

## Local government and national parks – how to break the deadlock in cooperation?

**Marian Kachniarz**

Wroclaw University of Environmental and Life Sciences

e-mail: [marian.kachniarz@upwr.edu.pl](mailto:marian.kachniarz@upwr.edu.pl)

ORCID: [0000-0003-3574-5398](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3574-5398)

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### Abstract

**Aim:** The article analyses the stunted development of Poland's network of national parks, identifying key barriers to their expansion and proposing specific directions for corrective action, and highlights the unique role of national parks in environmental protection while pointing out that in Poland their share of the area is only 1.05%, which is significantly below the European Union average.

**Methodology:** The research included an analysis of the legal and economic aspects and a literature review, to identify the main problems limiting the development of national parks. Particular attention was paid to barriers stemming from resistance by local governments, the loss of forest tax revenues, and discrepancies in salaries between employees of national parks and State Forests.

**Results:** It was found that effective ways to overcome these challenges comprise introducing financial support mechanisms for local communities and fostering partnerships between the national parks and local governments. The findings suggest that changing the approach of the central administration and implementing a management model based on cooperation and dialogue could effectively revitalise the development process of national parks.

**Implications and recommendations:** The proposed solutions can be applied not only in Poland but also in other countries facing similar challenges. Implementing financial support mechanisms and a partnership-based model could enhance environmental protection and foster harmonious collaboration between national parks and local communities.

**Originality/value:** The strengths of this paper stems from its comprehensive, integrated analysis of the stagnation of national park development in Poland, which uniquely takes into account legal, economic, and socio-political factors. By reframing the creation of national parks as a process based on

cooperation rather than antagonism, the article presents innovative theoretical and practical strategies that can be applied in Poland and countries facing similar challenges, balancing ecological goals with socio-economic realities.

**Keywords:** national park, local government, governance, eco-compensation

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## 1. Introduction

Protected areas such as national parks are essential for promoting sustainable development. They enable the natural regeneration of ecosystems and are a key element in strategies to reduce the negative effects of human activity. National parks are considered the most effective form of nature protection in Poland, as confirmed by the IBPES report which indicated that effective nature protection is fundamental not only to the well-being of humanity but also to its survival. However, Poland, where national parks cover only 1.05% of the country's area, compares very poorly with the EU average of 3.4% (IPBES, 2019). Despite numerous projects to protect new areas, the stagnation in this aspect has not been dealt with for more than two decades. Governments have consistently stressed that it is unfeasible to create new national parks in the current legal context.

The purpose of this paper was to identify in detail the causes of this impasse and to propose solutions to overcome the existing barriers. Previous analyses, both practical and academic, have not provided precise explanations of this situation, which significantly hinders the development of effective solutions. Although the research focused on Poland, its results are potentially applicable also to other countries facing similar problems.

The study posed the following research questions:

- What problems arise in public debates about the creation of new national parks?
- What are the real reasons for local authorities' opposition to the creation of new national parks?
- What measures can be taken to effectively remove barriers to the process of expanding national park areas?

The used a method of legal and economic analysis, which made it possible to identify key financial and legislative obstacles. The analysis was then supplemented by a detailed literature review which enabled to collect and organize existing information on the operation of national parks.

The study identified two main reasons for the stagnation in the creation of new national parks. The first was the opposition of local governments due to the reduction in their own revenues caused by the reduced tax rate on forest properties in national parks. These losses are not adequately compensated by the state, raising fears of further depletion of local budgets. The second reason was the significant difference in the salaries of employees of national parks and state forests. The granting of national park status to a forest area involves the takeover of employees, resulting in a worsening of their financial and professional situation.

A thorough understanding of these problems is key to successfully overcoming barriers to developing the national park network. Importantly, the proposed solutions are relatively easy to implement. Unfortunately, for more than two decades, successive governments have focused on solving problems inadequately, leading to ineffective measures. The purpose of this article was to rectify these mistakes through a sound analysis of the situation and to present viable and effective proposals for their solution.

