

Article

Global Gain, but Local Loss—National Park and Municipal Revenues in Poland

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Abstract: The paper analyzes the problem of stagnation in the creation of new national parks in Poland, identifying key barriers and proposing solutions. The background to the study refers to the role of national parks in nature conservation, but at the same time highlights the problem of the limited development of the park network in Poland, which remains at 1.05% of the country's area—well below the EU average. The main obstacles identified by the author are the resistance of local governments due to the reduction in forest tax revenues and the differences in salaries between employees of national parks and state forests. Research methods included legal and economic analysis and a review of the literature on national park management. The results indicate that the problem can be solved by adequate financial compensation to local communities and the introduction of a co-management model that integrates the interests of local governments and parks. The article suggests that a change in the approach of the government administration and a more participatory management model can help to break the stagnation and increase the number of national parks, which is relevant not only for Poland but also for other countries struggling with similar challenges.

Keywords: national park; local government; governance; eco-compensation



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1. Introduction

Protected areas, such as national parks (NP), play a key role in human survival by protecting biodiversity and stabilizing ecosystems that provide resources such as water, food, and air [1]. They help regulate the climate by sequestering carbon dioxide, prevent floods and droughts, and provide valuable ecosystem services [2]. They offer space for recreation and scientific research, supporting mental health and sustainable tourism. They also protect cultural heritage, strengthening the identity of local communities [3].

National parks therefore contribute to sustainable forms of development, which is particularly important in the context of growing environmental awareness and public pressure to protect the environment. There are scientific bases for allocating protected areas—one of the most widely used, based on analysis of phytocenoses, is the Braun-Blanquet method [4]. It is worth noting, however, that the process of establishing protected areas, including national parks, should not be seen as opposing capitalist models of production and consumption. On the contrary, it can be understood as a corrective mechanism that mitigates some of the self-destructive effects of these models, especially those that developed after the Fordist era [5].

The establishment of national parks in local government (LG) areas requires careful consideration of many factors, including the provision of financial compensation, protection of biodiversity and other global functions, public acceptance, and effective cooperation between all stakeholders. This approach is key to ensuring sustainable development and effective management of these protected areas. However, the establishment of national parks faces numerous barriers that require in-depth analysis and understanding if they are to be successfully overcome.

National parks are currently the most effective form of nature protection in Poland, a fact confirmed by the global assessment report on biodiversity and ecosystem services [6],

which indicates that effective nature protection is not only crucial for the well-being of humanity, but also for its survival. It is noteworthy that NP's local network plays a key role in the implementation of global ecosystem services, such as biodiversity conservation, carbon sequestration, and the preservation of natural processes, which are fundamental to climate stability and environmental health around the world. With their unique natural resources, they enable the implementation of obligations under conventions such as the Ramsar Convention, CBD, Paris Agreement, Natura 2000, and others. However, Poland, where national parks cover only 1.05% of the country's area, fares very unfavorably against this background, especially when compared to the EU average of 3.4%. Despite the existence of projects to extend protection to new areas, the deadlock on this issue has not been broken for over 23 years. Successive governments have expressed the belief that it is impossible to create new national parks with the current formal and legal status.

The aim of this article is to define in depth the causes of this impasse and to propose actions that can contribute to breaking down the existing barriers. Existing studies, both practical and academic, do not provide precise reasons for this inertia, which significantly hinders the formulation of effective proposals for solutions. Although the research focuses on Poland, its conclusions are universal and can be applied to other countries facing similar challenges.

The research questions are an extension of the objective formulated above. They are formulated as follows:

1. What problems are declared in the public debates on the creation of new national parks?
2. What are the real reasons for local government resistance to the creation of new national parks?
3. What solutions should be implemented to effectively eliminate barriers to the expansion of national park areas?

The research used the method of analyzing the legal and economic effects of the process of creating national parks, which made it possible to identify key financial and legal barriers. This analysis was preceded by a detailed literature review (desk research) on the determinants of the creation and functioning of national parks, which made it possible to collect and systematize existing knowledge in this area.

The research identified two main reasons for the inertia in creating new national parks. The first is the resistance of local governments due to the automatic reduction of their own revenues as a result of the lower tax rate on properties included in national parks. This loss is not systemically compensated by the state, which raises fears of a further reduction in income for local budgets. The second reason is the gross disproportion in income of national park employees vis-à-vis the State Forest Enterprise. The inclusion of forest areas under the status of a national park, and the consequent automatic takeover of existing employees, is associated with a worsening of their material situation and economic status.

A precise diagnosis of these problems is crucial for the effective elimination of barriers to the process of expanding the national park network. Importantly, solutions to overcome these barriers are relatively simple to implement. Meanwhile, for more than 20 years, successive governments have focused on solving problems defined in the wrong way, resulting in inefficiencies in the actions taken. This article seeks to correct these mistakes by providing a sound analysis of the problem and viable proposals for solutions.

2. Literature Review

National parks are fundamental components of global efforts aimed at environmental preservation. They stand out as some of the most prominent and widely recognized instruments used to safeguard biodiversity. Their role is acknowledged as being highly effective, not only in maintaining biodiversity but also in promoting ecosystem services and elevating overall environmental standards. By protecting habitats and species, these parks contribute significantly to the improvement of natural ecosystems, ensuring their long-term sustainability and enhancing the quality of the environment [7–10]. In a global

perspective, national parks cover about 6% of the world's land area, highlighting their importance in preserving natural heritage [11].

The definition of a national park, as formulated by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), defines these areas as “a clearly defined geographic space established, dedicated and managed by regulation or other effective means to achieve the long-term conservation of nature and its associated ecosystem services and cultural values” [8]. This definition emphasizes the need to protect parks from human interference, which often leads to treating them as isolated enclaves whose main purpose is to protect natural ecosystems from human activities [12–14].

The traditional approach to national park management, also known as the exclusionary model, is based on the assumption that the best way to protect nature is to minimize human interference. Under this approach, significant areas are excluded from the normal local jurisdiction of LGs and subordinated to government institutions. This type of isolationist strategy has been the dominant paradigm in protected area management for many years, but its social and economic consequences have caused much controversy.

