

Participative management of tourism in protected areas: Case-study from Lands of Priolo, São Miguel, Azores *

Gestão participativa do turismo em áreas protegidas: Caso de estudo das Terras do Priolo, São Miguel, Azores

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ABSTRACT

Community participation and adaptive management are commonly considered as good approaches for long-term success of environmental policies, however several challenges arise when confronted with practice. This paper presents the case-study of the application of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECST) in the Lands of Priolo (Eastern councils of São Miguel Island, Azores, Portugal). The participatory planning process took place in 2011 including a diagnosis, a strategy and an action plan (2012-2016).

More than one hundred people participated in the process, representing 50% of the stakeholders identified. Participation was higher in the initial diagnosis meetings (47%), which were held in every parish, than in the Forums (15%), despite the later being the actual decision meetings. After concluding the ECST process, in 2012, a Priolo brand was created to encourage and to allow companies to join the process; so far 15% of the stakeholders have applied for the brand. A clear reduction of participation of local institutions, little local businesses and individual people could be verified, while larger tourism related companies maintained their participation and joined the Priolo Brand. In terms of planning results, 55 actions were defined, of which 32 were of the responsibility of the Regional Government, 10 of the municipality of Nordeste, 5 of a national NGO, 3 of the Local Rural Development Association and 5 of other entities.

Although preliminary, these results allow to highlight some important conclusions in relation with the practical application of this kind of environmental planning processes such as: the importance of close-by or parish meetings; the relevance of non-formal information; the need for a balance between the number of stakeholders involved and the duration of the process; the importance of a facilitation entity that can rise trust among all involved stakeholders and the need of effective results to avoid disappointment.

Keywords: Sustainable Tourism; Participative methodologies; Social-ecological systems; Governance

RESUMO

A participação das comunidades e a gestão adaptativa são geralmente consideradas boas práticas para garantir o sucesso a longo prazo das políticas ambientais, mas a sua aplicação prática apresenta alguns desafios. Este artigo apresenta o caso de estudo da aplicação da metodologia da Carta Europeia de Turismo Sustentável (CETS) nas Terras do Priolo (concelhos na área leste da ilha de São Miguel, Açores, Portugal). O processo de planeamento participado decorreu em 2011 e incluiu um diagnóstico, uma estratégia e um plano de ação (2012-2016).

Mais de uma centena de pessoas participaram no processo, representando cerca de 50% dos stakeholders identificados. Porém, a participação foi muito superior nas reuniões iniciais de diagnóstico (47%) celebradas em todas as freguesias dos concelhos do que nos Fóruns (15%); apesar

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de estes últimos serem as reuniões decisórias. Após a conclusão do processo de adesão à ECST, em 2012, criou-se a Marca Priolo, que estimulou e permitiu a adesão das empresas ao processo e que, até a data, abrange 15% das empresas identificadas como stakeholders. Verificou-se ao longo do processo uma redução na participação das instituições locais, pequenos negócios e pessoas a título individual, enquanto que as empresas com maior dimensão relativa continuaram no processo e aderiram à Marca Priolo. O planeamento resultou em 55 ações, das quais 32 da responsabilidade do Governo Regional, 10 do município de Nordeste, 5 de uma ONG nacional, 3 da associação de desenvolvimento rural e 5 de outras entidades.

Apesar de serem ainda preliminares, os resultados permitem obter algumas conclusões sobre a aplicação prática deste tipo de processo de planeamento ambiental tais como: a importância de realizar reuniões de proximidade ou por freguesias, a relevância da recolha de informação não formal, a necessidade de encontrar um equilíbrio entre o número de stakeholders que participam no processo e a duração do mesmo; a importância de existir uma entidade facilitadora que conte com a confiança da maioria dos intervenientes e a necessidade de resultados efetivos de modo a não desapontar os participantes.

Palavras-Chave: Turismo Sustentável; Metodologias participativas; Sistemas sócio-ecológicos; Governança

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the management of protected areas has evolved from mostly caring about biodiversity conservation to a wider concept, taking into account the social and economic aspects of local communities as a mean to guarantee long-term conservation, by incorporating the concept of sustainable development (WCDE, 1987). This approach is especially important when confronted with conflicts between conservation and use of resources, which is common in both terrestrial and marine protected areas (Eagles *et al.*, 2002). Considering sustainability whilst managing Protected Areas raises new challenges such as how to reach a balance between economic development and conservation (McCool, 2009) but it also provides opportunities to improve management of visitors and general management of protected areas (Eagles, 2009) with benefits for species and habitats conservation.

