

**Gintaras Matiukas**  
**James P. Lassoie**  
**Daniel J. Decker**

# Improving Protected Area Management in Lithuania: A View from Overseas

## Introduction

**L**ithuania is among the countries of East and Central Europe that are in transition from authoritarian regimes to more liberal governments based on free markets and democratic processes. This transition is affecting all public and private institutions, including those charged with stewardship of natural resources. In this new era, public involvement in natural resource conservation is on the rise. Management of protected areas, accordingly, is changing from top-down administration and strict protection to a more collaborative approach that seeks to meet public demand for outdoor recreation and promote sustainable uses. In addition to internal challenges, Lithuania, like all the countries applying to the European Union, must also comply with international recommendations and requirements for managing protected areas.



Figure 1. Tytuvėnai Regional Park, Lithuania. *Photo by Roma Matiukiene.*

## Improving Protected Area Management in Lithuania

The system of nature protection areas and their management is still evolving in Lithuania. Challenges include a lack of a clear strategy, political and personal influence on managers' activities and priorities, low participation by local communities, lack of research and monitoring data, and insufficient management capacity. Many of these problems have been addressed satisfactorily by other countries. Examining models used successfully elsewhere can help identify cost-effective approaches for Lithuania. This article recommends ways to improve protected area management in Lithuania, based on the experience of developed Western countries, primarily the practices used in New York State.

thus the management of protected areas began abruptly, without experience.

Lithuania's protected areas are roughly comparable to four categories of protected areas described by IUCN-The World Conservation Union (IUCN 1994b). Six strict reserves, five national parks, 30 regional parks, and 290 other reserves represent the country's most valuable landscapes and natural ecosystems and constitute 11.2% of the total area (Table 1).

*Strict reserves* exclude development and management activities. *National parks* have mixed regimes: no or minimal management in conservation zones, management for visitors' needs in recreation zones, and regulat-

Table 1. Protected areas in Lithuania.

	Number	Area, km <sup>2</sup> (% of total area)
Strict reserves (IUCN category I)	6	255 (0.4)
National parks (IUCN category II)	5	1,381 (2.1)
Partial reserves (IUCN category IV)	300	1,892 (2.9)
Regional parks (IUCN category V)	30	3,809 (5.8)

### Protected Areas in Lithuania

After the restoration of Lithuania's independence in 1990, the reprivatization of land required a review of conservation priorities. Regional parks were created over a very short period of about two months in 1992, before the law on private land restitution was adopted. The hasty formation of the park system left many political and ecological problems to be reconciled after the system was created,

ed management in forestry or agricultural zones. *Partial nature and culture reserves* protect specific parts of ecosystems and landscapes. *Regional parks* integrate development and conservation.

Not all the areas are intended to protect nature. Of the six strict reserves, two are cultural. Of the five national parks, one is historical, and of the 30 regional parks, there is also one historical park. Other protected areas

are managed for a variety of natural features: geological (10), geomorphologic (46), hydrographical (35), soil (12), botanical (38), wetlands (27), theriological (1), ornithological (6), herpetological (2), ichthyological (11), entomological (20), botanical-zoological (20), landscape (61), cartographical (1), and cultural (10).

Lithuania's regional parks are equivalent to protected landscapes (IUCN category V; IUCN 1994b). Such areas encourage sustainable development and support traditional land uses and promote the well-being of local communities. Their relative importance in Europe is shown by the numbers: Protected landscapes account for only 15.3% of the world's total protected areas but 66.8% of Europe's. Many protected areas in Europe are small, close to urban or industrial areas, and surrounded by incompatible land uses. Sustainable development within and outside the parks is becoming a significant issue, and these parks are pilot areas for implementing and disseminating sustainable practices in the surrounding communities (Gambino 2000).

Most American state parks are very small, entirely public, and focused on recreation. But the Adirondack State Park in New York, with its size, range of activities, mixed ownership patterns, inholdings, and side-by-side conservation and development, presents management challenges comparable with those of the parks in Lithuania. We use the experience of the Adirondack State Park and other protected landscapes in developed countries to formulate recommendations for improving protected area manage-

ment in Lithuania in six domains: administration, management, advisory boards, work force, stewardship, and zoning and borders.

