

Article

A Tale of Two Protected Areas: “Value and Nature Conservation” in Comparable National Parks in Estonia and Russia

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Abstract: This study explores how local communities reflect on institutional frameworks and protected area governance in two national parks (NPs) with similar nature values in Estonia and Russia, and aims to understand the role of value systems in these interactions. It is based on 50 in-depth interviews with a broad range of stakeholders, and a desktop analysis of relevant regulation and plans. Interview questions reflect on various aspects of well-being (including fairness of governance solutions), awareness of NPs’ function and restrictions, related value aspects, and covered basic personal data needed to interpret the interviews. The study reconfirms the pivotal role of social justice as a driver of wellbeing. In particular, it articulates the significance of value systems playing the role of filters between governance inputs and specific management activities of communities. It underlines the vulnerability of such systems at a community level, most of all to the impacts related to various instances of “centralization”. They are manifested through the choice of restrictive measures and top-down arrangements at the expense of transparency and inclusiveness (in Russia), as well as through the removal of governance autonomy from NPs and transferring monitoring and enforcement functions to local communities without clear mandates or sufficient capacity (in Estonia).

Keywords: national parks; wellbeing; governance of protected areas; local communities; cultural landscapes; management of protected areas; Russia; Estonia; post-Soviet



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1. Introduction

The establishment of protected areas (PAs), even those with less restrictive legislation, such as national parks (NPs), inevitably puts significant limitations on many routines of the people living within or bordered by PAs [1–3]. As a result, some of the native populace may migrate away from PAs following their establishment [4], others will choose to stay (although often due to limited access to mobility options), while some people are attracted to living in NPs as a result of the pristine nature or emerging business opportunities [5–8]. At the same time, the relationship between PAs and poverty does not appear to be consistent, and reported as not significant at national and sub-national levels [9,10]. Building on the concept of wellbeing as suggested by Meadows 1998 [11], which encompasses an individuals’ capacity to achieve happiness, harmony, identity, fulfilment, self-respect, self-realization, community, transcendence, and enlightenment [11], as well as the wide literature base on the social impacts of PAs [1,3,5,12–15], the wellbeing of NP residents can be understood as a complex balance of the impacts caused by various

restrictive conservation policies, benefits created by the presence of outstanding nature and cultural heritage, and the readiness and capacity of local communities to cope with restrictions as well as grasp opportunities.

The success of a NP as a conservation project is related to the ability and motivation of residents to see themselves as a part of the project contributing to their self-realization, be it business, spiritual development, or any life/career target—at least if the wellbeing of local communities is considered as a part of the success [3]. This should also be in agreement with governance solutions conveying the policy of the state, e.g., seeking to reach conservation targets. This brings to conservation discussions the notion of "values", or preferences for modes of being [16].

The question of the importance of values as variables defining attitudes towards conservation measures and the readiness of the local populace to contribute to them is prominent in the conservation literature for the last two decades. This discussion is already included within Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) assessment reports [17,18], and represents an important topic of inquiry and a growing concern for governments seeking to understand what motivates peoples to contribute to a conservation action [19] and help to realise the management objectives of PAs [20], or how nature contributes to a good quality of life [21].

The interaction of biodiversity conservation regimes and value systems needs to be better understood [17], particularly for NPs, with their closer interaction between humans and nature than PAs with stricter protection regimes [22–24]. In order to address this, the authors, building on findings from field and desk studies of various stakeholder groups and conservation regimes in two NPs in Estonia and Russia, explored the following research questions:

1. How do conservation practices in Estonia and Russia impact the wellbeing of citizens and how do they interact with value systems?
2. What are the values behind wellbeing and the motivation to participate in nature conservation in Estonia and Russia?
3. How do conservation policies need to be informed of citizens' wellbeing and values in order to work better?

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Case Studies

The two comparative case studies were undertaken in Karula National Park (Karula NP) in southern Estonia and Sebezhsky National Park (Sebezhsky NP) in the south of Pskov Region of Russia (Figure 1). The reason for choosing these for this research was that they are located only some 200 km away from each other on opposite sides of an international border (Russia/Estonia), and feature similar landscapes and biodiversity (Figure 2). Prior to 1991 (when the USSR collapsed and Estonia and Russia became independent states) NPs in both republics had similar management regimes. Although the formal conservation status of both PAs is the same (NP), since then there has been substantial divergence in terms of management, and strategic development objectives set by national government. Such divergences had to do with difference in governance styles in Russia and Estonia that joined the EU, stricter conservation objectives in NPs of Russia, protection status of cultural landscape in Estonia as well rapidly emerging organic food market and telework jobs (and hence demand for housing outside cities).

