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Navigating tensions in inclusive conservation: Learning from the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park in the Netherlands

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ABSTRACT

Inclusive conservation is promoted as a means to integrate stakeholders in nature, conservation. Despite several studies recognizing that inclusive conservation of protected areas may be challenging and requires explicitly addressing potential tensions between stakeholders, little research has unpacked how these tensions manifest in specific contexts. This paper aims to explore possible approaches for navigating tensions to improve the facilitation of an inclusive conservation approach in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park in the Netherlands. We conducted 18 semistructured interviews with stakeholders such as public and private landowners and, municipal and provincial governments in the national park. Results reveal a longer history of collaboration which still fails to address the root of the tensions. The experiences show that compromising or consensus building amongst stakeholders alone is not sufficient for achieving inclusive conservation. Guidance and clear goals set by policy, as well as sufficient investments in capacity and trust building are recommended to avoid inaction. Furthermore, we found that tensions are inextricably linked to different dimensions of power, such as discursive and structural power. While considering power in inclusive conservation can provide a realistic perspective we also, acknowledge that equalizing power is not the silver bullet underpinning this conservation approach.

1. Introduction

Conservation debates are often polarized, both in the ways the relationships between people and nature are defined, and also how these relationships should guide decision making in protected areas (Mace, 2014; Tallis, Lubchenco, 2014). To increase support for conservation, protected area management has moved from emphasizing nature's biophysical values to a relational turn, focusing on the many different ways that humans relate to one-another and nature (West et al., 2020; Raymond et al., 2022). A relational approach contributes to transformative sustainability change through promoting diverse knowledge systems and values in sustainability interventions and decision-making processes (West, 2020).

In support of the relational turn, inclusive conservation has emerged as an approach which integrates different values to strive for participation from diverse stakeholder groups, and works towards just and sustainable conservation practices, prioritizing equality and justice in its processes as much as the end result (Murray, 2017; Tallis and Lubchenco, 2014). To do so, inclusive conservation strives for a dialogue that encompasses a *plurality* of values, knowledge, and worldviews among stakeholder groups (Raymond et al., 2022; Hölting et al., 2020; Pascual et al., 2021). However, the combination of many diverse values, knowledges, and worldviews may result in conflicts or tensions among groups. In multifunctional landscapes, stakeholders value functions in

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different ways, and prioritizing certain functions over others will lead to trade-offs (Hölting et al., 2020; Filyushinka et al., 2022). 'Community-based conservation' approaches similarly illustrate bottom-up strategies for protected area management (Armitage et al., 2020; Berkes, 2007). Inclusive conservation differs in the consideration of multiple values and knowledge systems to present a broader focus for initiating dialogues across stakeholder groups (Murray, 2017). Through these conservation approaches we see the shifting of discussions and responsibility from governments to local stakeholders and citizen groups, and a willingness to explore different modes of knowledge co-production (Chambers et al., 2021). Inclusivity also entails shifting power relations (Raik et al., 2008), which can lead to new tensions between stakeholders, or the (multiple) conservation goals. Raymond et al. (2022) have described several tensions that prevail in inclusive conservation approaches. Here, tensions are described as conflicts that result from constraints of inclusive protected area management. Tensions outlined revolve around navigating themes such as landscape boundaries, different knowledge systems, visions of nature, and consensus and dissensus. The authors propose three strategies to soften and reframe these tensions.

First, *hybridity* – of power relations, knowledge systems, and values – is stressed to "empower diverse voices and recognize the multiple ways of knowing and doing" (Raymond et al., 2022, p. 17). Conservation approaches are often challenged by academic and bureaucratic silos, as well as difficulties to communicate across them (Nielsen et al., 2019). Diverse perspectives and framings have been emphasized as vital to inclusive decision making in conservation (Cairns et al., 2013; Hirsch et al., 2011). Second, *reflexivity* refers to the ability to think back on one's self, with an external and critical perspective. When actors reflect deeply on their own positions and perspectives, they can better understand, accept, and integrate the voices of others, and potentially influence governance outcomes (Dryzek and Pickering, 2017; Pascual et al., 2021). Reflexivity among stakeholder groups can contribute to knowledge co-creation and co-learning (Hakkarainen et al., 2020). Lastly, Raymond et al. (2022) describe the importance of forming *new partnerships*. Partnerships can aid in building trust and empathy and therefore reframe tensions between stakeholder groups. The collaboration of stakeholders relates to co-production, which brings together actors to produce context-specific knowledge and potentially enhances sustainable pathways (Roux et al., 2021).

There are two major gaps in the strategies proposed by Raymond et al. (2022) and in literature on inclusive conservation more broadly (Matulis and Moyer, 2017; Tallis and Lubchenco, 2014). First, there is limited evidence outlining how these specific strategies are grounded in practice. Sandbrook (2015) warn that a "banner of inclusivity", could suppress debates (p. 566). Meaning, inclusivity in itself does not resolve tensions, but has the potential to sugarcoat such processes (Sandbrook, 2015). Instead of opening up such conversations, this could instead depoliticize conservation debates (Cairns et al., 2013) and undermine democratic processes (Peterson et al., 2005). Conservation projects are noted to under-report failures (Redford and Taber, 2000), contributing to a positive bias in the field. The question remains of how we can move past vague language to embed inclusive conservation approaches in concrete practice. It is therefore vital to closely examine how inclusive conservation operates in practice, tensions and all, and what practical approaches are found to navigate the identified tensions.

Second, issues of power have largely been treated superficially to date on work on inclusive conservation. While it is tempting to wave the flag of participation and inclusivity, processes in conservation are vulnerable to power imbalances among stakeholders (Peterson et al., 2005). Providing deliberative spaces for identifying power relationships is crucial for constructively dealing with consensus and dissensus (Raymond et al., 2022). However, a more in-depth analysis is necessary in relation to different dimensions of power. Issues of power have been hinted to in relation to democratic processes. Turnhout et al. (2020) argue that the co-production methods integral in inclusive conservation approaches depoliticize conservation discussions in the tendency to veil fundamental power differences. More comprehensive overviews of power in relation to conservation have recently been presented. Shackleton et al. (2023) introduce four dominant approaches to power of: actor-centered (capacity to act and impose will), institutional (power exercised through institutional systems), structural (power within political and economic structures), and, discursive/governmental power (power mobilized through certain knowledge, dominant ideas, discourses, and narratives). Each of these forms of power operate at different scales and in different contexts. The Values Assessment of the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES et al., 2022) also considers discursive power and structural power in relation to how certain forms of values or people-nature relationships are privileged or overlooked in decision-making (Anderson et al., 2022). Discursive power is exercised through constructing narratives and knowledge, and can emphasize certain values and worldviews (Feindt and Oels, 2005; Linell et al., 2015). Structural power is exerted through social, political and economic structures in rule-making power and operational power (Svarstad et al., 2018; Raik and Wilson, 2006).

