

'Work in small efficient groups'

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Étang de Mauguio, Languedoc-Roussillon
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Primary cause of the conflict:
Opposition of local stakeholders to the Natura 2000 perimeter

Category:
Users' expectations and Natura 2000

The conflict:

The precise definition of the Natura 2000 site perimeter. Local stakeholders - elected officials, land users, professionals - considered that the limits were imposed by government officials.

Conflict description / background:

In 2005, « Étang de Mauguio » was already proposed to be integrated into the Natura 2000 network to implement both nature directives: Habitats and Birds. Four separate local authorities, ten hunting organisations, one group of local authorities and one group of land owners took legal action to proceed with the annulment of the decision concerning the perimeter. Main reasons for legal action: incoherence of the perimeter and lack of previous specific inventory.

Within this context, after long negotiations and the promise of financial support to be given by the government, elected local officials decided to assume their responsibility and develop the strategic planning document (called DOCOB) for the future management of Community important habitats and species. Rather than leaving this responsibility to the government public administration, the process was led by the local formal structure called « Syndicat Mixte de Gestion de l'Étang de l'Or » (SMGEO)¹.

The conflict continued throughout the first phase of strategic planning, until « dialogue and negotiation meetings » were organised with representatives of the key stakeholders (hunters associations, farmers, fisher folks, etc.). Key stakeholders were involved in working groups, allowing achieving a consensual planning document.

To develop and lead this dialogue, the pilot programme « Actions de connaissance, de suivi et de médiation environnementale sur la chasse et Natura 2000 en Languedoc-Roussillon » (2006 – 2008) was set-up with the support of the regional Directorate for the environment (DIREN Languedoc-Roussillon) and the Regional Council Languedoc-Roussillon. The dialogue was facilitated by the Regional Hunters Federation (Languedoc-Roussillon), with the collaboration at the site level of the Department Hunting Federation (Hérault). A mediator was therefore leading the first meetings of the hunting working group.

All together the development of the plan (DOCOB) took 2 years. 33 meetings were organised, accounting for a total of 760 participants, out of which 32% were elected officials, 34% were « technicians » against 34 % as « land users ». The conflicting issue was systematically addressed during these different meetings.

Was it possible to transform the conflict into a win-win situation?

Yes, the management plan - DOCOB des sites Natura 2000 "Étang de Mauguio" – has been approved with unanimity on 18 December 2008.

The negotiation process has been reviewed and evaluated within the framework of a special study done in March 2009 by SupAgro² in collaboration with SMGEO: the dialogue strategy, leading to the approval of the DOCOB, was perceived by the different stakeholders as well adapted and pertinent to the situation. During the first phase, stakeholders did not feel involved in the project since they considered the proposal was imposed by the Government (notification in 2006 of a Special Protection Area).

¹ Local structure gathering Department of Hérault and 12 municipalities neighbouring the étang de l'Or. Recently, it evolved into a broader structure including all the 31 municipalities from the watershed, the Syndicat Mixte du Bassin de l'Or (SYMBO).

² Ecole Nationale d'Ingénieurs Agronomes

The process of dialogue allowed addressing the conflicting situation and the stakeholders to become involved in the definition of the objectives for the DOCOB plan.

Describe the most useful measures used to deal with the conflict:

- Involvement of local stakeholders at the very beginning of the development of the management plan (Diagnostics): knowledge sharing, recognition of competencies, acknowledgement of local stakeholders, self-appropriation of the project objectives.
- Facilitation of small working groups (by professional categories): understanding common (collective) motivations.
- Thematic workshops (i.e. water management): opened to a broader audience, identification of common issues and/or confronting issues – understanding what is at stake.
- Leading meetings focusing on dialogue, based on information sent ahead of the meeting (results, documents for approval...); dialogue to be continued after the meeting for remaining questions and personal concerns.
- Individual meetings focusing on listening: understanding personal motivations, identifying persons with a demobilising influence.
- Instant communication of results of dialogue and negotiation, in particular by systematically publishing the meeting minutes on the Natura 2000 website: agreed action points, with emphasis on the involvement of local stakeholders.
- Facilitating the dialogue between stakeholders (meetings, individual contacts...), giving preference to multi-partiality rather than neutrality.
- Adapting the dialogue according to the stakeholders (harmonisation of the specific vocabulary used by both government officials and local stakeholders, agreeing on common terms of reference) and adjusting deadlines (appropriation of the process, timeline for reflexion).

From your experience, what guidelines can you advise for dealing with conflict in Natura 2000 sites?

- Identification of the Natura 2000 site key stakeholders, their involvement but also their legitimacy vis-à-vis their peers and their capacity to transfer information (local facilitators);
- Setting up small groups involving specific stakeholders (i.e. hunters, farmers, etc.) in order to engage into an efficient dialogue including their concerns;
- Individual meetings with the most reluctant (divisive) stakeholders to understand their motivations and confront them with other stakeholders;
- Encourage positive stakeholders, in favour of the project, to express themselves and/or set up exchanges between Natura 2000 sites for the exchange of experience;
- Use didactic & communication tools (maps) easily understood by everyone;
- Through a specific individual and collective dialogue, ensure the identification and acknowledgement of everyone's interest and look for a compromise, make sure that the conservation of biodiversity is perceived as a common interest.

Your recommendations to make the Natura 2000 network more effective in involving stakeholders at the local level?

- Information & involvement of local stakeholders at the onset of the project (the best is before the delimitation of the Natura 2000 perimeter).
- Work with stakeholders committed to the cause, who are available and whose legitimacy is acknowledged by the most reluctant groups. They can play a positive role as local mediators.
- Enhance and improve the information and communication related to the Natura 2000 project at national (not sufficiently done in France) and European levels.

Suggestions for further reading:

Evaluation of the stakeholders involvement process:

[http://www.etang-de-l-or.com/uploads/file/Animation%20DOCOB/Rapport%20eval_concert_docob-0309.pdf]

Instant communication of results on the dedicated website: [http://www.etang-de-l-or.com/archives_docob.htm];

Analysis of the Communication / process: [http://www.etang-de-l-or.com/uploads/file/Validation%20DOCOB/DOCOB_TOME%20II_br.pdf]

Press article: [http://www.etang-de-l-or.com/index.php?page=archives_docob#PRESSE]