### Administration

**Centralization.** In most countries, protected areas are both established and managed by the central government; some countries give authority to regional or local governments (Leitmann 1998), or the administration may be mixed. The administrative method depends mainly on political and social traditions.

Decentralized management is used by Austria, Germany, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. The majority of European countries, like the United States and Canada, use a mixed model: the central government establishes and manages areas of national importance but may share responsibility for managing partial reserves and protected landscapes with regional and local governments.

Lithuania has a very centralized system: almost all protected areas are established and managed by the central government. Because the country is small and has a long tradition of strong centralized governance, this system is acceptable to its citizens. Collaboration with local authorities might be strengthened by allowing local governments to approve the strategic and management plans of the protected areas within their jurisdictions.

**Consolidated management.** Currently, management of protected areas in Lithuania is split: One historical national park and two cultural strict reserves are managed by the Ministry of Culture, and two regional parks are

managed by local governments.

In the Adirondacks, dividing management among separate agencies complicates the implementation of a general environmental policy (Meyers and Green 1989). To improve management of the Adirondack State Park, it has been recommended that all state and private lands be administrated together by the same agency (Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century 1990).

Similarly, Lithuania's nationally protected areas should all be managed by the same agency, with consistent regulations and goals.

**Equivalence of boundaries.** The boundaries of many regional parks in Lithuania do not follow administrative divisions. That some regional parks belong in two districts complicates management. The same problem exists in New York state, where Department of Environmental Conservation regions and the Department of Economic Development regions do not coincide with park boundaries. Developing common management strategies and coordinating activities are therefore difficult (Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century 1990).

Administrative and development districts and regions should coincide with the protected areas' boundaries where possible. Either the boundaries of the regional parks or the administrative borders should be reviewed and changed.

**Separation of forestry and conservation.** Lithuania has one Department of Protected Areas and Forestry within the Ministry of Environment. The financing of conservation can

thus depend on revenues from commercial use of forests. To separate protection and recreation from forestry, a new, independent Department of Protected Areas should be established under the Ministry of Environment, with a distinct mandate and mission.

### Management

**Regional management.** New York offers a very efficient model for the management of state parks: regionalization. The state's parks are organized into 11 regions, each with its own administration, accounting, general maintenance, and police.

Regional management, rather than each protected area being operated independently, promises many benefits for protected area management in Lithuania. It permits the sharing of equipment and facilities, eliminates duplication of accounting functions, makes the best use of limited scientific and cultural resources, and facilitates establishment and implementation of regional programs and large-scale projects.

In Lithuania, ten regions could be created, each with a national park or regional park (Kurtuvenai, Kauno Marios, Panemuniai, Birzai, and Krekenava) as its headquarters. The regions could also manage the partial reserves within their boundaries. Currently, no agency has direct responsibility for these 300 areas.

**Collaborative management.** Although the regional parks in Lithuania are established and funded by the government, they must meet the expectations of local communities. In the last decade, planners, managers, and politicians have changed their focus "from the products of their

activities (plans, projects, regulations, and realizations) to the process by which they are achieved” (Gambino 2000, 56), and parks everywhere now involve local residents in collaborative management. “Protected areas in Europe will only survive and flourish if they are supported by local people. Joint management will be the way of the future” (IUCN 1994a, 10).

Communities can be involved in natural resource management by different means and at different levels. Chase et al. (2000) describe a scale from “expert authority” through passive-receptive, inquisitive, and transactional approaches to co-management. The United States is at the far end of this scale and “co-management ... is already occurring in certain situations throughout much of North America” (Chase et al. 2000, 215); Lithuania is still closer to the authoritarian approach.

Both local communities and protected areas benefit from collaborative management. Local communities can obtain direct and indirect financial benefits from planning and management activities. Managers can gather additional information, make better decisions, implement ideas, and build trust with local communities, all yielding a better management environment (Lauber and Knuth 2000).

The Lithuanian government in its environmental strategy recognizes the need to encourage joint management of protected areas. This process will take time, but an intermediate solution is the strengthening of advisory boards (see below). Guidelines for co-management should be developed, and regional parks should be encouraged

to include local authorities, communities, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the decision-making process.