While power can be conceived in many forms (see: Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2018; Paulson et al., 2005; Shackleton et al., 2023; Svarstad et al., 2018), we find it most useful to view power as relational and dynamic. Meaning, rather than viewing power as a resource to be possessed, it is visible in interactions between actors (Ahlborg and Nightingale, 2018). Differences in power are reported among and within stakeholder groups in multifunctional protected areas, stressing the necessity for an in-depth account documenting tensions and detailing how differences in power and responsibility can be instrumental to inclusive conservation processes (Hölting et al., 2020; Turkelboom et al., 2017).

This paper aims to unpack and understand the tensions involved in inclusive conservation in relation to these knowledge gaps, based on a case study in the Netherlands. The Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park provides an interesting location to study these gaps. Unlike state-led national parks, the Utrechtse Heuvelrug is largely run by a networking foundation which brings together many public and private owners and stakeholders around shared nature protection goals. The national park has reported to employ bottom-up, participatory, and inclusive conservation approaches. These practices fit in Dutch planning history that has used concepts that evolved from the "polder model" (Schereuder, 2001) to "participatory society" (Boonstra, 2015), where there is a strong emphasis on consensus-building, cooperation, and community engagement. However, despite the collaborative processes reported at the Utrechtse Heuvelrug, persisting tensions concerning the plurality of functions and diversity of users create concern among stakeholders. Simultaneously, the quality of nature in the area is deteriorating, and the protected area is not achieving its conservation goals. The national park therefore provides an interesting case to explore the tensions associated with an inclusive conservation approach and how these are or could be resolved. This paper seeks to investigate inclusive conservation in practice by asking: how can tensions in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park be navigated to improve the facilitation of an inclusive conservation approach? In answering this question, we will also highlight the dimensions of power indicated above and how they are underlying the tensions visible in the inclusive conservation approach at the Utrechtse Heuvelrug.

2. Case description and methods

2.1. Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park: geographical context and stakeholder backgrounds

2.1.1. Geography and history

The Utrechtse Heuvelrug (100 km^2) is a national park in the center of the Netherlands, located in a peri-urban area close to the city of Utrecht

(360,000 inhabitants). The park is characterized as the 'hill ridge' (*heuvelrug*), a glacial moraine with a highest point of 69.2 m above sea level (Arnouts, 2010). While the full hill ridge is approximately 200 km^2 and 55 kilometers long, the current national park is only a portion of this area (see Fig. 1) stretching across six municipalities. The surrounding landscape is characterized by a combination of forest, farmland, pastures, and residential areas. The Utrechtse Heuvelrug is the second largest forest area in the Netherlands and highly multifunctional. A number of busy railways and motorways cross the park. While there is only some small-scale agriculture and grazing on the hill ridge itself, intensely cultivated farms surround the park, dominated by dairy farming.

After recognizing the decline and deterioration of natural areas in the Netherlands, in the 1980s, the Dutch government initiated policies to expand national parks (Arnouts, 2010; Van Kleef, 2004). A number of actions from instilled distrust between governments and the farmers and private owners residing on these lands. For example, governments ventured to ban hunting and requested farmers to sell their lands, which was discarded after being met with resistance from these parties (Arnouts, 2010). Policies delivered in 1990 allowed for the purchasing of and development of natural areas (Arnouts, 2010; Ministerie van LNV Landbouw, Natuurbeheer en Visserij, 1990). However, due to a decentralization measure in 1994, the responsibility of the implementation of these natural areas was given to the provinces, where it still lies today. The 1990s witnessed disagreements and failed attempts to create a national park, between the national and provincial governments, as well as between the private owners and nature organizations, largely due to clashes between the governments and private owners. Disagreements stemmed from how private owners felt to be treated (greater desire for acknowledgement and consideration of their opinions), the governance structure of the park (private owners found that the committee lacked transparency and an emotional connection with the region) and private owners' requests for higher payments for their upkeep of the natural areas (Arnouts, 2010). In 2003, the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park was established, in the southernmost region, with a subsequent expansion on the northern side.

2.1.2. Stakeholders and management

The national park is owned and managed by three primary nature conservation organizations as well as more than forty private estate owners, exemplifying a mixed-ownership landscape (Mölder et al., 2021) (see Fig. 2). While landowners have decision making power over their land, they are still bound to regulations at a municipal, provincial, and national level. The nature organizations are either fully or partially funded by national governments, and all owners (i.e. private, semi-public, and public) receive compensation for managing the land for recreational users. Concerns across these stakeholder groups are brought to the board of the National Park networking organization.

The largest of the three nature organizations is principally oriented towards forestry, while the smaller two focus more on nature management conservation. All three organizations engage in forestry as an economic activity. While this was more intense in the 1970 s, today timber harvesting is carried out through an Integrated Forest Management approach, where gaps in the forest are harvested over clear cutting (Arnouts, 2010). Previously, the (clear-cut) harvest area was limited to two hectares and has decreased to a ½ hectare based on feedback from the public.

Otherwise, land in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug is owned by a patchwork of more than 40 individual estate owners. These include wealthy families, also of nobility, who have lived on the land for generations. These owners use the land for leisure and to supplement their income, for example through selling timber and receiving government subsidies for recreation management. Nevertheless, subsidies are described as inadequate for covering costs of managing their land. Private landowners are said to have a history of distrusting the government and the national park initiative (Arnouts, 2010). Many, though not all, private landowners are members of an association for private estate owners (APEO), which provides resources to help individual owners manage their land and participates on the board of the national park foundation.

The unique geological, hydrological and cultural-historical features of the national park led to the development of a foundation to realize projects and goals around the national park. These goals are decided upon together by the provincial and municipal governments, nature organizations, private landowners, as well as a number of smaller

