Participatory Approach to Wetland Governance: The Case of The Memorandum of Understanding of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park

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Abstract: Wetlands are defined as dynamic ecosystems that combine the characteristics of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems and are important from ecological as well as social and economic perspectives. In response to the intense degradation and alteration of wetlands, communities have developed various management strategies. One of the ways to achieve more effective participatory wetland management is to introduce the concept of a Wetland Contract, a voluntary agreement that ensures sustainable management and development of wetlands. This study on the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park in Slovenia follows the methodology of the preparation (legal framework, scientific description and stakeholder analysis) and implementation (organization of Territorial Labs, scenario planning and development) stages of the Wetland Contract concept. Of approximately 200 potential stakeholders, 34 participated in the Territorial Labs, and 16 stakeholders signed the less binding type of Wetland Contract, called the Memorandum of Understanding. The Memorandum of Understanding and its implementation process, which included systematic cross-sectoral participation, successfully overcame conflicts between stakeholders with different interests. The methodology used has shown great potential for further applications in wetlands of common interest.

Keywords: stakeholder participation; governance; Wetland Contract; marine protected area; biodiversity; Slovenia

1. Introduction

Wetlands can be defined as dynamic ecosystems with a characteristic community of plants and animals at the transition between land and water [1]. Indeed, they combine the characteristics of aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, which are interconnected and often intertwined. This gives them diversity, dynamism and a richness of life forms, making them one of the most productive ecosystems on Earth, second only to tropical forests [2,3]. The basic rhythm of life is determined by the wetlands of water. Their chemical and physical properties, water regime and fauna influence their development and characteristics [4]. Plants and animals form a characteristic biocenosis adapted to the nature of the wetland, especially to the water and soil conditions. The term can be used for aquatic ecosystems such as lakes, rivers or lagoons, but also for marshes, swamps, floodplains or shoals on the coast [1,4].

Wetlands are important from an ecological as well as a social and economic perspective [5]. They provide various ecosystem services, especially important hydrological and ecological functions not only for plants and animals, but also for humans [3]. They are central to biodiversity conservation and are important providers of various goods and services such as water quality, flood control and carbon sinks [6,7]. Wetlands are popular recreational and relaxation areas, and their esthetic and educational functions are also important [8].
Yet, wetlands are now on the list of the most endangered ecosystems on Earth. In the past, people often considered wetlands as an insignificant, superfluous and less valuable part of nature [9]. As a result, many wetlands were drained, flooded or otherwise destroyed in the past. In the twentieth century, more than 40% of wetlands in Slovenia and up to 50% of wetlands worldwide were lost in this way [10–12]. In Europe, at least 50% of wetlands have been converted into urban or agricultural land [13].

In response to the intense degradation and alteration of wetlands, countries have created various wetland and hinterland management strategies at both the global and European levels. At the global level, the Ramsar Convention [14] was adopted in the 1970s, emphasizing prudent use as an integrated approach to planning and management and a necessary starting point for managing wetlands and their natural resources. At the European Union (EU) level, the Natura 2000 network has been adopted, the main objective of which is the conservation of biodiversity [15]. However, at the national level, various levels of protection and security have been established for these extremely vulnerable areas, such as landscape parks [16], national parks, and others [17]. Despite the seemingly good system, few countries effectively implement the above-mentioned measures to protect and safeguard wetlands in practice. They are particularly ineffective when economic interests are paramount [18,19]. One of the main reasons for this is that the aforementioned laws and policies are still relatively new, and those responsible often lack sufficient human, financial and organizational resources. In addition, there are differences between legislation, formal policies and actual planning and management. On the other hand, it should be emphasized that wetlands are natural ecosystems that cannot be managed through sectoral approaches and policies. Narrowly focused, single-objective policies usually result in external, negative impacts that may affect sectors other than those affected by the policy itself. Therefore, it makes sense to establish multi-level governance to improve collaboration between wetlands and their associated local areas, such as different levels of local communities. This requires a strategic and participatory approach to wetland governance that takes into account the different characteristics of wetland ecosystems and their spatial specificities [20].

One of the ways to achieve more effective participatory wetland management is to introduce the concept of a Wetland Contract, a voluntary agreement that ensures sustainable management and development of wetlands, ensures better coordination and consensus building among stakeholders involved in management, and minimizes discrepancies between environmental issues and economic activities in wetlands [3]. It is a type of agreement that provides a set of measures in the areas of public services, economic return, social value and environmental sustainability [20]. All of the above measures are equally involved in finding effective solutions for the wetland and its hinterland. The agreement involves various public and private stakeholders and different capacities interested in wetlands and waters to restore the environment and socioeconomically revitalize the wetland system [21]. The voluntary agreement is developed and formalized through a participatory and negotiated decision-making process. It also includes the programming act, called the action plan, which brings together and incorporates the various interests within the wetland and its hinterland and defines the responsibilities and implementation tools for the sustainable management of the wetland system. The idea of the Wetland Contract is a long-term process. It remains active even after its elaboration and is a prerequisite for its successful implementation [22].

