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M. Velamazan, C. Lopez, J. Flores F. Dios Cabeza (de)

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Master Plans in Sierra Espuña Natural Park and Gebas Protected Landscape (Murcia, Spain)

Participative planning for socio-economical development and ecological conservation

by Mario VELAMAZÁN, Cristina LÓPEZ, Francisco FLORES
& Juan de DIOS CABEZAS

The main objective of the European Project Qualigouv, is to strengthen the interaction between managers and people, through designing and testing strategies and innovative tools to improve governance and integral management of Mediterranean forest in protected areas. Within the framework of this program, a local project in Murcia (Spain) is focused in the Master Plans for socio-economical development and ecological conservation.

Introduction

The protection of Forestry areas and its management has evolved significantly during the recent decades, with “top-down” policies and technocratic measures that were not aimed enough at environmental conservation objectives. Different topics, such as co-management or environmental governance, have increased in their importance in order to develop inclusive policies for the different socio-economical agents interested in environment (EUOPARC-ESPAÑA, 2007; WILSON, G.A., 2009).

Following this, understanding the interactions between a protected area and the local communities of its surrounding areas is a preliminary and essential step to actively manage protected areas. It is essential to analyze the natural and cultural heritage and its conservation requirements, but also the socio-economical relationships and flows, to be able to optimize interactions between managers and society (GÓMEZ LIMÓN *et al*, 2000).

Since 2008, some Mediterranean Administrations and NGOs have been conducting a European Project called Qualigouv, whose main objective is to strengthen the interaction between managers and people, through designing and testing strategies at different levels and using innovative tools to improve governance and the integral management of Mediterranean forest in protected areas. Coordinated by Murcia Region, the members are the International Association for Mediterranean Forests (AIFM), the Parc Naturel Regional du Luberon, the Parc Naturel Regional des Alpilles, WWF, Generalitat Valenciana, the french Office Nationales des Forêts and Taranto Province in Italy.

The Qualigouv project, which has been developed through several monitored and evaluated pilot project actions, is focused on the Region of Murcia in the "Master Plans for socio-economical development and ecological conservation". These plans aim to improve people's quality of life in four small rural towns in the surroundings of Sierra Espuña Natural Park and Gebas Protected Landscape whilst being consistent with environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Location

Sierra Espuña Regional Park and the Gebas Protected Landscape are located in the geographical center of the Murcia Region, in the South-east of Spain. This territory was one of the first great reforestation areas in Spain. At the beginning of the 20th century, most of its mountains were reforested, transforming a wasteland into the biodiverse forest that it is nowadays, protected by its cultural and natural values. It covers 17,804 hectares across the municipalities of Alhama de Murcia, Totana, Aledo and Mula. In 1931, it was designated as a "Place of National Interest", and in 1992 it was protected as a "Natural Park". It is also classified as a SPA (Special Protection Area) because of its bird population and as a SAC (Special Area of Conservation) due to its important habitats and species. It holds around 1000 different species of flora, 36 of them protected by Regional and National laws. The predominant tree is the Carrasco pine and there are 123 species of birds, 38 of

mammals and a vast array of insects, amphibians and reptiles.

The Sierra Espuña Management team earned the Spanish National Certification "Q for Quality Tourism" for the Natural Park in March 2005, and its forest management has been certified by the PEFC (Programme for Endorsement of Forest Certification Schemes) and FSC (Forest Stewardship Council) systems.

Gebas Protected Landscape was established by the Regional Law 4/1992. It covers 1.875 ha across Alhama de Murcia and Librilla municipalities. Gebas creeks are one of the best examples of a typical arid territory, an impressive succession of "bad lands". The international popularity of this area is due to its geomorphological resources and landscape, together with the singularity of the plant communities.

The same Management Plan is working for both areas since 1995 (Regional Law 13/1995) and according to its rules, the socioeconomic and ecological Master Plans are continuing to be developed since 2008 in order to implement participative processes at a local level in the four small villages around Sierra Espuña Regional Park and the Gebas Protected Landscape. These small villages are: Gebas (Alhama de Murcia), El Berro (Alhama de Murcia-Mula), Casas Nuevas (Mula) and El Purgatorio (Totana).

Picture 1:
Sierra Espuña landscape
Juan Tomas Gandia Sanchez



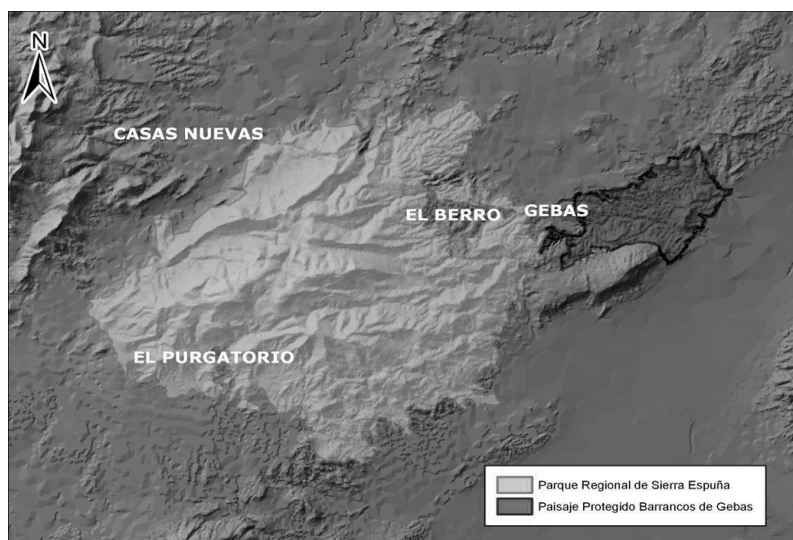


Figure 1:
Rural Villages in the
Natural Park where
Master Plans are being
implemented

The villages involved

El Berro (Alhama de Murcia and Mula) has 200 inhabitants. It is located within the forest and the country, the mountain and the valley.