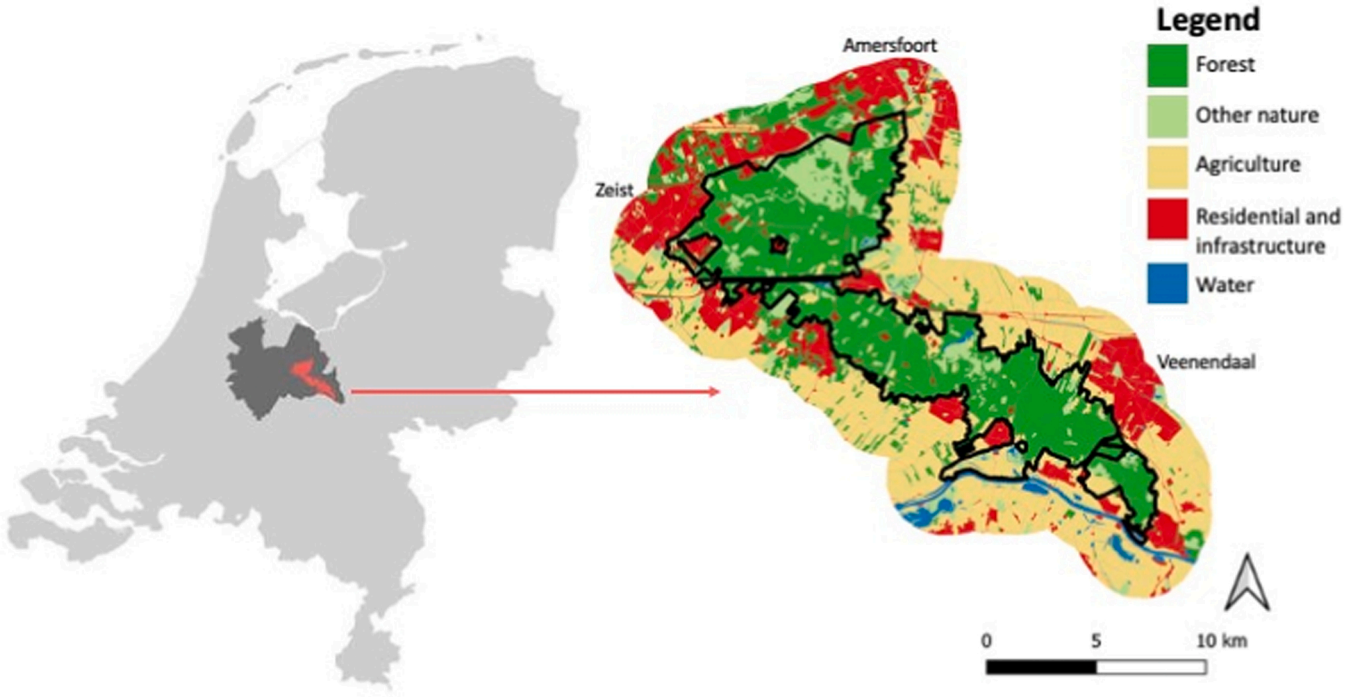

Fig. 1. Map of the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park, and its location in the Netherlands (courtesy of Adna Steinmann).

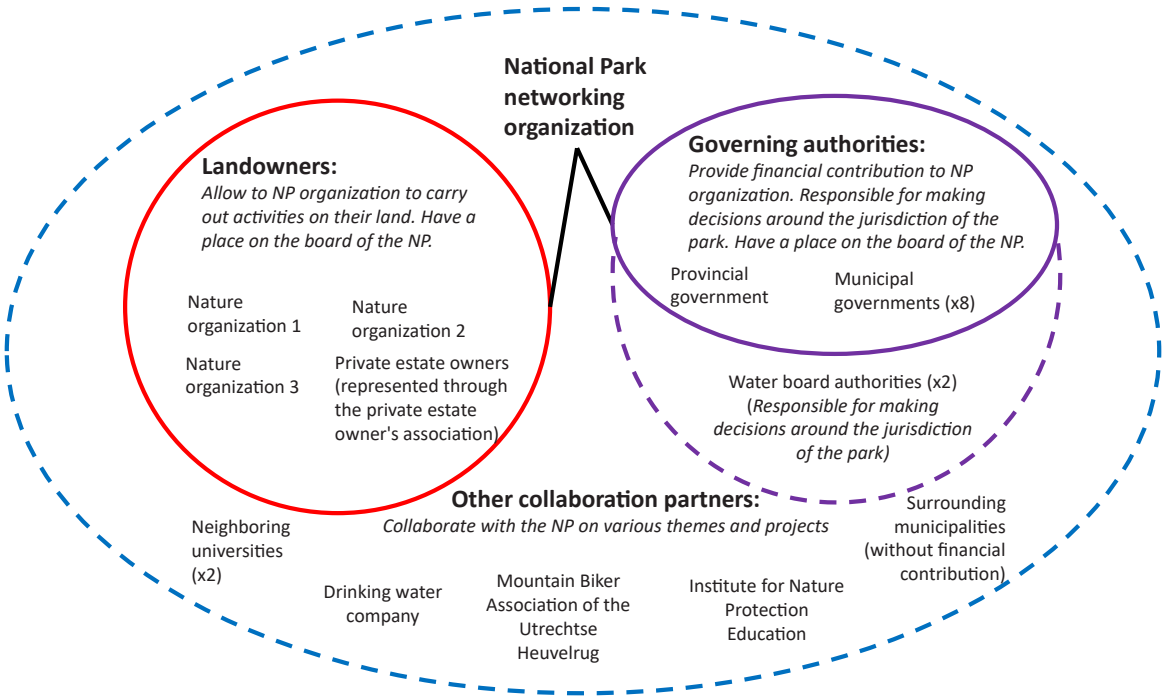

Fig. 2. Representation of the main stakeholders in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park.

organizations (e.g. tourism bureaus). While the nature management tasks are left to the owners, the foundation facilitates stakeholder collaboration, for example in knowledge sharing and educational and outreach activities. This networking organization is co-financed through municipalities and the province of Utrecht (each 50 %), and carries out its projects on the land of the nature organizations and private estate owners.

2.2. Methods

This study carried out in-depth and semi-structured interviews. Unlike previous research on this topic, which largely relies on mapping and survey data (e.g., Goodson et al., 2022; Turkelboom et al., 2017), interviews allowed us to more deeply explore the tensions taking place in the National Park and was therefore considered to be the most appropriate form of data collection. Considering the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park as a case of inclusive conservation, we take a case study approach, following Yin (2014).

Interview participants (see supplementary material) were chosen based on the role of their organization in the park. The main stakeholder groups, who were responsible for making decisions around the jurisdiction of the park (i.e., zoning, water levels), were identified. This includes landowners (three nature organizations and representatives from the private estate owners) and government actors, such as municipal and provincial governments, and water authorities. Lastly, in recent years, a networking organization was founded to initiate connections between stakeholders and carry out projects. Given their role in facilitating dialogues across stakeholder groups (as part of the inclusive conservation approach), representatives of this foundation were also interviewed. Visitors were not interviewed, as this research focused on decision making channels. That being said, a nearby resident who is involved in a local advisory group was interviewed. Initial contacts, including a gatekeeper interviewee, were suggested by colleagues also conducting research in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug. The gatekeeper recommended several contacts, while further participants were found through organizational websites, and snowball sampling. Decision-making actors of all major stakeholder groups (municipal and provincial governments, nature organizations, private landowners and the national park organization) involved in park governance were identified and interviewed. This includes actors from municipal (n = 2) and provincial (n = 3) governments; actors from all three nature organizations (n = 5), with the largest being the most strongly targeted; private landowners, and especially those active in the decision-making association (n = 2); and both directors who have served for the networking organization (n = 2). Other employees of these, and other, organizations were also interviewed. This includes the water board authority (n = 2), responsible for governing the management of water bodies. Several groups, such as the mountain bike organization, the drinking water company, and additional private land owners, were also contacted for interviews, though no response was received. Considering the park governance structure (Fig. 2), we are confident to have included the key actors in the national park. Ethical procedures from the first author's university were followed, and all participants gave informed consent to participate in this study. Their names and identifying information (for example organizations and institutions) are all anonymized and generalized, so that it could be not traced back to individuals. After conducting the total eighteen interviews, stakeholders were found to be repeating the same themes and no new information about the tensions arose, therefore saturation was considered to be reached.

