

Biodiversity Conflicts – Perspectives from the social sciences

Summary of the aperitif talk given by Fritz Reusswig on 04 September 2007, by Martin Hirschnitz

Provocatively contrasting the views on biodiversity (BD) conflicts from a natural sciences perspective and a social sciences perspective Fritz Reusswig emphasized the differences in viewpoints, approaches and perceptions between both. For instance, while there is a strong notion in the natural sciences that BD is widely endangered and threatened due to various detrimental conflicts between people and BD, in the social sciences Fritz Reusswig argued for a more nuanced approach: the social sciences assume that these conflicts do not arise from the relation BD (as a resource) versus people, but rather from different competing social goals of various social actors.

Furthermore, in the natural sciences BD simply exists, whereas it is viewed as a resource and medium for social (inter-)actions in the social sciences. These social actions are driven by a diverse set of interests and worldviews of the different social actors. This therefore embraces a larger perspective on human grounds for action than most economists do by seeing humans as rational subjects seeking for utility maximization as major driver for social action. According to Max Weber's typology of social actions four types of action can be differentiated: end-rational, value-rational, affectual/emotional and traditional. In reality, most people base their actions not on separate types but rather on a mixture of those types with differing proportions depending on their interests and worldviews. Therefore, the conflicting social actions are an integral part of society.

However, the conflicting actions are not seen as exclusively detrimental for BD, so social scientists argue for a distinction between productive and destructive conflicts. Productive conflicts have an integrative function in that they bring together different players with conflicting interests and leading to conflict resolution. Therefore it is argued, that also productive BD conflicts exist and not merely those leading to a degradation in its present state.

Those conflicts can be solved through the policy cycle that comprises of problem perception, agenda setting, policy formulation, decision making, implementation, evaluation and termination or reformulation of a policy. Each of these cyclical steps is likely to be influenced by differences in interests, worldviews, situational settings (e.g. freedom of speech and corruption) etc. therefore eventually leading to policy failure. Since BD hotspots are often located in countries also considered as hotspots of policy failure social conflicts adversely affecting BD are frequent.

Fritz Reusswig concluded with presenting findings from German studies on the perception of nature conservation, which showed that due to differing worldviews there is a mismatch between the reasons why conservationists and why lay people conserve BD. This in turn leads to a reduction in policy success and finally to increasing social conflicts negative for BD.

In the subsequent discussion the provocative way of contrasting natural and social sciences was challenged by stressing that natural scientists also consider different worldviews in their assumptions and research and that therefore there is not better or worse but rather a mutual benefit from integrating both sciences for the benefit of BD. However, the provocative contrast also was found in the real world because when preparing this Summer School some funding actors thought it a provocation to mix BD and policy.