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# Tourism versus nature conservation: reconciliation of common interests and objectives – an analysis through Picos de Europa National Park

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**Abstract:** Nature tourism and particularly tourism in national parks have acquired significant importance in contemporary societies. Post-Fordist consumers have reevaluated the meanings of ‘nature’ and ‘natural spaces’ and now avoid standardization to seek singularity. Tourism in national parks is a consequence of this tendency and has both positive and negative aspects. The purpose of this sociological research is to describe the most relevant conflicts in the Picos de Europa National Park (Spain) involving the park’s conservation, local economic development, and tourism. Seven in-depth interviews and three focus groups were addressed to key local stakeholders. In this research were identified three chief areas of existing or potential inter-related conflicts and the main actors interacting with them. The first is on population, particularly, the negative consequences of depopulations on the local socio-economic development and the environment. A second source of conflicts identified is caused by the difficult conciliation between commercial exploitation and conservation of the protected natural area. More precisely, this specific form of tourism positively contributes to the economy of local communities

whilst problems can arise for the conservation goals of National Parks. Thirdly, in this research is also analyzed the institutional governance and the inter and intra-governmental conflicts as well as with the Park’s management body. These findings provide important information for the improved management of tourism and conflicting interests in natural parks.

**Keywords** National parks; Environmental conservation; Nature tourism; Mountain traditional economy; Picos de Europa; Spain

## Introduction

‘National Park’ is the legal category that provides the maximum legal protection to nature in Spain. The increase of tourism in national parks, coupled with the need to guarantee the difficult conservation and protection of nature, has produced an important corpus of theoretical and empirical analysis (Budowski 1976; Butler and Boyd 2000; Vaughan 2000; Casas Grande 2005; Moore and Polley 2007; Frost and Hall 2009; Buckley 2012; Van Wilgen and Mcgeoch 2015; Mellon and Bramwell 2016; López and Pardo 2017).

In this paper, attention is drawn to the socio-

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economic and institutional conflicts that arise from the interaction between the protection of natural parks and the economic development of its population (Wells and Bradon 1992; Brandon et al. 1998; Naughton-Treves et al. 2005; Rescia et al. 2008).

Picos de Europa National Park (PNPE) is characterized by both processes. On the one hand, tourism has significantly increased during the recent years in this protected natural area. On the other hand, the population living in the park and its surrounding areas has been historically dependent on underdeveloped, high mountain agricultural economy (MacDonald et al. 2000; Mateo-Tomás et al. 2010).

This research aims to identify the park's most representative conflicts and to explore the possibility of reconciling three conflicting areas: the conservation of the protected natural territory and its species, the historically native population's economic development, and the interests of tourism.

This paper firstly proceeds to define nature tourism and the challenges faced by sustainable tourism in protected natural areas. Then, it describes the biophysical values and socioeconomic features of Picos de Europa National Park, as well as the area's main trends in the development of tourism during the recent years. Next is an explanation of the methodology, which includes interviews with local stakeholders and the sample used in the study. We then present the findings, and finally, the paper concludes with a discussion on the subject.

In recent decades, the overall trend of global tourism has been one of an uninterrupted growth. International tourist arrivals worldwide have increased from 25 million in 1950 to 278 million in 1980, and to 1.322 million in 2017 (UNWTO 2018). Similarly, international tourism revenues from destinations around the world have risen from \$ 2 billion US in 1950 to 1.220 billion in 2014 (UNWTO 2014). Furthermore, long-term forecasts (UNWTO 2017) predict that international tourist arrivals worldwide will grow by 3.3% annually between 2010 and 2030, to reach 1.8 billion. Tourism can become one of the most important activities by volume of income and jobs worldwide (UNWTO 2017). Southern and Mediterranean Europe (+13%) leads this growth. Spain is the third

largest tourist destination in the world and the second in revenue (UNWTO 2017) – since the 60's a 'sun and beach' tourism model – reaching around 75.3 million tourists in 2016 (10.3% more than the previous year).