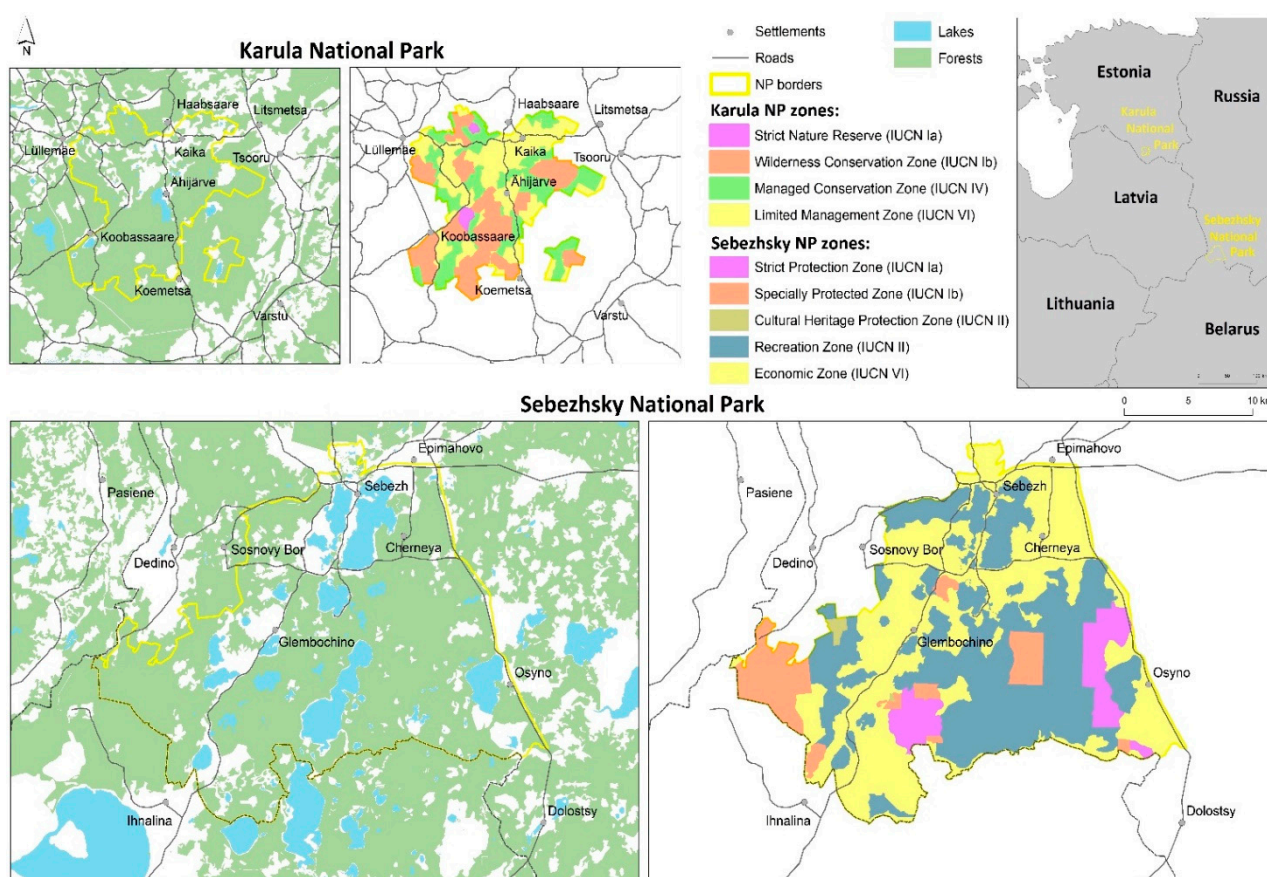


Figure 1. Locations and zoning of Karula national park (NP) in southern Estonia and Sebezhsy NP in the south of Pskov Region of Russia.

Socio-economically, the two areas are rather different. Karula National Park is also a quarter of the size of the Sebezhsy National Park [25–27]. Excluding the town of Sebezhsy, Sebezhsy National Park has almost 10 times the population of Karula National Park and the settlement pattern is also different. Karula NP features scattered and isolated farms, and in Sebezhsy National Park farms and households are concentrated in compact villages [27–30]. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of collective farms, most cultural landscapes in both national parks were abandoned and the population declined drastically [27,29,31]. To date, the socio-economic drivers of land-use change in Sebezhsy National Park have remained very similar with poor demographics and population decline reinforced by the Park managements' priorities focus on biodiversity and ecosystems, whilst overlooking livelihoods and cultural landscapes [28–30]. Unemployment is high with most jobs concentrated in the town of Sebezhsy and in law enforcement agencies, such as border guards and customs. In contrast, in Karula National Park the population has increased over the last two decades (2000–2017) with more children (0–14 years old) on average than in Estonian small settlements nationally [32]. A comprehensive comparison between the two areas is presented in Table 1 [27–33].

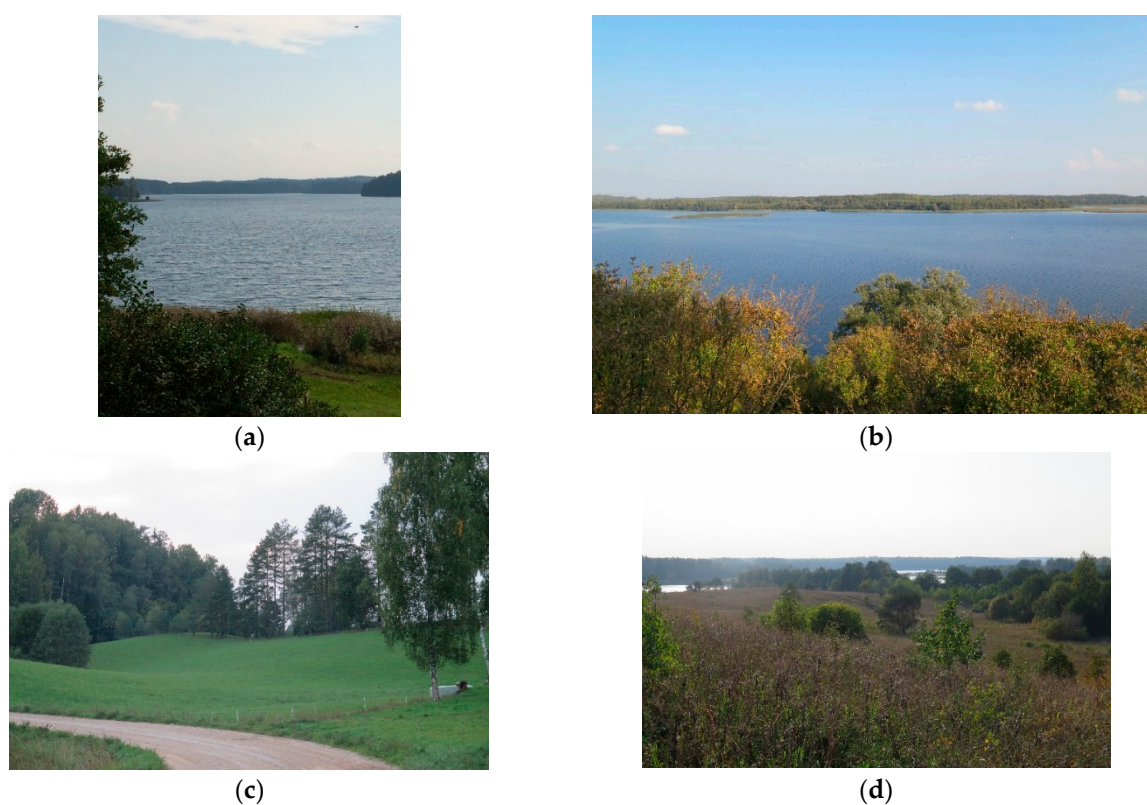


Figure 2. (a) Lake Ähijarv and surrounding forest in Karula National Park; (b) Lake Sebezsh and surrounding forest in Sebezshsky National Park; (c) Typical managed cultural landscape in Karula National Park; (d) Typical overgrown cultural landscape in Sebezshsky National Park.

Table 1. Comparison of the nature, management and socioeconomic contexts of the two national parks.

	Karula National Park	Sebezshsky National Park
Location	South-East Estonia	North-West Russia
Coordinates	57°42′52″ N, 26°29′12″ E	56°16′00″ N, 28°30′00″ E
Area	123 km ²	500 km ²
Year of designation	1993	1996
Landscape	Similar in both parks—forest and lake rich undulating landscape formed by glaciers.	
History	Both under rule of Soviet Union until 1991	
Land ownership	~75% State owned, ~25% privately owned.	State owned
Management regime	Managed by State, existing dialogue, involvement in decision making.	Managed by State, fully centralized, lack of dialogue, no involvement in decision making.
Population	~200 inhabitants	~2000 inh. in rural settlements + town of Sebezsh ~5300 inh.
Population dynamics	Population increasing and rejuvenating, in-migration.	Population decline, high proportion of elderly, low birth rate, depopulation of rural areas.
Settlements	~100 farmsteads, no larger settlements	~50 rural settlements + town of Sebezsh

Table 1. Cont.

