

Multi-stakeholder governance of European wetlands - networks as learning organizations

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INTRODUCTION

What kind of wetlands governance practices could allow wetlands and people to co-exist sustainably? Is there any way to organize local and regional stakeholders into „wetland stewardship” networks or communities? If so, can these networks become „learning organizations”, described by Senge (1990) as places “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together.”? So far, the concept of „learning organization” was applied mainly to single entities, at best encompassing some of their external stakeholders. What if we apply it to networks organized around the certain challenge, like wetlands conservation?

During the presentation, I would like to discuss the theoretical underpinnings and methodological approach planned to test a hypothesis on the governance models of European wetlands. The hypothesis claims that governance models based on multi-stakeholder networks embracing learning organization paradigm and systems thinking approach will catalyze sustainable co-existence of wetlands and people.

Biodiversity loss is nowadays one of the key environmental threats to our well-being, impacting our safety and pockets: more than 50% of the global economy is reliant on biodiversity (Herweijer et al. 2020). COVID-19 made us more aware of the importance of contact with nature when we were locked down in our homes. Yet wetlands remain largely unrecognized in terms of their role in protecting biodiversity and for the services and values, these ecosystems offer to people. Wetlands disappear rapidly due to the complex interplay of different phenomena that are largely affected by humans (Global Wetland Outlook: Special Edition 2021). Key policy-making bodies, such as United Nations Organization, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and European Commission, in their current strategic policy, research, and funding documents (European Commission 2020, CBD 2021, etc.) are seeking transformative change for biodiversity, due to the rapid (and increasing) loss of habitats and species, despite conservation efforts. Transformative change is understood as „fundamental, system-wide change that includes consideration of technological, economic and social factors including in terms of paradigms, goals, and values” (Decision IPBES-7/1). Such transformative change requires multi-level involvement of different stakeholders, since nature depends on people and most natural sites are „negotiated spaces” - even creating a new nature reserve requires certain social consent. Such involvement requires also shifting governance models, from top-bottom, reliant on

