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Discursive Struggle and Agency—Updating the Finnish Peatland Conservation Network

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Received: 7 August 2018; Accepted: 25 September 2018; Published: 27 September 2018



Abstract: This paper explores the process of updating the peatland conservation network in Finland—the Supplemental Mire Conservation Programme, which was drafted from 2012 to 2015. This study employs discursive agency approach (DAA), to reveal how agents actively seek to gain legitimate speaker positions and influence policy outcomes as they rely on existing discourses. It also studies the role of discourse in the context of Finnish peatland conservation policy and evaluates the role of agents in the discursive process and how they influenced the outcome. The empirical data consists of expert interviews, newspaper articles and policy documents. The results indicate that the discourses of ‘maintenance of biodiversity’, ‘regulatory program’, ‘voluntary conservation’ and ‘participatory approach’ influence the peatland conservation policy. Additionally, discursive agency is achieved through hegemonic discourse and a consensus seeking argumentation strategy that rely on keywords, such voluntary and sustainability.

Keywords: discursive struggle; discursive agency; conservation policy; peatland conservation

1. Introduction

This paper studies an ongoing, discursive struggle in conservation policy making. The discourses of ‘new’ conservation and ‘conventional conservation’ are contested in recent debates on nature conservation (Kallis et al. 2013; Tallis and Lubchenco 2014; Matulis and Moyer 2016). New conservation’ argues that the rhetoric and discursive practices of environmentalism is insufficient to deal with the practices of current deliberative and strategic policy making (Matulis and Moyer 2016). Meanwhile the policy instruments of ‘conventional conservation’, which aims to establish conservation areas through regulatory practices, has been re-named to command-and control policy, which is a rhetorical accomplishment of agency that favor the deregulation of environmental regulation (Dryzek 2013, p. 98). Inclusive conservation has been suggested as an approach to advance nature conservation not only through monetary terms and commodification, but through multiple values and inclusive processes (Chan et al. 2012; Matulis and Moyer 2016).

Discursive struggle emerges over the definition and framing of the problem, public understanding of the issues and shared meanings which motivate action (Stone 2002; Fischer and Gottweis 2012). Here, the discursive struggle occurred over the establishment of a conservation between proponents of a regulatory program and those who favored a voluntary one. The regulatory solution would establish new conservation areas, whereas voluntary policy means have been advocated as a response to legitimacy issues. The legitimacy of so-called conventional nature conservation has been problematized in the past with the implementation of the Natura 2000 network (Hiedanpää 2005). Additionally, Finland has been actively developing market-based and voluntary environmental policy instruments, which are inclusive towards the forest owners (Jordan et al. 2003; Paloniemi and Vilja 2009; Primmer et al. 2013; Salomaa et al. 2016). The voluntary policy solution that the SMCP eventually followed was initially introduced with the conservation model of

the National Forest Biodiversity Programme for Southern Finland (METSO) (Hiedanpää 2002; Paloniemi and Vilja 2009; Primmer et al. 2013; Salomaa et al. 2016). This voluntary model, which allows private forest owners to establish 10-year conservation contracts, has become an established practice in Finland (Primmer et al. 2013).

Peatlands such as bogs and fens, also referred to as mires in Finland (Seppä 2002), cover about 9.6 million hectares, or one-third of Finland's land area (Kaakinen and Salminen 2006). Finnish peatlands have been degraded by agriculture, forestry and the utilization of peat as an energy source. Therefore, peatland conservation and restoration, which are also effective ways for climate mitigation, are needed (Joosten et al. 2012). This paper studies the process of updating the Finnish mire conservation network between 2012 and 2015 in the Supplemental Mire Conservation Programme (SMCP). Before the network was updated 1.12 million hectares of mires and peatlands were protected; about 13% of all Finnish peatlands (Alanen and Aapala 2015). The National Mire Conservation Programme was prepared in 1979 and implemented in 1981 (Kaakinen and Salminen 2006). Since then the program has been evaluated twice, in 1995 and 2004, and new areas have been protected through the Natura 2000 network. The need to update the conservation network is evident especially in the southern part of Finland where many mire types are degraded and the land use pressure is high.

Discourse analysis often focuses on moments where discursive patterns or routines are broken up in a moment of dislocation (Hajer and Versteeg 2005). These moments of 'dislocation' enable the analysis of power and contestation in a discursive struggle (Rydin 2003; Hajer and Versteeg 2005). This paper analyzes a moment of 'dislocation' in Finnish nature conservation policy—the policy process of updating the SMCP in Finland, which was drafted between 2012 and 2015 (Alanen and Aapala 2015). What makes this an interesting example of dislocation in environmental politics is the change in political settings during the policy process that allowed the discursive struggle to emerge. In a discursive struggle agents take subject positions and rely on existing discourses to produce storylines, which are strategies to gain discursive agency.

Another concept which is relevant to the analysis of this paper are storylines, which have been defined as, "discursive practices of condensed narratives that guide a policy process over time" (Hajer 2005, p. 448). Storylines reduce the complexity of environmental problems and produce meaningful policy interventions (Hajer 2005; Teräsväinen 2010), but they do not require mutual understanding or coherence among agents. Storylines do not exist without agents that produce and reproduce them through linguistic practices. These agents can be either human or non-human, although in speaking situations agency is mainly recognised as human speaking objects, such as experts, government officials or members of the public (Dryzek 2013, p. 18). Storylines also do not require mutual understanding nor coherence among actors, but are in use to reduce the complexity of environmental problems and produce meaningful policy interventions (Teräsväinen 2010; Hajer 2005).