Post-Fordist societies today have responded to the crisis of standardization and massification with a search for singularity. Mass tourism is the result of the generalization of a Fordist type of standardized offer of tourist destinations at low prices (Font 2000; Weaver 2006; Baidal et al. 2013). Thus, segments of the population have sought specificity and a differentiated identity in a variety of fields, including that of tourism (Hirst and Zeitlin 1991; Kumar 2009).

The boom in nature tourism is part of this wider phenomenon of the extension of tourism. In the case of Spanish national parks, in 2017 nature tourism reached a record number that exceeded 15.4 million visitors (MAPAMA 2017).

The term 'nature tourism' is not identical to 'tourism in nature'. Since this differentiation does not affect the main objective of this paper, we include all types of tourism in our analysis. Nature tourism comprises a wide range of activities, such as the observation of landscapes, fauna or flora, sports activities, research, history and culture and conservation, among others. In the case of Spanish national parks the exercise of such activities is regulated by law (Act 30/2014). Often, these activities are also carried out together with the enjoyment of other tourist attractions such as gastronomy or historical heritage.

In turn, 'sustainable tourism' or 'sustainable tourism of nature', is a larger and more ambitious part of nature tourism. Although the meaning of this latter notion is still under open debate in the literature, the European Charter for Sustainable Tourism in Protected Areas defines it as "any form of tourism development, equipment or activity that respects and preserves natural, cultural and social resources in the long term and contributes positively and equitably to the economic development and the fullness of the individuals who live, work or make a stay in the protected areas" (EUROPARC 2001: 1).

National parks are catalysts for sustainable tourism. They have the maximum legal protection for natural spaces of wide extension. The main functions of the law are protective or

conservational, educational, scientific, aesthetic, and socio-economic.

Even though sustainable tourism in the national park is legally regulated, identifying the limits or "red lines" separating the compatibility of tourism with the conservation of the national park is a complex and far from unequivocal task (Manning 2002).

Thus, sustainable tourism in natural areas faces two main challenges. Firstly, the global environmental crisis (e.g. climate change) is a challenge that pushes all sectors of society to minimize the negative environmental impact. The second challenge is the decline of traditional farming methods and subsequent loss of inhabitants.

The objective for national parks is therefore to implement a model for the development of sustainable tourism based on the conservation of the value of nature and its leading role for the welfare and local development of the territory.

Next, we describe the fieldwork carried out in this research to achieve the objective of identifying the most representative conflicts occurring as a result of the difficult reconciliation between the conservation of the park's nature, the economic development of the population that historically inhabits the park and the interests associated with tourism.

## 1 Materials and Methods

### 1.1 Study area

Picos de Europa National Park is the first national park ever created in Spain (July 1918) – then called "National Park of the Mountain of Covadonga" – and since 2003, the park is a biosphere reserve (UNESCO Biosphere Reserves). It is located in the north of Spain, near the Cantabrian Sea (Figure 1). Although initially it was 16,925 ha large, it was extended to 67,455 ha in 2015. Featured by spectacular altitudinal variation that goes from 75 to 2648 m with numerous summits that exceed 2000 m, it is a unique space compared with the rest of the fifteen national parks of the country. Three features confirm its uniqueness.

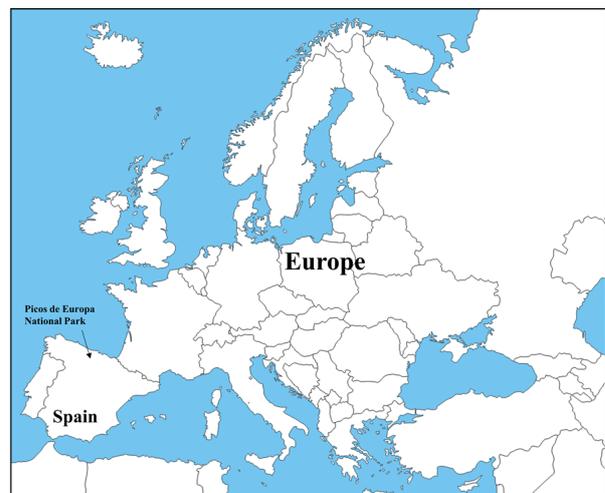
Firstly, its unique geological morphology

caused by the high Atlantic mountains of glacial geomorphology and karstic formations, which leads to broadleaved woodlands and prairies, along with very prominent, isolated massifs that are close to the sea and composed of limestone molded by the double phenomenon of glaciers and karst (González Trueba, Serrano Cañadas 2008).