## 2. Literature review

National parks play a key role in global environmental strategies, serving as one of the most important tools in conserving biodiversity. They are recognised as a highly effective way to protect biodiversity, promote ecosystem services and improve the environment (Bell & Stockdale, 2015; Chapes et al., 2008; Dudley, 2008; Gaston et al., 2008). Globally, national parks cover about 6% of the world's land area, demonstrating their important role in protecting natural heritage (Geldmann et al., 2019).

The traditional way of managing national parks, known as the exclusionary model, is based on the principle of minimal human intervention, under which large areas are excluded from local jurisdiction and managed by central state institutions. This isolationist model, although dominant for many years, has faced criticism because of its negative socioeconomic effects. The restrictions put in place often led to tensions between local communities and top-down imposed forms of conservation. In extreme cases the model has resulted in enforced resettlement, causing resistance from local residents and negative attitudes toward national parks (Mika et al., 2016; Stoll-Kleemann, 2001). The subject literature revealed that in some situations, the negative impacts of creating parks outweighed the benefits, compounding opposition to initiatives to create new protected areas (Sześciło, 2014). These projects were often seen as a threat to local identity and economic development (De Pourcq et al., 2015; Mohedano et al., 2019; Therville et al., 2016).

In response to criticism of the traditional approach, a so-called integrative model has been developed in order to reconcile conservation goals with the needs of local communities (Dudley, 2008). Proponents of this approach emphasize that working with local residents and providing them with benefits such as access to resources or financial support, increases the effectiveness of conservation efforts. The inclusive model implies community participation in decision-making processes, promotes transparency of activities, and equitable distribution of benefits. This not only reduces conflicts but also increases the efficiency of national park management (Andersson & Agrawal, 2011; Borrini-Feyerabend & Hill, 2015).

The evolution from an isolationist to an inclusive model, as described in the scientific publications, emphasises the importance of working with local communities. Co-management and the use of financial tools, e.g. eco-compensation mechanisms, play a key role in reducing tensions and increasing conservation effectiveness (Andersson & Agrawal, 2011; Ayivor et al., 2020; De Pourcq et al., 2015; Kulczyk-Dynowska & Przybyła, 2019; Moucheng et al., 2020). Despite advances in the theory of national park management, there is still a lack of a unified international policy, where each country is developing its solutions, leading to divergent approaches and difficulties in coordinating efforts at the global level, whilst no international trend analyses and consistent national studies are available. In Poland, the process of creating new national parks is stalled, and the relevant scientific literature remains inadequate.

This paper attempted to fill this gap, offering a detailed analysis of the barriers to the establishment of national parks and suggestions for an integrated approach that could improve biodiversity conservation at national and international levels.

## 3. Methodology

The research was based on a comprehensive methodology to obtain an in-depth understanding of the challenges of managing national parks in Poland. The first step was the analysis of literature and source data, including a review of scientific publications, reports, and government documents. The purpose was to identify current trends and issues in national park management and to assess the effectiveness of various approaches used in practice.

A key element was a legal and economic analysis to identify barriers and understand the impact of regulations on the operation of national parks and their relationship with local governments. Financial compensation mechanisms and the effects of national park status on local budgets were taken into account. The results stressed the need for changes in public policy to improve national park management and increase the effectiveness of nature conservation.

The analysis of public discourse focused on public opinions regarding the new national parks, examining media materials, the results of public consultations, and the positions of various stakeholders such as local communities, NGOs, and politicians. The goal of this section was to identify the most important arguments both supportive and critical of the protection initiatives.

