

CITIZEN SCIENCE AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN PROTECTED AREA MANAGEMENT: A NEW APPROACH FOR EUROPEAN TRANSITION COUNTRIES



The Inau Peak (2279m) from the Rodna Mountains and the Lala Valley scientific reserve

For information about:

- this policy brief and the conference please email anna.lawrence@eci.ox.ac.uk
- the application of this approach in Rodna Mountains National Park, Romania, see www.eci.ox.ac.uk/humaneco/rodnamountains.html and contact alina.szabo@eci.ox.ac.uk
- the Aarhus Convention see <http://www.unep.org/env/pp/>
- EU biodiversity policy see <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/home.htm>

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Policy Briefing Note

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What's the challenge?

Through its new and acceding member states, the European Union has inherited an impressive array of protected areas and traditional agricultural landscapes holding a wealth of biodiversity that has long been lost in western member states.

The decades of strict scientific management in these countries may however not be enough to save the special natural riches of those countries, many of which are struggling to allocate sufficient resources for management of their protected areas and to find opportunities for civil society engagement.

New EU policy (box 1), and changes in conservation philosophy, provide openings but also challenges for the central and eastern countries of Europe. This policy brief draws attention to the context, opportunities and methods which can help to address the challenges.

The situation in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE)

Early tendencies toward conservation were initiated, as in western Europe, with rulers concerned to protect game and reserve for their own use. In CEE countries this feudal approach was often combined with attempts to use rural culture as a focus for building national identity, in the late 19th century.

Policies under communism brought nationalisation of land and modernisation of agriculture, with a strict separation of natural history and productive processes. Biological studies of flora and fauna were academic and sporadic, and management focused on protection, while visitors to protected areas enjoyed picnics and escape from the city.

Conservation is therefore perceived today as scientifically elitist and hierarchical. Despite the best efforts of enlightened park management, both nearby communities and visitors can feel estranged from park management and uncommitted to its success.

In addition to these cultural and social aspects, there are significant economic and political constraints to conservation. Since the political changes of 1989 there have been insufficient resources - manpower, finance, infrastructure, equipment - for effective park management. The new and acceding member states have put huge efforts into policy changes to bring environmental legislation into line with the *acquis communautaire* (the body of EU policy) but studies indicate there are still issues of inconsistency between policy instruments, as well as overlapping and unclear property rights.

Matters are made more difficult by a legacy of distrust of authority combined with a reliance on the state to take care of public concerns. Commentators therefore highlight the need for engagement with local communities, cooperation between governmental institutions, transparent environmental monitoring and communication in general.

Global changes in conservation philosophy

These perceptions are influenced by wider changes in conservation philosophy. There has been a historical tendency to exclude citizens and their knowledge from conservation decision-making processes. Information, if provided at all, was provided in one direction only - from the authorities to the public.

Over the last two decades, conservation ideas have developed in three significant ways:

- From a focus on species to a focus on ecosystems and processes
- From blueprint management to adaptive management
- From centralised, hierarchical planning to participatory approaches, which recognise the value of local knowledge, local commitment to place, and traditional customs and rules for protecting resources.

The successful conservation of biodiversity depends not only on protected areas but on the sensitive management of areas in between. Involvement of landowners and resource users will be essential to:

- Ensure understanding and compliance with policy
- Exchange local knowledge, perceptions and experience
- Motivate the development of civil society organisations committed to the protection of biodiversity.

There has also been a strong recent focus on 'citizen science' and the benefits of including volunteers in monitoring biodiversity.

The benefits of participation are not simply that it provides scientists and policy makers with free data, or that it teaches scientific values to members of the public. Conservation is enriched through the wealth of local knowledge, and governance is strengthened as citizens engage with decision-making.



Monitoring environmental parameters in the Taul Muced bog lake area. Photo: APNMR

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What is the scope for participation within this context?

Whilst there are clearly experiences in common amongst the CEE countries, there has been a reaction against early tendencies to generalise, and assumptions that economic liberalisation and democracy would enhance conservation. Furthermore, the western European notion of biodiversity as separate from human cultures has been criticised in some CEE contexts, where the diversity of the traditional agrarian landscape is highly valued. This is nevertheless a contentious issue, as other stakeholders express concern that the emphasis on traditional agriculture works against rural people's concern for economic advancement.

