

# MINIMISING STAKEHOLDER CONFLICTS IN NATURA 2000 SITES

## INTRODUCTION

The Natura 2000 network is the centrepiece of EU nature and biodiversity policy; a network of Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs), designated under the Birds<sup>i</sup> and Habitats<sup>ii</sup> Directives respectively, that together cover around 18% of the land surface area of the EU<sup>iii</sup>.

Natura 2000 is based on the principle of conservation and sustainable use, and seeks to ensure the lasting coexistence of human values for which the sites were designated. The Natura 2000 sites can be considered as areas not being strictly protected<sup>iv</sup>. Instead, a big proportion of the land is privately owned and the emphasis is on achieving the conservation objectives of Natura 2000 sites while taking account of economic, social, cultural, regional and recreational requirements of the human population.

As a result farming, forestry, hunting and other socio-economic and cultural activities are allowed to occur as long as these are conducted sustainably and do not negatively impact on the population status of birds and conservation status of other species and habitats for which the sites have been designated.

The coexistence of activities within a site gives the opportunity for different land uses to work together in creating land management plans that satisfy all stakeholders while leaving rooms open for the integration of different activities into conservation policy and the creation of a dialogue between stakeholders that may at first appear antagonistic.

Natura 2000 sites represent more an integrative rather than a segregative approach to biodiversity conservation. Integrative approaches advocate that biodiversity is higher when low-intensity land uses are conducted on larger areas, instead of high-intensity land uses undertaken on a smaller area surrounded by strictly protected zones (i.e. the segregative approach).

In other words, integrative approaches support the integration of human activities within natural areas, while segregative approaches encourage geographic compartmentalisation of protected areas from land used for human activities.

The integrative approach therefore recognises the role of human-nature interactions as important as they are directly related to the ecosystem services that nature can provide, defined by the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment simply as "*the benefits that people obtain from ecosystems*"<sup>v</sup>, encompassing both goods, such as timber, and services such as air purification and the maintenance of the psychological, physiological and social well-being of those around them<sup>vi</sup>.

Sustainable integration of human activities within the natural environment is therefore preferable to isolating people from nature for a sustainable and long-term interaction between human and nature he depends on.

Despite the benefits of integrating multiple land uses within the same landscape, the multitude of stakeholders and activities occurring within a given Natura 2000 site could potentially be the origin of conflicts. While all parties may be trying to achieve what they consider as best for the site, differences in views and priorities can lead to conflicting opinions on how an area should be managed and what its goals are. If not managed correctly, these conflicts can cause problems in area management that can include the souring of working relationships, the slowing of progress and can impose financial costs.

In some cases conflicts can lead to a complete breakdown of relationships between stakeholders which can halt cooperation and even permanently destroy the collaborative management of a site while negatively impacting nature conservation objectives.

Considering these negative consequences, it is preferable to prevent rather than resolve conflicts.

It is therefore important to understand:

1. What are conflicts?
2. Why do conflicts develop in the first place?
3. What can be done to prevent conflicts from developing?
4. How can we resolve conflicts if they do occur?

This document intends to provide information on how to potentially avoid conflict between the various stakeholders operating within Natura 2000 sites, including hunters; however, the universal nature of these principles means they could also be applied to any group of stakeholders in non-Natura 2000 sites.

## What are conflicts?

Conflicts are disagreements or differences over the management of a site which can impose costs either financially or in terms of progress.

Conflicts represent the breakdown of cooperation; however, differences of opinion between stakeholders are not necessarily a bad thing. Low-intensity conflicts such as differences of opinion or disagreements can also be a natural part of cooperation: a collection of studies reported in Torre and Lefranc (2006)<sup>vii</sup> considered that conflict is intrinsic to life in any community as it is a tell-tale sign of innovation.

Stakeholders represent different interests and try to achieve the best possible situation for what they represent. If differences of opinion can be resolved in a manner all stakeholders agree with, then they allow consensus-based progress to be made in the management of an area, without suffering the negative consequences associated with conflicts.

As a result, attempts to prevent low-level conflict developing at all costs may not be the best approach as differences in opinions cannot be avoided. However, breakdown of cooperation can be anticipated and prevented by tackling the problem at the source and managing those differences; this would help avoid intensified conflicts from developing as these are to the detriment of fruitful cooperation for the management of Natura 2000 sites.

## Why do conflicts develop in the first place?

Conflict does not just occur, it “often emerges from an argument that escalates in terms of a gradual change from a disagreement to a dispute between people and/or groups”<sup>vii</sup>.