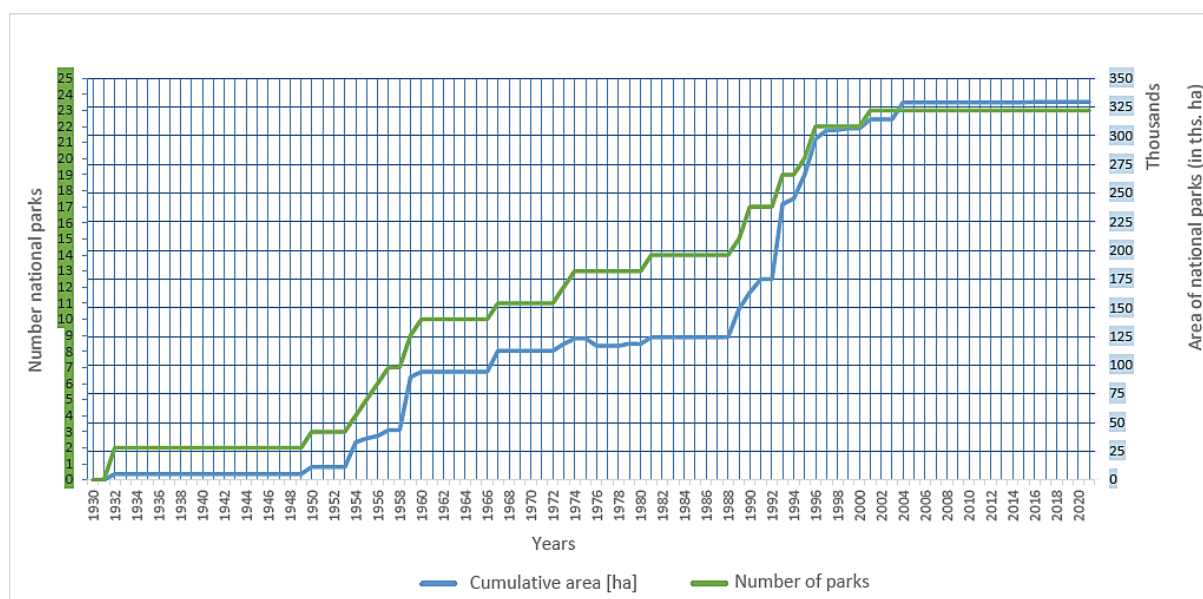
The final step was an analysis of the scientific discourse on barriers to national park management and proposed solutions. A review of articles and empirical studies helped with identifying obstacles and opportunities for improvements in conservation policy.

The entire study was based on the principle of triangulation, using a variety of sources and methods of analysis. This approach enabled a broad view of the issue, taking into account a variety of perspectives crucial to national park management and biodiversity conservation.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. The institutional system of national parks

National parks in Poland play a key role in nature conservation, aiming to preserve biological, landscape, and cultural diversity. Currently there are 23 such parks, which cover about 1.05% of the country's area (CSO, 2021), far below the European average of 3.4%. The first national parks (Białowieża and Pieniny NP) were established in 1932, however the dynamic development of the system took place after World War II, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, and another boost came with the transformation of 1989; the youngest park is the Ujście Warty (Warta Mouth), established in 2001. Since then the process of creating new parks has stalled, despite numerous recommendations proposed in strategic documents. The development of the number of parks and their area is presented in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1.** Growth dynamics of the number and area (thousand ha) of national parks in Poland

Source: Klub, P. (2022). *A proposal to supplement the network of Polish national parks*. Natural Heritage Foundation.

The legal and institutional design of national parks remains highly controversial, especially in terms of funding (Babczuk & Kachniarz, 2015; Kulczyk-Dynowska & Bal-Domańska, 2019; Sześciło, 2014; Walas et al., 2019). Earmarked grants from the state budget account for only 33% of their revenue, which is often not enough to cover basic costs such as the salary budget. The remaining funds come from their own revenues, including entrance fees, timber sales, and agro-environmental subsidies. This funding structure may shift the national parks' function toward economic activity (Babczuk & Kachniarz, 2015).

The current model for managing national parks in Poland is based on the central influence of government administration, resulting in limited cooperation with local governments. Park directors have significant powers, including the right to veto local government initiatives not only within the parks but also in their buffer zone. In turn, since 2000 local authorities have had the right to veto the creation, enlargement, or liquidation of national parks. This change in the law has effectively halted the development of the national park network despite the scientific and ecological basis for its expansion.