	Karula National Park	Sebezhsky National Park
Economy	High number of agricultural enterprises, self-employed, unemployment rate low.	Economy concentrated in the town of Sebez, very few enterprises and high unemployment in rural areas.
Education	Large proportion of highly educated people	
Main occupation	Self-employed in agriculture and forestry, but also commuting and telework.	Employees in town of Sebez and in law enforcement agencies, high number of retired people.
Current ecological status and pressure on values	In general good, major pressure on forest management	In general good, minor pressure from real estate development.
Cultural landscape	Usage near maximum.	Almost fully abandoned.
Services	Remote	Remote, except the town of Sebez
Support measures on local economy	EU and State subsidies on agriculture and maintenance of semi-natural habitats	None

2.2. Data and Analytical Strategy

Field research was conducted in both areas including structured interviews together with a desktop analysis of the regulatory environments and socio-economic contexts.

The aim of the field study was to evaluate the well-being [34] of permanent residents in Sebezhsky and Karula NPs, as well as to understand what they valued in relation to their life within the NPs, and what role (current and expected) governance solutions played in developing such a life of value. Based on the experience of Järv et al. 2016 [23], 27 interview questions covering the following themes were developed (sample questionnaire in Figure S1):

4. Relative importance of problems (social, economic, and environmental);
5. Relative importance of conservation targets;
6. Sufficiency or excessiveness of PAs in the region (in terms of number and area occupied);
7. Overall satisfaction about living in the PA;
8. Overall attitude of family and/or friends towards the fact that one lives in the PA;
9. Overall satisfaction towards the intensity of conservation measures in the area;
10. Awareness about actual conservation measures in place and their implications for everyday life;
11. Perceived overall impact of specific restrictions on everyday life;
12. Alignment of management plans and conservation rules with the interests of permanent residents;
13. Sufficiency or excessiveness and rationality of conservation measures on the PA;
14. Discretion and opportunities affected by the PA;
15. Preferred type of a management authority for the PA (e.g., the state, municipality, NGO, private business, etc.);
16. Impact of the PA status on real estate prices;
17. Acceptable compensation options for PA-related disadvantages and restrictions;
18. Attitude towards plausible socio-economic scenarios for the PA;
19. Overall willingness to pay price for nature conservation in the area;
20. Unsatisfying features of land management and land-use;
21. Valued landscape, land-use, and management features;
22. Willingness to participate in landscape management and protection, and necessary incentives;
23. Perceived effectiveness of the existing system of subsidies and compensations, and desired changes to this system;
24. Actual personal contribution (including behavior) to nature conservation (both relevant for the PA and broader);

25. Overall duration of residence in the area;
26. Duration of annual stays in the area;
27. Age;
28. Gender;
29. Educational level;
30. Employment information.

Questions 1–21 reflected on various aspects of well-being, as well as awareness of the NPs' function and restrictions, and on related value aspects. Questions 22–27 covered basic personal data needed for the interpretation of interviews. In total, 26 in-depth interviews were conducted in Karula NP, and 24 in Sebezhsky NP. The length of the interviews varied between 45 min and two hours, so each question (from 1 to 21) was allocated sufficient time to be well explained and discussed. Interviews in both areas were conducted over a week in September 2018.

Snowball sampling was used [35–39], with initial interviewees and interest groups selected on the basis of participation in national park's conservation management plans (only in Estonia) or suggestions by initially identified stakeholder contacts (in Estonia and Russia). They included permanent and temporary (however living all the year round within the parks) local residents, either workers or entrepreneurs, from different sectors (forestry, tourism, agriculture, fishing, hunting, etc.); public servants from municipalities as well as environmental and forestry public bodies; employees of the NPs; and land owners. The intention was to include as many interest groups as possible using local networks and initiatives, contacts of acquaintances and organizations engaged in these regions, and simple internet searches [35,39]. On-site, interviewees were asked to recommend further contacts, especially from those interest groups that were not incorporated into the initial sampling [39]. Responses to questions 1–21 were reviewed, classified as regards the overall attitude to the question, clustered according to age, social or professional groups of respondents, and further used to reconstruct collective discourses voiced by different groups regarding various aspects of management and living in a NP.

The desktop analysis was conducted to review the regulatory frameworks applicable to both NPs and their residents, as well as traditional and social media outlets (such as local forums and public groups) in order to provide more clarity to sociological findings, especially where conflicts or other uncertain situations took place [26,33,40–49]. This was also undertaken in order to provide a better understanding of social or professional groups underrepresented in the field survey.

The first and partly the second research objectives are addressed through the description and summary of the findings of our field and desk studies in the Results section. These are structured in clusters exploring (1) the issues of understanding and acceptance of governance solutions as they make impact on social wellbeing [50], (2) the fairness of the solutions as they impact the social wellbeing and the values behind the citizens' willingness to participate in nature conservation [51], and (3) the way governance solutions interfere with material, normative and relational values of citizens [19]. The third and the second research objectives (where this is not covered by the Results) are addressed in the Discussion, which is structured following the seven generic functions of environmental systems. These functions have been suggested by Jouni Paavola [52], who reframed Elinor Ostrom's principles of institutional design [53] in order to introduce to them the notions of justice and fairness, where they can be even more important to social wellbeing than purely economic considerations. Having discussed related value aspects, we summarize with suggestions for ways forward.

3. Results

3.1. Does the PA Provide Problems or Solutions?

This question reveals the roots of the relationship between PAs and local communities, and as such, it is fundamental to the understanding of social wellbeing and highlights: factors identified by the local populace as negative or positive concerning the PA (corresponds

to questions 1 and 3 in the questionnaire), overall awareness of conservation measures (7), and the material impacts and opportunities associated with PAs, and their influence on the real estate market (8, 11, and 13).

In Karula NP, most of respondents firmly stated that there are enough protected areas in Estonia. In Sebezhsky NP (when asked about PAs in Pskov Region) a similarly strong majority did not have any opinion on that matter, while the rest found PAs sufficiently or excessively abundant, with no interviewees (unlike in Karula NP) seeing them as too few. A plausible explanation is related to the low visibility of nature conservation issues in regular mass media or in political debates in Russia (i.e., people would not know, how many PAs there were), while in Estonia this is a popular topic attracting broad attention. Other explanations could be linked to the highly-centralized and extremely top-down nature of nature conservation governance in Russia, with relevant policies predominantly decided at the federal level and without much interaction with the regions. In Estonia, partly due to the much smaller size of the country and due to widespread private ownership of lands within PAs (~24% of the territory of PAs) [54], biodiversity conservation is regarded as a rather local issue directly concerning a substantial portion of the population [55].

