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Understanding Linkages Between Public Participation and Management of Protected Areas – Case Study of Serbia

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1. Introduction

The issue of participation is an important issue in protected area management. For instance, the IV IUCN World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas convened in Caracas, Venezuela, called for increased community participation and human equity in decision-making for protected areas in order to improve their management (IUCN, 1993). The term *participation* can be interpreted in very different ways, and therefore it is essential to define it carefully.

Until the 1970s, participation of local people in conservation was often seen as a tool to achieve the local approval to protected area plans, and participation was almost a mere public relations exercise. During the 1980s, participation of the local people was regarded as a mechanism to gain better results in natural resource protection, while in the 1990s, participation has been interpreted more and more as a means to involve local people in protected area management (Pimbert & Pretty, 1997).

It is now widely assumed that participation is required in order to achieve sustainable and effective conservation, particularly in protected areas; that it can bring economic and social benefits to marginalised groups; and that devolution of decision-making will benefit biodiversity (Jeanrenaud, 1999). 'Participatory approaches provide opportunities for the poor to contribute constructively to development' (FAO 1990, p.4; FAO 2001). The FAO People's Participation Programme believes that 'participatory approach is an essential part of any strategy and its call for 'the active involvement and organization of grass roots level of the rural people' (FAO 1990a, p.5).

As sustainability is defined in ecological, economic, and social terms, participation, as a democratic means of decision-making, has been increasingly recognised 'as an essential means and end to the development of the social dimensions of sustainability' (Finger-Stich & Finger, 2003, p.1).

According to Finger-Stich & Finger (2003), 'participation' is defined as, "the voluntary involvement of people who individually or through organised groups deliberate about their respective knowledge, interests, and values while collaboratively defining issues, developing solutions, and taking – or influencing – decisions". Furthermore, defining who can participate will lead to different types of participation processes. Finger-Stich & Finger (2003) distinguished three main types of participation: public participation, representative participation and community participation. This research focuses on community-based participation processes.

Public participation, collaborative management, and community-based management as types of participation may not always be distinct**.** For example, FAO/ECE/ILO define public participation as: *"a voluntary process whereby people, individually or through organised groups, can exchange information, express opinions and articulate interests, and have the potential to influence decisions or the outcome of the matter at hand"* (FAO/ECE/ILO, 2000 , p.9). And Renard (1997) defines collaborative or co-management as: *"a situation in which two or more social actors negotiate, define and guarantee amongst themselves a fair sharing of the management functions, entitlements and responsibilities for a given territory, area or set of natural resources"* (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2000, p.1). Co-management (short for collaborative or joint management) – this term has been defined as, *"...durable, verifiable and equitable forms of participation, involving all relevant and legitimate stakeholders in the management and conservation of resources"* (Renard, 1997). 'They may be complementary and evolve into one another over time' (Finger-Stich & Finger, 2003, p. 28). For example, a protected area policy may be drafted in consultation with the general public at the regional and/or national level, then there may be a co-management body to monitor the management of a particular protected area, and it may work in partnership with community-based associations to adapt this management to particular places, activities, and social groups (Finger-Stich & Finger, 2003, p. 28).

In order to understand the meaning of participation, as well as participation processes, the following definitions and understandings are collected from different authors: Participation processes, whatever their type, have the potential to evolve and provide space and opportunities for social learning (Korten, 1990). Participatory theories, such as social forestry (Korten, 1981), emphasize policy-making based on direct citizen participation, ahead of expertise and citizen representative structures. These theories propose a restructuring of institutional arrangements to accommodate greater citizen deliberation. In the field of social forestry, Korten (1980) identified several weaknesses in early traditional community development programmes, which he attributed partly to inappropriate governance structures. He maintained that new arrangements can be achieved through *"innovative social learning (which emphasizes) central facilitation over central control, performance monitoring and self-correction over planning, encourages local initiative and self-control, and reflects a tolerance for the ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the learning process"* (Korten, 1981, p.613).

"*While understanding that all participatory processes entail communicative action, it is useful to recognise that in the situation where problems are being defined and actors are forming or changing their roles, the essence of the participatory process is communicative action. This means that the degree of instrumental or strategic policy development is low since there is not a clear public problem and no organised social interests. Indeed, one can expect this part of the policy process to possibly extend over years as the nature of the public problem is slowly understood and shared understanding emerges through dialogue between the actors*'' (Shannon, 2003, pp.147-148).

