

National parks and Natura 2000 sites in Polish Carpathians vs local people: changing attitudes within the past 10 years

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Abstract

National parks and Natura 2000 sites are very different types of PA's, however, with their very formalized status within the Polish law, they often attract conflicts with local communities. Based on several in-depth case studies (interviews, queries of official documents as well as press) I am going to compare and contrast parks and Natura 2000 sites' 'conflicting potential' in the very specific context of mountains. In these vulnerable areas, factors starting from topography, through land use and land ownership, and finally culture and personalities of local leaders, are much more visible.

Keywords

national parks, Natura 2000, Carpathians, local development

Introduction

Similarly to Western countries, also in Poland we can observe the so-called paradigm shift in nature protection (RODARY & CASTELLANET 2003; MOSE 2007), especially in case of national parks. The idea behind the establishment of first Polish nature protection sites (dating back to the 1920s and 1930s) came from Polish scientific as well as artistic environments. It is worth to be mentioned that that it was strongly rooted not only in the interest in flora and fauna of the country, but also in the fascination of local people's culture and tradition, as well as cultural landscape, especially in the mountains. Local leaders were in many cases supporters and partners for nature protection activists. This tradition of an inclusive approach and cooperation was then neglected in the communist, afterwar period, when nature protection sites were established in a totally top-down manner and with no respect for compensations. National parks entered the new, democracy era at the beginning of the 1990s with a heavy 'baggage' of local people's regrets and feelings of injustice. Since then, many effort was put by the both sides in managing conflicts and seeking compromises which in many cases resulted in starting cooperation in promotion of regions and involvement in common events and projects. However, once the weak stabilization in these complicated relationships between parks and people was achieved, a new and important circumstance appeared: the Natura 2000 network was established in Poland when the country became a EU member in 2004. Implemented quickly and often based on outdated materials, and most of all – without a proper information campaign or large-scale consultation – the network evoked many conflicts. Although problems of such kind were also reported from other countries (HIEDANPÄÄ 2002; VISSER et al. 2007; GRODZIŃSKA-JURCZAK & CENT 2011), here the previous bad experiences with national parks added to unfavourable context for the new type of protected area. At the same time, an interesting dichotomy in perception occurred in areas where both types of protection exist. Finally, the past decade of 'living with Natura 2000' brought about, among other things, the challenging process of creation, consultation and implementation of the so-called 'management action plans' (MAPs) for the bird and habitat sites. Although this process is not finished, we can try to summarize its first phase.

Aim and area of the study, research questions

The aim of this study was to define areas of conflicts connected with national parks and Natura 2000 sites and their evolution within the past decade in the Polish Carpathians. In this region, 6 national parks and 40 Natura 2000 sites with already working MAPs can be found. The following research questions have been formulated:

- what are the fears and concerns of local communities compared to real limitations that protected areas bring?
- what is the 'conflicting potential' of national parks and Natura 2000 sites in mountain conditions?
- what is the role, in this context, of economic relationships between parks and local/regional enterprises?

Methods and data sources

The research aim and questions were addressed through 6 case studies of local communities located in the vicinity of chosen national parks and Natura 2000 sites. The sites represent different historical and cultural backgrounds, as well as diverse population density and economic features. In each case, several field trips to the area, 55 in-depth interviews with local and regional stakeholders along with queries of local documentary were conducted. Moreover, the MAPs for 40 Natura 2000 sites were studied in details and analyzed in what concerns: identified pressures and threats to the subjects of protection, recommendations to local and regional legal documents as well as remarks and comments formally raised by interested parties during the public consultation process. Additionally, protocols from public consultation's meetings and local press were taken into consideration. Another important source of information about the impact of Natura 2000 on local development was the database of administrative decisions made by the Regional Directorates for Environmental Protection (RDEPs) in three Carpathian voivodeships (provinces) of Poland (Silesia, Malopolska and Podkarpace), for the period 2009-2016 (RDEPs were established at the end of 2008). As for the data sources concerning national parks, a query of their protection plans (or plans' projects, respectively), annual reports and chronicles, and finally, the documentary of public consultation process were investigated.