The constraints of this approach often lead to conflicts between local communities and forms of nature conservation imposed from above. In extreme cases, the exclusionary model has resulted in the forced displacement of local people from protected areas, generating community resistance and negative attitudes towards national parks [15,16]. Some studies even indicate that the establishment of national parks has significantly affected the quality of life of local people, with the negative impacts outweighing the positive ones [17].

This led to growing opposition to the creation of new protected areas in many countries. Projects pushed by governments to create new parks were seen by local communities as a threat to their way of life and economic development [18–20].

In response to criticism of the traditional model, the so-called “integrative model” of national park management has emerged in recent decades, which seeks to combine conservation objectives with concerns for the well-being of local communities [8]. Proponents of this approach argue that local people will be more likely to support conservation activities when they receive direct benefits from such endeavors, such as access to resources or economic support.

The inclusive model is based on the premise that effective conservation requires working with, rather than marginalizing, local communities. A key element of this approach is the participation of local communities in decision-making processes and the promotion of dialogue, transparency, and equitable benefit sharing. This cooperation aims not only to minimize conflicts but also to increase the effectiveness of conservation activities by involving communities in park management [21,22]. This includes agreeing to the creation of new parks, on the premise that the local community will readily agree to such a project if it has a say in its operation.

Therefore, in many countries, park administrations have adopted collaborative management (co-management) as one strategy to reconcile conservation objectives with the interests of local communities [21]. Co-management is a form of collaborative governance in which power and responsibility are shared among several stakeholders [8]. However, one stakeholder has decision-making authority but is required to inform or consult other stakeholders when planning or implementing initiatives [23]. Co-management of protected areas has been studied extensively over the past two decades [24]. Studies have shown that co-management contributes to sustainable natural resource management [25], leads to improved local livelihoods, and plays an important role in conflict resolution [21].

One of the key tools of the inclusive model is co-management of national parks, which involves sharing power and responsibility between government and local stakeholders. Co-management is a form of shared governance in which decisions are made in consultation with local communities to minimize potential conflicts and ensure more sustainable management of natural resources [8,22].

Research on co-management of national parks indicates that this type of approach can bring numerous benefits. For example, Andersson and Agrawal [25] showed that

co-management contributes to sustainable natural resource management, while Kulczyk-Dynowska [26] noted that it improves local livelihoods. In contrast, De Pourcq et al. [21] and Ayivor [27] highlight the role of co-management in resolving conservation conflicts.

Despite these advantages, co-management is not without its challenges. Critics point out that in some cases it can exacerbate conflicts, especially when the distribution of responsibility and power is unclear and the institutional framework is poorly defined [28,29]. As an example of such difficulties, studies in Germany, Japan, Nigeria, and Vietnam point to challenges in implementing co-management, including a lack of clarity about the responsibilities of different actors that result in the recentralization of NP management [30,31]. This problem is clearly identified in Poland [32–36].

Another key element of the NP-LG relationship is the introduction of economic instruments to compensate local communities for the constraints imposed by conservation regimes. Eco compensation mechanisms, such as payments for ecosystem services or fiscal transfers, are an important element of conservation policy, allowing local conservation costs to be reconciled with the benefits of biodiversity conservation at regional, national, and global levels [37–39]. A review of different mechanisms for compensating local people for the operation of national parks in many countries around the world was carried out by a team led by Moucheng [40].

Economic compensation for placing an area under a conservation regime can directly affect land users or operators whose activities may be restricted [40–42]. Conservation subsidies, agri-environmental schemes, and, more recently, payments for environmental services are implemented and studied in many countries [43]. A separate category is local governments, which also face opportunity costs as a result of their territory being covered by forms of nature conservation. These typically result from a reduction in their own revenues from property taxes and also as a result of reduced opportunities for socio-economic development [1,39,44]. Consequently, opposition to the creation of new protected areas is encountered worldwide, as local communities often perceive them as an obstacle to development [14,45,46]. Local communities require appropriate instruments to cover their conservation costs. So that the global benefit of creating national parks does not cost local governments. Therefore, both LGs and private actors should be compensated for the lost benefits of biodiversity conservation [45,47–49].

One example of such a mechanism is Portugal's Local Finance Law, which introduces a system of financial compensation to municipalities for land use restrictions imposed by the designation of protected areas or Natura 2000 sites. This system provides a financial incentive for local authorities to support conservation activities while enabling more sustainable local development [50–54].

Similar arrangements are in place in Brazil, where ecological fiscal transfers (ICMS) have been introduced as a way to compensate local governments for land use restrictions. In addition to compensation, this system also acts as an incentive for the designation of new protected areas, which contributes to the further expansion of protected areas in the country [54,55].

Despite the positive effects of economic instruments, there are still many challenges in their implementation. One of the main problems is the lack of consistency in conservation policies at different levels of governance, leading to difficulties in coordinating activities and allocating resources. In some countries, such as Switzerland, the negotiation of national parks is complex and incorporates loosely defined ideas of the common good, which poses a challenge for bottom-up conservation projects. In such cases, as Michel and Backhaus' research [56] shows, insufficient consideration of local community interests can lead to escalating conflicts and resistance to conservation initiatives.

In a global perspective, the persistence of threats to biodiversity requires the further development and refinement of economic instruments and inclusive policies to enable more effective management of national parks. It is also crucial to increase the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes and to ensure that the benefits of nature conservation are equitably distributed among different groups [57,58].

The literature on national park management and biodiversity conservation indicates an evolution of approaches from the traditional isolationist model of conservation towards a more inclusive and collaborative model with local communities. Co-management and economic instruments, such as ecocompensation mechanisms, are important tools in minimizing conflicts and increasing the effectiveness of conservation efforts. Despite significant progress in the literature on national park management and biodiversity conservation, there is still an important research gap related to the lack of a coherent international policy in the management of these areas. Currently, each country is creating its own solutions in this area, leading to a significant fragmentation of approaches and difficulties in coordinating actions at the global level. There is a lack not only of international syntheses assessing the development of individual trends but also of comprehensive studies at the national level. Poland is an example of a country where there is stagnation in the establishment of new national parks, and the literature on the reasons for this is far from sufficient. This article seeks to fill this gap by offering an in-depth analysis of the barriers to the establishment of new national parks and proposing an integrated approach that can contribute to more effective biodiversity conservation at both national and international levels.