The concept of Wetland Contract does not represent a new decision-making or planning document, but rather brings about the formulation of actions through a participatory process and defines the responsibilities of the stakeholders involved. In doing so, the autonomy and specificity of the areas covered by the Wetland Contract are preserved. The Wetland Contract is a so-called inter-institutional agreement or decision-making and working process based on the voluntary implementation of accepted environmental and socio-economic interests and measures by the stakeholders involved. In this sense, we understand it as a management process based on shared knowledge and synergistic interaction between stakeholders and the exchange of opinions prior to decision-making. The
peculiarity of such a management arrangement lies in the contextual presence of voluntariness, involvement, participation and commitment [23]. These four attributes constitute a unique concept of a wetland agreement where any stakeholder joins voluntarily, anyone can join at any time, certain commitments must be met and certain obligations must be fulfilled before leaving the area.

No comparable legal instrument has yet been adopted at the EU level to pursue the objectives of the Wetland Contract. On the other hand, the Wetland Contract pursues the main objectives of the following European environmental directives (Habitats Directive 1992/43/European Commission—Water Framework Directive 2000/60/European Commission—Floods Directive 2007/60/European Commission—Birds Directive 2009/147/European Commission), which in turn include sustainable, inclusive governance and development among their objectives. All too often, however, these objectives remain only on paper [20].

The goal of our work is to demonstrate the transferability of the established Wetland Contract method to marine protected areas and to test how successful it can be. Through the development of a Wetland Contract, we aim to improve coordination among stakeholders and decision-makers in the pilot area and to increase and proactively engage these stakeholders. We also aim to improve the effectiveness of management of the wetland and its hinterland through the development and integration of agreed-upon actions. This paper also presents an innovative methodological approach that we developed for the implementing the participatory Wetland Contract that was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Study Area

The Sečovlje Salina Nature Park is located in the southwestern part of Slovenia in the southern part of the municipality of Piran, connecting the Adriatic coast with the floodplain of the Dragonja River, directly on the border with the Republic of Croatia. According to the physical-geographical classification of Europe, based on climate, rocks and soil, the area belongs to the Mediterranean region [24]. The protected area extends over a length of four kilometers in NW-SE and three kilometers in SW-NE direction and covers about 674 ha [25,26]. The Sečovlje Salina is one of the northernmost active salterns in the Mediterranean. The base of the salterns is the Dragonja River estuary, which is covered with sediments up to 90 m thick [27]. Recent measurements show that sedimentation is still active. In the hinterland, sediment production is 36 kg/m² per year from the flysch cliffs [28].

In the considered area, salt production probably dates back to ancient times, and written sources about salt production date back to the 13th century. In the past, the Sečovlje salterns were of great strategic and economic importance for the town of Piran, which at that time belonged to the Republic of Venice, as salt was an important ingredient for the preservation of food. With the system of dikes and canals, man was able to regulate the water level and change the natural environment. Nowadays, there are two types of salt works: the Lera area, with modernized salt production, and the Fontanigge area, which is the medieval part of the salterns. Due to the long-lasting human activity, a typical salt ecosystem has formed. No less than 45 species on the Red List of endangered plants, six species of amphibians, nine species of reptiles, more than 300 species of birds and 11 species of mammals are found in the Nature Park. They are most abundant where human influence is limited, especially where the water balance is maintained. There are few other areas on the Slovenian Adriatic coast where these habitat types occur. These habitats also represent a “stepping stone” between other coastal wetlands in the southern part of the eastern Adriatic coast towards the Gulf of Trieste, the Venice Lagoon and towards the northwest. The predominant economic activity is concentrated on salt production. Small private agricultural areas consist of meadows, pastures, fields, orchards and vineyards. The Museum of Salt Production, which is the center of activity within the park along with nature conservation, offers numerous opportunities for education and tourism. In addition,
the administrator of the marine reserve has developed the unique therapeutic tourism product Thalasso Spa Lepa Vida. The recreational activities are carried out in smaller groups [29,30].

The nature park has been protected by several national and international agreements. In 1990, a decree was issued recognizing the protection values at the local and national level, and at the local level (municipality), the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park was established (Figure 1). In 1993, the Sečovlje Salinas were included in the List of Wetlands of International Importance under the auspices of the Ramsar Convention. In 2001, the Government of the Republic of Slovenia issued the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park Ordinance with the aim of protecting this area of great natural value and preserving the high biodiversity of this typical saline ecosystem. Since 2003, the area has been managed by the company SOLINE Pridelava soli d. o. o., which was granted a concession. In 2011, the Decree on the Management Plan of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park established a ten-year management plan for the period 2011–2021. In 2004, the Slovenian government ratified the NATURA 2000 sites with its Regulation on Special Protection Areas (Natura 2000 sites). The larger site protected under the Habitats Directive is the Sečovljske soline in estuarium Dragonje (SI3000240), an estuary with a saltern complex of 366.3 ha. The smaller area protected under the Habitats Directive (SCI and SAC) is the Kanal Sv. Jerneja (SI3000239), a small estuary with halophytic ecosystems covering 31.8 ha. The largest area protected under the Birds Directive (SPA) is the Sečovljske soline (SI5000018), an important breeding and migratory area of 892 ha. In 2017, with the final decision of the Arbitration Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Slovenia and the Government of the Republic of Croatia, the boundary of the park was changed. About 48 ha of the nature park and Natura 2000 sites were lost (especially habitat types 1320 and 1420) due to administrative problems with the location of the marine protected area in close proximity to the border between the Republic of Slovenia and the Republic of Croatia [25,29–32].

