



Transboundary protected areas as ideal tools? Analyzing the Gerês-Xurés transboundary biosphere reserve

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ABSTRACT

Transboundary protected areas (TBPAs) have expanded across the world. Academic research, handbooks and guidelines for developing TBPAs have multiplied during the last few years, although a lack of critical analysis as regards to their development is detected. The aim of this paper is to test the suitability of the TBPA framework, as defined by leading international institutions, by using a case-study analysis on the border between Portugal and Galicia (Spain)—the Gerês-Xurés Transboundary Park designated transboundary biosphere reserve (TBR) in 2009. An explanation of the TBPA mainstream model framework is followed by a description of the data collection methods used for the empirical research. The results are then presented through open-coding and discussed in light of the TBPA framework. Although the Gerês-Xurés TBR has followed the framework, the TBPA is not functioning as it should be, showing the continuing importance of the border in shaping the land-use planning and management of the area. The analysis also questions the funding components of the TBPA framework. The paper highlights how border studies literature might contribute to an improved understanding of TBPAs.

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1. Introduction

Transboundary parks have expanded across the world and are generally based on the obvious fact that nature knows no borders, given that borders are political and human, not ecological nor natural (Erg et al., 2012; Linde et al., 2001; Thorsell, 1990). The expansion has been characterized by Büscher (2010a, p. 35) as “the latest ‘fashion’” in the “ever-widening plethora of popular concerns in conservation and development interventions”. Mainstream literature attributes significant virtues to these protected areas that cross international borders, such as conservation (the generic function associated with protected areas), socio-economic development (under the umbrella of sustainability), and the promotion of peace and cooperation (Erg et al., 2012; Linde et al., 2001; Sandwith et al., 2001). Hence, transboundary protected areas (TBPAs)¹ are widely considered ideal tools for preservation amongst neighboring countries. Their popularity is particularly noticeable in Southern Africa and the European Union, although there is potential for such a

device in many other regions throughout the world. Indeed, TBPAs are becoming a global phenomenon (Duffy, 2008; Fall, 2005) and handbooks and guides for developing TBPAs in several contexts have multiplied, including a globally influential IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) contribution (Sandwith et al., 2001) and targeted recommendations on transboundary biosphere reserves (TBRs) (Oszlanyi, 2001).

However, TBPAs have not been sufficiently critically investigated. Duffy (2008) has reported that the weakness in most research on TBPAs is the narrow focus on policy and planning whereas what is needed is a deeper understanding of how and why they are developed. In addition, Lange (2009) states that TBPAs are often regarded as a panacea. In fact, there is an enthusiastic assumption that they have to work *per se* (Fall, 2005), but this cannot be taken for granted. For instance, structures such as the *peace parks* in Southern Africa have received damning criticism from Büscher (2010a,b,c) and Ramutsindela (2007), among others. This paper offers a timely critique of TBPAs through a case-study analysis.

The European Union's (EU) particular circumstances seem expressly suitable for the creation of TBPAs due to the overall emergence of the cross-border political paradigm under the continental integration project (Trillo-Santamaría and Paül, 2015; Erg et al., 2012; Vasiljević and Pezold, 2011; Leibenath et al., 2010; Terry et al., 2006). EU programmes such as Interreg are usually understood as facilitators of the emergence of transboundary

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¹ Several names are used for those “parks on the borderline”, as originally coined by Thorsell (1990), it being true that the concept is the same for all of them. The common term, and the one preferred here, is *transboundary protected area*.

