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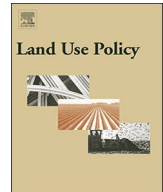
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## Participation in the implementation of Natura 2000: A comparative study of six EU member states



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### ABSTRACT

The establishment of Natura 2000, the European Union's network of protected areas, has been a challenging process and has caused a variety of conflicts. These conflicts are related to contradictory stakeholder interests and perceptions, as well as to procedural issues and feelings of exclusion, especially by concerned local land user groups. To prevent further conflict, local participation has been stressed as an important tool to increase the inclusiveness of Natura 2000 and its acceptance among land users. In this paper, we present an analysis of participation practices related to the Natura 2000 implementation processes in six EU member states. Based on material collected from semi-structured interviews and document analysis, we describe the organisational settings of the participatory processes, focusing, among other things, on the type of participants involved, the level and intensity of their involvement, and the goal of participation. In addition, we also describe the local context in which the participation processes have been embedded. Finally, we assess the outcomes of the participatory processes in terms of their impact on forest and nature conservation management practices. Our results show that local participation practices were shaped not just by the Natura 2000 policy, but also by the history of the area, including, for example, earlier conflicts among the local actors. We also show that although the participation process leads to a greater acceptance of the Natura 2000 policy, this does not relate to significant changes in management practices among local actors. These findings, however, do not suggest that participation is irrelevant. Rather, we conclude that participation involves context-dependent, localised learning processes that can only be understood by taking the historical socio-economic and institutional context in which they are situated into account.

### 1. Introduction

The European Habitats Directive (HD), including the provisions for the establishment of the Natura 2000 network of protected sites, was approved in 1992. Today, the Natura 2000 network roughly covers 18% of the EU's territory and many consider both the HD and Natura 2000 network as a unique, innovative and ambitious supranational policy (Rosa and Marques Da Silva, 2005; Fulchiron, 2004). The main goal of Natura 2000 is the conservation of natural habitats and species of community interest through the maintenance or restoration of a

favourable conservation status. Natura 2000 also aims at contributing to the sustainable development of rural territories in the European Union (European Commission, 1992). Hence, Natura 2000 targets both conservation and the integration of environmental and socio-economic concerns by taking “economic, social and cultural requirements, and regional and local characteristics” into account (European Commission, 1992: 6). The implementation of Natura 2000 has, however, been characterised by conflicts and delays in many countries (Fernandez, 2003; Ferranti et al., 2010; Grodzinska-Jurczak and Cent, 2011; Hiedanpää, 2005; Ledoux et al., 2000; McCauley, 2008; Young et al.,

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2007). These conflicts are usually related to different and competing land use principles, interests, and views on conservation often resulting from issues such as feelings of exclusion by land users (Winkel et al., 2015).

Regarding the implementation of Natura 2000, EU member states have adopted different approaches with widely varying degrees of local actor involvement (Rauschmayer et al., 2009a, 2009b). EU member states are relatively free to design the implementation process and the management of the protected sites in line with the overall objectives of the policy. The HD actually leaves member states with considerable leeway as to how they can meet the goals of the directive which has opened the possibility of participatory approaches to the implementation of Natura 2000. Whereas the selection of sites to be included in the network has been strongly driven by conservation science in all of the countries involved (Alphandéry and Fortier, 2001; Ferranti et al., 2013), subsequent phases of the network implementation, including the development of management concepts and strategies, have increasingly promoted stakeholder participation (Bouwma et al., 2010). This shift towards a more participatory environmental governance in the implementation of the Habitats Directive mirrors broader shifts in environmental governance in Europe instilled by EU policies (see Andonova, 2004; Saurugger, 2010; Sotirov et al., 2015). Participation in environmental governance, in general, and Natura 2000 implementation, more specifically, is argued to be a good way to lead to a more effective and legitimate policy in the eyes of local populations (Dimitrakopoulos et al., 2010; Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Luz, 2000; Newig and Fritsch, 2009; Rauschmayer et al., 2009a, 2009b). Yet, the actual contribution of the adoption of more participatory approaches to the outcomes of the European conservation policy in terms of both stakeholder acceptance and effectiveness is still in debate (Turnout et al., 2015).

A large body of literature addresses the challenges and obstacles of Natura 2000 implementation (Alphandéry and Fortier, 2001; Fairbrass and Jordan, 2001; Fernandez, 2003; Ferranti et al., 2010; Grodzinska-Jurczak and Cent, 2011; Hiedanpää, 2005; Ledoux et al., 2000; Young et al., 2007) and discusses the issue of participation in Natura 2000 and, more broadly, in European biodiversity policy (Alphandéry and Fortier, 2010; Paavola, 2004; Rauschmayer et al., 2009a, 2009b). However, the question of how participation relates to the implementation of nature conservation objectives into practice, and how this plays off in the interplay with local stakeholders and their social and economic concerns, is less specifically discussed (Winter et al., 2014; Winkel et al., 2015). This paper intends to shed light on the dynamics and effects of local participation processes in the implementation of Natura 2000 in general and the designation of nature areas for Natura 2000 in particular. It does so by systematically exploring participatory approaches used in the implementation of Natura 2000 in forest areas across six case studies in six different European countries. The aim of this paper is to draw conclusions on the relation between participatory approaches of Natura 2000 and acceptance and effectiveness of policy.

## 2. Participation and the governance of nature conservation

For a long time, human intervention has been largely portrayed as a potential threat to conservation, and the idea of separating humans and nature was deeply rooted in the global conservation movement (Colchester, 1994). However, this paradigm began to change from the 1970s on, and the relationship between people and nature was increasingly taken into consideration. Voices emerged arguing that the integration of the human dimension into nature conservation and management practices is significant and necessary (Wells et al., 1992; Wells and McShane, 2004). This change was also central to the international shift in conservation science during the 1990s that led to ecological theories that considered human activities as one of the elements contributing to the equilibrium and integrity of natural ecosystems (Larrère and Larrère, 1997, 2009). This resulted in the

widespread adoption of community-based conservation and participatory natural resource management schemes, which combined ecological, social and economic objectives (Dressler et al., 2010; Maier et al., 2014).