The existing formal regulations are not conducive to cooperation between parks and local governments, although some directors undertake such initiatives on a voluntary basis. This indicates the need to change the management model of national parks toward a more collaborative (collaborative governance) model.

## 4.2. Causes of stagnation

The problems mentioned above have effectively impeded both the expansion of existing national parks and the creation of new protected areas. As a result Poland has been facing stagnation in the development of its national park network for many years, despite numerous initiatives and projects. In order to face these challenges, not only legislative changes are needed, but also the development of financial mechanisms and cooperation with local communities. Such efforts could contribute to more sustainable management and protection of these valuable areas. It is also crucial to understand the causes of the present state of affairs and diagnose them properly.

One of the most frequently raised problems is the need to agree with local governments on decisions to create new national parks or enlarge existing ones. These agreements, which are the most far-reaching form of cooperation in lawmaking, mean in practice that local governments have veto power over such processes (Sześciło, 2011). The isolationist model prevailing in this situation has led to proposals to limit these powers of local governments, arguing that they are incompatible with ecological goals and even the Constitution, and stating that nature conservation at the level of national parks is a matter of state policy for which the Council of Ministers is responsible. According to this logic, decisions should be made at central level, in consultation with local governments (Klimkiewicz, 2021; Sześciło, 2014).

The debates on the subject have often seen the preference of conservation professionals over the interests of local communities, which have sometimes been seen as hardly progressive. It was argued that local communities should accept the costs of pursuing goals of overriding national and global biodiversity. There were voices criticising the situation in which a small municipality could block decisions that were important for the protection of the natural heritage of the entire nation (Klimkiewicz, 2021). As a result, many felt that the only solution was to limit the veto power of local governments so that decisions could be imposed at central level.

However, the analysis of the reasons for local government resistance indicated that it was mainly due to direct financial losses associated with the creation of national parks, which are insufficiently recognised or compensated by the government administration. A key problem is the reduction in forest tax revenue, reduced by 50% in national parks. Although nationally this accounts for a small share of municipal revenues (about 0.5%), in regions with a large share of forests its role is much greater. In municipalities such as Lutowska (12% of forest tax revenue), Cisna (10%), and Plaska (9%),

the reduced tax rate have a serious impact on the budgets as these areas are covered in 70-80% by protected forests (CSO, 2021).

As a result it is difficult to expect municipalities to agree to significant reductions in their revenues without adequate support. The failure to recognise this problem reflects the phenomenon of shifting global conservation benefits to local level, where the costs are borne by the local community.

One of the main reasons for local government opposition to the establishment of national parks is the lack of adequate shielding measures for local government units (LGUs), which bear the costs of development constraints resulting from the operation of forms of nature protection (Forest Tax Law, 2002). Decisions to establish national parks often force changes in the structure of the local economy, leading, among other things, to reductions in employment in key sectors such as the timber industry, which in forested regions is sometimes the backbone of the economy.

Local government officials and local residents are also concerned about the numerous restrictions imposed by rules in national parks and their buffer zones. These include prohibitions on certain forms of land use, restrictions on free movement off trails, and a ban on collecting mushrooms and other gifts of the forest. Another problem is the lack of effective compensation mechanisms on the part of the legislature to mitigate the negative economic and social effects of introducing nature conservation. The proposed financial instruments are too general and unsuited to real needs (Wydra, 2021).

Although many authors pointed out that the fears of local communities are often exaggerated and fueled by specific interest groups, all responsibility for resistance to the creation of new national parks is sometimes attributed to local government units. One of the key stakeholders in this issue, however, is the State Forests (SF), which manage most of Poland's forest areas. In municipalities where forested areas predominate, SF employees are often a significant political force. Analyses show that in public debates over projects for new parks (e.g. the Turnicki PN) and their expansion (e.g. the Białowieża or Karkonosze PN), forestry lobby successfully organize resistance and convince residents that the creation of a national park will bring losses to local communities.