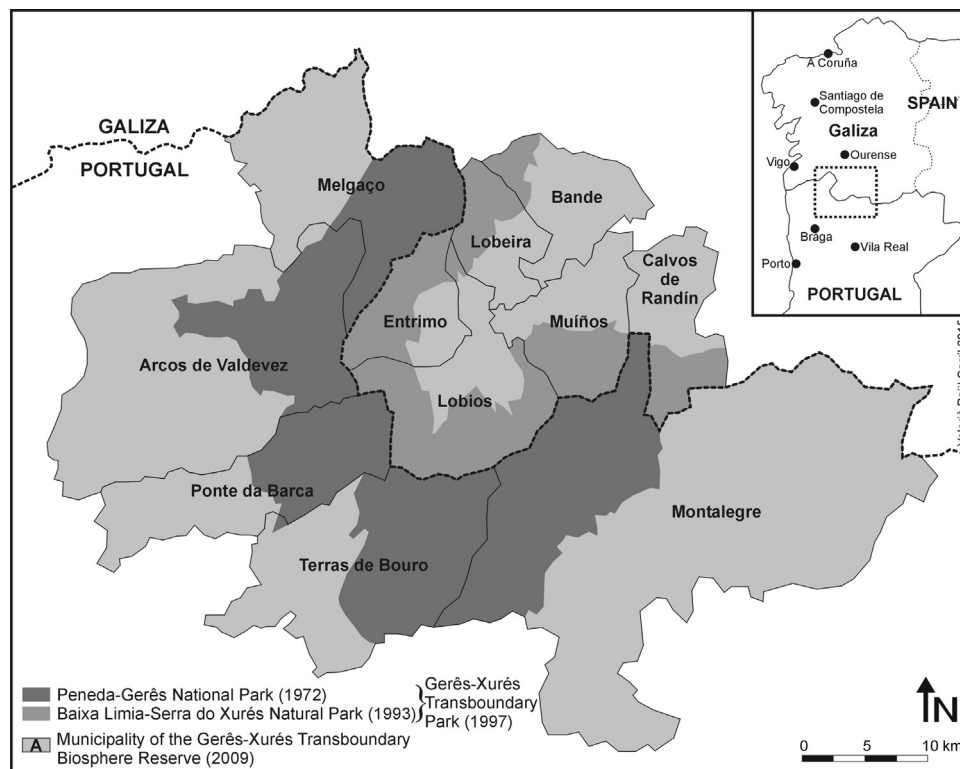


Fig. 1. Location map.

dynamics, which can embrace the environmental and land-use agenda and the development of joint protected areas that cross borders (EUROPARC Federation, 2010; Leibenath et al., 2010; Fourny, 2006; Terry et al., 2006). Nevertheless, there is a lack of critical analysis in this domain as observed by Dewan (2007), which reinforces the pertinence of an inquiry in this direction. In Europe, beyond these formal arrangements, there are also non-governmental organizations (NGOs) initiatives that are fostering the proliferation of TBPA, for instance, the EUROPARC Federation's (2010) certification system and the Erg et al.'s (2012) practitioners' guidelines under the IUCN umbrella. These frameworks are contributing toward making TBPA very popular and contain extensive sections on the potentials and opportunities for TBPA. However, they do not include critical examinations into the implementation of such devices at ground level.

In this context, this paper aims to test the suitability of the TBPA framework, defined by the peak leading international institutions and academics, through a case-study analysis. Specifically, the research questions are as follows: (i) what are the fundamental framework components of a TBPA? (ii) How has the framework been implemented in a particular TBPA? Our hypothesis is that simply following the framework does not guarantee that a particular TBPA will work in practice.

The case-study is the Gerês-Xurés TBR (Fig. 1), initially consisting of the Peneda-Gerês National Park in Portugal (designated in 1972 and covering 702 km²; in short, "Gerês") and the Baixa Limia-Serra do Xurés Natural Park² in Galicia, Spain (designated in 1993 and covering 298 km²; in short, "Xurés"). The renowned *Parks for Life* report (IUCN Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas, 1994, p. 118) had already considered the Gerês-Xurés region

as a potential site for the establishment of a TBPA. In 1997 the first international agreements resulted in the so-called Gerês-Xurés Transboundary Park. In 2009 UNESCO designated the case-study region as a TBR,³ widening the original protection devices: the area designated as a TBR is 2579 km², whereas the parks area is 1000 km² (Fig. 1). There is limited literature on this case-study TBPA regarding the issues under consideration herein, except Silva and Pina (2001) and Hewlett et al. (2004). The latter is based only on three interviews conducted in Portugal on tourism matters; and the former is an exploratory examination mostly based on legislation and landscape and land-use history analysis. Furthermore, other studies such as Silva (2011); Cabalar (2010) and González et al. (1995) have researched only one of the parks, with a superficial mention of the other.

The article is organized as follows: in the next section we propose a TBPA framework based on a review of international institutional reports and academic literature. Then, the empirical section outlines the Gerês-Xurés TBR, using qualitative research techniques of interviews and document analysis in order to understand how the case-study has developed in practice. This is followed by a critical discussion of the Gerês-Xurés experience against the TBPA model, arguing that TBPA understood as ideal tools are problematic and how both the case-study area and the framework might be improved. The paper concludes with some final remarks.

2. TBPA framework

The seminal contribution on TBPA by Sandwith et al. (2001) has been enriched and complemented by policy-making reports such as Erg et al. (2012); EUROPARC Federation (2010); Braack et al. (2006); Sandwith and Lockwood (2006) and Oszlanyi (2001).

² Roughly speaking, "Natural Park" is the Galician equivalent for "National Park", and is managed by the Galician Government rather than the Spanish Government (Paül et al., 2015).

³ TBPA are recognized as specific instances under the definition of TBPA by Braack et al. (2006), making the case-study area an appropriate one for analytical purposes.