The aim of this paper is to reveal the discourses and the role of agents in the nature conservation policy process intended to update the Finnish peatland conservation network. Legitimate policy decisions require inclusive and deliberative forms of decision making (Dryzek 1990; Fischer and Forester 1993; Hendriks 2005). Language and discourse can be a method of inclusion and exclusion in public deliberation. Also, in regards of inclusiveness and effect, who participates on the deliberative forum matter. For this purpose, the paper applies the discursive agency approach (DAA), which aims to highlight the role of agents in discursive processes (Leipold and Winkel 2016a, 2016b). The working group for the SMCP, was an expert forum to discuss the selection criteria for conservation areas and policy solutions. This working group functions as an example of deliberative forums, which are often constituted of professionals representing various economic and political agency groups (Hendriks 2005; Dryzek and Hendriks 2012; Busca and Lewis 2015). This working group followed the idea of inclusive policy making in network governance (Saarikoski et al. 2012; Sørensen and Torfing 2016). The main research questions in this paper are:

- (a) What was the role of different policy discourses and agency in the process of drafting the Supplemental Mire Conservation Programme in Finland?

- (b) Which powerful discourses did the agents rely on in order to gain discursive agency and persuade others to support their preferred policy solutions?
- (c) How did this influence the outcome of the process?

2. Discursive Agency

The drafting process of the SMCP offers an excellent example to study the agency and discourses in policy making. This paper analyses the process of updating the mire conservation network in Finland through the DAA. With its emphasis on agency, this approach can be used to reveal who is taking part in the construction of the Finnish peatland conservation discourses, what kind of argumentative “building blocks” these discourses consist of. This article highlights the discursive strategies that aim at influencing the policy outcome by combining agency with the use of language and argumentation. Accordingly, the focus of the analysis is on the strategic argumentative practices by the agents and the role of arguments in accessing political arenas in order to influence policy.

The DAA defines policy making as a continuous discursive struggle over establishing ‘political truths’ (Leipold and Winkel 2016b, p. 36). The DAA aims to bring agency back to discourse analysis (ibid.). DAA helps to identify power throughout the policy making process. Power has been conceptualized through institutional and ideational power (Carstensen and Schmidt 2016). Institutional power refers to actors attempts to achieve ones aims or control others through formal and informal institutions, whereby ideational power has been conceptualized as the capacity of actors to influence ones normative and cognitive beliefs through the use ideational elements (ibid). These ‘ideational elements’ are discourses, narratives, storylines, vocabularies and arguments. The concept of ideational power, helps to understand why certain political actors gain the discursive agency. Power influences what is the dominant discourse, who controls this discourse, and how.

The DAA aims to bring agency back to discourse analysis (ibid.). Discourse analysis builds on Foucault’s post-structural theory. Discourse analysis has been criticized for leaving the role of agency unclear in the process of critical discourse and local resistance (Fischer 2000, p. 27). As the DAA recognizes the multiple realities present in policy making, it follows the social constructivist understanding of problems embedded in particular discourses (Hajer 1995; Turnhout et al. 2015). As conceptualized by policy scientist Maarten Hajer, discourse is “*an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena, and which is produced and reproduced through an identifiable set of practices*” (Hajer and Versteeg 2005, p. 300). Discourse is an articulatory practice that organizes social relations and consequently shapes identities and constructs power relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Howarth 2010). These discursive structures are always interpreted by the researcher (Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Leipold and Winkel 2016b). For discourse analysts, language use is action which is always socially and historically situated in a dialectical relationship with the social context, being both constitutive of and constituted by it (Fairclough 1993; Hajer 1995); although drawing on this ‘linguistic approach’ requires recognition that these processes have both discursive and material consequences. In the DAA discursive agency must be achieved by gaining ground as a relevant speaker through institutional characteristics (or status) or through participation in the dominant discourse (Leipold and Winkel 2016b). Discursive agency must be earned from other stakeholders in the policy process by being perceived as a relevant speaker, which can be achieved through strategic action in terms of relevant subject positions of the policy issue or by choosing an effective argumentation strategy (ibid.). Stakeholders use argumentation strategies and coherent vocabularies that are in line with their interests and values and the issue at hand. Language and communication are actively employed by stakeholders in strategic action in order to persuade others to act and protect particular interests. The intentional use of language in a policy process is called a discursive strategy (Rydin 2003, p. 49). Stakeholders may choose discursive strategies where they use the dominant discourse in order to gain access to the arena of policy making or they might strategically shape the existing discursive structure by introducing new arguments and vocabularies. Thus, discursive agency is also about the power relations of stakeholders who wish to

gain access to the forum and shape the discursive landscape (Leipold and Winkel 2016b; Mol 2014; Borg and Paloniemi 2012).

