ENVIRONMENTALISM IN LATVIA

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ENVIRONMENTALISM IN LATVIA: TWO REALITIES

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Introduction

As a natural scientist, I have been trained to think in terms of unbiased scientific truth, whether in the lab or "out there" in nature. This scientific truth often demands particular action, which can be hindered by people who organize their lives according to other principles or who question the validity of scientific knowledge. For example, a property may be identified as part of the Natura 2000 area, which means that any activity on this property has to adhere to the Natura 2000 regulations. The Nature Protection Agency (NPA), which in Latvia is responsible for the management of all protected nature areas, describes Natura 2000 as follows:

> All countries of the European Union have made a joint decision to make a network of protected areas that is called Natura 2000. Since 2004 Latvia has joined this network. The existing specially protected areas were included in this network and another 122 new territories were added. The main reason for including a new area in the network is for the protection of plant and animal species and their habitats that are rare and endangered in Europe. (NPA 2010a)

However, a plant biologist who has relied on scientific criteria to define an area of vegetation as a valuable biotope, which requires protective action within the Natura 2000 framework, can encounter problems when the owner of the land where the biotope was found assumes that the scientific conclusion was influenced by bribes or corruption. For example, Raimonds,[1] the chief of the Department of Development of a district in western Latvia, describes a case where during the development of Lake Pape's Nature Park (a Natura 2000 territory) conservation plan, one landowner, whose property was identified as containing a valuable biotope, complained that the

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neighbor's seemingly identical property was not identified as such, not because of scientific findings, but because the neighbor paid a bribe to the biologist.[2]

Another kind of dispute between official environmentalism and ordinary life perspectives occurred during a public meeting regarding Dole Island's (also a Natura 2000 site) conservation plan (ELLE 2009). A local resident posed a rhetorical question: "what is the gain for the inhabitants, if the provisions in the plan consist entirely of prohibitions and restrictions?" and "who financed the development of the conservation plan and what is the contract sum?" In the same meeting another local resident later explained the reasoning that underlies the local residents' arguments: "local inhabitants consider it unjust that they can't use the private property they regained [in the land restitution process during the 1990s] as they wish, but need to take into account nature protection interests."

During the last decade, when environmental planning procedures such as Environmental Impact Assessment and conservation plan development have been introduced in Latvia as a matter of routine, public discussions of these procedures reveal tensions between seemingly well-grounded scientific data and a variety of non-scientific arguments or positions, as in the two examples above. Official environmentalism posits opposition to scientific arguments as a matter of negative attitudes and insufficient understanding rather than valid reasoning. The scale of the "problem of negative attitudes" has been recognized at the highest environmental policy planning level, namely the main Latvian government environmental policy document – "Environmental Policy Guidelines" – which recognizes that "To ensure favorable conditions for the protection of species and biotopes (…) commercial activities are restricted, which often provokes a negative response from landowners and local officials" (VARAM 2009).

These popular negative reactions may appear paradoxical, since at the end of the 1980s the majority of the nation was swept up in a widespread environmental movement against the negligent attitude of the Soviet government towards the Latvian landscape and nature, as well as against Soviet domination more generally. This movement was later termed eco-nationalism (Dawson 1996). In fact, Lake Pape, the place where struggles over biotopes take place today, was also the place where protests were staged against the Soviet army in 1989. Prior to its designation as a nature park, the area was used by the Soviet military. The protests against Soviet presence were articulated in the language of environmental protection and corporeal health:

> "The Soviet Army is a cancer on Latvia's body!" This was one of the slogans carried by protesters during the Lake Pape protests. Environmentalists from Liepāja and the surrounding area, including Palanga in Lithuania, gathered together to protect migratory birds. Lake Pape is a place where migratory birds rest before their long flight to southern Europe. These protests were also an act of solidarity with our neighbors in Lithuania. (Valdmane 1990)

The other example of today's tensions between official environmentalism and people's reactions – Dole Island's nature park – was also entangled in the eco-nationalist struggles at the end of the 1980s: "[The park's] establishment in 1986 was supported by locals due to (…) [hopes for] the closing of the concrete factory, which was on the island, and which degraded the surrounding area" (ELLE 2009).

The quest for deeper analysis and understanding of this shift from eco-nationalism to popular negativism does not appear to have penetrated state-based practices of Latvian environmental policy-making, planning and assessment. Such a critical discussion could benefit environmental policy-making and provide valuable inputs for improvement of management practices, including more public involvement. Yet, instead of doing so, environmental policy-makers tend to blame the public for creating and spreading myths about environmental restrictions. In their view, the solution, if any is needed at all, lies in a better explanation of the scientific truth to the misinformed public (see the next section on the myth for more detail).