Sustainable tourism, defined as a type of tourism that promotes a balanced development of environmental, social and economic issues (Clarke, 1997), is regarded as an excellent tool for promoting an adequate visitation to Protected Areas (McCool, 2009; Plummer & Fennell, 2009) as well as a potential tool for local development along with the protection of cultural, social and environmental aspects (Castellani & Sala, 2010; Neto, 2003). Protected areas visitation has increased considerably during the last years (Eagles, 2002) and if not adequately managed, it can cause conservation problems (McCool, 2009). But on the other hand, this type of tourism could aid and support conservation itself (Eagles, 2007). For example, in 1999 South Africa recovered 80% of parks budget from tourism (Eagles, 2002)

Sustainable tourism requires specific policies that should be implemented in the territory in order to promote the values of the protected areas as a tourism destination, ensure the necessary infrastructures for the development of touristic activities while avoiding impacts to nature and guaranteeing that visitors understand the values of the protected area (Bushell *et al.*, 2007, Eagles *et al.*, 2002).

Environmental planning can raise important conflicts between stakeholders, since they have different objectives, values and concerns (Kontogianni *et al.*, 2005). In protected areas management, managers care mostly about conservation of natural resources while tourism companies and local population require exploring them to guarantee their well-being (Jamal & Stronza, 2009).

For this reason, in sustainable tourism planning several partnerships must be developed between the protected areas and territory managers, tourism companies and other entities in order to guarantee long-term application and compliance (McCool, 2009; Jamal & Stronza, 2009). These partnerships have proven several advantages, such as an increase in efficiency and productivity, innovation stimulation, a boost in conservation initiatives, a promotion of collaborative decision-making and conflict resolution, among others (Pfueller *et al.*, 2011). Participative planning has been suggested as a best practice in order to promote the establishment of partnerships between protected area managers and local communities (Simpson, 2001; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Bramwell & Cox, 2009; Pfueller *et al.*, 2011) as well as to ensure that touristic activities are carried out without harming natural heritage (McCool, 2009). For example, participative methodologies applied in the management of Uruguay Coastal and Marine Zones enabled technicians and local leaders to increase their resource management capacity and promoted networking between them and scientists (Echevarria *et al.*, 2013)

Also, sustainable tourism planning in protected areas has to deal with some uncertainty in relation to the effects that tourism promoting practices will have on tourism attraction and on biodiversity conservation. Therefore, an adaptive approach would be necessary in order to evaluate and review policies along time (Olsson *et al.*, 2004) and aspects such as cross scale interplay of institutions, equity in benefits distribution and use of local knowledge should be taken into consideration (Berkes, 2003).

This paper describes the methodology and explores preliminary results of the process of the application of the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism (ECTS) (coordinated by EUROPARC) in the Lands of Priolo (Figure 1), comprising two rural councils of the island of São Miguel, Azores.

This process presents some peculiarities in relation to other known ECST processes. First, it was conducted within a LIFE project, EU's funding instrument for the Natura 2000 management, aimed for the restoration and sustainable management of priority habitats; secondly, it was started by a non-governmental institution, the Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds (SPEA – Birdlife International Portuguese partner) but quickly accompanied by the Regional Government, responsible for the management of the area and also a partner in the LIFE Sustainable Laurel

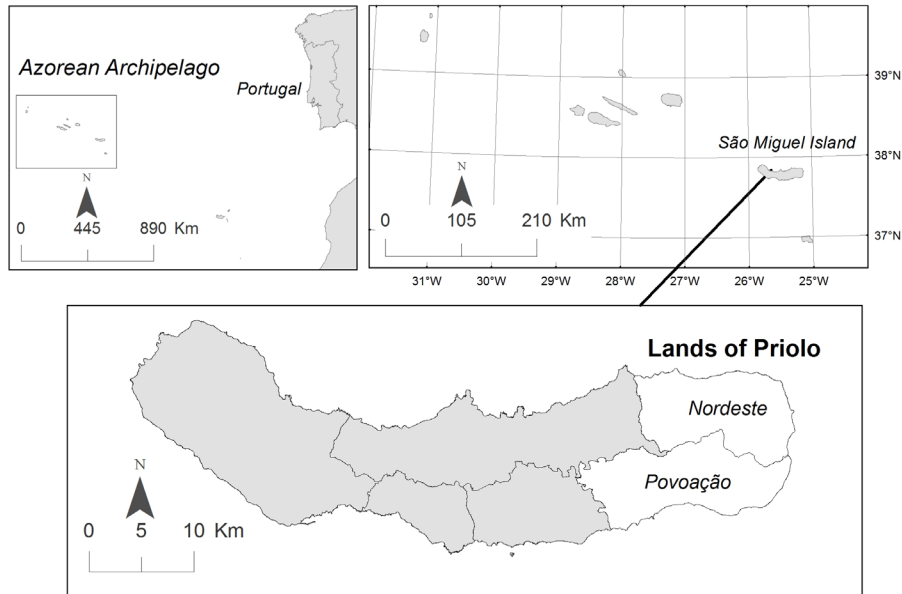


Figure 1. Location of the Lands of Priolo
Figura 1. Localização das Terras do Priolo.

Forest Project; thirdly, this ECST applies only to a part of the São Miguel Island Natural Park and not to the entire park that comprises all the protected areas in the island (Calado *et al.*, 2009).

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Why the Lands of Priolo?