Local communities in Karula and Sebezhsky NPs appeared to be concerned about different issues. The most important issue identified in NPs was unemployment, whereas in Karula NP it was found to be one of the least significant, and many interviewees complained of a labor shortage instead. This is due to rapidly developing entrepreneurship in recent decades (mainly in agriculture and landscape management). In Karula NP half of the respondents were self-employed vs. a small fraction in Sebezhsky NP. In Sebezhsky NP and surrounding areas, large state-owned agricultural and forestry enterprises had closed down, and any remaining meaningful jobs are associated with the government (e.g., national park rangers, public servants, or border and customs servicemen) and are too few. Tourism is relatively small-scale in the Sebezhsky NP and the service sector is rudimentary and other entrepreneurship opportunities are limited.

The most important problem identified in Karula NP was socio-economic marginalization. In Sebezhsky NP, this was perceived as the least important, arguably because its systematic nature was overlooked in the overall context of dropping income opportunities. Such problems as social tension, crime, inflation, environmental problems, and nature degradation were considered as significantly less important in both communities and were similarly prioritized in the two NPs.

Residents in both Karula and Sebezhsky NPs were well aware that living in and around NPs entailed many *restrictions*. In both areas respondents claimed that they were aware of the nature and mechanism of restrictions: most interviewees in both NPs assessed their knowledge as good or rather good respectively, while nobody assessed their knowledge as poor. Further discussing this with interviewees, we have observed that in Sebezhsky NP a much smaller subset of conservation regulation is relevant to everyday life, and most is limited to access and trespassing rules, which may explain the higher confidence of Sebezhsky NP residents.

Restrictions on fishing and hunting (see Figure S2 for a full overview of answers received) caused very little disturbance to both communities, although it can be noted that people of Sebezhsky NP had noticeably greater negativity towards restricted fishing than in Karula NP (arguably due to a higher population of retired people with more leisure time). For other restrictions opinions were more divergent. For instance, people in Karula NP mostly approved of land-use restrictions or were neutral about them. This is likely because the protected landscape is a selling point for local tourism and organic agriculture, while the negativity was associated with the pressure put on real estate prices due to the procedure of leasing state land and operations by large companies.

The *overall attitude towards restrictions* in Sebezhsky NP was negative or neutral at best, apparently due to heavy restrictions on any land operations (although many can be avoided through loopholes in the restrictive regime). In Karula NP, regulation is more relaxed, and some of these features, such as required use of traditional designs and construction

materials find many supporters, who either appreciated the value of such restrictions for the landscape or tourism. At the same time, many traditional building features are not suitable for some current economic needs (e.g., storage and maintenance of agricultural machinery), and this annoyed some. People in Karula NP were cautiously positive or neutral about the restricted use of pesticides and mineral fertilizers, as this supports organic agriculture and beekeeping. In Sebezhsky NP, this was supported by some (mainly beekeepers and new organic farmers) balanced by equally slight negativity, and greatly overwhelmed by neutrality indicating irrelevance of the impact. The most unpopular restrictions were related to timber harvesting, with almost no one neutral on this and no one without an opinion. In Karula NP the negativity mostly came from individuals disliking having to undertake regular checks on specific zoning restrictions, and from small-scale private forest owners, who (unlike large companies) did not have capacity to harvest timber in compliance with all the restrictions imposed by the NP, and therefore regarded the situation as unjust. In Sebezhsky NP, timber logging is forbidden, and that resulted in negative views on this restriction, with disagreement on the banned harvest of wind-fallen logs expressed particularly often.

Assessing the *overall impact of restrictions on opportunities*, about half of the interviewees in Sebezhsky and a quarter in Karula NP, found that the national park did not affect their freedom of action and opportunities in any way. The people of Sebezhsky NP mostly complained about difficulties with real estate management and construction, as well as movement restrictions that limited their access to non-wood forest products (as well as the restriction on the use of motor boats). In Karula NP, people disliked restrictions hindering their economic activity, such as management and movement in their private forest, and restrictions related to real estate and land use. Unlike in Sebezhsky NP where no one expressed a positive attitude towards restrictions, nearly a half of respondents in Karula NP expressed a positive response. They appreciated the sparse population, healthy and aesthetically pleasing environments, and related business opportunities (e.g., organic agriculture or tourism) as well as the attractive environment for creative workers to dwell.

Real estate prices are an important yet controversial indicator of material wellbeing, as depending on the context the same figures can indicate poor availability of housing or attractiveness of investments to the area [56]. In Karula NP nearly all respondents estimated that the NP stimulates real estate prices, valuing higher real estate prices as a largely positive thing. Quite opposite, almost half of the respondents in Sebezhsky NP found that the NP did not affect real estate prices, and a relatively large group of respondents had no opinion on this. It was noticed though that the greatest impact on real estate in the area was caused by a large community of public servants and military managing the border of the state, who were substantially higher earners than most locals.

3.2. Is PA Governance Fair?

The issue of the *relative importance of nature conservation targets* (e.g., wetlands; wooded meadows; coastal areas; primeval forests; protected species; natural monuments; traditional landscapes) was explored in order to understand how communities on both sides of the border value their landscapes, and how their perceived conservation priorities correlate to those of the NPs. Karula and Sebezhsky NPs are located in very similar landscapes, and responses were rather similar in both NPs. Old-growth/virgin/primeval forests were considered most important by half, and about one third of respondents prioritized traditional landscapes. Larger discrepancies came with the prioritization of wetlands and nature monuments. In Sebezhsky NP, wetlands and nature monuments were ranked much higher than in Karula NP, where nature monuments were seen as the least important and wetlands as average important elements. Explanations suggested by interviewees were that Karula NP's ecosystems were often considered from a more utilitarian perspective, such as potential for tourism and hospitality business, or comfort and safety for dwellers. In Sebezhsky NP, due to its tougher restrictions and fewer opportunities for local communities

to explore business benefits, the actual conservation value of ecosystem components is more prominent; hence, higher perceived value of wetlands and nature monuments.