However, my previous work with environmental impact assessment shows that it is not helpful to counter environmental negativism grounded in non-scientific (e.g., political or economic) arguments with more precise, thorough or convincing scientific data and explanations. Such an approach may in fact have the opposite effect, provoking further anger from the public. This observation has prompted me to look beyond environmental science to other disciplines for a deeper understanding of the process of environmental planning and popular reactions to it. In that respect this study is a natural scientist's attempt to expand beyond disciplinary boundaries and to bring a social science perspective to bear upon environmental science. It is an interdisciplinary attempt by an environmental practitioner with a natural science background to utilize social science perspectives and methods. For a natural scientist it may be a discovery to find that social science research on environmental discourses is a powerful analytical tool, and that seemingly solid scientific arguments, such as the importance of biological diversity, can be critically analyzed from that perspective. While social science scholars pay attention to the ways in which environmental issues are constructed within power relations, environmental experts and natural scientists are often convinced of the direct opposite, namely that scientific expertise is the most objective realm, free from political or other contexts.

The aim of this article is two-fold: on the one hand, I aim to investigate the practical problem of the apparent widespread negative reactions to environmental protection measures, specifically in relation to Natura 2000 sites, with the help of social science methods and perspectives; on the other hand, I engage in an interdisciplinary attempt and therefore also reflect on some of the practical problems of interdisciplinarity.

The article makes some general conclusions about the Latvian countryside, but the majority of analysis has been done with regard to one Natura 2000 site, in the form of interviews and analysis of relevant documents. The findings suggest that the conflict is generated by what might be referred to as two parallel realities. One reality is that of scientific truth and official environmental policy, therefore I term it "official environmentalism". The second is that of the everyday life of the countryside and locals. It is the economic and bureaucratic struggles of rural residents that result in what I have referred to as "environmental negativism". The environmental practitioner with training in natural sciences lacks the ability to, first, identify and, second, reconcile the two realities. Thus my emphasis on two realities in this article is meant as a rebuttal of easy dismissal of environmental negativism as a problem of lack of understanding and negative attitudes. It also invites environmental planners and natural and social scientists to further interdisciplinary cooperation in future research.

In the next section I describe several examples of how environmental negativism, particularly in relation to protected nature sites, is described and interpreted in official accounts. I am particularly interested in how it comes to be depicted as a myth.

Restrictions – Myth or Reality?

The Nature Protection Agency's Latgale regional office representative Zanda admits that there generally exist negative attitudes towards environmental protection in the public at large. She notes that this has been recognized by the NPA as well and that work has commenced on countering such negativism. For example, the Agency is attempting to be in closer communication with local residents. It has also started to introduce a park ranger system whereby local volunteers would take over some of the functions of park inspectors.[3] According to her, the local fear that after the establishment of a protected nature territory there will be overwhelming restrictions has evolved into a myth. She cited as a totally ridiculous absurdity an occasion when, in a public meeting with locals, a woman in the local Latgallian dialect asked if, after the status of protected nature territory was granted, she would be allowed to plant *buļbas* (potatoes in Latgallian) [in her garden]. This Latgallian woman had reportedly had an erroneous idea that everything would be forbidden, even the planting of potatoes in her garden. That is, from the point of view of the NPA representative it is absolutely clear and self-evident that there are no legal restrictions to grow potatoes in the garden whatsoever. The local lady's perception, however, was that there are or might be various bureaucratic requirements and procedures in the protected territories which might result in effective restrictions on planting potatoes. In an interview with a district planning chief in central Latvia I was told that in a protected area (also designated as a Natura 2000 site), people have abandoned the land and stopped all activities on it (possibly in fear of or due to restrictions) and that an intentionally protected landscape has deteriorated and become overgrown, as compared with the neighboring unprotected part of the district.[4] Similar fears exist for businesspeople. An example highlights how restrictions can be effectively created by bureaucratic handling while there are no explicit restrictions of business activities: in the mid-2000s a widely known conflict evolved between a well-known Latvian businessman developing tourist facilities in a Natura 2000 territory and the environmental protection authorities. An NPA employee who was involved in the matter explained to me that the source of the conflict lay in the prolonged bureaucratic procedure, entailing an endless exchange of official opinions and letters on whether or not to allow paving a section of a scenic winding countryside gravel road.[5] The NPA employee also mentioned that the local residents did not participate in the dispute and that it was only environmental officials and their experts on the other side of the table from the businessman. The businessman was so infuriated by the length of the procedure, lack of clarity, and amount of documentation needed to be produced that he took the case to the media. The end result was that the businessman simply ran out of time as the bureaucratic procedures continued, and the road was not paved.

A renowned Latvian geographer and landscape scientist, A. Melluma, who participated in the establishment of the first Latvian national park *Gauja* in the 1970s and continued with landscape planning and municipal consulting through the 1990s, has said with regard to protected territories in general that:

> The restrictions in these territories are perceived by the local people as being very severe. The overall concepts are not appropriate to the local environment, are being implemented without any explanation, and so are not understood (for example a biotope, biological diversity). The terminology is not suited to everyday usage. The locals become infuriated.[6]

These opinions of an experienced professional and scientist strengthen the assertion of the widespread negativism among local populations, stemming primarily from restrictions based on management policies and foreign environmental language and concepts.