Participatory approaches are now considered to be a “key element in reviving confidence in the State” (Abram and Cowell, 2004, pp. 701), and are expected to improve the decisions taken in conservation and development projects and policies (Barnaud, 2013; Cornwall, 2008). This is, among other things, because participation makes it possible to address complex environmental issues in a more inclusive, locally-adapted way instead of via centralised, “distant” bureaucracies (Koontz and Thomas, 2006). The participation of stakeholders and citizens may provide valuable local information and expertise that improves the quality and effectiveness of policies (Bulkeley and Mol, 2003). In the case of conservation, participation can, for example, facilitate the integration of tangible local knowledge about species, habitats and their conservation status (Young et al., 2013). Moreover, participatory processes are expected to provide decisions with greater legitimacy and acceptance, thus easing their implementation (Koontz and Thomas, 2006; Luz, 2000; Newig and Fritsch, 2009). Lastly, it is expected that repeated participatory processes result in trustful relationships between the public and government bureaucrats (King and Stivers, 1998), thereby facilitating future decision-making processes.

Concomitant with these positive expectations, the literature also describes numerous challenges related to participation. Notably, its contribution to principles such as the legitimacy and effectiveness of a policy is not self-evident. Participatory processes can lead to a disproportionate emphasis on individual issues or particular interests (Dietz and Stern, 2008; Renn, 2008; Sanders, 1997), which may alter its legitimacy in the eyes of people with alternative interests. Moreover, participation may not increase the effectiveness of policy implementation, especially not if substantial conflicts are prevalent (Newig and Fritsch, 2009). It may be “misused” as a purely symbolic appeasement strategy in polarised environmental disputes (Winkel and Sotirov, 2011), and can even increase conflicts (Walker and Hurley, 2004).

This may suggest that the merits of participation do not reside in the method of participation itself but are profoundly shaped by the practices in which participatory approaches are performed (Turnhout et al., 2010; Van der Arend and Behagel, 2011; Behagel and Van den Arend, 2013). Therefore, it is relevant to move away from either design approaches to participation that aim to find the optimal participatory approach, or approaches that see participation as a form of repression (Turnhout et al., 2010). Rather we should aim at uncovering the practices (intended and unintended) of public involvement in environmental decision-making to assess participation in practice.

## 3. Methodological approach

Participation can be defined in different ways and participatory approaches can be classified with regard to different dimensions (Arnstein, 1969; Fiorino, 1990; Pretty, 1995; Van Asselt and Rijkens-Klomp, 2002). Building upon the argumentation on the relevance of practices in which participation are performed and the environmental scope of the research, we choose an approach by Dietz and Stern (2008). This approach was, firstly, developed to analyse environmental assessment and decision making. This aim of the approach makes it relevant for explaining the policy processes of Natura 2000. Secondly, the participatory approach looks at the direct involvement of the public in decision making and the practice of participation. Finally and by identifying several key dimensions of participation, the approach offers the possibility to assess “public participation processes across a large range of types of agency activities” (Dietz and Stern, 2008, pp 14). This final reason makes the approach by Dietz and Stern (2008) particularly relevant for the different cases selected for this article.

Dietz and Stern (2008, pp. 11) broadly define participation as “organized processes adopted by elected officials, government agencies,

or other public- or private-sector organizations to engage the public in environmental assessment, planning, decision making, management, monitoring, and evaluation". Within this definition, they distinguish 4 key dimensions used to characterise participation processes. These are:

- Participants

Who is involved? Often in public participation, "the public" refers to a few individual citizens or groups of individuals. Dietz and Stern (2008) include all stakeholders of interested and affected parties as well as their number. In this article, the public generally involves stakeholders, the directly affected public and the general public, ranging from elected political representatives, administrators and experts, to normal citizens. It is not always possible to distinguish one type of participants from another, as these categories can overlap.

- Stages in the policy process

When and to what degree is the public involved? There are different stages in the policy process that are participatory. The first stage is the stage that precedes the decision to start Natura 2000 implementation. In this stage, there is for example problem formulation, information gathering and summarization in which the participants can be involved. The second stage is the decision itself to start Natura 2000. The third stage is the stages that follows the decision and entails the implementation, and the evaluation. During these stages the public can have an informative role, consulting role or a decision-making role (Dietz and Stern, 2008).

- Intensity of involvement

Although seemingly similar to the level of involvement, the intensity of involvement refers to the extent to and ways in which the public can express an opinion. These can be minimized to written letters or can be extended to highly intensive interaction. These can be a one-time event or a long-term ongoing process (Dietz and Stern, 2008). With level of involvement, we also consider the influence of participants. While this is a separate category by Dietz and Stern (2008), we argue that, in our research, it sufficiently overlaps with the intensity of involvement to be merged. The influence of public may differ from a mere check on a formal form, to actual information exchange of information, to explicit requirement for consensus (Dietz and Stern, 2008).

- Goals for participation

The goals for participation can be different. They can be modest such as gathering information and identifying public values. They can also be more ambitious and seen as a way to empower the public (Dietz and Stern, 2008).

In this article, we will use these four categories to describe and assess the participatory processes of Natura 2000 implementation in six case studies. We will also provide some necessary contextual information to the description. In addition, we complement the more organisational categories provided by Dietz and Stern with local perception on the outcomes of the participatory process in terms of impact on forest and nature conservation management practices.

### 3.1. Cases and data analysis

Our analysis is based on six local case studies, each focusing on one Natura 2000 site located in forest areas in six EU member states: Austria, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom (Table 1). These cases represent a diverse set of participatory approaches to the implementation of Natura 2000 in forests, and were selected from a more comprehensive set of case studies within a

European research project for representing a diversity of approaches to participation. The larger set of case studies from which these six cases were selected was based on a comprehensive set of ecological and socio-economic criteria for the implementation of the Natura 2000 policy in beech forest areas.