Lands of Priolo's territory comprises the councils of Nordeste and Povoação in the island of São Miguel, Azores. These are the two most rural and less populated councils in the island, having suffered from rural exodus along the past decades. Their main economy consists in cattle raising for dairy products and has an incipient tourism activity (Cruz *et al.*, 2011a). Around 50% of their territory integrates the São Miguel Island Natural Park and includes the Special Protection Area (SPA) of *Pico da Vara/ Ribeira do Guilherme* (Figure 2), a Natura 2000 network area designated under the Birds Directive because it is home of the rare endemic Azores Bullfinch or Priolo (*Pyrrhula murina*). This is a very endangered bird that has been the target of conservation actions for the last 10 years, allowing its population to recover (Ceia *et al.*, 2011; Birdlife International, 2013) and upgrade its conservation status from Critically Endangered to Endangered (IUCN, 2010). Conservation actions have also allowed a considerable national and international disclosure about this bird and its habitat, becoming a good symbol for the territory. Therefore, the conservation of this bird can be regarded as a challenge but also an opportunity for the area, in terms of touristic promotion.

Despite São Miguel Island Natural Park comprises protected areas in all of island, the scope of this process was limited to only two councils with all the protected

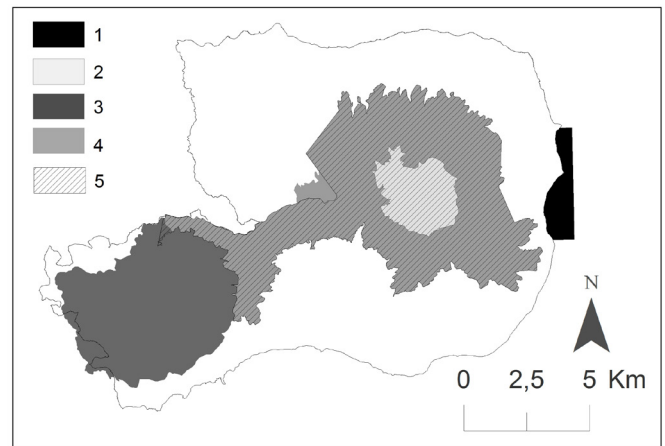


Figure 2. Protected Areas in São Miguel Natural Park (PNISM) (1 – Protected Area for resources management of Costa Este; 2-Natural Reserve of Pico da Vara; 3 – Protected Landscape of Furnas; 4 – Protected Area for the management of habitat or species of Tronqueira/ Planalto dos Graminhais.) and Natura 2000 (5- Special Protected Area Pico da Vara / Ribeira do Guilherme)

Figura 2. Áreas Protegidas no Parque Natural de Ilha de São Miguel (1 – Área Protegida para gestão de recursos da Costa Este; 2-Reserva Natural do Pico da Vara; 3 – Paisagem Protegida das Furnas; 4 – Área Protegida para a Gestão de Habitats ou Espécies de Tronqueira/ Planalto dos Graminhais.) e Natura 2000 (5- Zona de Proteção Especial Pico da Vara / Ribeira do Guilherme)

areas within them (and the entire Azores bullfinch world distribution). This decision allowed to reduce the number of the stakeholders involved as well as the area to manage, allowing to develop a more close-by process and accomplish

objectives in time, limited due to the availability of funding. Although the name “Lands of Priolo” had been previously used, it was not common. This name was chosen in order to define all territory as one and allow all participants to identify with it. During the process, this name was tested for acceptance.

2.2. Why the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism?

The choice of the methodology was based on the main objectives defined. Those were:

- To guarantee long-term maintenance of conservation work necessary to ensure the protected areas, priority habitats and the population of the Azores Bullfinch.
- To promote a sustainable tourism activity in the territory that would contribute to increase well-being among local population in social, environmental and economic terms.
- To increase the interaction and the cooperation among all stakeholders involved in the tourism activity and in the management of the territory with final focus on the conservation of the bird species and its habitat

It is commonly recognized that participative methodologies contribute to increase engagement of stakeholders with a common strategy (Innes & Booher, 2000; Kapoor, 2001; Reed, 2008) and therefore this was considered to be the best methodology to promote a joined work in the territory. The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism gathers, in our opinion, all of these advantages and therefore, this was the chosen methodology to apply in our case.

The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas is a management tool designed by EUROPARC Federation in order to guarantee tourism contribution to sustainable development of protected areas in Europe. It proposes a participative planning process that results in a common Strategy and an Action Plan towards the implementation of a more sustainable tourism in the economic influence area of Protected Areas. In addition to this it provides an internationally recognized award present in a network of more than 107 protected areas in 13 countries of Europe and commonly related to sustainability and good quality tourism in protected areas (Europarc, 2002).

Furthermore, the ECST process promotes a three parties' adhesion. First, for protected areas and their socioeconomic influence area; second, the tourism companies that operate in the protected areas; and third, the tour-operators willing to promote visits in charter protected areas with charter companies. This way, the ECST aims to include all relevant stakeholders in tourism market and promote sustainability in all the stages of the touristic product (Europarc, 2002).