Interviews largely revolved around the tensions: a) addressing what tensions did the stakeholders experience in the national park and b) focusing on which actions were undertaken or proposed to solve them. To achieve a homogenous understanding of the concepts used, tensions were described to interviewees as conflicts between functions in the park, which created difficulties to make decisions among stakeholders (see interview guide in supplementary material). These tensions were so prominent that little explanation or introduction to the tensions was necessary, as interviewees were quite eager to discuss them. Interviewees were also asked about their recommendations for solutions. Asking for recommendations was intended to stimulate reflexivity among stakeholders, as well as collect a diverse pool of suggestions to bring into a transdisciplinary dialogue. Interviews were also used to collect background information, such as how decisions are made in the park, how inclusive these processes are, and barriers to making decisions. Lastly, interviews probed for the three softening techniques described by Raymond et al. (2022). This was done by asking

participants if decision-making processes have changed because of the tension (partnership building), how they would expect other stakeholders to react (hybridity), and what they've learned working in the inclusive conservation process for this park (reflexivity).

Interview data was analyzed and coded in NVivo by the first author, in line with thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). Analysis was largely inductive, based on the tensions and theory from Raymond et al. (2022). This allowed for data reduction (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996), where themes emerged around the tensions and approaches. Categories were developed after the first round of coding, in consultation with the co-authors. The development of these categories was closely based on the language used by participants. Conversations with co-authors insured the distinctness of categories, and that they were grounded in the data. A second round of coding was conducted around the categorization, outlined in Table 1 and Table 2, to sharpen the findings.

3. Results

3.1. Inventory of the tensions

The main tensions found in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug revolved around resource use, stakeholder cooperation, and governance (Fig. 3). The tensions mentioned by the respondents could further be broken down into sub-categories, as seen in Table 1 below.

Resource use refers, in the responses, mostly to the excessive use of resources in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug. The national park lies in a multifunctional area with many competing functions. Excessive resource usage was witnessed throughout all functions in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug, for example pressure from the recreationists visiting the park, water extraction, fertilizer application, housing developments, and use of motor-ways. Many of these resources are finite, such as water, and park property/nature areas. Therefore, the excessive use of resources cannot continue and *absolute shortages* resulted, where resources must be governed, or compromises must be made. Tensions around resource use are further complicated by predictable and unpredictable changes, such as climate change impacts, where droughts, floods, and strong winds become more frequent and resources available are also volatile. Furthermore, stakeholders experienced different needs around the available resources, and often prioritized benefits to their interests, leading to *competing claims*. This is enabled by the positions stakeholders hold and how power could be used to their benefit. This is seen, for example, in the struggle for different groundwater levels. Farmers surrounding the Utrechtse Heuvelrug required low groundwater levels for agriculture land at the base of the hill ridge, while the nature areas needed high water levels. The waterboards have been noted by interviewees to be historically influenced by farmer lobbies and have a large fixed representation of farmers in their governance. Waterboards therefore had different priorities than nature conservation. As an ecologist from one of the nature organizations stated "the danger is that you get these very intense forms of agriculture to the most vulnerable nature areas". Furthermore, droughts on the Utrechtse Heuvelrug limited the water available and further exacerbated these tensions.

Stakeholder cooperation (describes the collaboration stalemate of stakeholders in the park. While stakeholders (e.g., private landowners, public landowners/nature organizations, local and provincial governments, the drinking water company) agreed that protecting nature is the priority, actors were seen to have different understandings of what is meant by 'protecting nature', varying means to make that happen, and (therefore) diverging priorities and interests. Hence, even when stakeholders intended to work together, their diverse resource pool, funding backgrounds, and histories with the land prevented the cooperation necessary to fulfill shared goals of protecting nature areas.

Stakeholders reported a *fear of losing their autonomy* in the national park. Meaning, with limited resources and contextual changes, actors feared that they now have to compete for the stake that they expected was guaranteed (i.e. property, decision-making potential). A poignant example was the private landowners in the national park. As described by a member of the APEO, "some [landowners] managed their property for, sometimes, 200–300 years through different generations. It is very important for them to keep their autonomy and what they see as a threat is that others decide on their property". Historically, the national government tended to modify its nature policies, requiring owners to

Table 1
Classification of tensions found in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug.

Tension	Qualities	Mechanisms	Sub-categories	Examples
Resource use	Excessive use of limited resources, putting pressure on the park and stakeholders to meet all the needs of the different functions.	More than an intense use of resources, the unsustainable way in which that use is carried out compounds negative effects and puts further pressure on various functions. For example, intensive agriculture and too many recreationists not abiding by the regulations of the park Tensions are also spurred by changes in context, including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change impacts, and increases in population. There are difficulties in protecting against, dealing with, and keeping up with such changes.	Absolute shortages	Water shortage; too little space to host all of the recreationists coming to the national park; chemicals from intensive farming leaking into the nature areas.
			Competing claims	Farmers wanting low water levels, nature on the HR needing high water levels; spatial fragmentation of land between different owners and functions
Stakeholder cooperation	Difficulty in cooperating	Despite the stated priority among stakeholders of protecting nature, many different priorities coexist, correlating to respective a range of values and identities of the stakeholders. Diverse funding schemes exist among stakeholders (ex. landowners, farmers earning money from land vs. being funded from governments), leading to different priorities	Fears of losing autonomy (over identity, land, decision-making)	Private landowners afraid of losing autonomy of their land; fears from farmers of having to change their practices; private landowners fear that singular national park identity will enhance recreation pressure and raise prices
			Distrust	Distrust of institutions from private landowners and farmers; distrust of drinking water company from waterboard and landowners; distrust of nature organizations from citizens.
Governance	Institutions lacking governance capacity	Lack of clarity of who has responsibility, and how to collectively make decisions.	Lack of capacity (financial, leadership, and expertise/human capacity)	Too little budget for reimbursing landowners for nature management; lack of knowledge of how to manage conservation areas; lack of knowledge for transitioning to nature-inclusive farming.
			Vague leadership	Vague leadership structure in *Blauwe Agenda,* unclear of who will lead and make decisions

Table 2
Classification of approaches and recommendations to solve tensions.