3. Materials and Methods

The present study used a complex and multifaceted methodology aimed at gaining an in-depth understanding of national park management issues in Poland. The methodology included several key stages, allowing for a comprehensive approach to the analysis (Figure 1).

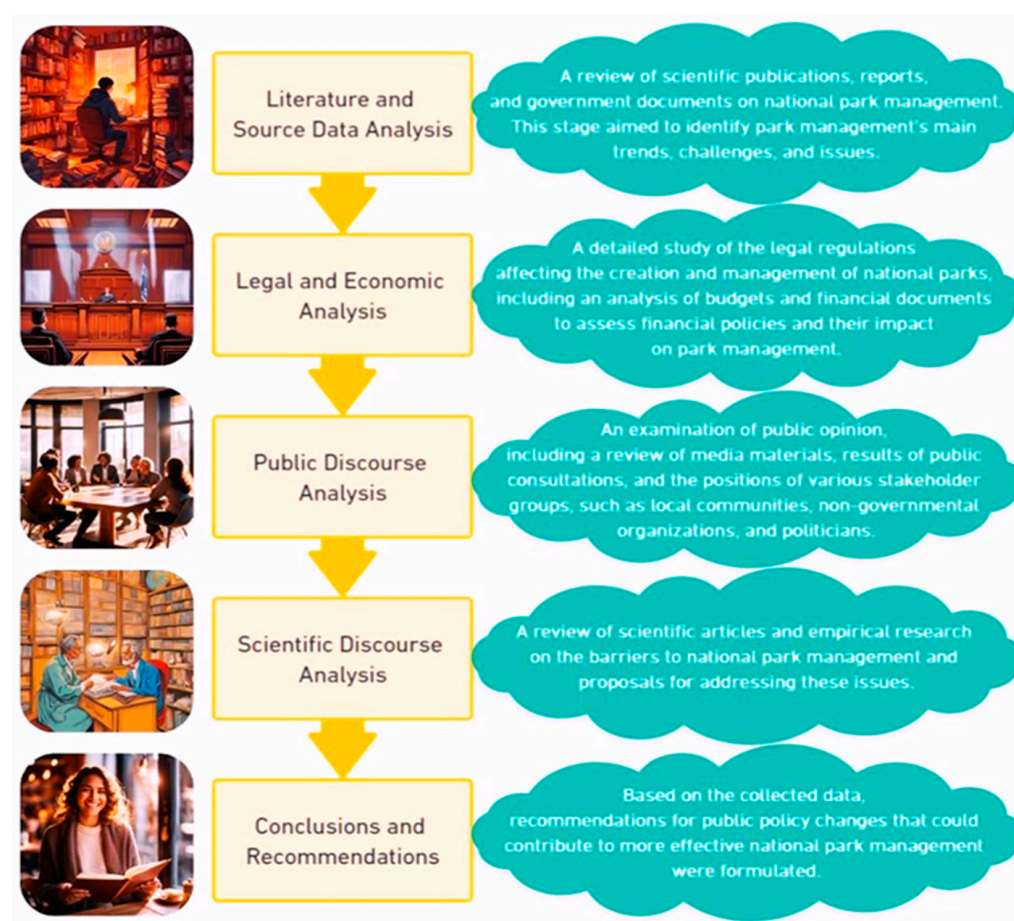


Figure 1. Diagram of the research process. Source: own compilation.

The first step was an analysis of literature and source data related to national park management. A thorough review of available scientific publications, research reports, government documents, and other relevant sources was conducted. The analysis aimed to identify current trends, challenges, and problems in national park management, as well as to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of different approaches used in practice.

The research also used a legal and economic analysis as a key element of the methodology to identify and understand the barriers and conditions associated with the establishment and operation of national parks in Poland.

The legal and economic analysis consisted of a detailed review and interpretation of legislation, regulations, and public policies that directly affect the processes of establishing, managing, and financing national parks. In particular, the focus was on nature conservation legislation, local government funding, and regulations concerning the management of land and property that may become part of national parks. In addition, budget and financial documents were analyzed to assess how financial policies affect the management of national parks and their cooperation with local authorities. Particular attention has been paid to the interactions between local authorities and national parks, which is key to understanding the context of the management of these areas.

This analysis examined how current legislation shapes the relationship between national parks and local government units, particularly in the context of funding. The analysis considered financial compensation mechanisms and the impact of national park status on local budgets' revenues. Key provisions were identified that lead to a reduction in local governments' own revenues as a result of their land being protected, which is a significant barrier to the creation of new national parks.

At the same time, the financial aspects of the salaries of national park employees compared to employees of state forests were included in the legal and economic analysis. Differences in salary structure and employment conditions were analyzed, which have a significant impact on the perception and acceptance of the conversion of forest areas into national parks, both by the employees themselves and by local communities.

The legal and economic analysis made it possible to draw conclusions about the effects of current legal regulations and to formulate recommendations for potential changes in public policy that could contribute to better management of national parks and increased effectiveness of nature conservation. The results of this analysis are an important contribution to understanding the administrative and financial barriers that hinder the development of the national park network in Poland.

This was followed by an analysis of the public discourse around projects to establish new national parks in Poland. This part of the study focused on the survey of public opinion, analyzing materials from the media, the results of public consultations, and other forms of expression of positions by different stakeholder groups, such as local communities, NGOs, entrepreneurs, and politicians. The aim was to identify the main currents of opinion, including arguments both supporting and criticizing initiatives to create new parks.

The final stage of the study was an analysis of the scientific discourse on national park management. The focus was on a review of academic articles, monographs, and empirical studies that address barriers to management and propose solutions. Through this analysis, the main barriers to effective management of national parks were identified, and proposals for overcoming them formulated by the scientific community were considered. This analysis has allowed conclusions to be drawn regarding potential innovations and improvements in conservation policy.

The entire research methodology was based on the principle of triangulation, meaning that a variety of methods and data sources were used to increase the reliability and validity of the results. This approach allowed not only a broad view of the issue but also the inclusion of different perspectives, which is essential in complex research on national park management and biodiversity conservation.

4. Results

4.1. Evolution of the NP System in Poland

National parks in Poland are the most important form of nature protection, aiming to preserve biological, landscape, and cultural diversity. There are currently 23 national parks in Poland, which together cover approximately 1.05% of the country's area [59], which is well below the European average (3.4%). Each national park encompasses areas of unique natural value, such as forest, aquatic, and wetland ecosystems, as well as valuable agricultural and mountain areas. These parks play a key role in protecting endangered species, as well as safeguarding natural habitats and ecological processes from the negative effects of human activity. The distribution of national parks in Poland is presented in Figure 2.