Finally, the ECST is one of the two methodologies recommended by the European Union for the development of Sustainable Tourism in Natura 2000 areas (European Commission, 2001) The alternative, PAN-Parks initiative is not applicable to our area, since it requires an area of around 10,000 hectares free of visiting and management. Unfortunately, all protected areas in the Lands of Priolo are

smaller and require active management in order to restore and preserve native habitats and species.

Other sustainable tourism initiatives have been developed in the territory at the same time as this ECST initiative, such as the Azores Geopark (Lima *et al.*, 2009), which was an active partner in this process.

2.3. Participative methodology

The methodology applied (Figure 3) was based on the one suggested by the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism and was adapted to the specific characteristics of the territory. ECST application requires the fulfillment of a participative planning method, based on Deming Cycle (Deming, 1994 in Castellani & Sala, 2010).

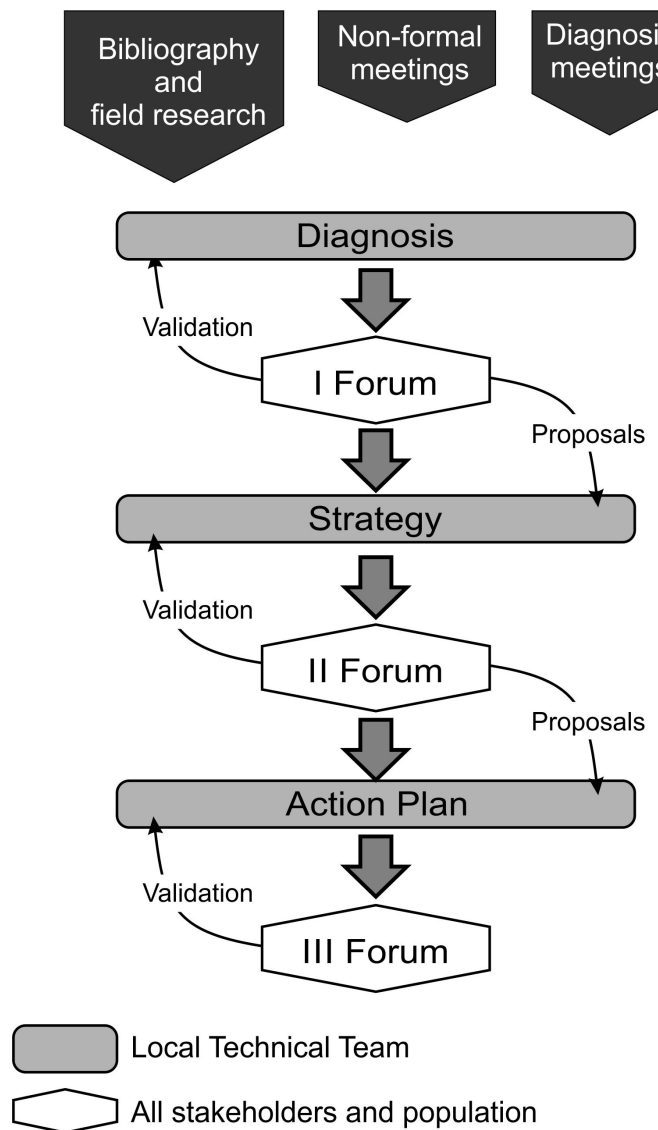


Figure 3. Scheme of the methodology applied for public participation
Figura 3. Esquema da metodologia aplicada para a participação pública.

The methodology applied in the Lands of Priolo had a preparatory phase that began with several institutional meetings with all partner institutions and potential stakeholders in order to determine whether the will of all parts matched the objectives of the process. This preliminary phase lasted for 1 year, in spite of not being a continuous process. As a conclusion, a workshop on “Business opportunities around protected areas” was held and presented examples of several initiatives for the promotion of sustainable tourism and visitation around protected areas. At the end, the main concerns of the participants about the process were discussed and subsequently taken into account for the definition of the participative methodology program.

After this meeting, a series of meetings took place in order to gather the partnership of all relevant institutions for the development of the process. This partnership was considered essential to ensure the effective application of the action plan, which was the main concern of local stakeholders. The first two institutions joining the process were the Regional Directorate of Environment and the Regional Directorate of Tourism, followed by the Regional Directorate of Forestry Resources, the municipalities of Nordeste and Povoação (although the later decided to quit after the I Forum) and the association for development and rural promotion – LEADER action group (ASDEPR). These institutions defined how the participative process would take place and named representatives to be a part of the Technical Local Team, responsible for monitoring the process and review it before the Forums in which all stakeholders and local population were invited to participate.

After the Local Technical Team had been constituted, the ECST planning process started. This process was open for participation of all population, but a group of essential stakeholders was defined. This group included local associations and institutions, accommodation, restoration, local handcraft and products and active tourism companies and a Public Participation Plan (not published) was developed. This plan had to be adapted along the process in order to effectively conclude the process in time, and some of the initially proposed meetings never took place.