Approach	Qualities	Sub-categories	How does this address tensions	Examples
Technical	Top-down, using "expert" knowledge. However, this approach must also be coupled with organizational approaches and be carried out in an inclusive way.	Legal	Finding creative funding schemes to address **lack of capacity**	Implementing vignettes for MTB and horseback riders. *Recommendation*: Allowing recreation in agricultural areas.
		Ecological	Building circular and sustainable ecological systems to **address absolute shortages**	Transitioning to nature-inclusive agriculture. *Recommendations*: Replacing pine trees, creating circular water systems.
		Spatial	Allocating functions to certain areas to overcome **space shortages**	Establishing zoning maps; expanding the National Park; closing and opening parking lots to control traffic flows *Recommendation*: allowing recreationists in the edges of the park, and protecting the inner areas for nature.
Outreach	Involving visitors and residents of the park. Building capacity for others to take initiative	Education	Sharing knowledge to enhance **expertise and human capacity.**	Working with farmers to transition to nature-inclusive farming practices (*in progress*); teaching APEO members how to manage their land for conservation
		Awareness	Raising awareness of water use to address the **absolute shortage of resources**; raising awareness of the national park to create a sense of shared identity	Making visitors and residents aware when they enter the park with signage; informing residents of water shortage to reduce water use; producing local national park products (beer, sausage, tea) *Recommendation*: developing a national park app explaining rules when entering the park.
		Inspiration	Overcome potential difference in **values and identity** through inspiring actors	Incentivizing visitors to use sustainable transport; working with youth and nearby villages to create "sister parks"
Organizational	Long term approaches that address interpersonal relations among stakeholders. Change that comes from above and below Addresses what is shared among organizations. Giving space for everyone to have a voice	Policy	Opening new funds for conservation/ nature projects to solve **the lack of funding**	Initiating *Groen Groeit Mee* (to expand green in development) (*in progress*).
		Meeting platforms	Establish meeting platforms to deal with **competing claims**, **vague leadership** and **fears of losing autonomy**	Establishing a board for the national park foundation (*vereniging van deelnemers*). *Recommendation:* establish board for the *Blauwe Agenda*
		Partnerships	Establishing partnerships to create more **trust** between parties; building partnerships to build a national park identity and **raise capacity and funding**	Initiating the *Blauwe Agenda* (collaboration to improve water quality and quantity in and around the national park) (*in progress*); founding the national park networking organization (the "spider in the web" to carry out projects among stakeholders)

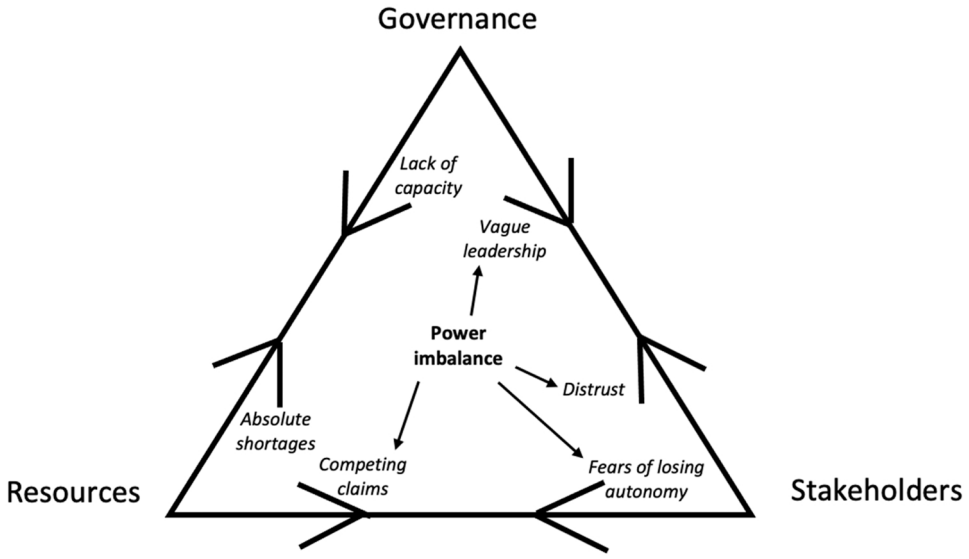

Fig. 3. Tensions found in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug.

independently navigate the different regulations. More recently, the networking organization had begun attempts to establish more collaborative bodies. The combination of their past with the national government, along with the ambiguous role of the networking organization, instilled a fear for many owners that they would lose their decision-making powers. Furthermore, the networking organization attempted to strengthen the branding of the park, to bring awareness to visitors and residents of the area. While this allowed opportunities for owners to earn

extra income, for example selling local products (e.g. tea, wool, cheese), the owners were concerned this would attract more recreationists and put more pressure on the protected area. The branding of the park was felt to threaten the private owners' identity and connection with their land. More than heritage, the owners' identity is important for the economic foundation of their estate. If another organization takes control of their land, the livelihoods of many of these families would be threatened.

Challenges among governments, nature organizations, and private owners in establishing the national park, set the stage for strained relationships (Arnouts, 2010). The suspicion of different priorities, (i.e., other than those protecting nature) as well as recollections of past betrayals, also created *distrust* among stakeholder groups. That being said, competing functions, which do not address common goals to protect nature, exacerbated these interactions. For example, the waterboard and landowners observed the drinking water company extracting excessive water from the hill ridge and causing damage to the surrounding nature through their extraction methods. The stakeholders assumed the drinking water company was prioritizing their profits and lost trust in them. Citizens also criticized nature organizations for harvesting too much timber out of the forest, even after the reduction of the maximum harvest area. A provincial employee working in the area described how this is connected to a feeling of ownership, "you shouldn't underestimate the importance of the people who live in the area. Even though the land is owned by someone or by an organization, people tend to claim the trees as their own". Distrust was seen to complicate decision making and cooperation among stakeholder groups.

Governance in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug illustrates bottom-up and participatory processes, where responsibility is decentralized from larger institutions. In the national park's governance, interviewees often mentioned the inability to reduce tensions based on the *lack of capacity* available. This included financial resources, for example, funding to compensate landowners for nature management costs, and human capacity and expertise, such as sharing knowledge with private landowners on sustainably managing those areas. Interviewees also shared examples of how the regulations surrounding the Utrechtse Heuvelrug limited actions of different parties. The lack of a Natura 2000 status (European Union protected area network status) for the park, for example, lightens protection requirements. Furthermore, municipal and provincial governments are limited in their incentives, as landowners have the ultimate say. A provincial government process manager elaborated, "[owners] get money to open up and sustain their areas… If they don't want to open up their area, conserve nature at a high level, that's their decision. It's important to work together in that. Not to dictate from the top what they have to do." If landowners are not persuaded to open their land (by financial incentives or otherwise), collaborating stakeholders are also unable to move forward.