For the six cases, we first analysed relevant social, economic and policy documents that provided information about the historical and socio-economic contexts of each case. Subsequently, between 2012 and 2013, we conducted 120 semi-structured qualitative interviews with various stakeholders at the selected sites (see Table 1 for the distribution per case study). Interviewees encompassed a broad set of actors that participated in the local implementation of Natura 2000 at the site level. These actors were mostly forest owners (both private and public), forest managers, forest consultants, mayors of villages located in or near the Natura 2000 sites, and other local elected representatives, farmers, breeders, hunters, state representatives, environmental NGOs, tourism entrepreneurs, and the project leaders of Natura 2000 sites. We also conducted interviews with institutional representatives at the regional and national levels. Our questions addressed the practical local implementation of Natura 2000 and the issue of participation in a wider sense. For instance, we asked about the involvement of local actors, the characteristics of the participation process, and the acceptance of the policy and its implementation process. We also asked for the interviewees' perception of the effectiveness of Natura 2000 and the perceived impact of the policy on the management of the area.

All interviews were transcribed *ad verbatim* by the primary researcher in the local cases. Subsequently, parts were translated into English for further analysis by the first author of the article who regularly consulted the co-authors in order to process the transversal data analysis and make the description more comparable. This analysis focused on: (1) the characteristics of the specific local context and history of the case; (2) the description of the "organisational" setting of participation according to the five categories established by Dietz and Stern (2008) and including the features of the observed participation practices; and (3) the impact of this participatory process on the local actors' acceptance of the policy and forest management practices. This structured analysis was done for the purpose of answering the research question of how both the organised setting of the participation process and the local setting and dynamics relate to acceptance and effectiveness of the policy.

Finally, the analysis was validated by means of frequent exchanges and back-and-force amendments among the team of authors of the article in view of developing a commonly shared interpretation of the data. This commonly shared understanding was further coded by the first author to better match the data with the theoretical framework used and the format of the case descriptions that needed to be short and concise while providing as many case-specific features as possible. It is also clear, however, that these interpretations remain interpretations – that is, a certain degree of subjectivity remains unavoidable in our presentation of the cases and data.

## 4. Results

The selected cases all have their specific context in which the participatory processes played out. In this section, we first introduce a general, short description of each of the participatory processes in the cases. This section is followed by an analysis of cases in terms of the 4 characteristics of participatory processes identified from the work by Dietz and Stern (2008). Each of the 4 characteristics is supported by 1, or more, examples from one of the 6 cases. Finally, this section also includes a brief overview of the outcome of the participatory processes.

### 4.1. Participatory processes

The assessment of the participatory processes in the cases results in the following descriptions of the cases. The full comparable overview of

**Table 1**  
Case studies.

Country	Name of the Natura 2000 site (and number of interviews)	Participatory process observed
Austria	Wienerwald (9)	Designation of the Biosphere Reserve and Natura 2000 areas, including management plan design
United Kingdom	East Hampshire Hangers (12)	Establishment of suitable management practices
France	Piémont vosgien (27)	Management plan design
Germany	Oberer Hotzenwald, Baden-Württemberg (14)	Management plan drafting (and communication around it)
Netherlands	Geuldal (22)	Management plan design
Spain	Montseny National Park (36)	Update NP management plan

the processes is presented in Table 2.

#### 4.1.1. Wienerwald, Austria

In Austria, the Nature Conservation Authorities of the provinces handled the Natura 2000 implementation. In Lower Austria, the Wienerwald Natura 2000 site was nominated in 1998. It covers parts of Lower Austria and Vienna and is the main forested area attached to the city of Vienna. It also benefits from a conservation status since the 19th century. The Natura 2000 sites in Lower Austria were nominated without the consultation of local landowners, which led to their initial resistance to the policy. This incited the authorities to launch information campaigns in the whole province in an attempt to appease conflicts. Nevertheless, the implementation of the Natura 2000 Wienerwald site progressed slowly until the provinces of Lower Austria and Vienna decided to establish the Wienerwald Biosphere Reserve (BR), which covers a major part of the Natura 2000 site. The two protection regimes actually require similar conservation and management measures. However, the implementation of the Biosphere Reserve followed a different path than Natura 2000, using a participatory approach in order to avoid conflicts from the start.

#### 4.1.2. East Hampshire Hangers, United Kingdom

In England, the list of Natura 2000 sites was drawn from an existing network of protected areas, the *Sites of Special Scientific Interest* (SSSIs), which was expanded in the 1980s to include nearly all sites of the eventual Natura 2000 area. The administration in charge of sites management is Natural England (NE), the English country conservation agency. The *East Hampshire Hangers* in Southeast England is made up of several such SSSIs and, as a result, Natura 2000 was generally perceived as an additional layer of protection and not as a radically novel instrument. The management of the site is based on agreements established for the SSSI units (Borrass, 2014), and the forests are nearly exclusively managed for both nature protection and recreation purposes. As a consequence, the site designation process was relatively uncontested.

#### 4.1.3. Piémont Vosgien, France

The Piémont vosgien Natura 2000 site is situated in Northeastern France. It is a densely forested area and the forest is closely linked to the local economy. In addition, many factories (e.g., related to the automobile industry and the high technology sector) are established in the area, making the region quite dynamic with a growing population. In France, the national government was in charge of implementing Natura 2000 throughout the country. The sites were originally nominated without informing or consulting local stakeholders, which resulted in massive conflicts between the government and the representatives of the rural world in 1996. In order to respond to the massive opposition to Natura 2000, the French government decided in 2002 to set up consultation processes in all of the French Natura 2000 sites related to the development of the management plans. The government also established a system of public-private contracts that compensated for the loss of income and also covered additional costs resulting from changes in management. In the Piémont vosgien, a pilot committee (COPI) was established in 2002 that consisted of representatives of local stakeholders concerned by the situation. Their goal was to draft

the management plan (*Docob*) for the site.

