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Management of the National Parks in the context of cooperation with the local stakeholders

Abstract: When searching for an optimal model for managing National Parks in Poland, especially in view of the planned modification of the law, it is necessary to assess attitudes and expectations between local stakeholder groups. Surveys conducted in 2020 made it possible to collect the opinions of representatives of the parks' surroundings and their employees on the subject of relations between parks and the socio-economic environment. The obtained results positively verified the hypothesis that nature protection policy requires changes to the management of the National Parks through effective legal and financial instruments, including those generating consensus of benefits for the local economy and stakeholders, while maintaining the objectives of environmental protection.

Keywords: national park, sustainable management, local community, environmental protection

1. Introduction

This article aims to present the results of research carried out in 2020 as part of the project "Building a new quality in the National Parks taking into account the expectations and potential of the socio-economic environment" funded by the DIALOG program of the then Minister of Science and Higher Education. National parks, functioning in specific social, economic, political-legal, technological, and environmental conditions, must be aware of the opportunities and threats they pose to the implementation of statutory objectives, without violating the rights of the environment and socio-economic development of the local stakeholders. A detailed analysis of the theses raised during the study made it possible to identify current, main problems that may result in the emergence of conflicts, the solution of which should be included in the modification of the legal status of the parks and the nature protection.

Based on the diagnosis of the problems it is possible to formulate recommendations in terms of management processes in a way that

eliminates or mitigates the emergence of potential conflicts.

National Parks in Poland are frequently touched upon in scientific studies and, from the point of view of the subject under discussion, it is important to investigate their relations with local stakeholders. It is apparent that without at least partial support of the local community it is impossible to effectively protect nature in the National Parks. Hence, in order to ensure more effective nature conservation and relatively conflict-free management of tourist facilities, there is a necessity to establish scientific foundations for the operation of National Parks (Mika et al., 2015). Considerable research interest in the issue of relations results from the growing sense of subjectivity of citizens living around the National Parks and the admission of the public to participate in proceedings concerning projects that may affect the nature of protected areas. In the study of the relationship between the National Parks and the social environment we can distinguish the following groups of issues (Olko, 2011; Hibszer, 2013):

the idea of the National Park and its functioning in the perception of the local community, threats to the National Park in the opinion of the residents of the municipalities in the immediate vicinity, benefits and difficulties arising from the proximity of the National Park to the residents of local municipalities, as well as the valuation of the relationship between the National Park and the local authorities, and the National Park and the local community.

Numerous studies have found a high level of acceptance for nature protection in the National Park adjacent to one's own commune, but at the same time there is a lack of willingness to give up or limit one's own rights in favour of nature protection. Local authorities of communes evaluate the value of the National Park definitely higher than inhabitants of the buffer zone (Domański, 1991; Bożętka, 1997; Komorowska, 2000; Górecki, et al. 2007; Królikowska, 2007; Kozieł and Kozieł, 2008; Hibszer, 2013; Walas et al., 2018; Pawlusiński, 2020), who do not accept restrictions in terms of investment or making profit from the existence of the park (Komorowska, 2000; Partyka, 2000;

Górecki et al., 2002; Hibszer, 2013). Hence, the "local" viewpoint cannot be ignored in the management of the National Park, and numerous studies and analyses (Domański, 1991; Partyka, 2000; Radecki, 2002; Bołtromiuk, 2003; Mochola, 2003; Wodzikowski, 2005; Skawiński, 2006; Królikowska, 2007; Ginalski, 2008; Hibszer, 2008; *Funkcjonowanie parków narodowych*, 2013; Mika et al., 2015; Babczuk and Kachniarz, 2015a, 2015b; Walas, 2019) have formulated several recommendations, inter alia:

- managing the development of relations with the social environment and downstream stakeholders,
- strategic planning,
- managing organizational structure of parks and nature protection,
- adjusting the system of financial management to the real needs and obligations imposed on parks,
- establishing a functional area under the name of Sustainable Development Area (OZR), as a modern solution for public management (Walas et al., 2018).

2. Area descriptions, methods and material studied

The subject of the study is national parks in their socio-economic environment, understood as the area of adjacent administrative units with their inhabiting populations that interact socio-economically with the National Parks.

The scope of subjects covered employees of the National Parks at various levels of competence, including directors, as well as persons representing the local stakeholders: representatives of the local government, entrepreneurs, inhabitants not directly related to the park, and representatives of social organizations and institutions that interact with the park.