The ‘Natura 2000 - Addressing conflicts and promoting benefits’ report identified three degrees of conflict:

- *Differences of opinion*: individuals have a different view on an issue, however this situation has not yet evolved into disagreement or conflict;
- *Disagreements*: individuals disagree on the solution of a problem, however, mutual trust between them does not influence co-operation and negotiations are possible. Even if they may disagree on factual knowledge, or on the values they attach to this knowledge they are nevertheless assures of the co-operation of others;
- *Outright conflicts*: individuals disagree on a solution to a problem and the mutual trust between parties is lost. As a result parties will choose for non-cooperative conflict strategies. These might result in subterfuge; lies, passive resistance, feigned misunderstanding or even violent actions.



*“Conflicts are by nature dynamic, they evolve, they change. Conflict management approaches differ according to the phase in which the conflict is evolving and social context. When potential conflicts are not dealt with, real conflicts develop. When disputes go too far they can lead to formal litigation. Ensuring respect of EU legislation at all levels tends to minimise conflicts, to save time and money, and to achieve gains for Natura 2000 and society in general”<sup>vii</sup>.*

Conflicts arise and escalate due to a lack of:

- A. **Information and communication** between stakeholders.
- B. **Education and training.** This is necessary to ensure those responsible for engaging with local stakeholders have good communication and conflict management skills.
- C. **Transparency** in the decision-making process.
- D. **Knowledge of the local area** and its cultural, socio-economic and scientific environment.
- E. **Integration of the conflict-causing activity into local development plans.** This would ensure that potential conflicts are identified at the strategic level and projects become designed in a way that takes these activities into account.
- F. **Access to funds.** Measures that will reduce conflicts will often require additional funding, it may therefore be necessary for stakeholders to assist in the accessing of funds.<sup>viii</sup>

It is therefore important that these points are covered as much as possible. The objective of this document is therefore to present potential solutions to fulfil those gaps.

## What can be done to prevent conflicts from developing in Natura 2000 sites?

- I. **Stakeholder mapping:** the first step in minimising conflict should always be stakeholder assessment and mapping: it is important to identify and make contact with all relevant stakeholders, although stakeholder composition will depend on the Natura 2000 site. By involving all stakeholders in all stages of the process from the beginning, concerns may be brought forward and addressed before they can develop into conflicts.

**How stakeholder cooperation in Andalusia (ES) helped prevent conflict:** cooperation of hunters and conservationists with the local public in Andalusia (Spain) helped increase recognition of the presence of Iberian lynx in the area. This gained considerable local support and, within the first two years, 80 agreements had been signed with private hunting estates to reduce hunting and manage the land in lynx-friendly ways. The project received a Eurosite communication award for the quality of the material produced and for its effectiveness in raising awareness for the lynx as well as for Natura 2000.<sup>ix</sup>

- II. **Involvement of local and non-local stakeholders:** it is crucial that discussion of the area management is not based on ideological debate, as this is often based on personal opinion and may overlook facts, but rather on scientific knowledge. It is therefore necessary to include scientists (e.g. conservation biologists) in management processes in order to ensure sufficient and high-quality data are collected, upon which management decisions can be based in an objective way. On the other hand, failure to recognise and include local knowledge can also result in the perceived alienation of the local community and the breakdown of local-external cooperation. It is therefore highly advisable to involve people from the local area in the information gathering stage and in the management process in order to avoid having an incomplete knowledge of cultural and socio-economic realities and in the development of conflict.<sup>x</sup>



**How perceived lack of involvement of local inhabitants in Sweden and Finland led to radicalisation of protesters and increased conflict intensity:**

in Sweden and Finland a conflict between hunters and other stakeholders, that originated with the growth of the grey wolf (*Canis lupus*) population, was drastically intensified by the authorities' poor handling of the issue. The perceived exclusion of the hunting community from negotiations regarding legislation formation intensified resistance to conservation. This was then compounded by the authorities' failure to recognise the existence of opposition to conservation measures, leading to the radicalisation of some individuals. These individuals separated from the legal hunting community and the subsequently formed a hard-line anti-government subculture which, at one point, illegally killed wolves as a form of resistance. The bad management of the conflicts by the authorities has threatened public debate, weakened the political legitimacy of the legal hunting community and the legitimacy of any conservation decisions that may be reached.<sup>xi</sup>

III. **Identify common goals:** once all stakeholders have been involved in the preliminary discussions it is beneficial for all to be working towards common interests; one way to identify these common interests is by questionnaires or interviews to be answered by all stakeholders.

An example of the questions involved could be:

- a. What does this Natura 2000 site mean to you?
- b. Which criteria do you think are the most important for the evaluation of different small pieces of land? (Including all social, economic and environmental factors).
- c. How do you think your interests regarding the nature reserve differ from the interests of other stakeholders? (Adapted from Shmelev, 2012<sup>xii</sup>)

Once results have been collected, the answers can be mapped to see if any interests are commonly shared by all stakeholders.

