



CASE STUDY

Poland: NATURE 2000 implementation as an example of the IWRM process

NATURE 2000 comprises a designation of nature sites of EU importance. However, after consultations with water managers, it became clear that NATURE 2000 sites located in the river valleys imposed new challenges for water resources management. Action was taken by GWP-Poland and WWF-Poland to find solutions. The project demonstrates that multi-stakeholder dialogue is a basic requirement for the solution of problems involving different perspectives and priorities.

Background

Among the areas in the Natura 2000 network, of special significance are river valleys. The natural features of valleys are universally known—a wealth of habitats as well as plants and animals, especially birds, as well as their essential role as ecological corridors. But at the same time, river valleys have for centuries represented an area of particularly vigorous human activity, with the aim of utilizing water resources to achieve various social and economic objectives. Economic activity and settlement in river valleys also require a variety of actions associated with flood protection. The Habitats Directive obligates member countries to effectively protect endangered species and habitats in the areas comprising the Natura 2000 network. The fulfillment of these requirements could turn out not to be coherent with the traditionally-conceived approach to river valley water management. However, in exceptional circumstances and situations, the Directive (Art. 6(4)) permits actions which negatively impact natural environment status in protected areas. This may take place only when three conditions are fulfilled simultaneously: the endeavor is justified by ‘imperative reasons of overriding public interest’, no alternative solutions exist to achieve this same objective, and all measures necessary will be taken to compensate losses occurring in the natural environment. In connection with EU membership obligations, water management in Poland is faced with objectives oriented towards meeting of social, economic and environmental needs. Action to protect river valley waters and ecosystems (to ensure protection of waterdependent species and habitats) is becoming one of the fundamental tasks of water management, aside from flood protection and water supply for the population. The Natura 2000 network, it is worth emphasizing, is a mechanism not only for nature conservation, but also for improvement of the human environment—of quality of life.

Actions taken

The seminar organized in July 2003 jointly by GWP-Poland and WWF-Poland “NATURA 2000 – chance or threat for water management in the river valleys” resulted in a letter inviting the Ministry of Environment to undertake a joint project for the solution of these problems.

The discussion, whose participants included representatives of the water resources management and nature science communities, showed that reconciling economic and flood safety needs with nature conservation requirements in the Nature 2000 areas is difficult and complex, but possible.

A positive response of the ministry initiated the project named “Establishing water management rules in the river valleys declared as NATURE 2000 sites”. The Steering Committee includes representatives of two departments of the Ministry of Environment (Nature Protection and Water Resources), GWP-Poland and WWF-Poland. All three parties finance work.

The main objective of the project is to facilitate the process of consensus building between nature protection professionals and water managers. To achieve this objective, three small working groups were established for Water Resources, Nature Protection, and Consensus Building.

Work on the project, which was endowed with the patronage of the Secretary of State in the Ministry of the Environment responsible for water management, was executed in two stages. In the first, two independent papers concerning river valleys were prepared—one devoted to nature conservation; and the other, to water resources management. The next stage encompassed discussion and preparation of a joint position concerning the principles which should be in force in the Nature 2000 river valley areas. As could be predicted, work on the first stage was completed quickly and without any great difficulty. The second stage, on the other hand, lasted considerably longer than initially predicted. Agreement on positions required many working group meetings, during which much time was devoted to explanations and discussions concerning terminology; indeed, the key challenge turned out to be finding a common language.

Outcomes

The case study showed that the interests of water management can be reconciled with those of nature conservation in Natura 2000 river valley areas. Without doubt, there exists a need to continue work on principles of functioning for the Natura 2000 network, as well as to search for solutions which will permit achievement of both nature conservation and water management objectives, in accordance with the principles of sustainable and balanced development.

Further activity in this area should be manifested in, among other things:

- Formulation of legal acts associated with the Natura 2000 network in a more precise manner, transfer of the principles of European Union law to national legislation, as well as care taken to ensure that the specific character of Poland’s natural conditions finds its rightful place and reflection in Union regulations
- Collection of experiences from the environmental protection reinforcement process, including from execution of nature conservation tasks in the Natura 2000 network; and, on the basis of these experiences, continued reform and fine-tuning of legal regulations, as well as improvement of management organizations and institutions
- Preparation of detailed guidelines, norms and instructions concerning both natural environment issues and management, economic, investment and technical issues
- Preparation, on the model of the [Poradniki ochrony siedlisk i gatunków Natura 2000] Handbooks on Natura 2000 Habitat and Species Protection, of a detailed methodology

concerning principles for water management in Natura 2000 areas

- Undertaking complex studies and academic papers, with particular attention paid to methodology for analyses and assessments, to definition and selection of criteria, and to algorithms and calculation procedures as tools for formulation of decisions
- Further involvement of technical specialists in nature conservation and environmental management decision-making processes; and of nature scientists, in water resources management, especially in investment endeavors
- Inclusion of nature conservation and expansion of its scope in course syllabi at institutions of higher learning in technical fields and in economics, as well as further implementation of elements of technical knowledge at institutions of higher learning in the area of natural sciences.

Coordination of the tasks mentioned above will be possible only through cooperation between water management specialists and nature conservation experts. Close collaboration of services and forces responsible for water management and nature conservation should also apply to all their joint efforts to obtain Union's financial support for protection activities in river valley areas selected for the Natura 2000 network.

Lessons Learned

The project demonstrates that multi-stakeholder dialogue is a basic requirement for the solution of problems involving different perspectives and priorities.

Civil society organizations representing either professional categories or interest groups are most effective in societies where there is a commitment to participation and consultation.

Regulatory capacity building can be seen as integral to the development of regulations themselves.

The case illustrates an integration of water uses and functions important to the nature. Some issues can create conflicts in water resources planning that are not necessarily the result of wrong or illicit approaches.

Planning for maximum net economic benefits is not sufficient. Issues of environmental quality can be as important as economic efficiency. The coordination of river basin planning with the nature planning processes are necessary.

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GWP Central and Eastern Europe

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