This negativism or local fear of the environmental protection measures aimed at Nature 2000 territories had already been identified by the end of the 1990s. In her book *Nature and National Identity after Communism*, Katrina Schwartz describes discussions regarding the establishment of Northern Kurzeme National Park where the "proposal unleashed an avalanche of hostility from local officials and residents" (Schwartz 2006, 127). Regardless of that hostility, the park was established in 2000 as Slītere National Park (also a Natura 2000). Schwartz attributes the hostility among residents and local officials during the establishment of Slītere National Park to the peculiarities of local politics and the legacy of strict nature reserve prohibitions which existed there in Soviet times. The lack of adequately organized public relations and sincere public involvement attempts in the park planning process is also likely to have fostered perceptions of a project that was hatched in secrecy "at the top" and imposed upon unwitting local residents, suggests Schwartz.

A number of other examples of what seem to be negativism and hostility can be added. For example I have reported elsewhere (Pavasars 2012) that the existence of a Natura 2000 site in a municipality's territory is attributed by municipal government representatives to the category of "environmental problems". Some time ago, I was invited to present the findings of this study to an audience of about 100 top-level municipal managers from virtually the entire country (there are 110 local municipalities/districts – *novadi* – in Latvia and nine townships).[7] When presenting the finding that Natura 2000 is regarded by municipal governments as a problem itself, there was an exclamation in the audience of "of course"! This is particularly noteworthy, as it was not typical to have many loud and spontaneous exclamations from such an audience. The exclamation, moreover, was followed by an approving silence in the auditorium.

The signs of the negative perception of official environmental policies as restrictions are reflected even at the European level. In a *Eurobarometer* report on environmental issues, policies aimed at protecting the environment are considered as obstacles to economic performance in Latvia, with the third highest rate of 23% "agree" responses in the EU – after the second highest in neighboring Lithuania of 24%, with the EU average only 16% (Hungary tops the list at 26%) (European Commission 2008). Interestingly, the Estonian rate of 15%, where historical environmental attitudes and the economic and natural conditions are very similar to the rest of the Baltic countries, shows that other factors, such as differing government approaches, may be responsible for differences in public attitudes.

As mentioned in the introduction, the negativism towards official environmentalism, in particular related to Natura 2000 territories, has become so widespread that this was recognized in the country's highest environmental policy document. However, the policy- makers in the same document failed to analyze the situation critically from various perspectives but instead appeared to be locked into the correctness of the scientific or experts' findings and considered that the problem lay with the uneducated public. In the document, it was explicitly stated that the talk of restrictions was only a myth and was refuted as false:

> There is no basis in fact for the often heard assertion that all economic activity and development in protected areas is stopped or forbidden, for in those areas with a lot of territories – nature parks, areas with protected landscapes, as well as biosphere reserves, depending on the zoning of the territory, the protection laws are comparatively weak and economic activity is minimally impacted. (VARAM 2009)

Where does the myth of restrictions and the general negativism come from, then? It seems that at the bottom of it lie the restrictions-based thinking and approach of the official environmental policies and management, exacerbated by the bureaucratic handling of the situations. This results in effective restrictions, as any activities are made very difficult or nearly impossible due to cumbersome procedures. Apparently, the government does not consider its own procedures cumbersome and rather considers that people are spreading a myth that everything is forbidden.

A local government representative from a district in central Latvia, Inga, mentioned that a Nature Protection Agency regional chief considers that people have a false idea that nothing is allowed, and that there needs to be a greater dialogue with the people in explaining the requirements of nature protection.[8] The same reasoning that people "do not understand" is actually contained in the already cited Latvian Environmental Policy Guidelines: "This [myth] is explained with the lack of information and *understanding* that exists in the public at large and amongst land owners regarding the type and method of economic activity in relationship with the long-term protection of the values of nature" [emphasis added] (VARAM 2009). According to this official explanation of the myth, only official environmentalism possesses truth and knowledge about the environment or about policies related to its protection. It just needs to be better explained, or else it is the failure of society for its "lack of understanding". No report acknowledges the possibility that it is the prohibitive bureaucracy that creates the sense that activity is restricted. But as I will show with later examples, the district agricultural consultant blames the hassle with permits for the negative attitudes. This clash of understandings supports the argument that there are two realities: one official, correct environmentalism; and, the other, the reactions of local residents, land owners and the public at large which are often misunderstood as based on lack of knowledge rather than stemming from legitimate frustrations with the various restrictions and over-bureaucratization of environmental practice.

Thus, the abundance, persistence, and lastly, the official recognition of the negativism against Natura 2000, as well as attitudes registered in European opinion polls, signal a more profound division between official environmental policies and the way they are perceived by the public. This division is greater than that which usually occurs in a democracy with competing opinions and advocates both pro and contra. It registers a clash between frameworks of interpretation and thus also a lack of common ground for dialogue.

I proceed with a case study of *Rāzna* National Park (Natura 2000). I draw on interviews and document analysis in an attempt to look at the local perceptions of official environmentalism in one of the Natura 2000 territories.