The question of the *alignment of management plans and conservation rules with the interests of permanent residents*, if properly answered, would on its own provide answers to most of the questions brought by this study. It is, however, problematic to deal with in a straightforward manner, because the actual level of residents' awareness of rules is likely to be much lower than stated, as also was noticed during interviews. In principle, the conservation objectives of both NPs attach importance to the same values, and include the protection of cultural heritage and traditional way of life and settlement. Potentially this means that management plans and protection rules should be based on the interests of permanent residents managing their livelihoods. In Karula NP, opposite opinions on the alignment were equally split. When detailing their negative assessments, respondents complained of excessive centralization of nature conservation that resulted in poor knowledge of local conditions and of limited dialogue with local communities. They further complained that although the development of management plans is transparent and inclusive, with all the concerns duly documented, this does not bring expected changes and improvements. In Sebezhsky NP, most interviewees believed that the interests of local communities were not sufficiently taken into account. Respondents could not confirm that residents were involved in any stages of the development of management plans, although the procedure of public hearings is a formal requirement.

To understand perceived overall fairness of conservation measures, respondents were asked to evaluate and detail the *sufficiency or excessiveness and rationality of conservation measures in the PAs*. In Karula NP, an overwhelming majority of respondents had found that the measures were strict enough to achieve park's conservation objectives. Further commenting on this, they agreed that although restricting their activities, the measures were also needed to maintain habitats and environmental quality, but noted that more restrictions were not needed because even existing ones were not properly enforced and monitored due to limited capacity of the NP staff. Karula NP residents found it particularly heartening that some park areas (their privately owned land), which were designated during the initial zoning as "manageable" special protection zone, were at some point converted to regular special protection zones that meant a great reduction in a range of eligible activities. They found it fair that locals enjoyed greater access to the NP's resources (including timber) than forestry companies, while a recent revision of forestry regulation lifting some logging restrictions [57] was generally seen as a worrying development endangering NPs and the interests of local communities. Karula NP residents also wanted the NP management to have greater flexibility and discretion in dealing with requests and complaints submitted by locals, so conflicts could be resolved at an earlier stage and at a lower cost.

In Sebezhsky NP, about half of the respondents said that conservation measures are strict enough. Similar to Karula, respondents in Sebezhsky NP felt that although the rules were strict, their enforcement was weak and arbitrary, as anyone could see from many semi-illegal construction sites. That made the interviewees wonder whether more restrictions are required in some areas, or existing ones should be better enforced. The same as in Karula NP, people felt that locals should have greater access to the NP than non-residents, and that the current access privileges are too few and too modest. In particular, they wanted more options for land-use, greater access to non-timber products and restricted areas, and also permission to use motorboats. Some frustration for Sebezhsky NP residents was further caused by less restrictive regimes for people on the Belarusian side of the border, within the Belarusian extension of the transboundary PA (this was due to a lower protective status of the Belarusian segment of the PA, which is designated as a *zakaznik*).

Considering the question about the *preferred type of a management authority for the PA*, nearly everyone in Karula NP stated that the national park should be managed by the central government. Only several respondents suggested that it could be managed collaboratively by the central and local governments, and nobody entrusted this to a private organization. This was due to fears of corruption in the case of non-state institutions, which

suggests that although heavily criticized, the current park management is still considered as an acceptable one. In contrast, just over the half of the respondents in Sebezhsy NP wanted the central government to manage the park, with a smaller group giving preference to local government. A suggested explanation to such a response was that the federal government managing the NP was considered too distant, and there was, therefore, a high appreciation of any options bringing the center of decision-making closer to the community. This also suggests that people are less overwhelmingly happy about the current arrangement or the current PA management.

All respondents agreed that as long as NPs are public goods serving the whole nation, local residents must be entitled to certain *compensation options for PA-related disadvantages and restrictions*. In Karula NP, respondents had split in almost equal groups satisfied, dissatisfied and having no opinion about the sufficiency of existing compensation schemes (as many never applied for support grants), while in Sebezhsy NP nearly everyone was dissatisfied (often adding that meaningful compensation arrangements were not in place at all).

Choosing among *preferred compensation schemes*, people in Karula NP were mostly in favor of direct compensation and subsidies (such as compensations for lost income from forest management or grants for the maintenance of traditional agriculture systems), apparently due to their tangibility, and because such schemes were already in place, proved inclusive enough, and showed results (e.g., natural ecosystems re-emerged, while agricultural systems were restored). It is worth mentioning that pioneering entrepreneurs were attracted to the PA some 20 years ago due to direct financial support schemes, and that created a snowball effect, and as a result, abandoned or unrestored plots are almost impossible to find in the park now. The second preference was for compensatory measures, such as extra investments to physical, learning (including consulting services) and service infrastructures. A general relaxation of restrictions was the least desired option.

In Sebezhsy NP, with its stricter and (for the most part) less customized restrictions, the first choice of almost all respondents was to lift some restrictions for locals, while the second choice, the same as in Karula NP, was to receive compensatory measures. Respondents remarked that the quality of roads and services is declining, and this creates a lot of discomfort and direct losses (such as longer travel times, car breakdown, or inaccessible online services). Residents are predominantly in paid jobs unrelated to the NP's resources, therefore, people in Sebezhsy NP had little interest in direct financial compensation (and even expressed their confusion about what exactly could be compensated in their case), and no interest in consulting services. Just the same as in Karula, nobody in Sebezhsy NP wanted the overall conservation-related restrictions to be relaxed (for everyone), which suggests that both communities, in principle, have a general appreciation of their NPs. It also can be expected that if adequate direct financial incentives become available to local communities in Sebezhsy NP, they would be duly appreciated, although to a lesser extent than in Karula NP, due to limited local land ownership in Sebezhsy NP.

To understand any required changes or effects of subsidized land management activities that could improve social well-being, respondents in both NPs were asked to identify and rank current *unsatisfying features of land management and land-use*. In Sebezhsy NP, respondents were particularly annoyed by abandoned and degrading agricultural landscapes, while in Karula NP this problem was considered the least significant. This outcome is a reflection of the current land-use situation in the NPs where in Sebezhsy NP land abandonment is an ongoing process, in Karula NP this was the case until the early 2000s, after which most agricultural landscapes were restored [27,58,59]. The most disturbing land management problem in Karula NP was, according to respondents, littering on the borders of the park. Although the problem was not of a very large scale, it is clearly visible in a relatively well-maintained landscape. The least annoying issue identified by respondents in Sebezhsy NP were ugly buildings compromising the scenery, while in Karula NP this problem was the next to the least annoying one. The perception of this problem in Sebezhsy NP can be seen as surprising, since nearly every building constructed in the

1990s and early 2000s was considered of low architectural value and/or not built following local or regional architectural features, and many are poorly maintained. In Karula NP, new constructions are allowed only on existing foundations and in a traditional style, i.e., the problem can be considered as objectively not an important one.

