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Digest

Stakeholder Conflicts and Conflict Management in Nature Restoration in Europe, and Beyond

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What is Biodiversa+

The European Biodiversity Partnership, Biodiversa+, supports excellent biodiversity research with impact for policy and society. Connecting science, policy and practice for transformative change, Biodiversa+ is part of the European Biodiversity Strategy for 2030, which aims to put Europe's biodiversity on a path to recovery by 2030. Co-funded by the European Commission, Biodiversa+ brings together partners from research funding, research programming and environmental policy across European and associated countries to work on five main objectives:

Plan and support research and innovation on biodiversity through a shared strategy, annual joint calls for research projects, and capacity building activities.

Set up a network of harmonised schemes to improve monitoring of biodiversity and ecosystem services across Europe.

Contribute high-end knowledge for deploying Nature-based Solutions and valuing biodiversity in the private sector.

Ensure efficient science-based support for policy-making and implementation in Europe.

Strengthen the relevance and impact of pan-European research on biodiversity in a global context.

More information: https://www.biodiversa.eu/

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Framework

The EU Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) marks a major step in European biodiversity policy by establishing legally binding restoration objectives across freshwater, coastal, marine, agricultural, forest, and urban ecosystems. Achieving the NRR objectives is not only an ecological and technical challenge. Restoration changes how land, water and natural resources are used and governed. As the NRR extends beyond existing protected areas (such as Natura 2000), it affects a wider range of ecosystems, activities and stakeholders and can impact livelihoods, property and use rights, policy and law, economic opportunities, established practices, cultural values and the distribution of decision-making authority. Stakeholder conflicts are consistently recognised as a major obstacle to effective restoration (Cortina-Segarra et al. 2021) with conflicting interests among stakeholders and low political priority for restoration frequently ranking high among the stated barriers. Therefore, anticipating and managing societal conflicts is therefore likely to be an important feature of restoration planning and implementation.

The aim of conflict management is not necessarily to eliminate disagreement. In many restoration settings, complete consensus is neither realistic nor normatively desirable. Conflict management may rather prevent escalation, clarify differences, correct avoidable injustices, create workable agreements, facilitate coexistence or transform the institutions, rules and relationships that (re)produce conflict.

This report, developed by the BiodivRestore Knowledge Hub, examines **why societal conflicts arise in nature restoration and how different types of conflict can be managed more effectively**. Its central proposition is that successful conflict management requires more than stakeholder participation or communication in general: it requires identifying the underlying causes resulting in disagreement and finding matching conflict management pathways to that cause.

This report applies a framework for conflict management, building on five conflict types and five related conflict management pathways.

Five restoration conflict types

Conflict emerges when actors perceive their objectives, claims, rights, values, interests, power or preferred courses of action as incompatible and act - or are likely to act - in ways that obstruct one another. Conflict may be destructive when it entrenches polarisation, delays action or produces inequitable outcomes. Yet conflict can also reveal hidden costs, institutional contradictions, excluded knowledge or power asymmetries. We distinguish five types of conflict: interest-based, rules-based, norms-based, ideological/knowledge-based and power-based conflicts. In practice, these types frequently overlap, and the dominant type of conflict may change over time.

1. **Interest-based conflicts** arise where stakeholders face competing material costs, benefits, risks or opportunities. Restoration may generate substantial public ecological benefits while imposing concentrated private costs - for example through reduced agricultural production, restrictions on resource use, or changes in access to land.
2. **Rules-based conflicts** arise where restoration objectives interact with inconsistent, ambiguous or competing formal rules. Such conflicts require policy coordination, legal clarification, regulatory reform or, in some circumstances, authoritative judicial decisions.
3. **Norms-based conflicts** concern legitimacy, fairness, recognition and socially accepted practices. Stakeholders may support environmental objectives while opposing the way

restoration is planned or implemented, particularly where interventions challenge established understandings of land management or where affected actors believe that their concerns have not been recognised.