Moreover, there are thematic-specific papers on this issue published in international journals and other scientific publications (e.g., [Leibenath et al., 2010](#); [Schliep and Stoll-Kleemann, 2010](#); [Lange, 2009](#); [Hewlett et al., 2004](#)) consistent with this grey literature contributing to the common understanding of TBPA. Scholars such as [Lange \(2009\)](#) have attempted to put together some of these references and, although [McKinney and Vasiljević \(2012\)](#) indicate that there is no single model for such devices, the literature is mostly iterative. [Fig. 2](#) summarizes the main characteristics of the TBPA interpreted from an analysis of the literature.

2.1. Underlying management principles

Joint management guidelines are dealt with under a group of issues that are based on cooperation between the different stakeholders on both sides of the border, comprising government officers, conservation managers, civil society members (i.e., NGOs) and entrepreneurs ([Erg et al., 2012](#); [Braack et al., 2006](#)). According to [Leibenath et al. \(2010, p. 86\)](#), “The position or role of actors seems to be crucial in explaining whether a cooperation initiative develops at all and the direction it takes”.

First of all, [Sandwith and Lockwood \(2006\)](#) and [Sandwith et al. \(2001\)](#) acknowledge the need to identify the common values shared between the two protected areas, such as shared species, and common landscapes and land-uses. This may or may not be reflected in the documentation, but what is critical at an early stage is to have a starting point in order to begin the construction of the TBPA. In this respect, some authors talk about a *vision*, which consists of a future orientation to be implemented together by the respective partners ([McKinney and Vasiljević, 2012](#); [Vasiljević and Pezold, 2011](#); [EUROPARC Federation, 2010](#); [Lange, 2009](#)). This vision goes hand in hand with a real commitment from the decision-makers, because only they can start and develop a specific TBPA project at ground level ([McKinney and Vasiljević, 2012](#); [Terry et al., 2006](#)).

The common values and the decision-makers' commitment are supposed to be put into practice through mutual collaboration between dedicated parks staff. The wide range of activities and internal communication measures includes: periodic joint meetings, constitution of operational teams for specific tasks, joint training courses and field trips, linguistic training when needed, promotion of an understanding of the neighboring country's culture, equipment sharing, technical assistance, common GIS development with an integrated land-use and land-cover monitoring system, and exchange of environmental information, data and staff members ([McKinney and Vasiljević, 2012](#); [EUROPARC Federation, 2010](#); [Oszlanyi, 2001](#); [Sandwith et al., 2001](#)). These multiple options may not all be followed, but some are essential to ensure collaboration between parks officers and conservationists on both sides of the border. Furthermore, guidelines by [Erg et al. \(2012\)](#); [EUROPARC Federation \(2010\)](#); [Sandwith and Lockwood \(2006\)](#) and [Sandwith et al. \(2001\)](#) concur that partners should stimulate mutual understanding, the sharing of experiences and the building of trust among neighboring communities as specific ways to develop local participation in a TBPA.

2.2. Planning process

Planning is a second pillar of a TBPA, understood as a process of several steps, echoing the policy process modeled by [Hogwood and Gunn \(1984\)](#). According to [Erg et al. \(2012\)](#); [EUROPARC Federation \(2010\)](#); [Linde et al. \(2001\)](#) and [Sandwith et al. \(2001\)](#), a written agreement is a critical early stage given that it enhances the creation and development of a TBPA within a time frame.

Typically, the next step is the plan itself, which strategically outlines the stages and tools needed to ensure the delivery of the agreed-upon goals ([McKinney and Vasiljević, 2012](#)). The

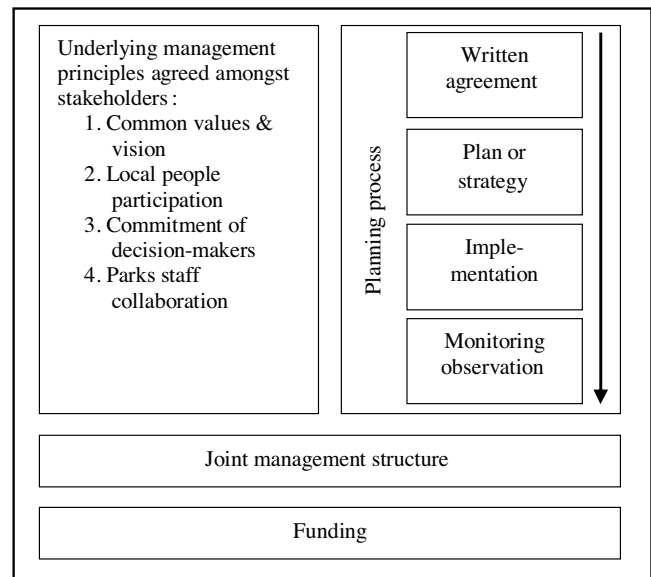


Fig. 2. TBPA framework.