**Evaluation of effectiveness.** The management of protected areas is complex. Traditional functions include establishing protected areas, demarcating borders, detecting and enforcing violations of regulations, and planning and implementing management activities. Integrated management functions include attracting funding from government agencies and private investment, collecting user fees, maintaining relations with local and external stakeholder groups, carrying out administrative functions, providing tourist services, and facilitating research (Kramer et al. 2002).

Management effectiveness depends on many variables besides the capabilities, activities, and efforts of the managers. The most important matters for assessment are management plans, clarity of desired outcomes and evaluation criteria, and feedback (Hockings 1998).

Currently, evaluation criteria in Lithuania are not clear and are not based on objective and measurable variables of performance. Moreover, the agency evaluates all parks equally, even though the smallest (Rambynas) has two employees and an annual budget of about 25,000 Litas (US\$1 4 Litas), and the most developed (Kurtuvenai) has a staff of 16 and an annual budget of 600,000 Litas. Managers should know what outcomes are expected, and the agency should take into account the capacity of the regional parks.

### Advisory boards

Though variations exist, all fifty U.S. states have organizations that oversee their park systems and management. Advisory boards have no direct decision-making power, but they can usually influence decisions that are made (McLean and Smith 1990).

**Decision-making power.** In Lithuania, an advisory board analyzes the state of each park and its activities and presents conclusions and recommendations to the park's managers. The park director is the chair of the advisory board; in effect, then, she analyses her own results and then makes recommendations to herself.

Regional parks' advisory boards should be able to influence the decision-making process. Following the experience of New York state, the boards should review and approve annual budgets, reports of activities, and plans for the next year, and the comments should be presented to the agency. The advisory boards might also regularly evaluate the parks and their managers' performance. To assure objectivity, the advisory board should be independent of park management (i.e., park managers should not be board members).

**Representation.** Currently, Lithuanian boards comprise mid-level workers from regional and local governments, regional environment and culture conservation agencies, state forest enterprises, and representatives of the regional park; they serve regardless of their expertise or even interest in park management. The Adirondack State Park's board members, by contrast, are high-level representatives

who are approved by the governor (Adirondack Park Agency 2000).

The formation of Lithuania's advisory boards should be changed. Board members should be recognized specialists and respected authorities in fields related to park management, and they should be appointed by the mayor of the county and by the governor of the region. A rotation period would mitigate the effect of political changes. The chair of the board could be selected by board members but should be approved by the head of the agency. Managers of the regional park should participate in the board meetings to facilitate a two-way flow of communication between the managers and advisors, perhaps as *ex officio* members, but not having voting rights.

If a regional management model (see above) were implemented, regional advisory boards could be formed, perhaps with the chairs of the individual park boards as members.

**Strengthening the boards.** Currently, Lithuania's regional parks report on the previous year's activities to the Department at the end of January. On the basis of this report, the park's future financing and even staff salaries are determined. The results are then presented to the park advisory board, which has no opportunity to effect changes.

The process should be changed so that management plans have the approval of local authorities, land owners, and land users. Properly formed and representative, boards can reflect the positions of major stakeholders on different matters. An advisory board with representatives of local governments, NGOs, and inter-

est groups ensures public participation and collaborative management on a small scale.

Regional parks should present annual reports and proposals for the next year to their advisory boards, get members' approval or comments, and incorporate suggestions *before* the official presentation to the Department. The boards should meet at least twice a year: in February–March to present the results from the previous year, and in September–October to present the next year's activity plan.

### Work Force

**Development.** Increasing management capacity is crucial for Lithuania's protected areas. Both the regional parks and the Department of Protected Areas and Forestry suffer from staffing problems.

In regional parks, most employees have biology and forestry backgrounds, but "managing parks calls more for the skills of working with people, organizing and financial skills" (Beresford and Phillips 2000, 16). The agency should therefore change its recruitment and development strategies to ensure that managers of protected areas have the necessary management skills, cultural and social skills, technical skills, and ability to guide policy development (Shepard 2001). Along with the matters of protection and recreation, staff should focus on improving the social and economic conditions for people living within the protected areas. Training of regional park staff should focus not only on general management, biodiversity conservation and monitoring, recreation, and visitors' needs, but also on public relations with tourists and

local residents.