#### 4.1.4. Oberer Hotzenwald, Germany

In Germany, the implementation of the HD, including site designation, is the responsibility of the 16 *Länder*. In Baden-Württemberg, the nature conservation administration is responsible for the development of the management plans for Natura 2000 sites, supported by the forestry administration for issues related to forest habitat types. One of these sites is the *Oberer Hotzenwald* where forests and farmlands are significant elements of the landscape and the local economy. Many parts of the *Oberer Hotzenwald* Natura 2000 site already benefitted from a conservation status before the introduction of Natura 2000. The establishment of this previous conservation status had already met with strong opposition from local landowners. This led the nature conservation administration to initiate a participatory approach involving the organised stakeholders of the area in order to strive for a joint vision, conservation goals and scenarios for future developments, prior to the Natura 2000 designation. When the area was eventually designated as a Natura 2000 site, the development of the management plan was able to build on these earlier processes and the working relationships that had developed among stakeholders, as well as on the existing knowledge about conservation of the area.

#### 4.1.5. Geuldal, the Netherlands

The Natura 2000 site of Geuldal is located in the province of Limburg, the Netherlands. It is an area characterised by rich nature, abundant forests on the hilltops, and extensive agriculture (mainly cattle farming) in the valleys. This diverse landscape of forests, pastures, rivers and streams draws many tourists to the Geuldal. Similar to many other nature areas in the Netherlands, this Natura 2000 site was already protected under a Dutch network of nature areas, known as EHS.<sup>1</sup> In Geuldal, the provincial administration (province of Limburg) was formally responsible for the designation of the area and the general implementation of Natura 2000. They set up an intense series of meetings where all involved stakeholders provided their input in the management plan of Natura 2000.

#### 4.1.6. Montseny NP, Spain

The Montseny National Park (NP), located north of Barcelona in Catalonia, was already a national park before it was designated as a Natura 2000 site. Montseny is a popular tourist destination and is also designated as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The designation of the Montseny NP as a Natura 2000 site was based on its prior inclusion in the Catalan network of protected areas called *Plan Especial de Interés Natural* (PEIN).<sup>2</sup> The *diputaciones*, the provincial administrations of both the provinces of Barcelona and Gerona, are responsible for the management of the site. When the time was there to review of the management plan of the PEIN, the responsible administrations of Barcelona and Gerona, took the opportunity to include the Natura 2000 requirements in these participatory processes.

<sup>1</sup> *Ecologische hoofdstructuur* – the Dutch national ecological network.

<sup>2</sup> Plan for Areas of Natural Interest.

**Table 2**  
Comparison of participatory processes in the local case studies following the dimensions of Dietz and Stern (2008).

Wienerwald (Austria)	East Hampshire Hangers (England)	Piémont vosgien (France)	Oberer Hotzenwald (Germany)	Geuldal (the Netherlands)	Montseny NP (Spain)
<p><b>Participants</b> (* organizing stakeholders, alphabetical order)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nature Conservation Authorities (NCA, provincial administration)*</li> <li>- Environmental NGO</li> <li>- ÖBF, nature organization/landowner</li> <li>- Land owners (private)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Natural England (NE), nature protection authority*</li> <li>- Land owners (private/public)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Centre for private forest property (CRPF)*</li> <li>- Environmental NGO</li> <li>- Farmers</li> <li>- Hunters</li> <li>- Land owners (private)</li> <li>- Mayors of municipality</li> <li>- Nature protection authority</li> <li>- State forestry services</li> <li>- Tourism organisations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Nature and forest administration*</li> <li>- Forest organisations*</li> <li>- Farmer organisations*</li> <li>- <i>Lander</i> representatives*</li> <li>- Tourism organisations*</li> <li>- Land and forest owners (private)</li> <li>- General public</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provincial administration (PA)*</li> <li>- Environmental NGO</li> <li>- Farmers</li> <li>- Land owners (private/public)</li> <li>- Municipalities</li> <li>- State forestry services</li> <li>- Tourism organisation</li> <li>- Water companies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Provincial administration (PA)*</li> <li>- Inhabitants NP</li> <li>- Land owners in the NP (private)</li> <li>- Local entrepreneurs in the NP</li> </ul>
<p><b>Stages in policy process and roles of participants</b> (chronological order)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establishing nature reserve as predecessor Natura 2000 area by NCA:</li> <li>- ÖBF (decision-making role)</li> <li>- Landowners (consulting role)</li> <li>- Decisions on management of area by NCA:</li> <li>- ÖBF (consulting/decision-making role)</li> <li>- Landowners (informing role)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information gathering on management by NE:</li> <li>- Landowners (consulting role)</li> <li>- Implementation N2000 by NE:</li> <li>- Landowners (consulting role)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consultation of local stakeholders N2000 management plan by CRPF:</li> <li>- all participants (consulting role)</li> <li>- Establishment of voluntary public-private contracts by CRPF:</li> <li>- all stakeholders (informing role)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- General information meetings by AB:</li> <li>- all participants (informing role)</li> <li>- general public (informing role)</li> <li>- Specific face-to-face information meetings by AB</li> <li>- Land and forest owners (consulting role)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Drafting N2000 management plan by PA</li> <li>- All participants (consulting role)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Information meetings by PA</li> <li>- all participants (informing role)</li> <li>- Revision conservation management plan (including Natura 2000 requirements) by PA:</li> <li>- all participants (consulting/informing role)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Intensity of involvement</b></p> <p>Ongoing, intensive interaction with the ÖBF and landowners concerning establishment nature reserve.</p> <p>One-time Natura 2000 information campaigns for all participants</p>	<p>Ongoing, intensive interaction with landowners.</p> <p>Repeated information exchange with land owners</p>	<p>Multiple negotiations, working group meetings, oral and written communication concerning management plan.</p>	<p>Internal meetings, meetings with landowners, public meetings</p>	<p>Ongoing, intensive interaction through negotiation meetings. Information campaigns for inhabitants area</p>	<p>Multiple sectorial information meetings with participants. One-way communication with participants and general public.</p>
<p><b>Goals</b> (instrumental or normative)</p> <p>Instrumental goal: managing conflicts and facilitating implementation process</p>	<p>Instrumental goal: Facilitating implementation</p> <p>Normative goal: establishing relations of trust</p>	<p>Instrumental goal: managing conflicts</p> <p>Normative goal: empowering stakeholders</p>	<p>Instrumental goal: reducing resistance and facilitating implementation process</p>	<p>Instrumental goal: managing conflicts</p> <p>Normative goal: Transparency in decision-making.</p>	<p>Instrumental goal: communicating decisions</p>