plan embraces a wide range of relevant issues including: land-use regulations; conservation, nature and environment; economic development, tourism and visitors; social wellbeing; infrastructure; and security ([Büscher, 2010b](#); [Lange, 2009](#); [Braack et al., 2006](#); [Sandwith et al., 2001](#)). In any case, there is a common acceptance that the plan has to specify the different measures for correct implementation through detailed practical projects ([Erg et al., 2012](#); [Sandwith et al., 2001](#)). Moreover, the plan is intended to include land-use zoning provisions ([Fall and Thiry, 2003](#); [Oszlanyi, 2001](#)). The planning arrangement consisting of three conservation zones (core, buffer and transition) is widespread, following the Seville Strategy on Biosphere Reserves passed in 1995 ([Paül et al., 2011](#); [Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007](#); [Oszlanyi, 2001](#); [IUCN Commission on National Parks and Protected Areas, 1994](#)). However, the specific planning mechanisms for Biosphere Reserves are contingent upon each country having its own legal and regulatory context (e.g., [Paül et al., 2015](#) for Spain; [Durand and Vázquez, 2011](#) for Mexico; [Schliep and Stoll-Kleemann, 2010](#) for three Central European countries), despite the common framework.

Lastly, the plan's implementation is expected to be assessed through joint monitoring and the holding of regular data exchanges. The purpose of this is to readjust the mechanisms in order to accomplish the shared aims ([McKinney and Vasiljević, 2012](#); [Linde et al., 2001](#); [Oszlanyi, 2001](#); [Sandwith et al., 2001](#)).

2.3. Joint management structure

According to [Büscher and Schoon \(2009\)](#) and [Oszlanyi \(2001\)](#), a TBPA requires a common management structure at ground level because, beyond the agreements, implementation will be unfeasible if there is no joint, international body in control. In particular, [Oszlanyi \(2001\)](#) gives several indications of an organizational arrangement for TBRs, but the same might be applicable to other types of TBPA:

- (a) The management structure represents the various levels of government, the scientific boards, the local communities and the NGOs on both sides of the border;
- (b) It has a Permanent Secretariat;
- (c) It includes designating people on each side of the border to act as focal points for cooperation;

- (d) It holds regular meetings at the general level, but also thematic ones and those of *ad hoc* groups;
- (e) It sets up an association to promote the TBR.

2.4. Funding

Appropriate funding is essential to operate a TBPA, according to Erg et al. (2012); EUROPARC Federation (2010); Fall and Thiry (2003); Linde et al. (2001) and Sandwith et al. (2001). These authors include recommendations on lobbying for fundraising and attracting international donors, and state the need for establishing common funding mechanisms in order to cover cooperation costs. Indeed, scholars have shown how the availability or potential availability of funding in the European Union and Southern Africa have been key reasons for transboundary cooperation between bordering protected areas, over and above the purpose of nature conservation (Büscher, 2010c; Lange, 2009). The common structure is not always mentioned as a condition for setting up a TBPA, but funding always appears as a critical dimension. However, some contributors such as Büscher (2010c); Leibenath et al. (2010) and Lange (2009) have pointed out that funding alone does not lead to the proper implementation of TBPAs. The latter author argues that projects only initiated to gain access to certain funds will most likely cease when these funds end.

3. Research methods

Two data collection methods were adopted. Firstly, documentary analysis was undertaken from a number of sources including: official agreements, management plans, reports, brochures, and webpage information. Secondly, semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore the issues related to the case-study development. This procedure allowed the interviewees to introduce new issues and the interviewer to follow up on topics in depth. A schedule was used to ensure that every anticipated topic was covered (Kitchin and Tate, 2000; Valentine, 1997). Apart from obtaining information about the interviewees' background as a first step, five main issues were discussed during meetings: (a) the role of the institution, agency, service or any other organization to which he/she belonged in the protected area; (b) personal perceptions about the protected area and their implications for daily life and work environment; (c) considerations about different stakeholders and legal instruments for the protected area's management; (d) the international dimensions of the protected area; (e) tourism.

The study was undertaken in March and April 2013. Twenty-three in-person interviews were conducted with public and private stakeholders identified through criterion and snowball sampling. The interviews ranged from half an hour to two hours in length and, with permission, were recorded and transcribed. Criterion case selection included a mixture of regional and local government representatives, the protected areas' management bodies, private enterprises, and civil society groups supporting cultural, economic and environmental issues. The informants were: 4 staff members of the two parks, 6 supra-municipal officers, 1 municipal officer, 5 civil society representatives, 3 local politicians, 2 entrepreneurs and 2 tour-operators. In order to ensure anonymity, the interviewee were assigned a number (from I1 to I23), followed by a brief profile.

Data from the interviews were structured using open-coding, which allows for comprehensive appraisal of the main points identified as critical for the Gerês-Xurés TBPA and TBR developments. The codes are an abstract interpretation of the key themes raised by the interviewees, embracing both *emic* (directly taken from participants) and *etic* codes (used by the researcher) (Cope, 2010; Crang, 1997). These codes are grouped in the results section, and later

discussed in relation to the TBPA fundamentals. Direct quotations have been translated from Galician, Portuguese and Spanish into English.