Thus, communicative action leads to a better understanding of the actors, stakeholders and interests and why they are associated with this problem (Finger-Stich & Finger, 2003).

"*Participation processes are both a way to manage conflict by seeking compromise between various interests, and they are also a means of developing more creative solutions that would not have emerged without the interaction of stakeholders. The decisions born out of such collaborative thinking and negotiation have the advantage of being the product of all those taking part, and are therefore more likely to be effective. Effective participation is a means and an outcome of collaborative learning*'' (Finger-Stich & Finger, 2003, p.41).

In general, scholars have agreed about the main points of participation, namely: learning process, communicative action and participation as a means and as well as an outcome of collaborative learning.

One promising overall approach to building cooperation between local people and protected area managers is 'collaborative management' or 'co-management' of protected areas – a partnership whereby various stakeholders agree to share amongst themselves the management functions, rights, and responsibilities for a territory or set of resources under protected area status (Borrini-Feyerabend, 1996).

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the integrated management of protected areas, which means the ample participation of the local people in the decision-making and management of the area (Ghimire & Pimbert 1997; Orlove & Brush 1996; Shyamshundar 1996; Wells & Brandon 1993).

In our case study, the focus is on the role of public participation in the management of the Special Nature Reserve Zasavica (SNR Zasavica) in Serbia. The aim of this study was to analyse and describe how managers of the SNR Zasavica work with local communities in order to achieve biodiversity conservation.

2. Methods

A qualitative approach to the study was chosen, with triangulation of different data collection methods. Understanding a situation in its entirety and characterization by a number of specific principles like subject orientation, adequacy of theories and methods, reflexivity of the researcher and research are characteristics of qualitative research (Tomićević, 2005). In-depth expert interviews were used in order to collect a great deal of 'rich' information from relatively few people (Veal, 1992). The expert interviews were held during spring 2009 in Belgrade. They included expert from the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia, expert from IUCN for SEE and one resource manager of SNR Zasavica. Topics discussed during the interviews were: achievements and development projects that managers of this reserve accomplish. Furthermore, the issue of the participation of local people in the management of protected area was discussed, as well as the way in which local residents are involved in the management of SNR Zasavica. The purpose for expert interviews was not only to provide the personal attitudes towards the Special Nature Reserve Zasavica, but also to obtain the broader understanding of the relationships between different stakeholders. Therefore, this study encompasses both an interest in understanding the specific circumstances of Special Nature Reserve Zasavica and the broader role of public participation in a management of protected areas.

Furthermore, secondary data, i.e. data gathered by research of literature and different case studies which deals with issues of public participation, were considered in the analysis undertaken. Legal, strategy, and other institutional and statutory documents were also analyzed as a basis for understanding the management of protected areas in Serbia.

3. Results and discussion

Managing protected areas is essentially a social process (Lockwood & Kothari, 2006). The traditional approaches to protected areas management are currently being challenged. Indeed, protected areas are undergoing a shift from a preservationist paradigm towards an integrated approach. This process is reflective of social changes. These social changes increased interest in, and demand for, participation in decision-making processes (Tomićević, 2005).

Guidelines for effective participation processes include encouragement of all stakeholders to contribute; opportunities for participation in a manner that best suits the particular understandings, needs and contributions of each participant, and ensuring that participants have access to all relevant information (O' Riorden and O'Riorden, 1993; Moote et al, 1997).

Participation is often promoted by government as a mechanism for giving participant power to influence policy outcomes. However, despite some participatory processes offering opportunities for citizens to express views, and perhaps have an influence at the margin, the core policy agenda and framework may often largely remain under the control of governments (Lockwood & Kothari, 2006).

In general, Balkan Peninsula is one of the richest regions in Europe in terms of biodiversity, but is suffering as a consequence of a decade of conflict followed by political and economic crisis. The fact that most of the protected areas are situated in isolated and poor rural regions makes the situation even worse. Problems are especially noticeable in Serbia, where political, social and economic conflicts combined with conflicts of interests over the use of natural resources by different groups and individuals have resulted in a people moving from rural villages to cities in order to survive (Tomićević, 2005).

In the case of Serbia, protected areas management system has been characterized by a top-down approach. Serbia has a long history of centralized planning for and management of protected areas. Recent research show some improvements towards participatory management approaches in protected areas in Serbia (Tomićević, 2005; Tomićević et al. 2010, Tomićević et al., 2011).

