



INFORMING AND INVOLVING THE PUBLIC IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED AREAS IN CROATIA

– *STATE OF THE GAME AND
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE*

THE FUTURE

Project “Responsible for Nature”



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SUMMARY

Successful protection of nature can only be achieved with the active engagement of all members of society and especially the local community living in the protected area. Public participation in nature protection has its legal basis in international law, in particular the Aarhus Convention and in Croatian legislation, primarily in the Nature Protection Act and the Environmental Protection Act. On the other hand, public participation in the management of protected areas as the most valuable parts of nature has been recognized as an important tool for achieving effective protection of these areas. That is precisely why through the project "Responsible for Nature" we sought to determine the level and quality of public participation in the work of protected areas in Croatia, what are the potential obstacles and what are the benefits of inclusion. As a result, document "Informing and involving the public in protected areas management in Croatia - state of the game and recommendations for the future" was created. The document is based on the conducted analysis of the level of information and involvement of the public in the management of protected areas and the results of the workshop part of the cross-sectoral seminar held within the project. The methodology and key results of the mentioned analysis as well as the methodology for making recommendations for participation of the within the seminar were shown. Opinions of the participants of the seminar, representatives of civil society organizations, public institutions for protected areas and other stakeholders in protection of nature were presented regarding the current level of public participation. We expect some of the recommendations to be applied by various stakeholders involved in nature protection. This way, the project "Responsible for Nature" and this document as one of the project results will contribute to improving the public participation in nature protection. Ultimately, in line with the positive experiences in the world, a more extensive involvement of the public will contribute to a better-quality and more effective protection of nature in Croatia.



INTRODUCTION

The two-year project "Responsible for Nature" started on 11 November 2015. Association Sunce is the project holder, and Association BIOM, Society Marjan and Split Faculty of Economics are partners in the project. The Split Faculty of Law is a collaborator on the project.

The overall objective of the project is to contribute to the increase of the level of transparency and efficiency in the management of natural resources in Croatia. One of the specific objectives of the project is *to increase the transparency of the work of the institutions responsible for management of natural resources and to improve the public participation as a basis for open management and fight against corruption in the management of natural resources.*

For the purpose of achieving this specific objective, several activities are anticipated, among others those aimed at public institutions for the management of protected areas in Croatia. **An analysis of the current level of information and involvement of the public in the management of protected areas** has thus been carried out. The results of this analysis were presented at the national seminar held in March 2017 in Zagreb. This document presents the most important results of the analysis as well as the recommendations of the seminar participants. **The purpose of this document is to enhance public participation in the protection of nature at local, regional and national level, and to share experiences on an international level.** Therefore, the document is intended for all stakeholders in these processes, for representatives of public institutions for nature protection, competent institutions (Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy, Croatian Environment and Nature Agency, county administrative departments), environmental organizations and interested citizens. The document is available in PDF format in English and Croatian on the following web pages:

www.sunce-st.org

www.biom.hr

www.drustvomarjan.hr

ANALYSIS OF THE CURRENT LEVELS OF INFORMATION AND INVOLVEMENT OF THE PUBLIC IN THE MANAGEMENT OF PROTECTED AREAS

Methodology

The first step in the analysis of the current level of information and involvement of the public in the management of protected areas was a review of the web pages of all public institutions for protected areas in Croatia. The review was carried out through a questionnaire prepared in cooperation with Associations Sunce and BIOM, with the help of company Prizma CPI d.o.o. which is engaged through the project for this service. The questionnaire examined whether the public institutions had mandatory documents available on their web pages and additional documents and information that could be provided to citizens. Also, it was estimated how easy it was to find the mentioned documents, as well as the visibility and transparency of the web pages in general. In order to make a review which reflects the “common citizen approach”, the students of the Faculty of Economics performed the review within the framework of the program of socially useful learning.¹ The review was conducted in April 2016. After the review, interviews were conducted with representatives of the public institutions for management of protected areas, also via the given questionnaire. The interviews were conducted by Associations BIOM and Sunce in the period from June to September 2016. It is important to note that the reviews and then the interviewing of all public institutions, i.e. county, local and public institutions which manage nature parks and national parks, were carried out through the same questionnaires regardless of the differences between institutions that relate to management, organization, competencies and responsibilities.² Therefore, the results were processed bearing in mind the different types of institutions.

Results of the analysis of participation of the public in the work of protected areas

Web pages review³

At the time of the research, no mandatory documents such as the Statute, Ordinance on Internal Organization, Financial Statements etc. were available on the web pages of all public institutions, as can be seen from Figure 1 and Figure 2. The review also showed that **two public institutions on the county level in Croatia still don't have their own web pages.**

1 Development of the program of socially useful learning is also one of the activities of the project “Responsible for Nature”. The basic objective of establishing the program of socially useful learning for the students of the Faculty of Economics is to increase the participation of young people in the society through inclusion in activities related to monitoring of natural resources and public goods management.

2 In Croatia, there are three types of public institutions for protected areas: public institutions for the management of protected areas at the local and county levels, and public institutions established for the management of nature parks and national parks. Local public institutions are established by cities/municipalities and are responsible for managing a certain protected area in the city/municipality area. There are 6 such public institutions in total. County public institutions are established by counties and are responsible for the management of protected areas in that county area, including the ecological network, excluding nature parks and national parks. There are 20 such institutions in total. Nature parks and national parks are managed by public institutions established by the Government of the Republic of Croatia, and in total there are 8 public institutions for the management of national parks and 11 for the management of nature parks.

3 Due to the limited size of the document, only a part of the results of web pages research is shown, while the complete questionnaire as well as the results per certain issues are available on request.



Figure 1. Availability of basic management documents on the web pages

The assessment of the transparency of the public institutions web pages, their clarity and comprehensiveness, can be seen in Figure 3.