4. **Ideological and knowledge-based conflicts** arise from competing beliefs, interpretations, knowledge claims and understandings of what landscapes and ecosystems should be. Providing more scientific information may be useful, but information alone is insufficient where disagreement concerns values, identity or competing interpretations. Such conflicts require dialogue, joint learning, knowledge exchange, mediation and sometimes long-term relationship building.
5. **Power-based conflicts** concern who possesses resources, authority and effective influence over restoration decisions. Where power is central, conflict management may require co-governance, empowerment, procedural safeguards or institutional reform.

Usually, one **dominant conflict type** explains best the principal opposition, impasse or escalation at a given time. However, frequently additional conflict types interact with the dominant conflict, and observed conflicts do not necessarily reveal the underlying cause.

Five conflict management pathways

Based on a literature review, five pathways for conflict management have been distinguished. Each pathway relates to one of the five conflict types, and each pathway includes multiple conflict management instruments.

1. Interest-based conflicts can be mitigated through **economic incentives** such as compensation, subsidies, payments for ecosystem services, contractual arrangements, market incentives, or taxes.
2. Rules-based conflicts need **policy coherence, legal and regulatory instruments**, including clarification of legal obligations, amendment or harmonisation of rules, policy integration, administrative decisions, law enforcement or judicial rulings.
3. Norms-based conflicts can be mediated through **procedural fairness and recognition-oriented instruments**. This includes meaningful participation, mediation, stakeholder recognition, transparent procedures, fair representation, trust-building and processes that improve procedural justice and social legitimacy.
4. Resolution of **ideological or knowledge-based conflicts** should be based on dialogue, deliberative and learning-oriented instruments, such as knowledge exchange, education, collaborative learning, joint fact-finding and reframing.
5. Power-based problems require **institutional, governance and organisational reform**, such as redistribution of decision-making authority, co-governance, co-regulation, empowerment, clarification of institutional competences and creation of structures giving affected actors meaningful influence.

Key findings

The analysis combines a review of relevant literature with a purposive portfolio of restoration cases covering multiple ecosystem types. The cross-case analysis shows that similar restoration measures can generate very different conflicts, while similar conflict mechanisms occur across very different ecosystems. **The ecosystem or restoration measure alone therefore does not explain stakeholder conflict;** the underlying causes need to be diagnosed.

Across the cases reviewed, the strongest general finding is that **conflict-management strategies need to correspond to the causes sustaining the conflict**. Economic losses require an economic response; contradictory rules require institutional or legal action; legitimacy problems require fair and meaningful procedures; competing knowledge and values require learning and dialogue; and unequal influence requires attention to power and decision-making authority.

As stated above, conflicts commonly involve several interacting causes, requiring **smart combinations or sequences of conflict management pathways and instruments** rather than a single instrument. Historically, restoration conflicts in Europe have long been addressed through combinations of economic incentives, regulation, specialised institutions, education and advisory services, contractual arrangements and shared governance, or combination and (sometimes tokenistic) participation. However, financial compensation may be necessary but insufficient where land users distrust the responsible authority. Participation may improve legitimacy but cannot compensate for substantial income losses. A court ruling may clarify legal obligations while leaving underlying ideological disagreement unresolved.

What can be learned from unsuccessful and unresolved conflict management?

