

Nature conservation, conflict and discourses on forest management: communities and protected areas from Meridional Carpathians

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The paper aims to bring into focus the issue of nature conservation in Romania and the response of local actors to top-down conservation policies. A type of conflict that arises at the fringe of Romanian protected areas, the conflict between collective proprietors and national parks' administration will be taken as a research example. It will be shown that the top-down approach of the park administrators is based on the ideas of law and science and on the idea of traditional, „good” state forestry practice. This approach is strongly contested by communities, which begin to establish as relatively organised entities ; with small steps, „participation” begins to function.

Keywords: obște, collective property, joint-ownership systems, regulation and customary systems.

Cuvinte-cheie: obște, proprietate colectivă, devălmășie, legislație, sistem cutumiar

Introduction

In Romania, forests were privatised in proportion of 50%, out of which 60% (meaning 1.5 million hectares) are owned and managed in a collective manner (RNP¹, 2007). Therefore, a huge number of community-based institutions were established or re-established all across forested areas, named *obște*, *composesorat* or *comunitate de avere*. Consequently, a very dense net of forestry institutions is beginning to „move” in rural Romania for administrating, managing and regulating forest-related issues in a decentralised way.

In this social setting, the environmentalist discourse gains more ground and environmental protection organisms expand their influence.

Romanian environmental laws and policies did change very often over the last years and there is an institutional rupture, meaning that the institutions related to environmental protection (Ministry of Environment, Ministry of Agriculture, Romanian Forest Administration – RNP) do not communicate efficiently and do not benefit from each other's stock of knowledge, skills and attributions².

In this context, *the aim of the present paper* is to investigate the consequences of these environmental reforms on the ground, at the level of rural communities that live at the fringe of protected areas. The response of the communities to conservation measures might be categorized *a priori* as being positive and negative. The example presented in this paper is on the negative side and illustrates a conflict. Besides quarrels between brothers,

neighbours, people and municipalities, a new type of „property” conflict arises in Romania³, the one concerning interaction between environmental protection organisms and private owners. Usually, the conflict arises because of two empirical reasons: restrictions regarding pastoral uses of land or restrictions regarding forestry in protected areas. The case presented in this article concerns forestry.

The paper tries to grasp the forms of this conflict, its causes and consequences and the narratives of actors on each side. It will be shown that the central motives for conflict lie on the distribution of power and on the lack of communication skills. It will also be shown that the participation of the community in the management of the protected area is not always the best solution, at least not participation *per se*, but prepared and constructed in a certain manner and by certain actors.

From the methodological point of view, I have undertaken a qualitative approach⁴, consisting in intensive interviewing with lay members of the village community⁵, members of the *obște* committee⁶, forestry agents and guards (belonging to both *obște* and the Park)⁷ and members of the park administration⁸. Initially, it was my academic interest in the topic of forestry that drove the research methodology, but during the work in the field, the idea of intervening in conflict management made me take a more definite position, in order to be able to make certain recommendations, as it is visible in the final part of the paper⁹. Analyzing interviews in the case of conflict, when information and interviewees' opinions sometimes express certain interests and sides of stories more convenient for the speaker, is not an easy task and the subjectivity and deduction skills of the researcher might interfere in the presentation and interpretation of research data.

Theoretical perspectives: nature conservation and conflict

I draw my study on two bodies of literature, one on conservation practices in the light of environmental anthropology, and the second on the more general perspective on conflict.

Approaching nature conservation from a social sciences' perspective

From the first perspective, concerning nature conservation and, more specifically, protected areas, *I am especially interested in the way that the ideology and practices of conservation are received by and interact with local communities, and, more specifically, with local actors.*

Because in Romania the sociological and anthropological literature on ecology-related aspects are underrepresented (a gap that the present journal special issue is trying to fill), I will take the occasion in the following lines to give a brief review of the main ideas and study directions concerning the topic of nature conservation and protected areas.

Protected areas are thought to be rich sites of social production and social interaction (West *et al.*, 2006). The social disciplines concerned with the topic of protected areas have mainly focused on the social, material and symbolic effects of protected areas and on the way they impact people's lives.