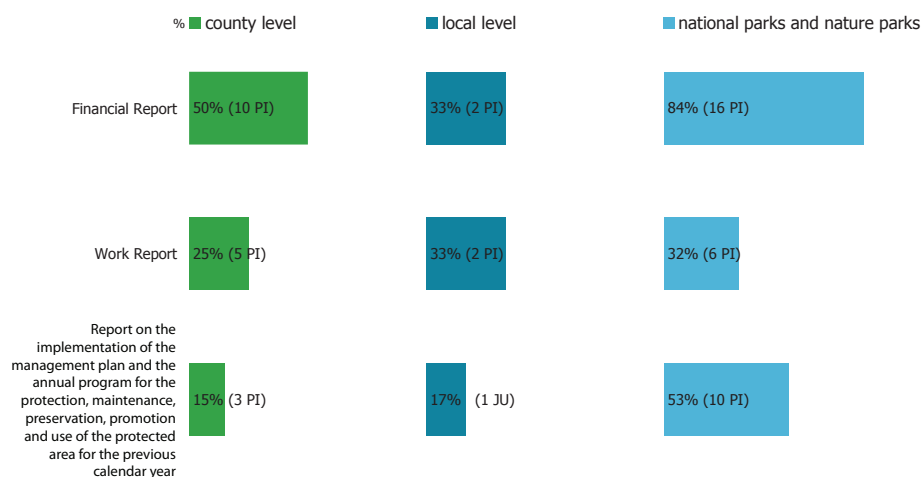


Figure 2. Availability of reports on web pages

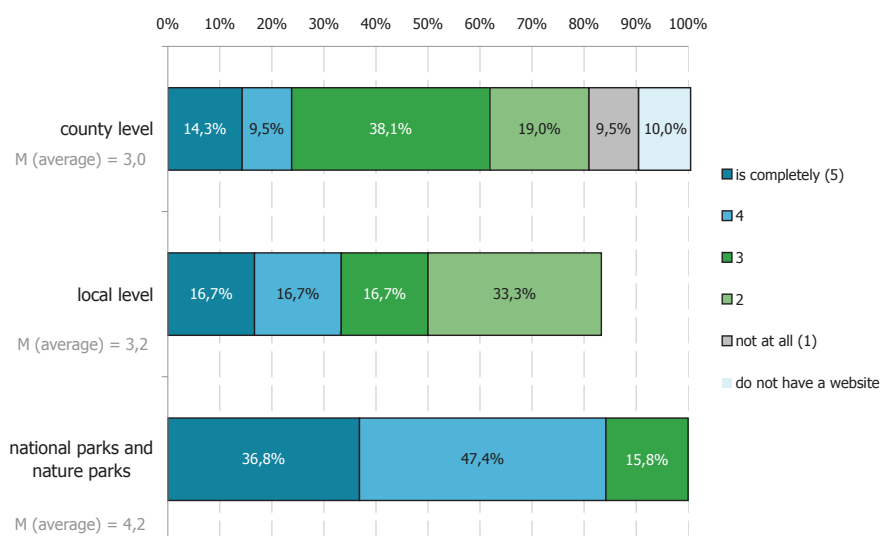


Figure 3. Website transparency (scale 1 to 5)

What is evident from the web page reviews is that **public institutions responsible for the management of national parks and nature parks lead the way in providing information about their work to citizens and their web page activities**, although they still have room for improvement. One of the possible reasons for this is their responsibility to the institution of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy, while the county and local public institutions are responsible to different counties, thus the practices and ways of managing the pages and ensuring transparency through them differ from county to county. It has also been noted that the openness of authorities at the local level is lower than when it comes to national authorities. It is important to point out that during the interviews it was examined whether the public institutions have sufficient financial and human resources to maintain the web pages (Figure 4). Although the public institutions of national parks and nature parks lead the way in providing information via their web pages, only 39% of the respondents estimated that they have sufficient resources, while a lack of funds and human resources for the maintenance of web pages was estimated at 50% of interviewed counties and 50% of local public institutions.

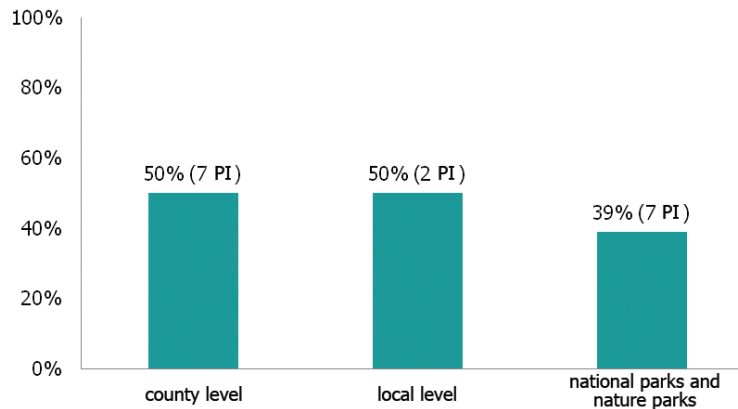


Figure 4. The proportion of public institutions that have estimated that they have enough financial and human resources to maintain a network page

Interviewing

All public institutions in Croatia were invited to participate in the interviews. In total, 36 out of 45 public institutions participated in the interview (Figure 5), which is 80%. The data shown in the figures below refer to these public institutions. Collecting interviews was a lengthy process partly due to the interviewing taking place in the summer when a large number of public institutions are engaged in activities related to the tourist season.

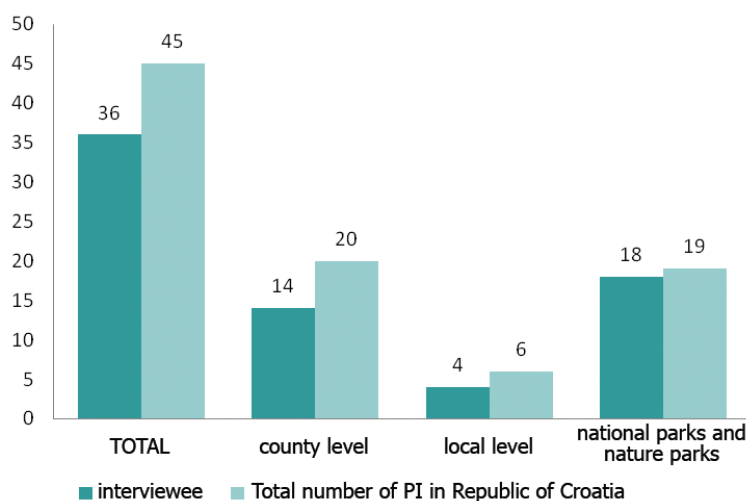


Figure 5. Total number of institutions and number of institutions responding to the survey

The average grade of the quality of cooperation with the public institutions during interviews on a scale from 1 to 5 is 3,51.

Although interviews are a qualitative method, given the relatively limited size of the population of interviewed public institutions and the excellent response of the institution to participation in this part of the research project (66% to 90% of responding institutions, depending on the observed level of activity of public institutions), it was concluded that it is appropriate to set some quantitative questions within the interviews themselves and to quantify information collected through interviews.

