Managing Natural Protected Areas in Romania. Who is More Suited for this Task?

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A B S T R A C T

The question embedded in the title of this paper is often heard in the meeting rooms of the Romanian Ministry of Environment and Climate Change. Several other variables arose, such as: *Who is the most suitable for managing the natural protected areas of Romania? Which type of organization has the best credentials, experience, and resources to preserve these areas?* The intention of this article was to present the main types of establishments who regularly apply for the administration or custody of natural protected areas in Romania, then to try to put forward their general strengths and weaknesses, more importantly the ways in which they can contribute to the preservation of such areas, and finally, if possible, to pinpoint the best suited organization for handling the issues that frequently arise in natural protected areas. Even though the absence of organizations that could have been suitable for such a task was startling, the research revealed a wide range of applicants for the title of administrator or custodian. No clear winner emerged, as each had its useful endowments, but also flaws that could disrupt the management of natural protected areas. However, these stakeholders could collaborate and, in theory, complement each other to attain sustainability in natural protected areas.

1. INTRODUCTION

Romania possesses a wide range and a great number of natural protected areas, mostly due to its diverse geographic conditions, but also to an increased government involvement. Some are small county natural protected areas; others have a more prominent international status, such as geoparks, Ramsar wetlands or biosphere reserves, while some can trace their origins to Romania's accession to the European Union, like the case of Nature 2000 sites [1], [2]. The number of natural protected areas steadily increased over the years. For example, according to Decision no. 971/2011 and Order no. 2387/2011, there were 149 Special Protection Areas (SPA) for birds [3] and 408 Sites of Community Importance (SCI) for habitats [4], which are all part of the Natura 2000 ecological network set up by the European Union.

This entire web of interconnected natural protected areas is managed in a top-down manner by the Ministry of Environment and Climatic Changes (name subject to change due to political reasons). As the ministry is unable to manage such a vast number of sites, it organizes one or two ascription sessions each year, in which different bodies can apply for the title of administrator or custodian of a particular area. This procedure is divided into two sections: one for those natural protected areas that require their own administration structure, and a simpler procedure for those that do not require such a structure. Order no. 1470/2013 regarding the approval of the Methodology for awarding administration and custody of natural

protected areas states that the Ministry is the one that decides which areas require administration and which do not [5], the main criterion being their extent, meaning that larger natural protected areas such as special protected areas, natural and national parks have administrative structures and not custodians.

The applicants vary in terms of size, importance and experience, but everyone aims to win this procedure, and it is the ministry's job to carefully assess each candidate's file and assign the administration or custody to the best suited one. And here is where this paper intends to intervene and shed light on this process, by presenting the main types of establishments that apply for the administration or custody of natural protected areas in Romania. It will then try to reveal their general strengths and weaknesses, more importantly the ways in which they can contribute to the preservation of such areas, and finally, if possible, pinpoint the best suited organization for handling the issues that frequently arise in natural protected areas.

2. THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The administration of natural protected areas around the world is heavily influenced by the so-called "*American model*". The core of this model is the US National Park Service, created in 1916 by the United States Congress, as an agency under the tutelage of the Department of Interior, which manages all US national parks, many national monuments (including natural ones), national preserves, and national recreation areas, among others [6].

The remaining natural protected areas in the United States are governed in a similar top-down fashion, by bodies directly under each federal state, by the US Forest Service [7], part of the US Department of Agriculture, by the US Fish and Wildlife Service [8], by the Bureau of Land Management [9], both part of the US Department of Interior, and by some tribal level authorities. Even though said government bodies have a working partnership with Native American tribes, nonprofit organizations, historic property owners or educational institutions, this is a *well-established, top-down, state-run type of organization*. Similar systems can be found in Australia (Department of Environment), New Zeeland (Department of Conservation), Brazil (Ministério de Meio Ambiente), and even China (Ministry of Environmental Protection).

The member states of the European Union (EU 28) follow a comparable top-down structure. For instance, according to Bromley (2012), in Austria, the Federal Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry, Environment and Water Management, through its Department I Environment and Climate Protection, manages national parks as well as other issues concerning nature conservation and species protection. The rest of the

existing natural protected areas are supervised by the nine states (Bundesländer) [10].

However, as stated by Keulartz (2009), this system has become more diluted ever since the 1990s, when the first implementation of the Natura 2000 network has met considerable resistance from farmers, fishermen, foresters, and other local residents in most of the European Union Member States. In response to the rural protest, the majority of governments have gradually abandoned their centralist, top-down approach and increasingly switched over to methods of participatory and interactive policy-making [11].

In Romania, a competitive process was implemented for the management of natural protected areas, especially the newly-established Natura 2000 sites. The Ministry's Order no. 1470/2013 contains all the guidelines and information necessary for visualising the entire process of awarding custody or administration of a natural protected area. It comprises the methodology for attributing the administration and the custody of natural protected areas, the blueprints for administration contracts and custody conventions alongside financial and technical addenda, but most importantly, it includes the evaluation charts which enable the ministry and the assessment committee to decide the winner applicant (see Table 1 and Table 2).