They are thought about as changing the face of the Earth by renaming places, drawing boundaries around areas, and erasing boundaries between states (*ibidem*). In Western societies, scholars believe that protected areas have become the means by which many people see and understand parts of the world that are called nature and the environment. However, even in non-western societies, the organizations and actors which promote and implement protected areas formation derive their ideas and discourses from westernized international environmentalist discourses. The poststructuralist and more generally, the constructivist perspective on environment

(Brosius, 1999b, Escobar, 1999) consider that the internationally (in subsidiary, Western) production of concepts, such as conservation, biodiversity, protected area, ultimately determines the production of nature, through highly circulated ideas that influence people's ways of representing nature. Therefore, in this view, nature is a construct and people that are subject to studies deploy often imported discourses or produce themselves different ideas in which they constantly construct nature. And the concept of protected area, together with the related concepts such as species, reserve, biodiversity, ecosystem, highly contributes to the social construction of the concept of nature as something isolated and distinct from humans and ultimately separate nature from culture.

For Romania, environmentalist discourses and practices are quite new, as I have stated in the introduction. The emerging environmentalist international discourse, promoted through international organisms in order to support this new „environmentalist” cosmology of the natural as a just, moral and right way of seeing and being in the world (West *et al.*, 2006) begins to take shape.

Understanding conflicts

Many studies concerning protected areas go in the direction of studying conflicts. From various examples, taking the shape of displacements or alteration of land-use rights, protected areas' establishment and maintenance are fueling conflicts (West *et al.*, 2006).

In the post-socialist states, emergence of conflicts is seen as a feature of the property reform (Swinnen and Mathijs, 1997, *apud* Sikor, 2004). Conflicts gave birth to political negotiations between central state actors, local state authorities, historical landowners, agricultural managers and new entrepreneurs. These negotiations mediated the reform implementation at the local level. These actors have competed with each other in gaining legal rights to land and agricultural assets and in translating the legal rights into rights-in-practice (Sikor, 2004).

The wider concept of conflict has been discussed in relation to several issues.

First, *conflict is about resources*. In this approach, conflict is explained in terms of interests of the groups and persons involved, especially their competition for resources or gains (Schlee, 2004, 135). Second, *conflict is about identification*. Here, attention is drawn from the object to the subject of the conflict and the research question is „who fights whom?”. One becomes concerned who is excluded and who is included and on which basis, in which ways people make and break alliances and which patterns of identification they follow (*ibidem*). Third, *conflict is about power*. Here, power is the central concept of the research and conflict is one possible point of entry, a methodological setting in which power relations are revealed (Nuijten, 2005, 9).

Empirical context

Description of obște and the park

Cheia is a village lying at the feet of the Buila-Vânturarița Massif¹⁰, right next to a famous tourism centre, the Olănești city. Although placed in such a fortunate neighbourhood, their prospects for tourism are very poor.

The law 1/2000 enabled the community to restore its former forest property in the form of a common property regime, named *obște*¹¹. Almost all inhabitants of the village have shares (*drepturi*) in the *obște*, unequally distributed. The total surface of owned forest and pastures is 3700 hectares. From this surface, almost 30%, 1400 hectares, were included since 2004 in the Buila-Vânturarița National Park.

Obște is a community-based institution that owns and administers the forest, through the „ruling council” – an executive committee, formed of a president, a secretary and five members, elected among local inhabitants, usually those with the highest amount of shares. Parallel with this committee, at the

decision-making process the village assembly participates also formed of all members (usually once a year).

In this type of genealogical *obște*, the **members** are the heirs of the „original” members, those who were registered on the property tables before 1948. They can be inhabitants of Cheia, or residents elsewhere. There is a total of 400 members, spread over 16 villages and cities. However, the inhabitants of Cheia are members of *obște* in proportion of 90%. *The inequality of shareholding* is not very high. There are 70.000 shares, out of which the organization itself holds 14.3%, the largest shareholder has 8.6%, and the next has 4.3%. Annually, timber is exploited by companies and the revenues are allocated partly towards the members (the largest shareholder makes a profit of 2250 euros), partly towards investments in infrastructure.

Theoretically, this form of property regime has all premises to contribute to the local development from the management of the forest-resources. Unfortunately, until now people that I have spoken with in the community are not satisfied with the management of the *obște*, many of them appreciating that the *obște* officials are corrupt, and the signals for development are weak. As I will show further in the paper, this is partly due to internal conflicts and to exclusive orientation towards pure timber exploitation as economic strategy of *obște*. Nevertheless, everybody in the community seems to consider that the biggest problem is the „encroachment” of forest by the National Park.