Based upon research in 2004 from the case study from Tara National Park we learned that while local people are generally willing and interested in engaging in participatory management, there are currently no opportunities for the kinds of deliberative discussions regarding management priorities or implementation strategies. The only clear relationship between the local people and Park administration is through direct employment. From the perspective of the Park administration, engaging in collaborative planning with the local people requires support from the State. Regardless of the personal interest of a park manager or the willingness of local people to work with park managers, without adequate resources and commitment, participatory management will not move forward (Tomićević et al., 2010).

The findings of the Tara study indicate the need to strengthen the clarity of nature conservation policy and the missions of the responsible authorities. In addition, in order to

promote the involvement of local people and empower the national park management to work with them collaboratively, it is necessary to promote communication among all stakeholders (Tomićević et al., 2010).

Furthermore, research findings from NP Kopaonik in Serbia from 2011 indicate that the poverty of the local people and conflict between the local people and the management authorities are the biggest threat to conservation of plant species and natural resources generally in protected areas (Tomićević et al., 2011).

In general, conservation policies that attempt to keep communities out of the decision–making process and/or benefit sharing are unlikely to be sustainable for a long period. Community support is needed to achieve long-term conservation objectives. There is no substitute for engaging with people. Indeed, public communication and collaboration can significantly enhance conservation objectives and outcomes (Kothari 2006).

Today, there is growing understanding that is necessary to ensure the participation of those stakeholders who have not had a role in the decision making process. According to the expert from the IUCN office for SEE "*Interested public, whether it is an individual or organization, is a significant and unavoidable part in a nature conservation system*" (director of IUCN office for SEE, personal communication, 2009). In our conditions, it requires increased role of local communities, NGOs, educational and scientific - research institutions and the private sector. All stakeholders should take part in shaping and implementing decisions and the implementation of an efficient and permanent dialogue between them (Vukadinović, 2009).

Legislation aimed at biodiversity conservation and the management of protected areas has been developed in Serbia. However, the challenge is to guarantee that the policies work to ensure peoples' livelihoods, to avoid future conflicts and to achieve the best means of protecting nature (Tomićević et al., 2011).

Protected areas in Serbia have experienced considerable weakness and constraints in terms of their management. Most protected areas in Serbia suffer from inadequate funding and have weak institutional and human capacities (Tomićević, 2005, Tomićević et al., 2011). According to the reserve manager of SNR Zasavica the "*main problem in managing is inadequate funding and support from Ministry of Environmental Protection*" (personal communication, 2009).

However, in spite of all difficulties in legal and institutional terms, there are examples where a significant shift in the management of protected areas and public involvement in the process can be noticed. According to expert from the Institute for Nature Conservation of Serbia (public relation manager) and an expert from IUCN office for SEE the SNR Zasavica is an example of good practice, in which the public, in terms of non-governmental organizations, the local population, individuals and various associations take some share in the management of the protected area (personal communication, 2009).

3.1 Special Nature Reserve Zasavica (SNR Zasavica)

SNR Zasavica is located in the southeastern part of Europe, in Serbia, in the area of the southern Vojvodina and northern Mačva, east of the Drina River and south of the Sava River, in the municipality of Sremska Mitrovica and Bogatić (Fig. 1). The Reserve is

dominated by water mainly comprising marsh ecosystems with fragments of meadows and forests (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Location of SNR Zasavica in Serbia



Fig. 2. Water biotope and marsh ecosystems

The NGO Nature Conservation Movement from Sremska Mitrovica (Pokret gorana Sremska Mitrovica) is the Manager of the Special Nature Reserve Zasavica and this organization is achieving good results mostly thanks to its inventiveness, creativity, management skills and enthusiasm. This non-governmental organization initiated this area to be declared as a SNR in 1997 (UNEP, 2005). Zasavica is a part of a national network of Ramsar sites (wetlands protected according to the Ramsar Convention) (http://www.ramsar.org/pdf/sitelist.pdf), and according to IUCN management categories, it is a Habitat and species management area – category IV. Since 2001 Zasavica is a member of The Europark Federation (http://www.zasavica.org.rs/en/zasavica-lokacija-rezervata/).

Before the proclamation of Zasavica as a Special Nature Reserve, this area was not managed properly. Even more, this area was abandoned and without any kind of protection. Local people and authorities were not realizing the importance of this area in terms of its biological diversity and ecological significance.