Figure 1. Sečovlje Salina Nature Park with its hinterland.

3. Methods

In the present study, following the example of the existing methodology (Figure 2) for the implementation of a multi-stage wetland management [3], we carried out two main stages and six sub-stages required for the preparation of a Wetland Contract. The presented
stages are tailored to the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park, but their purpose is broader. With them, we want to give an example of how it is possible to reach an agreement on cooperation between different stakeholders in a certain rounded area. They were implemented in the period from 1 March 2020 to 1 April 2021 (Figure 2).

The first sub-stage of the process is a regulatory framework analysis, in which we examined the legal background related to wetland management. This explains laws, regulations, procedures, plans, policies and jurisdictional levels that relate to wetland management at the national and international levels. The next sub-stage was the scientific description of the pilot area, in which we collected important information about the wetland in terms of ecological, socio-economic and territorial development aspects. This information was collected to align the objectives with the challenges and priorities of the wetland. In the next sub-stage, a stakeholder analysis was conducted. In this process, all key stakeholders were identified and classified into different categories based on their territorial level, area of activity (according to the quadruple helix approach), influence on the management of the wetland, and interest in the area according to the influence–interest matrix [33]. The list or register of stakeholder must be constantly updated during the process to ensure coherent involvement of key stakeholders.

The second stage, the implementation stage, consisted of the three sub-stages, organization of the Territorial Labs, scenario planning and development of the Wetland Contract. The Territorial Labs are a series of public meetings aimed at establishing participatory governance. Due to the COVID-19 situation, all Territorial Labs were organized online using innovative participatory techniques. They relied on the real participation of the main stakeholders and their collaboration. The active participation of the local people in this area is not new [34] and proved to be conducive to a constructive dialog between stakeholders, creating a chain of responsibility focused on achieving common goals. The last two sub-stages consisted of the development of the wetlands contract. The first is scenario planning. This is a technique based on the integration of the studies and scientific diagnoses carried out in the first stage, as well as on the results of the participatory process carried out by the Territorial Labs. It aims to develop a strategy that links the general planning objectives with the policies and needs. The last sub-stage is the elaboration of the Wetland Contract itself and its signature by the stakeholders involved in the participatory process, developed during the Territorial Labs. The Wetland Contract is a formal act by which the different stakeholders commit to carry out all the activities listed in the attached action plan in order to achieve the planned wetland management objectives.

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**Figure 2.** Wetland Contract implementation methodology.
4. Results

A large number of potential stakeholders (approximately 200) in the local community and beyond (with particular knowledge and interests) were targeted. In selecting these stakeholders, a thorough analysis of their potential to participate in the Marine Protected Areas Pilot Agreement was conducted. A total of 62 out of approximately 200 potential stakeholders, from both sides of the border between Slovenia and Croatia responded to the online questionnaire, which was active between June 2020 and January 2021. The largest group of stakeholders who responded (62) belonged to the public institutions/agencies sector (33.9%), followed by others (17.7%), interest groups (14.5%), private business (9.7%), education/training center and school (8.1%), landowners (8.1%), higher education and research (6.5%) and business support organization (1.5%). The areas of activity of these stakeholders are concentrated in tourism (32.3%), biodiversity (32.3%), culture (22.6%), agriculture (21.0%), local development (19.4%), recreation (19.4%), fisheries (12.9%), navigation (8.1%), energy (3.2%) and other (33.9%), which are the main themes in the expansion of the project (Figure 3).

![Figure 3. The field of activity of the participants of the questionnaire.](image)

More than half of the stakeholders are active at either the local (35.5%) or national (29.0%) level, while the regional and international levels are equally underrepresented (17.7%). The objective of the project activities proved to be even more important, as the stakeholders’ area of activity is mostly only partially (61.3%) or not at all (27.4%) involved in the protected area. In addition, we asked stakeholders to share their confidence and experience with inclusive governance processes. Most stakeholders have moderate knowledge of the process (48.4%), moderate knowledge of how they work (50.0%) and little experience (58.1%). For Wetland Contracts, knowledge and experience are even lower. Most stakeholders have little knowledge of the process (48.4%), little knowledge of how they work (53.2%) and little experience (77.4%). Given this, project activities need to be even more focused on promoting and explaining in detail inclusive governance processes Wetland Contracts. Knowing the background of the stakeholders, we wanted to know more about their participation in the following processes in the project. A high percentage of stakeholders only wanted to be informed (45.2%), consulted (21.0%) and 27.4% of them wanted to be actively involved. The fact that they have not been involved in these processes so far is clearly reflected in their assessment of the influence they believe they will have in
the development of the protected area agreement. Most of them believe that they have a small (61.3%) and medium (24.2%) influence, while only 8.1% of stakeholders claim that they have a great influence on the process of Wetland Contract development (Figure 4). According to the experience gained from the results of the questionnaire, the importance of the project activities was even greater for the stakeholders and the protected area.