Casas Nuevas is another small village in Mula with 215 inhabitants. It was the last village founded within the Mula municipality. It is located in the Northern area of the Protected Area.

Gebas (Alhama de Murcia) with less than 100 inhabitants, is located between the “bad lands” protected landscape and Sierra Espuña.

El Purgatorio is located in the North-West of the Totana municipality, belonging to the hamlet of La Sierra. It has 56 registered residents in 2009.

Picture 2:
Barrancos de Gebas
Juan Tomas Gandia
Sanchez



Although the four villages and hamlets involved in the project are rather small, they are very influential in the Natural Park management, as the livelihoods of the inhabitants is from tourism, agriculture or forest management, which have a great influence over the fauna, flora and other natural protected resources in the area. The speed of inhabitant reduction, which was very rapid some decades ago, has decreased recently. Apart from this, there is an important percentage of people that live in other municipalities who return on weekends or on holidays (BARAZA MARTÍNEZ *et al*, 2003).

Methodology

The methodology was applied in four small rural villages that depend on the main municipalities: Gebas (Alhama de Murcia, El Berro (Alhama de Murcia y Mula), Casas Nuevas (Mula) and El Purgatorio (Totana). The first objective was to learn about and analyse the characteristics of the municipalities that compose the protected areas. Information on the socioeconomic status of the small towns was collected (through surveys, longue interviews with decision-makers and participatory meetings) in order to understand the influence of the protected areas on the municipalities and their environment, to define actions that could be implemented to promote economic growth in a conservation framework and to be able to create mechanisms that could improve communication among local communities and the Environmental Administration.

Results

At the moment, three processes have been completed and the fourth one is facing the last step. People’s responses have been very positive due to the fact that they had never previously been consulted about land management planning in their territories before. However, implementation has turned out to be the most difficult process because it was such a broad request that the needs and suggestions that were identified involved different administrations and managers, which has created difficulties in giving responses as promptly as the local population was expecting.

The actions that were extracted from the participatory meetings in different hamlets are included in the different working lines:

- Promotion of social participation.
- Valuing natural and rural heritage.
- Recovery and enhancement of cultural heritage.
- Training and advice for rural development.
- Promoting local production systems.
- Creation or improvement of infrastructure and equipment.
- Create structures for institutional coordination.

The most voted for actions, and therefore the highest priority, are to: improve the health and transport in the hamlets, improvement infrastructure (roads, sewage...), hire a local development agent, provide support for local associations, organize several conferences (training, the dynamization of the populations...), provide technical support to farmers to develop a "Natural Brand" for products from the area, undertake changes in the legal declaration of certain areas...

Conclusions

After three years, several lessons have been learnt from these and other processes included in the QUALIGOUV project. Consequently, new procedures have been devised in order to create conditions for future success in other Mediterranean protected areas. Firstly, although village scale provides very detailed and precise information about measures proposed, actions and areas where they would be implemented often overlap. A single socioeconomic plan, including all the villages involved, is considered to be a better option for the whole protected area.

Secondly, administrations and institutions that will be responsible for the implementation of measures should participate from the beginning of the process in order to be able to integrate corresponding actions into their own activities. This will enable the adjustment of measures to realistic budgets and avoid false expectations from the local population.

Finally, dynamic and local implementation and monitoring are essential. That is the



Picture 3:
El Berro
Lydia Lorca Cava

reason why local offices, the Master Plan dynamizer role and monitoring committees with managers, technicians, politicians and local stakeholders participation, are very important, as well as coordination of these committees. These four committees, focused in villages, will have to integrate coordination with other participatory processes such as Model Forest (larger scales), Park Council (with management objectives) or European Chart of Sustainable Tourism (focused in a concrete activity).

In conclusion, the Master Plan methodology is a very effective tool in making people

Picture 4:
Participatory meeting
in Casas Nuevas
Juan José Andujar Diaz





Picture 5:
Casas Nuevas
Juan José Andujar Díaz.

feel that a closer relationship with the administration is being developed. People from rural areas are not too worried about limitations derived from protection requirements. However, in a sustainability context, they are asking for an administration that is able to work together with them for their territory development, protected or not.

M.V.

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Summary

Mario VELAMAZÁN,
Cristina LÓPEZ,
Francisco FLORES
Juan de Dios
CABEZAS
General Directorate
for the Environment,
Murcia Region
Spain

Email:
mario.velamazan.ros
@gmail.com
For more information:
www.qualigouv.eu

Since 2008, some Mediterranean Administrations and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) are conducting a European Project MED called Qualigouv, whose main objective is to strengthen the interaction between managers and people, through designing and testing strategies at different levels and innovative tools to improve governance and integral management of Mediterranean forest in protected areas. The local project in Murcia is focused in the Master Plans for socio-economical development and ecological conservation. These plans are aimed to improve the life quality of people consistently with environmental conservation and sustainable development in four small rural towns around Sierra Espuña Natural Park and Gebas Protected Landscape.

Through a participatory process, information on the socioeconomic situation in the small towns was collected (through surveys, large interviews to decision-makers and participatory meetings) in order to understand the influence of the protected area on the municipalities and their environment, to define actions that could be implemented to promote economic growth in a conservation framework and to be able to create mechanisms that could improve communication among local communities and the Environmental Administration.

After three years, several lessons have been learnt from these and other processes included in the QUALIGOUV project. Consequently, although the Master Plans have shown to be a very efficient tool, new procedures have been thought in order to create conditions for future success in other Mediterranean protected areas.