High attachment and poor relationships: how social processes influence the development of diverging views into social conflicts.

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For the last decade, the establishment and management of National Parks has resulted in numerous social conflicts all around Europe. The implementation of Nature 2000 gives rise to renewed conflicts between local groups and management authorities. Based on an ongoing research project in a National Park in the Netherlands, we describe the development and partial resolution of a conflict between local residents and Park authorities.

The study is based on qualitative research methodology. We have organized 7 focus group discussions in 2005 and repeated these with the same respondents in 2007. Furthermore, we analyzed 127 documents produced by the most important stakeholders and interviewed 8 representatives of a range of authorities related to the National Park (e.g. municipalities, nature conservation agencies). These data are analyzed and coded using ATLAS.ti.

Local residents set up a protest groups to resist implementation of the management plan. This group collected 7000 signatures to protest against the management of the Park. After two years of conflicts, managing authorities decided to invest in the relationship with the protest group. Soon after, the protest group and park managers signed a covenant on the management of the Park. To describe this public conflict, we have adjusted Stoll-Kleemann's well known model of social barriers to nature conservation (Stoll-Kleemann 2001). Based on our study as well as on the mounting literature on public participation (Coenen 2009), we argue that the scope of this model could be enhanced. Instead of focusing only on cultural and emotional factors as starting point for the development of attitudes on Park management, we argue that public protest is often based on a combination of strong attachment to the area and the existence of diverging views on the content of the initiative. All ingredients are present for a local conflict to emerge especially when the relationship between the different stakeholders is weak and not effectively managed..

Based on this adjusted model, we describe:
  i)   How the views on the content of the management differ and how these diverging views relate to diverging values, preferences and ecological beliefs.
  ii) How attachment to the area influences the process of implementation and reactance.
  iii) How the relationship and lack of public participation stimulate critical framing processes.
  iv) How perception and communication barriers have lead to group processes encouraging social identity in combination with processes of stereotyping of opponents.

In this study we focus especially on the influence of the two prime driving forces for local conflicts: diverging images of nature (Buijs 2009) and stakeholder attachment to the area. Based on both focus groups and questionnaires, we have developed a 'conflict intensity matrix' as a heuristic tool to identify possible conflicts. Based on the level of attachment to the area and the level of agreement and disagreement with management plans, this matrix distinguishes between four possible reactions: protest, enthusiasm, resignation and acceptance. We hope the matrix can be a useful tool for managers to prevent, manage or understand local conflicts on nature and biodiversity management.

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The results suggest that small adjustments in Stoll-Kleemann's model could improve its usefulness to understand real life management issues related to environmental conflicts. We consider the matrix we developed based on this model as a first step in further understanding the diversity of positions people and groups can have in a environmental conflict. We suggest to further develop this matrix using also quantitative research methods.

References

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