Public participation in nature conservation – making it happen

A new study has analysed four Scandinavian examples of public involvement in nature conservation and suggested that successful participation requires clear rules to enable public involvement and a process to resolve conflicts.

20 per cent of the EU’s terrestrial area now has protected status and many of these areas have both a conservation value and a value to local people for purposes such as farming, fishing, recreation and tourism. This can produce a conflict between conservation and existing land use and one solution is to encourage direct public involvement in nature conservation. International agreements, such as the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD)¹, have recommended public involvement in nature conservation. The Norwegian and Swedish governments have committed to this approach by signing international agreements including the CBD and Agenda 21². One of CBD’s goals is to enhance and secure involvement of indigenous and local communities and relevant stakeholders.

The study examined two cases of protected areas in Norway (Setesdal and Blåfjella-Skjaekerfjella) and two in Sweden (Laponia and Fulufjället) that have tried implementing participatory approaches to conservation management. Data were collected from relevant documents, such as management plans of the protected areas, and from interviews with central and local government officials and important local user groups.

Despite consultations, there has been heated debate about the boundaries of the protected areas and the rules that govern their use by the public. There has been particular conflict arising from activities including reindeer herding and the rights of the indigenous Sami people to use the land. Representation and power-sharing has been a particularly difficult issue. Although local stakeholder groups were involved in all four protected areas, not all of them were involved and some did not receive equal representation.

Another issue is the perception by local actors that there is unfair allocation of benefits and costs. For example, many considered the costs of establishing the protected areas too great as they imposed limits on local livelihoods which depend on the area’s resources. However, by offering something in exchange, such as local influence, jobs or better infrastructure, some of local resistance could be translated into, at least, reluctant approval of conservation.

The study identified some key problems in attempts to enable public participation in managing the protected areas. Firstly, there was a lack of clear boundaries and rules that state who has the right to use resources from the protected area, from which part and at which time. These boundaries could be defined in the management plans of the protected areas. Secondly, there needs to be an effective framework for participation in which the decision process is transparent, democratic and respects minority interests. Thirdly, there need to be mechanisms in place for conflict resolution before the conflict actually occurs, otherwise old hostilities are likely to re-emerge. Finally, there needs to be better communication and power-sharing between different levels of government and local user groups.

The researchers did point out that systems to govern participation cannot be developed overnight and the analysis might not be fully applicable to all four of the cases. Nevertheless, it was clear in these cases that there was an overall lack of rules or design principles in place to encourage local participation and that this has sustained conflicts between central government and local stakeholders.

1. See: www.cbd.int
2. See: www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21


Contact: sissel.hovik@nibr.no

Theme(s): Environmental information services, Sustainable development and policy analysis