A New National Park – Two Realities

Gauja National Park is the oldest in Latvia, established in the 1970s, while three other Latvian national parks have all been established since regaining independence from the Soviet Union – all four have Natura 2000 status as well. The newest and second largest park (after *Gauja* National Park) in Latvia is *Rāzna* National Park, established in 2007 (but with protected status as a Nature Park since 2005). The park encompasses an area of 596 km^2 (230 mi^2), and includes the local municipalities (*pagasts*) of *Rēzekne* and *Dagda* districts (*novads*) in south-eastern Latvia. In the Latvian context nationals parks are in a subcategory under the broader category of protected nature territories. It is thus regarded in this study as a Natura 2000 site rather than being a national park with its attendant history and traditions. The focal point of the park is Lake Rāzna, but a comparatively large dry-land area that can be characterized as typical of the countryside in that part of the country was included in the park, although before 2003 it had never been recognized as an area that was valuable or needed protection (with the exception of some small localities). In the official park documentation, it says that the value of the park is "the 14 habitats as defined in the EU Biotope directive first addendum; 14% of the territory is covered by eutrophic lakes. There is also a relative diversity of meadows (4 meadow habitats of European significance)" (NPA 2010b).

The *Rāzna* park's official information says that the idea to include much larger territories other than those directly related to Lake *Rāzna* in the nature protection regime "was actively supported by the local municipalities" (LDF 2009). One municipal leader said in an interview with me that that "the decision by the municipality to be a part of the park was rushed and was taken without long discussions, and actually [the establishment of the park] was not really in our interest. We were told it had to be large enough in order to promote some projects".[9] The "promotion of projects" seems to be one of the main reasons for the inclusion of large dry-land areas in the park. Since independence, the significance of obtaining financing for projects by applying to various funds, primarily of EU origin, has continuously increased. Thus referring to "projects" presumably means a very wide variety of project ideas and applications. Further on I'll give some examples of these "projects" – for instance, the observation tower in *Rāzna* National Park. The district environmental coordinator says that originally there was an understanding that land and forest owners would receive some money as compensation for environmental protection restrictions.[10] In reality, however, the expected payments weren't received, although the restrictions were. The district agricultural consultant, when asked if the park was established at the initiative of the elected municipal officials, replied "No, I do not think it was that way".[11] These responses do not seem to reflect the official version of active local support printed in the park materials – although it does not preclude the existence of such formal support at that time. These responses do illustrate that the residents and local officials are pointing to failings of government institutions rather than merely lacking knowledge and exhibiting backward attitudes.

Katrina Schwartz describes the hostility among residents and local officials reported during the establishment phase of *Slītere* National Park largely as the legacy from the Soviet period of mutual suspicion, resentment and tensions with park officials due to park rules, restricting local residents in their subsistence activities of gathering mushrooms and firewood in the forests (Schwartz 2006, 127). In *Rāzna,* as opposed to *Slītere*, the large dry-land areas had not had previous restrictions. Therefore, recognizing the various reasons mentioned by K. Schwartz, I would put this hostility in *Slītere* as well as the attitude in *Rāzna* into the same more general category of negative attitudes towards official environmentalism as already described in this article.

These attitudes are in sharp contrast to those of the establishment of *Gauja* National Park in the 1970s, which "precipitated a tremendous outpouring of social interest and support" (an interview with A. Melluma cited in Schwartz 2006, 118). The concept of two parallel realities used in this article resonates with the categories of internationalists and agrarian nationalists which K. Schwartz uses throughout her book (2006). She characterizes the *Gauja* park concept embracing large inhabited countryside areas as that of agrarian nationalists in contrast with modern Western biodiversity thinking (internationalists) – who wanted to decrease the *Gauja* park territory by concentrating on important habitats and protecting biodiversity. In this sense the case of *Rāzna* seems to be an attempt to involve both concepts – on the one hand it embraces large areas of populated typical countryside (as in *Gauja*), claiming it to be rich with the traditional way of living and crafts (reflecting the agrarian nationalist concept); on the other hand it tries to comply with the habitat and modern biotope approach of Natura 2000 territory status (the internationalist approach) by identifying and counting biotopes of European importance. These two approaches do not necessarily have to be in conflict. However, the described evidence of widespread negativism suggests that in the current Latvian environmental governance and social climate they appear to be in conflict and that they seem to also fit the two-reality concept: the official Natura 2000 reality and the everyday countryside reality.

The management structure of protected nature territories, which includes the national parks in Latvia, has recently been reformed, changing from a permanent park staff arrangement to a model where the regional office of the Nature Protection Agency is responsible for the management of all Natura 2000 sites in the region. The representative of the agency's regional office, Zanda, tells of the great enthusiasm and dedication of the small team of eight people before the reform, who dealt with all relevant park issues: advertising brochure content, information stands, and contacts with entrepreneurs during the park's establishment phase.[12] As a recent achievement – a dream come true – Zanda mentions the construction of a wooden observation tower at Lielais Liepukalns in the park, which took a great effort, both to obtain the financing by preparing and submitting a project application, as well as in the practical sense of coordinating the construction.