Figure 4. Questionnaire participants confidence and experience in river and Wetland Contracting processes.

Depending on the response, they were invited to participate in the further process of elaborating the Wetland Contract in three Territorial Labs and two local conferences. This approach was chosen due to the diversity of activities and interests of stakeholders in the small transboundary coastal area. Within the three pillars—nature conservation, tourism and agriculture—the groups addressed challenges and sought solutions for the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park area and the wider hinterland. Within each pillar, stakeholders in groups discussed problems, proposed solutions and pointed out challenges they had identified in the area of the park. In total, 34 stakeholders participated in the Territorial Labs.

Twelve stakeholders attended the kick-off event held as part of the project Promoting Multilevel Governance for Tuning Up Biodiversity Protection in Marine Areas (TUNE UP). At the launch event, the Director of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park gave a welcoming speech. The Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts (ZRC SAZU), the project partner of TUNE UP, familiarized the participants with the progress of the project so far and explained why the next step is a participatory process in the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park. A good practice example from the implementation of a similar project process in the Ljubljansko barje Nature Park was also presented. The expert staff member for nature conservation monitoring in the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park emphasized the importance of the project for the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park and the main challenges for the park. The methodology of the Wetland Contract with an action plan was explained in more detail. The moderator of the meeting presented to the participants the whole structure of all five workshops and explained how the whole process will take place. The second part of the meeting was dedicated to a facilitated discussion where participants were encouraged to create a culture of dialog, listen and express their opinions. Three groups of four participants each were formed. Participants introduced themselves, got to know each other and collectively answered two questions, “What is your overall perception of the process and what would you change about it?” and “What do you think is the biggest challenge that needs to be addressed?”. To record their answers, participants used the online jamboard tool, where they entered their key findings. In the last part, the representatives of the groups presented the results of each group. This was followed by an exchange of views among the participants and a complementation of the results. The meeting ended with a closing speech and a presentation of the next steps in the process.
The first Territorial Lab was attended by 24 stakeholders. By way of introduction, an expert in nature conservation monitoring in the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park gave a welcoming speech. The moderator of the event summarized the program of the meeting. The leader of the Slovenian part of the project TUNE UP then explained to the participants the purpose of the project, the role of the European pond turtle as a potential brand of sustainable development in the pilot area and summarized the results of the introductory meeting (Figure 5). In addition, the Kozjansko Nature Park, where the Kozjansko jabolko brand was developed, was presented as an example of good practice. The experts of the project TUNE UP gave a presentation on the protection of the European pond turtle as a way to combine nature conservation, agriculture and tourism. The second part of the meeting was devoted to a guided discussion using the World Café method. Three groups were formed with seven to nine stakeholders. The stakeholders introduced themselves, got to know each other and thought together about the problems, solutions and challenges related to the three pillars. Each pillar was facilitated by a professional manager and a record keeper, both from ZRC SAZU. The professional facilitator led the group discussion and recorded the stakeholders’ key findings on the online Jamboard tool. After twenty minutes, the groups changed topics. The expert leader familiarized the group with the contributions of the previous group and invited them to further discuss and reflect on the topic. In the last part, the expert leaders presented the results related to the pillars—science, tourism, agriculture.

Eighteen stakeholders participated in the second Territorial Lab. The meeting took place through the Zoom application. As an introduction, the director of the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park gave a greeting. The head of the Slovenian part of the project TUNE UP then presented the results of the previous meetings to the stakeholders. Experts presented further work in the areas of the three pillars—nature conservation, agriculture and tourism.

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**Turtle in the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park**

**The European pond turtle**

*Emys orbicularis*

- It lives a hidden life.
- With luck we can see them sunbathing.
- It is the only indigenous freshwater turtle species in Slovenia.
- One of the largest populations in Slovenia lives in the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park.

*Figure 5.* The European pond turtle is one of the most important indicators of biodiversity and habitat condition in the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park, as shown in the Territorial Lab.

Due to the lack of stakeholders who could take responsibility for implementing each action in the action plan, we decided not to create an action plan at this stage. Based on the experience from the Ljubljansko barje Nature Park [3], we decided to replace the Wetland Contract with the Memorandum of Understanding containing only a part of the action plan (goals, measures, initiatives and risks).

Eighteen stakeholders participated in the second Territorial Lab. The meeting took place through the Zoom application. As an introduction, the director of the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park gave a greeting. The head of the Slovenian part of the project TUNE UP then presented the results of the previous meetings to the stakeholders. Experts presented further work in the areas of the three pillars—nature conservation, agriculture and tourism.
The second part of the meeting was dedicated to a guided discussion using the World Café method. Stakeholders discussed in groups and together with experts searched for possible solutions within the three pillars—nature conservation, tourism and agriculture—in the area of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park and the wider hinterland. Three groups were formed, each with six stakeholders. Stakeholders introduced themselves, got to know each other and worked out proposals and solutions for the three pillars together. Each pillar was facilitated by a professional manager for a specific area and a facilitator. The professional manager led the group discussion and recorded the stakeholders’ key findings in the Google Slides tool (Figure 6). The notes were in a different color for each group. After twenty minutes, the groups switched topics. The expert leader first informed each group about the previous group’s contributions and asked them to continue discussing and thinking about the topic. In the last part, the expert leaders presented the results on the pillars—science, tourism and agriculture.