The park also hosts an exceptional biodiversity in a relatively small space – about 1800 taxa of flora, 212 species of vertebrates and spectacular invertebrate fauna – and richness in diurnal lepidoptera – 128 species of daytime butterflies, that represents 26.14% of the European diurnal species cataloged (PNPE 2017).

The second characteristic of the park is the complex geographic-political situation of the territory included in it. The park belongs to three autonomous communities – or regions – (the Principality of Asturias, Cantabria, and Castile and León). Spain has a semi-decentralized system of government and the environmental management competencies are transferred to the autonomous communities. In addition, the territory of the park is within 11 municipalities or councils and hosts inhabitants in its perimeter (1157 people). This only happens in one other national park in the country.

The local economy of the park's municipalities has traditionally developed in the primary sector (basically, livestock with a large presence of sheep and goats, gradually including extensive beef cattle) and their derived goods' production (artisan cheeses produced in clusters of huts, stables and other small constructions called *majadas*). Until the 1970s there was also some mining activity, and



**Figure 1** Location of Picos de Europa National Park.

there are still some hydroelectric projects in the park. However, its economic activity is currently undergoing a strong conversion towards the tertiary sector, largely to serve the services demanded by visitors to the national park.

Thus, these special factors together – its rich ecological value; the presence of three different autonomous communities; and the continuing existence of the local agricultural population currently engaged in tourism services – justifies the need to make compatible interests that may a priori appear to be conflicting but necessarily have to come together (Budowski 1976; Wells and Bradon 1992; Vaughan 2000; Van Wilgen and Mcgeoch 2015). Understanding the park as a socio-ecological system (Berkes et al. 2000), the goal is the sustainable development of both tourism and the villages of the park. Next, we describe the statistical information concerning visits to the park and its evolution in recent years as provided by the park management.

### 1.2 Evolution and destination of visitors to Picos de Europa National Park

Picos de Europa National Park is an "open" visiting park. Data was gathered in the villages of Lagos, Fuente Dé, Valdeón and Cabrales, where the park's administration has set the periodic control of visitors. The number of visitors is controlled through counting the vehicles, by size and time, and establishing monitors of people on certain trails (other entrances to the park register a much lower and irrelevant demand for their quantification).

This park is the third most visited national park in Spain (MAPAMA 2017), and one of the most visited natural areas of the Iberian Peninsula. The economic crisis that started in 2008 slowed the pace of visitors, and was not until 2014 when a rising trend began, surpassing 2 million tourists in 2016 (Figure 2).

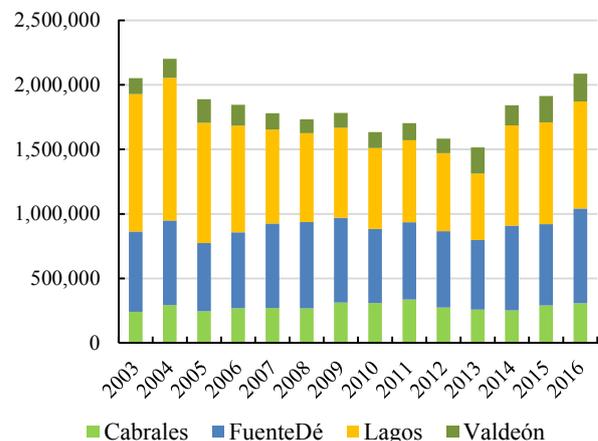
Currently, the municipality of Lagos receives the highest number of visitors (sharing about 40%), followed by Fuente Dé (over 35% of the visitors). The municipalities of Cabrales and Valdeón played a secondary role (close to 15% and 10% of the visitors respectively) (Figure 3).