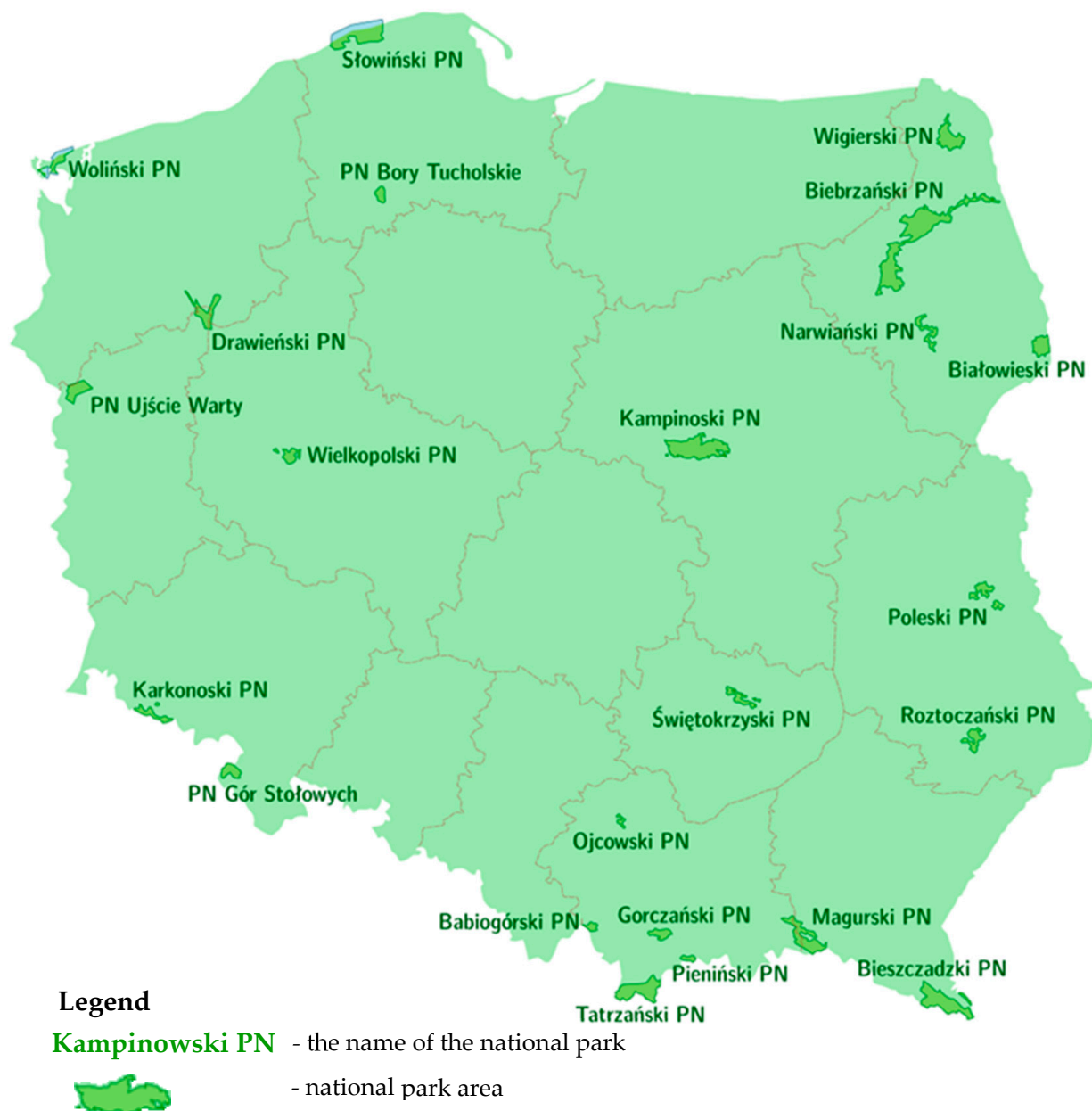


Figure 2. National Parks in Poland. Source: Ventic—own source, CC BY-SA 4.0 Available at: https://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parki_narodowe_w_Polsce#/media/Plik:ParkinarodowePL.png (accessed on 25 July 2024).

The first NPs in Poland were established in 1932 (Białowieża NP and Pieniny NP). Increased action to create new parks took place after World War II at the end of the 1950s. The next 20 years saw the successive completion of the system through the establishment of individual areas. Another acceleration took place after the system transformation in 1989. The youngest park is the Ujście Warty NP, which was established in 2001. After this favorable decade for NPs, the creation of new areas was halted. No new parks have been established so far, although the necessity of their establishment has been repeatedly pointed out in strategic documents (is the longest in Poland—starting from the establishment of the first national park, including also the years of World War II—without the establishment of a new national park). The development of the number of parks and their area is presented in Figure 3.