Figure 6. The innovative approach of discussion with participants through the World Café method.

The third meeting of the Territorial Lab was attended by 21 stakeholders. The meeting was held via the Zoom app. The leader of the Slovenian part of the project TUNE UP presented the purpose of a less binding type of Wetland Contract, the so-called Memorandum of Understanding as a tool for a more comprehensive approach to cooperation between three sectors—with the main goal of preserving the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park. The Memorandum of Understanding include a number of actions in the areas of governance, environment and socio-economic development. It is a comprehensive and participatory management of the wetland and hinterland of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park. The document is signed by public and private stakeholders. The Memorandum of Understanding is valid if it is signed by at least 10 signatories. The custody of the Memorandum of Understanding was accepted by the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park. The second part of the meeting was dedicated to a moderated discussion, which took place in plenary. Participants were encouraged to make constructive proposals for changes to the text in the script, which would make an important contribution to its improvement and would be realistic. Experts gave a technical opinion on the reasons for including the suggestions in the document. The session ended with a closing speech and a presentation of the next steps in the process. Participants also received a Memorandum of Understanding in the coming weeks, inviting them to sign the document and participate in the next steps to protect the wetlands of the Sečovlje Salina Nature Park and its hinterland.

The final conference was attended by 12 stakeholders. The meeting took place via the Zoom app. In the introductory part, the participants were welcomed by the Deputy Director of ZRC SAZU and the Director of Soline d.o.o. and the experts presented their contributions. During the final conference, stakeholders were also offered the opportunity
to present their contributions in order to involve them in the process. One stakeholder accepted this invitation and presented his contribution. During the contributions to the final conference, a summary of the participatory process of four meetings was presented, the goal of which was to formulate a Memorandum of Understanding that actively involved all relevant stakeholders and encompassed the entire area (Figure 7). The head of the ZRC SAZU team presented the next steps and the importance of the Memorandum of Understanding as a starting point for the approach needed to develop Wetland Contract for the Seˇcˇovlje Salina Nature Park with the hinterland and the Action Plan. Funds for further cooperation with stakeholders and elaboration of the agreement could be provided through the project of European LIFE financial mechanism, which is in the final stage of approval. Seˇcˇovlje Salina Nature Park has taken the lead in the further process and has also committed to take care of the connection and increase the number of stakeholders. Potential signatories of the Memorandum of Understanding were contacted in the coming weeks. The signed document was forwarded to the signatories. Later in the meeting, a recent film about the project TUNE UP was also made available to the stakeholders. The meeting ended with a closing speech and thanks to all stakeholders for their active participation and involvement in the development of the Memorandum of Understanding and their willingness to sign the document.

A total of 34 stakeholders participated in the Territorial Labs. ZRC SAZU initiated a participatory process from October 2020 to March 2021, which led to the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding of the Seˇcˇovlje Salina Nature Park by 16 stakeholders. The main objectives are: (1) establishment of a cooperation network between key stakeholders, (2) stable management of agricultural land, (3) regulation of water balance, (4) sustainable management and development, (5) transboundary coordination and development, (6) good condition of natural habitats, (7) conservation of the European pond turtle, (8) enhancement of nature in protected areas, (9) establishment and effective management of trademarks, (10) enhancement and promotion of natural and cultural heritage, (11) improvement of transport infrastructure and sustainable mobility, and (12) design and promotion of sustainable tourism products (Table 1). The Memorandum of Understanding is not legally established, but rather represents a voluntary commitment by the signatory entities. Integration and compliance with the specific objectives of the Memorandum of Understanding is envisioned in subsequent successful project proposals, e.g., European Financial mechanism LIFE, etc. Nonetheless, certain laws, regulations and administrative procedures are relevant to the implementation of good practice.

Figure 7. The evaluation and consultation of experts in the field of nature conservation, tourism and agriculture on the implementation of the Memorandum in the Seˇcˇovlje Salina Nature Park.
Table 1. Preferred scenario for the pilot area included in the Memorandum of Understanding.

