So, discourse analysis also involves looking at the possibility that discourse actively shapes the policy process itself and can be intentionally used to do so (Mazza and Rydin, 1997). In cases of environmental political debate, the arguments of actors often rest on more than one discourse at a time (Hajer, 1993). In particular, actors may align their arguments to the discourse of other parties in debate when they seek the common ground and create possibilities for problem closure. Furthermore, actors may seek to secure the political relevance of their claim by making linkages with prevailing discourses and contemporary concepts, such as sustainability, climate change, human health and people involvement (Van Herzele, 2006, 2015; Medina et al., 2009; Winkel et al., 2011; de Koning et al., 2014).

The present study follows a three-step discourse-analytic process, which we developed iteratively in relation to the particular research subject. The first two steps are largely informed by Hajer (1995, 2005, 2006) and Sharp and Richardson (2001). In extending their works, we explicitly focus the third step on the argumentative uses of specific concepts by parties when attempting to influence the process of policy development.

1. We reconstruct the development of the conflict and debate over the last decades, outline the critical events in the course of policy action, the coalitions formed and the main argumentations presented.
2. We identify the discourses that shape the debate by tracing regularities or patterns in the conceptualisation and linguistic representation of issues, situate these within broader discourses in Polish society, and ascertain eventual institutionalisation of the discourses.
3. We focus on the argumentative exchange between the parties to identify how they brought particular concepts – in this case, referring to forest and people-forest relationships – into play, in order to influence the process of policy development.

We used a variety of documentary sources from which the material for analysis was gathered. First of all, the publicly available documents, such as official statements (e.g. of the Ministry of Environment or the State Forests Holding), appeals (e.g. of NGOs or local people), discussion or protest papers, leaflets, media coverage (articles, radio and TV programmes), web-pages of institutes and organisations, and legal documents from the early 1990s to 2013 were scrutinised for information on the argumentation and discourses. Most of the documentary sources stem from the period after 2000 (due to limited availability of earlier sources). Accuracy of interpretation was sought through repeated reading and crosschecking between data from different sources. The original documents were used in complement with other sources of information – including literature concerning the Białowieża Forest (references