

## **Overcoming National Park Conflicts by Regional Development: Experiences from the Doñana Area in Southern Spain**

**Andreas Voth**

University of Vechta, Germany

avoth@ispa.uni-vechta.de

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**Abstract:** The number of protected areas in Spain has increased considerably in the last two decades. The country's membership in the European Union favoured an important economic growth and social change and was also fundamental for the evolution of environmental policies and the exchange of management concepts for protected areas. The intensive use of natural resources was followed by a growing awareness of land use conflicts and the necessity of nature conservation. The area around the National Park of Doñana in Andalusia, presented in this contribution, is an outstanding example of a long history of competing land use interests and recent efforts to overcome conflicts introducing new concepts of regional development based on the principals of sustainability and participation. A regional label highlights the national park image to stimulate environmental sensibility and marketing. The local population increasingly perceives a new consciousness of their common problems, opportunities and responsibility.

### **Introduction: The protected areas policy in Spain**

Since the adherence of Spain to the European Union, a significant consolidation and regionalization of the country's environmental policy takes place and is reflected by an amazing proliferation of protected areas of different categories. The localization of most areas with some kind of protection in disfavoured rural districts requires a progressive transition from traditional policies of passive conservation to new approaches of active conservation, integrating the local population and surrounding territories and converting the protected areas into instruments of sustainable development (Troitiño et al., 2005). A recent shift of paradigm can be observed in protection policies in Spain towards new instruments of environmental planning and management taking into account the close interrelations between protected natural areas and their social and economic environment. Even the national parks are no longer seen as areas isolated from the rest of the territory, and their peripheral protection zone is increasingly regarded as part of a surrounding area of socioeconomic influence offering opportunities for the promotion of sustainable development.

The beginning processes of democratization, social and economic change and the political status of Autonomous Communities granted to the regions gave a fresh impetus to the amplification and declaration of national parks and to the diffusion of other categories of protected areas. The transfer of responsibilities for environmental legislation to the regional level caused a real boom of protected areas and also a change of their objectives and tasks. The priorities shifted gradually from landscape and ecosystem conservation to regional development. The regionalization process has not only led to an institutional change of the Spanish Network of National Parks, but also to a parallel evolution of regional networks and innovative types of protected areas characterized by an increasing integration of development functions. The case of Andalusia demonstrates the enormous expansion of the protected areas based on the own legal framework of 1989. The National Park of Doñana in the Guadalquivir river marshlands at the Atlantic coast is surrounded by nature parks and becomes incorporated into the Network of Protected Areas of Andalusia (RENPA).

The Action Plan published by Europarc-Spain (2002) provides orientations and recommendations on different planning and management processes in the protected areas and seeks to increase citizens'

awareness and participation concerning conservation and development decisions. In this document, protected areas are regarded as basic instruments for territorial planning and as diffusion centres of new sustainable development strategies. The Spanish Action Plan assesses that the switch towards the planning of protected areas integrated into a wider territorial framework is still very limited and more conceptual than real, so that a specific document about the present difficulties and opportunities to integrate protected natural areas in regional planning has been elaborated recently (Europarc-Spain, 2005). Environmental and regional planning legislation are responsibility of the autonomous regions. For some protected areas, the sub-regional planning level has gained greater importance. This is the case in the area of socioeconomic influence of the Doñana National Park, where a specific document for regional planning (Junta de Andalucía, 2004) was designed to adjust a previous document to the changing legislation in Andalusia and to take up the recommendations elaborated by an International Commission of Experts concerning the severe land and water use conflicts and development opportunities (Comisión Internacional de Expertos, 1992). The new legal framework for planning and sustainable development in the Doñana area is based on a detailed characterization and analysis of present uses, infrastructure and demands around the national park and contains ambitious objectives and action lines to make nature conservation and different economic uses and opportunities compatible.

## Methods

The study of land use conflicts and regional development in the Doñana area forms part of a long term research line of the author about concepts of economic upgrading of natural and cultural heritage in Europe, especially in Spain. The objectives are also combined with own recent analysis about the role of regional products in processes of regional development. Experiences and results of earlier studies dealing with problems of intensive agriculture in the Doñana area (Voth 1998 2004a) were of great importance for the ongoing research activities around the National Park. The evaluation of publications and planning documents, as well

as interviews with regional experts are the main methods used. A long term field observation and documentation in the park area and frequent personal contacts with local actors are essential for the application of qualitative research methods focussed on the area's evolution in time.