| Strategic Area | Goals | Measures | Incentives | Risks |
|----------------|-------|----------|------------|-------|
| **G. GOVERNANCE** | | | | |
| G1: Establishment of a network for the cooperation between key stakeholders (nature conservation, agriculture, tourism, education) in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | • Link KPSS with farms and other stakeholders in the hinterland into a consortium. | • Establish a development and communication plan for coordinated cross-sector cooperation. Involvement of the KPSS in the formation of the MLP. | • Conflict of interest between conservation and economic development. | |
| | • Participatory approach to management. | • “Informal” updating of the KPSS Management Plan to include sustainable agriculture, tourism and education for the hinterland. | • Insufficient synergy between destination development, hinterland and KPSS visitation. | |
| | • Involvement of local target groups through communication activities. | • Active search for funding sources for the implementation of measures and projects. | • Lack of interest in long-term operation of the network. | |
| | • Active search for funding sources for the implementation of measures and projects. | | | |
| G2: Stable management of agricultural land in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | • Local farmers have priority in leasing and purchasing agricultural land. | • Establishing a set of conditions for preemptors and land leases of the Farmland and Forest Fund of the Republic of Slovenia. | • Complaints from farmers from other areas. | |
| | | | • Implementation depends on legislation in force for agricultural land. | |
| G3: Regulation of water balance on agricultural land in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | • Climate change adaptation program. | • Construction of reservoirs to serve as flood control in winter and as a source of irrigation water in summer. | • Difficult and slow placement in space due to many interests. | |
| | | • Regular and comprehensive cleaning of watercourses and the networks of drainage ditches according to the principles of sustainability (from source to the outflow) | • Management of infrastructure. | |
Table 1. Cont.

| Strategic Area | Goals | Measures | Incentives | Risks |
|----------------|-------|----------|------------|-------|
| G4: Sustainable management of development, tourism and education flows considering carrying capacity in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | • Improving sustainable tourism management.  
• Information and education of key tourism stakeholders.  
• To enable organized school groups (kindergartens, primary and secondary schools) to learn about and agree on research work in the KPSS in a quality manner. | • Ensuring balance in the timing and location of visitation.  
• Maintaining quiet areas within the park.  
• Encourage staff development in areas where there is a noticeable shortage of staff and knowledge (green products, responsible nature experience, experience design, local supply chains, sustainable gastronomy, interpretation and boutique)  
• Train guides for a high quality and responsible experience of the area. | • Congestion of certain points and negative environmental and socio-social impacts.  
• Poor visitor experience due to overcrowding and non-redirection of flows.  
• Lack of stakeholder interest and non-recognition of the importance of this content.  
• Lack of cross-sector collaboration. |

| G5: Coordinate the development of the local cross-border area between Croatia and Slovenia. | • Cross-border action plan to secure the area with a long-term sustainable strategy.  
• Promotion of efforts to reinsure particularly valuable parts on the left bank of the Dragonja River. | • Establish a cross-border park in part of the municipalities of Piran and Buje. | • Numerous changes in cadastral boundaries. |
Table 1. Cont.

| Strategic Area | Goals                                                                 | Measures                                                                                                                                  | Incentives                                                                                                                                       | Risks                                                                                           |
|----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| E. ENVIRONMENT | E1: Good condition of natural habitats of endangered and protected species in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | - Promote the transition to sustainable/organic agriculture.  
- Integrate a sustainable orientation for the protection of waters. | - Organize hands-on workshops and demonstrations of management on organic farm management—open days.  
- Promote agricultural crops that have less negative impact on nature.  
- Demonstrate protected species habitat to tenants and owners/farmers near their farmland.  
- Regular and comprehensive maintenance of water bodies according to the principles of natural solutions.  
- Designation of nature reserves and ensuring their protection (nesting sites, spawning sites, resting sites and wintering grounds)  
- Preservation of green belts along water bodies and promotion of mosaic vegetation of the banks.  
- Construction of reservoirs. | - The eternal search for a compromise between agriculture and nature.  
- Difficult transition to organic farming when production if the water regime is not regulated.  
- Excessive investment in renaturation.  
- Questionable technological discipline (following professional instructions)  
- Irregular review of the situation on the ground. |
|                | E2: Conservation of protected and endangered European Pond turtle in the KPSS area with hinterland. | - Include guidelines for maintaining suitable nesting sites in land use plans and implement interventions.  
- Adapted agricultural practices (without intensive technology) on arable land suitable for egg laying.  
- Call for thematic seminar papers and offer to VIZ organizations. | - Locate nesting sites and ensure adequate protection from disturbance.  
- Compensate land users for additional costs and loss of income.  
- Educate local farmers.  
- Include content in school programs (in curricula—school curricula, content on this topic and objectives in curricula are already included, written. It is necessary to create a program for their implementation and present them to schools) | - Record of egg-laying sites. |
Table 1. Cont.

| PREFERRED SCENARIO | Goals | Measures | Incentives | Risks |
|--------------------|-------|----------|------------|-------|
| **E3:** Strengthening the value of nature in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | • Raise awareness and educate residents and visitors. | • Educate people about the importance of organic farming and the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. | • Lack of understanding of the importance of natural and cultural heritage. |
|                     |       | • Strengthen the offer of educational and quality programs for tourists on the interpretation of cultural heritage. | • Lack of interest of providers in sustainable tourism. |
|                     |       | • Education on forms of sustainable tourism. | • Lack of awareness of people about the behavior in the natural environment (letting dogs loose, uncontrolled trespassing, vandalism). |
|                     |       | • Activities to raise awareness among the local population about the importance of the park. | |
|                     |       | • More active and targeted communication about the importance of responsible behavior through sustainable measures and activities within Slovenia Green Park. | |
|                     |       | • Conduct stakeholder training to raise awareness of the impact of tourism and agriculture on the environment using the “story” of the European Pond Turtle. | |
|                     |       | • Establishment of appropriate infrastructure for the observation of animals in the natural environment. | |
|                     |       | • Regulation of infrastructure in the area of Korea. | |
|                     |       | • Use of metals and materials that do not interfere with sensitive navigation aids along the runway. | |
Table 1. Cont.