It is important to understand the *willingness to participate in landscape management and protection, and necessary incentives*, as understood by local communities. Most respondents in both NPs agreed, under certain conditions, to participate in the management of the NPs landscapes. Only a few respondents in both areas were not interested, stating that they were too old for that.

In Karula NP, with its long history of joint activities and community-based projects, nearly all respondents agreed to participate in landscape management in the park, with or without any compensation. In Sebezhsky NP less than half of the respondents wanted to participate in landscape management with or without claiming compensation for incurred costs, while roughly the same portion wanted it be a paid activity. From interviewees we could derive that possible reasons for the less enthusiastic attitude in Sebezhsky NP are likely related to a range of factors including: the highly centralized organization of nature conservation in Russia (landscape management in a NP is normally considered the same kind of engagement as any other kind of a remunerated activity and not recognized as a community service), the small proportion of private lands in the NP (i.e., not seeing a direct use in helping the NP), the limited track record of community-based projects in the region, and lower individual income level in Sebezhsky NP compared to Karula NP. Importantly, although permanent residents usually play a key role in sustainable landscape management arrangements (including the maintenance of traditional lifestyles and landscape features), this also requires local people to be directly engaged with landscape management in their professional or personal life [23,60]. At the same time, NP management may appear to locals as a cumbersome and technically complex procedure implying that instructions are strictly followed and benefiting only the NP and not local people.

3.3. Do We Live a Life of Value?

Overall satisfaction about living in a PA appears to be a very straightforward wellbeing indicator. However, it should be taken in the context of the individual situation of the respondents and all the living quality priorities coming with age, experience with the area, purpose of staying in (or moving to) the area. As a result, the analysis here focuses more on how wellbeing components (including governance solutions) are balanced with the current mixture of residents, also considering their capacity to move out if they dislike it.

In Karula NP, the overall attitude towards dwelling in a NP was positive, while in Sebezhsky NP opinion was more divided. Importantly, all the respondents enjoying life in Sebezhsky NP were around 50 years old or older, and the same way as in Karula NP (where age groups were more representative among positively-minded respondents), they appreciated, above all, the opportunity to live in a healthy and aesthetically pleasing environment. In Karula NP respondents further hoped that the NP's conservation status will help the area to preserve its beauty and environmental status, and to secure more green investment, while in Sebezhsky NP people expected that the status of a NP would drive the government to invest in local development and infrastructure. The dissatisfaction of some respondents in Sebezhsky NP about the NP had to do with continuous depopulation and related socioeconomic and land use issues (which are, however, common trends for most of Pskov Region). In both NPs, about half of the respondents settled after the formation of the national park. This shows that at least during that period the NPs were sufficiently attractive for people of working age, as confirmed by reported reasons for moving, which were work and income in both areas. In Sebezhsky NP, many were hired and moved in for a job at the NP's administration and then chose to stay even after they were no longer employed there.

Personal satisfaction or dissatisfaction about living in a place is also greatly impacted by the *attitude of reference groups (such as family and/or friends living elsewhere)* towards the

fact that one lives in the PA, whereby this attitude can enhance or deteriorate the perceived value. In Sebezhsy NP reference groups had, in general, a more positive opinion about living in the NP than its residents. In the case of Karula NP, levels of positivity were about the same between reference groups and residents. Possible explanations can be that in case of Sebezhsy NP, outsiders mostly see the positive side of living in the area (e.g., when visiting relatives or hearing about it), without being well aware of and exposed to the high level of restrictions in the NP. In the case of Karula NP, restrictions are more relaxed; hence, there were similar attitudes between reference groups and residents. It can be further argued that people in Sebezhsy NP, with their lower capacity for, and interest in, moving across the region and the country, had problems with changing residence after encountering difficulties linked to dwelling in a NP, and therefore had to stay, even if not being too content about the place and available income opportunities.

Respondents were asked about their *overall satisfaction towards the character and intensity of conservation measures*. In Karula NP, the methods and objectives of nature conservation were clear and understandable to residents, and management outcomes were obvious as well, as ecosystems appeared to be healthy and cultural landscapes well maintained. This resulted in a reasonably high level of satisfaction concerning nature conservation in the NP. As mentioned, continued centralization of NP management in Estonia and weak implementation of some rules and provisions made a bad impression on local communities. Respondents provided neutral or rather negative assessments specifically complaining about forest protection measures (not effective enough) and poor enforcement capacity. Moreover, frequent complaints were about the decrease in state support and the NP being left to self-regulation by local communities, who were not happy about extra-burdens related to monitoring and enforcement.

In Sebezhsy NP, the attitude towards the NP's purpose and objectives was more skeptical. There may be several reasons for this negativity. One is that the NP's management outcomes were less visible to public (e.g., cultural landscapes degrading). Another is that the very concept of a NP was not properly communicated, and hence remarks such as "We understand what *zapovednik* and *zakaznik* (categories of protected area in Russia) are, but what is a national park?" Those with greater knowledge of the Russia's concept of a NP pointed out that in its legal definition traditional lifestyles and human activities should also be protected and supported. However, this was not practiced, at least in Sebezhsy NP, and no viable business opportunities, e.g., related to tourism or organic farming, were generated or supported by the NP.

Respondents were also asked to identify the most *valued landscape, land-use, and management features*, in order to understand whether the landscapes and ecosystems they dwell in represent what they value. The fit was very high in both areas, with forests and water bodies identified as the most valuable features, and also as the most visited. In addition, respondents in Karula NP mentioned semi-natural ecosystems (wooded meadows and pastures; swampy meadows) and respondents in Sebezhsy National Park also mentioned monuments and agricultural landscapes (noting that unfortunately they were mostly overgrown at the moment). More informed respondents, who had some background in nature conservation, also mentioned protected species and habitats.

In Karula NP, most options for socio-economic change (e.g., immigration, increase in visitor numbers, establishment of businesses/enterprises, and establishment of visitor objects) are considered welcome, as long as they are minor or moderate, and do not make any significant impact on the established balance. Explaining their attitude, respondents in Karula NP often referred to past experiences when many project-based solutions and infrastructure (e.g., hiking trails, and observation towers) had been created without clear means for sustainable maintenance, and therefore often failed due to neglect, and needed to be demolished. In contrast, any changes, large and small, are welcome in Sebezhsy NP, as long as they bring life to this "marginal" area [61], even though there are many known examples in the region of abandoned "project-based" infrastructure [62]. In particular, this is well demonstrated through the attitude to holidaymakers and their summer houses.