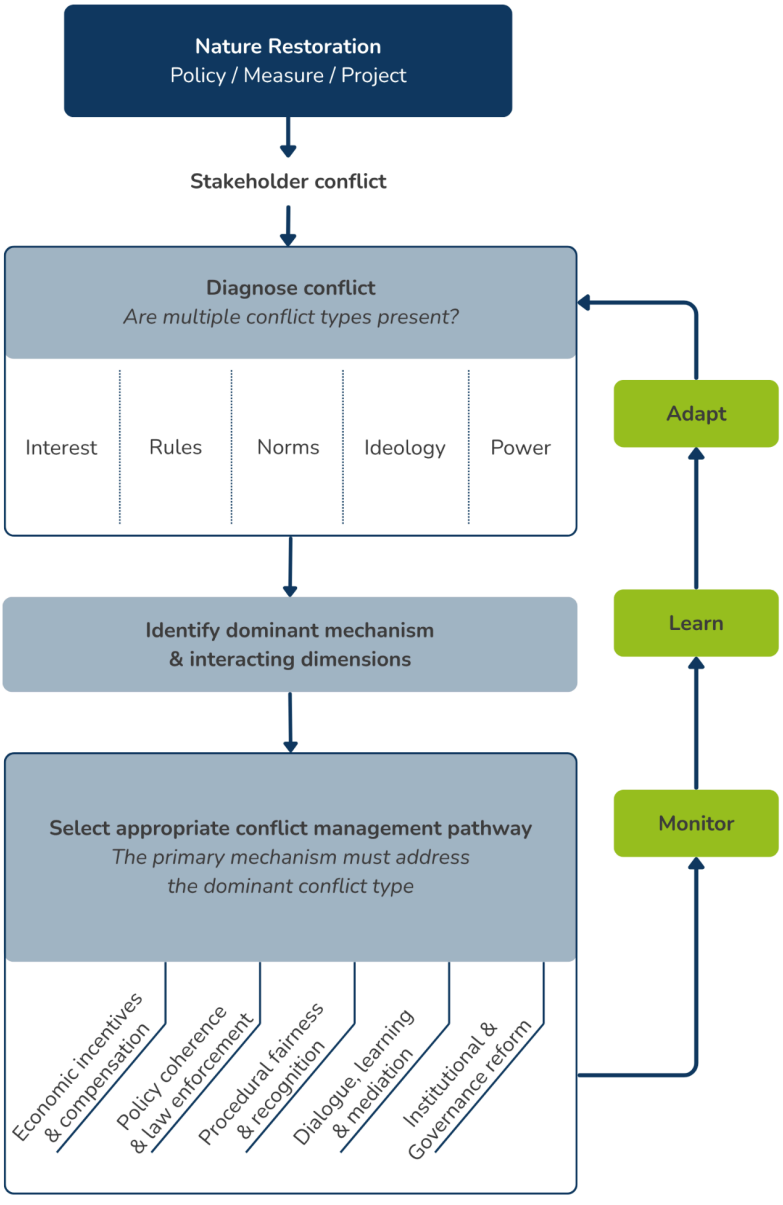
1. Conflict management fails when the intervention does not address the dominant cause.
2. Addressing one conflict type may expose rather than eliminate another.
3. Participation and engagement can come too late. Once positions become public, participation may function mainly as conflict containment rather than collaborative problem solving.
4. Displacing restoration and its associated conflicts does not solve underlying conflicts.
5. Structural power asymmetries can undermine problem resolution.

The central finding: diagnose before prescribing, but allow for learning and adaptation

To develop an effective conflict management strategy, the (potential) conflict should be diagnosed in detail following the steps described below. This scheme is not only relevant for ongoing conflicts, but can also pro-actively be followed to avoid potential conflicts, or to be prepared for plausible conflicts in nature restoration planning and implementation. The diagnosis should begin before opposition gets entrenched. Ecological conditions, economic circumstances, governments, stakeholder coalitions, knowledge and policy frameworks will change; conflict configurations of dominant and interacting conflict causes can likewise change. Therefore, the diagnoses should be regularly revised.

1. Identify the **subject and parties** to the conflict: what is contested, which actors are involved and what claims or demands they advance.
2. Diagnose the **underlying cause(s)** of the opposition.
3. Identify the **dominant and interacting conflict cause**.
4. **Match conflict management pathways and instruments** to the dominant and interaction conflict causes.
5. **Monitor the outcomes and re-diagnose**.
   Four guiding questions support assessing the impact of the conflict management strategy:
   a. Was the implementation blockage removed?
   b. Was the underlying conflict cause mechanism changed?
   c. Have interacting conflict dimensions been addressed?
   d. Was the conflict resolved, transformed, institutionalised or merely displaced?
6. **Adapt** the conflict management strategy if needed.

