

Volunteer networking in coastal biodiversity monitoring - LT

1. Policy Objective & Theme

- SUSTAINABLE USE OF RESOURCES: Preserving coastal environment (its functioning and integrity) to share space

2. Key Approaches

- Participation

3. Experiences that can be exchanged

Public participation in coastal biodiversity monitoring is not a new issue for the Baltic States, although only recently has it become applicable consistently as part of a broader ICZM process in the coastal NATURA 2000 areas. The experience to be shared by this case study deals with the know-how in involvement of local nature lovers into the coastal biodiversity monitoring network. It has a strong integration potential linking biodiversity conservation with the sustainable development of rural, nature and water tourism.

4. Overview of the case

There is a pressing need for volunteer amateur naturalists to participate in data collection for coastal biodiversity monitoring programmes in Europe. It is being addressed in some countries, but less so in others. This case study considers the results of the project focusing on the analysis of the coastal bird monitoring network in the Curonian Lagoon area and its contribution to ICZM: the features that facilitate recruitment, retention and motivations of volunteers to participate in coastal biodiversity monitoring, including the social and cultural milieus in which they operate.

5. Context and Objectives

a) Context

The non-tidal Curonian Lagoon is the largest coastal lagoon in Europe located on the southeast rim of the Baltic Sea. The major part of the east coast of the lagoon is, or has historically been, part of the Nemunas Delta, which is a wetland of international importance (a Ramsar site) for nature conservation due to high concentrations of waterfowl. Considering ICZM efforts in the Nemunas Delta within a broader social and economic context, there is an increasing need to develop time- and cost-effective inventory methods and techniques for assessing the abundance, distribution and conservation status of coastal endangered species and of NATURA 2000 habitat types.

b) Objectives

The specific objectives to be achieved with the ICZM approach include integration of the voluntary networking in monitoring of abundance, distribution and conservation status of coastal endangered species and of NATURA 2000 habitats with the networking in provision of nature, rural and water tourism services in the Nemunas Delta. The timescale associated with implementation and goals achievement is considered in decades since this is a continuous ICZM and biodiversity monitoring programme.

6. Implementation of the ICZM Approach (i.e. management, tools, resources)

a) Management

The authorities, organisations and stakeholders involved include the administration of the Nemunas Delta Regional Park and the participatory monitoring network (PMN) comprised of voluntary and/or semi-professional birdwatchers organised into the Birdwatchers' Association of the Klaipeda Region. Nature-based monitoring organisations utilise volunteers to collect records and assist with surveys. Although these organisations are self-contained institutions, we describe them as networks because of the way in which information – primarily in the form of raw or processed biological records – is circulated within them, between individuals and groups, and is channelled to partner organizations.

b) ICZM tools

This case represents a toolbox of participatory ICZM tools *sensu lato*. Embodied skills – such as the dexterity to disentangle birds from mist-nets at the Ventes Ragas Ornithological Station, the correct use of optics or the quiet stillness required to observe animal behaviour – is a must for this kind of tool. Participation offers considerable opportunities for informal learning, and social learning is a strong feature across all the PMN types in our study. Social learning in PMNs is characterised by the desire to learn, combined with the desire to teach and tutor others: volunteers eagerly share their knowledge with tourism service providers in the Nemunas Delta.

Communicating to volunteers the 'usefulness' of their data is vital, because many people have a 'strong sense of wanting to be in nature, wanting to go slow, wanting to look in detail – but somehow needing a purpose, an excuse or permission'. Emerging professionalism is accompanied by an increase in the participation of expert amateurs. This positive outcome results from an institutionalised attitude of trust towards non-professional practitioners. Volunteers in PMNs ascribe importance to both their data-gathering activities and their social experience. The need of volunteers to share food, shelter and resources generates trust, social bonds and a sound environment for social learning, within which volunteers can increase their knowledge and skills. Such social 'intensity' is a major characteristic of local associations, whose members prize the sociability of their organisation, with meetings, informal gatherings in the field, organised trips and close, long-standing friendships and groups. PMN management efforts should be geared towards enlivening and motivating participants by providing an inspiring environment where trust, respect, recognition, value and enjoyment can flourish.

7. Cost and resources

Cost: €10,000 annually. Resources: ca. 30 volunteers, skilled and committed semi-professional birdwatchers.

8. Effectiveness (i.e. were the foreseen goals/objectives of the work reached?)

Forming networks with partner organisations is particularly important in countries where there are many small- and medium-sized PMNs rather than larger national organisations, as in the case of the Nemunas Delta. Participation in such collaborative networks enables PMNs to more efficiently improve public awareness of their work and - in the case of conservation-oriented organisations - influence policy-makers. Volunteers place a high degree of significance on their social experience within the coastal biodiversity monitoring network. Successful creation and management of participatory monitoring networks thus requires that similar levels of attention be paid to social aspects of the organisation as are paid to the generation and management of the coastal biodiversity monitoring data.

9. Success and Fail factors

PMNs are complex formations. Their success or failure depends on culturally and historically specific conditions that vary from region to region, country to country. To comprehend fully the underlying factors that enable or prevent the contribution of PMNs and their volunteers to bio-monitoring programmes, it is necessary to understand their 'inner workings'. To be successful, PMNs must thus pay similar attention to both coastal monitoring data generation and social management.

10. Unforeseen outcomes

The detailed example of the Birdwatchers' Association of the Klaipeda Region, unexpectedly, demonstrates the impact of wider societal factors on the direction and development of participatory monitoring networks which must constantly adapt to shifting socio-cultural contexts—including shifting perceptions of the value of nature-based activities. In the case of participatory monitoring networks of coastal biodiversity, retention is the twin of recruitment: in a sense, insofar as it reduces the need for recruitment and enables the PMN to build long-term expertise, it is even more significant. Successful retention requires a sensitive approach to volunteer motivation. Volunteer monitors are motivated by a combination of cognitive, social and emotional drivers. Rather than any single factor, it is the composite of motives that stirs the volunteer to action and sustains commitment. PMN coordinators need to recognise this complex balance of motives when they design a managed volunteer programme.

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13. Sources

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