4. Results

4.1. Motivations for protection

Both Portuguese and Galician interviewees shared the opinion that the Gerês-Xurés is worth protecting, and hence deserves designation. This common view was based on an identification of natural and cultural values and assets that require protection. As pointed out by one respondent:

The Gerês is the jewel [of Portugal], the most important asset we have, in economic terms, in environmental terms and in ecosystem services terms. (I2, Portuguese officer)

Similarly, an interviewee from the other side of the border also recognized that the area holds substantial assets that need to be protected. However, this participant highlighted the environmental assets, and omitted the cultural ones.

The world of stone, batholiths, [...] domes... the world of glaciers, differential erosion, granitic landscapes... monumental character, this [is] the Xurés! (I6, Galician environmentalist)

Importantly, a widespread consensus was identified that the Portuguese side of the TBPA has more natural and environmental values than its Galician counterpart. This belief was even expressed by Galicians themselves:

That oak forest [Albergaria Forest, located in Portugal after crossing the border from Galicia] impressed me... [...] I came from our area [from Galicia], which was half burnt, half re-burnt, and I marvelled when I entered into that forest. (I19, Galician cultural activist)

We will always lose [in a competition with them]... [...] What does the Xurés represent in Spain? What does the Gerês represent in Portugal? We cannot compare! (I6, Galician environmentalist)

Unsurprisingly, this perception of the dissimilarity between the two sides was still more evident in Portugal:

Gerês for us is the only National Park [...]. For Galicia, the Xurés is just another one because their jewel is the Cíes Islands [the only National Park in Galicia, so-called Atlantic Islands of Galicia.] (I1-2, Portuguese officers)

Xurés Park was designated later than ours [Gerês Park] and clearly they assume that it is a complement of our park. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

The latter observation was officially recorded in the Decree designating the Xurés Natural Park. This legal document acknowledged that the Xurés has relevant environmental and natural values, but that a critical motivation for its designation was the contiguity with the Portuguese park, accepting that the Xurés was designated because the Gerês was already protected.

[I]ts proximity to the Peneda-Gerês National Park, adjacent to it, increases the importance of its designation as a protected area even more. (Official Gazette of Galicia, 22-2-1993, p. 1382)

This assumption is still there, as reflected by a Galician respondent:

[The Natural Park] has been created because of the existence of the Portuguese Park. Otherwise, it would have never been designated. (I10, Galician park manager)

4.2. TBPA origins and assessment

On July the 31st 1997 the “Portela do Homem Agreement” was signed right on the Galician-Portuguese border, symbolically in the old customs office, unused since 1993 due to European integration. The representatives of the Galician Government and the Portuguese Institute for Nature Conservation designated a so-called “Gerês-Xurés Transboundary Park”. The Agreement was reaffirmed 10 years later at the same place (October the 19th 2007), with the Spanish Government also participating. The first Agreement was a memorandum of understanding which outlined some shared goals, including:

1. Objectives

(a) To encourage and to establish common or complementary norms and measures for the defence, preservation and conservation of natural values in both parks. [...]

(b) To promote joint cooperation projects and actions [...].

2. Shared use of resources and infrastructures

(a) At the reception centers and other dissemination premises, information given must concern both parks [...].

(b) Implementation of pedestrian and equestrian trails, crossing both parks, with continuity in their itineraries and with consistent signposting and design. [...]

3. Research and common promotion [...]

(b) Thematic maps covering the territory of both parks [...]

5. Follow-up Commission

(a) A Follow-up Commission will be created in accordance with this cooperation agreement.

Several interviewees believed that the results after almost two decades since the 1997 Agreement have been positive:

Since the Gerês-Xurés Transboundary Park was created in 1997, there have been a set of actions, including the conservation of species and the spatial management of the transboundary territory (I3, Portuguese officer)

However, one participant considered the 1997 Agreement as simply “big politics” in action, with limited effects at ground level:

The Transboundary Park is nothing more than a political ploy – the politicians want this “crown of glory” – of the work that we [the technicians from both parks], without banner newspaper headlines, were doing and we are still doing. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

Moreover, an analysis of the participants’ words suggests that the 1997 Agreement has not been effective. That document was not always openly mentioned, but the issues being raised with dissatisfaction were those dealt with in 1997. For instance, in terms of the expected joint norms for land-uses, leisure and protection of environmental values, one interviewee observed that:

Here [in Galicia] it is easier to use the park, there is more openness [...], but there [in Portugal], since they cannot control, they deny everything [...]. If you go to the forest [in Portugal] it is very unlikely you’ll see a warden, [...]. and this is not so in Galicia. (I8, Galician entrepreneur)