The DAA focuses on how agents seek to legitimate their speaker positions and arguments in order to gain discursive agency (Leipold and Winkel 2016a, 2016b). With this emphasis, the paper continues interest in how various actors exercise power by drawing on existing discourses and how these existing discourses shape agency (Hajer and Versteeg 2005; Leipold and Winkel 2016b). Compared to the more established empirical heuristic approach of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1993, 2010), the discursive agency approach has been less tested empirically. While critical discourse analysis studies the reproducing and changing aspects of discourse and how this change occurs—revealing power asymmetries and critically examining the relationship between power and society (Fairclough 1993; Takala et al. 2017), the discursive agency approach recognizes the role of agents, which aim to gain acknowledged speaker positions within the dialectical process relying on hegemonic discourses and shaping discourse through agency (Leipold and Winkel 2016a). The aim to legitimate oneself as a relevant speaker can be achieved through strategic action in terms of relevant subject positions to the policy issue (Leipold and Winkel 2016a), positioning oneself within competing storylines, which is done by referring to particular discourse or by strategic practices of argumentation.

3. Case Study, Materials and Methods

This study is based on qualitative case study research, which may combine different sources of data (Yin 2003; Hartley 2004). The data was collected in spring 2015 and consists of semi-structured interviews, public policy documents and relevant newspaper articles. First, the agents involved in drafting the SMCP were identified from the document material, which are publicly available on the Finnish Council of State web-page under the project YM027:00/2012. This web-folder includes the minutes from the working group, 22 public hearing documents and 81 responses to the call for comments on the proposal. After identifying relevant agents, 23 professionals were contacted for interviews and 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted in January and February 2015. These interviewees were either participants in the working group or representatives of interest groups that took part in the seminars or workshops organized by the Ministry of the Environment (Appendix A). Interviewees were asked to describe the process, including what topics and policy solutions for mire conservation were discussed in the working group. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The interview transcripts and document material were coded following qualitative content analysis. Furthermore 35 newspaper articles, fact sheets and blog posts from 12 June 2014 to 13 February 2015 support the analysis.

The working group for supplemental mire conservation consisted of 17 full members and 9 substitute members. These members were representatives from the Ministry of the Environment and the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, the state forest enterprise, (Metsähallitus) representatives of sectoral research institutes (the Finnish Environment Institute, Geological Survey of Finland, Natural Resources Institute Finland), universities, regional environmental and land use planning administrations, the Central Union of Agricultural and Forest Owners (MTK) and the Finnish Association for Nature Conservation (FANC). The participants were selected by the Ministry of the Environment. While these stakeholders represent various institutions, interests and voices, they were expected to aim at common problem solving and forget about their institutional affiliations in the deliberative forum. Simultaneously they were lobbying their interests in policy making and media.

The meetings of the working group took place between 4 September 2012 and 30 September 2015 (Alanen and Aapala 2015). The process was led by the Ministry of Environment, which invited a government initiated forum to deliberate on the mire conservation objectives. The aim of this working group was to define criteria for the selection of conservation areas, select areas with high nature values and discuss the policy and implementation measures of the SMCP. The working group specified areas where conservation needs were most urgent, decided on selection criteria for areas of high nature value and the methods to develop scientific evidence in areas with high nature value. Subsequently,

the first phase of the program concentrated on southern Finland. It should be noted that stakeholders and interest groups outside of expert forums also attempt to influence policy outcomes. Therefore, understanding agency and the discursive practices that influence policy processes and their outcomes is important.

The moment of discursive opening, wherein the regulatory and voluntary conservation methods were contested, allows us to scrutinize the role of discourses, agents and arguments, and how they constitute discursive agency in the process of updating the content of the Finnish mire conservation network. The agents listed above participated in the discursive struggle over the content and definition of the mire conservation policy. The interviews for this study took place in the middle of the process where the voluntary and regulatory means for mire conservation were contested. At that point the outcome of the process was unclear, which allows us to look for storylines and other discursive elements in the struggle over the means of the SMCP.

The discourse analysis was carried out in two phases. In phase one analysis of the arguments applied throughout the discursive struggle was conducted. In this phase 207 arguments presented by 22 stakeholders were identified from the document material and the interview data. The arguments were verified with qualitative content analysis from newspaper material, which also focused on the arguments employed to persuade others. These arguments were then coded based on whether they support regulatory or voluntary conservation. Yet, scientific expert discourse was differed from the administrative expert discourse and voluntary conservation discourse differed from participatory demands. Based on this, four coherent storylines that demonstrate how agents employ strategic practices of language and argumentation and aim to gain discursive agency to influence the outcome were identified. These storylines and their central arguments are presented in Figure 1. In phase two the outcome of the process, which was published as a draft report in 2015, was analyzed. This phase analyzes the influence of agency and discourses to the policy outcome.

4. Analysis and Results

4.1. *The Discourses of Mire Conservation*

Initially the working group was supposed to create a mire conservation program according to the Finnish Nature Conservation Act. This objective changed when the political setting shifted. In the beginning of the process the Government of Finland had a Minister of the Environment from the Green Party. In the autumn of 2014 the Greens stepped down from the government because of a disagreement over the decision to build more nuclear power plants. On September 26 the ministerial position was filled by a politician from the National Coalition Party, which is a centre-right pro-Europe liberal party (Yle 2014). Voluntary nature conservation became the policy solution advocated for by the new Minister of the Environment and the new task of the working group was to define suitable policy means to improve voluntary measures. In addition, a sub-working group was selected to evaluate the policy instruments for mire conservation before the actual working group was allowed to continue the selection of conservation areas.