Buila Vanturarita is the smallest national park in Romania, with a total area of 4186 ha, lying on the territory of Costești and Bărbătești villages and of the Băile Olănești city, in which is included the community of Cheia, our location. The Park administration is ensured by a state structure, the National Forest Administration (NFA) together with the NGO Kogayon. The activity of the administration is supervised by the Scientific Council of the Park, formed of specialists in geography, biology, forestry. The participation

of local communities and other interested agents is ensured by the Consultative Council of the Park, formed of representatives of proprietors, local municipalities and other people involved.

The park was formed out of the initiative of a group of young „nature lovers” from the communities around the Massif, students in geography or geology, the members of the today NGO Kogayon. Seeing that the mountain becomes dirtier with the infusion of tourists, they did everything to declare it a national Park and they succeeded in 2004.

Premises for participation ?

The core of the conflict with the community of Cheia lies in the regulations and interdictions presupposed by the existence of the park. Inside the special conservation area, the proprietors have no right to extract wood, except for one that has been „felled” by natural calamities. In the area around the special conservation, named the „buffer area” (with a surface equal to that of the special conservation area), proprietors have the right to extract timber, with the approval of the park administration.

Theoretically, through the above-mentioned Consultative Council, all the communities involved in the constitution of the park do participate in the decision-making process. As the denomination suggests, the type of participation implied is the consultative one, in which decisions are taken by the centre and legitimated through the participative scheme (Lawrence, 2006, 283).

The general discourse of state representatives concerning environmental measures and decisions in the case of establishing protected areas is that of a centralized authoritarian protection strategy. They believe that communities should not be consulted for establishing protected areas, because of exaggerated demands and of lack of communication skills.

De facto, the community of Cheia does not even recognize the constitution of the

Park, denying all collaboration. They even sued the administration of the Park, arguing that they constituted illegally, because *obște* Cheia did not sign for incorporating their territory in the Park. The others communities that have property rights in the park recognize the Park and some of them have a favorable attitude. However, until now very few participatory actions have taken place.

Actors and their profile

The two main actors involved are „the community” and „the park”. However, I do not approach the community as a monolith, as a body that acts independently and uniformly. Very often, in the literature on environmentalism, even in anthropological or sociological studies, the community is reified and essentialized („the community” against the state ; „the community” against illegal logging), even though in depth case studies reveal that inside a community there are divergent „forces” and actors (Brosius 1999b, Boonzaier, 1996). My paper takes into consideration that multiple actors compose both community and the park.

The most active player in the conflict is the committee of *obște*. A president, together with a secretary (both over 65 years old), rules the committee. Both were active communist members and part of the „old” structures. From this characteristic derives the fact that they are supposed to have very good connections at the local level and to be important players in different patron-clients networks. People from the village often characterize the *obște* as „the same way as it was with the collective farm in communism” and through the term of corrupt.

Lay members of the *obște* and merely people that are not directly involved in forestry do not express vehement opinions against the park. They would rather display aesthetical and ecological arguments in favour of it, expressing their satisfaction with its establishment.

The lay members of the community have a consultative role in the participatory process.

They also have a role of „legitimizing audience” for the decisions of the committee. Because the rules for membership in *obște* are based on the inheritance principle, the older members of the community are the rightful owners, thus the general assembly has the appearance of a gerontocracy¹².

The actors of the park are the state structure, Romsilva, and the Association (NGO) Kogayon. The park has a Managerial Council, a Scientific Council and a Consultative Council, in the latter being involved the representatives of the surrounding communities. The members of the Association are mostly young and enthusiastic „nature” specialists that grew up in the area, thus manifesting a strong attachment towards environment in the region. In the Managerial Council there are forestry specialist from the Romanian Forest Administration (*RNP – Regia Națională a Pădurilor*).

Flow of conflicting ideas

I will try to list and analyse all the arguments and complaints that the *obște* committee members and lay people from the community have displayed in different conversations that we had and to provide for each of them the „response” from the Kogayon director (F., age 32) and of *RNP* representative (M., age 40). This section of the paper is meant to depict the conflict and the objects of the conflicts from a discursive perspective. *The perspective of narratives*, of „flow of ideas” is very important in this case, because the „flow of actions” does not yet play a very important part. Scholarly work in anthropology suggests that „discourse”¹³ is at the core of any environmental movement or action, because images and the metaphoric cloth are constitutive of environmentalism, the concept of „nature” being partly a constructed one (Brosius 1999b, Escobar, 1999).

