

Community engagement activities – a powerful tool in river ecosystem management

Activités d'engagement communautaire – un outil puissant dans la gestion des écosystèmes fluviaux

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RÉSUMÉ

En Croatie, la conservation de la nature est encore relativement simple. Les institutions publiques – les autorités des aires protégées – sont responsables de la gestion des aires protégées. L'implication des parties prenantes de la communauté dans le processus de gestion n'est toujours pas intégrée dans la conservation de la nature. Grâce à l'initiative « Unis pour les rivières », nous avons mis en œuvre diverses activités d'engagement communautaire avant et après la création d'aires protégées sur la rivière Mrežnica en Croatie. Grâce à des questionnaires en ligne, des entretiens téléphoniques, des groupes de discussion et des ateliers adaptés à des groupes d'intervenants spécifiques, nous avons d'une part recueilli des informations précieuses sur les personnes et leur lien avec la rivière et, d'autre part, nous avons réussi à susciter un sentiment de responsabilité commune concernant la protection de cet écosystème précieux. Nos parties prenantes sont prêtes à s'engager dans la gestion et la préservation d'une aire protégée. Ces activités, qui ne sont pas des événements ponctuels mais font partie d'un processus continu, ont été soigneusement conçues et mises en œuvre pour que la communauté reste activement impliquée dans la préservation de l'écosystème fluvial.

ABSTRACT

Nature conservation in Croatia is still mainly straightforward, with public institutions – the protected area authorities – responsible for managing protected areas. Including community stakeholders in the management process is still not mainstreamed into nature conservation. Through the “United for Rivers” Initiative, we have implemented various community engagement activities before and after the establishment of protected areas on the Mrežnica River in Croatia. Through online questionnaires, telephone interviews, focus groups, and workshops tailored for specific stakeholder groups, we have acquired valuable information about people and their connection to the river on one hand, and on the other hand, we managed to foster a sense of joint responsibility about the protection of this valuable ecosystem. Our stakeholders are willing to engage in the management and preservation of a protected area. These activities, which are not just one-time events but are part of an ongoing process, have been carefully designed and implemented to keep the community actively involved in river ecosystem preservation.

KEYWORDS

Community engagement, management, protected areas, rivers, stakeholders

Aires protégées, engagement communautaire, gestion, parties prenantes, rivières

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Short overview of nature protection in Croatia and community engagement

Nature conservation in Croatia is still mainly straightforward, with public institutions – the protected area authorities, being the ones responsible for managing protected areas. These institutions are responsible for drafting management plans and implementing specific projects for their respective protected areas. Outreach or including the general public or specific stakeholder groups is often limited to these particular tasks. The protected area authorities are not yet fully leveraging the potential of the community as a powerful resource, nor are they seen as a valuable and knowledgeable partner in protected area management.

In this paper, we are thrilled to showcase a pioneering example of different community engagement activities as participatory approaches in the protected area designation process of a river ecosystem, the Mrežnica River in Croatia. This innovative approach sets a hopeful precedent for future conservation efforts of rivers and other ecosystems.

As part of the “United for Rivers” Initiative, The Nature Conservancy, public institution Natura Viva, which manages the Mrežnica River protected areas, and GAIA, an entrepreneur in nature conservation, have jointly drafted and implemented **various community engagement activities**. These activities, which are not just one-time events but are part of an ongoing process, have been carefully designed and implemented to keep the community actively involved in the protected area designation process and later in preserving the river ecosystem. The Mrežnica River is protected as of March 2024 in two IUCN categories: IUCN Category III Natural Monument – the upper stream, and IUCN Category V Significant Landscape – the lower stream.

2 IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

2.1 Online questionnaire

Prior to establishing the protected areas on the Mrežnica River, we launched an online questionnaire to assess local communities' views on specific aspects of legally protecting the river. Launching a questionnaire was a significant and groundbreaking step in nature conservation efforts in Croatia, especially before the legal establishment of a protected area occurred. It provided a platform for the community to voice their opinions and concerns.

The questionnaire consisted of 27 questions, with a combination of open-ended questions and offered answers. The questionnaire was distributed and available online for 7 days, and we received 324 answers. This immense response indicated that we have potentially active community members and should include and engage them actively in the process of establishing the Mrežnica River protected areas.

According to the preliminary results, more than 94% of respondents consider it a high priority that the natural surroundings of the Mrežnica River be in a good state (e.g., preserved nature, high biodiversity, waste-free nature) for their activities to occur.

More than 64% of respondents believe that protecting the Mrežnica River would positively impact their activities, while almost 18% believe that protection would not affect their activities. More than 16% of respondents are unsure how protection would affect their activities, thus leaving us room to fill in the gaps and explain the benefits that protection would have on their activities.

Respondents were well aware of the natural richness and uniqueness of the Mrežnica River, as well as potential (and actual) problems and threats to this beautiful ecosystem. They also believe establishing a protected area could help solve some threats.

More than 60% of respondents are willing to engage in some form of community participation in establishing a protected area and its future management. 19% are still determining, as they need to learn more about the topic and the process. We saw this as an opportunity to communicate more precisely how the local community could participate in establishing a protected area and, in the future, protected area management. It motivated us to design various community engagement activities further.

2.2 Telephone interviews

After the online questionnaire was analysed, local community members interested in a detailed interview were contacted. Nineteen people were interviewed one-on-one through the telephone, and the average interview lasted approximately 25-30 minutes.