#### 4.2. Who participates?

Generally speaking, a great variety in type of stakeholders involved existed in the participatory processes that were researched. Most of the cases included the directly affected stakeholders. Some cases such as in France, and the Netherlands, showed a high amount of involved stakeholders while others, such as the English case, had a low amount of involved stakeholders.

##### *Participants in Piémont Vosgien, France*

Meetings on Natura 2000 were organised by an officer of the *Regional Centre for Private Forest Property* (CRPF). The voluntary actors that participated in that process were the local mayors, private forest owners, state forest managers, hunters and farmers' representatives, one environmental NGO and tourism entrepreneurs. Representatives of the French government also participated in the committee. Although, everyone could join the COPIL, and information was made public at the local village town halls and/or in local newspapers, some specific stakeholders were particularly targeted to participate. More specifically, the fact that the Natura 2000 project leader was also the officer of the CRPF greatly facilitated the involvement of the private forest owners and the mayors of villages that owned forestland.

The general public that was not directly involved were given a minor role (for example were addressed via information campaigns) or none at all. In some cases, this did not contribute to the acceptance of the policy.

##### *Participants in Montseny NP, Spain*

The provincial administrations responsible for the implementation of Natura 2000 in the area (Barcelona and Gerona) contacted only the directly affected stakeholders that were also living in the National park. These were Montseny NP, forest owners, tourism entrepreneurs (whose businesses were located within the site boundaries), as well as other people living within the park. Information was communicated via local newspapers and, in addition, news bulletins about Natura 2000 were sent to the contacted stakeholders. Stakeholders located outside but depending on the park for their activities, such as hunters and foresters, were not consulted. These stakeholders felt that they were not sufficiently considered or were even excluded from this participatory process. This affected the acceptance of Natura 2000 policy in Montseny as not all stakeholders were given an important role in the process. These missing stakeholders are those living outside the park but depending on the park for a living.

#### 4.3. Stage of public involvement

In many cases public involvement happened at a stage that preceded the actual execution of rules and regulations and often involved the assignment of the area. For example, the participatory processes of the Austrian, the Dutch and the Spanish case were linked to the assignment of the area and the drafting of the management plan. Finally, most of the involved stakeholders were given a consulting role: they were asked for their input, view, opinion, or knowledge. The Dutch case is a good example of this.

##### *Stages and roles in Geuldal, the Netherlands*

As leading the participatory process in Geuldal, the province of Limburg was invited the directly stakeholders to participate in the drafting of the management plan. These stakeholders were landowners such as *Staatsbosbeheer* (state forest service), *Natuurmonumenten* (nature organisation), *Stichting Limburgs Landschap* (nature organisation) and local farmers represented by the *Limburgse Land en Tuinbouw Bond (LLTB – regional agricultural organisation)*. Furthermore, two water companies, an environmental organisation, the organisation for tourism and recreation, private landowners, the Ministry of Defence – also a landowner – and the different municipalities of the area were involved

in several consultation rounds. The process was intended to be collaborative with the aim to jointly construct a commonly accepted management plan on which all stakeholders could agree. The area was already part of an existing Dutch nature conservation network, and the management plan would therefore be an addition to the already protected status of Geuldal. A series of face-to-face meetings took place during which different parts of the proposed MP were discussed among the various local stakeholders involved. All stakeholders were given the opportunity to bring in their expertise and opinion on the area. They were consulted about the biodiversity and geographical borders of the area. However, not all of the parties reached consensus. In particular, the forest and nature organisations and the farmers could not achieve a compromise since they have opposing opinions about the conservation of the Geuldal. As a result, the Geuldal management plan had still not been validated as of January 2015.

In addition to this, participatory processes were also directly linked to already existing nature protection policies and nature areas. Again, the Austrian, Dutch, and Spanish cases are examples of this, as well as the English case where a network of protected areas, the *Sites of Special Scientific Interest* (SSSIs), was already implemented.

##### *Natura 2000 and Biosphere Reserve Wienerwald, Oberwald, Austria*

In Wienerwald, the implementation of Natura 2000 was heavily impacted through the parallel implementation of another protected area, the Biosphere Reserve (BR). In the process of establishing the BR, the nature conservation authority played a much greater role than in Natura 2000 implementation, mostly because the leeway in decision-making in the BR was much greater than in Natura 2000. The representatives of landowners' and hunters' interest groups only became involved after the decision to establish a BR was made. Representatives of big landowners were also invited, i.e., the *ÖBF AG (Österreichische Bundesforste AG, the Austrian Federal Forest SC)*, the major landowner of the site, as well as a few private owners. While landowners were only informed about Natura 2000 through information campaigns, they were more deeply involved in the establishment of the BR. They participated in defining the zones and contributed to the development of the BR management plan. The ÖBF occupied a central position in that process. This organisation was already implementing management practices for biodiversity conservation related to the previously designated conservation status of the Wienerwald Forest. Consequently, in the participatory process, the ÖBF supported the idea that the provinces (Lower Austria and Vienna) should compensate landowners for the required management activities and any losses that may occur due to the new conservation regime. A tailor-made contract was then drawn up between the ÖBF and the provinces, including provisions for management objectives and measures, consistent with Natura 2000 requirements. The other private landowners of the site were not in such a strong negotiating position and never reached such a contractual agreement.