**Flexibility.** Regional parks in Lithuania have very similar staff configurations despite significant differences in size, facilities, visitor numbers, ecological and cultural features, and the presence of settlements and inhabitants inside their boundaries. Managers' flexibility in selecting the most appropriate staffing structure should be greater. The number of positions should be based on the ecological, cultural, and social context and the stated goals for the protected area.

**Seasonal and temporary positions.** The recreation season in Lithuania lasts three to four months; there are almost no facilities for year-round uses. Hence, regional parks need recreation managers, ecologists, and rangers only seasonally. The use of part-time and seasonal employees in the Adirondacks can be a model for Lithuania.

University students could be offered summer internships. Volunteers and part-time workers could fill summer jobs. Foresters who work primarily in winter and high school teachers with two months of vacation could be attracted to working in regional parks during the summer. But again, managers must be allowed to use their staffing funds more flexibly and independently.

**Sharing specialists.** Some parks do not have the professionals they need to manage their resources well. A regional management model would permit better use of staff and increase the potential pool of specialists by locating the regional headquarters in the major parks, which are served by

nearby towns.

Even within the current structure, it is possible to improve the situation through job sharing and exchanges, particularly for planners, ecologists, and rangers. Some parks have architects and planners who could lend expertise to neighboring parks, for example, and an entomologist could swap positions with an ornithologist from another park.

### Stewardship

The European Union defines protected areas as centers for promoting a general nature conservation policy. But regional parks exist in a social and cultural context and must not become islands (Council of Europe 1998). Their main purpose—superseding the traditional goals of conservation and public enjoyment—is improving social and economic conditions for local communities (Gambino 1998).

Although stewardship of natural resources is a widely used tool for managing protected areas, it represents almost unused potential in Lithuania. Along with the potential financial benefits, regional park managers can offer local governments and residents assistance in dealing with regulations and restrictions. And when regional parks have the technical and intellectual capacity, they should provide technical assistance for planning and zoning administration (Commission 1990).

### Borders and Zoning

**Management plans.** IUCN strongly recommends that each protected area have a management plan (IUCN 1994b). Such plans are essential if the areas are to achieve their stated aims

(Beresford and Phillips 2000). Developing planning schemes for regional parks is included in Lithuania's environmental strategy.

Nevertheless, only about half the regional parks have developed management plans to date, mostly because of financial problems. At present, a plan for each national and regional park shows its functional zones—the type and intensity of development, if any. Management of the regional parks is thus based on zoning, and these schemes indicate only preliminary zoning and have no legal power.

Lack of individual planning documents thwarts the realization of the parks' potential. A real working document—the unit management plan—should be prepared for each unit of land (Thorndike 1999).

Given the lack of resources to prepare management plans, however, a partial planning method may be used, in which units are prioritized. Lands with conservation easements and those with designated scenic, wild, and recreational value have priority (Commission on the Adirondacks in the Twenty-First Century 1990). Privately owned parcels do not need to be evaluated in the first stage if the activities on this land do not conflict with park objectives (Meyers and Green 1989).

**Borders.** The borders of the Lithuanian regional parks and separate zones are often arbitrary—one of the legacies of the parks' rushed creation. Borders do not follow administrative divisions or, often, natural boundaries.

Boundaries should be reviewed, as the management plans are prepared.

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The relationship between the parks and their natural and cultural context is important when delimiting a protected area (Gambino 1998). Adjacent cultural and natural assets may be included in the park if the administrative, ownership, and ecological situation permits.

The borders of the zones and units within the parks are problematic, too. Although the general pattern is consistent with zoning models used in other countries, zones and units should reflect natural borders, land uses, property rights, and the goals of management.



Figure 2. Tytuvėnai Regional Park, Lithuania. Photo by Roma Matiukiene.

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Gintaras Matiukas, former director of Tytuvenai Regional Park in Lithuania; current address: Basanavicius 25-4, Vilnius, Lithuania; gmatiukas@hotmail.com

James P. Lassoie, Cornell University, 10 Fernow Hall, Ithaca, New York 14853; jpl4@cornell.edu

Daniel J. Decker, Professor, Cornell University, 245 Roberts Hall, Ithaca, New York 14853; djd6@cornell.edu