The erection of the observation tower at L. Liepukalns and the associated infrastructure – access trails, information stands and a parking lot – is mentioned by virtually all respondents in the area – park management, municipal representatives, and entrepreneurs alike, as one of the first things when talking about the park. It seems to be an object through which the park can be identified in the eyes of the respondents. It is the first thing that comes to mind for my respondents when I mention that I want to talk about the park – not protected habitats, biological diversity or other issues mentioned in the park's conservation plan, but the man-made object as a tourist attraction. The park inspector, at the very start of the interview, tells me of the large number of tourists now visiting the observation tower.[13] There is also a brochure that summarizes the results of a project exploring tourism possibilities in Rāzna park. It lists and analyzes the park's advantages, but also lists many obstacles to the development of tourism, for example the underdeveloped road infrastructure. Such a tourism analysis project additionally signals the willingness and attempts to "sell" the park to tourists, to develop the territory by promoting tourism, to redefine that part of the countryside as a national park worth visiting. The redefinition of the typical countryside as Natura 2000 and national park is carried out by identifying and articulating scientifically described values according to the recognized paradigms of habitats and biological diversity, attracting tourists, and erecting an observation tower – not in the middle of nowhere as before, but in a national park. However, the underdeveloped countryside, with its underdeveloped road infrastructure, as in the Latvian countryside in general and in that region in particular, is holding this kind of tourism development back. One could then ask the question of why the park was established in the first place. Could not the tower have been erected and tourists attracted without the establishment of the park, which eventually entailed the redefinition of the countryside and thus the emergence of a new parallel reality? Is it not then just the selling argument, meaning that the Natura 2000 and national park labels are used primarily for attracting tourists rather than for protecting biodiversity, and that a greater number of tourists may actually harm the biodiversity that was to be protected? "National park somehow just sounds better", says the park inspector of this matter.[14] Thus, from the local inhabitants' point of view, an externally imposed and scientifically endorsed artificial redefinition of the countryside has taken place. The observation tower and the tourists obviously are better suited for this newly created, redefined reality, though physically it has not changed. Furthermore, this redefined reality is better suited for "project promotion", as summed up by the municipal leader.

A person who participated in the park management plan public meetings, and was named in planning documents as a local land owner, also turned out to be a municipal employee. This is characteristic of the formalism of public meetings in Latvia (Ozoliņa 2010): in order to give to readers of the meeting documents the impression that local public representatives have also taken part, people from surrounding municipality offices are often included.[15] This person, when asked for his own opinion as to what the park protects, quietly paused and then burst out laughing: "I do not know what it [the park] protects. The honest truth! (…) Inspectors are trying to protect the fish, limit [the catch] (….)." Interviewer: "Then what good is there from the park?" He replied, "Perhaps with time [it will come]. Now I really do not know. There is work for the local people, perhaps that's what".[16] Here we can see that locals cannot quite make sense of the environmental planning procedures, even if they are involved in the work of the municipality. They also therefore seem uninterested in environmental issues. In other types of environmental planning procedures this kind of stance has been attributed to a lack of understanding of the procedures, having only a few active persons in the municipality, or the belief that their opinion will be of no consequence and will thus be ignored (Pavasars 2012). It also reflects what was expressed by professor Melluma regarding locals not understanding the terminology and concepts.[17] The interview shows that it is very difficult for an outsider and non-specialist to understand the park protection issues, as even after participating in several meetings it is still unclear what the park protects. To such people park protection matters become an incomprehensible other reality, important only for park specialists and in park documentation. But a vague connection with the other, the everyday reality, appears through the idea of a few workplaces for people.