Another relevant trend is the diversification of the visitors. Until the year 2013, visits to Lagos

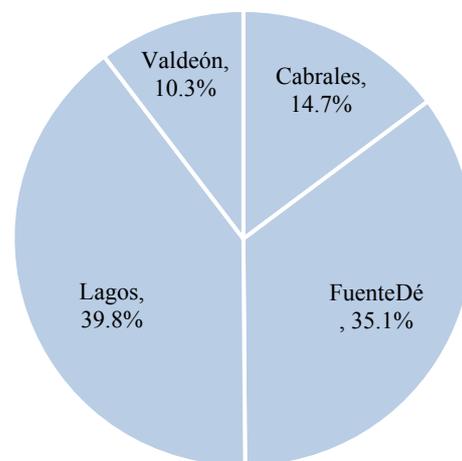
decreased whilst it remained constant or increased in other touristic destinations. In particular, Valdeón is the village with the highest increase rate in tourism (174.2%) from 2003 to 2016, followed by Cabrales, with a growth of 128.0%.

Likewise, a feature of tourism in this protected natural space is its seasonality. July and August are by far the months with the highest number of visitors in all the destinations analyzed (more than 300,000 and 480,000 visitors, respectively), while February is the one with the fewest visits in all destinations (less 30,000 visitors) (Figure 4). This seasonality makes sense because of the benign climate in summer and low temperatures in winter.

However, the analysis of the data also indicates that in general the seasonality has moderated slightly. Visits increased especially in

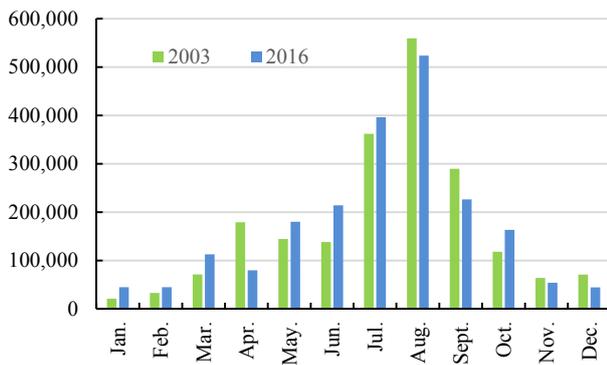


**Figure 2** Evolution of visitors to the municipalities of Picos de Europa National Park 2003-2015 (PNPE 2016).



**Figure 3** Distribution of visitors in the park's municipalities – 2015 (PNPE 2016).

January and March (both months are vacation time in Spain: Christmas in December-January and Holy Week in March-April), and May to July, while decreased in April, August, and September. Regarding tourist destinations, visits decreased in the two main destinations (Lagos and Fuente Dé) and increased in the other two (more significantly in Cabrales).



**Figure 4** Monthly distributions of visitors (PNPE 2016).

Seasonality and tourist destinations are two relevant issues for the management of sustainable tourism in the park.

### 1.3 Primary data collection: selecting stakeholders and sample size

The identification and analyses of the social conflicts which have taken place in the park have been carried out using a qualitative methodology. The methods used have been semi-structured interviews and focus groups (up to five participants) with key informants from the local community of the park.

The combination of these two methods improves the possibilities of increased knowledge as a result of social research. Whilst the discussion group allows us to observe how discourses interact, through the interview it is possible to go deeper into each of the profiles of social actors.

Although a discussion guide was initially designed for both the interviews and the discussion groups, the qualitative approach allowed us to avoid the sequential development of the quantitative approach. Thus, the first interviews served to introduce some modifications on the topics that were raised in the rest of the interviews. It was a semi-structured guide with open-ended questions addressing the research questions. This

interview design facilitates participants to express their opinions openly and with almost without restrictions.

The sample of research participants is representative of the positions, functions and interests present in the socio-economic and institutional structure of the park and its area of influence. The size of the sample in a qualitative study is determined by the saturation of the topics covered during the interview process, and thus when the participation of more actors does not provide additional information no more interviews are needed (Sandelowski 1995; Carlsen and Glenton 2011).