The general lines of the narratives and the main conflict reasons

The red line that crosses the narratives of both parts is the lack of communication. *Obştea* complains about „nobody asking them”, while the managers of the Park complain about lack of understanding about meaning of protected areas from the part of the community.

It was very difficult for me to isolate the precise causes for the emergence of the conflict¹⁴, because of the contrasting opinions expressed by the two parts. However, I will present the main „accusations” and then try to analyse each of the arguments.

Firstly, it appears very interesting in the *obştea* officials’ narrative how the park is associated with the „imperialist” (T., age 67, *obşte* councillor) or autocratic State. In their opinion, the state still wants to administer the zone, despite the fact that nowadays the community is the private „master”.

The heads of the *obştea* committee believe that in the backstage of the park constitution lies the political interest of state actors, foresters and political personalities, which want to control access in the area. They do not believe in the crucial scientific importance of biodiversity of the region and do not understand the scientific argumentation for the buffer zone, as it appears in their following statement :

„There are some objectives in the park, not exceeding 60 hectares : the yew trees and the caves, the rest is buffer zone.” (L., age 75)

As for the members of the Kogayon Association, the *obştea* officials put them in a mercantile light, saying that their goal is to obtain a safe salary and nothing more.

The principal accusations of the park administrators against *obştea* officials are that their prevalent economic interest in the area disregards environmental values¹⁵ and that it is impossible to build an effective communication, because of „old customs and communist-like ways of relating to people and pursuing self-interest” (F., age 32).

Moreover, even if not directly related to the conflict *obşte*-park by the interviewees themselves, a very important point can be made from interviews with lay members of the community that treat corrupt practices and selfishness of certain *obştea* officials. Many people from the community place guilt of forest mismanagement on the top actors of *obştea* committee, saying that :

„S. and L. [president and vice-president] are thieves, they are old and do not care what will happen in 10 years ; they are not skilled and don’t care about the forest, only about their economies and profit” (G., age 38, forestry worker)

From this point of view, lack of care for forest and, more generally, for nature, and economical interest in forest exploitation, might constitute an explanation for the negative view of officials towards the park.

Contested legitimacy, participation and symbolism of property

The first claim of the *obştea* officials is that they have never been consulted about the constitution of the park and they did not sign anything giving the right of establishing a conservation area on *their* territory. The denial went so far, that the *obştea* was severely prejudiced financially. The area included in the park is legally exempted of taxation, but the *obştea* decided to pay the tax (amount of 12.000 euro), in order to deny the existence of the park.

The director of Kogayon (F., age 32), who is responsible with the relation to the involved communities, told me that he went several times to talk to the *obştea* officials, that he even participated in the village assemblies to convince them that the park is a good thing and there is no point in opposing it, but he was not able to obtain a positive response. Thus, he sustains, the *obştea* was aware of what was going on, and that „the park” did everything possible for maintaining the peace and providing necessary information. Hence, in his opinion, *obştea* was informed, but malevolent towards the park.

Some informers from the community provided me with two variants for this problematic interaction. The first story is that the lay members were against the establishment of the park and threatened the officials that they will set their houses on fire if they approve and sign the constitution of the protected area. The second story is a conspiracy one, that somebody from inside the committee would have hidden the monthly „official monitor”¹⁶ at the *obște* centre, in which there were articles about the establishment of the park, and thus, the president was misinformed and got angry when he suddenly found out that the park was actually already constituted. At the core of the whole argument is in fact the idea of participation and the symbolism of property. They frequently use the expression of *expropriation* for the fact that the park has been established. The proprietors feel that they have finally gained *their* forest back and thus, as proprietors, they claim to be consulted about any decision concerning *their* land. In this case, property is linked with the idea of empowerment. By gaining back their property rights, the community believes it has power to contest decisions made by the State¹⁷. The idea of power is important, as it will emerge in other circumstances, described later in the paper. Furthermore, the committee considers that the administration of the park is guilty for violating their rights.

Competing power or hampering illicit gains ?

Another argument is that the ruling committee contests the right of the Park to control and approve the extraction of damaged wood from the special conservation area and for extraction of timber from the buffer zone. In their words, they ask :

„Why do we need their rangers to approve what our rangers have already approved ? Why do we need them to approve what is already written in the Forest Management Plan, that we have paid so expensively ? ” (S., age 70).