#### 4.4. Intensity of involvement

In most cases, the extent of involvement of stakeholders was rather high. There were multiple interactions between the different stakeholders. Often the influence of the participants was somewhat big. In the Dutch case, and already described above, the participants were needed for their input and knowledge of the area. Perhaps one the least intensive processes was that of Austria, where the ÖBF dominated the process and arranged the outcomes of the processes while the rest of the stakeholders were less directly involved.

##### *Intensive collaboration in the Piémont vosgien, France*

Following the directive from the French government, a pilot committee (COPIL) was established in 2002 that consisted of representatives of local stakeholders concerned by the situation. Although, basically, everyone could join the COPIL, and information was made

public, some specific stakeholders were particularly targeted to participate: local mayors, private forest owners, state forest managers, hunters and farmers' representatives. One environmental NGO and tourism entrepreneurs also joint the committee. These local stakeholders were consulted in order to draft the Natura 2000 site's management plan. They met several times all together and separately gathered into working groups to discuss more specific topics, e.g., forest and hunting, agriculture and open fields and aquatic habitats. The stakeholders' opinions were listened to and taken into account to adjust the content of the management plan to the local context. During the process, mutual relationships of trust developed. Moreover, the fact that the Natura 2000 project leader was also the officer of the *Regional Centre for Private Forest Property* (CRPF) greatly facilitated the involvement of the private forest owners and the mayors of villages that owned forestland. Local actors were also offered to participate in biodiversity conservation by voluntarily signing public-private contracts that stipulated management measures for biodiversity conservation.

The UK case shows a different picture and is somewhat the exception. Participation, there, took a much more informal form based on very regular personal interactions between stakeholders that started after the implementation of Natura 2000.

#### *Strong informal collaboration in East Hampshire Hangers, United Kingdom*

The main participants in the UK case were Natural England (NE) and individual landowners such as private owners, private nature conservation agencies (e.g., *National Trust*), public owners (e.g., Forestry Commission, local councils), and large-scale estates. Only landowners within the Natura 2000 site boundaries were included in the process and directly informed through mail. The level of involvement of landowners regarding the management measures and their possibility to influence these measures was initially rather low. NE provided the landowners with an extensive list of management operations that were likely to damage the quality of the site and that were therefore possible only if subjected to special agreement from NE. The administration also provided the landowners with its view on appropriate management practices for the site. Land and forest owners usually voluntarily agreed on these requirements. However, after the implementation of the requirements, NE officers often collaborated with the landowners on a personal basis to implement these management measures. The management processes and outcomes heavily depended on these regular inspections and person-to-person relationships. NE officers occupy a key position in this process that was based on informality and trust, as well as on shared knowledge about the area.

#### 4.5. Participatory goals

Participatory goals can range from modest and instrumental, such as information gathering, to ambitious and normative, leading to an empowerment of stakeholders. Each of the participatory processes was set up to fulfil an instrumental goal such as conflict avoidance and facilitation of the process. Some cases also included a normative goal like empowerment or transparency. In the Netherlands, for example, the reason to do a participatory approach was to smooth out potential bottlenecks while at the same time to be a transparent democratic process in which each stakeholder has its own say. In Spain, the approach was designed to inform more people of the decisions and to openly communicate the decisions taken. The example below comes from the German case, which shows a rather general approach to Natura 2000 implementation among EU member states.

#### *Participation as problem solving in Oberer Hotzenwald, Germany*

During the implementation of Natura 2000, nature and forest administration representatives, tourism organisations, farmers' and forestry organisations and Länder representatives organized in an advisory board. In addition, two meetings with local stakeholders were also organised, and 35 individual landowners were consulted. Although

the general public was also informed, it was not invited to these meetings. Private landowners were intensively targeted and invited to face-to-face discussions in which management goals and measures were outlined. The administration organised public meetings to inform the general public about the plan's content, only after the first draft of the management plan was finalised. In Germany, as in most EU member states, legal provisions give citizens the right to make statements concerning such a plan. However, such statements can only be made using scientific arguments and criteria, which make the process quite difficult for the general public that generally lacks the appropriate knowledge. Consequently, comments were rather limited. Generally, the management planning process and the participatory elements in it aimed at reducing resistance and easier incorporation of management measures into practices. In order to deal with outsiders concerns, more informal discussions among actors and the passing of time, however, helped to reassure people, and the management plan was finally accepted by common consent.

#### 4.6. Outcomes of the participatory processes

In addition to the analysis of participatory processes according to the categorization by *Dietz and Stern (2008)*, we collected data on local perception of outcomes of the participatory processes in terms of impact on forest and nature conservation management practices.

##### 4.6.1. Outcomes participatory process in Wienerwald, Austria

As a result of the participatory negotiation process around the BR management plan, a tailor-made contract was drawn up between the ÖBF and the provinces. The contract is a binding document that serves as the Biosphere Reserve management plan and includes the Natura 2000 requirements. It gives the ÖBF substantial additional means to strengthen their conservation-oriented management. The other private landowners can only participate in EU co-financed and voluntary nature conservation agreements, which are accessible for all landowners apart from public entities such as the ÖBF, although this option has not proven to be very popular. Hence, the impacts on forest management in those forests are frequently described as being non-existent. Natura 2000 raised initial resistance amongst landowners since they felt excluded from the implementation process. Subsequently, the implementation of Natura 2000 benefitted greatly from the more positive image of the parallel Biosphere Reserve process among the local stakeholders. The nature conservation authorities actually promoted this second conservation status to avoid difficulties caused by the bad image of Natura 2000. It seems that in this case, the combination of Natura 2000 with BR, and the participatory organisation to draft the BR management plan, created a greater acceptance of both conservation policies and alleviated the resistance toward Natura 2000. The compensation programmes and contracts negotiated by the ÖBF also played a significant role in facilitating the general implementation of Natura 2000 through the BR.