Water Management Organization "Sava" Šabac, has used this area for water supply, which led to a significant drying of the very fragile aquatic ecosystem. Because of drainage and regulation, as well as eutrophication processes, this very sensitive ecosystem was in danger of drying up completely (reserve manager, personal communication 2009). In addition, local residents had often used this area as a site for waste disposal, which turned parts of this area into garbage dumps.

Nature Conservation Movement recognized the value and importance of the survival of this area. For twelve years they have realized significant results in maintaining and upgrading this area, individually or in cooperation with the local population, authorities and various institutions. From the very beginning, this NGO launched a whole range of initiatives, programs and projects for the preservation and improvement of this area in a sustainable way (Vukadinović and Tomićević, 2009).

The flora of Zasavica includes invasive species which are in expanding. Invasive plants are introduced species that negatively influence biological diversity of any region. The main activities of the Nature Conservation Movement were: regulation of water level, removal of garbage and shrub and invasive vegetation. On the other hand, important achievements for sustainable economic and social development are part of the project "Zasavica - *Support of local community through sustainable tourism*".

Regulation of water level successfully prevents further drying and desiccation of the water ecosystem. Before the experimental regulation of water level, invasive plant species, especially *Stratitoides adoines*, were widespread and threatened the survival of rare species. Within a period of two years the aquatic eco-system with clean water and without invasive vegetation was re-established (reserve manager, personal communication 2009).

Very rare plant and animal species have been preserved due to ecosystem restoration. Among them is a relict species of insectivore (*Aldrovanda vesiculosa),* which has already disappeared from many European countries, and is on the red list of the flora in Europe. The most important of protected species of animal is the fish -*Umbra crameri* (Simić, 2005). According to Stevanović et al. (1999), there are four species that are critically endangered in Serbia that are found in the Reserve: *Groenlandia densa, Hottonia palustris, Ranunculus lingua, Hippocheris palustris.* For these globally endangered species, Zasavica is the only remaining

habitat in Serbia. This indicates the importance of protecting Zasavica in order to preserve the biodiversity of Serbia and Europe (Stanković, 2008).

Various actions for removing of garbage were organized in cooperation with the local population. Cleaning actions were taken several times and all the existing landfill were successfully repaired. One of the actions named *"Nature gave us-and we?"* is aimed to raise awareness of local people and to motivate their involvement in implementing activities (Fig. 3 and 4). Construction of sanitary landfills in the area outside the reserve, enabled local residents to dispose waste in a planned and efficient manner (reserve manager, personal communication 2009).



Fig. 3. The garbage before action



Fig.4. The same area after removal of garbage

As a measure of maintenance of pastures and meadows, removal of shrub vegetation is a regular activity (Simić, 2008). The, diversity of ecosystem is preserved and richness of species successfully conserved in the Reserve (reserve manager, personal communication 2009).

Also, in the forests of the Reserve, in accordance with natural requirements, replacement of hybrid poplar with autochthonous species (oak, ash, willow) was carried out - (Simić, 2008).

These measures, mentioned above, contributed to ecological sustainability of the Reserve. Beside it is also very important sustainable economic and social development of the area. Managers of the Reserve carry out a whole range of programs and projects that will enable all aspects of sustainability (Vukadinović, 2009). One of the most important projects is *"Zasavica- support of local community through sustainable tourism"*. The vision of this project is to ensure protection of biodiversity with development of sustainable tourism - as a form of ecologically rational use (UNEP, 2005).

SNR Zasavica represents a unique entity, very important for preserving biological diversity. Today it represents a very attractive tourist resource. Therefore, the development of the whole area is based on sustainable development and tourism (EAR, 2007).

SNR Zasavica is surrounded by nine villages. Economical and social conditions of the local population are very difficult at this moment (UNEP, 2005). Unemployment is high (over 50%). Therefore, it is necessary to increase local employment and generate other social and cultural benefits. It is very important to motivate local residents to participate in the development of this area (Fig. 5). Through their participation and economic and cultural development, the local community will become aware of the need to protect their natural resources (EAR, 2007).



Fig. 5. Project team and local people – "Helping the community to identify themselves and their opportunities through sustainable tourism."