Recently, a number of new knowledge sharing collaborations emerged around the national park, such as the *Blauwe Agenda* (Blue Agenda), a participatory platform to tackle water shortages and floods on and around the Utrechtse Heuvelrug. Coordinated by the provincial government, projects under the Blue Agenda include improving water infiltration, and rainwater retention programs for local residents. A hydrologist involved with this agenda reported the sudden expectation to contribute to the governing processes, when in reality they have a technical background, not one focused on making decisions. According to this interviewee, "the problem is nobody has time and nobody wants to spend [time]. everybody already has a job". The hydrologist continued, saying, "technical solutions are easy…but the difficult thing is somebody has to make the political decisions." This sentiment further connects to the lacking or *vague leadership* experienced by those involved in different partnering organizations in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug. With coexisting participatory platforms (for example, the Blue Agenda and the national park networking organization), and many overlapping tasks and stakeholder involvement, it was not always clear how authorities are delineated.

Power imbalances (middle, Fig. 3), played a central role in the different tensions. Returning to the dimensions distinguished in the introduction, discursive and structural power were predominantly witnessed by stakeholders.

Resource use was observed as disproportionate among different stakeholder groups. The examples of water usage illustrate how stakeholders take advantage of their (political/economic) position, exercising structural power. A communication and marketing representative of a nature organization in the park stated "[our organization] should be everything for nature, and of course we are, but we are also an organization in the middle of society… Politics, people, etc. We are also just a business. we have to generate money." This quote illustrates realities which ultimately dictate the organizations' actions. To some extent, stakeholders exercise structural power to pursue their (political/economic) interests and contribute to competing claims, resource competition and shortages.

Stakeholders' challenges with collaboration were seen to be linked to the unique ownership structure of the Utrechtse Heuvelrug and tensions around distrust and fears of losing autonomy. Differently sized land parcels created disparities in cooperation and potential power imbalances. A manager from a nature organization on the Utrechtse Heuvelrug stated, "we're not in a position to dictate how the others should manage their areas…. If we were the owner of the national park, maybe we would introduce grazing, but in the small piece that we own, it's not useful to do on that scale when the others won't." Landowners with more land were better positioned for making decisions - otherwise, they are forced to cooperate and often compromise. Imbalances also played out among the private landowners. A member of APEO acknowledges that "[larger landowners] are more or less self-supporting, so they are less interested in cooperation because they don't need it. Small owners need more cooperation and subsidies from the government." Such differences are largely linked to structural power, in reproducing structural and class hierarchies among stakeholder groups. Examples of discursive power were exercised by the networking organization in their branding and promotion of the national park. While many were pleased with these actions, it was also controversial among many private owners, who were already struggling to assert their identity and autonomy in the park.

Lastly, discursive and structural power could be linked to tensions around governance, specifically vague leadership. Here, tensions emerged from difficulties in organizations taking on responsibilities. The Blue Agenda, for example, had not yet settled on a governance structure. A manager in the waterboard described it as "a really fuzzy way of governing. Because if you want to make a decision, nobody of the Blue Agenda is really in charge. If you want to invest X amount of money or if you want to make a government plan for the Utrechtse Heuvelrug, you need to go to several boards of the province, different water boards, three municipalities – it's difficult to effectively make decisions." While the other tensions pointed to uneven power landscapes, this tension arguably stems from too little power existing in the Blue Agenda, where too much responsibility is outsourced, and now it is difficult to navigate.

3.2. *Handling and responding to the identified tensions*

In the interviews we asked participants *how* the identified tensions were being handled and for recommendations to address them. The responses can be categorized into technical, outreach, and organizational approaches. Interviewees were further asked about recommendations for future solutions (see examples in Table 2).

Respondents indicated that **Technical** approaches were initiated using "expert" knowledge and often in a top-down manner. This included legal, ecological, and spatial solutions (see Table 2). More than an "easy fix", interviewees noted that such strategies must be carried out in an inclusive way, giving all stakeholders a voice and respecting their input. Technical solutions might require a particular expertise, however, they occur within a context of communication and governance. Interviewees referenced the example of a zoning map developed by the

national park networking organization, to utilize a spatial solution and solve the puzzle of space shortages. The importance of spatially zoning the park for recreation and conservation had been previously established by all parties. However, once a zoning map was presented to the private landowners, many interpreted this map to be established without room for adjustments. This misunderstanding resulted in tensions between the private landowners and the networking organization, where many owners retracted their collaboration with the foundation. This situation triggered the private owners' past and fears of losing autonomy, requiring a new mediation process with the two parties. Here, trust building between the two parties is essential to resolve this tension and more generally to complement such technical approaches. Technical approaches largely addressed tensions of absolute resource shortages (for example, space shortages through zoning) and lack of governance capacity (for example, implementing vignette for mountain bikers) (see Fig. 4 and Table 2).

Outreach approaches involved local residents and visitors of the national park and included strategies such as education, awareness, and inspiration. More than the end result, the process of these approaches intended to create a collective sense of ownership among visitors and residents, and therefore overcome potential schisms in values and identities. Investing in the park created a shared feeling of responsibility to treat it with care and respect. This approach was seen to provide a longer-term perspective of how to (re-)distribute responsibility with local communities and therefore align with the inclusive conservation approach. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the national park experienced an influx of visitors and many nuisances. As an attempt to lessen negative impacts (i.e., disturbing wildlife and leaving trash), park authorities took on projects to enhance awareness of the park, such as adding welcome signs and creating "sister parks" in nearby cities and villages to disperse the crowds and enhance appreciation of the nature areas. These efforts intended to better bond local communities with the park and bring attention to the absolute shortage of resources available (e.g., water, space for recreation), for local communities to help contribute. Outreach approaches addressed tensions of lack of capacity (for example, teaching farmers how to transition to nature-inclusive farming practices) and absolute resource shortages (for example, raising awareness around the water shortage among residents) (see Fig. 4 and Table 2).

Lastly, **organizational** approaches were perceived by the respondents as more systematic solutions focusing on long-term collaboration between stakeholders. This included developing policy, meeting platforms, and partnerships. While these approaches were often the most challenging to initiate, they were also seen to be the most relevant solutions for addressing the tensions outlined above. These approaches reflected an inclusive conservation approach and align with strategies from Raymond et al. (2022). The Blue Agenda (described above) is recognized by an employee from the provincial government as "a nice example because the water company who provides drinking water participates now… the way we organize it, the company feels comfortable to join. It's all about where you are going to pump up water for drinking water, where you should not do it, and if you make money with it, can you invest some of it in nature." While the details have yet to be worked out, the platform provided a mirror of how organizations can collaborate on shared goals. Enhancing transparency through this partnership can further build trust between actors, and help negotiate competing claims around resource use. Organizational approaches were seen to address almost all tensions, with the exception of absolute shortages of resources (see Fig. 4 and Table 2).