Furthermore, one participant expressed the belief that tourism information offered at visitor centers is not transboundary, but solely for each individual park:

If you go to the Lobios interpretation center [in Galicia] and ask for information regarding Portuguese visitor centers, I really doubt they could give you any information about [Portugal]. If you go to a Portuguese reception center, I really doubt there is any information about the Spanish Natural Park [...]. We work inwardly towards our territory on both sides. (I3, Portuguese officer)

The same interviewee directly mentioned the 1997 Agreement with a sense of disappointment stating that the projected cross-border trails have still not been implemented after more than 16 years:

Since the creation of the Transboundary Park in 1997 [...] we talked a lot about creating cross-border trails, and I thought it was a great idea [...], but then that got bogged down in political red tape and we, the staff, started to wait, and we are still waiting!... (I3, Portuguese officer)

As for the Follow-up Commission, some interviewees confessed that cooperation is mainly based on random staff meetings when specific issues arise, rather than formal pre-scheduled meetings:

Staffs know each other, they have lunch together, and that’s important. If there are problems, they go. Our wardens sometimes cross the boundary because of the ibexes,⁴ they go there, and then they come back, and also Spaniards come here, there is no problem at all. [...] One warden once had an accident, he broke a bone in his foot, and a Spanish helicopter went there to pick him up. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

4.3. TBR designation and assessment

The application for designing the TBR resulted from a proposal directed by [Reza and Pereira \(2009\)](#).⁵ The document included an in-depth description of the area and a reasoning on how the TBPA meets the TBR criteria set by UNESCO. Furthermore, a common zoning (following the Seville Strategy) was agreed and the TBR management bodies were set, as follows:

- (a) A steering committee consisting of regional representatives, local politicians and directors of both parks. Meetings to be convened at least twice a year.
- (b) Regular staff meetings to be held, daily basis if necessary. Proposals and reports to be presented.
- (c) An advisory council.

Despite this formalization, the TBR management bodies are not working as envisaged, as noted by several interviewees:

The Biosphere Reserve is still not working 100% because there is a problem of mutual management between the Portuguese and the Spanish sides. (I5, Portuguese tour-operator)

The TBR joint action plan is not working, it is not going to be implemented, there is neither the money, nor the intention to do so. [...] In fact, the document was done because it was obligatory for UNESCO approval. (I4, Portuguese tour-operator)

⁴ The Spanish ibex (*Capra pyrenaica*) was a native species of the area until it became locally extinct in the late 19th century because of over hunting. The Galician Government re-introduced the ibex in the Xurés in 1997 and the animals quickly crossed the border ([Reza, 2011](#)). Now the ibex is an emblem for the TBPA as a whole. Controversially, in 2014 the Galician Government allowed hunting to recommence, a decision that received severe criticism from environmentalists and questioned the real intentions for its re-introduction.

⁵ B. Reza was the first appointed Director of Xurés Natural Park in the 1990s. From 2005 to 2009 he was the Director-General for Nature Conservation at the Galician Ministry for the Environment. H. Pereira was the Director of Gerês National Park from 2006 to 2009.

In fact, the TBR designation does not entail direct effects on land-use planning and management, as an informant advocated:

The planning document [one from each park] determines prohibitions and conditions activities; the TBR does not have any effect in that matter [...]. The aim is to find stronger consistency with the other side, but this will never be absolute, because we have different legislation. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

A reported case in point of TBR's ineffectiveness is the lack of officially set meetings:

There were periodic meetings when it was necessary to make the proposal submission to UNESCO, and then to do the joint action plan, but due to lack of resources, the meetings were stopped. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

Some participants expressed the belief that the TBR designation was due to an interest stemming from the Spanish central government, rather than a transboundary aspiration:

The Spanish Environment Ministry lost a lot of competences on environment, mainly the most important protection device: the National Parks [...]. Now, the [Spanish] Ministry is really taking care of TBRs. (I10, Galician park manager)

The Biosphere Reserve was a Spanish initiative. [...] I saw that [the Spanish central government] wanted this device [...], placed great emphasis on implementing biosphere reserves [...] and we said "that's OK, we're going to work toward this!" [...]. What is the advantage of having a biosphere reserve? [...] It gives fame to our park. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

This observation recognizes the tourism intention of the TBR initiative; as this same respondent stated, "every protection device, like the biosphere reserve, is a label that [...] increases its demand" (I15, Portuguese park manager). With regard to the actions being implemented by the TBR since its inception, one informant revealed no work at all:

There is a really interesting website [<http://www.reservabiosferageresxures.com>] about the TBR [...]. On seeing the site it seems as if we were in the same territory, it's nice, but the work being done is not like that. Maybe it is interesting for a tourist, but in reality there is not this joint work. (I5, Portuguese tour-operator)

