

ANALYSIS

# The edges of conflict and consensus: a case for creativity in regional forest policy in Southwest Finland

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## Abstract

In this paper I articulate and describe how societal systems can be meaningfully integrated into development and environmental policy planning. I contrast two cases, the planning and implementation of the Natura 2000 reserve network and the Regional Forest Programme of Southwest Finland and discuss the elements that make the former process conflictual and the latter consensual. An analogy between ecosystem health and institutional health connects the vocabulary used in this paper with the vocabulary of environmental sciences and management. I describe the constituents of institutional health and discuss their importance in affording groups and individuals with power to resist, liabilities to resilience and capacity to adapt. I conclude by presenting a case for reform in development and environmental planning.

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## 1. Ignored social systems

Finnish forest policy has a rather long history of neglecting the social systems within which forests and forest practices occur. In principle, forest legislation in the country requires that social impacts shall be assessed together with economic and ecological impacts when forest policies are planned and initiated. In practice, however, both economic and ecological

implications are considered in great depth, whereas the only social aspects customarily weighed are the impacts upon employment, landscape, recreational uses including mushroom and berry picking, and ancient heritage (Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, 1999).

One reason why ecological systems and ecological impact assessment have assumed greater importance than social systems and social impact assessment is that environmental planners and practitioners lack the competence to identify social systems and structures, the social implications of policy actions, and the social rules according to which these impacts come

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into being. They have a much deeper understanding of ecological systems, ecological impacts and the rules according to which these impacts are produced. This is mainly due to a longer history of environmental impact assessment (EIA), international treaties and agreements on the environment, and up-to-date practices of conservation research. Another factor that obviously comes into play is the lack of societal pressure for the meaningful integration of social systems and social impacts into forest planning. As it is, ecological impacts are brought into the public consciousness by the various activities of environmental organizations and movements.

The absence of societal systems in development and environmental planning has its consequences. Most importantly, the planning processes have remained socially innocent and shallow. This state of the art motivates my work. The purpose of this paper is to suggest how planning, valuation and decision-making can learn from scientific and practical experience on incorporating ecological structures, functions and dynamics into environmental planning and impact assessment. The aim is to see how social systems, social diversity and social impacts can be made more understandable, tangible and manageable in the context of regional forest planning in SW Finland.

The paper builds upon old institutional economics and ecological economics, and it proceeds in the following way. First, I introduce two cases: the planning of the Regional Forest Programme of SW Finland and the planning and implementation of the Natura 2000 Reserve Network. Second, I describe an analogy between ecological health and institutional health. Third, I discuss some aspects of social emotions and individual action tendencies as surrogates for institutional health. Fourth, I explore the significance of functional groups in maintaining institutional environment healthy. Fifth, I connect the analysis with a transactive approach to participatory and collaborative planning and decision-making.

## 2. Materials and methods

Over the past 5 years a number of regional forest-related environmental and developmental planning processes aimed at integrating economic activities,

environmental concerns and social dimensions of development have taken place in SW Finland. The purpose of these processes has also been to develop regional practices of participatory and discursive planning. My focus here is on one of these processes: the Regional Forest Programme of SW Finland.

I will contrast it with the planning and implementation of the European-wide Natura 2000 Reserve Network in SW Finland. This is motivated by the fact that the two processes offer different answers to the same timely question of how to approach economic activities, social well-being and environmental conservation. I will be trying to make understandable how one of these processes resulted in consensus and the other in conflict: what happened and what did not happen in the processes and what can we learn from these processes.

### 2.1. The Natura 2000 reserve network

The Natura 2000 reserve network is an extended, European-wide conservation network that is based on the [Birds Protection Directive \(79/409/EEC\)](#) and the [Habitats Directive \(92/43/EEC\)](#). Natura 2000 is based on a EU directive and therefore it has to be integrated into national legislation. Planning got under way in 1995 and implementation in 1997. The aim is to create a coherent network of different habitat types throughout Europe by the year 2007.

Natura 2000 imposes new formal restrictions upon local and regional land and resource use within certain ecologically significant areas. The seeds of doubt and dispute were planted already in the very beginning of the creation of the Natura 2000 network because of the lack of participation of landowner interest groups during the preparation of the Habitats directive. The environmental non-governmental organizations, on the other hand, had a significant influence of the drafting the directive ([Weber and Christopherson, 2002](#); [Paavola, 2003](#)). In Finland, planning for Natura 2000 was in principle a collaborative process. However the collaboration only involved national level interest groups and organizations; regional and local interest groups remained absent. No arrangements were made for public involvement. Partly for this reason the process prompted a huge reaction, including almost 15,000 letters of appeal nationwide. More importantly, from my point of view, it gave rise to

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