The four storylines of ‘maintenance of biodiversity’, ‘regulatory program’, ‘voluntary conservation’ and ‘participatory’ summarize the values and arguments of each discursive agency (see Figure 1). The maintenance of biodiversity storyline builds on the expert discourse, regulatory program storyline on the traditional conservation discourse, voluntary conservation on the neoliberal discourse and participatory storyline emphasize the local stakeholders’ interests. Some of the arguments are overlapping, such as biodiversity and restoration, which means that each discursive agency emphasizes them. This means that the agents employ each other’s arguments, some of which belong to multiple discourse categories. Due to this, discourse analysis is always related to the researcher’s interpretation. However, analyses of discourses and discursive agency reveal strategies to gain power and influence the outcome in a particular speaking situation. Within these storylines the agents employ arguments in a coherent way in order to shape policy meanings, interpretations and the outcome.

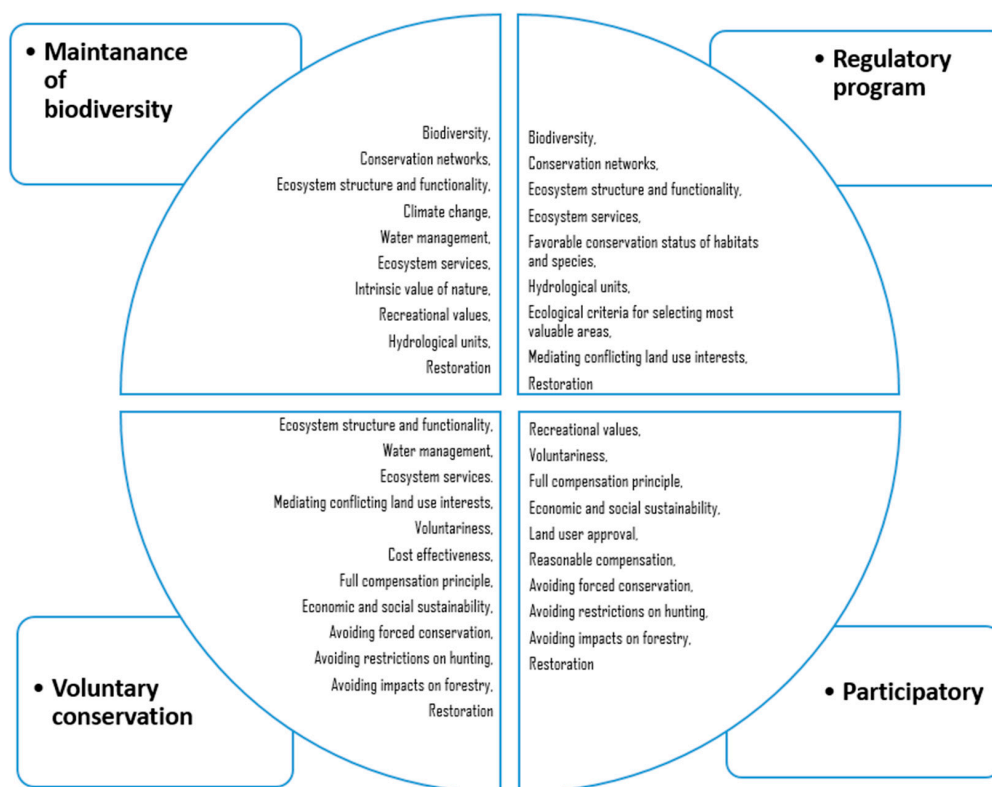


Figure 1. Central arguments employed by the agents of ‘maintenance of biodiversity’, ‘regulatory program’, ‘voluntary conservation’ and ‘participatory’ discourses.

a. Maintenance of biodiversity

This storyline builds on the expert discourse. The agents representing this storyline highlight the improvement of nature conservation networks, maintaining ecosystem structure and functionality, achieving the favorable status of nature conservation and protecting mires as hydrological units (Interviews 4 Natur och Miljö—Swedish speaking nature conservation association of Finland and 7 Finnish Association for Nature Conservation; Finnish Council of State 2012). International biodiversity targets, protecting habitats and species and returning the ecological health of wetlands were represented as infallible targets requiring action. The discursive agency here consists of nature conservation associations. Under this discourse category, the agents employed the professional vocabulary of nature conservation, which included terms such as conservation network, ecosystem structure and functionality, and nature or habitat type:

“The biodiversity indicators of Finnish nature, [. . .] conditions that can not be reduced to endangered nature types and endangered single species, [. . .] these indicators are alarmingly red, which means mire biodiversity is declining. So this is basically the scientific fact that many stakeholders have systematically emphasized”. (Interview 4 Natur och Miljö—Swedish speaking nature conservation association of Finland)

Recreational values, such as berry picking and bird watching, were also emphasized within this discourse. This reflects the middle-class, recreational background of the conservation movement. Characteristic to the Finnish nature conservation movement is that it has been in the hands of experts and has institutionalized over time (Kaakinen and Salminen 2006). Climate change, although it was mentioned did not play a major role within this discourse (Interviews 4 Natur och Miljö—Swedish speaking nature conservation association of Finland, 5 Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Forest services and 7 Finnish Association for Nature Conservation). Yet, climate change is an important argument for peatland conservation on a global scale (Joosten et al. 2012).