## Land use conflicts around the Doñana National Park

The Doñana area is certainly one of the best studied and documented territories in Spain, and the large National Park has become the country's most famous protected area on the international level, but also the most conflictive and difficult to manage. First initiatives to protect part of the Guadalquivir river marshlands were directly related to the foundation of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 1961. The wetlands, pine forest and coastal dune ecosystems are of vital importance for many migrating birds and for the survival of the Iberian Lynx. Thanks to international pressure and financing, a growing area could be protected, leading to the declaration of almost 35,000 hectares of Doñana as a national park in 1969, amplified to more than 50,000 hectares in 1978. The protection initiatives have saved an important part of Doñana from being transformed for intensive agriculture, mass tourism, urbanization and traffic infrastructure, but nature conservation was not compatible with the dominating economic development policy of that time. The marshlands in the triangle between Sevilla, Huelva and Cádiz were an objective of several development plans competing directly with the conservation interests. Intensive irrigation and the modernization of rice growing in the Northeast part of the marshlands (Voth 1998) as well as the massive groundwater extraction for an agricultural colonization scheme at the Northern park border threatened the complex ecosystem. The deforestation caused by the dynamic expansion of export-oriented strawberry growing on the coastal plains also affected the Doñana area (Voth 2004a). The implementation of the industrial growth pole in Huelva and new seaside urbanizations called for the construction of a road connecting the cities of Huelva and Cádiz, but these plans were never put into practice. The renouncement of

this road and of other large infrastructure projects in the park area is still used by local interest groups as an argument for claiming a continuous reception of different kinds of compensation.

The parallel but uncoordinated promotion of the National Park, intensive agriculture and mass tourism in neighbouring or even overlapping areas caused serious problems still not fully resolved. Traditional activities, an increasing number of modern land use interests and external impacts put the Park under pressure (figure 1). Severe land use conflicts characterized the relationship between the Park and the local population and have led to an unsustainable situation requiring new development concepts and institutions (Voth 2004b). In 1998, a mining accident caused a destructive contamination of the Guadiamar River, an important catchment area of the Doñana wetlands, and demonstrated the vulnerability of the National Park.

Nevertheless, this threat once again directed the political and scientific attention on Doñana and attracted new funds for conservation and development.

Even substantial compensations could not guarantee the acceptance of the protected area, and traditional concepts based on the conciliatory effects of subsidies turned out to be inadequate as a long-term solution. Some authors denounce not only the lack of information and participation of locals in planning processes, but also the 'culture of assistance' becoming firmly fixed in the population living around protected areas (Troitiño et al. 2005). In the case of Doñana, a compensation policy attempted to overcome the long lasting conflicts between nature conservation and economic interests, and people continuously expected the arrival of new 'development plans' to generate a new economic upturn, as Ojeda (1993) demonstrated in his