This is a very important argument for the forestry employees of the *obște*, the guard and the ranger, who see their power diminished because they „suddenly” owe direct upward accountability. This idea is directly linked to the one above, about property and power. Privatisation and property means freedom to administrate the forest and this is seen as something that the park is taking away at a symbolic level. Apparently, this argument might have a „materialistic” interpretation, in the sense that the *obște* and its employees are restricted in their attempt to extract (unreasonably) as much as they want. There is much talk in the community about illegal logging (in the literature on Romanian forestry as well, Vasile, 2006 ; Dorondel, 2007 ; Niculae, 2005), and thus one might think that one more control authority hampers the *obște* officials and their employees to make illicit profit.

F. says that these approvals are merely a formality and *obște* should not see it as a hindrance. Moreover, he invokes the laws and state regulations. He describes only one case in which *obște* requested authorisation and the park did not approve, based on the fact that the trees were not legally marked for harvesting and the quantity was important (700 trees). The case was investigated by the Territorial Inspectorate for Forestry and Hunting (in Romanian *ITRSV*) and they decided that the park was right. Hence, the park opposes to the *obște* narrative of over-bureaucratisation and of authority diminishing. In response, they formulate an „illicit logging” narrative, by insinuating that the real reason for *obște* complaints is the interference in their illicit business, a narrative that converges with opinions expressed by certain community lay members, as presented above.

Struggle over resources

The most prevalent argument of the *obște* officials is that the placement of the park hampers the economic activity of the *obște*, by several mechanisms : (1) the inclusion of

the alpine pastures in the special conservation areas, „*taking the food of our sheep*”; (2) an unjustified extension of the buffer zone, which, they think, necessarily reduces the approved quantity of timber to harvest; (3) interdiction to expand the roads inside the special area and the buffer zone, thus hampering harvesting activities and potential tourism, seen as mass tourism; (4) the infestation mechanism – letting fallen trees rotten in the name of preserving pure state of nature and developing ecosystems means a threat to healthy standing trees.

The first argument against the Park is a very strong „weapon” in the hands of *obşte*a officials, because to this argument are sensible most of the lay people, sheep owners or former shepherds. However, the park representatives sustain that this is not true, that actually the shepherds and their flocks (except for the goats, which are very destructive) do have access in the park. Moreover, he says that pasturing enhances biodiversity, thus, from a scientific point of view it would be wrong to prohibit this activity. Thus, the idea of grazing prohibition is only a weapon, used by *obşte*a officials to manipulate lay-people.

The second argument flows like this:

„We understand what conservation means and we agree to preserve the nature, but creating such a large buffer zone is a proof of malevolence towards the communities that want to harvest something for their living.” (L., age 75)

They add the fact that the surfaces that were state property were not included in the buffer area, while those in private property were included and they perceive that as an offence towards private owners¹⁸.

F. (age 32) responds to this with a scientific argument and says that the percentage and surface is determined on scientific criteria, depending on the species to be protected and, moreover, there exist even preserved areas with 90% buffer zone.

The third argument, about the roads and interdiction of mass tourism, is the only one that might hamper the economic benefits of

*obşte*a on the long run. However, on the short run, even though the *obşte*a complains about the theoretical limitations of developing tourism, practically their plans for tourism activity are non-existent and their management strategy¹⁹ is based almost exclusively on timber extraction.

F. answers by saying that the park administration does not intend to limit tourism activities, quite on the contrary, to develop certain kind of activities in collaboration with local communities to attract tourists and to protect nature in the same time, to develop ecotourism in the sense of sustainable development:

„I would not agree to build a huge hotel with a huge parking here. There are other kinds of tourism as well; I would rather encourage developing more sophisticated tourist attractions, like a circuit of ecological pastoralism, for people to see how cheese is made...” (F., age 32)

Ecological versus economical image of the forest

The fourth idea, about the damages that fallen trees might cause, expresses empirically very well two „competing” perspectives in forestry: the „economic” discourse against the „ecological” one (the core dichotomy in almost every study and discourse on environmental issues, e.g. Brosius, 1999a; Boonzaier, 1996). The economic perspective is based on the idea that the forest should be clean, everything that is fallen down, branches, trees, should be cleaned up, because otherwise it appears the danger of developing unwanted insects that will infect the healthy trees. This perspective is also for the best of the users, as they make a use of the damaged wood. This kind of narrative is expressed almost by all members of the community that I have spoken with. *Nonetheless, it is not to say that their view is in black and white and I do not want to force the interpretation into a black and white picture.* I do not want to suggest that villagers prize only economic advantages in the light

of their immediate interests and therefore they neglect more „ecological” values, such as beauty of nature or biodiversity.