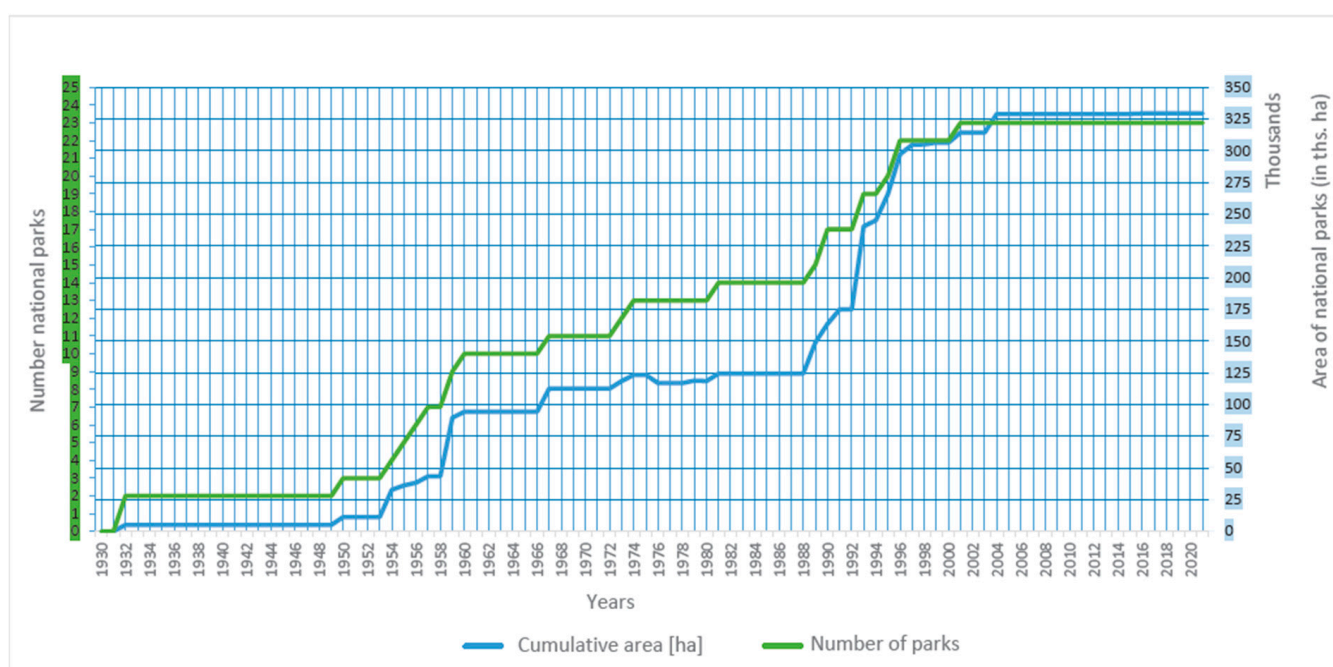


Figure 3. Growth dynamics of the number and area [thousand ha] of national parks in Poland. Source: P. Club. A proposal to supplement the network of Polish national parks. Fundacja Dziedzictwo Przyrodnicze. Kraków 2022.

The functioning of national parks in Poland is regulated by the Nature Conservation Act [60], which sets out the rules for their creation, management, and protection. Each park functions in the form of a state legal entity within the meaning of Article 9 of the Public Finance Act [61]. The activities of national parks are supervised by the minister responsible for the environment—it is he who appoints and dismisses the NP director. The scope of competences of the director, who—it is worth emphasizing—performs the function of a state administration body, is precisely defined in Article 8e of the Nature Conservation Act [62]. These include the implementation of tasks resulting from the park's protection plan or protection tasks and the issuing of orders specifying how park areas are to be made accessible. Interestingly, despite the fact that the areas of parks overlap with Natura 2000 sites, the state administration authority for matters concerning them is not the director of the park but the Regional Director for Environmental Protection at the provincial level. The competence of the director also includes agreeing on projects of development plans of communes in the part concerning the national park and its buffer zone within the scope of arrangements that may have a negative impact on the nature protection of the national park. Agreement with the director of the national park is also required for decisions on the location of public-purpose investments, e.g., road and water supply infrastructure,

as well as decisions on development conditions [62]. Thus, it is able to block projects of local authorities.

This position of director often gives rise to a perception among local authorities that parks can be a major “brake” on their development projects. On the other hand, however, park directors face many challenges, including urbanization pressures, conflicts of interest with local communities, and financial constraints.

A certain manifestation of the institutional cooperative elements is the scientific council, which is an advisory and consultative body of the director. Its members are appointed from among representatives of science, practitioners, members of environmental organizations, and locally competent local authorities working for nature protection. Due to its diverse composition, this body can play a consilium role between the national park authorities and the local community. However, in practice, due to their merely consultative and formal nature, they do not play a significant role [63].

The institutional and legal construction of national parks is not without its flaws and is the subject of quite a lively debate [24,64–66]. For example, the problem of the level and form of NP funding is pointed out. They should be adequate to the strategic nature of the tasks. Meanwhile, there is a noticeable lack of systemic solutions based on objective principles. Funds are allocated on the basis of arbitrary, departmental decisions. In the structure of revenues of national parks, the purposeful subsidy from the state budget for current functioning constitutes only 33%. In many units, it does not even allow to cover the salary fund. As much as 36% of the revenue is own revenue, which consists of entrance fees, the sale of timber, agri-environmental subsidies, and leases of areas covered by these subsidies. This raises the danger of a drift from the position of nature protectors towards resource managers [64].

The current shape of Polish NPs to a large extent represents a closed model of such units, in which the government administration has a decisive influence on shaping relations with local self-governments. These relations are based on the hard instruments of binding agreements (as opposed to opinions) of the government administration body that is the park director. He practically has the right to veto many local government initiatives not only in the strict area of the park but also in its buffer zone.

On the other hand, LGs have gained a hard instrument when creating new conservation areas. Indeed, since 2000, the Nature Conservation Act has provided that the creation, enlargement, reduction, or liquidation of a national park can only take place after agreement with the locally competent authorities of the local government units concerned, where the above changes are planned [66]. In other words, local governments have the right of veto in deciding on the development of the network of parks protecting the most valuable natural resources for the whole society. Previously, they only had the right to give an opinion on such initiatives. The effect of this solution is to effectively stall the process of expanding park protection, despite the ecological and scientific justification for creating new parks and expanding the areas of existing parks.

The current formal rules do not favor the development of collaborative initiatives with LG units, which is not to say that many directors do not undertake such initiatives. However, these are voluntary actions without binding decision-making character. They do, however, clearly indicate the need to change the management model of national parks to one that is closer to the concept of collaborative governance.

4.2. Reasons for Stagnation

The problems mentioned above hinder both the expansion of existing parks and the creation of new protected areas. As a result, despite numerous initiatives and projects, Poland has been experiencing stagnation in the development of the national park network for many years. In order to effectively counteract these challenges, it is necessary not only to introduce legislative changes but also to develop financial mechanisms and cooperation with local communities to enable more sustainable management and protection of these

valuable areas. It is also necessary to properly diagnose the problem and accurately identify the causes of this state of affairs.