The hypothesis put forward is as follows: nature conservation policy requires the modernization of the National Park management through effective legal and financial instruments, including those that support social competences and generate consensus of benefits for the local economy and the protection of environmental values.

The following research questions were posed for the research process:

1. What do stakeholders of the socio-economic environment expect from parks?
2. Is the scale of conflicts large enough to disturb the economic development of communes in the park buffer zone?
3. Do attitudes of stakeholders in the socio-economic background of National Parks allow them to pursue their mission in the current legal and financial conditions?
4. Does the current level of cooperation and mutual understanding hold the potential to allow for coexistence, mutual respect, and sustainable development of the area?

A quantitative study was carried out in the first quarter of 2020 on a sample of 380 representatives of stakeholders in the immediate environment, supplemented by responses from 103 employees of 20 parks (Fig. 1) The selection of the sample of respondents from the environment was non-probabilistic in nature and was

conducted using the CAWI technique based on own and obtained databases. In the sample of environment representatives there were

respondents representing the buffer zones of all National Parks from 9% to 2% of each sample size.

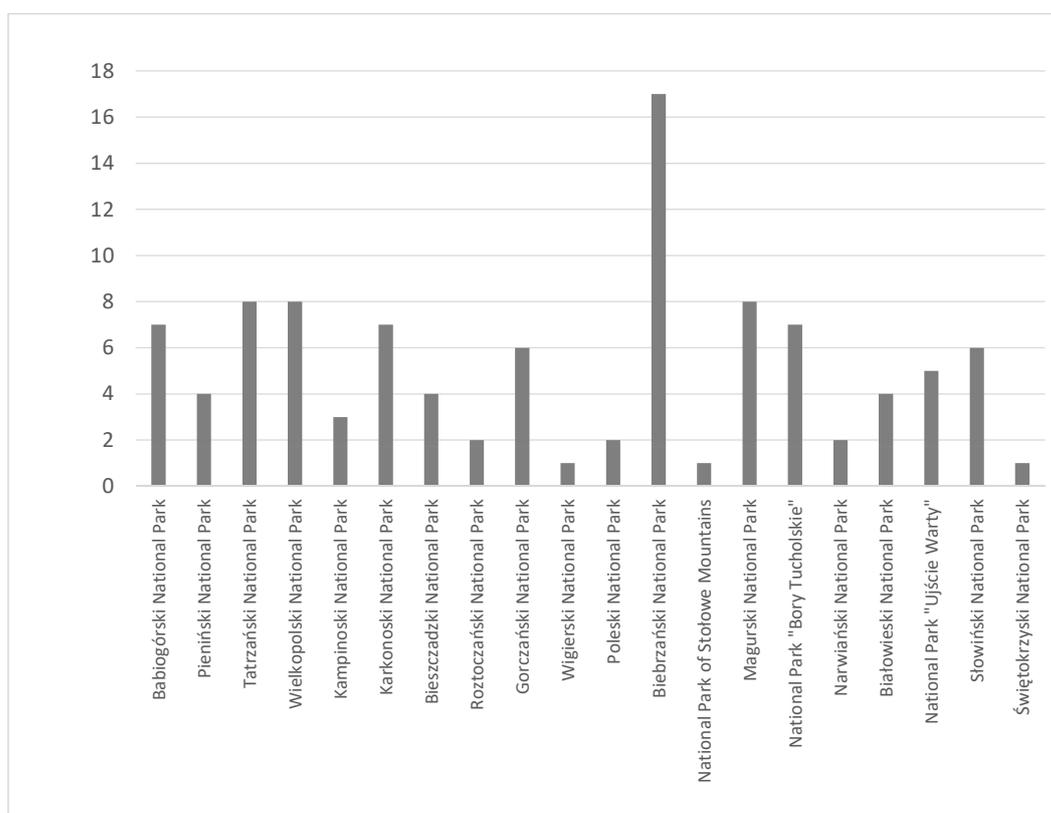


Figure 1. The number of employees of National Parks who took part in the study (Source: Authors' own research)

The structure of the environment respondents included various groups of stakeholders from local government officials, employees of broadly understood tourism industry, trade,

education, and entrepreneurs. The detailed structure of the surveyed representatives of the local stakeholders is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-professional structure of the surveyed representatives of the local stakeholders (Source: Authors' own research)