The diagnosis phase aimed to produce a complete analysis of the initial touristic, environmental and socioeconomic situation of the territory. This diagnosis was both technical (regarding mostly bibliography and fieldwork) and participative (including meetings in every parish of the territory) and those two approaches took place at the same time being complementary. Local knowledge gathered in the diagnosis meetings was later contrasted with bibliographic information and fieldwork.

Diagnosis meetings counted with the support of parish authorities and some other local leaders and they aimed to identify local touristic resources, as well as to characterize potentialities, problems and proposals for the development of Sustainable Tourism in the territory. Another diagnosis meeting was held in Ponta Delgada, with touristic companies in order to assess the profiles of actual visitors to the territory as well as potentialities, problems and proposals for improving tourism activity.

All information acquired in these diagnosis meetings, bibliography reviews and fieldwork was gathered in a first

draft of the “Sustainability and tourism diagnosis of the Lands of Priolo” (Cruz et al., 2012a) that was presented to the public and discussed in the I Fórum of the ECST.

The I Forum took place the 23rd of May of 2011, and lasted all day. The morning was for the presentation and discussion of the diagnosis document and in the afternoon working groups were created in order to discuss Potentialities, Problems and Proposals – a simplified SWOT analysis – based on the objectives of the ECST (Europarc, 2002). At the end of the session, each group would present their conclusions to be discussed by the entire forum.

The I Forum allowed to define a clear common vision of the sustainable evolution of tourism in the territory stated as “*The Lands of Priolo as an integrated product of the Azores Destiny with a coherent definition of pedestrian trails, thematic routes, events, activities and products that allow the discovery of natural patrimony, culture, traditions and rural life of this territory*” (Cruz et al., 2012b)

After this Forum, the Strategy definition process started. This process was led by the Technical Local Team that analyzed Potentialities, Problems and Proposals identified in diagnosis meetings and I Forum, split them into themes and defined general and specific objectives for each of them. This process resulted in 12 general objectives with 41 specific objectives, relating to all the principles in the ECST.

This Strategy was presented and discussed in the II Forum that took place in October 14th in the afternoon. Within this Forum, one new objective was included in the Strategy by suggestion of the public. After the presentation, participants were asked to prioritize these objectives, for this purpose they were given 5 stickers that could be placed at their will all in one objective or divided by those objectives they considered more important and urgent to assess. Prioritization results were presented and discussed with the public as a conclusion for the Forum.

Action Plan definition resulted in a longer process with the partner institutions and required several meetings in order to accomplish the final document. For starters, each partner institution was asked to identify those actions, in development or planned, that fitted the objectives of the strategy. Individual meetings with some institutions took place in order to identify those actions.

Later, identified actions were compared towards the objectives in the strategy and the principles in the ECST, with special regard to those objectives that had been identified as a priority, and suggestion of new actions were presented to partners. Also new partners were included in this process in order to increase the actions in the action plan. As a result, the action plan comprises 55 actions (Cruz et al., 2012c) of the responsibility of the different partners in the ECST process as well as new partners.

The action plan concluded the process of application for the ECST, which was awarded to the Lands of Priolo in 2012, but not of the participative planning process. This should be a continuous process, with an annual analysis and revision of the Action Plan, that ensures the application of the proposed actions and allows adapting the objectives and actions to reality changes. This continuous process also allows any interested entity to be included in the Action Plan at any moment.

From all defined actions in the ECST Action Plan we would like to highlight one, the creation of the Priolo brand, since this action aims to include tourism related companies into the objectives of the strategy. For the development of this action, a manual with rules for the brand was established in a participative meeting with touristic companies that had participated in the ECST process. These rules provide some advantages to those companies in terms of promotion in exchange for their contribution to the ECST action plan. Each company has to define three voluntary actions that match the objectives of the ECST for the next three years. This brand can be considered as the actual partnership arrangement between tourism companies and the protected area managers.

3. RESULTS

In order to measure the preliminary success of this participative process, we evaluated the initial participation

process regarding some indicators, such as the number of stakeholders involved, the strategy and action plan defined and the application of the plan on its first year.

For the participation's analysis, we considered three different stages of participation: the previous meetings, diagnostic meetings held in every parish of the territory, the forums, actual decision-making meetings, and the Priolo brand affiliation, which despite not being a part of the participative process is a direct consequence and determines the actual partnership between companies and the Protected Area managers.

More than 100 people were involved in the whole process (Table 1). Most of them only participated in the diagnosis meetings, most likely because of their proximity, but they might have accompanied the process afterwards (with more than 8000 visits to the process' blog and some e-mail feedback from stakeholders that remained interested in the process even if they couldn't participate).

Table 1. Dates and number of participants in meetings for the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in the Lands of Priolo.