To move beyond generalisations, and develop models appropriate to the conditions and realities of stakeholders in each place, there has been a move to focus on the issues at national and local level. Participatory approaches can be helpful in this context, but existing models rely either on a strong civil society sector, as in western Europe, or coherent semi-autonomous communities motivated by resource dependence to respect traditional rules, as in developing countries.

There is a need for new models of participatory conservation appropriate to the conditions of CEE. A more inclusive and less alienating approach to park management is also likely to be more effective through engaging the support of a greater part of the community.



Darwin Club students monitoring forest health. Photo: GSS Nasaud

A model from Rodna Mountains National Park, Romania

We are testing a simple but relevant model for community participation in protected areas in the northern Carpathians of Romania as part of a Darwin Initiative funded project. The approach recognises that participation is a relatively new concept for many of the stakeholders, and therefore builds on existing relationships of trust within communities and schools, as well as joint learning activities.

- 1 School children are involved in documenting local and traditional knowledge and use of the national park, thereby learning from their grandparents and neighbours, and raising the profile of the park with these same people.
- 2 Schoolteachers were consulted through a special advisory group, during the preparation of the recent management plan.
- 3 In six communities around the park schools have formed eight 'Friends of Rodna Mountains' clubs. Each club consists of children of a particular age and community, and focuses on the specific interests of their school. For example, one club is from an art school, and uses art as an approach to understanding and promoting the park.
- 4 Each club contributes directly to the implementation of the management plan, by selecting a specific group of plants or animals to study. The club collects and provides data to the park management team, to contribute to baseline, monitoring and management decisions.
- 5 Together with the park staff, each club organises excursions to the park, which are extremely popular with the students. For many this is their first contact with the park and they are now associating biodiversity and conservation with a positive experience instead of something restrictive.
- 6 Data collection by students acquires scientific reliability and status through training in GIS (Geographical Information Systems) and the use of GPS (Global Positioning Systems). This also allows the park administration to consolidate, analyse and map all the data.
- 7 Very importantly, the clubs share their experiences and data. They link up with the other clubs, to exchange experience and news at workshops and camps. And they meet with the national park administration to learn how they have contributed to park management.
- 8 The park administration team not only uses the data collected by the students, but accompanies the students, provides training in data collection methods, and communicates to the students and the club coordinators the ways in which the data has been used.

The approach is promising: already the clubs are discussing ways to ensure they can continue beyond the three-year project period, and have decided to set up a non-profit organisation to provide a formal framework for their activities.

In late 2007 we will invite colleagues to share their experiences of participatory conservation in CEE contexts, at a conference based on Rodna Mountains National Park.

Box 1. Relevant EU policy

Most transition countries have joined, or will soon join, the EU. The recent policy Communication no. 2006-216 is therefore significant for them. Entitled 'Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 - and beyond' it summarises existing policy:

- 1979 Birds Directive
- 1992 Habitats Directive, linking to form a network of protected areas known as Natura 2000
- 1998 adoption of the EU biodiversity strategy
- 2001 adoption of four biodiversity action plans
- 2001 Malahide accord: commitment to halt (EU) biodiversity loss by 2010
- 2002 commitment (at the Rio+10 conference in South Africa) to significantly reduce world biodiversity loss by 2010

It also notes that other policy is closely related to biodiversity outcomes including:

- Reform of the Common Agricultural Policy and the Fisheries Agricultural Policy
- The forthcoming Forest Action Plan
- The Aarhus Convention which provides for access to environmental information and public participation and access to justice in environmental matters.

In addressing these needs, the Communication announces an Action Plan which includes a focus on involvement of wider society, particularly in measuring biodiversity change.

Nevertheless, the participatory aspects of the EU biodiversity policy are sketchy, and refer mainly to education. The provisions of the Aarhus Convention are stronger, and explicitly require public participation in the 'Three Pillars':

1. Access to - and dissemination of environmental information,
2. Public participation in environmental decision-making,
3. Access to environmental justice.



Silene nivalis - an endemic species from the Rodna Mountains