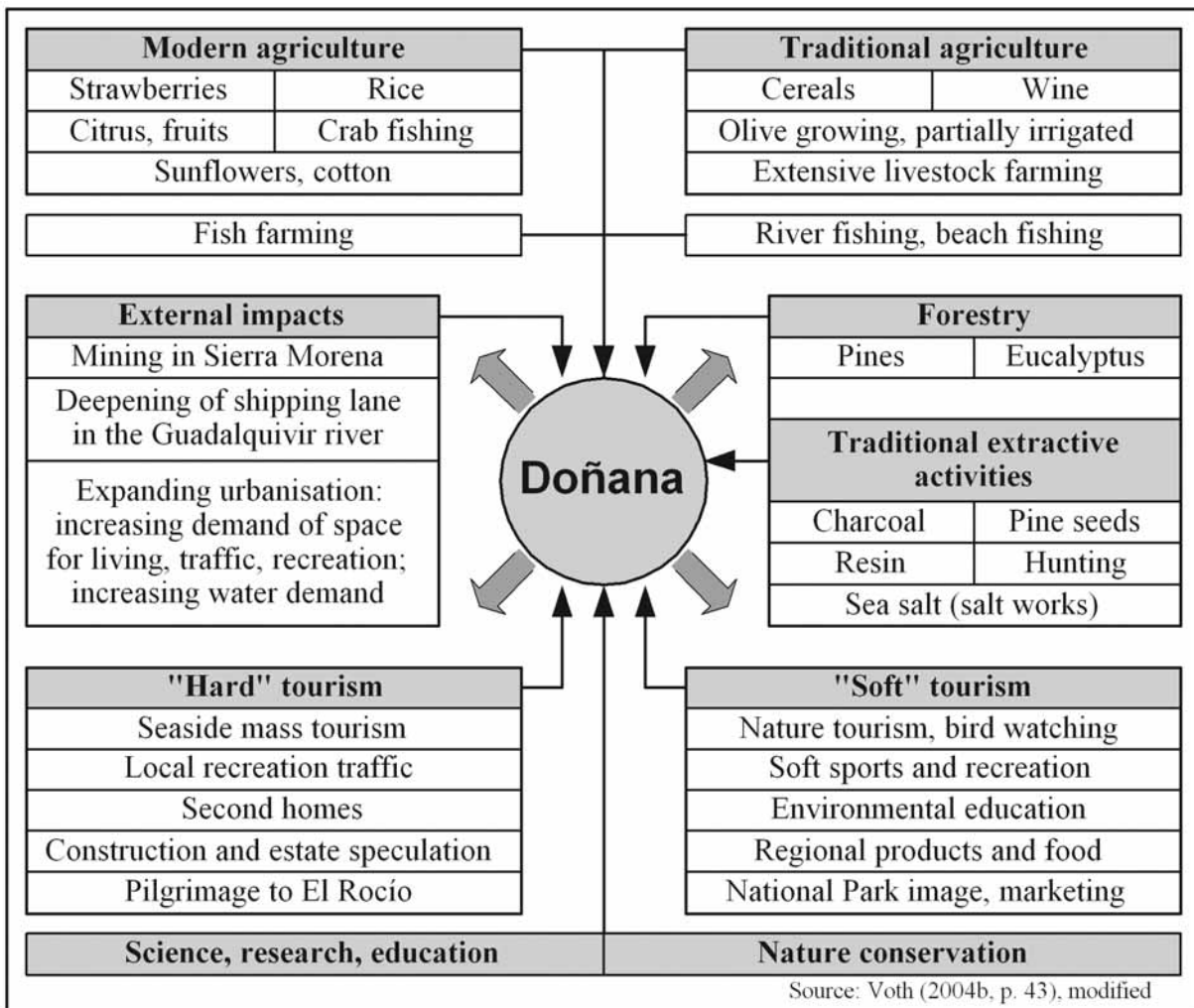


Figure 1: The diversity and interrelationship of land use interests in the Doñana area.

detailed analysis. Decades of uncoordinated sector policies strengthened the deep rooted idea of local communities to have a legitimate claim to compensation for renouncing a complete transformation of the area for intensive agriculture and tourism development. New concepts were needed.

### **New concepts of sustainable development in the Doñana area**

Increasing land use conflicts forced the regional administration to look for an alternative way of development for the Doñana area. The judgement of the International Commission of Experts (1992) in charge of an independent evaluation study tried 'to make compatible the justifiable aspirations of the inhabitants in municipalities surrounding Doñana for a better life with an integral conservation of Doñana's ecosystems, from a perspective of sustainable development. The experts were convinced that the conservation of the Park could represent a comparative advantage for the area regarding the expanding market of nature tourism and the market segments for agricultural products with a quality label or a denomination of origin. To achieve this goal, they also recommended a general improvement of the infrastructure in the area and the realization of an ambitious programme of education and professional training. The start of a Plan for Sustainable Development (PDS) in 1993 was the logical consequence of the analysis of problems and opportunities. With the financial support of EU funds, the regional administration implemented the plan and created the Foundation 'Doñana 21' to promote social participation and public and private actions for the sustainable development of Doñana and its area of socioeconomic influence. Taking the role of a new development agency for the 14 municipalities constituting the area of Doñana, the Foundation supports coordination and cooperation among different entities and social agents and stimulates the participation and own initiatives of the local population.