The main part of the research was conducted between 2014 and 2017, though thematically covering all the period of Natura 2000 presence in Poland.

Main findings and results

When Natura 2000 was introduced in Poland, it was perceived as new threat to development of tourism and recreation and the return to management of land without consulting its inhabitants, as it was performed in the communist period and also in case of national parks right after their establishment. Some people even spoke about the violation of right to private property, as Natura 2000 also largely included private lands (KAMAL et al. 2013). Local and regional media eagerly pumped up the growing conflicts, as in case of communes like Zawoja or Szczawnica. Another fear that was broadly expressed, concerned possible obstacles for developing built-up areas. With such mixed feelings, the communities entered the hard process of negotiations and consultations within the framework of MAPs preparation. The analysis of their documentary shows that after several years of living with Natura 2000, to focus of stakeholder's concerns changed. Issues like tourism and development of built-up areas were represented only in case of 15% and 7% of the plans, respectively, while issues like possible limitation of forestry and obstacles concerning streams' regulation were expressed in 1/3 of plans. This picture is to high extent concise with the results of identification of possible pressures and threats to the subjects of protection that was a part of the part of the procedure of preparation of MAPs (Fig. 1). While the pollution and trashing were mentioned as an existing threat in most of the plans, forestry occupied the second place and the category of hydrotechnical investments was also among the important ones. When it comes to main recommendations that MAPs imposed on local and regional policies, they seem relatively low impactful and generally formulated, as most of all they required: 1) the maintenance of ecological corridors (that is, the maintenance of current land use in particular places), 2) implementing the general information about the existence of Natura 2000 site on the territory of the commune/region and 3) the necessity of agreement with a RDEP in case of certain types of investments, possibly dangerous for the nature. The analysis of administrative decisions made by RDEPs also rests in contrast to the initially expressed fears about 'not being able to build up a house on one's own parcel', as such decisions were limited to very specific cases. For instance, in Małopolskie voivodeship (province) only 1% of such cases ended up with rejection (no agreement for realization of an investment), while 75% of them were accepted even without any additional procedures.

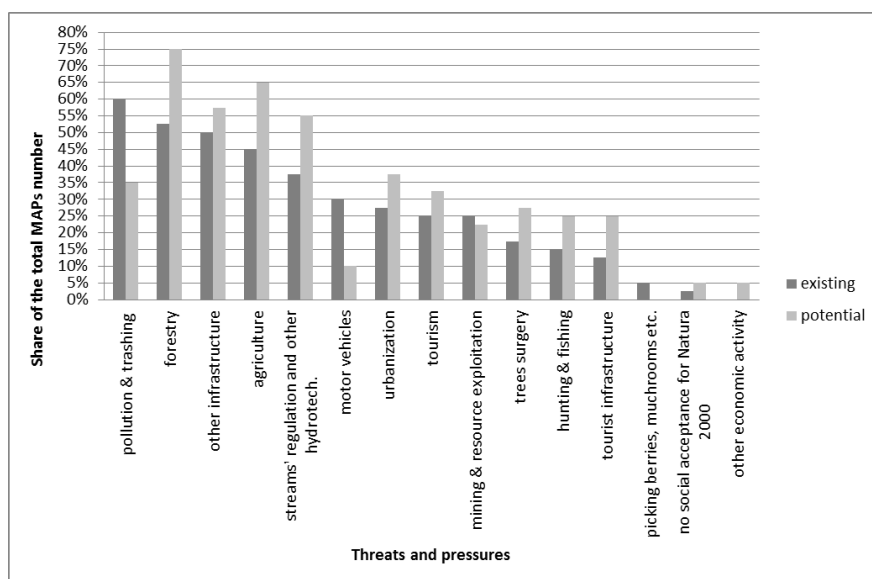


Figure 1: Pressures and threats to the subjects of protection identified in management action plans (MAPs) for 40 Natura 2000 in the Polish Carpathians, expressed as share of MAPs where a given category was present; Source: own elaboration based on MAPs