While people of Karula NP saw their growth as a controversial issue (e.g., because this only increased seasonality, without much money locally spent, or a positive contribution to a community life), Sebezhsky NP respondents had a very positive attitude, explaining that new summer houses and their residents would bring life to the region at least in summer time, and that holidaymakers were always a happy and relaxed crowd. The question on migration had very similar responses in both areas. While emigration was unanimously condemned, as NPs are sparsely populated areas either historically (Karula) or currently (Sebezhsky) experiencing land abandonment, some moderate immigration was felt necessary, including some little (but not excessive) influx of foreigners. At the same time, opinions on the possible abolition of NPs were quite different in the PAs. In Karula NP most respondents were strongly against this suggestion, and in Sebezhsky they were slightly more positive. In Karula NP people actively co-manage and co-govern the NP, whereas in Sebezhsky NP residents do not have a strong sense of the NP belonging to the place, and also do not see any clear value it brings to the community. As a result, even if not necessarily wanting to abolish the NP, most in Sebezhsky want it to be different.

Answers to the question on the willingness to pay for nature conservation were similar in both PAs, with respondents equally divided (agreeing and not agreeing). For residents in both Karula and Sebezhsky NPs, the nature of their neighborhood represents a high value they are willing to pay for, however respondents in both areas made it clear that were not ready to tolerate higher prices or more inconvenience than they have at present, they would not be interested in subsidizing nature conservation elsewhere beyond their areas, and that if paying more for the privilege of living in a NP, they would also want to have a fair share in its governance, including budgetary arrangements.

Responses to the question on the individual contribution to nature conservation through life choices, behavioral and consumption preferences, and management practices suggested that the most commonly recognized and practiced sustainable practices were waste separation and recycling (everyone involved) as well as organic farming. Importantly, waste separation and recycling is a traditional and rational choice for remote rural and forested areas, where organic waste composting is convenient to arrange, and logistics (including waste transport) is difficult and expensive, especially as waste dumping is closely monitored and prosecuted in NPs. In the case of organic farming, high acceptance in Sebezhsky NP is likely due to respondents' belief that any of their traditional household gardening is organic (while it is not necessarily, so see, e.g., Shkaruba et al. 2021 [63]), while in Karula NP respondents mostly referred to certified organic farming. In terms of purchases of environmentally friendly (including locally produced) products and involvement in sustainable management practices the discrepancies between Karula and Sebezhsky NPs were high with high interest expressed in Karula and very moderate in the Sebezhsky NP. The discrepancy can be due to the significantly higher availability of such options in Karula NP (also due to functioning arrangements for production and distribution of local produce, which are not well developed in Sebezhsky NP), and due to comparatively larger presence of discussions and information on sustainable lifestyle options in Estonian mass and social media. The latter is also seen from responses to the question on the interest in environmental issues in genera. Nevertheless, respondents in both communities seemingly expressed the similar in joint activities related to nature conservation and in environmental NGOs.

4. Discussion: Wellbeing and Values through the Lenses of Governance Functions

National Parks can be considered as an environmental governance system whereby success is measured through the achievement of core management objectives (e.g., related to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage) without conflict with local communities over wellbeing-related issues. Jones et al. 2020 [3] argue for human rights (impacted through PA regulation, most of all) and social equity as the most important impact categories of PAs in Europe, which subsequently have a domino effect on other drivers and systems, such as behavior, livelihoods and local culture. Acknowledging this,

we further recognize their impact on values providing motivation to protect nature and involve co-management actions, while also articulating the importance of human rights and social inequality drivers associated with overall governance regimes (i.e., lying beyond conservation regulation), including social constructs and practices.

Here we review generic functions of environmental systems [52] of Karula and Sebezhsky NPs, and discuss them in terms of human rights and social equity dimensions, with reference to values, thus addressing research questions 2 and 3. From the perspective of values, functions 1–6 represent external variables and underlying conditions that influence group or individual motivation to protect nature in NPs. Function 7 (collective choice) is an output of many drivers (including values) acting together to produce such a motivation.

4.1. Exclusion of Unauthorized Users

Exclusion policies are relatively relaxed in Karula NP and strict in Sebezhsky NP. Excessive bureaucracy and control associated with PA management can be detrimental to social wellbeing and threatening to citizens' motivation to protect nature [64,65]. In both communities many exclusion measures, such as restrictions of economic activities or access rights, are not fully understood. However, in Karula NP they predominantly affect certain business sectors (such as forestry) and are relatively limited for local residents. In Sebezhsky NP, restrictions are perceived as affecting everyday life with customary rights of local residents not duly recognized. As a result, in Karula NP local residents, in principle, can see an overall balance between exclusion measures and benefits they bring, and this also contributes to the sense of relational values (resulting from connectedness to heritage, belonging to a place, etc.). In contrast, in Sebezhsky NP the appeal clearly exists mostly in the normative context (moral values dictating that nature is protected because it ought to be), while relational values, although strongly expressed by residents, do not have much space to be realized. In addition, missing cultural landscape conservation targets in Sebezhsky NP is yet another restraining condition for realizing emotional relations with the place. While cultural landscapes are being degraded (e.g., agricultural landscapes are becoming overgrown with forest, or through the appearance of new constructions, which do not follow local architectural traditions), the sense of linkage to the landscape can be eroded, which degrades support for landscape restoration activities.

4.2. Regulation of Authorized Resource Uses and Distribution of Their Benefits

Perceived inequality in cost and benefit distribution are among the most persistent governance problems, found in most PAs across Europe [66]. In Karula NP, the benefits of a PA are convertible to benefits for individuals and local economies, however small forest users are afraid of their marginalization, as large companies are better prepared to deal with technological restrictions and bureaucratic demands, as observed in marine PAs [67]. In Sebezhsky NP, such conversion options are limited and unsustainable. All in all, a relatively modest pool of benefits was made available to share in Sebezhsky NP, mostly related to the quality of environment and scenery. Most benefit sharing conflicts therefore have to do with land-use. In addition, in Sebezhsky NP local residents enjoy limited extra privileges (e.g., related to access) compared to non-locals, and recently they were further restricted, e.g., by the extension of the areas closed to all visitors. This feels like a displacement of traditional property rights and gives the perception of unfair benefit distribution [68], while tourists and seasonal residents feel less of a negative impact on their wellbeing, as also observed elsewhere in Europe [3]. In terms of values, such a situation creates very little space for material values to thrive in Sebezhsky NP compared to Karula NP due to the problematic recovery of material benefits in the former NP. Access issues bring further constraints to the production of relational values, as new generations of local residents (as well as newcomers) develop a patchier picture of their home landscape compared to previous generations who used to enjoy access to the whole area.