In a workshop organized by the Foundation 'Doñana 21' in 1997, local experts and the mayors of all municipalities within the socioeconomic influence area approved a 'Doñana Local Charter for Sustainable Tourism', considering that "the present

trend in tourist demand, in accordance with the notion of sustainable development, requires a product which is integrated into the particular characteristics of the area." The existence of the protected area is promising a life quality of great attractiveness for new seasonal or permanent residents, so that nature conservation is not only perceived yet as an obstacle to economic development (Elbersen & Prados 1999). Also the tourist flows have grown considerably, and the National Park receives more than 400,000 visitors annually, although less than 20% of them participate in paid tours inside the Park. Analysis of visitor statistics show a significant seasonality and spatial concentration of visitor flows on the mayor visitor centres (Litago et al. 2003). Public relations of the park administration are directed to tourists as well as to residents. Great efforts of environmental education are made to improve people's comprehension and estimation of their park. Recent problems like the introduction and diffusion of exotic species (e.g. American tortoises) and of new aggressive sports (e.g. quads) demonstrate the necessity of innovative approaches in the management of visitor flows and public information. Originally, the primary objective of public use concepts was to offer facilities of environmental interpretation and education, but the increasing demand for other recreational activities and additional services requires a change in public use planning and gives private enterprises new opportunities. The number of visitor centres and information points has increased drastically in recent years, most of them managed by the park administration, but also through service concessions. Doñana already shows a certain saturation of this type of infrastructure and a great variety of other tourist attractions and facilities (figure 2). Recently emerging centres of rural tourism indicate an alternative way outside the traditional seaside urbanizations. Tourism in and around the protected areas offers news opportunities of economic development and plays an important role in the diffusion of the regional image. Of all thirteen Parks composing the Spanish Network of National Parks, Doñana is the only one possessing the entire collection of protection titles: after its important enlargement of 1978, the Doñana was recognized as Biosphere Reserve in 1981, Wetland of International Importance in 1982, Protected Area with European Di-