To conclude, in this case, the implementation of Natura 2000 was heavily impacted through the parallel implementation of another type of protected area, the Biosphere Reserve. This resulted in practice in a close interlinking of both processes and even an implementation of Natura under the umbrella of the reserve. While this coevolution increased the acceptance of Natura 2000, its impact on forest management remains limited beyond the property of the biggest (state) landowner in this case.

##### 4.6.2. Outcomes participatory process in East Hampshire Hangers, United Kingdom

The Natura 2000 measures were described as generally being implemented without bigger challenges since they mostly follow the practices that have been established under the previously established SSSI scheme. The management of the Natura 2000 site was little contested and conservation objectives and measures were generally



well accepted. This is, to a significant degree, the legacy of the already established SSSI protection status, which means that forests in the East Hampshire Hangers region were already effectively managed for both nature protection and recreation purposes.

In conclusion, in the UK case, the introduction of Natura 2000 did not significantly change the management of the area. Overall good personal relationships between private landowners and the NE officers have resulted in a significant level of mutual trust. Hence, while no formal participatory process was ever established in this region (and such a process was never requested), the personal communication between landowners and the administration, and a certain mutual willingness to compromise has led to what may be referred to as a “participatory atmosphere” entrenched in local practices surrounding this site.

#### 4.6.3. Outcomes participatory process in Piémont Vosgien, France

Thanks to the participatory process, the Natura 2000 policy and site are generally well-accepted today by the local population and forest actors. The responsible officer succeeded in developing a relationship of confidence with the involved stakeholders, mostly because he was very knowledgeable about the site itself, its actors and local forestry and spoke the stakeholders’ “language”. However, although, Natura 2000 gained acceptance among local actors, they rarely changed their management practices, with the exception of State forest officers whose mission is to implement the policy. They, however, did it under certain limits. Moreover, although the French government established a system of public-private contracts that compensated for the loss of income and covered additional costs resulting from changes in management, these contracts generally experience difficulties in reaching their target: municipalities that own forestland have to strike a balance between Natura 2000 and other demands from other policies (e.g., on water quality) or for new houses and roads. Private forest owners, although their management practices generally correspond well with the Natura 2000 required practices, are still reluctant to sign voluntary contracts, as they often fear that these agreements will diminish their autonomy.

To conclude, in the French case, the deep consultation process succeeded in alleviating most of the local resistance to Natura 2000 and greatly increased its general acceptance among local actors. However, this in itself did not result in major changes in the management of the site and most forest stakeholders still resist changing their usual practices.

#### 4.6.4. Outcomes participatory process in Oberer Hotzenwald, Germany

Despite the participatory process, the implementation of the MP is limited because it is only binding for state forests. Moreover, even at that level, many forest managers are not very familiar with the management plan’s content, which does not seem to be enough promoted internally. As a result, they are not very active in implementing specific Natura 2000 management practices. Generally, most forest owners and managers continue to practice their usual management assuming that this will be sufficient to maintain the current good conservation status of the site. The official participation process and several informal meetings helped to gain the local stakeholders’ acceptance of the Natura 2000 policy and management plan. The participation of an external and legitimate mediator also eases this process.

In the German case, the prior history of the area provided an important backdrop for the introduction of Natura 2000. The relationships built during the former intense contestation and reconciliation formed a solid basis that influenced not only the process established to implement Natura 2000 but its acceptance as well. Despite this general acceptance, the management of the area did not really change due to Natura 2000.

#### 4.6.5. Outcomes participatory process in Geuldal, the Netherlands

The main characteristic feature of this case is that the anticipated

outcome of the participatory process has not yet been achieved: the management plan still has to be finalised. Consequently, to date, no changes can yet be observed in the local stakeholders’ management practices. Overall, the implementation of Geuldal as a Natura 2000 area has not been highly contested since it overlaps with an already existing nature area. Nevertheless, the consultation process has not led to a greater acceptance of the policy among local actors. Farmers especially fear more restrictions regarding their land use practices because they do not know exactly what will happen in the near future. The delay in implementation seems to do Natura 2000 implementation in Geuldal more harm than good.

In the Dutch case, it appears that the participation process did not lead to a larger acceptance of the Natura 2000 policy. Moreover, the delay in the implementation of the management plan due to the conflicting policy frameworks and interests between forests and agriculture has led to a deflated outcome of the participatory process and has made the Natura 2000 implementation in Geuldal primarily an abstract process. As a result, Natura 2000 has not yet affected the management of the area in a significant way.

#### 4.6.6. Outcomes participatory process in Montseny NP, Spain

Although the park managers claim that the *Plan Especial* and the added Natura 2000 requirements place more importance on the conservation status of the Montseny NP and functions as an important weapon against the threat of urbanisation in the park, no major changes in forest management practices have yet to take place at the Montseny site. Because not all of the relevant stakeholders were explicitly included and also because full consensus was not achieved among those included, the acceptance level of the *Plan Especial* is rather low.

In the end, in the Spanish case, the provincial administrations succeeded in updating the *Plan Especial* and adding the Natura 2000 requirements to it. However, Natura 2000 itself seems to be mostly invisible since its relationship with the Montseny NP plan was never explicitly discussed among the different stakeholders. Furthermore, no significant changes in forest management have occurred at this site to date.

## 5. Syntheses and discussion

Our comparative analysis points to a number of findings regarding the six participation processes observed. First, participation in the selected cases was mostly organised in an instrumental manner: reactively in response to already developing resistance against Natura 2000. These conflicts had often already developed during site designation. This was in many cases an expert driven process as the nomination of Natura 2000 sites needed to be done mainly on the basis of scientific ecological criteria, according to the requirements of the EU directives, and not primarily with respect to socio-economic criteria. Stakeholder involvement was increasingly emphasized only at the stage when management measures were implemented (Alphandéry and Fortier, 2001; Ferranti et al., 2013). The dominant choice for instrumental participatory goals in Natura 2000 implementation resonates with a wider body of literature (See for example Van Bommel et al., 2009; Turnhout et al., 2010; Young et al., 2013). This literature often criticizes these forms of participation as being ultimately self-defeating because it leaves little room for the self-empowerment of local actors, given the already predefined political frame.