Profession	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
Farmer not involved in additional businesses such as tourism	22	6%
Farmer involved in other businesses such as tourism	15	4%
Municipal clerk	48	13%
Teacher, academic teacher	39	10%
Hotelier/apartment owner	70	18%
Other tourism services	58	15%
Salaried employee	32	8%
Commercial company owner	50	13%
Entrepreneur	38	10%
Not working (student, unemployed, pensioner)	8	2%

3. Results

The necessity and inevitability of cooperation with the local government, indicated in many analyses to date, but also criticised, is assessed well by the representatives of the local stakeholders in this study. As it is presented in Table

2, 90% of respondents attributed level 3 and 4 to the indicator of cooperation between local governments and the management of National Parks.

Table 2. Indicator of the degree of cooperation between local governments and the management of the National Park (1 – does not cooperate at all, 4 – fully cooperates) (Source: Authors' own research)

Degree of cooperation	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents
1	11	3%
2	28	7%
3	204	54%
4	137	36%

The authors confronted respondents with several theses without informing them whether the statements were correct or con-

tradictory. The assessed level of their acceptance became the basis for answering the research questions.

Table 3. Acceptance level of the theses (Source: Authors' own research)

Thesis	I agree completely		I agree		I disagree		I disagree completely		Don't know/ don't have an opinion	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Presence of the National Park has no influence on economic activity	3	1	37	10	289	76	37	10	14	4
National Park increases tourist attractiveness of the commune	188	49	177	47	8	2	4	1	3	1
The Park should inhibit increasing pressure to develop attractive landscape areas in the park or its immediate vicinity	158	42	174	46	22	6	11	3	15	4
The Park should be able to acquire private land	98	2	200	53	32	8	14	4	36	9
Land in the immediate vicinity of the park should be purchased in order to create a buffer zone, in which the park will take care of the landscape	106	28	187	49	32	8	19	5	36	9
Through its activities The Park competes with residents in order to gain income	37	10	123	32	108	28	33	9	79	21
Most inhabitants of the commune are aware that the Park positively influences the economy of local communities not only through tourism, but also, e.g. through employment, purchase of materials or services	83	22	240	63	27	7	14	4	16	4

Municipality supports the national park in any way possible	58	15	255	67	27	7	7	2	33	9
There should be no pressure for development and investment in the park or its buffer zone for natural reasons. This has to be accepted	156	41	181	48	20	5	11	3	12	3
The National Parks should be legally integrated with their socio-economic environment, e.g. in the form of a special socio-economic zone	87	23	256	67	13	3	6	2	18	5
Conflicts of interest with the socio-economic environment of the park are inevitable, regardless of the legal status of the park	12	3	68	18	224	59	33	9	43	11
Municipality, park authorities and inhabitants should reach a compromise for development and cooperation	219	58	134	35	14	4	8	2	5	1
There is a need to extend the buffer zone of the park for natural reasons	49	13	220	58	43	11	17	4	51	13
There is a need to expand the National Park	55	14	199	52	49	13	22	6	55	14
Activities in the area of the park result from legal regulations, i.e. nothing can be done there that is contrary to the interest of nature protection	207	54	139	37	15	4	6	2	13	3
Owners of private land within the Park boundaries should have their share in the eventual profits of the Park	51	13	211	56	36	9	15	4	67	18
If the landowners were to benefit from the profits resulting from the trail, they should also participate in the costs of trail maintenance	60	16	211	56	34	9	19	5	56	15
The Park Directorate should lift restrictions on tourist and sport movement in the Park	30	8	113	30	180	47	39	10	18	5
In the National Park nature protection overrides any other possible activity	275	72	77	20	11	3	11	3	6	2
If it were not for the National Parks, nature would be irretrievably destroyed	291	77	57	15	17	4	8	2	7	2
I am not interested in the state of nature conservation, but in my family's standard of living	14	4	22	6	282	74	47	12	15	4
I am willing to have my rights (property, mobility) restricted because of the existence of the National Park	36	9	251	66	38	10	30	8	25	7
The National Park is needed	235	62	120	32	15	4	7	2	3	1
Conflict between the local community and the park is due to legal regulations	8	2	54	14	223	59	16	4	79	21