Differences in wealth status and salaries between employees of SF and national parks also influence reluctance to change. The former, including forest supervisors, earn significantly more than their counterparts in national parks, even though park directors' duties and responsibilities are broader (Babczuk & Kachniarz, 2015). The creation of a national park was associated with the prospect of a change of employer, which in practice meant a reduction in earnings and professional status. Although these differences have been partially reduced, there is an anchoring effect that makes it difficult to change perceptions of these institutions.

The reluctance of local communities to see worsening of living conditions, even in the name of global benefits, is understandable. Therefore, it is necessary to use collaborative instruments in conservation management. The greater involvement of local communities in national park policies could strengthen their identification with these areas. At the same time, the government administration should carefully study the socio-economic effects of national parks and adjust compensation instruments accordingly, as without such measures it will be difficult to change the attitudes of local authorities and residents.

Research showed that conservation without the support of local communities is less effective. Therefore, for the sake of the effectiveness of conservation at global level, it is worth investing in local support and compensation activities that can reduce social tensions and resistance to the creation of national parks.

Another major obstacle to the creation of national parks in Poland is the decision-making powerlessness of the central administration, often resulting from unprofessional diagnoses and poorly defined priorities. The lack of precisely planned activities leads to low efficiency, and the risks involved in undertaking complex initiatives discourage decision-makers. The Ministry of Climate and Environment has consistently resorted over the past two decades to the argument that the creation

of new national parks requires prior legislative changes. Instead of the right to agree on decisions with local authorities, it proposed introducing a form of public opinion that would be non-binding.

Although official statements and documents suggested a desire to consult with stakeholders, in reality they sought to limit their real influence on decisions that were ultimately to be made by the ministry itself. Such an attitude reflected only a declarative model of governance, in which a change in regulations was supposed to automatically trigger processes without having to eliminate the real causes of resistance.

Since 2008 the Ministry of Climate and Environment has focused primarily on the implementation of the European Natura 2000 programme, with the priority given to negotiating boundaries, conducting consultations with local residents in accordance with EU standards, preparing applications to EU bodies, and developing conservation plans. At that time, the creation of new national parks receded into the background, whilst a new agenda emerged in the form of the General Directorate of Environmental Protection, which required considerable administrative resources and commitment.

The legal formula of the national parks has also changed, transforming them from budget units into independent state legal entities. This was intended to provide greater autonomy for the national parks, yet at the same time weakened the ministry's oversight and responsibility for their activities. As a result, despite the declared support for nature conservation, the lack of a coherent strategy and the focus on other priorities have slowed the development of Poland's national park network.

#### **4.3. New projects**

The analysis of the legal and economic conditions of the process of creating and enlarging national parks in Poland is still based on the assumption that the removal of the veto right of local government units (LGUs) is crucial to unlocking the process. Instead, it proposed the introduction of the public opinion formula, supplemented by extensive public consultations. However, depriving local governments of their veto power contradicts the stated goals in this document, which were to introduce a more deliberative model of consultation. Such a model is intended to enable local governments to make a real, substantive contribution to shaping the design of new national parks, transforming the process from that imposed top-down to a bottom-up system.

This new approach should increase the responsibility of local authorities for established protected areas and their legitimacy in the eyes of local communities (Walas et al., 2019), yet practice shows that weakening the influence of one party in negotiations can lead to its marginalisation, rather than a greater inclination toward participatory governance.

Recent analyses of public discourse on new park projects and the expansion of existing protected areas revealed a more comprehensive approach to these processes. At last, the reasons for local communities' resistance were to be studied in depth, stemming from, among others:

- The poor financial condition of national parks, which do not offer attractive employment conditions.
- The lack of compensation for lost financial benefits, such as lower tax revenues and restrictions on the local economy.
- The need for special subsidies to compensate local communities for carrying out environmental tasks of national and global importance.

Discussions, analyses, and experiences in recent years indicate significant changes in the approach to this problem. Initially, the prevailing belief was that removing local governments from the decision-making process would automatically unlock new initiatives. Today, however, there is recognition of the need for a more thorough analysis of the impact of nature conservation on local socioeconomic systems. It is also crucial to take into account the economic losses of LGUs and provide them with adequate compensation.