Originally, the commonly pointed out problem was the already mentioned necessity to agree with the LG on the decision to create new or enlarge the areas of existing NPs. Reconciliation is the most far-reaching form of cooperation between bodies in the law-making process, so in practice this meant giving representatives of local authorities a veto right in the decision-making process concerning the creation or enlargement of the area of national parks [67]. The logic of the isolationist model prevailed here—since LGs block new projects, they should be deprived of such a right. Not only were arguments raised about the contradiction of such a solution with ecological goals, but also the unconstitutionality was pointed out. In doing so, it has been argued that the functioning of national parks as the highest form of nature protection falls within the scope of the state's ecological policy, for which the Council of Ministers is constitutionally responsible. It is a typical matter of state-wide (rather than local) importance, where the decision-making competence (with the obligation of consultation and participation of local governments in the decision-making process) should be located at the central level [24,68]. A similar argumentation prevailed not only in widely held media debates but also in professional conservation bodies. Sometimes in these discussions, an attitude of superiority of informed professionals over the down-to-earth concerns of local communities was apparent. There was no hiding the fact that local communities had to bear the costs of pursuing goals of overriding national and global bio-diversity. Many were even appalled by the possibility of a municipality with a population of a few thousand people blocking a decision to protect the natural heritage of a population of 38 million [68]. The only and effective panacea for resolving this situation was to limit the powers of local authorities so that they could not block decisions imposed “from above”. A feature of this phase of the debate was the lack of exploration of the problem of the motivations of local communities, often accused of being very conservative and not very progressive.

Meanwhile, the LG's resistance is mainly due to the direct negative consequences of the creation of the national park on municipal revenues, which are not properly recognized by the government administration and even less compensated from the state budget. The direct consequence is a reduction in forest tax revenue, which has a reduced rate of 50% in national parks. On a national scale, it does not constitute the main income of municipalities (about 0.5% of total income), and therefore its role may be neglected. However, the situation is quite different in municipalities whose majority of area is covered by forests. The highest shares on this account occur in 36 units (from 2.5 to 12.5%), which are usually covered by national parks. The highest revenue in relation to total income was recorded in the Lutowiska municipality (12%), followed by Cisna (10%), Płaska (9%), Komańcza, and Giby municipality (8%). These are covered in 70–80% by forests, which are included in protection areas [59]. Such large shares of revenue therefore occur at a reduced tax rate. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the municipalities unproblematically accept such a significant depletion of their income. Failure to recognize this fact is an expression of the internationalization of global profits at the expense of the local community.

One of the reasons for resistance from local authorities is the lack of protective measures aimed at TSUs bearing the costs of developmental constraints that result from the functioning of nature protection forms on their territory [69]. The decision to create such a protected area forces a change in the structure of the local economy, including a reduction in employment in some of its sectors, such as the timber industry. In forested areas, this is often the basis of the economy. In addition, local government officials and their constituents are concerned about the restrictions and prohibitions that apply within the boundaries of the park and its buffer zone, i.e., the exclusion of certain forms of land use and development, the prohibition of off-trail travel, or, finally, the prohibition of collecting mushrooms and other forest fruits. The legislator did not foresee mechanisms that would effectively compensate for the negative economic and social consequences of covering a given area with natural protection. The individual financial instruments proposed to local

governments are too general and do not correspond to a real analysis of the costs and benefits of changing the protective status of an area [70].

According to many authors, the fears of local communities are exaggerated and often fueled by certain interest groups. They are not necessarily related to LG; nevertheless, the whole odium of resistance to the creation of new parks is identified with them. In Polish conditions, a very serious stakeholder is the State Forest Enterprise (SF). They administer the vast majority of forest areas in Poland. It is not difficult to imagine that in municipalities where most of the area is covered by forests, it is SF employees who will be the main political force. Analyses of public discourses on projects to create (Turnicki NP) and expand parks (Białowieski NP, Karkonoski NP) show that foresters effectively use their own organizational resources to build a coalition opposing changes to national park boundaries in a given area. They try to convince local residents that local communities will lose out on this and consequently influence LG decisions. The resistance of these communities stems from the different property status of SF and NP. Although both institutions are state-owned, the salaries of SF employees were twice as high as those of NP employees. The director of the national park also earned twice as much as the chief forest officer, despite the fact that the former's scope of competence and responsibility is much broader [66]. The establishment of the national park was associated with the prospect of a change of employer from SF to NP, which meant a significant degradation in emoluments. Despite the reduction of these disparities in recent years, it is important to bear in mind the so-called "anchoring effect", which causes inertia in the perception of individual institutions.

It is therefore hardly surprising that people do not want to worsen their living conditions, even in the face of benefits for the planet as a whole. Reducing this social tension lies in the collaborative instruments towards which the evolution of conservation management should move. Local communities will identify more closely with national parks if they have more influence over their policies. On the other hand, the government administration needs to study in depth and holistically the potential impact of the creation of a specific park on changing socio-economic conditions. Compensation instruments should be adjusted accordingly. Without financial compensation, it will be difficult to change the attitude of local communities. As many studies have shown, nature conservation without the participation and involvement of the local community is less effective. Therefore, local support for local communities should be considered for the global effectiveness of forms of nature conservation.

Another barrier to the establishment of national parks, which is not commonly identified, is the impotence in decision making by the central administration. It often stems from unprofessional diagnosis of the state and poorly calculated tasks that result in low efficiency of activities. The prevailing view tends to be that complex initiatives that are risky are not worth undertaking. The pattern of action of the Ministry of Environment over the last two decades shows a strong adherence to the argument that new national parks cannot be created without first changing the statutory provisions. The law of agreement for LGs is replaced by a soft and non-binding form of opinion. There was even an inclination in some official documents and statements to consult widely with stakeholders, but after first limiting the possibility for them to actually influence decisions. These were ultimately to be taken autonomously by the ministry. This is a typical form of declarative-only governance. The typical bureaucratic approach prevailed, that all one had to do was change the regulation, and the processes would trigger themselves. There was usually not enough energy left to explore the causes of resistance and try to eliminate them.

Another very noticeable trend in the environment ministry was the focus on the European Natura 2000 programme. This was explained by the priority of their rapid implementation, the negotiation of boundaries, the process of consultation with local people (required by EU standards), the preparation of applications to EU bodies, and the creation of mandatory conservation plans. Since 2008, the Ministry seemed to be more focused on the creation of a new agenda—the General Directorate of Environmental Protection. In the meantime, the legal formula of the NP was changed from budget units to independent

state legal entities. This meant, on the one hand, that NPs gained more independence, but on the other hand, the ministry's responsibility and supervision over their functioning was reduced. Although the ministry was still responsible for the institutional framework for the functioning of the park system, the impression was that they were inferior children of Natura 2000 areas. The negligence in the coordination of activities and funding of the parks was so significant that in 2015, at their own expense, an expert report was prepared exposing the dysfunctions in the system [65].