One of the leaders of a municipality within the park said that even though the largest part of the municipality's territory is within the park boundaries, the municipality "does not feel it [the park]" – and this was reiterated several times throughout the interview.[18] This statement was made in a neutral tone, indicating that life in the municipality continues on in its own way, regardless of the fact that the municipality is part of the park. It also clearly appears in the interview that the municipal government has its own preoccupations and problems (joblessness, social issues) that differ from those of the park. Although enough time has passed since the establishment of the park in 2005–2007, the park's "activities can't be felt". It is as if two parallel realities coexist – the local life of the municipality as well as the park, which "can't be felt". These more neutral attitudes in my opinion reflect the diverse character of the relations between the two realities. This municipal leader has obviously been mostly preoccupied with the "internal" social issues rather than with the various restrictions. Thus, even though the official Natura 2000 reality mostly provokes negativism, there can also be neutral relationships, or even some positive overlapping between the two realities in some instances. For example, small-scale entrepreneurs running a holiday house in the park told me that even though they had many objections against the park's restrictive and bureaucratic management, there are still some benefits from the park and its tourism promotion.[19] The district's local agricultural consultant, when asked about the park, generalizes about the situation and mentions the 31 LVL (about 55 USD) per ha which can be gained as extra agricultural subsidies in any Natura 2000 territories.[20] When asked what is positive about the park she answers: "The positive is (these) extra 30 *lats*, [thoughtfully] we don't feel other positive aspects." The consultant explicitly mentions throughout the interview the hassle with permits for various activities that need to be coordinated (*saskaņot* in Latvian) with environmental officials: "In practice you have to coordinate all activities. If you want to cut one or two trees you need to go and coordinate." She thinks that it is generally acceptable to have some protected territories, but only "if it were *their* property, the park's property" [emphasis added]. So the park and the protection of the environment are thought of as "their", someone else's matter – an outside or other reality. Ideally, the land should belong to the park and thus the park would not interfere at all with the other, the countryside's reality. The realities, though, do overlap positively in the extra 30 lats subsidies and negatively in the coordination hassle. When asked generally about everyday life she explains that for a land owner "the landscape [alone] doesn't bring a profit" and "to stay here and live off tourism isn't enough", thus indicating that it is not possible to sustain themselves only with the park's reality – that of scientifically defined landscapes and tourism projects. (There is a *Landscape-Ecological Plan* for the park comprising no fewer than 459 pages, representing yet another element of the other, scientifically defined reality, that is hardly accessible or helpful for locals.)

Unfortunately, another dire reality in the territory is joblessness, alcoholism, and depopulation as reported in several interviews. Joblessness was mentioned in virtually all interviews in various contexts as a major everyday problem and concern – *Nav darba* – that is the doomed expression (no jobs), as if unemployment were the *alpha* and *omega* of all evil problems. This is mentioned from east to west across the Latvian countryside. Once again, in these reported interviews the two realities are revealed in the same territory of the national park. While in one reality we have the social, economic and practical problems of inhabitants, land owners and responsible municipalities, in the other reality there is "their" environmental protection issues, including a scientifically developed landscape-ecological plan of almost 500 pages. The *Rāzna* park construct, based on the interpretations of international environmental paradigms and norms, creates a new parallel reality when applied to that countryside territory. Thus, in reviewing the park's conservation plan we see that there is a full list of specialists who took part in the preparation of the document – a plant and species biotope expert (simultaneously also the plan's project manager), lichen species expert, cartographer, assistant, two ichthyologists, entomologist, forest biotope expert, ornithologist, landscape expert, mammalogist, tourism expert, bat expert, and freshwater biotope expert (LDF 2009). These experts represent the disciplines relevant to the habitat and biodiversity approach to protected nature territories – the Natura 2000 concept. Thus in this new reality, the park construct rather "belongs" to those who can access and use this specialized information or who have a special interest in the park, not to the local residents. It also provides jobs only for those, presumably non-local, experts. No wonder the municipality employee, even after participating in park planning meetings, burst out in laughter and could not say what the park is protecting and what good there is from the park. And the interested people usually happen to be people from elsewhere – tourists, scientists from Latvian universities, or environmental activists from Riga. For example, the association "*Latvijas ezeri*" [Latvian lakes], an NGO from Riga uniting lake conservation professionals, was concerned about a waste water treatment plant (WWTP) in the park territory and engaged in discussions with local authorities on the environmental permit-issuing process – the locals who lived in the vicinity of this WWTP and its discharges did not get involved in this matter at all.[21]

The analytical concept of two parallel realities has already been introduced in this article. To summarize, we can discern an imagined divide of one protected nature territory of a national park (a Natura 2000 site) into two parallel realities. One reality is the national park construct itself, existing in legislation, park conservation plan documentation, experts' opinions, scientific research (landscape and habitat mapping), park management activities (marketing vision and plan to entice and attract national and foreign visitors, controls by park inspectors, permit issuing and coordination procedures, project applications), in tourist brochures, in staff enthusiasm, in various projects, in special nature trails and also observation towers. Parallel to that, more or less invisible to each other, there exists the other reality of the everyday life of the countryside and locals, represented in problems of joblessness, social issues, agricultural and forestry business or small guest-house tourism business. This other reality, when it overlaps with the park construct, is manifested through some restrictions (for example max 1 ha allowable clear-cut forest), difficulty or hassle in obtaining permits and coordinating activities, or only in imagined restrictions or fear about possible restrictions. On a positive note, the overlap does result in 30 lats extra subsidies, attracted tourists as potential customers for some local guest-house owners or a few extra workplaces in the park. But this everyday reality can also be totally indifferent to the existence of the park. The park can be invisible to this other parallel reality, a reality that co-exists in the same territory.

