

Challenges for mountain protected areas in Central and Eastern Europe. Examples from Poland and Ukraine

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present challenges faced by mountain protected areas in post-socialist countries on the example of Polish and Ukrainian Carpathians. Although both countries are not very mountainous, the Carpathian Range plays an important role in the culture and identity of both nations and first mountain protected areas were created there yet before the World War II. However, it is during the communist times, when most of them gained their contemporary shape. For about two decades they function in a new economical and institutional reality, facing new challenges related to this transformation:

- environmental conflicts on the local level, usually resulting from insufficient consultation and different visions of development
- a rising pressure on creating large-scale ski resorts and recreational centres
- problems with maintaining cultural landscapes due to insufficient incentives for traditional activities
- problems with land ownership structure and inadequate compensations for lands formerly included into protected areas
- problems with implementation of international nature protection rules into local contexts

Apart from many historical similarities, Poland and Ukraine represent two different transformation cases. Ukraine - nowadays independent – after the WW II was a part of the totalitarian Soviet Union. Poland after the war remained under communist regime but was (at least formally) an independent country, and since 2005 is a member of the EU. By choosing case studies from these two countries, my aim is to provide a more complete image of the abovementioned problems and opportunities for the nature protection in Central and Eastern Europe.

Keywords

protected areas, Carpathians, nature conservation, summer farming

Introduction

Throughout Europe, there is a growing interest in a role that protected areas can play in stimulating regional development. Some authors even state that nowadays we observe a paradigm shift from a selective towards integrative approach to nature conservation (MOSE & WEIXLBAUMER 2007). However, such statements are usually based on the experiences of the Western countries and in case of mountain protected areas – especially on the Alpine examples. When it comes to the East Central Europe countries, however, the knowledge about the nature of the challenges they face when it comes to the transition towards this new approach, seems to be rather generalized. Countries of the former Soviet bloc are often seen as one homogenous category, whereas in fact they differ in many aspects no lesser than the Western ones. These differences also touch the organization and functioning of the protected areas. I am going to show this variety on the Carpathian examples from Poland and Ukraine. These countries obviously share some common experiences connected with living under a totalitarian regime as well as the painful transition from the command market towards market economy, but at the same time represent two quite different contexts for this study.

Aim and the area of study

The aim of this study is to show actual challenges for the mountain protected areas through case studies of Ukrainian protected areas (with a special accent on the highest mountain range they cover - the Chornohora): the Carpathian Biosphere Reserve (CBR) and the Carpathian National Nature Park (CNP), compared to the situation in my home country, Poland, based on the example of the Babia Góra National Park (BGNP) and the Tatra National Park (TNP).

The basic features of these sites are the following:

- 1) The two Ukrainian protected areas in question are compatible with administrative borders, which in this case means a division of the Chornohora range between them, as the border of the oblasts' (regions) goes along the range. Such situation is quite an abstract thing in Poland. Nature does not know the human-made borders,

does it? However, the latter approach has disadvantages, too as it can lead to overlapping of several types of protected areas. The consequences of this situation will be commented on later in this paper.

- 2) The Carpathian Biosphere Reserve is characteristic for its division in eight separate parts while the Babia Góra National Park is characteristic for its relatively little size: 33,93 km² (Rodzaje ochrony...). Such circumstances surely provide challenges for an effective management and especially for reaching conservation goals, e.g. when it comes to protection of animals that need large territories like a brown bear (*Ursus arctos*) or a grey wolf (*Canis lupus*).
- 3) The two Ukrainian sites have been under protection for much shorter time compared to the Polish ones, which is symptomatic and could be explained by this country remaining a part of the totalitarian Soviet Union until 1991. Although the tradition of nature protection here is shorter, there is an opportunity that more solutions based on experiences from Western countries can be directly implemented without repeating their mistakes.

Materials and methods

The main methods of this study included:

- field observations in all four protected areas in question
- interviews with local inhabitants and other actors (e.g. protected areas' workers) in case of the Ukrainian protected areas and two interviews in the seat of the BGNP
- Studies of literature, internet sources, maps etc.