The interviewing established whether the public institutions have an appointed **public information officer**, as can be seen from Figure 6, which is their obligation under Article 13 of the Act on the Right of Access to Information (OG 25/13, 85/15). However, a significant number of appointed officers at the interviewed public institutions was not educated for this role, as is also apparent from Figure 6, which may be an important obstacle to the quality of public information.

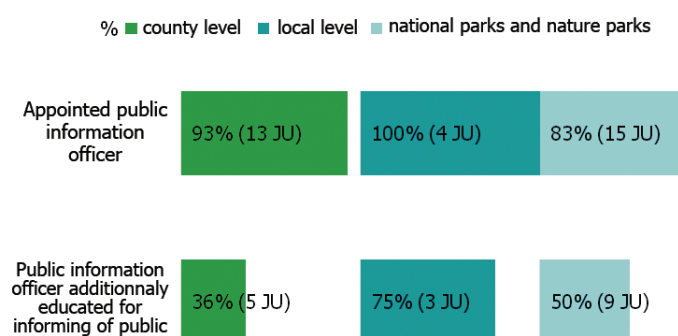


Figure 6. Public information officer

All interviewed public institutions on the local level and the level of nature and national parks stated that they **include the public** in the process of adopting documents, while on the level of county institutions, 57% of public institutions stated the same (8 institutions). However, here it is important to note the difference that the county public institutions themselves pointed out. Namely, in the organization of public participation in different processes, in relation to the work of county institutions, the county is competent. Also, a large number of interviewees stressed that the public is also included for the documents in accordance with legal regulations.

Management plans are the basic documents for the management of protected areas, and are drafted on the basis of Article 138 of the Nature Protection Act (OG 80/13). The current world practice has shown that adopting management plans in a participatory way contributes to their later successful implementation. Therefore, one of the subjects of the analysis was related to management plans. Figure 7 shows how many plans were completed at the time of the interview, how many plans were being drawn up and how many public institutions from different levels included the public in drafting their management plans. It should be noted that all 14 completed national park and nature park management plans are available on their public institution web page, while on the web pages of county public institutions there is only 1 out of 6 completed plans.



Figure 7. Prepared management plans, ongoing work, and public participation

According to the responses received during the interviews, in the **governing councils** of public institutions for nature protection are mostly representatives of political parties. However, some of the members are experts in nature protection, often representatives of the Croatian Environment and Nature Agency, the Ministry, various faculties and others. In only three governing councils there are also representatives of associations, but who have acquired their role in the council on the basis of their expertise in the field of nature protection and who are mostly delegated as individuals rather than as official representatives of associations. The share of experts and associations according to different types of public institutions is shown in Figure 8. Per inclusion of experts, the public institutions of national parks and nature parks are again leading the way.

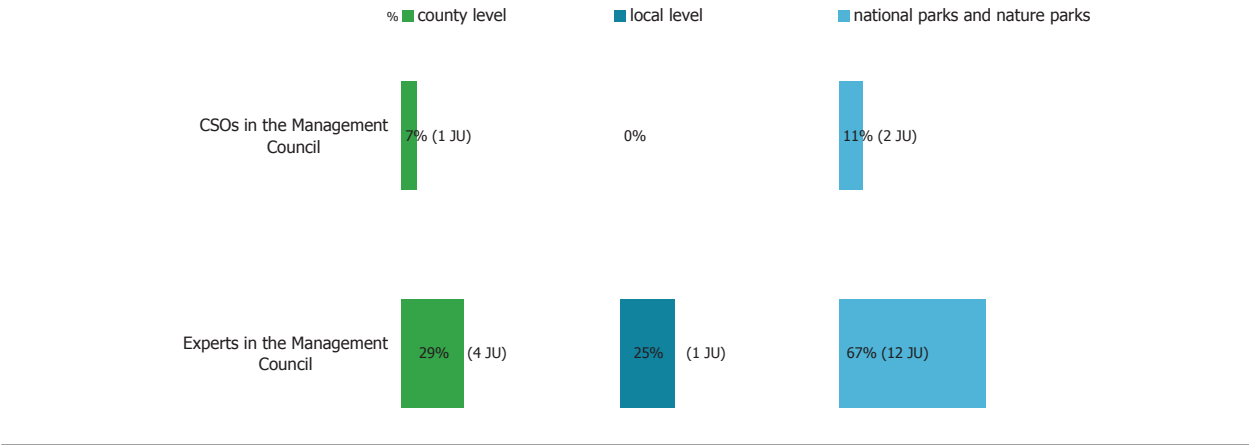


Figure 8. Members of the management councils

When examining the responses related to public participation funding (Figure 9), the accompanying commentary on interviews shows that a large part of public institutions, of those who have pointed out to allocate funds, actually allocate funds to public education and information rather than public participation (e.g. opinion polls, focus group organization, associate councils, public debate organization etc.).