| Strategic Area | Goals | Measures | Incentives | Risks |
|----------------|-------|----------|------------|-------|
| PREFERRED SCENARIO |       |          |            |       |
| SE. SOCIO-ECONOMICAL DEVELOPMENT | SE1: Establishment and effective management of brands in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | • Joint tourist-agricultural brand European Pond Turtle. Elaboration of a strategic plan for the brand launch.  
- Improvement and certification of sustainable measures in the field of tourism (Green Scheme of Slovenian Tourism and obtaining the label SLOVENIA GREEN Park)  
- Acquisition of the possibility of using the mark on their crops and products (farms follow the principles of sustainable/organic production; e.g., KP Strunjan, Kozjansko) for farms from the Dragonja Valley.  
- Mutual exchange of experiences, opinions and conducting trainings.  
- Observation of nature and life on organic farms.  
- Introduction of green standards and eco-labels also at the level of accommodation facilities, attractions and agencies in the hinterland.  
- Strengthening short supply chains and the presence of local products and food in accommodation and catering establishments (with emphasis on seasonal food)  
- Organize a local food exchange (linking producers and customers—accommodation and catering providers)  
- Elimination of single-use plastic throughout the KPSS area. | • Lack of interest in collaboration.  
- Building a brand is a lengthy process of ensuring partner commitment to the idea.  
- There is no proper placement of the brand in relation to the KPSS umbrella brand and the destination brand.  
- A lot of hard work that is not enhanced by good publicity.  
- Lack of financial resources.  
- Operation too slow—all other destinations and parks are faster and more ambitious.  
- Disinterest of various Portorož/Piran suppliers in local products. |
Table 1. Cont.

| Strategic Area | Goals | Measures | Incentives | Risks |
|----------------|-------|----------|------------|-------|
| **SE2:** Enabling sustainable valorization and promotion of natural and cultural heritage in tourism in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | | • Improve the quality of the key building blocks of the offer (accommodation, food, visit, experiences) | • Development of professional bases for the planning and management of tourism in the area—as a basis for strengthening or upgrading the quality of the offer and its sustainable placement in the area (accommodation in the hinterland, gastronomy, design of trails, observation points of cycling and hiking trails) Conducting trainings on quality enhancement for tourism providers and investors in tourism (presentation of guidelines for sustainability, boutiques, spatial identity) | • Insufficient interventions in the area. • Lack of investors. • Long-term process of establishing the supply. • Due to different interests (agriculture, environment and tourism), land and infrastructure are not maintained. |
| | | • Insufficient interventions in the area. | | |
| | | • Long-term process of establishing the supply. | | |
| | | • Due to different interests (agriculture, environment and tourism), land and infrastructure are not maintained. | | |
| **SE3:** Improve transportation infrastructure and sustainable mobility in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | | • Optimization of public transport by land from Portorož to the park. | • Ensure an efficient and simple system for sustainable visitor mobility. | • Inefficient public transport. |
| | | • Use of suitable materials that do not interfere with the sensitive navigation aids along the runway. | • Establish a parking lot in front of the entrance to the KPSS on Lera. | • No private sector interest. |
Table 1. Cont.

| Strategic Area | Goals | Measures | Incentives | Risks |
|----------------|-------|----------|------------|-------|
| SE4: Design and promotion of sustainable tourism products/experiences in the KPSS area with the hinterland. | Develop new green products in keeping with the Park’s identity (slow tourism, green tourism and boutique) and with thoughtful placement to ensure visitor orientation in the area and throughout seasons. | Strengthening cooperation between tourism and agriculture—local crops and products. | Lack of knowledge and skills in sustainable product design and nature experience. | Lack of building blocks (accommodations, travel agencies, attractions) in the offer. |
| | Upgrading of existing sustainable products (Parenzana) | Strengthening competitiveness and promotion of sustainable gastronomic products. | | Hotels in Portorož/Piran do not market hiking products/experiences in the hinterland. |
| | | Cross-border cooperation (products and promotion)—establishment of a cross-border park Istria. | | | 
| | | Development of organic and geotourism products tailored to selected target groups and their promotion by the destination level and selected agencies. | | | 

5. Discussion

Ecosystem services are a concept that promotes the understanding of the use and management of natural resources [35] in the landscape in general and in protected areas such as wetlands in particular. Within the complex environment that surrounds us, the three largest categories of ecosystem services (provisioning, regulating and cultural) have been identified. The Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park and its hinterland provide all three categories. Organic agriculture in the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park hinterland provides high quality food as a provisioning service. Regulatory services are an example of regulating water flow by staying in the Seˇ covlje Salina wetland. Finally, there are intangible values, and an example of such cultural services is the tourist’s experience of the beauty of the wetland and the experience of nature in the wetland and in its agricultural hinterland. Because it is such a valuable place, comprehensive participatory governance is essential to achieve its preservation and, at the same time, effective sustainable development of the wetland and its hinterland.

