

Lessons Learned – Partnerships between protected area authorities and non-governmental organisations

The challenge

A protected area (PA) authority is a formally designated organisation set up by the state with the legal mandate to manage a protected area; in the wider Prespa area (WPA) PA authorities are either public institutions as in North Macedonia, services of the public sector in Albania or private legal entities established by law and supervised by the state as in Greece. In all cases they are part of the wider public sector and have formal mandates and rules of operation. PA authorities in general, and in Prespa in particular, usually have some secured but insufficient funding, often inadequate in number or not appropriately trained personnel and some form of management plan for the PA, if at all. These are usually poor in terms of their transboundary dimensions and they are often only partially – if at all – implemented. PA authorities are largely dependent on central state or government policies and influences, and follow bureaucratic, protracted procedures for both decision-making and implementation of activities. Despite weaknesses they are the legitimate overall manager of the PA that can guarantee continuity of conservation efforts.

On the other hand, conservation NGOs are civil-society entities that have been established by private persons to pursue a public-benefit aim, related to the conservation of biodiversity, ecosystems and more generally of natural and cultural values and sustainable development. NGOs in the WPA are in general more flexible than public sector actors in their operations; they use their extensive international networks to recruit skilled specialists in fields of expertise where the 3 littoral countries have limited experience; are able to pursue substantial international funds for specific focused projects; operate on the basis of strategic planning – rather than the classical PA management planning that has a more limited and narrow scope – and can thus offer a more integrated transboundary perspective. Donors, on the other hand, at least in our part of the world, work on the principle that the bulk of the work for the protection of biodiversity is the responsibility of the authorities for PAs, while NGOs should play only a minor, supplementary role. As a result, funding for concrete conservation work can hardly be entrusted to NGOs. This fact, in combination with the remoteness of the area that is not conducive to attracting young educated individuals, usually leads to weak NGOs in terms of scientific and technical nature management capacity, or lack of continuity in their operation. But even when NGOs do have the capacity and funds, they have no jurisdiction to undertake management actions without the express consent of PA authorities.

These two types of actors have, therefore, important similarities but also institutional and structural differences, the same targets in principle (environmental protection, species and ecosystems conservation and management, sustainable development) and the same territorial and thematic scope of work, a situation that can sometimes lead to antagonism. A significant difference between the two concerns their role and the degree of freedom they have in relation to political influences and operational effectiveness, with NGOs having a more flexible position in these matters. Moreover, in order to achieve conservation results in an inhabited area which is highly politically influenced, NGOs are often required to be critical and apply pressure to authorities for PAs, a fact that can create a tense and invariably negative environment. Consequently, co-operation between the two can sometimes seem daunting or impossible.

Despite the difficulties, PAs need both types of organisations and neither of the two is redundant. Nowadays, it is widely understood that the two actors have to join forces and collaborate in order to increase the efficiency of conservation efforts in PAs, and that co-operation has more benefits than drawbacks and can also contribute to alleviating the tensions. Collaboration between PA authorities and NGOs would not only offer added value to conservation efforts in Prespa, but also contribute to an increase in structural capacity, as well as building the institutional tradition and memory of the two. Accordingly, it is often the case, especially in Europe, that conservation NGOs have a clearly defined institutionalised role in the PA authority, usually participating in its governing board, as is the case in Greece with SPP and the Management Body for the Prespa National Park (MBPNP), or in scientific or advisory boards. It is also common to develop and establish extra-institutional partnerships between the two actors with NGOs collaborating on an ad hoc basis in specific projects or on a more permanent basis as an advisor.

In Prespa co-operation between management authorities and NGOs has been taking place for decades; nonetheless, so far this has mostly not been in a systematic way, nor strategically driven. There have been many cases where the lack of a more systematic co-operation has led to unsynchronised activities, an ineffective dispersion of funds and a decrease in efficiency, creating in local people the impression of an absence of planning by actors having same aims. What is more,

sporadic and unsystematic co-operation might in the long-term lead to misunderstandings and conflicts between two actors. On the other hand, in cases where both sets of actors have co-operated under a long-term, organised framework, the effectiveness of the conservation results has multiplied. Often such paradigms are taken as examples of good conservation practices, and unquestionably strengthen both conservation actors internally.

The overall challenge therefore is:

[The harmonious and mutually beneficial collaboration of these two different types of organisations, PA authorities and environmental NGOs.](#)

A more strategically organised co-operation and co-ordination is needed between the authorities for PAs and NGOs in the planning and implementation of their activities, which would create added value for both. Not enough discussion has yet taken place on how the two can join their efforts under a common strategic framework in order to be more effective and overcome any deficiencies, without negatively influencing or weakening their respective positions and roles.

The SPP also faced two further main challenges related to its relationship with the PNPMB:

[How to support an entity with very low capacity for a long period of time while keeping each one's autonomy in terms of opinion and of action?](#)

[How to build the trust necessary among stakeholders in order to reach viable compromises for conservation and sustainable development?](#)

The solution

The SPP was founded in 1991, when the Prespa PA in Greece was managed by the local forestry service. At that time there was neither a set legal framework nor a mentality in the country that would enable and encourage a process of collaboration between the two types of actors and the relations that did exist were sometimes tried by tensions and differences in perceptions.