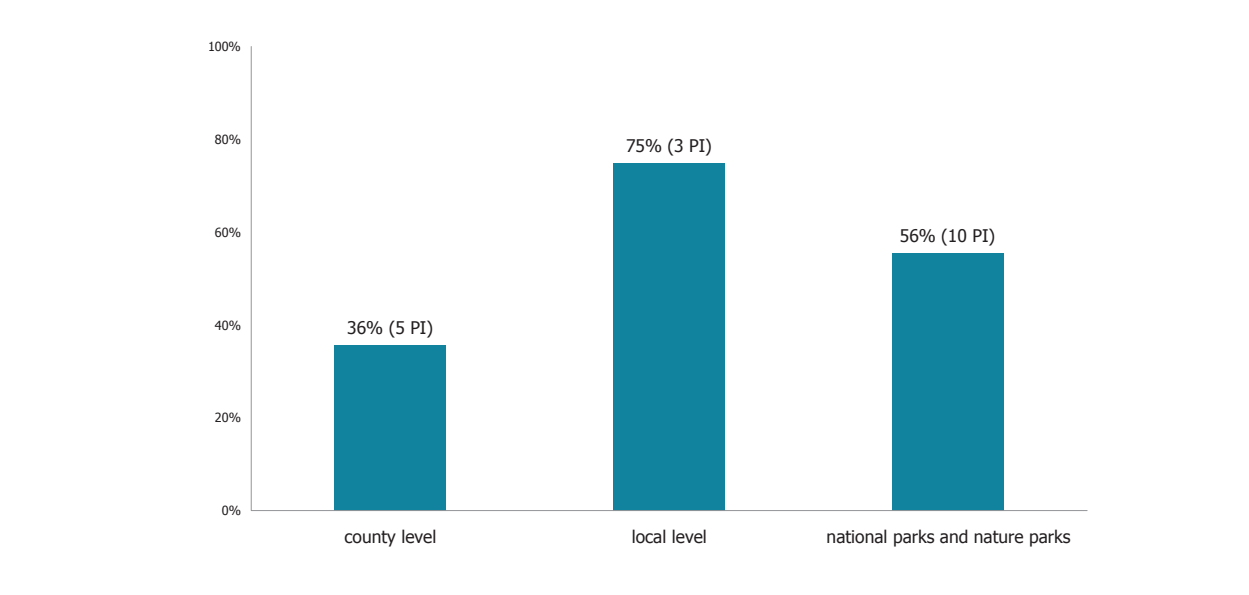


Figure 9. Allocation of financial resources for public participation

The institutions that do not allocate funds have highlighted the lack of human capacity to organize public participation as a reason for that, but also the view that it is not necessary to involve the public.

Associate councils are recognized internationally as an excellent way to involve local communities in the management of protected areas. Therefore, through the interviews it was examined to what extent the public institutions use this recognized tool and model for inclusion of local community in the management of protected areas. Also, it was examined whether there is a strategy of early stakeholder involvement. It is interesting that the largest number of associate councils among the interviewed institutions has been established at the level of public institutions managing nature parks and national parks. However, to the question whether they are considering the establishment of such a council, as many as 7 county institutions showed interest. On the other hand, no interest was noticed in national parks or nature parks which do not yet have an associate council. The results are shown in Figure 10. During the project implementation and after interviewing, we learned that the number of associate councils is higher, as one of the county public institutions⁴ also has a council established, but unfortunately did not participate in the interview. Such a number of established associate councils is partly a result of projects aimed at enhancing cooperation and public participation in nature and environment protection implemented by civil society organizations from the end of 2013 to 2015 within the IPA programme "Support Structures for CSOs at the Regional Level". The priorities of this programme were to strengthen the capacities of civil society organizations for addressing local problems in partnerships with local government bodies, to increase the civic engagement of citizens and to develop innovative models of cooperation between civil society organizations, citizens and local governments in solving local problems.



Figure 10. Advisory Boards and early involvement of stakeholders

The interviews provided answers to questions related to the implementation of **joint activities** with the local community and associations, providing **volunteering** opportunities in a public institution and holding **annual meetings with stakeholders** (Figure 11). It is positive that the vast majority of interviewed public institutions conduct joint activities and provide volunteering opportunities. This is partly the result of established volunteering programs for national parks and nature parks under the "EU Natura 2000 Integration Project – NIP" of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy implemented in 2015 and 2016. Within this project, Association Sunce was a subcontractor for providing support to nature parks and national parks in establishing a volunteering system and developing volunteer programs.

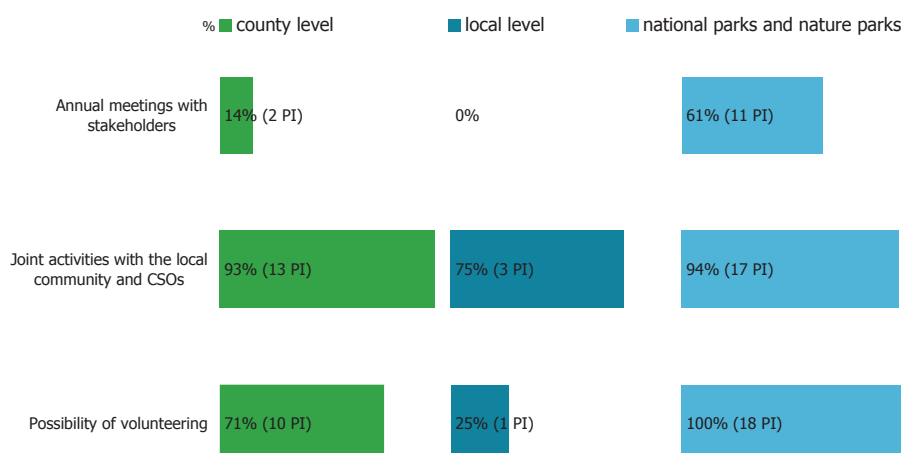


Figure 11. Annual meetings with stakeholders, joint activities with the local community and CSOs, possibility of volunteering

4 Public institution of Sisak-Moslavina County.

During the interviews, the public institutions provided answers to questions about the projects they are currently implementing. Some projects are related to the inclusion of the public and establishment of various associate councils. However, most of the projects that the institutions highlighted are related to the development of infrastructure. What is worrying is the lack of projects aimed at direct conservation measures and protection of areas (Figure 12).

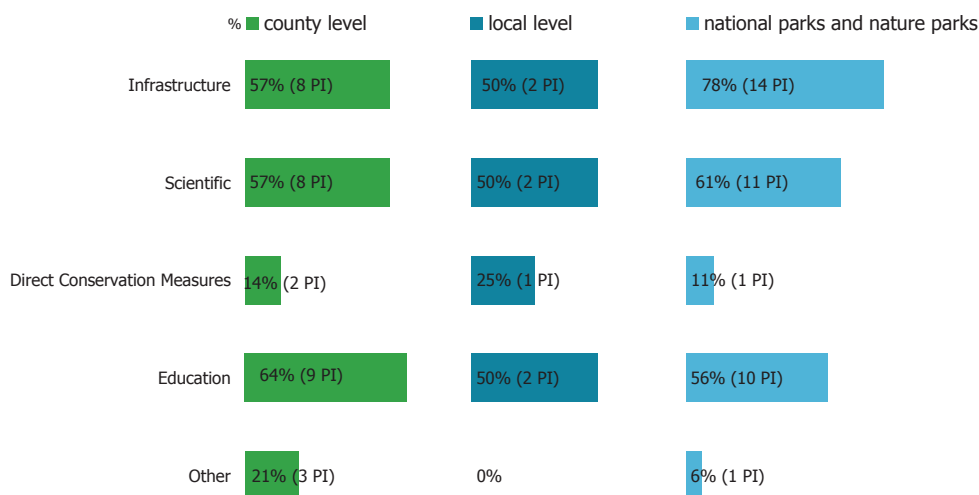


Figure 12. Previous projects of public institutions

Opinions related to **recommendations for enhancing public participation in the management of protected areas and increasing the availability of information related to the work of the institutions** and a large number of interviewed representatives of institutions highlighted their opinions. These recommendations have been examined and discussed within the framework of the joint seminar (see chapter Recommendations from the Seminar). The findings of recommendations collected via the interviews and those during the seminar are summarized in the chapter Conclusions and Recommendations of this document.