Thinking about possible reasons for the described negative attitudes, the Nature Protection Agency's regional representative mentions the public's general lack of trust in government institutions.[22] The lack of trust in the government was also mentioned in an interview with the representative of the Regional Environmental Board, which, together with the Agency, carries out the official environmental policy locally, as a factor responsible for the negative attitudes of the public to their environmental institutions and requirements.[23]

The general mistrust in state institutions has also been monitored by a local sociological opinion poll company, SKDS, and shows a steady decrease in trust since the autumn of 2002, from about 50% to the historical low of 7.3% (trust in government) and only 4.5% (trust in Parliament) in the first months of 2009. Since then a slow increase is observed, creeping up to just over 20% for the government but staying below it for the parliament (data presented during an interview with the SKDS director Arnis Kaktiņš).[24] Thus the Latvian public, after 20 years of independence, show a considerable lack of trust in state institutions – according to Kaktiņš this mistrust is one of the possible reasons for the various failures of state institutional governance, including the environmental authorities and governance. On a European level this mistrust is also amongst the highest, as *Eurobarometer* reported in 2009 that:

> the absolute majority of the poll does not trust the Latvian government and *Saeima* [Parliament] – 88% and 91% of population respectively (European Commission 2009). These are some of the highest distrust percentages in Europe. In Latvia, the highest level of distrust in political parties in the whole EU can be observed (93%), while only 5% of respondents trust them.

As formulated by anthropologist Dace Dzenovska (personal communication, 6 July 2012), who has participated in several of the interviews used in this article, people's apathy or hostility towards environmentalism is not to be read as their apathy towards the environment as such, but rather towards the governance of the environment as carried out by government agencies. A study of the Latvian Green party (Auers 2012) notes the general low status of environmental issues on a political level in Latvia and the fractured environmental movement as a result of mistrust in the Green party. It seems very plausible that a substantial component of general mistrust in state authorities is responsible for the described negative environmental attitudes and the creation of parallel realities, since environmental policies, including those of protected territories and Natura 2000, are part of national state governance. However, it can also work in the opposite way, as mishandling of environmental issues by environmental authorities can contribute to increasing the general mistrust of state authorities.

Environmentalism as a Position of Power

The observations reported here have led me to the idea that the "official environmentalism" exhibits certain characteristics of a position of authority over "ordinary people", the locals. This is not a new concept for social scientists and has been mentioned in the context of Latvia by K. Schwartz (2006). In the chapter "The Power of Environmental Narratives", she quotes several critics of the sustainable development and biodiversity thesis who say that it may "vilify local people as environmentally destructive and sometimes literally fence them out of traditional lands", and that the extra-local understandings of nature "are transforming environments around the globe, often to the detriment or against the will of local users" (McCarthy 2002 cited in Schwartz 2006, 5). Radical critics say that, rather than protecting nature and empowering local communities, the pursuit of sustainable development, along with biodiversity conservation and other components of global environmentalism, simply extends the scope of technocratic managerial strategies to the entire planet (Schwartz 2006, 6). Are these very critical observations applicable to the penetration of global environmentalism into the Latvian countryside?

An elderly lady who has long been living on the shores of Lake *Rāzna* recounted an occasion when the park inspector saw her burning old grass on her property. She was sure that burning old undergrowth in the early spring, when the soil is still frozen, would not damage the flora and fauna in the grass and she did not have enough money to remove the old grass from the field prior to cutting it the previous year. The inspector took photos and warned her that she would be punished by removing her agricultural subsidies (subsidies are paid out if one cuts the grass every year, but it is not allowed to burn the old grass instead of cutting it), and later reported this to the park authority. The old lady was annoyed by such an attitude and requirements. The lady also cleans up the shoreline by cutting reeds in wintertime when there are no birds nesting in them, but even then one must apply for a written permit. She does not understand why park employees have such broad authority, whereas for the locals "nothing is allowed". More importantly, she is convinced that she knows best how to preserve the local environment, better than any outsiders:

> But when the fish inspector comes in his boat, where the swans and ducks are nesting, he just runs right through there with his boat. He is allowed to do this! He is allowed to do this! The inspector is allowed to do this. But for us, nothing is allowed, God forbid! I ask you – am I an enemy of my own land? Will strangers look after my fore-fathers' land better than I can?[25]

Rather, the woman blames the overgrown agricultural lands, where storks can no longer find food, as well as imported agricultural chemicals which can now be found in abundance in stores. Symbolically, such disputes represent new paradigms of emergent power: the woman is over 70 years old, while the inspector is in his twenties.

Other examples of environmental arguments possessing the power to trump other arguments have been encountered in my environmental impact assessment practice, in particular those arguments on behalf of avian protection interests. Raimonds, the district development department chief, said in an interview that "The environment ministry is afraid of ornithologists. The environment ministry won't risk going against the ornithologists because there are precedents for complaints to the EU which may hurt the Latvian state".[26]

The issue of the trumping power of Latvian official environmentalism cannot be adequately academically analyzed here by an environmental practitioner, but it certainly shows signs of its presence, and can be a field for further investigation. Meanwhile, the awareness of such a trumping power allows for more critical thinking by environmental experts when producing and presenting scientific data.