Very often, forest-dwellers or „indigenous” people are seen to be the causing agents of ecological problems, as environmentally benign (Fairhead, Leach 1994) both by environmentalist theories (Scoones, 1999: 489) and foresters or forestry specialists (Lawrence and Szabo, 2005: 6). Private owners are seen by forestry people to conceive the forest merely as an economical value: „they see it as an immediate source of money” and „they don’t see the forest, they see the wood” (*ibidem*). From what I have seen, I reject the false dichotomy between greedy, rational-oriented villagers and ecologists. I would rather say that the perspective of the villagers is nuanced²⁰. They reject the ecologists, but sometimes they come with the argument that they know more about nature and know better the species and the mountain than the ecologists themselves.²¹ They do have ambivalent opinions, like:

„Protecting nature and a beautiful landscape is a good thing, but I do not agree with letting wood rotten on the ground... it does not help anyone”. (G.P., age 42)

From what I observed, their attitude is of respect towards the forest, saying that „I believe it is O.K. to conserve flowers and animals and not to let anyone come into the forest as in a bar”. (G.P., age 42)

However, wilderness and „climax”, equilibrium state of the forest, are not in their dictionary about a „good” forest.

For them, „pure” nature is not a state of equilibrium in itself and nature is not always „fair”. Besides trees, ozone and pastures, nature means dangerous animals, unwanted damaging insects. These parts of nature should be „corrected” by humans. In the light of these beliefs, foresters and those who intervene in nature to „clean” it are seen as guardians of the „good” nature, as agents against infestation.

Believing that ecology and protection means total „conservation”, non-intervention

of humans in nature, even is the nature is „evil”, they appreciate the pure ecological perspective as against their interests and, moreover, as against their beliefs about nature and humans-nature interaction.

Interpretation of narratives in the light of conflict perspectives

In the above sections of the paper, I have deployed a range of different narratives of this conflict. At a first glance, it is possible to understand *the conflict as a struggle for resources*. Every part is suspected by the counterpart to derive some economical benefit out of the forest in cause, be it the direct or illicit gain from forest overexploitation and grazing on the part of the community, be it a secure job, returns from funding or illicit advantages on the part of the state and the NGO. As long as we take into consideration the „information” about the case in which the park stopped the illegal felling of an important quantity of wood from the buffer-zone and we believe other information from local gossip about illicit business of *obštea* officials, we might accept that the conflict is partly based on the economic interest of a few community actors. This type of interest is not the interest for community development out of resource revenues, but the selfish interest of the elites that pursue their personal gains through corrupt practices.

Despite for one or two *obštea* officials, for the other members of the community this conflict appears as having at its core *the idea of identity*. The community identifies itself as „proprietors”, masters of the forest and the pastures. This type of identity is very salient at present because it was recently achieved. The possession of the forest has shifted from the hands of the state to those of the „people” and, suddenly, the forest „goes back” to the state, thus excluding again the community from major decisions concerning the protected areas. Moreover, the community does not identify itself with the ecological discourse on the forest. Their

image of nature is not an essentialist one (Escobar, 1999 ; Brosius, 1999b) or a romanticized one, rather a practical and heterogeneous one.

On the other side, F. and the Kagayon association identify with the ecologists. Their environmentalist discourse is only briefly touched by moral imperatives and currently more based upon „law and science” narratives, as I suggested above in the description.

The literature on environmental anthropology suggests that interests and representations may be subject to reformulation and that environmental discourse evolve and thus researchers should address discourses in their context, in their temporality and dynamic (Brosius, 1999b). Following the temporality of F.’s discourse, I can draw two distinct phases: the first one (about three years ago), when the park was in the process of establishment²², he deployed a moral discourse – *„look what is done in the park, the community and the uneducated tourists destroy protected species”*; the second phase, when the park is already established, the interaction with the communities is institutionalized and the Kogayon association is developing, is characterized by a discourse that shifted from moral imperatives to the „law and science” arguments. In other words, of identification, we might say that F. identifies himself more with the environmental institution, with the administrator that he represents.