Tabela 1. Datas e número de participantes nas Reuniões da Carta Europeia de Turismo Sustentável nas Terras do Priolo

Meeting	Location	Date	Participants
Diagnosis meetings	Salga	1st February, 2011	3
	Achadinha	3rd February, 2011	4
	Achada	31st January, 2011	2
	Santana	4th April, 2011	3
	Algarvia	16th February, 2011	10
	Santo António	2nd February, 2011	9
	São Pedro	--	--
	Lomba da Fazenda	5th February, 2011	12
	Nordeste	21st February, 2011	9
	Água Retorta	9th February, 2011	20
	Faial da Terra	17th March, 2011	6
	Nossa Senhora dos Remédios	23rd February, 2011	8
	Povoação	9th April, 2011	5
	Ribeira Quente	18th April, 2011	6
Furnas	18th February, 2011	4	
Ponta Delgada	11th April, 2011	13	
SUBTOTAL			114
I Forum	Povoação	23rd May, 2011	60
II Forum	Nordeste	14th October, 2011	28
III Forum	Furnas	16th January, 2012	30

Although there was a considerable reduction from the I Forum (60 participants) to the II and III (around 30 people), the institutions represented in all the forums did not suffer the same reduction (17, 12 and 13 different stakeholders respectively). It is important to note that those companies where the most representative ones in terms of the number of tourist for the territory. This difference in total participants was due to a reduction on the number of representatives of each institution in the second and third forums.

In total, 50 % of the identified stakeholders participated in the process plus some individual people. From the identified tourism related companies 39% participated in the process. 83% of local institutions participated although mostly in the initial diagnosis meetings, while tourism companies participated in the forums as well. Only 3 local institutions maintained their participation in the forums and, from the tourism related companies, the smaller local businesses followed the same pattern, while bigger companies accompanied all the process. Catering and accommodation owners were those who more intensively participated in the process, but later affiliation to Priolo Brand was lead by active tourism and accommodation companies.

In terms of planning results, the final strategy had 13 general and 41 specific objectives with priority given to those relating pedestrian trails and promotion of activities in the territory. Those objectives were translated into 55 actions in 7 groups: Cooperation and coordination (8 actions); hiking trails and activities (10 actions); Cultural and environmental interpretation (11 actions); Protected area conservation (4 actions); Promotion and disclosure (11 actions); Sustainability of tourism (10 actions) and Monitoring (1 actions). All these actions matched the objectives defined in the strategy as well as the principles of the ECST. The Regional Directorate of Environment (DRA), leader of the process, was responsible for 26 actions, the municipality of Nordeste for 10 actions, the Regional

Directorate of Tourism (DRT) and the Portuguese Society for the Study of Birds (SPEA) were responsible of 5 each and the Regional Directorate of Forestry (DRRF) and the Local Leader Group (ASDEPR) of 3 each. Another 5 actions were assumed by other private entities that were not part of the Local Technical Team (Figure 4)

We can also consider the number of actions accomplished

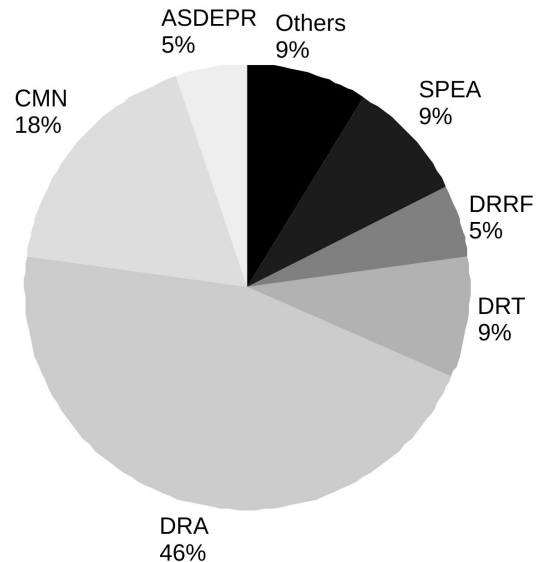


Figure 4. Distribution of actions in the action plan among partner institutions in the process.

Figura 4. Distribuição das ações do plano de ação entre as entidades parceiras no processo.

Table 2. Participants in each of the stages of the participation process as percentage of identified stakeholders (N). Participants column includes all stakeholders participating at least in one of the stages of the process, while diagnosis meetings and forums columns account for stakeholders participating in each stage. na = Not available data.

Tabela 2. Participantes em cada uma das fases participativas do processo e percentagem em relação com os stakeholders identificados inicialmente (N). A Coluna "Participants" inclui todos os stakeholders que participaram pelo menos uma vez no processo, enquanto que a coluna "diagnosis meetings" e "forums" contam os stakeholders que participaram em cada uma dessas fases. na = sem dados disponíveis.