Another example of the lack of collaboration is the absence of joint tourism brochures and maps. On the Galician side a brochure entitled "Reserva de la Biosfera Transfronteriza Gerês-Xurés" (27 pp., without indication of the year of edition and published by the Galician Government) is distributed. It gives an overview of the whole territory, but with almost all the pictures of the Galician side. When it refers to the "TBR trail routes" [sic], 12 out of 12 are from Galicia, thus no trails from the Portuguese side are offered. The picture painted by some respondents was a lack of real enthusiasm to work together:

It makes sense that, in the context of the Biosphere Reserve [...], having the same common principles [...]... they [the parks] should develop projects together. ... However, what happens [...] is that [...] there is no need [...] to work together. (I4-5, Portuguese tour-operators)

4.4. EU role

Many of the interviewees noted that there has been a permanent influx of EU cash flow that has been received since the 1990s because of the transboundary character of the protected area made official by the 1997 Agreement. Some interviewees revealed that

"This transboundary aspect [of the park] is also very useful for EU funding, of course" (I10, Galician park manager) and that the Agreement was "necessary to apply together for Interreg programmes [...]. We had to agree on the lines of work and we had to discuss common issues" (I9, Galician park manager). The consensus seemed to be that the EU funding has been substantial for cooperation since the TBPA inception. However, participants revealed that EU-funded transboundary cooperation has not resulted in truly joint projects:

It is fundamental to think and develop joint projects, to make use of EU funds to promote actions in order to develop both sides, but there has never been real joint action. Each side does what is feasibly possible to be done, then the results are joined together, and they are called joint projects [laughs]. (I4-5, Portuguese tour-operators)

Several respondents reported that the global financial crisis (GFC) post-2007 has brought about a reduction in EU cash flow, even its termination. For the Portuguese side, one interviewee bitingly indicated that EU funding is essential for sustaining the TBPA:

Spaniards had money from the central government and the Portuguese from the EU, but these funds ended, and the [Portuguese] State does not allow us to apply for EU funds as it does not have the necessary 25% to co-finance projects. We don't have anything, nothing [...]. We can't lie: we need EU funds. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

4.5. Governance

In Galicia the Regional Government holds the power to designate, manage and plan the Galician parks (including the Xurés Natural Park) and the Spanish Government is almost absent in these matters. Across the border, however, the North of Portugal Region does not have a devolved government and relies on Lisbon's direction and decisions regarding the Gerês National Park.

It is not easy, because Portuguese work too slowly [...] because in the end [...] every single matter has to go through central organizations, and the time taken by red tape in Lisbon makes for project failure. (I16, Galician officer)

Portugal is the most centralized country in the Western world, and that conditions our work. (I20, Galician officer)

Recent changes on the Portuguese side regarding environmental and park management have aggravated the situation. Until 2007 there was an appointed director for the Gerês National Park, but since then the Park has been administered from a Directorate-General amalgamating all the protected areas in Northern Portugal. In practical terms, an independent body for the National Park no longer exists as recognized by I15 (Portuguese park manager), "the park as a specific entity has disappeared [...]. It has lost fame and it does not have the importance it should have". Participants reported the effects of the loss of the director:

The park used to have a director, and local people used to see him as a person that could make things happen for them [...]. The notion of a director as a person close to the people has been lost. (I14, Portuguese tour-operator)

One of the major topics identified during interviews was the controversy about community consultation and people participation, because the TBPA is inhabited. On the one hand, several park managers contended that listening to people could lead to problems arising.

Inhabitants may think they are not listened to as much as they deserve, but from my point of view they are [...], but the decisions may not coincide with what they think or want. (I15, Portuguese park manager)

In some cases what inhabitants ask for is nonsense, like when we request them to change some old-fashioned customs because they go against conservation (killing wolves, for instance). (I3, Portuguese officer)

On the other hand, most, but not all, participants regretted the absence of public involvement in the TBPA: *“We don’t have a say in the protected area”* (I8, Galician entrepreneur). This frustration was clearly expressed by another respondent: *“We have a representative on the advisory council [...] but I think this council has never met”* (I22, Galician officer). Importantly, all these opinions related to people’s involvement were raised regarding only one side, not the TBPA as a whole. These remarks were consistent with the following astute observation:

At the end of the day, administratively, they [Portuguese and Galician parks] work independently, because they are in two different countries. As far as I know, although they try to coordinate themselves, they work separately. (I20, Galician officer)

