

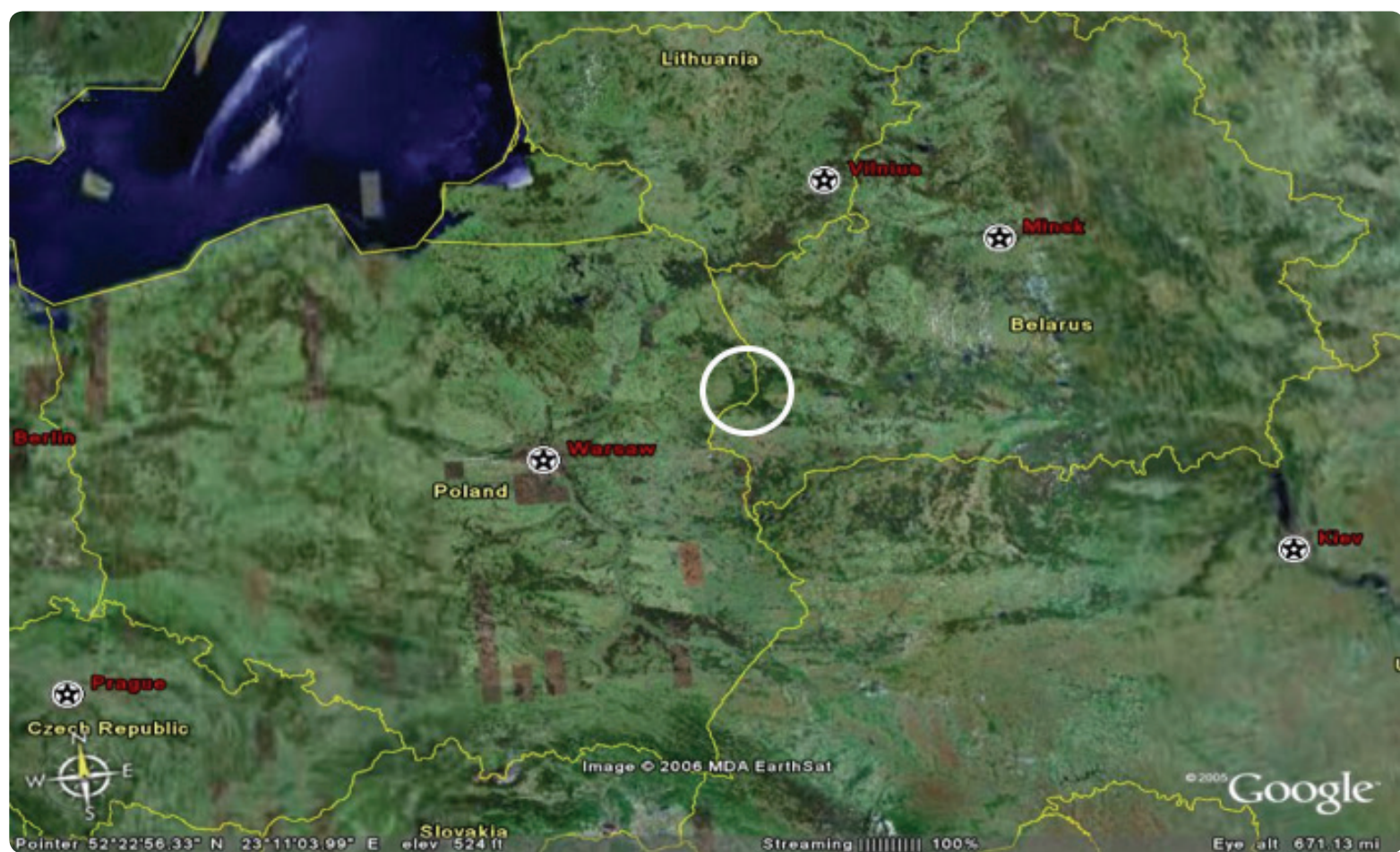
Conflict in the protection and management of the Polish Białowieża Forest