Participants were contacted by a local social researcher who knew local population and institutions. Likewise, the recruitment of interviewees was done by 'snowball sampling' technique were they advise of respondents on other potential participant they considered could fit the sample's criteria (Lewis-Beck et al. 2004). This approach has been crucial for the study's success due to the team of researchers were not from this region.

In total, seven in-depth interviews and three mini-discussion groups were conducted in May and June 2016 (Table 1). The participants were mayors from municipalities whose territory is totally or partially within the perimeter of the park, representatives of business associations in the area, local action groups, autonomous communities, park managers, civil associations with opposing interests (e.g., hunters and livestock farmers facing ecologists), scientists and "ideologists" or authorities in the design of the current model of management of Spain's national parks.

Each focus group was composed of the same type of participants (the national park's co-managers, municipal mayors, and population from municipalities in the studied area). Thus researchers could delve into the opinions, perceptions and discusses without the interference of possible interest conflicts from antagonistic stakeholders (Stewart et al. 2007).

The transcriptions of audios were analyzed focusing on the discourses and opinions of local participants regarding the conflicts as well as the consensus trends that feature the development of the socio-economic activities and tourism in this protected natural space.

**Table 1** Type of techniques, number of sessions (No.) and composition of the sample

Type of technique	No.	Composition of the sample
Interviews	7	Rural tourism association.
		Hunters association.
		Association of entrepreneurs.
		Foundation of the osprey.
		Landowners within the national park / hostelry and tourism activities.
		Consortium for Rural Development of Eastern Asturias.
		Senior official civil servant manager of the national park's management model in Spain.
Focus Groups	3	The national park's co-managers (three participants).
		Municipal mayors (five participants).
		Population from municipalities in the studied area (five participants).

The variety of participants and the different roles they play in the context of the national park has made possible a complete description of these conflicts, their inter-relations and the mains actors interacting with them.

## 2 Results

Picos de Europa National Park presents a special difficulty for management due to the existence of multiple interests influence it. The fact that it is an inhabited park with many recognized historical uses generates many conflicts that are still unresolved, like the important development of tourism in the area. The main results of the study are presented below.

### 2.1 Identification of existing or latent conflicts and intervening social agents

We identified three areas of existing or potential conflicts. The first one regards those conflicts motivated by the interaction between population and territory, and specifically the demographic trends in the park (depopulation and spatial concentration) and the characteristics of the territory (threatened environmental sustainability and factors related to protection).

The second area addresses conflicts that arise from the difficulty of reconciling activities based on the productive economy that includes the commercial exploitation of the territory and the conservation objectives of the national park. For example, some conflicts include the flow of tourists and their impact on the environment, the risk that tourism can pose to the survival of traditional economic activities, or the management of conflicts

of interest in this space.

Thirdly, this paper addresses the institutional conflicts that take place between different public agencies in the management of the park's territory; that is the tensions between the three autonomous administrations and the municipal policies of the localities inside the park (Table 2).

### 2.2 Population, demography and protected natural spaces

The long-term sustainability of the protected natural space is linked to the demographic trends in the studied area. Three main dimensions need to be considered: the process of depopulation or drastic loss of population in the area; accompanied by the growing concentration of population in some municipalities; and the conflicts that take place around the municipalities within the park.

First of all, a major conflict emerges in relation to the decrease of the park's population. The municipalities that form part of PNPE lost about half of their population during the 20th century, a tendency that continues today, although at a somewhat lower rate. The ageing of the population and the possibility that some of these municipalities will be uninhabited in the near future poses another problem.

The decrease of the population leads to the uncertainty of the sustainability objectives and many of the aspects that define the park's identity, such as traditional farming activities, the architectural heritage or the anthropic landscape that highly depends on the population. A clear example is the current migratory livestock crisis. Since 2005, sheep farming has been reduced by 80%. However, traditional grazing is the only way to preserve artisanal cheese production and the