The two charts mentioned above provided the basis for our very own evaluation chart, which, although simpler, would be able to help us find the answers we were looking for in this paper. Thus, the focus was almost entirely on the general criteria as they were strikingly similar in both situations and we used them to devise a new, more accessible framework for evaluating the applicants for the custody/ administration of natural protected areas. As one can clearly see, the intention was to merge the two charts into one encompassing entity.

The reason for this was threefold: *1. It was easier to follow one procedure than two; 2. The breadth of natural protected areas found in Romania was too vast and would have implied creating evaluation charts for each and every one of them; 3. The removal of criteria that proved to be useless, such as the actual presentation of the application file, which brings no added value, a fact confirmed by the Ministry's project to alter Order no. 1470/2013 in this regard* [12].

Therefore, the criteria were the following, in order of importance: *money; vision; experience;* and *base of operations* (*MVEB*). Before going forward and illustrating each criterion, one must know that all of these frames of reference were created bearing in mind the preservation and enhancement of the biodiversity found in these areas, including the protected habitats and species as well as the natural elements that have lesser protection or none at all from a legislative standpoint.

Table 1. The evaluation chart for assigning administration of natural protected areas.

Evaluation criteria		Maximum score	Minimum score required
Technical endowment	Headquarters	10	13
	At least two means of transport, at least one off road	5	
	Other equipment	5	
Scientific ability	Studies and qualifications	10	28
	Experience in biodiversity conservation	15	
	Material base necessary for studies and research	7	
	Staff number	7	
Action plan for administration	The general description of the natural protected area, its current status and the identified issues	5	28
	Proposed actions for protection	5	
	Monitoring plan for habitat and species conservation	10	
	Current partners, consultants and collaborators	2	
	Forms of visit and the intended measures for mitigating their negative impact	3	
	The scientific organization of activities: mapping and monitoring species and habitats	20	
Financial resources	Financial resources for operation expenses	10	17
	Financial resources for specific management activities	10	
	Financial resources for salaries	5	
	Annual budget plan, exclusively for the administration structure	3	
	Project proposals	2	
Presenting the application file		20	14
		Maximum total points 150	Minimum points required (in total) 100

The *money* criterion mainly refered to the applicant's ability to financially support the management of a natural protected area from its own funds. The capability of attracting funds from outside sources, which mostly included structural funds and sponsorships, was of lesser importance as they were discontinuous and more difficult to attain. For this criterion, a maximum of 40 points out of a 100 can be awarded.

Table 2. The evaluation chart for assigning custody of natural protected areas.

Evaluation criteria		Maximum score	Minimum score required
Technical capacity	Ownership of spaces, buildings, furniture, equipment, etc. (the proximity to the area is also important)	10	6
Scientific capacity	Studies and qualifications in natural sciences (biology, ecology, geography, environmental studies, pedology and associated sciences) of staff members	9	15
	Experience of the involved staff	8	
	Experience in biodiversity conservation	8	
Financial capacity	Financial resources from own funds	10	9
	Project proposals	5	
Action plan for the custody of the natural protected area	The description of the area's current status and identified issues	10	23
	Actions towards actual protection	3	
	Current partners, consultants and collaborators	3	
	Forms of visit and the intended measures for mitigating their negative impact	3	
	The scientific organization of activities: mapping and monitoring species and habitats	20	
	Other types of activities and proposed measures	1	
Presenting the application file		10	7
		Maximum total points 100	Minimum points required (in total) 60

The second criterion, labelled *vision,* implied an airtight action plan that must be easily and effectively translated in the field, into the preservation of all natural elements in the area. The plan must have a life span of at least 10 years and must be highly

adaptable to the changing needs of biodiversity preservation. A maximum of 30 points out of a 100 can be awarded in this case.

Experience, with a maximum of 20 points /100 on the evaluation chart, is not as crucial as the first two. Well experienced researchers/staff can be hired, permanently or temporary. This, however, requires a good manager with a comprehensive knowledge of such matters, one who knows who to employ.

Base of operations or *HQ* was the last criterion employed in this evaluation, with a maximum of 10 points/100. This criterion, encompassing office(s), vehicle(s), hardware, and software, etc., was where most applicants generally excelled. Furthermore, these elements can be easily purchased or rented, and the charts found in Order no. 1470/2013 give it the fewest points, thus making it the least important in deciding the winning applicant.

The choice of money and vision over experience, for example, could be viewed as rather unconventional, but these two criteria were the most crucial for the success of any type of management in any type of natural protected area.

The categories of natural protected areas were not the only ones that are numerous. The organisations that submitted the already mentioned applications were also quite manifold. At the last session, held between November-December 2013, for example, the list of applicants included forestry departments, universities, private companies, research centres, non-governmental organizations, and county councils [13], while at the 4th session (2011), there were also environmental protection agencies (EPAs), museums, city councils, and even legal persons [14]. As a side note, the poor involvement of city councils in matters concerning the natural components of their own administrative territory was rather perplexing (only five in the last four years), as these entities would make fitting candidates for managing small or even medium sized natural protected areas, situated, exclusively or partially, on their land.