Second and in spite of the instrumental goal of participation, our results also show that there was room for local actors to influence the participatory processes. This room for manoeuvre was mostly visible with the decision-making stakeholders and the organizers of the participatory processes. The Austrian case showed that the stakeholders involved in the participatory process were able to use the already existing frame of the biosphere reserve to provide them with some flexibility in terms of decision-making. In spite of the EU requirements for site designation, member states do have, and can provide, leeway in

setting goals, establishing management practices, and in organising the implementation process in response to local demands and discourses (see also Bouwma et al., 2010 or De Koning et al., 2014a, 2014b).

Third, an important finding across the cases is that participation, in practice, never included a broader public or “average” citizens, but usually addressed and brought together the “usual” or “expected” local stakeholders and their representatives. In other words, participation *de facto* gives advantages to specific groups. It remains an interesting point as to how far this limited scope of participation is the result of the lack of interest of the broader public, and/or is justified with regard to the particular impact of the policy on specific groups, in particular, landowners. Quite controversially, it could be interpreted as a limitation of access to the implementation of a democratically legitimised public policy, or even the appropriation of this policy by local interest groups, at the expense of a more representative segment of society (Blatrix, 2009).

Fourth, the organisation of participation seems to impact the acceptance of nature conservation policy. More intense participation has, on average, a positive effect on the acceptance of Natura 2000. The English case is a good example of this. Although it arguably is the one with the lowest level of organised participation, Natura 2000 enjoys a relatively high level of acceptance. Strong personal relationships between the responsible administration and landowners facilitated trust and mutual beneficial communication. Additionally, Natura 2000 was merely an additional layer to the already existing nature protection regulations. As a result, landowners in the area did not have to change their practices. However, this acceptance does not increase the effects of the policy on forest management practices. As for acceptance, our data indicates that the greater number of stakeholders that were involved in discussions and not just informed (such as in Spain), the more the policy was accepted (see the French, German and Dutch cases). One noticeable exception is the English case. Unlike Young et al. (2013) who suggest that stakeholder involvement would lead to good social outcomes (for instance increased trust and improved learning), which can positively impact biodiversity conservation, our study reveals the challenges that result from differences between socially-accepted and environmentally-effective policies. Even if intense participation increased the acceptance of Natura 2000 in several of our cases, to date this did not necessarily translate into a change of management practices towards biodiversity conservation. It could even be argued that the opposite might come true in the event that there are significant trade-offs between local land users’ interests and the objectives of the conservation policy (Winter et al., 2014; Winkel et al., 2015).

## 6. Conclusions

The findings presented in this paper have created a nuanced picture regarding the effects of participation in nature conservation policy. This picture is well in line with similar nuanced findings in the literature that were presented in the beginning of this paper. However, in our opinion, this does not mean that participation is irrelevant or even counterproductive. Instead, we would conclude that participation needs to be considered (a) within a specific institutional and social context and history, and (b) in interrelation with local practices and perceptions of participation. As for the first point, we have seen that the conservation history of a member state determines the extent to which Natura 2000 and related possible specifications for management were perceived to be new, problematic, or “business as usual” (Borrass et al., 2015). Clearly, when Natura 2000 was built upon existing experiences and traditions of nature conservation policy, including existing and trustful relationships amongst actors, the policy “fitted in” much more easily in the local social environment. As for the second point, participation practices and the building of mutual trust appeared to be important and even more influential for policy acceptance than the design of the respective participatory process itself (Blondet, 2016;

Young et al., 2013), as the disparity in the UK and the Netherlands cases clearly demonstrate. This finding resonates well with some of the policy science literature that argues that policy implementation and outcomes are always shaped by the practices in which policies are interpreted and negotiated (Borrass, 2014; Dekker et al., 2007; de Koning and Benneker, 2013; Turnhout, 2009; Yanow, 1996; Young et al., 2013).

This in turn brings us to the relationship between participation, acceptability and effectiveness. Whereas participation processes are often implemented to improve the legitimacy and efficiency of a policy (see for example Bouwma et al., 2010), this article shows that the relationship between participation, acceptability and effectiveness is not always that straightforward. The acceptability of Natura 2000 in terms of a change in management practice was not noticeable in our case studies. This finding resonates with other literature on the effect of Natura 2000 on practices and participatory processes (Blondet, 2016; De Koning et al., 2014a, 2014b; Turnout et al., 2015). This shows that the understanding of legitimacy and effective participation, and the intention beyond the implementation of participatory processes can change. Participation is often established for its effectiveness but, as it turns out in practice, it is also just as much about the “right thing” to do in democratic context. As a result, the meaning of legitimacy and acceptability is not just related to formal legal principles, but is rather linked to the articulation of democracy (Behagel and Turnhout, 2011).

Finally, our study is also a warning against simple assumptions that a more intense participation process and related increased acceptance of nature conservation policy automatically translates into a more effective policy. Meaningful participation means not more or less aligning worldviews, perspectives and interests as well – in this case, mostly the interests and worldviews of local land users – with the policy objectives established at higher policy levels (in this case, nature conservation). If such an alignment is to be meaningful, it will result in compromises in most cases and, therefore, a softening (or even weakening) of the conservation goals established at the higher levels. In contrast, a deep and trustful commitment might, eventually, also pay off through long-term processes of mutual learning and commitment between conservation agencies, land users and a broader public. However, to make such a fruitful partnership possible, participation needs to be embedded in a broader policy mix of supporting instruments, including financial compensation (Winkel et al., 2015). Only if such a holistic and long-term oriented approach can be implemented, can participation hold the major promise to achieve both a socially locally well-embedded and effective nature conservation policy. This paper is meant to provide some indications for such a long-term perspective on European nature conservation policy.

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