In the beginning of the 2000s a radical transformation of the system of governance in Greece took place, with the introduction of PA management bodies for the most important PAs nationwide. From the setup of these new institutions, that were a new hybrid form of body with a public mandate, it was foreseen that environmental NGOs would be represented in their governing boards. The SPP has thus held the seat of the NGO representative in the board of the MBPNP for the last 16 years, and for most of that time it has also served as the secretary of the board. Beyond this formal role in decision-making, the SPP has also served as the main permanent scientific, technical and management advisor of the MBPNP throughout its operation, to make up for the fact that it existed for the first 5 years without any personnel and for the next 11 with very limited and non-expert staff who were in need of guidance and support in all fields, including wetland monitoring and management, awareness raising and communication.

The close co-operation between the SPP and the MBPNP was based on joint strategic priorities laid down in the legislation governing the PA, or, after 2010, in the management plan for the Prespa National Park (PNP) and in the periodically revised strategic priorities of the SPP. The working relations have not always been ideal, very productive or smooth; they largely depended on the balance of opinion and composition of the board, which has changed over time, and on the attitude of the board chairperson vis-à-vis NGOs and the SPP in particular. Another problematic element of this long-term relationship that should be noted is the impression, especially in the minds of local people, but also many public services, that the SPP and the MBPNP are one and the same, particularly in terms of decision-making and viewpoint.

But the most far-reaching achievement of the PA authority-NGO collaboration in the PNP in the last two decades has undoubtedly been the establishment and operation of the Wetland Management Committee, an advisory body to the board, which was proposed by, and has been scientifically, technically and politically supported and facilitated by, the SPP since its establishment in 2007. This body regularly gathers local and regional stakeholders and authorities concerned with wetland management in Prespa, to discuss and find jointly beneficial or compromise solutions to relevant issues and consensually propose management measures to be taken by the MBPNP and implemented on the ground by all competent stakeholders, including local farmers. This application of the responsibility-sharing principle between the different stakeholders – authorities for PAs, local societies and NGOs – has been shown to be the only way of ensuring sustainability in conservation results in Prespa, where it was made possible thanks to funding from more adventurous donors, such as those supporting the SPP (especially the MAVA Foundation and the EU Commission).

Beyond the national level, in the last two decades the SPP has also had collaborative relations, discussions and exchanges with the Prespa PA authorities from the two neighbouring countries, but of a much simpler character, on the basis of specific projects the SPP was carrying out, either at the request of the PA authority or on its own initiative.

Lessons learned

- **Pursue dialogue.** Two or more different and distinct actors can only find common ground if they enter into a more or less structured discourse. Without this trivial and seemingly self-evident step misconceptions about each other's motives, intentions and ideas persist and may result in distancing and antagonism.
- **Lay down rules of engagement.** Dialogue between conservation NGOs and PA authorities will inadvertently lead to an understanding of common goals and objectives, as well as to clearer ideas about the strengths and weaknesses of the two organisations, which can be enhanced or alleviated with collaboration and with the building of a long-term partnership. But it is better to explicitly spell out the rules of this lasting engagement, including division of roles, tasks and responsibilities – in writing in the form of a memorandum, or agreement of co-operation – and not leave them implicit. Otherwise there is a risk of failed expectations and misunderstandings that would undermine trust, and eventually the partnership. This written agreement is still useful even when there is a legal and formal form of participation of the NGO in the authority's structure.
- **Engage in strategic priority setting.** Long-term collaboration needs to be based on specific priorities that have to be determined through dialogue and reviewed periodically to adapt to changing conditions and the evolving strategies of the two actors. If this step is skipped, then it is unlikely that best use of the – always – limited resources of both actors will be made. Moreover, there would also be potential for one actor imposing its own agenda on the other and/or generating disagreements and eventually undermining the partnership.
- **Respect autonomy.** Arguably the most difficult aspect of a PA authority/NGO partnership is the mutual respect of the autonomy of the other partner. Precisely because of the different nature of the two types of organisations and at the same time their largely identical aims, there is much scope for falling back into believing that the other partner is redundant, that it consumes sparse resources that would better be invested in oneself, and that any criticism or advocacy practiced by the NGO against government policies, or against the authority itself, harms the latter and should not take place. This is a very common trap that such partnerships fall into and should be consciously managed and prevented by both parties. Provided that both actors acknowledge and respect the role, limitations and opportunities that each can offer, the management of difference is a substantial factor in every form of co-operation. In any scheme for successful collaboration the actors must retain their autonomy, and thus the risk of co-operation affecting their roles when called upon to be critical of each other is mitigated. In addition, greater co-operation is likely to strengthen the PA authorities as conservation actors, thus reducing the need for NGOs to play their watchdog role.
- **Invest in participatory institutions with actors partaking in defined roles.** Organised, well-prepared and structured partnerships between two conservation actors are worthy in themselves, but the maximum benefits can be derived when all interested and concerned stakeholders that can influence the condition of the PAs and their values are brought together in a lean and appropriate institution. The example of the Wetland Management Committee under the auspices of the MBPNP in Greece is a good example of how to put together such a mechanism for co-ordinated action and maximise synergistic effects in a PA.

Bibliography

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