The field research was conducted systematically from 2009 to 2012 during 10 field trips to Ukraine, 5 visits to the BGNP and 3 visits to the TNP. The stress is made here on Ukrainian examples, Polish cases serve for a comparison that helps to show the variety of nature protection approaches that countries from behind the former 'Iron Curtain' choose.

The interviews did not follow a fixed structure but were modified according to the background of the respondent and the knowledge he/she was expected to have. Interviews' topics concerned the perception of the protected area, good and bad practices both in nature protection and land use such as grazing, local development and quality of life, tourism etc.

The main written sources included most of all the materials provided by the protected areas: monographs, reports, conference proceedings, brochures, maps and plans, websites, etc. The idea is to confront these sources with opinions of different local actors as well as other scientific works when possible.

Main results

Among the main findings there should be mentioned:

1) Problems with implementation of international nature protection rules and standards into local contexts

The two Ukrainian cases, CBR and CNNP showed a quite different approach towards the relationship between the nature conservation and human activities like tourism and summer farming. This is especially visible in the Chornohora mountain range where these two protected areas border. In CBR we can observe not only a greater 'tolerance' for tourism, but also attempts to manage it by creating 'soft' infrastructure (marked trails, tourist shelters, camp sites). The interview in CBR showed that the authorities of the Reserve are trying to become a leader of the 'green' branches of tourism for the whole region, gathering together smaller local initiatives. However, in view of some local actors and potential partners in such cooperation, CBR is perceived without too much confidence and plans of its area's enlargement even provoked a conflict with the local community. But at the same time, apart from undertaking actions that enhance tourism, CBR also allows grazing on traditionally communal (in the Soviet times – collective farms') pastures that are situated in its buffer zone. On the other side of the range, the CNNP presents a much more conservationist approach. Although active in some development projects for the local inhabitants (e.g. connected with water management system), it seems to be totally passive when it comes even to some basic tourist amenities within the Park. The most striking example here is the area around the Lake Nesamovite – a little post-glacier lake, one of the symbols of the Chornohora. Its location very close to the main range makes it a frequently visited, though illegal – camp place. One of the most popular trekking trails in the Chornohora is to walk along the range. However, as it takes 2-3 days and as there are no tourist huts along the way, tourists often choose (and in case of bad weather sometimes have to choose) to camp near the lake. When asked about this place, the CNNP authorities claim that they try to change the category of a small parcel of land near the lake in order to create there an official camp place or even to build a tourist hut. But as the area is situated within the strict protection zone, they have to wait for the permission of the Ukrainian Parliament. The situation remains and remains, in spite of the fact that in the neighboring CBR 'soft' tourist infrastructure exists even in the strictly protected core zone.

As for the grazing, the Park allows it on some lower situated meadows (called polonynas), while most of the old pastures are left abandoned facing reforestation or dwarf pine expansion (SITKO & TROLL 2008).

This duality of approach within one mountain range obviously brings challenges in keeping the goals of these two protected areas. And moreover, makes it harder to find a cohesive strategy for the whole region especially if such a strategy was to be based on nature protection, as the modern paradigm states (HAMMER 2007).

By contrast, in Poland a great challenge is the overlapping of several (sometimes contradictory in their priorities) types of protected areas. Although this is not exclusively a Polish problem (HAMMER et al. 2007), it can be very

well shown on the Babia Góra National Park example. This relatively little protected area (created to protect well developed altitudinal zonation of the highest peak of Poland outside the Tatras) is at a time:

- a national park - under the Polish law
- a UNESCO MaB Reserve - under international, UN regulations
- a Natura 2000 both SPA (Special Protection Area - for birds) and SAC (Special Area of Conservation - for habitats) - under EU regulations

Although all these 4 sites have different borderlines (e.g. the Biosphere Reserve's transition zone in 100% covers area around, but outside of the National Park), they all contain the BGNP in their core. As a result, the fundamental question occurs: which protection type has the biggest priority in the Babia Góra range? For example: in the zone of strict protection of the national park, in fact no human intervention is allowed in order to let the natural processes work. But what to do if at the same time Natura 2000 imposes maintenance of a certain type of habitat there, impossible to preserve without e.g. some forestry actions? Park workers admit facing such dilemmas.