The interview included a few in-depth questions, and the questioner guided the interviewee through them.

We were interested in determining their media preferences for using the most suitable channel to distribute information about the future protected area to the general public.

Furthermore, we were interested in their willingness to engage in protected area management and their previous experience in citizens' initiatives or participation in NGO work. We also wanted to know if there is an existing communication with the public authorities in their local community.

Lastly, they were asked to explain potential threats in the area elaborately, and their answers served as a basis for defining and facilitating focus groups, as a new community engagement activity.

2.3 Focus groups

Based on the answers provided in the online questionnaire and telephone interviews, people were divided into three focus groups, with 25 participants altogether:

1. Tourism,
2. Fishing and other related sports activities, and
3. General population.

All focus groups were guided through the same set of questions with a focus on their predominant activities.

The main question was what they see as the positive and (potential) negative aspects of establishing a protected area on the Mrežnica River. Each focus group saw a different set of problems, which was expected and correlated with their activities on the river.

It was extremely interesting that none of the focus groups **saw any negative impacts of establishing a protected area**; they unanimously supported the establishment of the protected area. However, they were all keen to see how the protection would be implemented in the field. They saw the protected area establishment as an opportunity for specific problems in the river ecosystem to be solved finally.

Focus groups were asked to reflect on priority activities in establishing the protected area. Each focus group had specific priorities related to its activities. Still, they all agreed on the same thing—**communication with management authorities, workshops, and the inclusion of local community members in the process**.

They also wanted to see sustainable development in the area, as pressures from tourism are felt daily during the high season (mid-summer).

This was very important as it helped us create further community engagement activities tailored to specific focus groups. People want to be heard. There are people in the local community who are on the river every day and have a better understanding of the activities happening there. They are a great resource that can be used to define river management activities through participatory approaches.

2.4 Workshops

From November 2023 to June 2024, we conducted intensive workshops with diverse stakeholder groups, all with an intrinsic and direct connection to the Mrežnica River. These key stakeholders, whose livelihoods depend on the various ecosystem services provided by the river, particularly its cultural services such as tourism, understand that their activities are, and will be affected by the level of protection of the river's regulating and supporting ecosystem services. They understand that their role in river management and its preservation is integral.

These workshops were organized monthly for each stakeholder group, leading to 4-5 workshops per stakeholder group. The workshops were organized to disseminate information, foster a sense of shared responsibility, and encourage stakeholders to actively participate in preserving the protected areas on the Mrežnica River. Facilitation topics and discussions were designed for each group specifically, reflecting their current strengths, needs, and their potential and capabilities to participate in protected area management. The interactive nature of these workshops, where stakeholders actively engaged in discussions and brainstorming sessions, was crucial

in achieving this goal.

Key stakeholders that took part in workshops were the following:

1. Tourism service providers – kayak, canoe, and raft operators,
2. Tourism service providers – restaurants, bars, and camp owners,
3. Fishermen's associations,
4. Private accommodation renters, and
5. Weekend house owners.

The first stakeholder group was the most affected in the protected area establishment process as they were about to encounter a new regulation – a concession-granting scheme in a protected area. We informed them about all the changes and discussed all the aspects of a new model in river preservation (with strong inclusion of their comments and suggestions), including a fee and their commitment to preserving the river through monitoring activities. We see them as vital partners on the river in high season, advocating for sustainable use of river resources.

The second stakeholder group, restaurants, bars, and camp owners, while not yet directly affected by the concession-granting scheme, will soon be. Despite their awareness of the threats and pressures Mrežnica faces, there is a perceived lack of transparent communication within their group and with other stakeholders. As this process will likely start in 2025, there is an opportunity to empower them through new workshops and discussions with a better understanding of the process and its potential benefits.

The third group, the fishermen, is a vital stakeholder group that operates within a closed communication system. They have good communication with the public institution Natura Viva, which is responsible for managing protected areas in Karlovac County, Croatia. Still, with other groups, their communication is limited to what is required. They possess extensive knowledge about the river's functioning and activities in the field but need to develop more trust towards other stakeholder groups. Acknowledging and discussing their challenges in opening up their communication with other stakeholders and providing them with the support and training they need is essential.

The fourth and fifth stakeholder groups are the most motivated to preserve and protect the Mrežnica River. They have a substantial intrinsic value to engage in Mrežnica River preservation. After all, they are the ones who live in and with this area. Through our workshops and discussion, an idea to establish an NGO as a base for future engagement activities on the Mrežnica River came to be.

We believe that community engagement activities are a process, not a one-time thing, and we should continue working with the community if we want long-term benefits for Mrežnica River conservation and preservation and an active community.

3 CONCLUSION

3.1 Further community engagement activities

We are currently conducting new workshops that started in November 2024. They are a continuation of previous workshops, with a focus on translating words into concrete actions. Our new community engagement activity involves bringing two groups together—weekend house owners and private accommodation renters—and guiding them through the process of establishing an NGO. The NGO would benefit the community and its specific activities and preserve their joint resource, the Mrežnica River. It will also serve as a platform for further community engagement activities.

In 2025, we plan to organize community engagement activities with tourism service providers – restaurants, bars, and camp owners, fishermen's associations, and with a new stakeholder group, entrepreneurs, and the private sector. The idea is to work towards the Mrežnica River Fund establishment. The Fund would generate financial resources for Mrežnica River management, and the latter stakeholder group has a great potential to be actively involved.