Water pollution control and water quality targets, which have been highlighted in Finnish peatland conflicts (Albrecht and Ratamäki 2016), were major concerns within this discourse category (Interviews 4 Natur och Miljö—Swedish speaking nature conservation association of Finland, 5 Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Forest services and 7 Finnish Association for Nature Conservation). Additionally, the ecosystem services emphasized by this discourse were water resources, flood control, and carbon sequestration and storage.

b. Regulatory program

This storyline builds on the traditional nature conservation discourse. Central to this storyline was the willingness to proceed according to the Finnish Nature Conservation Act (1096/1996; para. 7–9 and 50–54). The European Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), which has been implemented by the Finnish Nature Conservation Act, aims at the favorable conservation status of natural habitats and species. This was linked to the effectiveness of a top-down approach, as ‘traditional’ nature conservation would most likely lead to a sufficient outcome. This discourse was mainly revealed from the comments of the regional environmental administration (The Centres for Economic Development, Transport and Environment), which implements the programme at the local level. The nature conservation associations could also be connected to this storyline as they argued that state driven regulatory measures are necessary to achieve biodiversity targets. In the hearing round after the release of the proposal for supplemental mire conservation, the regional environmental administration was the only agent arguing for a binding policy solution (Finnish Council of State 2012). The Ministry of the Environment had a coordinating role in the process of drafting the supplemental mire conservation programme. The nature conservation associations argued this way as well:

“It is crystal clear for us that there is a need for this type of nature conservation planning, the so-called conventional nature conservation which is approved by the Council of State”. (Interview 4 Natur och Miljö—Swedish speaking nature conservation association of Finland)

Additionally, this discourse emphasized that hearing procedures are already at a good standard and follow regulations on social and environmental impact assessments (Social Impact Assessment Act (200/2005) and Environmental Impact Assessment Act (468/1994)). The resources of the Centres for Economic Development, Transport and Environment are limited, which is why they see additional landowner questionnaires as an extra burden for the regional administration. Thus, a mire conservation program adhering to the Environmental Protection Act would be the most cost-effective solution to reach the SMCP objectives because it would lead to an environmentally preferable result (Interviews 4 Natur och Miljö—Swedish speaking nature conservation association of Finland and 7 Finnish Association for Nature Conservation). The argument here is that conservation targets are better achieved through centralized administration and expert analysis.

It appears that this discourse builds on administrative rationalism, which relies on the institutionalized problem solving of the government agencies, expert panels and regional administration (Dryzek 2013, p. 20). The regulatory program as a policy means is often referred to as the ‘command and control’ solution, which Dryzek calls a “rhetorical accomplishment” to reason the deregulation of environmental norms (Dryzek 2013, p. 98). The regulatory solution was the basis of the SMCP, before the Minister of the Environment from the Green Party (Ville Niinistö) resigned. As a regulatory conservation program, the selection of areas with conservation values of national significance should be carried out with appropriate methodology and the resulting program should consist of nationally significant wetland areas to be purchased for permanent conservation. Mires are hydrological units that should be integrated in the program as a whole.

c. Voluntary conservation

This storyline emphasized a voluntary conservation model, especially on private land and therefore builds on voluntary conservation discourse. The discursive agency here consists of expert organizations representing landowner and forest owner interests as well as forest industries.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, and they argued that mire conservation should be approached voluntarily (Interview 10 Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland). What is noteworthy here is that these agents were not against mire conservation but called for more innovative solutions to improve biodiversity targets that would not hinder the developments in the bioeconomy:

“That type of symmetry or equilibrium and action that allows the development of the bioeconomy as a leading economic activity in Finland, which is based on sustainable natural resources and sustainable use of them, and which is a state-of-the-art activity in Finland compared to many other nations. And in this regard we should reconsider the nature conservation issue, not only as an ideology, but in practice and being realistic”. (Interview 8 Finnish Forest Industries)

In this model, mire conservation should be approached voluntarily because of the lessons learned from previous conservation conflicts. The implementation of previous conservation programs, such as Natura 2000, provoked negative reactions among forest industries and forest owners as the program did not fit with existing national and regional governance practices (Hiedanpää 2005). These agents argued that the conservation model for mires should follow the national forest biodiversity program for southern Finland, METSO, which introduced a voluntary approach to forest conservation (Borg and Paloniemi 2012; Primmer et al. 2013). These agents perceived the ‘new’ conservation solutions as a way to build legitimacy for conservation and solve the conflict between individual property rights and nature conservation as a public good.

The sustainability of the voluntary conservation model was highlighted, especially its socio-economic benefits which would guarantee that the profitability of forestry activities would not decrease and that the property rights of private land owners would be respected (Interviews 6 Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Central Office, 8 Finnish Forest Industries and 10 Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland). When establishing borders for conservation areas, forest agents argued that the forestry sector’s operational precondition should be respected (Interview 8 Finnish Forest Industries). The forest industry has traditionally played a strong role in Finnish decision making structures (Rytteri and Kortelainen 2015). This means that they have over time gained the discursive agency through institutional status.