Let us assume that legal regulations concerning the National Parks change and most decisions are made „in Warsaw”, and the park management only executes them.	1	0	17	4	94	25	236	62	32	8
The National Park in my area is not needed	8	2	20	5	103	27	242	64	7	2
Communes adjacent to a park should receive a government subsidy, but in return they shall respect the park tasks and even restrictions	51	13	274	72	16	4	14	4	25	7
Parks have too small a budget for their tasks	30	8	71	19	173	46	13	3	93	24
Each National Park is internally well managed	5	5	31	30	38	37	5	5	24	23
Each Park should have a strategic document (other than the protection plan)	16	16	46	45	22	21	4	4	15	15
The Park has legal instruments that make it possible to curb the increasing pressure to develop attractive landscape areas within the parks or in their immediate vicinity	10	10	31	30	33	32	19	18	10	10
Lack of a coherent, cyclical and systematized system of monitoring and inventory of nature components in the park	6	6	40	39	31	30	9	9	17	17
There is no general strategy for land acquisition in the parks	13	13	47	46	17	17	3	3	23	22
There is a problem concerning land inventory in accordance with the requirements of the law on accounting	9	9	30	29	8	8	4	4	52	50
The number of employees in the Park Service should be correlated with factors, such as: the area of the park, the length of tourist trails, protection activities, or the number of tourists visiting the park	25	24	46	45	17	17	6	6	9	9
Deadline for the Minister's approval of protection plans is appropriate	2	2	14	14	29	28	25	24	33	32
Lack of a basic planning document makes it difficult to properly justify the position of the Park Director when agreeing on plans and decisions regarding the management of the buffer zone and the areas of the park owned by other entities or private persons	17	17	58	56	8	8	2	2	18	17
Expenditure structure creates a clear risk of excessive commercialization of National Parks to obtain higher revenues necessary for functioning	26	25	46	45	12	12	4	4	15	15
The Park Director can authorize in the area of the National Park deviations from prohibitions, if it is justified	16	16	60	58	18	17	4	4	5	5

The respondents seem to fully accept the need to protect nature in their surroundings, but do they accept the consequences like restrictions on economic activity, priorities for development?

According to the data presented in Table 3, a vast majority of respondents indicate that the presence of the National Park influences the economic activity in its surroundings (in total 86% of answers) and, what is important from the nature protection point of view, it attests that its presence is needed (in total 94% of answers), which was confirmed in the further part of the research via the control thesis “National park in my surroundings is not needed”, with which in total 91% of respondents disagreed. What is more, it was also indicated that nature protection is important from the point of view of socio-economic environment, and park management should not lift limitations for

tourist and sport movement (in total 57% of responses). The statements implying that nature protection in the park is of utmost importance, and that without it nature would be irrevocably destroyed were both confirmed (accordingly, in total 92% of responses).

Analysing further theses of the study, it is clear that local stakeholders see a positive impact of the presence of the park on the local economy (in total 85% of responses) and acknowledge the fact that it increases the attractiveness of tourism in the community (in total 96% of responses). According to the opinions of respondents it is clear that constant cooperation with national parks is imperative, and it is necessary to work out a compromise between development and cooperation, and also that parks should be legally integrate with their socio-economic environment (accordingly, in total 93% and 90% of responses).

Table 4. Theses of relations with the surroundings of The National Park (Source: Authors' own research)

Thesis	I agree completely	I agree	I disagree	I disagree completely	I have no opinion
Municipalities should contribute to the operation of National Parks, and not receive a subsidy for being located in the park	0%	18%	36%	9%	36%
The park should be able to have more influence on the shape of the nature protection plan and protection tasks	64%	18%	9%	0%	9%
The park management model should allow for greater public participation in management	0%	50%	17%	8%	25%
There is a distinct lack of different management tools that would be proceduralised at the central level	42%	17%	8%	17%	17%
Conflict of local interests and park tasks is inevitable	33%	25%	25%	17%	0%

In accordance with the data presented in Table 4, respondents indicated that municipalities should receive a subsidy for being located in the area of the park (in total 45% of responses) or they had no opinion in this matter (36% of responses). It was also confirmed that a park should have more possibilities to influence the shape of the nature protection plan and protection tasks. Most of the respondents also indicated that the management model of National Park should allow for a greater extent of public participation in management (50% of

responses). More than half of the respondents indicated a lack of management tools that would be formalized at the central level. It is interesting to note that in relation to the data in Table 3 at this stage of the study, the issue of inevitable conflict between local interests and park tasks divided the respondents in almost half – 58% of the respondents confirmed this thesis, while 42% rejected it.