Although Tatra National Park is in analogical situation, its greater challenge seem to be connected with massive tourism and in consequence, among other things, a very high density of marked trails (their total length is 275 km with the total Park area almost 212 km²). Being the only mountain range of alpine landscape in Poland and therefore having a deep meaning in Polish culture and tradition, the Tatras are extremely popular tourist destination. There are around 2,5 mln visitors entering the Tatra National Park each year (Turystyka piesza...). Thanks to cable cars linking the town of Zakopane with Kasprowy Wierch (1987 m.a.s.l.), even the highest parts of the range are quite easily accessible for massive tourism and for skiing, which poses many environmental (as well as safety) questions. One of the most visible evidences of tourist pressure are degradation of trails (FIDELUS 2008) and garbage.

2) Problems with maintaining cultural landscapes due to some protection regulations and insufficient incentives for traditional activities

Cultural landscapes both in Polish and in Ukrainian Carpathians are especially connected with grazing and use of natural (alpine) and semi-natural meadows as pastures. In Poland, starting from the 1960s, grazing was forbidden in the mountain national parks, which reduced not only the abovementioned cultural values, but also the biodiversity as many lower situated meadows reforested (e.g. Hala Czarna in the Babia Góra range is an example of an almost full reforestation). Moreover, the process of establishment the national parks as well as the removal of summer farming from their territory was conducted in an extremely top-down manner. This caused a strong resistance of the local communities and until today influences the Parks-people relationships. Due to environmental as well as social reasons, programs of reintroduction of seasonal grazing - though on a limited scale and with a limited success - have been developed yet in the 1980s.

In Ukraine grazing remained and even flourished in the communist period – obviously not on the basis of private property, but within the collective mountain farms in a re-shaped, 'industrial' form. Nowadays some people continue individual pasture activity in a pre-war style despite the fact that without any program of institutional support this occupation is nowadays dramatically low cost-efficient.

3) Problems with land ownership, inadequate compensations for land (formerly) included into protected areas

These problem can be especially well seen on the Tatras' examples. Around 22,30 km² of TPN in Western Tatras (mainly forests and some semi-natural meadows) is not only owned but also in fact managed by a cooperative of inhabitants of eight villages situated in the neighborhood. The cooperative's history dates back to the first half of the 19th century, so it is much older than the park (Historia...) . Even though its territory is formally included in the national park, the cooperative can run forestry and business, use meadows for pastures, sell tickets at the entrance and to some extent develop tourism infrastructure. This situation brings environmental concerns as nature protection obviously is not the main goal of the cooperative.

Another type of the problem connected with property rights - inadequate compensations for land – was in the core of the conflict around using alpine (natural) and semi-natural pastures in the Tatras after the establishment of the National Park. The local people were not only frustrated by the prohibition of the land use they had been practicing there for generations, but also by the far inadequate (in their view) price the state proposed for the pasturelands they owned.

Such conflicts were possible in the post-war Poland where despite of the socialist regime, private property rights were maintained (which was quite unusual in the former Soviet Bloc). They were however impossible in the totalitarian Soviet Union after the forced and brutally executed collectivization of land. Protected areas in the Ukrainian Carpathians were established on the basis of lands formerly taken away from the people and currently through these protected areas, they remains the property of state. Therefore it is not surprising that the local people there treat protected areas with a very limited confidence – which was observed by other scholars, too (WALLNER et al. 2007).

4) Environmental conflicts on the local level, usually resulting from insufficient consultation and different visions of development e.g. a rising pressure for creating large-scale ski resorts and recreational centres

On the Ukrainian side the main conflict around protected areas is the one between the CBR and the authorities of the Rakhivskiy rayon. The core of the dispute is situated in the Lazeshchyna village where the local community stepped against enlargement of the Reserve that was to cover forests and alpine zone on the north-west slopes of Goverla (2061 m.a.s.l.), the highest peak of the Chornohora range (and the whole Ukraine), until now unprotected. This seems to be in fact a conflict for control over good quality forests. Despite the presidential

decree signed in 2010, that set the new borders of the CBR, until now (end of 2012) the status of the area of conflict is still pending (TROLL & WARCHALSKA-TROLL 2013).