	N	Participants	%	Diagnosis meetings	%	Forums	%	Priolo brand	%
Restaurants	29	12	41.38%	12	41.38%	5	17.24%	1	3.45%
Handcraft/ Local products	18	5	27.78%	5	27.78%	1	5.56%	1	5.56%
Active Tourism	22	6	27.27%	5	22.73%	3	13.64%	8	36.36%
Accommodation	43	21	48.84%	19	44.19%	10	23.26%	13	30.23%
Local institutions	36	30	83.33%	29	80.56%	3	8.33%	0	
Individual people	na	30	-	30	-	2			
Total	148	74	50.00%	70	47.30%	22	14.86%		15.54%

in the first year of application of the ECST (2012). From the 55 actions, 4 were to be accomplished in the first year of the action plan, and all of them were finished within that year. From the 48 actions that were planned to start that year, 34 were actually started and 14 have been postponed to 2013. Most of the postponed actions were considered to be developed during the 5 years of the plan; therefore it is still time to accomplish them. Anyway, it will be important in the future to pay special attention to some actions considered of high priority by participants, such as the improvement of official pedestrian trails network, which had to be postponed due to a reorganization of this network coordination. Also, it is important to note that all partner institutions developed at least one of the actions proposed in the action plan and that new entities included actions of their responsibility into the action plan, such as Azores Geopark and the Microbian Observatory of the Azores (OMIC) (CETS Terras do Priolo, 2013).

4. LESSONS LEARNT

The ECST in the Lands of Priolo application is a recent process, therefore it is yet soon to say whether it is going to be successful. But we can analyze the initial indicators of participation and planning and take some conclusions about this process. Those conclusions will be useful for improving future stages of the participative planning process, but may also apply to other participative situations.

Firstly, the scope chosen for this process, reducing it to a part of the São Miguel Island Natural Park, the Lands of Priolo, proved to be effective in terms of involvement of stakeholders and effectiveness of methodologies with a small number of technicians involved (2 to 5 along the process). This scope allowed the implementation of diagnosis meetings in all parishes, which proved very useful in terms of diagnosis. This, would not have been possible to develop for all the parishes in the island, a total of 68, with such a small team and limited time. Also, the development of this process for the entire island would have obligated many of the stakeholders to longer travels to reach the forums and we already identified distance as a problem in a relatively small territory such as the Lands of Priolo. And last, but not least, the size of population in other councils of the island, especially Ponta Delgada and Ribeira Grande, would have obligated to a redefinition of participation techniques applied and probably to more than one meeting in some of the most populated parishes. Another important issue is the equity problem, since due to the small size in population of Nordeste and Povoação councils, it would have been more difficult to consider their needs in front of the wide majority.

The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism seem to be an adequate methodology and basis for this participative planning process, providing both motivation and guidance for the effective conclusion of the process. The cooperation with the Geopark process taking place in the Azores archipelago, showed that this two methodologies can be perfectly complementary. In our case, the Geopark promoted geotourism and sustainability in a larger territory, while the ECST served as a tool for a more close-up work with local communities in the Lands of Priolo territory.

Regarding the process itself, some conclusions match the general opinion of many participation studies, such as the importance and relevance of promoting participation since the first stages of planning (Simpson, 2001; Reed, 2008). This was clear at the III Forum where the action plan was unanimously adopted by stakeholders, as well as the affiliation to Priolo Brand that shows the support by local companies to the process. Also the need to adapt each process to the type of public that it is directed to and to include relevant institutional representatives in the process (Reed, 2008). The creation of the Local Technical Team was very important in managing the participative process and ensuring that all decisions counted with the necessary political support.

This process highlighted the importance of non-formal processes, such as informal questioning of local people or institutions representatives, in order to get a better understanding of the actual situation and conflicts. These revealed to be essential in order to accomplish some of the objectives of the process and are also recognized by several studies on participative methodologies (Reed, 2008) as an important information source. This non-formal processes contributed with integrating local traditional knowledge into the planning process. For example, the lack of information on needs of tourist in the territory was overcome by gathering information from the tourism related companies and local touristic resources identification was enriched in local meetings.

Analyzing the implementation process also shows that unforeseen situations might arise along the process, such as in our case, the quitting of one of the partner institutions. In those cases, it is essential to have a flexible process planning and to reflect whether the process is feasible regarding the new circumstances (Olsson *et al.*, 2004). In our case, and mostly due to stakeholders motivation we continued the process without this institution, expecting that some day it will be willing to participate again.

In relation to the differences with other known ECST process, we can state that the present and previous LIFE Projects carried out in the territory made possible to start this process. SPEA and the Regional Government have been working together in this territory since 2003 for the conservation of the Priolo and its habitat with highly positive conservation, social and economic results. Simultaneously to this process, a formal and non-formal educative program has been developed and caused a significant increase in the awareness on the importance of the Priolo and the natural habitats in the area (Cruz *et al.*, 2013), as well as on the economic potential of protected areas in tourism previous to this process in the overall population.

Also, the participation of SPEA was regarded as positive by stakeholders due to its independence and for the facilitator work done as a non-governmental institution, as stated in the participative Diagnosis (Cruz *et al.*, 2011a). In this case, we can consider that SPEA developed successfully the facilitation job, essential to the success of any participation process (Reed, 2008).