Awareness of the need to widely involve local communities in the processes of creating national parks and offering appropriate compensation give hope for changing their attitudes. Involving LGU in the formation of new protected areas and recognising their economic and social needs can effectively turn local communities into allies of nature conservation. Such a model has the potential for more sustainable and acceptable solutions to develop Poland's national park network.

The change in the approach to the creation and expansion of national parks was reflected in the introduction of new legal regulations on compensation for the so-called "ecological needs" (Ustawa 1 Oct. o dochodach JST...) in 2024. This mechanism covers all local government units (LGUs) on whose territory there are legally protected areas of special natural values, such as national parks, nature reserves, landscape parks, and Natura 2000 areas.

The size of compensation depends on the area of the protected areas and the rates assigned to them, which vary depending on the natural value and the degree of restrictions on economic activity. For example, municipalities with national parks receive PLN 620 for each hectare of protected land. The justification for the law emphasises that this support is intended to address barriers to the creation and development of protected areas while changing local government attitudes toward new conservation initiatives (Ministry of Climate and Environment, 2024).

The effect of this change is a return to faith in the feasibility of creating new national parks. In response to the new regulations, a comprehensive and coherent concept for the development of a network of national parks in Poland has been developed. It assumes, first of all, the expansion of the boundaries of 21 existing national parks (except Narwiański and Ujście Warty) and the creation of 25 new national parks, namely (names listed in Polish): Turnicki, Jurajski, Mazurski, Doliny Dolnej Odry, Szczeciński, Knyszyński, Sobiborski, Chełmski, Janowski, Orawski, Borów Dolnośląskich, Puszczy Pilickiej, Puszczy Śląskiej, Wiślański, Puszczy Boreckiej, Kaszubski, Stawów Milickich, Puszczy Romnickiej, Jaworski, Wysoczyzny Elbląskiej, Bydgoski, Śnieżnicki, Odrzański, Bramy Morawskiej and Podziemny Park Narodowy Kopalnia Soli Wieliczka.

The total area of the new parks would cover 1.55% of Poland's land area, while projects to expand the existing protected areas would take up another 0.53%. In total, the new network of national parks could cover 3.13% of the country's area, creating a representative and evenly distributed system of nature protection (Klub, 2022).

After years of stagnation, this concept has the potential to initiate quantitative and qualitative growth in Poland's national park network, just as it did in the 1990s. It is worth noting, however, that the proposals are not entirely new, but synthesise the earlier, substantive ideas that have not yet been implemented.

Optimistic signals are emerging from recent activities of the Ministry of Climate and Environment, which announced that by the end of 2024 there would be a project to create the Doliny Dolnej Odry (Lower Oder Valley) National Park. This process, both in terms of the proposed restrictions and the way decisions are made, employs the tenets of the so-called "third way" in the creation of national parks. It is a model that combines a participatory approach with the provision of real support for local communities, providing hope for the sustainable development of protected areas in Poland.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The study defined in detail the reasons for the stagnation in the establishment of new national parks in Poland, while offering suggestions for measures that could break down the existing barriers. Although the analysis focused on Poland, its conclusions are universal and may be useful for other countries struggling with similar challenges.

A review of the literature indicated that at global level, threats to biodiversity require strengthening economic instruments and inclusive policies. A key element is increasing the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes, as well as the equitable distribution of conservation benefits. The model of co-management of national parks, based on the sharing of power and responsibility between the state administration and local stakeholders, is a key solution. Shared decision-making allows for reduced conflicts and a more sustainable management of natural resources.