Polish mountain protected areas are familiar with similar circumstances, too. For instance, a quite new conflict in Zawoja was based on opposition of the local community towards designation of the new Natura 2000 sites in the village surroundings situated outside of the national park. Keeping past conflicts with the park in mind, the people and especially the local authorities acted against including even more of the district's area into protected areas. The crisis was deepened by the fact that the designation of the Natura 2000 sites was not consulted with the community and that not enough of basic knowledge about this new type of protected area was provided before its implementation. Out of despair, in 2008 local authorities organized a referendum (even though it could not have a legal force in such case). It was preceded by a campaign 'Capercaillie or You' (the main reason for creating Natura 2000 near Zawoja was to protect the habitat of the western capercaillie *Tetrao urogallus*) through which they tried to persuade the inhabitants to vote against Natura 2000. At present, the conflict is ceased and the Natura 2000 sites remain, but what is worth to be mentioned, problems of the perception of this new type of protected areas by local communities are much broader and still actual (GRODZIŃSKA-JURCZAK & CENT 2011) as well as discussed not only in the Polish context (HIEDANPÄÄ 2002; HIRSCHNITZ-GARBERS & STOLL-KLEEMANN 2011).

Finally, tensions around the protected sites in the area of interest result from quite a constant pressure on developing tourism, recreation and sports infrastructure in order to attract more visitors. Conflicts between nature conservation and tourism are obviously very common around the world (see for instance Nolte 2007 for case studies from the Poland's and Ukraine's neighbor - Slovakia). Many mountain communities see such direction as natural and even the only possible path of economic grow, and the interviews conducted within this research confirmed this. The pressure on creating ski resorts and extending ski infrastructure is especially rising. Our Ukrainian example - the Chornohora range - is until current times free from large-scale ski infrastructure. To some extent, this is surely caused by the presence of the protected areas described in this study. But at the same time, this could be simply a result of weak accessibility of this mountain range especially because of the bad quality (or lack) of roads. In the recent years two large, modern ski resorts - Bukovel and Dragobrat - emerged in its very neighborhood, raising questions about the future of the highest Ukrainian mountain range, too. In Poland, disputes around ski infrastructure in the TNP return regularly, e.g. in 2007 when the existing cable car to Kasprowy Wierch was modernized. In contrast, the BGNP is until now free from cable cars and ski lifts. However, plans of the construction a chairlift reaching the main range of Babia Góra (in the core zone of the Biosphere Reserve) still remain in the official strategy of development the Zawoja commune (Strategia...), marking a moot point in the park - local community relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can state that in both countries mountain protected areas face challenges that are to some extent similar. They include: adaptation of international standards to a complex local reality, problems with finding a right place for the traditional (especially pastoral) activities and balance between the human activity and biodiversity maintenance, high (or rising) number of visitors, pressure on extending sports and recreational infrastructure. These challenges sometimes lead to conflicts which are harder to resolve when the memory of a previously experienced injustice (e.g. related with inadequate or lack of compensations for land as well as limitations that the protected area imposed) remains in their background. Such feelings are (potentially) much stronger in Ukraine, where people faced collectivization of land. Also finding an adequate, both 'nature-friendly' and 'human-friendly' way of managing the rising amount of tourists seems to be ahead of the Ukrainian side, especially CNNP. On the other hand, Ukrainian cases discussed here have at least two advantages comparing to the Polish ones:

- 1) they do not overlap with other types of large protected areas so therefore can more freely follow their main goals and tasks (provided that they cooperate with each other when it comes to the strategy for the Chornohora range where they border)
- 2) having a shorter protection history they can still take advantage of good practices and experiences from the Western countries and not to repeat some mistakes like the prohibition of grazing in the semi-natural meadows (and by so to maintain both their environmental and cultural values).

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