SEMINAR RESULTS

The results of the analysis of public participation in the work of protected areas were presented within the seminar "Public Participation in the Work of Protected Areas" held on 9 March 2017 in Zagreb. A total of 60 participants attended the seminar, including the representatives of 19 public institutions responsible for nature protection in Croatia⁵, 5 civil society organizations⁶, the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy, the Croatian Environment and Nature Agency, and representatives of the Škocjan Cave Public Institution from Slovenia as presenters. It is interesting that the seminar was attended by representatives of three public institutions that did not participate in the interview, one from the local, one from the county and one from the level of nature parks and national parks. Apart from the results of the analysis, during the seminar the participants were introduced to the experiences of the associate council of the Public Institution Green Ring from Zagreb County, experiences of CSOs participation in the preparation of strategic documents and the work of public institutions, challenges and experiences related to inclusion of stakeholders in the planning of management processes. Furthermore, new models of public involvement implemented in the protected area Škocjan Cave in Slovenia were presented. The Croatian Environment and Nature Agency presented a structured approach to involvement of stakeholders. The representatives of Associations Sunce and BIOM introduced the participants with experiences in court practice as a mechanism for public participation, while the representative of the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Energy gave a presentation related to public participation through the experience of nature protection inspections

5 Public institutions (PI) participating in the seminar: PI National Park Paklenica, PI Natura Jadera (Zadar County), PI Maksimir (City of Zagreb), PI Natura Histrica (Istria County), PI Nature Park Biokovo, PI for the Management of Park Forest Marjan (City of Split), PI National Park Brijuni, PI Dubrovnik-Nerevta Nature, Nature Park Vransko Lake, PI Green Ring of Zagreb County, PI Koprivnica-Križevci County, PI Nature Park Medvednica, PI Bjelovar-Bilogora County, PI National Park Kornati, PI National Park Mljet, PI Nature Park Telaščica, PI Natura Viva (Karlovac County), PI Nature Park Žumberak Samoborsko gorje, PI National Park Northern Velebit

6 Civil society organizations participating in the seminar: Association Sunce (Split), Society Marjan (Split), Association BIOM (Zagreb), Brod Environmental Society (Slavonski Brod), WWF Adria (Zagreb).

Methodology

In the second part of the seminar, the participants discussed important issues related to public participation in nature protection, from the prism of the present representatives of different sectors. The participatory method World Café was used as a suitable method for the exchange of knowledge and ideas among a large number of participants. In a relaxed atmosphere, through a few conversational cycles, a creative process was initiated with the aim of developing new ideas, acquiring new insights and discovering the possibilities of action. Thus, all participants exchanged ideas, experiences and knowledge related to the following questions:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of public participation in nature protection?
2. Why is the cooperation between public institutions (PIs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) important?
3. How to approach the organization of public participation for it to be effective?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of involving the public through associate councils?
5. How to improve the cooperation between public institutions and citizens and nature protection inspection?

The focus of participants was also on suggesting solutions to the particular perceived disadvantages. Then all the participants in the plenum confirmed the group's findings, based on which recommendations were made.

We bring the conclusions and recommendations per particular issues.

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of public participation in nature protection?

Advantages

The involvement and participation of the public was rated as a gain for everyone. The participants emphasised that public participation facilitates the conduct of nature protection activities in the field, enables a faster flow of information, faster gathering of information from the field and sometimes faster decision-making. At the same time, the public's motivation for nature protection increases. It also opens up opportunities to notice new perspectives for specific problems. By securing public support, the legitimacy of individual decisions and their communication to other sectors strengthens, at the same time strengthening the public's trust and positive attitude towards public institutions managing protected areas. A conducted public participation procedure guarantees the expertise of the decision, as well as its easier subsequent implementation. Public participation also contributes to education of the public and approximation of professional terminology. The public that once had the opportunity to participate in a process conveys the experience to new stakeholders. When the public is involved in drafting plans, there is a need to identify with decisions, making it easier to implement them. Procedures of public involvement contribute to greater transparency of the institution and ultimately to democratization of the society.

Disadvantages

The process of involving the public requires time, which leads to a slowdown in the decision-making process, although in some cases it can also accelerate it, which is evident in the above-mentioned advantages. On the other hand, in some cases, there is an inadequate public interest for participation. Respecting minimal legal procedures leads to the use of inadequate methods of communicating with the public, while blind observance of the form slows down the procedures. In addition, sometimes the people who conduct the procedure are under-educated and the process of involving the public is not carried out advisedly.

It was noticed that often the lack of information of the public about the decision-maker's competence leads to erroneous conclusions about the obligations, which instigates dissatisfaction of the rest of the public. The public sometimes ill-uses the right to access information, and sometimes private interests block decision-making. The lack of interest of the media for this issue is evident, because the environment is oftentimes not an attractive enough topic.

2. Why is the cooperation between public institutions (PIs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) important?

The joint conclusion of the participant was “together we are stronger”. During the exercise the participants emphasised the complementarity of public institutions and environmental CSOs in nature conservation and their synergistic contribution to this goal, as well as the mission and vision of both environmental CSOs and public institutions. It was emphasised that cooperation and joint projects can attract donations for funding of public institutions and CSOs and at the same time save on public funds. Expertise and views are exchanged through cooperation. CSOs can bring together stakeholders, either for inclusion in the process, or for organizing resistance against unfavourable decisions of the competent ministry or county bodies, represent certain stakeholder groups, act as motivators, and as “eyes and ears” in the field. CSOs have a certain level of flexibility in their work because they are not obliged to demanding procedures, they are independent, dynamic, adaptable and networked, they are the carriers of avant-garde and innovative ideas and approaches. They can also be support to public institutions. CSOs are also identified as professional associates for specific issues. The professional support that some environmental organizations can provide is related to a variety of issues in which they are specialized, such as legal, biological or managerial issues and various other aspects of work. CSOs can be a corrective factor for public institutions in decision-making and protection implementation, alleviate political pressure on public institutions, facilitate communication with the general public, act as a link between public institutions and the local population, facilitate processes and communication between public institutions and the relevant ministry, transfer experience and problems among public institutions. On the other hand, public institutions can “channel” critical information towards CSOs which can exert pressure on state administration through such information. Environmental CSOs may also initiate litigation processes in cases of damage to protected areas.