Identifying common interests helps to establish the basis for future dialogue and development actions while proving to historically antagonistic stakeholders that they can share common values.

IV. **Communication is key:** cooperation of stakeholders relies on dialogue which allows collaborations to occur, consensus to be reached or problems to be overcome, and without which the management of a site is extremely difficult. One way to include all stakeholders in dialogue and reach decisions is by involving them in the creation of **management plans** for an area.

By helping to establish a dialogue between all interested parties and to agree on pragmatic management solutions for the area concerned, multi-functional management plans can be very useful in reducing potential conflicts as they:

- a. provide an open forum for debate amongst all interest groups;
- b. help build a consensus view on the long term management of the site;
- c. create a sense of shared ownership for the final outcome;
- d. ensure the transparency of the decision-making process - make an effort to show how stakeholders' feedback has been addressed;
- e. record the conservation needs of the habitats and species present so that it is clear to all what is being conserved and why (useful to avoid conflicts with conservation groups);
- f. explain the socio-economic and cultural context of the area and the interactions between different land-uses and the species and habitats present (useful to avoid conflicts with conservation groups).<sup>xiii</sup>



- V. **Be respectful:** ensure an open and respectful atmosphere during meetings to ensure trust and relationship building. Preferably, informal contacts should be organised beforehand, in order to enable people to get to know each other.
- VI. **Celebrate stakeholder involvement:** encourage and acknowledge participation of stakeholders by highlighting their involvement and (for example) by developing special award schemes celebrating active involvement in management processes.

## How to resolve conflicts if they do occur

Despite extensive actions taken to minimise the risk of conflict, they can still occur. Should they do so, a basic framework comprised of 4 steps exists for conflict reconciliation<sup>xiv</sup>:

### 1. Screening of the conflict

The first step is a preliminary evaluation of the history, intensity, and dimension of the conflict to raise awareness of key aspects to consider when developing a reconciliation strategy.

### 2. Assessment of the conflict

The second step is to evaluate the ecological, socio-economic, and institutional basis of the conflict to improve factual knowledge and understanding of it:

- Over what has the conflict arisen?
- Exactly what are the fundamental concerns of the stakeholders involved?

For conflicts to be resolved it is important to precisely identify the source of conflict; this topic would become the focus of the debate and deviation from it should be minimised during discussions.

### 3. Development and implementation of solutions

Based on the results of the Assessment phase, solutions can be developed in the third phase. Solutions to conflicts are often based on establishing greater communication between the antagonistic stakeholders. Organisation of small working groups or meetings can be useful in resolving these conflicts. For example, stakeholders can be organised into smaller working groups on particular themes or by professional categories, allowing a more structured approach to stakeholder dialogue while addressing issues on a topic-by-topic basis.

It can also be useful to organise individual meetings between the most divisive stakeholders in order to understand their motivations and highlight other stakeholders' perspectives<sup>vii</sup>.

It is also imperative that discussion is based on scientific knowledge rather than on ideology or personal factors. Once a compromise has been found and the conflict is resolved this can be formalised through a joint decision such as an agreement or the formal approval of a management plan or via a statement.

**How hunters in the Languedoc-Roussillon region (FR) resolved conflicts and gained support for sustainable hunting through improving dialogue.** In the late 1990s misunderstandings and conflicts emerged between hunters and other stakeholders over Natura 2000 implementation in the Languedoc-Roussillon region of France. In order to improve dialogue, the Regional Federation of Hunters started the ChasNat2000 scheme.



The **ChasNat 2000 scheme** is an awareness-raising project including mediation and information spreading, characterization of Natura 2000 hunting activities, organisation of working groups and workshops, support for impact assessments and general support for contracts between Natura 2000 sites and hunting societies.

This resulted in the resolution of conflicts and paved the way for today's situation where the hunters' organisational bodies are involved in the management of several Natura 2000 sites in the region. The high quality and successes of the mediation and communication work being done meant that the ChasNat2000 scheme was selected as a finalist for the 2014 **Natura 2000 awards** in the 'Reconciling Interests/ Perceptions' category.<sup>xv, xvi</sup>

- 4. The monitoring phase.** To ensure the long-lasting success of a conflict reconciliation process, the intended outcomes of all parties of the conflict have to be assessed. Monitoring should serve as a feedback mechanism for improving the outcome and the process of conflict management, and should assess both the intensity of the conflict among different groups of stakeholders and the social and economic effects of the conflict.