4.3. Provisioning and the Recovery of Its Costs

In terms of cost provision and recovery, business benefits related to NP are practically non-existent in Sebezhsky NP, while payments for ecosystem services (or similar) are not in place either. Indeed, although relatives and friends of Sebezhsky NP's residents are happy about them living in a NP, this does appear to boost interest in residents becoming engaged in conservation initiatives. Importantly, the range of conservation initiatives to be involved in is very narrow in Sebezhsky NP due to the scope of the conservation agenda and management instruments permitted by national legislation [69–71]. Provision and recovery mechanisms are somewhat patchy in Karula NP, however they are sufficient for business to develop and for farmers to be involved in landscape management. Their involvement is partly triggered by material incentives, but also can be considered as a strong manifestation of relational values (see also the statistics demonstrating substantially higher percentage of those inclined to be involved free of charge or even without costs compensated in Karula NP).

4.4. Monitoring

In Sebezhsky NP, there was noted to be a centrally established and managed close monitoring of NP management objectives (including related restrictions). This did not include residents and did not rely on local networks and expertise. As such, this externally imposed monitoring mechanism is rather efficient in terms of achieving the formal NP's conservation management objectives. It could be nearly ideal in large and desert areas [72], however this is more problematic in smaller and populated areas, where it fails to evolve with local communities and interest groups. Furthermore, abandonment and transformation of cultural landscapes as well as communities' wellbeing are not recognized as formal management objectives in Sebezhsky NP, and therefore not monitored by the NP. This undermines residents' relation to the landscape, as the landscape is not "their" concern in this system. In Karula NP, the monitoring approach is quite different as much of this is undertaken by local residents. They are not pleased by the increasing monitoring burden as a result of the shrinking capacity of the NP management and resultant loss of staff to undertake monitoring. Such a situation is described in literature as unsustainable [73], while in terms of value systems and wellbeing, the outcome is becoming unbalanced as value-based incentives become overexploited.

4.5. Enforcement

Enforcement patterns are similar to those described for monitoring, and with a similar effect. Restriction in Sebezhsky NP is imposed and enforced according to Federal regulations, and therefore has little flexibility and a top down approach. Being rather burdensome, they discourage public involvement initiatives, as well as the overall readiness to volunteer to manage landscapes, similar to what is observed elsewhere in Europe [64,65]. At the same time, the regulations have loopholes, which are readily exploited by locals and visitors, who are unaware of compromised legality or are ready to take risks. As mentioned, the limited presence of local communities and cultural landscapes in management plans also disharmonizes value systems, as management objectives find limited appeal in communities, except the overall understanding of the normative side. In Karula NP, enforcement is somewhat patchy and partially delegated to land-owners, who would prefer a stronger enforcement system, with rules clearly set and strongly supported by NP officials. Local residents tend to adhere to rules as they generally find them reasonable in terms of the maintenance of landscapes and ecosystems. However, they also expect others to comply with them as well, as they find it disappointing when some stakeholders, such as forestry companies, actively exploit grey areas, raising further skepticism regarding the quality of enforcement and this may potentially compromise the whole set of values.

4.6. Conflict Resolution

The introduction of new restrictions, especially without a due consultation process with local communities is an important driver of conflicts in PAs across Europe [3]. Low cost conflict resolution mechanisms do not exist in Sebezhsy NP, as the NP management has little discretion in interpreting rules and granting exemptions. Therefore any disputed issues, if not moderated between the NP and stakeholders, need to be taken to court. In Karula NP, there is some discretion in rules; however, it is criticized as too limited, and with the NP management shrinking and taken out of the area, low cost options are likely to become less accessible. The most important implication for value systems is that moral incentives become eroded and social networks weakened when conflicts cannot be routinely prevented or resolved in a transparent and acceptable way [2,64]. Sebezhsy NP appears to be more problematic in this sense, while the situation in Karula NP is worsening.

4.7. Collective Choice

In the context of a PA, relevant collective choices are linked to the commitment of local communities to follow conservation rules and restrictions, as well as with the involvement in co-management of PAs. The findings of this study confirm that building knowledge and awareness among local communities for natural and cultural heritage is absolutely essential in order to engage citizens in nature conservation [74,75]. Karula NP demonstrates a more consolidated set of collective choices aimed at sustainable co-management of a NP's socio-ecological system. In line with what is described in the literature, it is strongly backed up by good social relations [53], as well as material value systems interplaying in a supportive manner with NP management objectives and practices, in particular with those concerned with livelihoods and maintenance of cultural landscapes. In Sebezhsy NP, this is more complicated due to the more restrictive nature of the conservation regime, and NP management objectives, which are less appealing or relevant to local communities. As an important difference from Karula NP, although livelihoods feature in management objectives of the Sebezhsy NP, they are not specific and convincingly mandatory, while cultural landscapes are not mentioned in any form whatsoever. The implication is that the Sebezhsy NP *does not need* any meaningful interactions with the locals, as long as residents obey the rules, and do not challenge conservation policies by legal, political or public relation means, which is similar to observations from wetland conservation projects in Belarus [76].

In both NPs collective choices are predetermined by the age and social composition of permanent residents, as well as by the purpose of their re-allocation to NPs (if relevant). In Karula NP, many residents were those who arrived specifically to explore the opportunities of the NP, either related to business or lifestyle. In contrast, in Sebezhsy NP only a few moved due to the NP, and for most it was as a result of family reasons or direct employment opportunities.

5. Conclusions: Incentives and Opportunities for Nature Conservation from the Lenses of Value Systems

Comparisons between Karula and Sebezhsy NPs suggest that, in principle, in spite of numerous constraints and shortcomings reported by respondents in Karula, the NP model adopted in Estonia provides its residents opportunities for a better experience of searching and finding harmony with their landscapes, insofar as the NP's mandate to protect cultural landscapes makes space for local communities to be involved, residents have broad access rights, and their lifestyle is related to the management of their landscape. The Russian model of NP apparently provides relatively modest means for relational values to thrive. Key reasons for this are arguably, the top-down and rigidly framed approach to conservation, limited flexibility as regards recognition and securing land and forest property rights, and the absence of cultural landscapes in the list of eligible management targets.

As such, the Russian model is closer to The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Category II (National Park), while the Estonian one has many features of IUCN IV (Habitat/Species Management Area), IUCN V (Protected Landscape), and VI (Protected area with sustainable use of natural resources) categories, that also imply a higher level of restrictions associated with nature conservation. However, even under the IUCN Category II approach, some mechanisms for involving and encouraging local communities to landscape management are still underexplored, which is of particular relevance to Russia's NPs with numerous settlements within NPs' boundaries, such as the case of Sebezhsy NP. This could include more instrumental public involvement to the discussion and implementation of strategic management documents as well as arrangements for mandating local communities to be involved in enforcement and management of PAs, e.g., in exchange for better recognition of their right to access a NPs' natural resources.

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