**Table 2** Types of conflicts and social actors

Types of conflict		Public administration			M	P	Y	F	H	B	T	S	V
		Nat.	Reg.	Loc.									
Population vs. Territory	Depopulation vs. sustainability of the natural space	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓					
	Population density and depopulation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓		
	The protection of inhabited areas	✓						✓					
Commercial Exploitation vs. Conservation	Impacts on the environment of the influx of visitors				✓						✓	✓	
	Tourism vs. traditional economic activities		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓				
	The management of competing interests				✓	✓		✓	✓				✓
Institutional Conflicts	The shared governance between three autonomous communities/regions		✓		✓								
	Municipal policies vs. the park's integrated management		✓	✓	✓								

**Notes:** Nat. = National; Reg. = Regional; Loc. = Local; M = Management body; P = Park's population; Y = Young emigrants and ageing population; F= Farmers; H= Hostelry companies; B= Business association; T= Travel agencies; S=Sports federation; V= Visitors.

traditional way of life in the area. Moreover, maintaining migratory livestock is necessary for the maintenance of some of the ecosystems of the park through the use of mountain pasture, modernizing traditional systems of environmental management and controlling wolves (García et al. 2013).

Thus, the challenge is making traditional uses of the territory compatible with new ones arising from technological advances (González González and Villoldo Pelayo 2004) without affecting the conservation of the park's natural values. The provision of grants for the recovery of traditional grazing is thus justified.

The main social actors that intervene in this conflict are: livestock farmers; the state, regional and local administrations; the management body of the park; the young population that emigrates and the ageing population.

The second aspect analyzed is the concentration of population in municipalities that comes with the aforementioned process of depopulation. Data shows that due to the increase of tourist pressure and tourist activity, only the municipalities that have their main nucleus outside the park have shown growth – such as Cangas de Onís, which concentrates half of the population of the municipal territory of the park – in contrast to those that are totally inside the park's limits (the municipalities of Tresviso, Oseja, and Posada). The young population changes the rural family home and traditional activities for urban life, which offers

alternative forms of life, and a larger variety of jobs (mainly in the tourist sector), infrastructures and services.

The social actors involved in this process include the population of the nuclei within the park – in which there is only one settlement with more than 100 inhabitants, and eight have less than 60; the state, regional and local administrations; tourism agencies and hospitality companies; as well as the management body of the park.

The third type of conflict analyzed is caused by the conflicts of interests taking place between conservation and the local population. As previously indicated, PNPE is one of the only two national parks in Spain with inhabited nuclei inside, which represents a challenge for the management of this protected space.

One of the clearest examples analyzed in this study is the tension between the protection of the natural spaces and the activities that livestock farmers historically carry out in the park. The farmers do not value the national park as a figure needing protection. They consider the prohibitions and the limitations to the development of their activity, on the one hand, and the financial subsidies that they can receive, on the other, very unbalanced.

Traditional farms are the main source of income for about 70% of the population in the area, and this percentage is higher for those with goat livestock (Mateo-Tomás and Olea 2010). In addition to the low profitability of this activity –

conditioned by the small size of the farms, orographic difficulties and other various factors – coexistence between cattle grazing development in an extensive regime and the presence of a notable Iberian wolf population is difficult, often resulting in damage to livestock (Llaneza et al. 2000).

Cattle predation by wolves leads to almost 59% of the losses compared to 40% of natural mortality due to illness, deforestation or other causes (Mateo-Tomás and Olea 2010). However, the so-called 'wolf conflict' is not between wolves and people, but one between people confronting the 'anti-wolf sector' (cattlemen, hunters) with the 'pro-wolf sector' (environmental associations, urban tourists) (García et al. 2013: 33).

The different regulations for each of the three autonomous communities governing the park make more complex the management of the wolves' conflicts. A master plan enabling a single design of uses and management could make the protection of wolves compatible with livestock and the derived cheese production (García et al. 2013). Such a master plan is currently in the phase of public consideration. Livestock farmers living in the park and the autonomous administrations are the two social actors involved in this conflict.

### **2.3 Commercial activities and conservation of the natural space in the park**

This section includes a description of the commercial activities related to tourism, as well as an analysis of their consequences, both positive and negative, for the park's conservation objectives. The following three problems are analyzed: 1) the impact of visitors in the park; 2) the difficulties to maintain both, tourist activities and traditional socio-economic activities; 3) and the management of the conflicts of interest between these activities and the conservation goals.