3. How to approach the organization of public participation for it to be effective?

A common conclusion is that the organization of public participation needs to be approached **strategically, proactively and locally, and make a long-term public participation plan**. It is necessary to carry out targeted communication towards interest groups in order to encourage them to get involved. On the other hand, it is necessary to encompass as many different stakeholder groups, including those who are, as well as those who are against certain decisions/actions/solutions. Effective public participation should be geared towards reaching agreement and achieving compromise with stakeholders, as only in this way can the long-term goals of nature protection be achieved. Repressive measures are rated as unsuccessful. In order to achieve effective public participation, it is necessary to find the time and capacities; human and material, for a planned approach. Also, public involvement should be set as a priority. It was concluded that associations could be a link between public institutions and the local community and the importance of their support to the work of public institutions was recognized, and is therefore necessary to acquire. Possible ways are to invite associations through the media to participate in the development of management plans, as well as to **include associations**, along with other local community representatives, in the body drafting the management plan. **Organizing various events** together with associations was recognized as useful for deepening cooperation. When approaching the local community, it is important to find a positive and useful topic that is relevant to the local community and thusly attract, find positive emotions and build local patriotism for natural heritage. Introduction of public acknowledgments and awards, support of local initiatives and incentives for the local population, with the purpose of subsequent insurance of self-sustainability, are recognized ways to build cooperation and a generally positive social environment.

Establishing boards and councils is recognized as an effective tool for achieving public involvement. The stakeholders gain in importance, which increases the motivation for participation. To improve the work of these councils, it is proposed to draw up a work report at the end of each year as well as a work plan for the following year, which are proposed to the competent public institution. More on the work of these councils was discussed under question 4.

Communication methods were recognized as extremely important for achieving effective public participation and therefore the participants discussed this as well. It was concluded that it is important to adapt the processes and ways of communication to the local community, gather stakeholders, present what is wanted and require feedback.

It is necessary to report on the work, but at the level appropriate for the local community. It was concluded that information is mostly carried out through web pages and media, some public institutions carry out county prefects press conferences for information on activities. Also, the participants emphasised that although there is a need for holding meetings with the local community, such meetings are not organized.

Education of local and wider public on democracy, civic education, communication and coordination, including education of public sector employees has been recognized as **one of the key factors** for achieving effective public

participation. The participants emphasised that it is necessary for education to start early on; in kindergartens and schools, therefore the importance of establishing and maintaining cooperation between public institutions and kindergartens, schools and universities was recognized. Marking important dates in nature protection through public events and organizing open door events are recognized as useful in public education. Also, some participants emphasised the need to design an education programme for children and adults, which should be free for the local population.

4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of involving the public through associate councils?

*At the international level, the need to include local communities in the management of protected areas has been recognized, and associate councils are one of such tools. **Associate councils are bodies made up of stakeholders interested in sustainable use of protected areas with special emphasis on the local community.** The purpose of establishment of associate councils is to strengthen the local community's role in the management and planning of sustainable development, as well as to promote cross-sectoral cooperation and communication between institutions and the local community, and promote transparency and social responsibility. The councils work on strategic planning of sustainable development and implementation of activities in the execution of strategic documents. The work of the councils is based on the principle of non-partisan, non-profit and transparent action and focus on the work for the general public good.⁷*

Through research within the project, it was established that 7 public institutions have experience in the work of associate councils, of which two are on the county level, 4 on the level of nature parks, and 1 on the level of national parks⁸. I.e., 19% of interviewed institutions confirmed the existence of associate councils in their area. Institutions on the local level do not have established councils. It is important to note that the interviews showed a certain lack of understanding of a part of the institutions what in fact is the significance and role of associate councils, hence the implementation of further education in the form of various workshops and seminars and the provision of material, such as this document, are of paramount importance.

During the interviews and seminars, the advantages of establishing associate councils, the interest of public institutions for their establishment and the key obstacles to those activities have been identified as largely related to the lack of human resources.

Advantages

The advantages of associate councils fit into the benefits of participation in general (see question 1). It is thus stressed that associate councils allow the **exchange of experiences**, i.e. more views, perspectives, ideas and the avoiding a narrow view of the issue. Furthermore, associate councils encourage the **sense of belonging to the community** in the local people. Namely, the local population feels involved and respected and is therefore more willing to assist and cooperate in other aspects of public institutions' work and joint achievement of managerial goals. Raising awareness and involving the local population in nature protection contributes to creating a sense of pride and responsibility, i.e. "all protecting together". Associate council contributes to a better understanding of the public institutions' work, to **increasing transparency** and represents a long-term bridge between institutions and the local population. By equally involving influential and less influential stakeholders in the work of associate councils, it is evident that in making decisions that affect different groups everyone's voice is equally important. The associate council can provide **timely information** to both parties; the local population knows what decisions which directly affect them are being made, and the public institution has a better insight into the situation in the field. Associate councils enable greater reach in the distribution of information and facilitate communication with the stakeholders. If key members of the council communicate with certain groups in the local community, they are much better informed about the activities of the public institution. In order to emphasise the advantages of founding and work of the council, it is necessary to organize the work of the council well.

⁷ Together for the nature and environment – A guide for active citizenship in environmental protection and cooperation between the local government and citizens, Association Sunce, Split, 2015

⁸ Among 36 interviewed public institutions, the following were noted for having councils: Public Institution "Natura Slavonica", Brod-Posavina County (<http://natura-slavonica.hr/hr/>), PI Green Ring, Zagreb County (<http://priroda-zagrebacka.hr/>), PI National Park Kornati (<http://priroda-zagrebacka.hr/>), PI "Nature Park Medvednica" (<http://www.pp-medvednica.hr/>), PI Nature Park Telašćica (<http://www.pp-telascica.hr/>), PI Nature Park Lonjsko Field (<http://www.pp-lonjsko-polje.hr/>), PI Nature Park "Lastovo Archipelago" (<http://pp-lastovo.hr/>)