This discourse emphasized the multiple uses of peatlands, including recreation, tourism, medical uses of peatlands, peat extraction and forestry (Interview 2 Forest Centre Tapio). The concept of ecosystem services was employed to emphasize the human well-being dimensions of conservation. Additionally, ‘forced conservation’ was used as a rhetorical device to gain power for the voluntary discourse. The constitutional protection of property was used as an argument to support voluntary conservation. Here especially the central union for agricultural producers and forest owners argued that landowners should have the right to make land use decisions on their property and, if willing, offer their property to the conservation program.

According to this discourse, the legitimacy of conservation improves with voluntary measures, as many landowners are in favor of conservation. This is especially the case when conservation is voluntary and compensation fair (Interview 5 Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Forest services). It also includes the idea of full compensation, which is compensation for the loss of future peat production and the loss of economic benefits from forestry (Interviews 5 Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Forest services and 6 Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Central Office). When the compensation for conservation is fair, it will motivate land owners to choose conservation. This contributed to the legitimacy of conservation received from local land owner groups as the outcome of the process was closer to the forest and land owners’ interests.

d. Participatory

“I think that talk is increasing that there has to be local support to these[...] nature values and biodiversity”. (Interview 1)

This storyline emphasizes the role of local communities and calls for wider deliberation and greater inclusion of local agents in decision making. This is why it builds on participatory discourse. The argument here was that local legitimacy increases through a voluntary bottom-up approach to mire conservation and local decision making improves the social and economic sustainability of nature conservation. Therefore, local landowners need to be provided with sufficient information and heard in the decision making process (Interviews 1 The Bioenergy Association of Finland, 3 Finnish Wildlife Agency, 9 Geological survey Finland and 12 Council of Oulu Regions). This discursive agency consisted of conservation experts with first-hand experience with the wants and needs of the landowners. They argued that recognizing local needs was important, even though the acceptance of nature conservation is generally high at the local level. Within this discourse the multiple uses of peatlands were recognized and calls for open dialogue between various stakeholders who benefit from the use and conservation of peatlands were emphasized. Dialogue would benefit both the nature values of mires and local inhabitants who benefit economically from peatlands. Additionally, to maintain the acceptance of mire conservation, compensation should be fair and align with the full compensation principle (the value of wood and peat).

“A model that could be applied, would be to find out what are the most important mires for conservation and then to market voluntary conservation for landowners in those areas, that there would be compensation. We can negotiate higher compensation and then, if the area is under conservation, the recreational uses should not be restricted unnecessarily. And another important thing is to reserve enough resources for peatland restoration”. (Interview 3 Finnish Wildlife Agency)

Local uses of peatland, such as berry picking and hunting, were emphasized here. Nature conservation and hunting are typically contested during most nature conservation projects in Finland (Interview 11 Ministry of the Environment, Finland). Hunting as a form of recreation was an argument used to garner support for voluntary conservation and increase local legitimacy. Hunting is not allowed in nature conservation areas established under the Nature Conservation Act, but on voluntary conservation areas the landowner can decide whether or not to allow hunting if it does not significantly weaken conservation objectives. Other recreational values and the need for restoration were also recognized with the argument that peatlands should be conserved for local people, and not from them.

4.2. The Outcome

We now turn to the third research question of the paper and illustrate how the discourses and agency influence the outcome of the process. The outcome of this process was a compromise between different policy means on public and private land. These were outlined in the proposal for the SMCP (Alanen and Aapala 2015). The final report suggests voluntary conservation on private land based on the National Forest Biodiversity Programme for Southern Finland (METSO) on wooded peatlands and voluntary conservation on open bogs (Alanen and Aapala 2015). It was developed from 2003 to 2007 and implementation began in 2008 (Vainio and Paloniemi 2013). Forest owners were integrated in the planning process of the METSO program, helping its synchronization with local forestry practices and governance patterns (Hiedanpää 2005). The METSO model, in which forest owners can offer high biodiversity forest areas for conservation, would be a suitable policy solution for the voluntary conservation of the wooded peatlands. This payment for ecosystem services approach is based on discussions in which the state and private forest owners negotiate the terms of a conservation contract (Borg and Paloniemi 2012). The program recognizes forest owners as important agents and improves the legitimacy of conservation but simultaneously contributed to shifts towards neoliberal nature conservation as the state's conservation responsibilities were shifted to regional authorities, entrepreneurs, NGOs and private landowners (Vainio and Paloniemi 2013; Apostopolou et al. 2014).

This was result of the discursive opening and the changes in agency. The new Minister of the Environment gave a press release on 15 October 2014 stating that the supplemental mire conservation was to establish voluntary conservation alongside the regulatory mire conservation programme

(Ministry of the Environment 2014). On the same day the Central Union of Agricultural and Forest Owners (MTK) gave a press release saying that the Ministry's press release is a significant act for nature conservation because voluntariness will improve the legitimacy of nature conservation (MTK 2014). These press releases resulted in a lively citizen debate where the constitutional protection of property and nature conservation were contested. Members of FANC and politicians from the opposition parties, such as the Greens and the Social Democratic Party of Finland, were particularly active in this debate. On 2 December 2014, Minister Grahn-Laasonen organised a public event in which she invited an expert panel to discuss conservation (Helsingin Sanomat 2014; Maaseudun Tulevaisuus 2014). Nature conservation associations were concerned that the Central Union for Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners were behind the watering down of the original objective (Interview 4, 7). This reflects the antagonism between interest groups for nature conservation and land owner groups which derives from divergent worldviews (Interview 4).

