

Protected Areas in Local Socioeconomic Systems Functional Connectivity Models In Light of Contemporary Concepts

In the face of increasing impacts from climate change, a rapid decline in biodiversity, as well as the on-going urbanization of countries and a decrease in areas not managed and transformed by humans, more attention is being given to undertakings aimed to mitigate the adverse effects of human activity on the natural environment. A significant role in this context is played by the spatial development of natural protected areas and improvements in their functioning. Unfortunately, including a given terrain in legally protected areas and introducing restrictions with regard to the use of such territories is controversial from the perspective of local socioeconomic development and is often disapproved by local inhabitants.

Presently, world debates on protected areas are characterised by a changing approach to their functioning. Such areas are seen as significant not only because of their role in the natural environment, but attention is also given to their social and economic aspects. Efforts are being undertaken to combine the function of the conservation of nature with improvements in the living conditions of local communities, leading to their acceptance of relevant programmes. Efforts aimed to seek optimal solutions are supported by research studies which show the impact of protected areas on the economy and benefits resulting from their functioning. Also, recommendations are formulated with regard to implementing management models based on permanent cooperation between local institutions and organizations which affect local development and entrepreneurs and inhabitants. In Poland, these issues have not been explored in a satisfactory manner, and as yet, no research studies are available which present the functioning of Polish protected areas in the context of globally recommended new patterns. Moreover, no comprehensive studies have been conducted on a national scale which show the significance of protected areas in local socioeconomic systems.

The main objective of the project is an analysis and assessment of the functioning of protected areas in Poland in the context of developing a new paradigm for protected areas worldwide, the identification of social and economic functional connectivity related to the existence of protected areas, and, consequently, the development of models which explain the place and role of these areas in local socioeconomic systems.

The achievement of this objective will be based on answers to the following research questions: 1) What are various approaches to functional models for protected areas in the world in the context of their relationships with local socioeconomic systems? 2) Which models and implemented solutions in the area of the functioning of protected areas best correspond to the new functional paradigm, and what are their possible practical applications in Polish conditions? 3) What is the level of socioeconomic advancement and do differences occur in the level and dynamics of communes' (Pol. gmina) development depending on the existence of protected areas? 4) What are the impulses for and barriers to communes' socioeconomic development resulting from the functioning of their protected areas? 5) What are the demographic changes that affect local government units having protected areas within their territory? 6) What is the land use structure of the communes located in the protected areas, and does it change because of the functioning of national and landscape parks? 7) What is the functional connectivity between protected areas and their socioeconomic environment? 8) How can protected areas enhance the endogenous development potential and stimulate the development of functionally connected areas? 9) How can local government units conduct development policy in protected areas in a rational way, taking into account the specificities and constraints generated by these areas? 8) How can protected areas enhance the endogenous development potential and stimulate the development of functionally connected areas? 9) How can local government units conduct development policy in protected areas in a rational way, taking into account the specificities and constraints generated by these areas?

Research studies within the framework of the project will be conducted at three spatial levels: a global level (the identification of the models of functioning of world protected areas in the context of their relations with local socioeconomic systems), a national level (an analysis of relations between Polish protected areas and their socioeconomic environment, resulting from legal, organizational, spatial conditions; an analysis and assessment of the socioeconomic development of legally protected areas – national and landscape parks, and the identification of types of national and landscape parks), and a local level (the identification of local and translocal functional connectivity related to the existence of selected parks, as well as their role in socioeconomic systems).

a) characterisation of an empirical model explaining the functioning (place and role) of protected areas in local socioeconomic systems, b) development of a concept proposal for integrated management of protected areas, based on integrating these areas into the system of socioeconomic planning and on permanent cooperation between park management boards with self-governments, economic entities, and NGOs, c) developing specific research methodology for monitoring the role of protected areas in local development.

The implementation of the project will also contribute to developing protected area management mechanisms and stimulating the areas' endogenous development potential, ultimately leading to an increased social acceptance of parks in local communities.