## CONCLUSIONS

The diversity of land uses occurring simultaneously within Natura 2000 sites means that conflicts between different stakeholders is to be expected and proper prevention and/or management measures are required. Conflicts are costly in terms of time and money, and can result in the breakdown of working relationships, preventing progress from being made in site management and halting the achievement of site objectives.

With planning and careful management of stakeholders it can be possible to avoid the majority of conflicts, while those that do develop can be reduced and resolved in most cases if appropriate steps are taken. This document is an information source providing steps that can be taken to ensure proper functioning of a Natura 2000 site and proper collaboration of the stakeholders within it.

Several main points can be identified:

- **Conflicts are costly** - either in terms of time, money, nature conservation objectives or respect between stakeholders, they should be prevented where possible and resolved if not;
- **Conflicts develop gradually** - they do not appear from nothing and they escalate due to a lack of communication, training, transparency, local knowledge, planning and funding;
- **Conflict avoidance is preferable to resolution** - because it is easier. Involvement of all stakeholders in the entire process is key, but avoidance also relies on identifying common goals, good communication and ensuring a respectful collaborative environment;
- **Conflict resolution can only occur through rational discussion** - it is important to precisely identify the source of conflict. Once identified, it is imperative that debate is based on scientific knowledge rather than ideology; formation of smaller working groups on particular themes can help focus this process, and a joint agreement made by the conflicting stakeholders can help cement a resolution. Post-resolution monitoring helps ensure the conflict does not arise again.

With careful planning, proper management and adequate strategies in place to identify, prevent and resolve conflicts once they develop, the Natura 2000 network can continue to preserve Europe's biodiversity while enabling various human activities to simultaneously use of the land on a sustainable and a long-term basis.



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- <sup>i</sup> Directive 2009/147/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 30 November 2009 on the conservation of wild birds (codified version)
- <sup>ii</sup> Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora
- <sup>iii</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/barometer/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/barometer/index_en.htm) [Accessed 26.10.15]
- <sup>iv</sup> EC 2013 Sustainable Hunting and Natura 2000
- <sup>v</sup> MA (2005) Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: Synthesis. Island Press, Washington, DC.
- <sup>vi</sup> Douglas I and UK MAB. 2005. *Urban Greenspace and Mental Health* [pdf]. UK MAB Urban Forum. Available at <[www.psykinfo.regionsyddanmark.dk/dwn109162](http://www.psykinfo.regionsyddanmark.dk/dwn109162)> [Accessed 26.10.15]
- <sup>vii</sup> Torre A and Lefranc C. 2006. Les Conflits dans les zones Rurales et périurbaines. Premières analyses de la Presse Quotidienne Regionale. *Espaces et Sociétés* 124-125 (1-2) : 93-110
- <sup>viii</sup> I.M. Bouwma, R. van Apeldoorn, A. Cil, M. Snethlage, N. McIntosh, N. Nowicki&L.C.Braa, 2010. Natura 2000 - Addressing conflicts and promoting benefits. Alterra, Wageningen, The Netherlands
- <sup>ix</sup> *Commission Journal 2004/EC of the LIFE-Nature program: communicating with stakeholders and the general public*, best practice examples for Natura 2000
- <sup>x</sup> Dimitrakopoulos PG, Jones N, Iosifides T, et al. 2010. Local attitudes on protected areas: Evidence from three Natura 2000 wetland sites in Greece. *Journal of Environmental Management* 91: 1847-1854
- <sup>xi</sup> von Essen E, Hansen HP, Kallstrom HN et al. 2015. The radicalisation of rural resistance: How hunting counterpublics in the Nordic countries contribute to illegal hunting. *Journal of Rural Studies* 39: 199-209
- <sup>xii</sup> S.E. Shmelev, *Ecological Economics: Sustainability in Practice*, p.166, DOI 10.4007/978-94-007-1972-9\_9, © Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2012
- <sup>xiii</sup> Commission Report 2005/EC on Natura 2000: conservation in partnership
- <sup>xiv</sup> Henle, K., Ring, I., Klenke, R., Jepsen, N., Kranz, A., Neßhover, C., Rauschmayer, F., 2013. A generic framework for reconciliation action plans for human-wildlife conflicts. In: Klenke, R., Ring, I, Kranz, A., Jepsen, N., Rauschmayer, F., Henle, K. (Eds.), *Human-Wildlife Conflicts in Europe—Fisheries and Fish-eating Vertebrates as a Model Case*. Springer, Heidelberg.
- <sup>xv</sup> <http://www.face.eu/about-us/resources/news/french-hunters-initiative-selected-finalist-for-european-commissions-natura>
- <sup>xvi</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/awards/previous-editions/2014-edition/finalists/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/nature/natura2000/awards/previous-editions/2014-edition/finalists/index_en.htm)