It seems that the expert study, prepared at the request of the national parks, provoked broader activities related to the reform of this system. Subsequent studies confirmed the main theses of the mentioned publication. One of them is an item explicitly recommending a change in the style of park management from a closed to a collaborative style [69]. A very valuable initiative was the involvement of NGOs, including the ClientEarth Foundation Lawyers for the Earth. This has resulted in key studies that analyze the causes of stagnation and ways of solving these problems [71] and create a proposal for concrete actions on expanding the area of existing parks and creating new ones [72,73].

The analysis of the legal and economic conditions of the process of creating and enlarging national parks in Poland still clings to the argument that unblocking the possibility of creating new parks requires excluding LGs from the possibility of veto [71]. Instead, it proposes an opinion formula supplemented by extensive public consultation. Depriving local governments of this right is counter-productive to further declarations in this document. According to them, this is a way of a new, deliberative model of the consultation path that gives local authorities the possibility of real, substantive input into the shape of the national park project, which changes its essence: from top-down imposed to bottom-up shaped. Such a solution should increase the level of responsibility of local authorities for the new protected area, as well as enhance its legitimacy in the eyes of the local community [74]. The practice of such negotiations suggests that weakening the influence of one party may lead the other to take advantage of the situation rather than increase the inclination towards participatory governance.

In addition to this observation, it is important to note the change in approach to the procedures for creating and extending NP areas. This is the result of a very broad analysis of the public discourse on the design of new parks and the extension of existing areas. Finally, the reasons for such and not other attitudes of local communities have been properly explored. Starting from the poor financial condition of the parks themselves, which do not guarantee financially attractive employment conditions, through the need to compensate local governments for lost benefits, to special subsidies. The latter are supposed to be an annuity for local communities for fulfilling ecological functions of a national and global nature.

5. Discussion

This study defines in depth the reasons for the stagnation in the establishment of new national parks and identifies proposals for actions that can contribute to breaking down existing barriers. Although the study focuses on Poland, the conclusions are universal and can be applied to other countries facing similar challenges.

The literature review seems to confirm that, from a global perspective, the persistence of threats to biodiversity, climate change, etc., requires further development and refinement of economic instruments and inclusive policies to enable more effective management of national parks. It is also crucial to increase the involvement of local communities in decision-making processes and to ensure that the benefits of nature conservation are equitably distributed among different stakeholder groups.

An important element of the inclusive model is co-management of national parks, which involves the sharing of power and responsibilities between the state administration and local stakeholders. This type of co-management is based on joint decision making with local communities, thus reducing potential conflicts and leading to more sustainable management of natural resources.

An important aspect of the relationship between national parks and local communities is the introduction of economic instruments to compensate for the constraints imposed by conservation regimes. Mechanisms such as payments for ecosystem services or fiscal transfers are an important part of conservation policy, allowing the costs incurred locally to be balanced against the benefits of biodiversity conservation at regional, national, and global levels [37–39]. Compensation can apply to both land users and operators whose activities are restricted. Conservation subsidies, agri-environmental schemes, and payments for environmental services are implemented in many countries [43]. Local governments also face opportunity costs, resulting from, among other things, a reduction in their own income from property taxes and reduced development opportunities. Opposition to the creation of new protected areas is often the result of concerns from local communities who see them as a barrier to development. To ensure that the global benefits of creating national parks do not burden local communities, there must be adequate compensation for both local governments and private actors [1,45,48,49].

Research on national park management and biodiversity conservation points to a shift from the traditional isolation-based conservation model towards a more integrated approach that takes into account cooperation with local communities. Co-management and economic tools, such as ecological compensation mechanisms, play a key role in mitigating conflicts and increasing the effectiveness of conservation efforts. Despite significant advances in research on national park management and biodiversity conservation, there is still a significant research gap regarding the lack of a coherent international policy in this area. Currently, each country is developing its own solutions, resulting in a considerable diversity of approaches and difficulties in global coordination. There is a lack not only of international analyses summarizing the development of key trends but also of comprehensive studies at the national level. Poland is an example of a country where there is a noticeable stagnation in the creation of new national parks, and the literature on the causes of this phenomenon is severely lacking. This article aims to fill this gap, offering a detailed analysis of the barriers to the establishment of new national parks and proposing an integrated approach that can contribute to more effective biodiversity conservation at both national and global levels.

The current model for the functioning of Polish national parks in Poland is largely based on a closed system in which the government administration plays a key role in shaping relations with local self-governments. These relations are based on hard legal tools that give the director of the national park, who is a government administration body, broad powers, including the right to veto many local government initiatives, both within the park and in its buffer zone. In turn, local government units have been given significant influence over the process of creating new national parks or changes to their boundaries. Since 2000, according to the Nature Conservation Act, the creation, enlargement, reduction, or liquidation of a national park requires the agreement of the relevant local government bodies, which de facto gives them the right to veto such decisions. Rather, the current formal provisions are used to block mutual initiatives between NPs and LGs, although they could just as well be used in collaborative cooperation. This situation clearly points to the need to change the governance model of national parks towards a more collaborative and inclusive approach, similar to the concept of collaborative governance [57,58].

The study defines the barriers and problems hindering both the expansion of existing parks and the creation of new protected areas. As a result, despite numerous initiatives and projects, Poland has experienced stagnation in the development of its national park network for more than two decades.

The first barrier is the veto right of local governments. Since 2000, local governments have been given the right to agree on decisions to create or expand national parks, which in practice means that they can block such initiatives. While this is intended to involve local communities in decision making, it often leads to stagnation in the creation of new protected areas. Justifications for opposition include concerns about economic constraints and tax revenues. However, as this work has tried to justify, this barrier is not the main reason

for stagnation. Rather, contrary to many studies [20,68], it is an instrument of deliberative governance that is misused by both disputants. However, a shift in this approach towards a greater emphasis on collaboration has been noted in recent years [20,70].