Disadvantages

Based on the experience of the work of associate councils established in Croatia and on the presented example from Slovenia, the disadvantages related to the work of such councils were also identified during the seminar workshop, where the participants also focused on possible solutions to overcome the observed disadvantages. It was emphasised that the councils are not legally formalized. As the rights and obligations of associate council members are not defined and have no legal merit, this can be a potential source of problems in implementing decisions. There is no defined mechanism of decision-making; e.g. in which cases the decision of the associate council will be made/rejected/adopted or in what way the decision/suggestion will be taken into account. As a solution to these disadvantages, it was proposed to adopt some kind of Ordinance on the work of the councils. It is important to note that some councils established in Croatia have guidelines for work ⁹, however, what has proven to be a problem is the implementation of decisions that are not within the competence of the council itself. Part of the disadvantages is related to the members themselves and to the structure of the council. Namely, it was emphasized that narrowly focused attitudes, views and interests of individuals could prevent the reaching of consensus. Furthermore, there is a danger that “saboteurs” will be referred to a position in the associate council to promote their interests at the expense of others. Also, oftentimes the persons who have the greatest influence on the local community are not prepared to work in the direction of nature protection. It was stressed that it is difficult to predict the reactions of individuals involved in the council and therefore a good facilitator should be provided. Also, all members of the council should be given the time to get used to working together, and choose people ready for dialogue and cooperation in the council, i.e. avoid conflicting persons. When selecting members of the council, it is recommended to use the bottom-up approach, i.e. to try to agree first with individuals who demonstrate the potential for constructive engagement and then suggest to their organizations/groups to nominate them as their representatives in the council.

It was pointed out that in cases where the managed areas are particularly large or fragmented by a geographic barrier, the population in one part of the area is often uninterested and sometimes should not have an influence on the problems and discussions related to the other part of the area. It was also pointed out that one council model is not equally applicable to areas of different sizes and locations. As a solution, instead of one comprehensive council, it is proposed to organize local (or thematic) councils. It should be borne in mind that the establishment of such councils entails the need for additional investment of time and resources for the gathering and coordination of such councils by the public institution.

It is also important to emphasise that in the field of management of individual public institutions many local government units have different political parties in power and their possible disagreements could adversely affect the work of the associate council and thus potentially sabotage the work of the public institution. It is therefore proposed to include persons who are politically unaffiliated in the council, which is sometimes difficult. However, we believe that by choosing the people who are ready for dialogue and cooperation and by using facilitators during council meetings, it is possible to overcome these disadvantages. One of the options is for all members of the council to sign a statement that they are committed to the mission of the public institution and that they are not guided by their own, partisan, economic or any other interests.

The participants pointed out that it is difficult to foresee in advance who is needed in the council and that there is a danger that the stakeholders which might be proven particularly relevant in specific situations could be left out. Therefore, as a solution, instead of a single council which decides on all matters, it is proposed to establish thematic councils and/or identify relevant persons and/or experts who would be called for consultations and thematic meetings if needed.

Some participants emphasized that the model of public involvement through councils is still unacceptable in certain areas and that it is necessary to look broader and look for other models and approaches. Namely, the participants concluded that the Croatian society is still far from offering “self-realization” to council members as everyone is still mostly looking after their own benefits and that therefore it is necessary to find a way to present those benefits to them (especially in temperamental and divided communities). It was pointed out that it is necessary to use the already existing local habits (ways of communication, tradition) i.e. to address the local population in the “local language” and not firstly invest energy in changing the mentality overnight. A solution for some local communities may be finding a less formal system of exchange of experiences and opinions, or at least designing a less formal title for the council.

A possibility of turning the associate council into something that exists “only on paper”, that is called twice a year and has no active function, something whose members are in no way active in achieving the common goals for which the

⁹ The associate councils of NP Lastovo Archipelago and NP Telašćica, established within the project “Together for the nature and environment” and Association’s Sunce SEAMed project, implemented between 2013 and 2016, have developed the guidelines for council work, available in the guide “Together for the nature and environment”.

council has been appointed, was recognized. Solutions proposed are to establish continuous communication with regular meetings, communication via mailing lists and additional council assemblies in cases of need for discussion of a particular burning subject. It was also emphasised that it is important to try to offer members of the council a certain form of self-realization that will motivate them to participate in the work of the associate council in the long term. Although it is mentioned above that we are still far from it, it is still recognized that this is the path to follow.

In conclusion, what has proven necessary is to ensure the performance of the council, to adjust the work of the council to the conditions and specificities of the local community in which it is established, to provide a good organization of council work, to provide financial means, facilitators, to take account of the selection of council members and to provide some form of reward to members to motivate them for the work in the council, to involve experts or other relevant local community representatives for specific issues.

5. How to improve the cooperation between public institutions and citizens and nature protection inspection?

Review of the nature protection inspection through the Green Telephone work experience, Head of the Green Telephone of the Association Sunce, Ivana Krstulović Baković, LL.M.

In the legal system of the Republic of Croatia, inspection is the bond between the citizens and the state when a problem related to nature protection occurs or is noticed. The Nature Protection Act prescribes the competence of nature protection inspectors in controlling the legality of the conduct of individuals and legal entities in the sense of material regulation of that act. If anyone fails to comply with the provisions of the Nature Protection Act, the nature protection inspector is obliged to impose the appropriate sanction for improper conduct. Namely, the idea of having a state service with such powers is in the quick and economical addressing of the problematic situations when the judicial processing of punishable conduct would require the execution of overly long and expensive procedures. However, the practice often shows something quite different - instead of problems that are quickly and efficiently resolved, we encounter the ignoring of certain problems or resolving the reports for too long. Both situations pose a danger to the object that Act protects - nature, and themselves are contrary to the principles of the that Act. Namely, over the years of practice, it has been noticed that the inspection services are under-capacitated and thus unable to efficiently go out on the field and respond to individual reports in a timely fashion. The result is the impossibility of identifying the perpetrator, which means not punishing the harmful behaviour and not repairing the damage. So, reporting the problem in this case loses every meaning and the citizens' trust in the inspection service is seriously compromised. Often times, the priorities in the procedure and the criterion by one problem is more or less important or urgent are unclear. Such arbitrary decision-making often entails connotations associated with favouring individuals or legal entities, and provokes a distrust amongst citizens which may or may not be accurate. However, it is certainly advisable to publicly announce the criteria or plans to ensure that all citizens have the same information and as not to jeopardize the trust. Giving feedback on inspections carried out to the applicant who has requested rarely happens voluntarily. More often, the applicants are forced to access the tools available to them in accordance with the Act on the Right of Access to Information, and use deadlines and fines to dig up the information when the inspection took place and what were its findings. We believe that the information about what has been done is important to the person who has reported the problem and that it ultimately completes the process of inspection supervision upon citizen's reporting. If there is no feedback or report, we do not see the purpose of reporting. Availability of information and accessibility of the service is a problem that is underlined by insufficient capacities and insufficient funds. However, although seemingly of technical nature, the problem is very important for the system because the right of access to information is the first pillar of public participation in environmental and nature protection and it creates a prerequisite for any further meaningful action of citizens. Citizens are the voice of the environment, the voice of nature, and as allies with the nature protection inspector they have the same goal - protection and prevention of adverse behaviour. The openness of inspection services to citizens in terms of developing a method of dealing with reports involving information of citizens and free flow of information would have multiple benefits for the operation of that same service, which ultimately means the protection of nature of the Republic of Croatia.