As for the national parks, especially after the implementation of Natura 2000 network, their image in local communities improved. Although some conflicts still exist (e.g. concerning urbanization pressure in particularly landscape-attractive places), the parks' involvement in promotion and social activities on the ground are generally appreciated. The interviews show that this positive 'added value' is especially visible in communities with strong identity, trying to build their brand on local traditions and natural resources such as landscape, arts and crafts or ecological agriculture. Last but not least, parks as institutions operating directly in place, are in many cases also important business partners and employers on the local and regional scale (Fig. 2, MIKA ET AL. 2015)

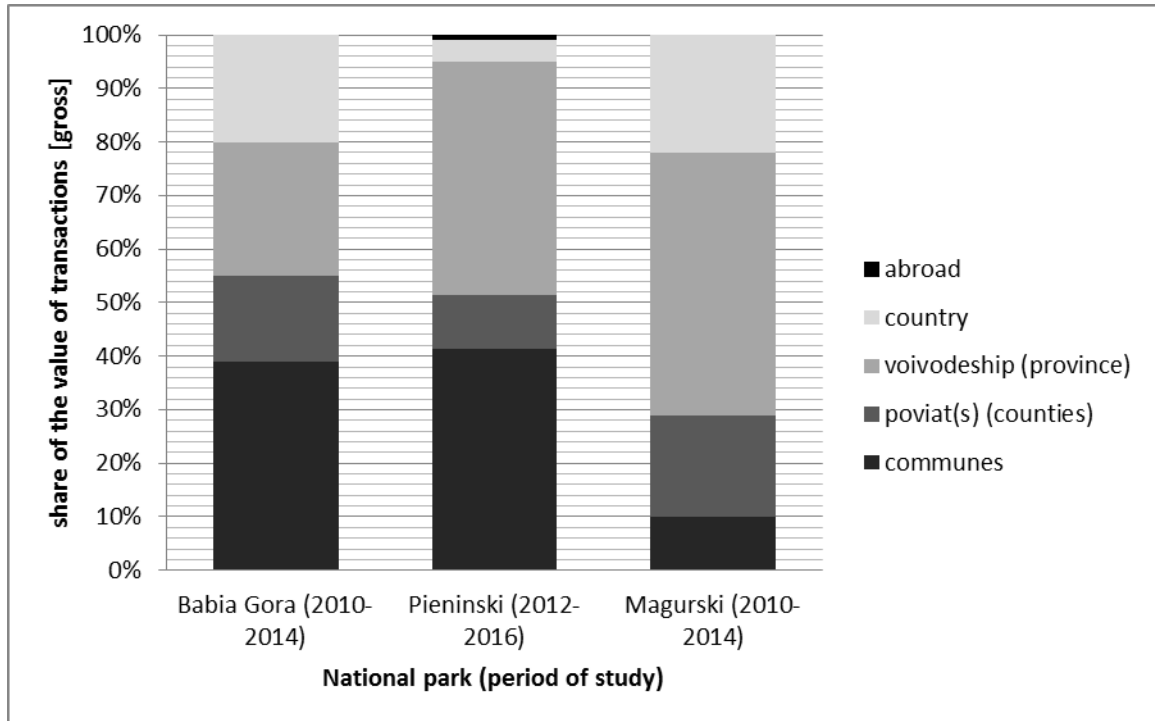


Figure 2: Share of the gross transactions value in case of purchases made by selected national parks in the Polish Carpathians, according to administrative levels; Note: commune level = commune(s) where a chosen NP is located, powiat (county) level = the powiat where a chosen NP is located, excluding 'park commune(s)'. Source: own elaboration based on data provided by the NPs (Pieninski, Magurski) and in case of Babia Gora NP Mika et al. (2015).

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have to point out that the main initial fears towards Natura 2000 network expressed by mountain communities in the Polish Carpathians did turn into reality. This obviously does not mean that the fields of conflict do not exist, but they concern usually rather forestry and streams' regulation than tourism and urbanization. Although local communities slowly learn how to deal with this type of protected areas, it seems rather unlikely that they will occupy a place similar to national parks in local environments in terms of social, cultural and economic coexistence and development.

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