First, the influx of visitors to the park represents a threat to its conservation. The visitor concentration in a few entries to the park and its seasonality puts pressure on road infrastructures and the collection of rubbish. In addition, activities like hunting and extreme and adventure sports are not always compatible with the conservation goals of the territory.

Thus, some of the outstanding problems are the excessive concentration of hotels, tourists'

damage to the environment, the seasonality of tourism, mass tourism in popular locations, and the disorganized growth of tourism. The management body of the park, sports federations, and travel agencies are the social actors in this conflict.

Secondly, the difficulties posed by the emigration of large numbers of young people present a threat to the continuity of the traditional economic activities protected in the park. Many interviewees considered that the slow disappearance of the workforce threatens the survival of these activities. The social actors engaging with this conflict are the management body of the park, the autonomous and local administrations, cattle ranchers, cheese makers, and business associations.

Finally, another aspect that we analyze is the lack of compatibility among certain activities in the park. Reflecting this situation stand the different interests associated with cattle ranchers and those of tourist businesses, or the different interests between logging and extractive or mining enterprises.

As such, one of the functions of the management body of the park is to harmonize these conflicting interests, prohibiting those uses and activities that are incompatible with conservation, and mediating between those which are compatible but which must be subject to surveillance and/or regulation. This is a particularly important function in Picos de Europa National Park due to the recurrence of these kinds of conflicts.

Five kinds of social actors are involved in this conflict: the management body of the park, cattle ranchers, hoteliers, and the population living in the park and the visitors and practitioners of leisure activities (hunters, sportsmen, among others).

### **2.4 Governance shared by three autonomous communities**

Governance is an important analytical aspect for the management of natural parks (Eagles 2009). In this regard two issues are analyzed: the coordination between the three autonomous communities of Asturias, Cantabria, and Castile and León, which are in charge of the management of the park; and the subsidies given to counteract

the problem created by the depopulation of the area. The need to reach a consensus between three different administrations poses a challenge to make and execute the park's budgets. This particular feature differentiates PNPE from the other national parks in Spain.

In addition to the three autonomous communities, the state and the local administrations have a say in the management of the park. This increases the difficulties in managing the park and the number of challenges to overcome in order to guarantee the conservation of the natural area. The management of the park is subject to the National Parks Law, the Declaratory Law of Picos de Europa National Park, and other statutes, and the management body of the park.

It was found that the local population's demand for subsidies keeps growing to compensate them for the decline in their level of population and the decrease in their income levels. This results in continuous conflict and is one of the main issues affecting the park's governance.

According to other studies ([González González and Villoldo Pelayo 2004](#)), given that the majority of the granted subsidies are dispersed, complementary and not aimed at supporting direct, individual or entrepreneurial productive actions, they are insufficient to promote the economic development of the municipalities.

In this case, the social actors involved in this conflict are two: the management body of the park and the three autonomous administrations.

The management body of the park has a complex composition. It is composed of a management committee (with one representative of each of the three autonomous communities, one representative of the state, one (rotating) representative of all the municipalities); a technical committee (the park's director, the co-directors, one technician for each autonomous community); the consortium of the park (the three autonomous communities); and the park's patronage (composed by the president of the management committee, seven state representatives, two representatives for each autonomous community, eleven representatives of the park's municipalities, three representatives of universities, NGOs, agrarian associations, and landowners; one representative of the Spanish Federation of Municipalities, the Spanish Federation of Speleology, the workers of

the park, and the director and the two co-directors of the park).

This study has emphasized the relevance of institutional conflicts. For example, the municipalities' position regarding their presence in the patronage committee, which they considered is not enough; and their portrayal as insufficient of the support they receive from the park's authorities. To this problem, we have to add the limited cooperation taking place between the municipalities. One of the clearest examples of this is the municipalities' reluctance to cooperate with the management body of the park in the fight against fires. The social actors involved in this conflict are the management body of the park and the autonomous and local administrations.

### 3 Conclusions and Discussion

The conservation of protected natural areas is a serious challenge faced by societies in the 21st century. However, the medium – and long-term – survival of these sites of high ecological and social value often conflicts with the economic development of the territory of which they are part of.