These precise issues were discussed during the seminar and suggestions for improving the cooperation between public institutions and citizens and nature protection inspection were identified accordingly:

- Creating a simple and easily accessible nature protection inspection service for citizens' reporting (e.g. on a web page, application development...).
- Establishment of a telephone for citizens' reports that would include all inspections (construction, nature protection, environmental protection...).
- Popularization of nature conservation and nature protection inspection through manifestations (e.g. Nature Guard Day, Open Doors Days, etc.).

- Popularization of all inspections and their authorities through a campaign in the media.
- Organizing the education of children in schools related to the nature protection inspection (e.g. a classroom with a nature protection inspector or a nature guard).
- Organizing the education of local population on the function of nature guards and nature protection inspectors.
- Ensuring the recognizability of nature protection inspectors amongst the public (e.g. creating uniforms).
- Designing a communication strategy for nature protection inspection towards different stakeholders.
- Organizing regular meetings of public institutions with nature protection inspection, for the purpose of improving communication.
- Strengthening the communication between the judiciary system and the nature protection inspection.
- Improvement of legal regulations for the purpose of more efficient work of nature protection inspection and nature guards.
- Removing administrative barriers to nature protection inspection, in order to accelerate going out on the field.
- Increasing the number of nature protection inspectors.
- Introduction of the nature protection inspector's watch duty for the purpose of timely reaction.

Participants also pointed out that the associate council is useful in alleviating some of the environmental inspection's presented problems, or can speed up the entire process of misdemeanour reporting.



*The Green Telephone is a free tool for all citizens who wish to report an environmental or nature-related problem, but do not know whom to contact. The Green Telephone network currently consists of 9 associations; Green Action from Zagreb, Eko Pan from Karlovac, Environmental Society Žmergo from Opatija, Green Istria from Pula, Sunce from Split, ZEO Nobilis from Čakovec, Green Osijek from Osijek, Eko Zadar from Zadar and Krka from Knin. The network members use a unique telephone number 072 123 456 and the reports are directed to the nearest association. The purpose of the Green Telephone is to encourage citizens to actively participate in environmental protection and to encourage competent institutions to effectively address environmental issues. The visibility of this service, despite its almost 20 years of work, is still insufficient amongst citizens, but amongst various institutions and services, as evidenced by the results of this seminar, and in the forthcoming period it should be intensified.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The recommendations arising from the performed activities can be grouped into several key areas.

Education

Further education of all participants in the public participation process, citizens, employees of public institutions and the media is needed to ensure successful public participation. Education should include raising public awareness of the importance of nature protection and the benefits of public participation. The public should also be educated about legislation related to the right to information and participation. It is also necessary to point out the benefits of public participation as well as examples of good practice. Therefore, such documents are a valuable source of information.

Communication and tools for involvement of the public

There is a need to implement education on communication methods and develop aids such as communication manuals.

In order to effectively communicate, public institutions should ensure transparency in their work and decision-making. Therefore, we encourage the use analysis results presented in this document and improvement of web pages. Communication can also be carried out via other channels (e.g. e-mail), but depending on the local community it is necessary to find an appropriate form of communication. It is necessary to organize more meetings, workshops, actions. But in order to achieve this, it is necessary for the actors involved to understand the key concepts related to public participation.

Associate councils are recognized as an excellent tool for involving the public in the work of protected areas, but their establishment and operation requires resources and capacities, especially of public institutions that most often need to coordinate the work of such councils. It is therefore necessary to plan the resources and personnel for activities related to the work of associate councils.

Given that public institutions are managed by governing councils, one of the recommendations for improving the work of the councils and involving the public in the management of protected areas is the obligation for at least one member of the governing council to be a representative of civil society organizations.

Planning the involvement of the public

Although during the course of the research as well as during the seminar the need for implementation of legal regulations related to public participation was emphasised, a large number of those involved emphasised the importance of planning activities related to public participation to ensure early public involvement. One way is to design a strategy at the level of the public institution, which would define the dynamics of public involvement for each public institution, and approach early public involvement in some key processes in a timely fashion. Through the planning of public involvement, it is possible to plan the necessary financial and human resources, which reduces the possibility of various problems related to the lack of those resources. Also, activities are planned according to available possibilities, trying to achieve the most within the current and anticipated future circumstances. Planning also enables setting priorities related to public involvement, defining key stakeholders, meaningful public involvement with specific proposals as well as the synergy of different processes.

Cooperation with civil society organizations

Since the cooperation with environmental civil society organizations is recognized as extremely important, the need to consider CSOs as partners in the implementation of various activities in strategic and management plans for protected areas is emphasised as a recommendation for public institutions. Partnerships can also be achieved through cooperation on projects and engagement of CSOs in certain activities for which the public institutions do not have the necessary capacities. .

Conclusions

Through its activities, the project "Responsible for Nature" contributed to the further development of participatory democracy in Croatia.

Namely, all stakeholders involved in the analysis process as well as the participants of the seminar had the opportunity to educate and inform themselves about the importance of public participation, the benefits of public involvement and the obligations arising from international and national legislation. The activities also contributed to the strengthening of cooperation between civil society organizations and public institutions for the management of protected areas.

In recent years there has been a rise in the level of knowledge and experience, as well as the improvement of public participation in environmental and nature protection, which is the result of synergy processes. However, there are still individuals and institutions who are unaware of the importance and benefits of involving the public. There is a wide range of public institutions experience that actually goes from complex public involvement to disabling access to information. Examples of associate councils were found in county public institutions as well as nature parks and national parks, but associate councils were not found in local public institutions. Associations play a key role here through their involvement in the relevant processes, gaining and dissemination of experiences of their implementation, constant pressure to involve the public when it has been left out, as well as through advocacy to improve the public participation process by using examples of good practice.

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