Poland has experienced stagnation in the development of its national park network for more than two decades, despite numerous initiatives. The main barriers are:

- Local government veto right – since 2000, LGUs have had the right to agree on decisions to create and expand national parks, making it possible in practice to block these initiatives. Although the law was intended to involve local communities in the decision-making process, it has often led to deadlock. Arguments by opponents included concerns about economic constraints and tax revenues, however the analysis indicated that the right of veto was not the main problem, but a deliberative governance tool misused by both sides in the conflict.
- Poor financial condition of national parks – the lack of attractive employment conditions and inadequate funding make it difficult to work with local communities and discourage them from supporting conservation projects.
- Inadequate economic compensation for LGUs and local communities – it is necessary to introduce compensation mechanisms such as payments for ecosystem services or special subsidies in the form of ecological rents. All of these can balance local costs with the benefits of biodiversity conservation at national and global levels.

The deadlock in the creation of national parks has contributed to a major shift in thinking about the process. The initial belief that eliminating the influence of local governments would unlock initiatives has given way to a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of the protection regime on local socio-economic systems. There is growing recognition of the need to take into account the losses incurred by local authorities and offer them adequate compensation.

The author stressed that successfully eliminating barriers to the establishment of national parks requires:

- Increasing involvement of local communities by introducing participatory mechanisms and more deliberative decision-making processes.
- Establishing adequate economic compensation for conservation constraints.
- Strengthening funding for national parks to ensure competitive working conditions and increase their efficiency.

The new approach offers an opportunity to change the attitudes of local communities and transform them into allies of nature conservation. The ecological needs legislation adopted in 2024 was an important step in this direction, introducing compensation depending on the area of protected areas and their conservation value.

In conclusion, the article offers a comprehensive analysis of the problem and points to viable solutions that can end more than 20 years of stagnation and initiate quantitative and qualitative growth in Poland's national park network.

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## Samorząd terytorialny a parki narodowe – jak przełamać impas we współpracy?

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### Streszczenie

**Cel:** W artykule przeanalizowano zahamowany rozwój sieci parków narodowych w Polsce, wskazując kluczowe bariery ich ekspansji oraz proponując konkretne kierunki działań naprawczych. Podkreślono unikalną rolę parków narodowych w ochronie środowiska przy jednoczesnym wskazaniu, że ich udział w powierzchni Polski wynosi jedynie 1,05%, co znacząco odbiega od średniej w Unii Europejskiej.

**Metodyka:** Badanie objęło analizę aspektów prawnych i ekonomicznych oraz przegląd literatury w celu identyfikacji głównych problemów ograniczających rozwój parków narodowych. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono barierom wynikającym z oporu samorządów lokalnych, stratom wpływów z podatku leśnego oraz różnicom w wynagrodzeniach pomiędzy pracownikami parków narodowych a Lasów Państwowych.

**Wyniki:** Wskazano, że skutecznym sposobem przezwyciężenia tych trudności może być wprowadzenie mechanizmów wsparcia finansowego dla społeczności lokalnych oraz rozwijanie partnerstw między parkami a samorządami. Wyniki sugerują, że zmiana podejścia administracji centralnej oraz implementacja modelu zarządzania opartego na współpracy i dialogu mogłyby efektywnie zrewitalizować proces rozwoju parków narodowych.

**Implikacje i rekomendacje:** Postulowane rozwiązania mają potencjał zastosowania nie tylko w Polsce, lecz także w innych krajach borykających się z podobnymi wyzwaniami. Wdrożenie mechanizmów wsparcia finansowego oraz modelu partnerskiego mogłoby przyczynić się do poprawy ochrony środowiska i harmonijnego współdziałania parków narodowych z lokalnymi społecznościami.

**Oryginalność/wartość:** Zaletą niniejszego artykułu jest kompleksowa, zintegrowana analiza stagnacji rozwoju parków narodowych w Polsce, uwzględniająca w wyjątkowy sposób czynniki prawne, ekonomiczne i społeczno-polityczne. Przekształcając tworzenie parków narodowych w proces oparty na współpracy, a nie antagonizmie, autor przedstawia nowatorskie strategie teoretyczne i praktyczne, które można zastosować w Polsce i krajach borykających się z podobnymi wyzwaniami, równoważąc cele ekologiczne z realiami społeczno-gospodarczymi.

**Słowa kluczowe:** park narodowy, samorząd lokalny, współzarządzanie, eko-kompensacja

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