Improved local management needed for the Natura 2000 network

The protection of some environmentally valuable Natura 2000 sites is poorly supported at the local level, according to a study from Poland. An analysis of Polish sites in the protected area network has suggested that there is resistance among local communities to the network, but that this may be because they have been misinformed about its purpose and benefits.

The aim of the Natura 2000 network is to protect Europe’s most important ecological sites. Protected and managed by Member States, Natura 2000 sites minimise biodiversity loss and environmental deterioration. In Poland, a fifth of the country’s land area falls under the network, but many Polish people, including farmers, landowners and those working in the tourist industry, view Natura 2000 as a burden, complaining that it hinders economic growth in rural areas. Regulations affecting development activities in Natura 2000 sites have led to conflict and communities have argued that a lack of financial support to protect their local sites can cause local economies to suffer.

The study analysed social and economic development in 341 local communities in the ‘Green Lungs of Poland’ region in the north-east of the country. It aimed to gain greater understanding about the influence of Natura 2000 on rural communities and inform management of the network in Poland and other European countries.

The results show that a lack of adequate information about the network appeared to be widespread in Poland, particularly among small business owners who were poorly supported in dealing with the rules and regulations. The study found that those responsible for managing the sites often did not disseminate sufficient information about the network and its potential benefits. Furthermore, they did not publish detailed development plans and cooperation with local people and businesses was not effective.

The study suggests that properly formulated sustainable development strategies for Natura 2000 sites should benefit communities by enhancing economic growth through, for example, agri-tourism. However, it warns that development of a region’s tourist industry has to be balanced by development in other economic activities in order to secure a sustainable economic future.

Community engagement and funds devoted specifically to the protection of Natura 2000 sites are necessary, the study concludes. The study suggests that a new EU-level funding mechanism for managing protected areas should be introduced to provide support for integrated environmental protection and socioeconomic development, and recommends increased sources of finance for communities and farmers within the network. The latter could include the prioritised action frameworks currently being developed by Member States, where integrated funding mechanisms would generate greater leverage for dedicated nature conservation funds.