Numerous studies emphasize the conflict of interests between the National Parks and their socio-economic environment, and seek to

remedy the situation by means of altering the way parks are financed, or establishing a heterogeneous system of values and interrelationships. (Moore, 2012). Such a statement finds confirmation in the responses provided by the

National Park employees, 77% of whom considered conflicts of interest with the socio-economic environment of the park to be “unavoidable regardless of the legal status of the park” (Table 5).

Table 5. Diagnosis of the National Parks management as evaluated by their employees (Source: Authors’ own research)

Thesis	I agree completely		I agree		I disagree		I disagree completely		I don't know/ don't have an opinion	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Each National Park is internally well managed	5	5	31	30	38	37	5	5	24	23
The Park has legal instruments to curb the increasing pressure to develop attractive landscape areas within the parks or in their immediate vicinity	10	10	31	30	33	32	19	18	10	10
There is no general strategy for purchasing land in the parks	13	13	47	46	17	17	3	3	23	22
The deadline for the approval of protection plans by the minister is appropriate	2	2	14	14	29	28	25	24	33	32
Lack of basic planning document makes it difficult to properly justify park director's position when agreeing on plans and decisions pertaining to the management of the buffer zone and park areas owned by other entities or private persons	17	17	58	56	8	8	2	2	18	17
Structure of expenses creates a clear risk of excessive commercialization of the National Parks in order to gain higher income necessary for their functioning	26	25	46	45	12	12	4	4	15	15
Conflicts of interest with the socio-economic environment of the park are unavoidable regardless of the legal status of the park	23	22	57	55	14	14	3	3	6	23
The Park Director can authorize in the area of a national park deviations from prohibitions, if it is justified	16	16	60	58	18	17	4	4	5	5

In the presented diagnostic part several aspects pertaining to the functioning of the park were identified, according to the park employees, as faulty and in need of improvement. Respondents considered the following to be significant:

- risk of excessive commercialization of the park in order to obtain funds necessary for its operation (through expenditure structure) – 70%;

- internal improvement of park management – cumulative indicator¹ amounted to only 35%;
- development and implementation of a general strategy for purchasing land in parks – 59%;
- introducing legal instruments that would inhibit the increasing pressure to develop attractive landscape areas within the parks or in their immediate vicinity – 50%;

¹ Cumulative indicator means sum of the positive answers to the thesis.

- providing the Park Director with the authority to grant consent to derogate from prohibitions in the area of the National Park, if this is justified – 74%;
- changing the deadline for approving protection plans by the minister – 52%;
- lack of a basic planning document that makes it difficult to properly justify the position of the Park Director when agreeing on plans and decisions regarding the manage-

ment of the buffer zone and areas of the park owned by other entities or private persons – 73%.

It seems that the legislator should decide on such financial solutions that would change the structure of expenditures posing the risk of over-commercialization of the National Parks in order to obtain higher revenues necessary for their functioning (70%).

4. Discussion

The results obtained and presented in Table 3 indicate that the representatives of the environment understand the role and functions of the National Parks, as 96% of the respondents acknowledge the presence of the park as a factor increasing the attractiveness of the municipality and agree on the possibility of stopping the increasing pressure to pursue development in the attractive landscape areas within the park or its immediate vicinity (88%). This was further confirmed with the statement on refraining from exerting pressure on development and investment in the area of the park or its buffer zone for environmental reasons (89%).

Respondents also recognize (85%) that most of the commune inhabitants are aware that the park has a positive impact on the economy of local communities not only through tourism, but also, for example, through employment, purchase of materials or services. Nevertheless, the study results suggest that the problem of private land in the park should definitely be solved through acquisition (79%). This could also apply to land in the immediate vicinity of the park in order to create a buffer zone, in which the park would take care of the landscape (77%).

Representatives of the local stakeholders in 68% consider conflicts of interest with the socio-economic environment of the park to be avoidable, but also believe that said conflicts do not result from legal regulations (63%).

The study confirms the frequently observed claims on the part of private landowners whose land falls within the borders of parks for participation in the profits of said parks, mainly with regards to trail use (69%). Nevertheless, these claims lead to a hypothetical thesis that the

landowners should also participate in the costs of trail maintenance. It may seem surprising, but 72% of respondents accepted this solution, which may be due to the fact that they are not aware of the costs of maintenance of tourist infrastructure, as there are also costs of maintaining cleanliness of trails, toilets etc.