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Context

The Białowieża Forest is a trans-boundary area, located on the border between Poland and Belarus. It is considered the only remaining large area of near-natural lowland temperate forest in Europe having properties of untouched forest and a set of rare species including re-introduced European bison, a symbol of the Białowieża Forest. Presently, 16% of the Polish part of the Białowieża Forest (i.e. ca. 105 km² out of ca. 630 km²) is protected as a national park, while the rest is managed by the State Forest organisation. Since the beginning of 1990s there has been conflict in the Białowieża Forest regarding protection and management of its biodiversity. While environmentalists and scientists, supported by the Government, believe that the management by the State Forest has been detrimental to the unique biodiversity of this area, and have advocated enlargement of the national park to cover the whole Polish part of Białowieża Forest, foresters and local people have been keen to sustain the less biodiversity-friendly State Forest regime.



Location of the Białowieża Forest (google maps)



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was satisfactory for the proponents of the park enlargement as it meant large decrease in the detrimental impacts of forestry and improvement of the conditions for the forest’s biodiversity.

Arguments

The main argument for park enlargement put forward by proponents of the park enlargement was related to the unique nature of the Białowieża Forest and its European importance for biodiversity conservation. They highlighted that forest management was detrimental for the special biodiversity of this area by interfering into natural dynamics of the forest and removing structures important for biodiversity, such as old large trees and dead wood. They presented scientific evidence to support their claims. The opponents of park enlargement underlined that extending protection would mean increased costs for the local communities (e.g. limited access to forest resources such as firewood). In addition, they claimed that the management by the State Forest was necessary to maintain the natural values of the BF, because “the forest cannot manage itself”. While the proponents of the park enlargement perceived the forest as something important at national or even international level, local people were mainly concerned with the local effects of the increased conservation.



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Framing

The lines of arguments used by the various parties mirrored three wider discourses, presented in the table below.

Discourse	Main stakeholders representing the discourse	Main focus	Illustrative quotes
Managerial	Foresters	Foresters are presented as stewards of the forest, actively managing it for sustainable outcomes, i.e. both for biodiversity and local livelihoods	“Forest needs people to grow well; it cannot manage alone” “The Białowieża Forest survived to present days due to foresters who through rational management retain its beauty and natural wealth”
Livelihood	Local people	The forest is important in fulfilling the local people needs	“Enlargement of national park will mean end of forestry, forest production and hunting, and more restrictions on investments, non-wood forest product gathering and moving in the forest” “Locals have right for development and civilization like in other parts of Poland” “Park enlargement would mean loss of jobs”
Primeval	Scientists and environmentalists	The Białowieża Forest is a unique place of primeval character, with extremely rich biodiversity. It has intrinsic value important not only locally but also nationally and even internationally	“Białowieża Forest is last relict of the lowlands primeval forests of Europe” “Białowieża Forest is a window into the past, providing an indispensable model for the reconstruction of Europe’s forests” “Let’s leave it for natural processes”

Effectiveness

Lines of argument relating to wider discourses that were strongly institutionalised (i.e. embedded into professional guidelines, organisational practices and legal system) proved to be the most effective. The concept of foresters as stewards of the forests and carers for its biodiversity, rooted in the long history of State Forestry and its positive image in the eyes of the Polish society, as well as the legal framework, legitimised arguments for continuing forest management. The local people’s arguments had societal support and became more effective when an Act of Parliament gave them the power to veto park enlargement. Arguments put forwards by the proponents of park enlargement, focused on the intrinsic value of the Białowieża Forest, were ineffective for decades until they drew support from the legal context when Poland entered European Union in 2004 and accepted EU conservation policies.



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Lesson learned

Arguments focused on the intrinsic value of biodiversity are not effective alone, particularly where there are substantial social and economic concerns.

Different lines of argument have different weight depending on scale. Global or national level arguments need to be adapted to better address the local scale concerns.

Institutionalisation of wider discourses and specific lines of argument enables policy action.



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Publication

Blicharska, M. & Van Herzele, A. 2015. What a forest? Whose forest? Struggles over concepts and meanings in the debate about the conservation of the Białowieża Forest in Poland. *Forest Policy and Economics*. DOI 10.1016/j.forpol.2015.04.003



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