The RNP representatives (M., age 40) identify themselves with the forestry institution, with those who protect the forest by itself as mere technical operation, and do not display a conservation discourse based upon morality or universal ecologist values. Moreover, they identify with the state and thus, they feel legitimate about managing the protected area as they consider best.

However, I believe that the best way to understand the conflict lies in analysing *power relations and means to gain symbolic power* through discursive practices. First,

we have to think about the direct accusations that the parts deploy. The „park” believes that certain actors in the community had the relational power (meaning that they are clients of certain political persons) to obtain legal approval for logging in areas that were scientifically important. On the other hand, the community officials believe that behind the idea of the park lies the interest of the state in controlling (in other words, to hold power over) natural areas.

The underlying concepts in each of the narratives refer to power. The *obşte*a officials deploy the rhetoric of the „master” and, as I have shown above, underneath the idea of property lays the idea of empowerment. Moreover, these officials and the *obşte*a rangers are unsatisfied about the transfer of authority that occurred with the establishment of the park, in the form of the vouchers for logging in the buffer zone.

On the other side, F.’s narrative is based upon the idea of power given by law and scientific arguments, in other words he uses a rhetoric based upon the institutional type of power.

Finally, the discourse of RNP officials (M.) seems to be based on the idea of continuity, tradition and legitimacy of the state administration and protection of the forest. For them, the forest is not a scientifically valuable area for rare species, but an asset of global interest. Thus, the state should take the responsibility to govern the forests, in a technical manner and for preventing illegal logging, and the communities should not have a role in the decision-making process.

Conclusions. Recommendations

The conflict presented is very common all around the world where protected areas have been established. The „stake” and the arguments are common as well. I would say that the conflict between proprietors and parks, based upon the „economist” arguments deployed by „the community” that is

dependent of the resource is a classical theme in environmental and development studies. However, the scholarly studies to deploy this kind of conflicts from Eastern Europe are quite rare²³.

What is particularly relevant to this case and, I believe, what distinguishes the post-socialist context from others, is the strong concentration of decisions concerning protected areas in the hands of the state, meaning lack of autonomy for the communities (as for example in the African context, where the state is very loosely defined and communities devise their own rules) and the non-existence (yet) of international environmental agencies in the arena of negotiations.

I suggest in this paper that, for Romania, the top-down approach is strongly contested by communities, which begin to establish as relatively organised entities; with small steps, participation begins to function. However, one thing that might hamper effective participation is the capture at the local level of the participatory process by local corrupt elites, who pursue their own interests, despite the one of the other members of the community.

In the presented case, the top-down approach of the park administrators is based on the ideas of law and science and on the idea of traditional, „good” state forestry practice. The claims of the community are made in the name of a competing, older tradition of autonomous organisation of resources, the *obşte*. Behind this idea of „community” organisation, it was shown that different categories manifest different attitudes. Officials are oriented towards contesting the park and towards emphasising timber exploitation, while lay members are more „peaceful” and their discontent regards pasturing, not logging.

What could be done ?

Usually, recommendations go in the direction of including more the community in the participatory management of the protected areas, and even to reach the stage of „community-based conservation”. However, my analysis shows that the community is not a uniform body, thus inclusion of the community might mean listening to the opinion of the few spokespersons, potentially „corrupt” officials that express their own selfish interest. Additionally, from what I have observed, the capacity²⁴ of the community²⁵ is currently at a low level, thus I doubt its effective potential for participating in the decision-making process, this being also depicted in literature as one of the „biggest stumbling blocks towards the success” of national parks (Reid 2001: 151). Thus, *capacity building* is one of the potential solutions. But I do not believe that only the appropriate agency of actors is necessary. Probably a „purification” of the institutional milieu is equally necessary to put an end to the reciprocal „corruption” accusations²⁶.

On the short run, I propose a *mediation of conflict and a better flow of information* for the community. The mediation and the information should necessarily be done by a third part (NGOs or scholars in the specific field), because otherwise the community will not trust the source²⁷. The communication and the information should be prepared by a professional in communication and advertising, so that the members of the community access the information and get the message, regardless their education level. Moreover, I recommend that the information should be aimed at *touching the symbolic and the affective side* of the forest dwelling process. Thus, the information displayed should contain certain cultural and historical elements²⁸, stories about the past, legends from the area²⁹.