In view of the phenomenon of excessive tourist traffic observed in some parks before the COVID-19 pandemic, the representatives of the environment are willing to accept (57%) the introduction of restrictions by the park management for tourist and sport traffic in its area.

They also approve (85%) the statement on receiving a government subsidy by the municipality, in return for which the municipalities would respect the tasks of the park and even the restrictions imposed.

Relations with stakeholders become the key for further functioning of the National Parks, but also for their effective management.

The obtained research results allow us to address the posed research questions. The expectations of local stakeholders towards the parks are mainly economic in nature and are believed to be inevitable (see Table 4), but their scale seems to be diminishing over the years. Such a conclusion is prompted by the results obtained in previous studies (Królikowska, 2007; Hibszer, 2008; Olko, 2011; Babczuk et al., 2015b).

Thus, there are three dimensions to the relationship between the parks and local stakeholders. On the one hand, one may perceive the importance of parks through the prism of enhancing attractiveness of the area, also for potential tourists, or direct benefits to the

local population (Królikowska, 2007; Hibszer, 2013; Walas et al., 2018). On the other hand, some residents see parks as interference with their business activity and economic benefits (Górecki et al., 2002; Skawiński, 2006; Hibszer, 2013; Mika et al., 2015). Lastly, the third dimension is the attitude of national park employees, who tend to prioritise nature protection over other functions of the region (Domański, 1991; Olko, 2011; Walas et al., 2018).

The bone of contention is the limitation of economic activity resulting not only from the tasks necessitated by nature conservation, but also from insufficient financial resources, forcing the parks to pursue independent economic activity. Said activity is often perceived as competitive to the private sector. This aspect has also been emphasized in previous studies (Domański, 1991; Górecki et al., 2002; Hibszer, 2013; Mika et al., 2015; Walas, 2019; Pawlusiński, 2020).

Therefore, minimizing conflicts with local stakeholders cannot be achieved without introducing changes to the management and financing system of the parks themselves, because the answer to the research question on cooperation, mutual understanding and sustainable development of the area is an ambiguous one. It is also clear that parks cannot fulfil their mission in the current legal and financial conditions, which translates directly into the attitudes of local stakeholders. As early as in 1992, at the

4th IUCN Congress of National Parks in Caracas, a conclusion was drawn that “without the support of local communities, protected areas will never fully achieve their goals. This support is particularly important in Europe, where protected areas are usually adjacent to or territorially overlapping inhabited areas” (Walas, 2019).

Thus, the prospective resolution to the problems should not be sought only in the legal regulations pertaining to the status of parks and their financing, but also in establishing legal, organizational and financial tools that would ensure an integrated character of protected areas. The more so because the vision of spatial planning in Poland in the perspective of 2030 assumes the creation of three new parks (Masurian, Turnicki, Jurajski) and the expansion of others (the Białowieża and Kampinos Forests) (Uchwała Nr 239 Rady Ministrów z dnia 13 grudnia 2011 r. w sprawie przyjęcia Koncepcji Przestrzennego Zagospodarowania Kraju 2030, 2012).

Mika et al. (2015) refer to the integrated status of protected areas within national parks as a model of local economic system, and Walas (2019) call it an area of sustainable development. Both proposals advocate the idea of establishing a new functional unit, as opposed to an administrative one, encompassing the area of the national park along with the buffer zone.

5. Conclusions

Bearing in mind the absence of a comprehensive model of legal and financial solutions for the operation of the National Parks and their management, as well as their cooperation with the socio-economic environment, we may draw the following conclusions:

- The conflicting issue of claims put forward by the owners of land lying within the National Park needs to be definitely resolved by the State Treasury;
- The system of park financing must be strengthened, by increasing the budget;
- New, planned¹ legal regulations for financing the management of the national park must be correlated with the legal basis, including financing, for the functioning of adjoining municipalities. Otherwise, mitigating conflict with the local stakeholders may prove impossible;
- Tools for balancing relations with the environment should aim to minimize conflicts, and the simplest of such tools is marketing communication with the environment based, among other things, on education

¹ At the time of this research, a legal amendment to the functioning of parks is being prepared but does not have a final version and has not been implemented as of July 30th, 2021.

and development-oriented approach, as well as conservation of natural resources undertaken jointly with environmental institutions;

– The authors do not settle on any particular legal solutions, although their directions are postulated in numerous previous analyses and further supplemented in this research.

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