The Ministry of the Environment applied for an extension until 30 September 2015 (Finnish Council of State 2012). After the new Minister of the Environment took over, a sub-working group was formed to discuss alternative policy solutions. The sub-working group consisted mainly of representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry and the Ministry of the Environment, which meant the number of participants who were allowed to take part in the policy process was reduced. The rest of the working group saw this as a politicized effort to return power to state institutions:

“This change of assignment was clearly brought in by political direction and where those politics came from, there has to have been a group of political forces that wanted to push towards voluntary conservation instead of the nature conservation program according to the Nature Conservation Act”.
(Interview 12)

With the political changes the program was increasingly reoriented towards voluntary conservation. On state land mire conservation will be enforced through nature conservation areas under the responsibility of the Ministry of the Environment and supplemental mire conservation areas by the state forest enterprise (Metsähallitus). The voluntary approach will be used in mire conservation on private land. For those areas that meet the METSO-criteria (wooded peatlands) negotiations between landowners and the state will lead to conservation contracts. Temporary conservation contracts may be negotiated with those landowners who do not want to commit their land to permanent conservation. Several pilot projects are going to take place where the possibility to include open bogs on private land will be tested.

4.3. The Feedback

The proposal for the SMCP received comments from 81 stakeholder groups. They were grouped according to the categories of discursive agency which were previously identified from the interview and document material during the drafting process. These comments are summarized in Table 1. This reflects the categories of discursive agency which were previously identified from the interview and document material during the drafting process (see Table 1). The agents were mainly concerned about the openness of the process, resources and selection of areas. They were either satisfied or dissatisfied with the process. Additionally, the table summarizes the preferred policy solutions of each storyline. Pilot projects were proposed as a tool to develop new methods for peatland conservation, which gained most support from voluntary conservation and participatory storylines.

At this stage environmental conservation agencies were satisfied with the process, describing it as inclusive but dissatisfied with the proposal. Environmental conservationists stressed that the outcome was insufficient to guarantee the favorable conservation status of Finnish mires. Compared to the moment where the ‘dislocation’ occurred, in these comments the actors from the regional administration were more responsive to the ideas of voluntary conservation, arguing for pilot projects to test the voluntary conservation model. The actors behind the voluntary measures and

participatory discourses still argued that the interests of forestry and tourism should be better taken into account and that there should be as few restrictions on the use of natural resources as possible. Thus, when comparing the stakeholder argumentation from early 2015 to 2016, from the moment of dislocation to the proposal, it appears that the voluntary discourse gained momentum. Also, when comparing stakeholder argumentation from the first hearing round to the comments on the proposal for the SMCP, it appears that the stakeholders adopted arguments from each other. Adopting the objectives of other stakeholders may function as a discursive strategy in a discursive struggle over the definition of a problem and its solution (Åkerman and Peltola 2002). Additionally, it is very difficult to draw the line between discursive structures as there are as many speakers as there are viewpoints:

“the value of peatland is connected to which point of view is used and who is thinking about the issue”.
(Interview 12)

Table 1. Feedback to the proposal for supplemental mire conservation, which received 81 comments in 2016.

Comments on the Proposal	Maintanance of Biodiversity	Regulatory Program	Voluntary Conservation	Participatory
Satisfied /dissatisfied with the proposal	Dissatisfied: leads to (un)favorable status of mire conservation	Dissatisfied: Suggested measures do not guarantee favorable conservation status	Satisfied: Interest of tourism and forestry have to be taken into account	Satisfied: No legal effect on land use
Openness	The working group was well organized and open	The working group was well organized and open	Co-operation with interest groups	Acceptance of the land owners and forest owners
Resources	Sufficient funding has to be guaranteed	Sufficient funding has to be guaranteed	Sufficient resources needed; Cost-effectiveness	Full compensation principle; Direct compensation to landowners
Selection of areas	Should be based on nature conservation science, too much reliance on the 100,000 ha guiding the selection of areas	Ecological foundation for the selection criteria of areas; The connectivity of mire areas; hydrology	The bordering areas have to be purchased by the state	-
Favored policy measures	Mires have to be protected as hydrological units; METSO not suitable for the conservation of open bogs	Temporary conservation insufficient; METSO not suitable for the conservation of open bogs; Conflicting land use interests have to be consolidated	Voluntary action on private land; Land use planning part of the policy means; Most important areas with forestry use have to be prioritized; No restriction on hunting	Voluntary action; Increasing the knowledge of the importance of conservation through information campaigns; No restriction on hunting
Other	Decision on principle of sustainable use and conservation needs to be taken into account	Risks of voluntary conservation not assessed; Few resources for informing landowners and the public	Reduction of bureaucracy	Voluntary land owners can take part in restoration projects
Pilot projects	-	Deleloping new measures	Pilot projects	Pilot projects

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The policy process of updating the peatland conservation network in Finland was analyzed here as a discursive struggle over the means for conservation. The policy instruments for mire conservation were contested in a discursive struggle where the agents drew on discourses and presented arguments in order to influence the outcome and gain discursive agency. It appears that the need for nature conservation as such was generally well accepted by the agents participating in the expert forum. Instead, the discursive struggle occurred between ‘new’ and ‘traditional’ conservation approaches

(Oksanen and Kumpula 2008; Tallis and Lubchenco 2014; Matulis and Moyer 2016). Additionally, expert discourses were challenged by demands for voluntary measures and participatory approaches. In a case study on Irish peatland discourses similar demands for participatory approaches were recorded (O’Riordan et al. 2015).