Figure. Diagnostic framework for conflict management in nature restoration



Conflict type	Dominant logic	Central diagnostic question	Typical restoration manifestation	What primarily needs to change?	Primary conflict management pathway	Complementary conflict management instruments
Interest-based	Consequences	*What do actors gain or lose?*	Income loss, opportunity costs, unequal benefits or risks	Distribution of costs, benefits, risks or opportunities	Compensation, incentives, benefit sharing, contracts, market mechanisms	Participation, policy simplification, spatial coordination, advisory support
Rules-based	Formal/legal appropriateness	*What are actors required, permitted or prohibited to do?*	Conflicting legislation, policy incoherence, unclear rights or mandates	Inconsistent, ambiguous or contested formal rules	Legal clarification, policy integration, regulatory change, enforcement, judicial decision	Scientific expertise, institutional coordination, participation
Norms-based	Social appropriateness	*Is the process or outcome regarded as fair and legitimate?*	Lack of recognition, procedural injustice, contested legitimacy	Perceived fairness, legitimacy, recognition or social acceptability	Meaningful participation, negotiation, mediation, procedural reform, recognition	Compensation where material costs exist; communication; trust-building
Ideological / knowledge-based	Cognition and interpretation	*What is true, valuable and desirable?*	Competing restoration paradigms, beliefs, knowledge or problem definitions	Interpretations, beliefs, problem definitions or knowledge claims	Dialogue, learning, joint fact-finding, knowledge exchange, reframing	Mediation, experimentation, long-term engagement
Power-based	Authority and control	*Who decides and who can influence outcomes?*	Exclusion, unequal authority, resource control, institutional dominance	Distribution of authority, resources and effective influence	Co-governance, empowerment, institutional reform, redistribution/clarification of authority	Capacity-building, accessible information, procedural safeguards

Implications for the Nature Restoration Regulation

The findings have direct implications for preparation and implementation of **National Restoration Plans (NRPs) and nature restoration projects**. Conflict analysis should be integrated into restoration planning from the outset rather than introduced only after opposition emerges. Alongside ecological condition, restoration potential, financing and monitoring requirements, authorities should systematically consider **who bears costs and receives benefits; where legal and policy requirements conflict; whether proposed interventions are perceived as legitimate; which competing values and knowledge claims exist; and how decision-making power is distributed**.

Five priorities emerge for implementation:

Priority	Implication for restoration planning
1. Anticipate conflict early	Undertake stakeholder and conflict analysis before restoration measures and locations become fixed and before conflicts emerge. Guiding questions include: • who is likely to bear costs and who receives benefits; • which EU, national, regional or sectoral rules may conflict; • do affected stakeholders consider procedures and outcomes • legitimate; • which competing values, knowledge claims and understandings of restoration are present; • how are authority, resources and effective influence distributed among the actors involved.
2. Diagnose causes, not only positions	Distinguish material interests, conflicting rules, legitimacy concerns, knowledge/value disagreements and power inequalities.
3. Match conflict management instruments to conflict types	Use compensation for material losses, legal coordination for rule conflicts, meaningful participation for legitimacy problems, dialogue and learning for knowledge/value conflicts, and institutional reform where power is central.
4. Combine and sequence conflict management instruments	Most real conflicts require economic, legal, procedural, informational and institutional measures in combination rather than a single intervention.
5. Monitor and re-diagnose	Include social and governance indicators alongside ecological monitoring because conflicts can evolve during implementation.

Particular attention should be given to **policy coherence**. The cases reviewed repeatedly identified tensions between environmental objectives and other legal or sectoral frameworks. National Restoration Plans therefore offer an opportunity not only to identify where restoration should occur, but also to identify and address regulatory inconsistencies across agriculture, forestry, fisheries, water, heritage, energy, infrastructure and other policy domains.

Recommendations

To make ecosystem restoration planning and implementation more conflict-sensitive, we formulate three main recommendations:

- **Diagnose before prescribing**. The visible subject of disagreement should not be assumed to reveal its cause.
- Use **smart conflict management instrument mixes** rather than universal instruments. Participation is not a universal substitute for economic, legal or institutional action, just as regulation cannot by itself produce legitimacy or learning.
- **Monitor and re-diagnose**. Conflict management is a continuing component of restoration governance, particularly where measures extend over decades.

Overall conclusion

The report concludes that **nature restoration is simultaneously an ecological intervention and a process of societal choice and governance**. Societal conflict is not simply evidence of poor communication or stakeholder resistance. It can signal uncompensated costs, contradictory policies, contested legitimacy, competing knowledge and values, or unequal power. Understanding which of these mechanisms are operating is therefore essential for effective restoration.