In our research, we found that the concept of Wetland Contract, which can be defined as an agreement that enables the adoption of a set of rules in which criteria of public benefit, economic return, social value and environmental sustainability are equally incorporated in the search for effective solutions for the restoration of the wetland and its hinterland, can be successfully implemented in marine protected areas such as the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park. It was recognized as an inclusive and bottom-up process that takes a holistic approach that is not only consultative but also proactive. It proved to be an innovative process of sharing knowledge, interests, goals and commitments related to wetlands and their hinterlands. The decision-making process explicitly relied on the participation of the wetland water system stakeholders. The participatory approach was therefore critical to the success of the development of common goals and actions, as it enabled the opening of a constructive dialog among relevant stakeholders and the establishment of a chain of responsibility focused on achieving common goals. On the other hand, active participation was a prerequisite for decisions to be truly implemented, finding a whole community as the main actor and directly influencing the strategic elements for the overall development of the wetland and its hinterland [20].

The landscape is a part of the land, as perceived by locals or visitors that evolves over time through the action of natural forces and people. The public is encouraged to actively
participate in the protection, conservation and management of a particular landscape. They help guide and plan for changes brought about by economic, social or environmental needs, particularly for those areas most affected by change, such as coastal areas and especially wetlands. One of the most important innovations of the European Landscape Convention [36] is the definition of “landscape quality objectives”. Management consistent with landscape quality objectives also requires education and training. Throughout the presented participatory process conducted in the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park and its hinterland, stakeholders, with the help of various experts from the fields of agriculture, nature conservation and tourism, raised awareness about the quality of the landscape and the need for its protection.

The participatory process was originally intended to be developed by organizing live Territorial Labs in which stakeholders from four different categories of activities would participate according to the quadruple helix approach. Since the planned Territorial Labs could not be physically organized due to the COVID-19 lockdown, the researchers used digital solutions, as other similar projects have done [37,38]. Unfortunately, such an approach, excluded from the process those groups that do not use the digital network (e.g., the elderly). Another reason for the non-participation of certain groups, as well as for the drop-out of participants during the process itself, was the unfamiliarity with this type of issue and the impact that similar agreements in water areas entail, lack of interest in the issue, a sense of over-commitment to active participation, various obstacles such as a lack of time, etc. A significant decrease in the number of potential stakeholders contacted and those who actually signed the Memorandum of Understanding was therefore not surprising, as previous research shows similar results on the proportion of active stakeholders in processes related to water and environmental protection [39].

Of particular importance in the implementation of the Wetland Contract concept was the operational component, the aim of which was to implement various territorial and sectoral regulations and develop the obligations and objectives for the signatories of the Contract. Although we advocated for the signing of a Wetland Contract with all its components in the pilot area, we were not successful because no funds were allocated for the implementation of the desired objectives and concrete actions, and the stakeholders were not able to take responsibility for their implementation. The Memorandum of Understanding was signed by 16 stakeholders, which, unlike the Wetland Contract, did not refer to the responsibility of a single organization and financial resources, but only included objectives, actions, initiatives and risks in the pilot area. Under the Memorandum of Understanding, the signatories agree to mutual cooperation, efforts to establish the methodology as an example of best practice in participatory governance, and a commitment to raise funds for its implementation.

Previously, only one such process had been carried out in Slovenia, and that was in the area of the Ljubljansko barje Nature Park [3]. The major limitation of the entire study was the lack of knowledge among stakeholders about these types of Wetland Contracts and the lack of a legal basis for their implementation. Although the presented concept has not yet been incorporated into national legislation in Slovenia, unlike in Italy and France [40], it is based on active participation, which is a crucial key component of territorial planning and related governance processes.

6. Conclusions

This study of the Seˇ covlje Salina Nature Park in Slovenia follows the methodology of the preparatory (legal framework, scientific description and stakeholder analysis) and implementation (organization of Territorial Labs, scenario planning and development) stages of the Wetland Contract concept. Out of approximately 200 potential stakeholders, 34 participated in the Territorial Labs and 16 stakeholders signed the Memorandum of Understanding.

For the first time, many stakeholders discussed the issues, perspectives and solutions of the area, which opened up opportunities for further sustainable development of the
area. The stakeholders involved were active and provided ongoing feedback, which led to progress in the development of the Memorandum of Understanding. The methodology would have had a greater impact if it had been used directly at the live organized Territorial Labs, as things would have been discussed more easily. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, project members were forced to host the Territorial Labs via videoconferences, which caused some minor technical issues, but more importantly did not provide the full potential of the methodology used. Overall, the innovative tool and the integration process of its implementation proved to be capable of overcoming conflicts between institutional and legal jurisdiction and proved to be a dynamic way capable of activating a desirable relationship between different interests and supporting new forms of multisectoral stakeholder participation in wetland management. The applied methodology has shown great potential for further applications in wetlands, especially in marine protected areas.

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