Although the focus of the empirical analysis was on an expert forum, it seems that in this study electoral politics played an important role in defining the outcome. With a change of the Minister of the Environment the objective of the working group shifted as well. In this example of ‘dislocation in politics’, agents actively sought to gain discursive agency through their use of language, both intentionally and unintentionally, in order to influence the process and its outcomes. The dislocation occurred with the change of the Minister of the Environment, which challenged the well-established discursive order of the expert discourse, which relied on the vocabulary of ‘conservation network’ and ‘favorable conservation status of habitats and species’. The agents of the voluntary conservation storyline promoted the full payment principle and how they referred to the hegemonic discourse of sustainable development in order to legitimate their claims for better compensation in exchange for conservation. After dislocation, the new aim was to create a voluntary conservation model. The agents representing the forest industry and agricultural sector were then successful with their ‘voluntary conservation’ storyline. These agents also had strong institutional status as the forest sector’s interests have been very powerful in Finnish decision making structures (Rytteri and Kortelainen 2015; Lukkarinen and Rytteri 2016). This institutional setting is characteristic of Finnish environmental policy structures. Peat industry’s representatives did not take part in the drafting process of the SMCP, but they may have influenced the policy process indirectly.

The environmental NGOs and environmental administration relied on expert framings of the conservation issues. The vocabularies of biodiversity indicators, conservation networks and ecosystem structure and functionality that nature conservation associations and other environmental experts employ are often perceived as complex by the general public. This reduces the amount of potential participants in dialogue as the general public lacks the capacity to engage in particular discourses. In general, lay-people have less opportunities to participate in debates when the vocabulary used requires the capacity to process scientific knowledge. This is a challenge to meaningful participation in environmental policy processes (Fischer 2000).

In the context of Finnish peatland conservation, the consensus seeking discursive strategy effectively increased its discursive agency—gaining ground as a relevant speaker through institutional status and participation in the dominant discourse (Leipold and Winkel 2016b). The professionals and policy makers as well as the public speaking on behalf of landowner and forestry rights employed the rhetorics of sustainable development and emphasized economic and social aspects to support their objective of greater voluntary measures. The voluntary conservation and participatory storylines relied on the concept of sustainability and the discourse of sustainable development was influential in the argumentation of these solutions. Consensus seeking discursive practices are also powerful rhetorical devices to argue for one’s interests and garner support for preferred policy options across the political spectrum. As this study illustrates, they may also function as a strategy to gain discursive agency and defend one’s speaking position.

The outcome of this policy process indicates that voluntary policy solutions are gaining acceptance in the context of Finnish peatland conservation. Similar trend has been projected in Finnish forest conservation (Paloniemi and Vilja 2009; Salomaa et al. 2016). A value shift towards market-based and voluntary environmental policy instruments has been previously recorded (Jordan et al. 2003; Paloniemi and Vilja 2009; Gómez-Baggethun and Muradian 2015). This case study demonstrates that this value shift is becoming more permanent. During the process of drafting the SMCP, policy instruments were altered to support this new value emphasis with strong autonomy demands for landowners. Also, for the improved mire conservation network the voluntary conservation model was advocated for as a way to increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of conservation. Since the Natura 2000 conflicts in Finland, the METSO program and voluntary solutions have been advocated for as

a way to improve the legitimacy of nature conservation (Hiedanpää 2005). The dominance of these voluntary discourses in conservation policy has been connected to the integrative ability to connect elements of different discourses and forms of legitimacy (Turnhout et al. 2015).

Further analyses on power within the discourses could potentially reveal why ‘new conservation solutions’ were favored over conventional ones. New conservation solutions have not only been advocated for by agriculture and forestry interest groups but also by conservation science (Kareksela et al. 2013; Matulis and Moyer 2016). Simultaneously, one needs to remain critical about the material consequences of these changes within the vocabulary, such as the biodiversity impacts of voluntary conservation, and further examine whether it is possible to achieve effective conservation beyond traditional conservation areas. Despite the success of voluntary conservation in this particular case, the call for ‘traditional conservation’ and environmentalism is evident in the context of Finnish peatland conservation policy.

Funding: This research is funded by Academy of Finland: 263465.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. Background Organization of the Interview Respondents

- Interview 1. The Bioenergy Association of Finland
- Interview 2. Forest Centre Tapio
- Interview 3. Finnish Wildlife Agency
- Interview 4. Natur och Miljö—Swedish speaking nature conservation association of Finland
- Interview 5. Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Forest services
- Interview 6. Central Union of Agricultural Producers and Forest Owners—Central Office
- Interview 7. Finnish Association for Nature Conservation
- Interview 8. Finnish Forest Industries
- Interview 9. Geological survey Finland
- Interview 10. Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Finland
- Interview 11. Ministry of the Environment, Finland
- Interview 12. Council of Oulu Regions

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