Therefore, to achieve sustainable development, it is necessary to apply integrated approach in planning and management (Vukadinović and Tomićević, 2009). Also, the successful implementation of various measures of protection, as well as implementation of different development programs, to a large extent depends on the support of the local population support (Zavod za zaštitu prirode, 2007). The aim of this project is to include local communities in active participation. It promotes local actors- farmers, food producers, tourist organizations, NGOs, etc. The main stakeholders of tourist services will be the manager of the Ecotourism Center "Zasavica", Manager of the Reserve and local people (EAR, 2007). Through this project all interested parties will take part in planning, decision making, and development of this area.

The tourism project is ended in the year (2011) and still the final report from IUCN expert is missing but regarding to data from personal communication with park manager of SNR Zasavica we can preliminary conclude that the tourism project has improved livelihoods of local communities (for example according to park manager statistical data shows that in 2002 the number of permanent employed people (local residents) was four and in the year 2011 the number of permanent employed local people is twelve and in the year of 2011 between ten and fifteen locals are temporary employed which are engaged as a tourist guide or in production of traditional food products or handcrafts (personal communication, 2011). Furthermore, during this project in SNR Zasavica are offered some exclusive products such as mangulica meat prepared in different types of sausages, smoked ham and bacon.

Mangulica pigs are descended from wild boar populations and are breaded as traditional animals which still need to be made more profitable for the local communities. Breeding of indigenous animals, such as the mangulica pig is an example of the agricultural practices that need to be preserved and continued as part of the local traditions and promotion of local food products.

4. Conclusion

Public participation is an integral component of protected area management. It is now widely assumed that participation is required as a means of sustaining protected areas. Generally, protected areas are primarily viewed in biological or ecological terms, but they provide numerous functional benefits to humans, and may even be seen as essential to human welfare. Increasingly, they are seen as drivers and providers of social and economic change.

In order to achieve sustainable conservation, state legislators and environmental planners should involve local people in management of protected areas and identify and promote social processes that enable local communities to conserve and enhance biodiversity as a part of their livelihoods. Therefore, protected areas are undergoing a shift from a preservationist paradigm towards an integrated approach.

Management of protected areas in Serbia was characterised by a centralised approach that did not include all stakeholders. This approach in management has brought many problems and misunderstandings between government, non-governmental organisations, private sector and local people.

However, despite all the difficulties, Serbia has started the shift towards greater public involvement in protected area management. An example of good practice in managing of Special Natural Reserve Zasavica shows one of the solutions on how natural resources can be successfully preserved and protected. This proves that despite all economic and political difficulties, a solution for managing of protected areas in a sustainable way can be found. In fact, these circumstances should be seen more as a challenge to create the best possible conditions for successful public participation, rather than as an excuse to avoid any form of participation. The Zasavica example shows that involving the public in planning, decision making and management of protected areas could result ecosystem restoration, species recovery and generation of social and cultural benefits to people and thereby contribute towards sustainable development of the overall regiona where the protected area is situated.

In Serbian protected areas management Zasavica presents specific and unique place which represent a good example of integrated approaches to protected area management

compared to other protected areas in Serbia. From this example we learned that protected area management must include benefits for the people living around the protected areas and that financial mechanisms must be developed to sustain both conservation activities and improvements to rural livelihood.

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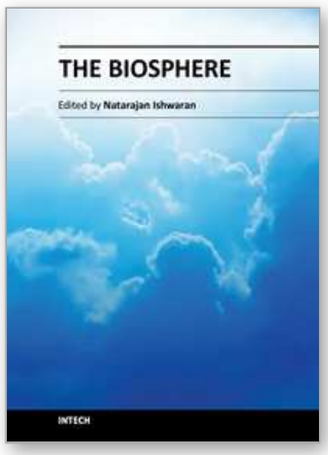
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The Biosphere

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In this book entitled "The Biosphere", researchers from all regions of the world report on their findings to explore the origins, evolution, ecosystems and resource utilization patterns of the biosphere. Some describe the complexities and challenges that humanity faces in its efforts to experiment and establish a new partnership with nature in places designated as biosphere reserves by UNESCO under its Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme. At the dawn of the 21st century humanity is ever more aware and conscious of the adverse consequences that it has brought upon global climate change and biodiversity loss. We are at a critical moment of reflection and action to work out a new compact with the biosphere that sustains our own wellbeing and that of our planetary companions. This book is a modest attempt to enrich and enable that special moment and its march ahead in human history.

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