When discussing environmental negativism, the conditions on the ground in the two decades after the breakdown of Soviet industries and the dissolution of collective farms in the countryside at the beginning of the 1990s cannot be disregarded. This economic breakdown has somewhat unintentionally contributed to the improvement of environmental conditions, especially in the countryside. As already mentioned, the return to wild conditions of the abandoned countryside and problems arising from that are now regarded as environmental problems, for example the overgrowth of agricultural lands (Penēze 2009), expansion of wetlands due to a lack of maintenance and breakdown of drainage systems [*meliorācija*], and the building of too many beaver dams (Pavasars 2012). Indeed, the Latvian Environmental Policy document itself concludes that with respect to species and biotope protection, the situation in Latvia is better than in western Europe largely due to the underdeveloped economy: "There are ancient traditions to protect nature in Latvia, which, together with the relatively undeveloped economy, have ensured the chance for the survival of many species and biotopes which have already disappeared from western Europe" (VARAM 2009). Thus, this difference between the condition of nature in Latvia (and the Baltics in general as well as other parts of eastern Europe) and the developed western countries, in combination with dominant (official) environmental narratives and norms of biodiversity and habitat protection (as in Natura 2000 sites), could be another factor contributing to the hostile perception and attitude towards official environmental policies as carried out by governmental institutions. It may also facilitate the separation of the two realities, as the official (international) one is to a large extent based on an overexploitation paradigm (intensive land and resource use), while in the Latvian countryside everyday life corresponds to an underdeveloped rather than overexploited situation.

Conclusions

The point of departure for this study was a problem I encountered and defined as an environmental practitioner. This was the widespread and seemingly unscientific negativism that has been expressed in Latvia towards official environmentalism at large, and which has been especially directed against protected nature territories (Natura 2000) in particular. These powerful and prevalent complaints were evident through participation in public events of the environmental planning process. For a practitioner this is highly disturbing and frustrating, as, on the one hand, public involvement and consultations are highly valued and legally required by official EU and Latvian environmental policies and legislation, but, on the other hand, the public's overwhelmingly negative attitudes and unscientific position do not appear to have many discussion points in common with the scientific environmental planning approach.

In my analysis of the environmental planning and assessment procedures, I have not been able to observe any attempts on the part of the Latvian policy-makers to understand this widespread negativism from alternative perspectives. On the contrary, practitioners of "official environmentalism" simply attribute the problem to a lack of understanding by the public.

I was thus prompted to adopt an interdisciplinary approach, in the sense that an environmental practitioner starts to use social science research perspectives and methods. If the social science findings and recommendations for more adequate policy-making already exist, they have not been recognized or adopted by environmental officials and practitioners in Latvia. Nevertheless, this seems to be an area where interdisciplinary cooperation of social and environmental scientists and practitioners may bring valuable and practical results, and may help to bridge the divide between the two realities in practice.

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Notes

1 Most of the interviewee names have been changed.

2 Raimonds, 5 August 2010, Kurzeme, Latvia.

3 Zanda, 25 January 2012, Rēzekne, Latvia.

4 Inga, 30 November 2011, Madona, Latvia.

5 Juris, 23 September 2011, Amata district, Latvia.

6 Project "Savs kaktiņš, savs stūrītis zemes – Latvijas lauku iedzīvotāju attīstības stratēģijas un kultūrvides pārmaiņas' No 2009/0222/1DP/1.1.1.2.0/09/APIA/VIAA/087, meeting protocol, 22 February 2010.

7 Latvijas pašvaldību izpilddirektoru sanāksme – seminārs [Meeting seminar of the executive directors of Latvian municipalities], 9 November 2011, Rīga.

8 Inga, 30 November 2011, Madona, Latvia.
9 Anonymous, 1 March 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
10 Pauls, 1 March 2012, Dagda district, Latvia.
11 Anonymous, 24 January 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
12 Zanda, 25 January 2012, Rēzekne, Latvia.
13 Roberts, 24 January 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
14 Roberts, 24 January 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
15 Līga Bulmeistere, 16 November 2011, Rīga.
16 Anonymous, 24 January 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
17 Project "Savs kaktiņš, savs stūrītis zemes – Latvijas lauku iedzīvotāju attīstības stratēģijas un kultūrvides pārmaiņas" ["Changing Development Strategies and Cultural Spaces of Latvia's rural inhabitants"] No 2009/0222/1DP/1.1.1.2.0/09/APIA/VIAA/087, meeting protocol, 22 February 2010.
18 Anonymous, 1 March 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
19 Anonymous, 24 January 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
20 Anonymous, 24 January 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
21 Society "Latvijas ezeri" [Latvian lakes]. Accessed 12 April 2012. www.ezeri.lv/blog/tech/1065/ and anonymous interview, 1 March 2012, Rēzekne district, Latvia.
22 Zanda, 25 January 2012, Rēzekne, Latvia.
23 Anonymous, 16 November 2011, Rēzekne.
24 Arnis Kaktiņš, 31 January 2012, Rīga.
25 Anonymous, 5 June 2010, Rēzekne district. Interview performed and transcript provided by Ieva Raubiško.
26 Raimonds, 5 August 2010, Kurzeme, Latvia.

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