Notes

1. Regia Națională a Pădurilor, engl. *the Romanian Forest Administration*.
2. A complaint that one often hears when interviewing and discussing with representatives of different central offices.
3. Although for other areas it is not new, for Romania it is only now beginning to take shape.
4. Fieldwork in the community lasted for one week in August 2007 and was followed by interviews with persons from the park administration; interviews were pursued by Liviu Mantescu together with the author of this paper. In March 2008, I pursued another fieldwork, together with a team of students, on the other side of the National Park, to gain a broader view of the comparative empirical elements regarding conflict incentives between communities and the National Park. Both empirical researches were undertaken financially independent, for the pure academic benefit of the researchers themselves.
5. Lay members were not always aware of their property rights, nor were they knowledgeable about the National Park regulations and restrictions. However, I succeeded to obtain a number of 10 interviews with lay members of the community.
6. A number of 3 interviews with key-actors, members of the *obște* committee (president, vice-president and the largest shareholder, counselor) and 2 with employees of *obște*.
7. A number of 2 interviews.
8. A number of 2 interviews.
9. The research results were presented to the Park administrators in a conference that took place in Bistrita, in March 2008, Participating in Nature : Communities and Protected Areas in Central and Eastern Europe, organizers : University of Oxford and Romanian Forest Administration.
10. In the Southern Carpathians, the Capățanii Mountains, in the Vâlcea county.
11. The original sense of the word is togetherness and underlines the participatory essence of the institution. Although they are named associations in the laws and in formal documents, these types of property can hardly be described as associations of proprietors, because the shares that one has are not delineated plots of forest that were put together, but a quantity of products that can be withdrawn from the forest and a number of votes in the general assembly.
12. The age characteristic does make a significant difference, because of the recent changes undergone by Romanian society; old members might encourage „old fashioned” ways of managing and deriving profit from a forest, as well as pastoralist use of the mountain and also they might behave according to the patron-client type of networks developed during communism.
13. I will use further in this article the term discourse interchangeably with narrative.
14. Based on a puzzle of information from the interviews, my own scenario is that, in the first place, few members of the community opposed the idea of the park because they were afraid that they would not be allowed to bring their sheep to the alpine pastures and expressed these opinions in public meetings in a threatening and convincing way; starting from that point, the committee of the *obște* developed its own argumentation against the park and begun to find more and more incentives for conflict.
15. They clear-felled 150 hectares of seminiferous beech with genetic importance.
16. Governmental monthly issue on governmental decisions, rules and laws.
17. It is interesting how they made the switch very quickly from the dominant attitude during communism, where the State is sovereign and they usually could not contest State decisions, at least not in court, but only on informal channels.
18. This idea sustains their claim that behind the Park are important political interest coming from State actors.
19. Although it could hardly be considered from what they presented during the interview that they have a management strategy at all.
20. However, the „villagers” are different people with different positions regarding the forest; for some actors, even for those being in official positions, the allegation about their immediate economic interest might be true, as mentioned also by certain interviewees, mentioned above.

21. Here, we come across another dichotomy that has been debated for a long time in the literature, between local knowledge and expert knowledge (Hobarth, 1997).
22. I can understand this phase of the discourse based on articles by F. on the www.alpinet.org website, more precisely http://alpinet.org/main/colshow_ro_t_mediu—informatii-dispute-protectie_idcol_3673_what_stiri_id_2565.html and from a several public email discussions from http://ngo.ro/pipermail/natura2000_ngo.ro/2005-May/000179.html, websites dating back to 2005 and consulted by me in February 2008.
23. From my knowledge, studies are concentrated upon Africa, South America and East Asia, usually in areas that are inhabited by people bearing the etiquette of „indigenous” people.
24. I mean by that skills, knowledge and information in economic and managerial matters.
25. The current officials as well as most of the other members.
26. Something very easy to preach and very difficult to accomplish.
27. The current situation is that every Park has a department in charge with the relations to the neighboring communities.
28. Issue mentioned also in the study of Fairhead and Leach (1994: 483). They argue in the beginning of the article that „*overlooking such histories can undermine constructive dialogue between local people and conservation agencies*”.
29. From my research experience in Vrancea, conscience about the past and reference to the legend of Stephen the Great were the elements that kept people involved, interested and caring about the forest (Vasile 2007).

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Primit la redacție: iunie 2008