In order to simplify the process, the types of applicants were classified into two broad categories: *governmental* and *non-governmental bodies*.

In the following section, these two classes will be evaluated based on the four sets of criteria that constitute the newly designed evaluation chart in order to see how they manage to comply with said criteria.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Evaluating governmental bodies proved to be more challenging than assessing their non-governmental counterparts, mostly due to their multiplicity. However, a pattern emerged among the government based applicants as they achieved good scores at two criteria, money and base of operations,

but failed at vision and experience. Non-governmental organizations on the other hand are strong when it comes to vision and experience, but are frequently unable to sustain their drive in terms of money and base of operations. This assessment stems from my personal experience, acquired daily dealing with custodians and administrators, local and central authorities, investors, locals and so on.

More specifically, government applicants earned points at the money criterion as their budgets were tremendously larger than of any other type of organization, allowing for a part of these funds to be directed towards biodiversity conservation and area management, even though these funds were frequently more difficult to use due to excessive red-tape. In order to comprehend the importance of funds and how they determine the outcome of many application sessions, the following example was presented. Romsilva or the National Forestry Department, and its many subunits, gradually gained the administration of 12 national parks, among which the well known Rodna Mountains, Cheile Bicazului-Hășmaș, and Retezat, and 11 natural parks, such as Bucegi, the Iron Gates, and Grădiștea Muncelului-Cioclovina [15], mainly due to the organizations' potentiality to *financially* support their management.

Government bodies also earned points for their base of operations, as they had a well-established, well-known, and visible headquarters, offices, hardware, vehicles, stationery, etc.

All this potential, however, was squandered, as their vision and experience had been lagging. According to Iojă et al. (2010) administrative bodies were generally under-staffed, conditions that were reflected in a poor enforcement and implementation of conservation goals [16]. Furthermore, excessive bureaucracy, lack of structure, desire, or passion, understaffing and very few experienced people, inconsistent set of goals (insistence on tourism and even development as primary directions), frequent change in leadership, infrequent contact with local communities and other stakeholders, unnecessary stringency, tunnel vision, dependence on subcontractors, a doomed to fail top-down planning method, the novelty of some protection schemes like Natura 2000 were only a few elements that diminished the ability of officialdom to win a grant session and manage a natural protected area.

Non-governmental bodies excelled when it came to experience and vision, scoring high points due to their dedication, knowledge (on-site and ex-site), experience, research, specialisation, independence of subcontractors, and youth, not to mention the volunteering. Some even contributed to the establishment of new natural protected areas, like the Romanian Butterfly Society, who helped create the Viișoara "Butterfly Hill" Nature Reserve, in Cluj County,

Romania [17]. NGOs even scored fairly at the base of operations criteria as they had specific equipment used in species mapping and monitoring.

The only considerable downside of their application proposals and the part where most NGOs lose points was the lack of funds and dependence on external financial aid. Other drawbacks included temporary base of operations, lack of people, dependence on larger entities, inexperience with government red-tape, and disconnection from the local, county or central government.

A final tally was presented in Table 3, which showed both types of applicants evaluated according to the four criteria, and the resulting scores.

Table 3. The evaluation of government and non-government bodies based on the MVEB framework.

Criteria	Score government	Score non-government
Money	30	10
Vision	10	20
Experience	5	20
Base of operations	5	5
Total	50 / 100	55 / 100

3.1. Proposals for better nature reserve management

As one can clearly see in the previous paragraphs, none of the categories manages to obtain an above average score. The logical step for both parties, for them to mitigate the negative characteristics that might cost them their custody or administration or, even worse, impede the proper management of natural protected areas, is to form joint ventures.

These endeavours can take the form of *intercommunity development agencies* (IDAs), between different levels of government (administrative territorial units such as communes, cities or counties) which generally work together on projects of zonal interest, including plans dealing with specific environmental issues (biodiversity loss, encroachment on natural protected areas by sprawl, motorways or any type of development, etc.). The next step for these agencies is to sign agreements or association contracts with non-governmental organisations, thus adding further value to their conservation projects.

Another collaborative way of improving the chances of winning custody/administration, not to mention the entire management process, is through the so-called *local action group* (LAG) [18]. This partnership is all encompassing, being comprised not only of government organisations, but also of non-governmental bodies, private companies, legal persons, etc., primarily from rural areas, that work in conjunction in a vast array of fields. Its objectives are for example the ecological reconstruction and the preservation of natural protected areas, including Natura 2000 sites, but also community economic development, the promotion and preservation of traditional values, the physical and intellectual development of young people, and the creation of national and international partnerships.

4. CONCLUSION

To sum up, no type of applicant had the necessary resources or/and know-how to successfully create the best management environment for Romania's natural protected areas. Fortunately, there were special cases that set good examples for such enterprises, but, as a whole, most organisations still did not have the maturity or/and the financial potency to reach the true goal of every natural protected area – biodiversity conservation. At least, not on their own.

Thus, close collaboration between the relevant stakeholders might be the only way to achieve said goal, meaning that the government and the private sectors must come together, temper one another, share their knowledge, share their resources, so that in the end they can share the efficient management of Romania's natural protected areas.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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