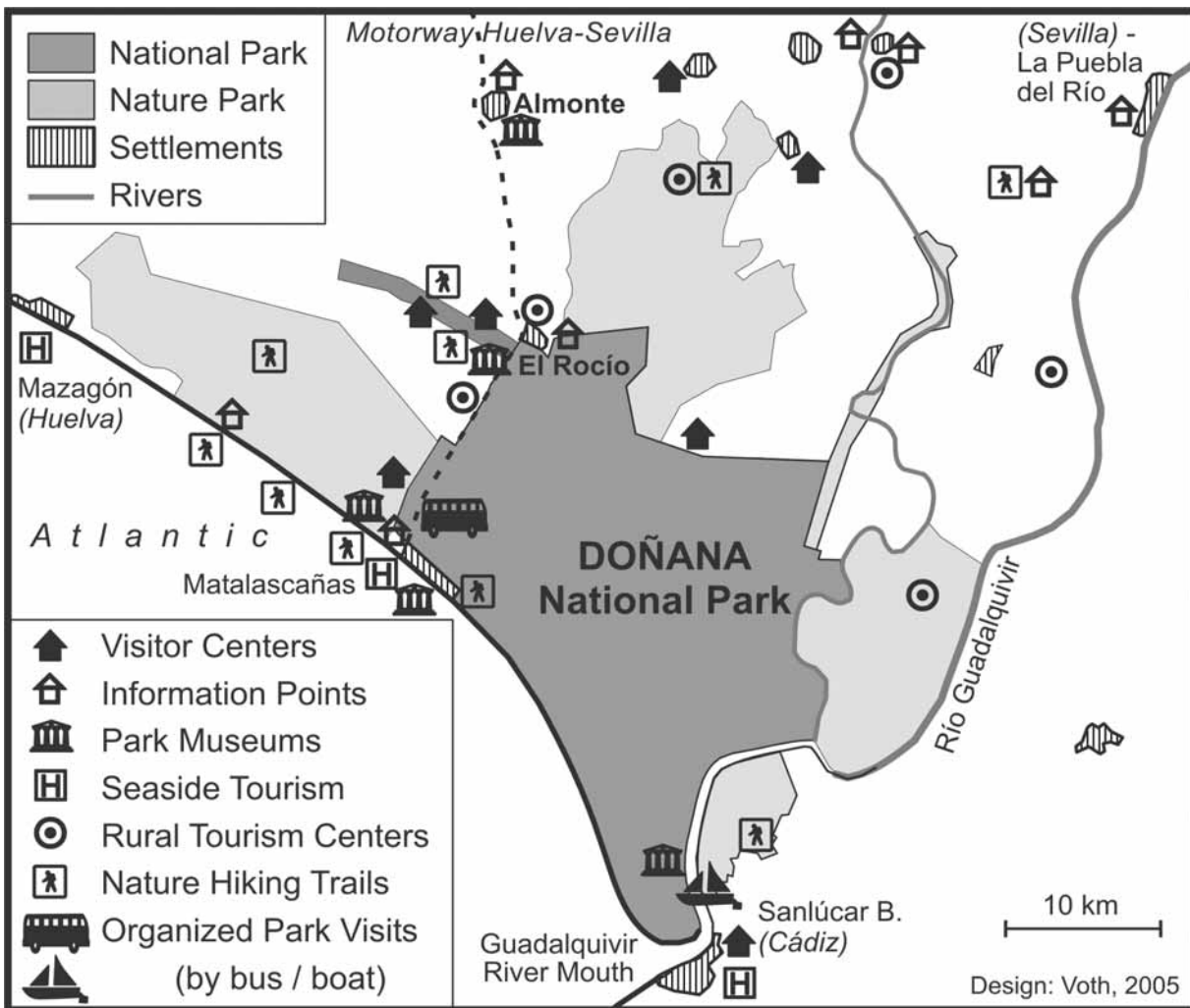


Figure 2: Tourism infrastructure around the Doñana National Park.

ploma since 1985, Special Protection Area for Birds in 1988 and UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1994. The outstanding international prestige of the protected areas offers best opportunities for establishing a concept of regional marketing using the name of Doñana. Therefore, one of the innovative initiatives carried out in the framework of the Plan of Sustainable Development (PDS) is the quality label 'Etiqueta Doñana 21' created by the Foundation in 1998 to enhance the differential values that the companies of the Doñana area offer. This sign of environmental respect and prestige is expected to improve the external image of Doñana and the companies' competitiveness and market access for their products and services. The distinctive label is granted only to local companies that incorporate and combine systems of quality and environmental management and fulfil detailed requisites for certification. Enterprises that like to obtain the label

have to adopt ISO regulations and to demonstrate a continuous improvement of their environmental behaviour in a process evaluated by external certification. Up to 2005, seventeen enterprises and institutions already received the certification, and forty others have started the evaluation process to obtain it. Most of these enterprises are dedicated to agricultural production and marketing (35%), services related to tourism (32%) and to handcraft and industrial activities (12%). The regional name of Doñana also is presented as a quality label on different international tourist fairs and used for destination marketing.

The introduction of the Etiqueta Doñana 21 label is only one piece in a wide set of measures covered by the PDS that consists of several programmes: the improvement of the water management, the structures in agriculture and the sustainable use of natural resources are specific objectives of the Plan, as

well as fomenting tourism and other economic activities and infrastructure compatible with environmental conservation. The recommendations of the International Group of Experts and main objectives of the first PDS are put into practice with the assistance innovative concepts and important financial funds. The considerable economic change that can be observed in the park region improves the conditions for a change of attitudes towards the protected area. After a successful realization and evaluation, a second PDS for the Doñana area is being elaborated in 2006 and based on the local Agenda 21 process. The PDS must integrate all territorial and sector policies related with the park area. The participation of local actors and rural development groups in the elaboration process and management of the plan is of fundamental importance in order to overcome persisting land use conflicts by regional development. The complex interrelationship between different actors and the recent experiences with new concepts of park management and marketing are of significant interest for further studies and a potential application in other regions with protected areas.

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