The case analyzed in this paper shows the wide range of conflicts of interest and the types of social actors engaging with them at different levels (local, regional and national), as it is the case in many nature parks worldwide ([West et al. 2006](#)). The high intensity of tourism in the study area and the attractiveness and added value of a protected natural area as well as the 'national park' brand, are the main influences on the close interdependence between the ecological conservation and the socio-economic development objectives.

In the so-called post-Fordist societies, 'nature tourism' and 'national park tourism' have become labels associated with a socially positive value of nature and the consumption of products and services from natural areas.

The park's economic viability depends to a large extent on its societal recognition. To avoid the loss of natural heritage and to reactivate the socio-ecological system of the park ([Berkes et al. 2000](#)), the multiple interests existing in natural and protected areas such as national parks need to be

reconciled with common objectives as well as ecological and socio-economic sustainability (Rescia et al. 2008).

Our findings bring to the fore how complex the governance of the national park is, and it highlights the importance of identifying social antagonism as well as shared goals for the governance of the park. This supports Eagles' (2009) claim about the significance of governance to achieve a good governance in nature parks.

Picos de Europa National Park rests in an "unstable equilibrium" between the conservation of its natural values and the historical rights and economic interests of its population.

Although the human population and its economic activities play a key role in the maintenance of the park's natural values, municipalities whose territory is totally or partially within the protected areas struggle against two main risks: 1) the severe demographic regression, 2) and the risk of losing their traditional agrarian activities. The new tourist activities provide some revenue to those villages, but the pressure exercised by tourism, especially as it concentrates in certain times and places, poses a new challenge to the conservation efforts of the park's management.

Another conclusion refers to the difficulties created by the involvement of three regional governments in the park's governance. An example analyzed in this paper is the demand of the park's population for adequate compensation for the limitations imposed on their legitimate ancestral rights within the park. The park's regulations make traditional rights such as hunting, fishing and the use of wood, among others, incompatible with the conservation of the park. However, each regional government differently interprets what is compatible with the conservation of nature in the park.

All the above fosters different social conflicts between different social actors. For instance, livestock farmers' opposition to the protection of wolves, hunters' hostility to the prohibition of hunting or environmental associations' resistance to tourism, among other conflicts and actors.

This justifies the economic compensation that the park's inhabitants receive in exchange for the cessation of these rights, but other rights that are based only on mere expectations and not on

formally approved plans or projects are not eligible for compensation, which is a matter of conflict. Identifying such conflicts is key for the good management of any protected area.

The multi-governance and multi-criteria governance existing today in protected areas is not yet well known. Nevertheless, the good governance of these spaces is a key issue for their conservation (Lockwood 2010).

Our results also show the importance of institutional support in order to increase the current low profitability of traditional farms and to ensure the bio-physical conservation of the park. Despite their small size, these farms are the main source of income (Mateo-Tomás and Olea 2010) for the park's inhabitants.

There is debate whether priority should be given to active conservation policies – resources and adequate planning and control tools – instead of mere passive conservation policies (Kellert et al 2000). This approach is particularly relevant for Picos de Europa National Park due to the absence of explicit measures concerning sustainable development in the Plan for the Use and Management of the Park. A new master plan, which we hope will address this deficit, is in the process of being developed.

According to Rescia et al. (2008) an alternative approach is to preserve the park without the need to abandon the extractive uses compatible with such conservation. This implies accepting intermediate positions, such as the existence of spaces reserved exclusively for recreational visits. The objective is to avoid traditional loss and to reactivate the socio-ecological system of the park (Rescia et al. 2008).

The situation analyzed in Picos de Europa National Park may become more complex in the near future due to three specific issues: 1) difficulties in establishing the exact limits of the carrying capacity of the territory in relation to some of the ecological values of the park; 2) the lack of a plan to foster sustainable tourism in the park; and 3) the impact of climate change. A deeper analysis of this case would need to take into account these three new uncertainties faced by the park's management. Also the current economic context of cuts in public services should be considered.

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