More attention is now being paid to the problem of lack of compensation for municipalities. Local authorities are concerned about a reduction in revenue, especially from the forest tax, which is reduced by 50% in national park areas. In municipalities where most of the area is forest (e.g., Lutowska, Cisna), such a reduction in revenue significantly affects the budget. There is a lack of adequate compensation mechanisms to compensate for these losses.

Another problem is the concerns of local communities about the constraints resulting from the creation of the park, such as bans on land use, forest harvesting, or economic activities. The lack of protective measures and adequate compensation exacerbates these concerns, resulting in resistance to new initiatives.

Very important is the role of the state forests which are an important player in forest communities where their employees have a strong political position. The creation of a national park often means that some employees move from the LPs to the parks, which entails lower salaries. LPs effectively mobilize local communities to oppose park expansion, fearing loss of influence. This problem has only begun to be recognized in the most recent [70].

The approach of the government administration is also a considerable problem. This is dominated by a top-down model and acting in a prescriptive manner. As a result, decisions concerning national parks are often based on incomplete socio-economic analyses. Instead of implementing complex measures, the dominant tendency has been to propose legislative changes (e.g., replacing agreements with opinions) without real consideration of local needs and concerns. This is one of the main reasons why the establishment of new NPs has stagnated for so long.

As above, another problem relates to the public administration and its focus on Natura 2000. The Ministry of Environment has in recent years focused on the implementation of Natura 2000, which has contributed to the marginalization of national parks. The new agenda and structural changes (e.g., the change in the legal status of the parks) have weakened the oversight and coordination of national park conservation efforts, leading to their neglect.

Lack of cooperation with local communities, inadequate compensation, and the dominance of state forestry interests result in blocking initiatives to create new national parks. Solving these problems requires a change in the approach in nature conservation management to a more collaborative one, with greater consideration of local needs and participation. Problems defined in this way answer the first two research questions on the declared and real reasons for resistance to the creation of new national parks. Framing the issue in this way broadens the debate, which often focuses only on the question of the LG's competence to agree on new national parks.

The paper identifies a major shift in attitudes towards procedures for the creation and expansion of national park areas, resulting from an extensive analysis of public discourse on the design of new parks and the expansion of existing ones. Finally, the reasons for the attitudes of local communities were identified in depth, taking into account, among other things, the poor financial condition of parks, which does not provide competitive employment conditions, the need to compensate local governments for lost benefits, and the need for special subsidies. The latter would act as an ecological rent, compensating local communities for the implementation of conservation functions of national and global importance. This direction is in line with global trends indicated by [9,40,52].

An analysis of numerous studies, accounts of public consultations, and discussions on the creation of national parks indicates that the process is complex. However, there is a growing realization that the success of such projects is not possible without the broad participation of local communities and the provision of economic compensation for lost benefits. In this way, it can be seen that the stagnation in the creation of new parks has

contributed to an important evolution of views about the barriers to this process. The initial belief that the elimination of local government influence would unlock initiatives has given way to a deeper analysis of the impact of the protection regime on local socio-economic systems. There is a growing recognition of the need to take into account the losses incurred by local governments, which provides an opportunity to transform the attitudes of local communities towards supporting the creation of new national parks. Recommendations for this course of action answer the third research question.

6. Conclusions

An analysis of many other studies, accounts of public consultations, and discussions on the establishment of national parks shows that this is not a simple process. However, there is a maturing realization that such projects are all the more impossible to do without the extensive involvement of local communities, and economic compensation for lost benefits. In this way, it can be seen that the stagnation in the creation of new parks has “served” to significantly evolve views on the barriers to this process. From the belief that removing local government from the decision will immediately unlock new initiatives. To a more thorough analysis of the impact of the park protection regime on the functioning of the local socio-economic system. The need to take into account the LG’s lost benefits is already widely recognized. This offers an opportunity to change the attitudes of the local community in favor of creating new areas.

The effect of this change in attitudes is to restore faith in the feasibility of establishing new national parks. The emanation of these changes is a study presenting proposals for new national parks and the possibility of extending the boundaries of existing national parks in Poland. It is a coherent, rational, and detailed concept of the network of Polish national parks. First of all, it proposes extending the areas of 21 existing national parks (except for Narwiański and Ujście Warty, whose boundaries have been deemed appropriate). This was followed by proposals to create 25 new national parks, which is a very progressive concept after years of stagnation¹. The total area of all the proposals for new national parks is 485,301.43 ha, which is 1.55% of Poland’s area. Together with the existing national parks, which account for 1.05% of the country’s area, and their potential additions of another 0.53% of the country’s area, they would cover a total of 3.13% of Poland’s area, forming a fairly even and representative network in terms of nature [72].

It seems that after years of stagnation, this concept is very progressive. In the meantime, it does not create a new reality but synthesizes all substantively justified but not yet realized ideas for the creation and enlargement of national parks. One can cautiously hope that the more than 20-year period of stagnation will turn into a process of quantitative and qualitative growth in the creation of new NPs. (similar to the 1990s). This seems to be borne out by the recent actions of the Ministry of the Environment, which has announced that there will be a project to establish a Lower Oder Valley National Park by the end of 2024. Both the proposed restrictions and the process of working out the decision seem to fulfill the assumptions of the so-called third way in the creation of parks.

In summary, a precise diagnosis of these problems is crucial for the effective elimination of barriers in the process of expanding the national park network. Importantly, solutions to overcome these barriers are relatively simple to implement. Meanwhile, for more than 20 years, successive governments have focused on addressing problems defined in the wrong way, resulting in inefficiencies in the actions taken. This article seeks to correct these mistakes by providing a sound analysis of the problem and viable proposals for solutions.

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Note

- ¹ The proposal includes the establishment of the following national parks: Turnicki, Jurajski, Mazurski, Doliny Dolnej Odry, Szczeciński, Knyszynski, Sobiborski, Chełmski, Janowski, Orawski, Borów Dolnośląskich, Puszczy Pilickiej, Puszczy Śląskiej, Wiślański, Puszczy Boreckiej, Kaszubski, Stawów Milickich, Puszczy Rominckiej, Jaworski, Wysoczyzny Elbląskiej, Bydgoski, Śnieżnicki, Odrzański, Bramy Morawskiej and Podziemny Park Narodowy Kopalni Soli Wieliczka.

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