4. Discussion

4.1. Inclusive conservation in practice

The Utrechtse Heuvelrug represents an area where an inclusive conservation approach has been adopted for 19 years, and inclusive conservation has been an explicit objective of the national park, which was established six years ago. Nevertheless, we found similar tensions and suggested concrete actions and ideas to work through these tensions, related to those described by Raymond et al. (2022). Results indicate that tensions in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug remain an obstacle for effective management. While autonomy in decision making has been cited to support community-centered conservation governance (e.g., Armitage et al., 2020), the fear of losing autonomy by stakeholders has not been cited and is therefore a novel contribution of this research to inclusive conservation literature. Furthermore, in managing tensions, this research recognizes how more technical top-down approaches, and public engagement (outreach) approaches are integrated with the 'organizational' aspects, to produce inclusive conservation approaches, and reflecting the processes suggested by Raymond et al. (2022) when carried out in practice. In addition, the findings recognize the importance more 'practical' approaches for navigating tensions on the ground,

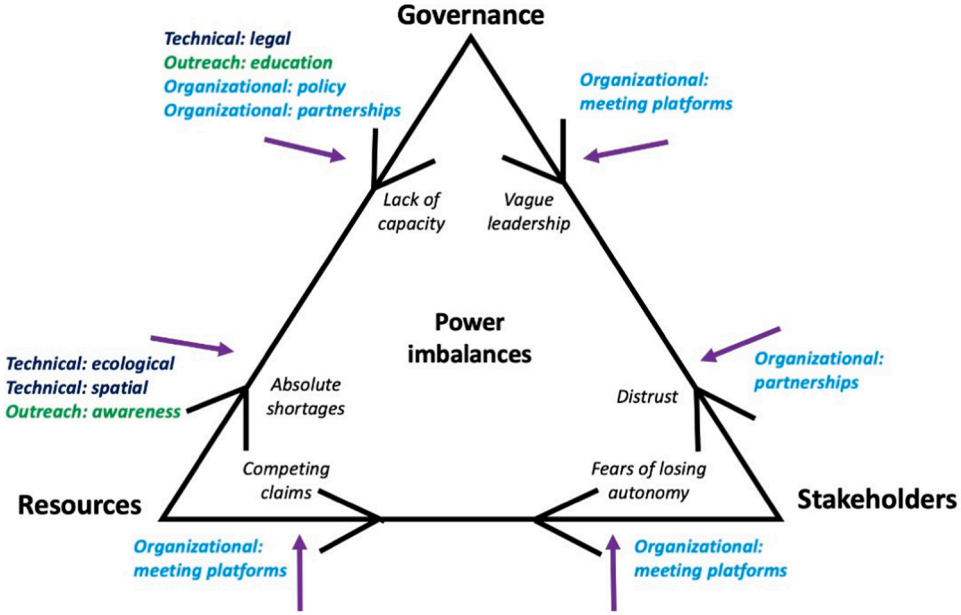

Fig. 4. Approaches for navigating tensions (in colors).

specifically 'technical' and 'outreach' approaches.

Our results indicate that the current approach of implementing inclusive conservation in the study area, might not work, and that it is difficult for stakeholders to think and act beyond the existing organizational structures they are embedded in. While we recognize the potential of the inclusive conservation approach, this study area poses deep-seated challenges which need to be unpacked more systematically. Nevertheless, recommendations by stakeholders also suggest a further investment in the same or similar procedures in the future. This could be due to still working within institutional and disciplinary silos (Nielsen et al., 2019), a practice that the inclusive conservation approach specifically attempts to disrupt (Pascual et al., 2021). As noted in the results, interviewees had difficulty finding time and energy for organizational activities. This includes the hydrologist's remarks in 3.1., as well as seen by the private landowners could therefore indicate potential burnout among stakeholders (Byron and Curtis, 2001) While networks and attempts to cross organizational frontiers existed, this was seen to be a slow-moving process with limited results. Therefore, even as there were intentions to break these boundaries, in practice, it did not materialize.

This points to the challenge of managing plural values for inclusive conservation approaches. Is expecting consensus, as Cairns et al. (2013) claim, then a "false assumption" (p. 21)? Peterson et al. (2005) argue that, in conservation, consensus is insufficient and, through masking tensions, could even reinforce power imbalances. Similar results have also been seen in participatory approaches, which can exacerbate hierarchies between locals and natural resource managers (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Raik et al., 2008). Therefore, there is a danger in inclusive conservation carried out while disregarding tensions between stakeholders, which we perhaps see occurring at the Utrechtse Heuvelrug. In their comprehensive review, Reed (2008) insists that there is hope for stakeholder participation in conservation projects. Authors point to a focus on the process, and especially skilled and impartial facilitation to manage tensions, a potential gap in the case of the Utrechtse Heuvelrug (Reed, 2008; Richards et al., 2004). In a case study with high pressure on recreation and other resources, processes must be taken seriously to soften stakeholder tensions.

Where to go from here? In the introduction we argued for a grounded inclusive conservation approach – one that moves past the broad language of Raymond et al. (2022). Here, we illustrated practices that happen on the ground. We, therefore, urge attention towards an approach to account for practical challenges. This specifically includes: building trust (Goodson et al., 2022; López-Bao et al., 2017), increasing financial and human capacity (Brooks et al., 2003), and strengthening leadership in institutional arrangements (Gutiérrez et al., 2011; Wright et al., 2016), which were all found to be gaps in the case of the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National Park.

We found trust, one of the main desired outcomes of inclusive conservation approaches, largely absent in stakeholder processes. Distrust among stakeholders can be detrimental for participatory approaches, especially when engagement in management fails to deliver promised outcomes (Emery et al., 2015), and has been cited as a major challenge for collaborative governance (Ansell and Gash, 2007). Private landowners were especially uneasy about potential risks, aligning with findings in the literature (Fischer et al., 2019). This has been shown to hinder cooperation, pointing to the importance of strengthening relationships among owners (Fischer et al., 2019) and other stakeholders as a potential solution. Second, authors recommend expanding social benefits to incentivize cooperation (Fischer et al., 2019), as well as financial payments (Mölder et al., 2021). Social benefits could include learning skills and building confidence among owners, as well as a collective feeling of being able to accomplish more together (Fischer et al., 2019). While, to some extent, financial payments are occurring in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug, it was cited by interviewees as a point of discontent. Compensation for nature management has been, historically, a topic of contention for private owners (Arnouts, 2010). Developing a payment system in collaboration with private owners could enhance the acceptability (Tyrväinen et al., 2021), and illustrates the importance of looking into past wounds for appropriate solutions. Lastly, strong guidance and leadership was fundamentally missing in the collaborations between stakeholders. Recommendations in the literature also pointed to the need of a steering committee, with enough decision-making power, which can also help to strengthen trust among all parties (Reed, 2008; Richards et al., 2004).