For the implementation of the Nature Restoration Regulation, the central recommendation is to make **conflict-sensitive governance an integral part of National Restoration Planning**. EU institutions and Member States will require not only ecological targets, maps, indicators and restoration measures, but also institutional capacity for stakeholder conflict mapping to anticipate societal conflict, diagnose its causes and deploy appropriate combinations of economic, legal, procedural, informational and institutional instruments.

European historical experiences and the contemporary cases examined in this report point in the same direction: durable restoration depends not only on determining **what ecosystems need**, but also on understanding **why people disagree, who bears the consequences of restoration, how decisions are made, and which governance arrangements can make ecological recovery socially legitimate and institutionally durable**.

Finally, the objective of conflict management in ecosystem restoration should not necessarily be to eliminate societal conflict. Restoration involves genuine differences in interests, values and visions of desirable landscapes, some of which cannot be fully reconciled. Effective conflict management may therefore mean resolving a dispute, mitigating its consequences, reaching accommodation, establishing legitimate institutions for continuing disagreement, or transforming the conditions that generated the conflict.

Annex

Annex 1. Recommendations by actor group

Actor group	Priority recommendations
EU institutions	• Maintain clear and stable restoration obligations; • Improve coherence between EU biodiversity/restoration policy and national agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy and other sectoral policies; • Ensure EU financing supports national restoration implementation, and remove biodiversity-harmful EU funding; • Facilitate exchange of conflict-management experience among Member States, ideally supported by social science research expertise; • Monitor the implementation of National Restoration Plans in particular, and the theory of change of EU Nature Restoration Regulation across EU from a societal conflict and conflict management perspective, and link it to an improved ecological monitoring.
National and regional authorities / NRP planners	• Include conflict diagnosis and conflict anticipation in restoration planning; • Map costs and benefits, rules, values, knowledge and power; • Identify regulatory incoherence early; • Improve coherence of national agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy and other sectoral policies with EU biodiversity/restoration policy; • Ensure national financing supports restoration objectives implementation, and remove biodiversity-harmful funding; • Facilitate exchange of conflict-management experience among Member States and between restoration projects, ideally supported by social science research expertise; • Select instrument mixes appropriate to diagnosed conflicts; • Monitor both societal and ecological implementation.
Landowners, farmers, foresters, fishers and businesses	• Engage early and pro-actively in nature restoration planning; • Articulate material, regulatory and practical constraints explicitly; • Avoid ideological confrontation, and be honest about the diversity of land-owners and land-users, and what society values and needs, and what land-users can provide; • Participate in co-design where available; • Explore contractual, incentive-based, rules-based and collective solutions rather than treating restoration only as regulatory restriction. • Act as knowledge brokers or conveners, ideally with NGOs/CSOs and social scientists where appropriate

Actor group	Priority recommendations
Environmental NGOs and CSOs	• Combine ecological advocacy with attention to societal conflict management incl. livelihoods, recognition and procedural justice; • Support underrepresented actors; • Avoid ideological confrontation, and be honest about what society needs and what land users can provide • Distinguish factual disagreement from value or distributional conflict. • Act as knowledge brokers or conveners, ideally with land-users and social scientists where appropriate;
Restoration project managers	• Undertake stakeholder and (potential) conflict analysis before technical plans become fixed; • Create repeated rather than one-off engagement; • Use neutral mediation and social science research where needed; • Monitor changes in conflict configuration; • Treat adaptation of project design as a possible success rather than necessarily a concession.
Environmental and social scientists	• Work jointly with stakeholders from project design onwards; • Distinguish evidence disputes from value, interest, rules, norm and power conflicts; • Evaluate conflict-management interventions and not only ecological outcomes; • Communicate uncertainty transparently; • Provide independent knowledge and mediation where conflicts become polarised.
Courts and administrative/legal institutions	• Develop capacity to address complex restoration disputes, incl. using stakeholder- conflict management analysis and social science research, not just ecological science; • Clarify competing legal obligations; • Provide predictable legal interpretation and case-law of restoration requirements while recognising that legal decisions may need complementary social, economic and policy measures.