Regarding measured participation indicators we can conclude that it could have been higher, but considering that most stakeholders are not used to participative processes, 50%

can be considered acceptable. Recent studies underline that participation should be regarded as a continuous process, a long term commitment, instead of the application of a “tool-kit” of methods in a specific moment (Reed, 2008). Therefore, it is important to seek a balance between guaranteeing everyone’s participation and time spent in the process, since a long process can lead to discouragement of participants and delay on decision making (Tosun, 2000). In the present case, time was chosen before participation, considering the previous statements, preventing the discouragement of the first participants and promoting results that would encourage other stakeholders to participate, therefore, we expect to see participation increased in the future. These expectations are supported by the increase in interest observed after the process was concluded and translated into a bigger number of stakeholders in Priolo Brand than those who participated in the process.

Individual people and local institutions participation decreased considerably from the initial diagnosis meetings to the forums. These individual people and voluntary representatives of institutions do not depend on tourism for their living and therefore have less interest or availability for moving to the forums, that were celebrated in the municipalities capitals. This fact highlights the importance of maintaining the meetings in the parishes in order to reach to a wider range of stakeholders, especially if their motivation for the process is not strong. The development of parish’ meetings in all the stages of the process would have been a considerable improvement to this process, in order to promote small business or institutions participation in all the decisions. This was not possible due to the little time available for concluding the application, but we expect to fulfill this gap by developing annual parish’ meetings during the application of the plan. Also it was relevant the choice of local leaders to promote this diagnosis meetings (Reed, 2008), for example, *Agua Retorta* was the most participated meeting since the priest talked about the process in the mass. Some other parishes showed also good participation thanks to the efforts of the parish’s president in gathering the participants.

Considering planning results, we reckon an effort by all partner institutions in order to assume actions into the action plan. Many of the actions were based in the work actually undertaken by the institution, but the participative process allowed to improve or adapt it to the identified needs for the territory. This fact underlines the fact that sometimes, it is not necessary an increase of resources, which was not possible on our case, but just achieving an optimization of available resources towards a well defined goal (Reed, 2008).

A very relevant concern should be the management of participants’ expectations about the process (Tosun, 2000). This was clear during all the process. Some stakeholders refused to participate in the initial phases because they wouldn’t believe on the success of the process, but joined the process later, when the action plan was publicized and started. Since this is an adaptive process, stakeholders can be included at any step. Also, in order to avoid the disappointment of stakeholders it was very important to develop a previous process of gathering institutions commitment to the process. This was especially important since at initial stages

the initiative came from an environmental NGO that has no decision power in many policies. Leadership of the process by the Regional Directorate of Environment fulfilled this problem and it is expected to guarantee long-term commitment of all parts.

Considering first year application results, we can also be optimistic about the accomplishment of the action plan. Specially considering the economic circumstances and the fact that some of the actions identified but lacking specific budget were used for the development of LIFE Terras do Priolo project, a new LIFE project started in July 2013 that will contribute to the application of the action plan. This last illustrates another advantage of participative planning processes they allow to identify need for action that can be used to promote projects for the area.

Results of first year also allow understanding the need for an adaptive management (Olsson, *et al.*, 2004, Carlsson & Berkes, 2005) through an annual review of actions. Only in one year, there was a legal change that made one of the actions redundant so in the annual forum it was removed from the action plan. Other actions were included from new stakeholders that contributed to the success of the plan.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper presents preliminary results of an environmental planning process aimed to promote sustainable tourism development and management within and around protected areas, that allow us to retrieve some important conclusions:

- Close-by participatory meetings are important in order to gather less motivated but still relevant stakeholders and subsequently, this kind of processes should reduce their scope or increase human resources in order to cope with this time consuming meetings.
- The European Charter for Sustainable Tourism proved to be an adequate methodology for the participative planning of a strategy towards sustainable tourism and complementary to other initiatives.
- Leadership by a decision-making entity, in this case the Regional Directorate of Environment, must be ensured, as well as the commitment by most of the relevant entities with competence in management of the territory and tourism industry. This is essential to rise trust in the process.
- It is relevant to this type of process to count on an impartial and locally implemented entity, in this case SPEA, as facilitator and to involve local leaders into the process.
- Flexibility is essential at all stages of the planning and participation process in order to be able to cope with unforeseen situations.
- Participants’ expectations must be taken into consideration and managed in order to avoid disappointment.
- Continuous monitoring and evaluation of the process is necessary to guarantee the application of the action plan.

From now on, new challenges arise such as the effective application of all the actions included in the action plan, the maintenance of the motivation and participation of all stakeholders on the process and the effective improving of sustainability of tourism in this territory together with the preservation of natural values.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was developed within the LIFE Project LIFE 07 NAT/P/000630. We would like to thank all participants in the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism process for the Lands of Priolo, especially to Paulo Castro and Concepción Fagundo for their guidance in the initial phases, Lourdes Perez Peñil for the map and Natália Melo for a latter review on the manuscript.

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