While this case study focuses on the Dutch context, with privately owned land, these implications are relevant for other inclusive conservation ownership structures, such as co-managed (López-Rodríguez et al., 2020) or government owned land (Goodson et al., 2022). For such a densely populated country, the Netherlands especially sees strains on resources, such as land, for nature conservation. Challenges of collaborating across the spectrum of public-private actors and different interest groups bind these cases together.

4.2. *Power imbalances underpinning tensions*

Results indicated that power imbalances further deepened tensions, impeding many concrete actions which could contribute to inclusive partnerships. While we witnessed the naivety of participatory processes when power is not taken into consideration, we acknowledge that addressing power imbalances is not a silver bullet in managing the tensions that emerge. Power imbalances are inevitable and potentially reinforced in systems of governance (Raik et al., 2008), particularly in multi-level governance processes such as inclusive conservation. Therefore, we would like to nuance the potential role of addressing power in reducing the tensions found.

As outlined in the results, structural and discursive power were tied to the tensions and useful to understand outcomes in this inclusive conservation approach. These dimensions played out differently. Structural power, which is embedded in historical social/political systems, was found to be exercised by certain stakeholder groups (e.g., large private estates, the drinking water company). Based on their positions of power, these groups could benefit from resources available. This aligns with previous research, where stakeholders exercised their position to access ecosystem services (Felipe-Lucia et al., 2015), and larger agencies and organizations were shown to have more power to influence such usage decisions (Turkelboom et al., 2017). Discursive power was visible in governing bodies (e.g., the provincial government) and networking organizations in their framing of the narrative of the park. Different framings led to tensions in relationships, especially between these institutions and the private owners, resulting in many private owners pulling out of collaborative partnerships. When actors feel overlooked in participatory projects, they can therefore subvert the decision-making processes (Reed, 2008). Destabilizing the cooperative platform is arguably also a means through which the private owners exercise power, inverting power relations, and exposing the relational dynamics of power in participatory projects (Cooke and Kothari, 2001). As stated by Raik et al. (2008), "[natural resource practitioners] are constantly negotiating intricate webs of power, and either transforming or reproducing them" (p. 737). Here, we witnessed more of the latter: reproducing power relations. This could be due to the high demands on the area and the strain on resources available. The national park is an example of a highly multifunctional area where resources are becoming more disputed. Further instabilities and resource scarcity due to climate change and population increases, enhances the relevance to recognize power dynamics in multifunctional protected areas.

However, we contend that navigating the identified tensions involves more than balancing power dynamics. This aligns with literature suggesting equity (in power) does not necessarily lead to conservation successes (Klein et al., 2015). In the results, we witnessed ambiguities around governance structures, especially in the collaborative platforms. The expectation of balanced power is a common challenge for participatory conservation projects (López-Bao et al., 2017). Institutional

structures and platforms exist within a larger context of multi-scalar governments and ownership rights, inevitably embedded with power (Raik et al., 2008). Shifting responsibilities to stakeholders in inclusive conservation also entails shifting power dynamics. Such institutions might not have a personal interest to renounce their power, or are unable to re-negotiate set conservation targets. Critiques have been documented in participatory projects, claiming governments wish to outsource their functions as a cost-saving measure (Rosol, 2011), or to make institutions more bureaucratically efficient (Raik et al., 2008). Therefore, such tactics must be approached with caution. For example, López-Rodríguez et al.'s (2020) framework for participation in conservation governance, could be one way to support embedding participation in policy and management practices. Accordingly, clarities in governance and decision-making must be given beforehand, as well as awareness in these processes. Power is not to be equalized per se, rather acknowledged and accepted genuinely with the responsibilities that accompany it.

Power was not the initial focus of this study, but emerged from the interviews conducted. Therefore, there are limitations to the extent to which we can draw conclusions of its role in inclusive conservation projects. Other limitations relate to our methods. While we attempted to collect a mixed sample of stakeholder from the park, certain groups did not respond to our interview requests. The absence of including these stakeholders, e.g. mountain bikers and the drinking water company, who are quite active in the park, could mean that some tensions have been missed.

On the contrary, the participating stakeholders could be said to have experienced positive effects from this research, such as validation of their experiences, by having space to discuss these tensions. In this sense, this research could be seen as a part of the inclusive conservation process. As a follow-up, findings and recommendations were also summarized and communicated to participating stakeholders.

Future research could more closely examine power in inclusive conservation projects, and compare our findings with situations where responsibilities and decision-making authority are made more clear. Future case studies could also include more deeply investigating various inclusive governance models, for example those that more strongly consider user preferences. The topic of collaborative capacity also emerged among several stakeholder groups. Future research could further explore this topic and how it relates to burnout in inclusive and community conservation projects.

5. Conclusion

Inclusive conservation approaches have been advocated for in the literature to reduce conservation conflict. However, we found that, despite a long history of inclusive approaches, tensions often inhibit effective conservation action. These tensions specifically revolved around excessive resource use, stakeholder cooperation difficulties, and lacking governance capacities. Power imbalances, including discursive and structural power, contributed to deepening tensions among stakeholders. However, beyond power imbalances, tensions also lie in unclarities in governance and collaborative platforms. Surprisingly, stakeholders only suggested similar strategies to resolve these tensions, despite complaints of not having reduced tensions in the national park. Therefore, tensions in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug National park can be navigated by focusing on building trust, enhancing human and financial capacities, and strengthening leadership and guidance, to enhance the facilitation of an inclusive conservation approach. We also stress that these tensions must not be taken lightly as they have been shown to be toxic in the participatory processes of an inclusive conservation approach. Critical and constructive pathways for navigating tensions could include collaborating in creative funding schemes, establishing steering committees with enough decision making power, and expanding knowledge and expertise sharing. Analyzing cases studies like this one has added value for learning and better implementation in other cases, expanding the relevance of this work beyond the case study.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

- **Ciska Ulug**: Conceptualization, methodology, investigation, analysis, writing – original draft, visualization. - **Miguel A. Cebrian-Piqueras**: Conceptualization, writing – review and editing, visualization. - **Marc Metzger**: Conceptualization, writing – review and editing, visualization. - **Christopher M. Raymond**: Conceptualization, writing – review and editing, visualization, funding acquisition. - **Peter H. Verburg**: Conceptualization, methodology, writing – review and editing, visualization, supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare the following financial interests/personal relationships which may be considered as potential competing interests: Ciska Ulug reports financial support was provided by Belmont Forum. Miguel A. Cebrian-Piqueras reports financial support was provided by Belmont Forum.

Data Availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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Appendix A. Supporting information

Supplementary data associated with this article can be found in the online version at doi:10.1016/j.envsci.2023.103620.

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