5. Discussion

5.1. Underlying management principles

Our interviewees acknowledged that the case-study area deserves to be designated as protected, thus the general understanding of a common vision appears to have been achieved. However, almost every interviewee revealed that the Portuguese side possesses higher value than its Galician counterpart. Arguably, this spatial disparity hinders cooperation between equals. Moreover, an underlying discussion about the “weights” of natural and cultural elements attributable in assessing the area’s value emerged. Such a debate can bring the consideration of the region as a Biosphere Reserve into doubt as they are specifically designated to reconcile biodiversity conservation and human development (Durand and Vázquez, 2011; Schliep and Stoll-Kleemann, 2010; Depraz, 2008; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007). Although this nature-culture tension is found in almost every protected area in the world (Paül et al., 2015, 2011; Depraz, 2008; Zimmerer, 2000), the Gerês-Xurés is a specific instance because of its transboundary character. Hence, the dissimilar perceptions of natural and cultural values across the TBR by respondents evidence that the boundary remains as a mental barrier. This insight is fundamental because the TBPA framework, as noted earlier, does not emphasize people’s perception of the area but merely tries to implement a fixed and rigid model of local participation deemed to be universal. In this sense, Houtum (2000) stresses the need to include an analysis of human production and reproduction of borders when dealing with border areas – the so-called “people approach” –, which is highly appealing for expanding the TBPA framework.

Although advisory councils for local transboundary participation were set up, they were reported to be inactive. In addition, interviewees described the Galician and Portuguese populations living on both sides of the border as disconnected from the TBR. These results confirm previous research on the issue carried out elsewhere: “Community consultation and participation are often lacking in TBPA declaration and management [...]. This situation is not surprising as the declaration of transfrontier areas is often driven by international interests under conditions that emphasize massive asymmetries of power among different actors” (Candanedo, 2010, p. 44). The lack of public participation and involvement is commonplace across the world, but TBPA seem to be a particular case in point as they are commonly driven by internationally-connected elites (Büscher, 2010a,b; Ramutsindela, 2007). We can infer that the stipulated requirement for community participation outlined in the TBPA framework is nominal, given not

only our observations in the Gerês-Xurés, but other practical experiences reported by authors such as Büscher (2010a,b); Candanedo (2010) and Ramutsindela (2007).

With regard to the commitment of decision-makers, this would appear to have been guaranteed once the 1997 Agreement officially set joint meetings through a Follow-up Commission for cooperation between parks. Such a direction was supposedly reinforced with the 2009 TBR designation, which established three joint bodies. At first sight, this follows the TBPA framework. However, our empirical research shows that cooperation is based on random meetings, on a personal basis and is limited to specific topics. Furthermore, some respondents stated that the joint bodies are mere political instruments without any effectiveness at ground level. This is in accordance with Matela and Fraser (quoted in Büscher, 2010a), who conclude that relations between parks staff on each side of the border are usually fragile, cover minor issues and are used as a façade.

5.2. Planning process

The TBPA framework initiates the planning process with a written agreement. That step was successfully achieved in our case-study area in 1997 by the Portela do Home document. However, the analysis of the Gerês-Xurés reveals that the very conception of the TBPA began before the written agreement itself as the Galician Natural Park was designated in 1993 as a result of the previous existence of the Portuguese National Park. This is an opinion largely shared by the interviewees. This finding challenges the sequential planning procedure of the TBPA framework.

With regard to the 1997 Agreement itself, we consider that the images of lost opportunity and frustration expressed by the interviewees are revealing. The participants did not always talk openly about weak implementation, but there was strong evidence of this, such as the lack of cross-border trails and joint information materials and tourism brochures. We can infer that the Agreement remains mostly unexplored and our results support Lange (2009) when she suggests that there is no clear correlation between the absence or presence of agreement, on the one hand, and the intensity of cooperation between the parks on each side of the border, on the other hand.

The paralysis has not been lessened with the establishment of the TBR, based on the joint plan directed by Reza and Pereira (2009). Although a TBR is conceived as an opportunity to deepen transboundary cooperation, ironically some respondents suggested that the Gerês-Xurés TBR was due to a wish to re-centralize power in Spain. This observation is contrary to Vasiljević’s (2012) assumption that national governments tend to avoid recognizing TBPA in their legislation. In fact, the recent Spanish Act 42/2007 confers powers on Biosphere Reserves and TBPA upon the central Spanish Government, despite, constitutionally, conservation, protected areas management, and land-use planning and management being devolved competences to the autonomous regions such as Galicia.

In order to deal with the TBR requirements, Reza and Pereira’s (2009) proposal zoned the Gerês-Xurés TBR following the Seville Strategy. The resulting map (Fig. 3) subtly illustrates the boundary’s ongoing role: (i) the central core zone is attached to the very border as if the artificial political borderline might justify stronger protection; (ii) beyond this central core zone, the other core zones in Galicia adjoin the borderline, without correspondence on the Portuguese side (designated buffer zone). The TBPA are grounded on the fact that nature is borderless and ecotonal, and borders are political rather than ecological (Erg et al., 2012; Linde et al., 2001; Thorsell, 1990). However, our research suggests that the boundary defines TBR zoning. Indeed, Röder et al. (2015) and Sheelanere et al. (2013) show for border areas how land-use planning and management are consequences of nationally bounded

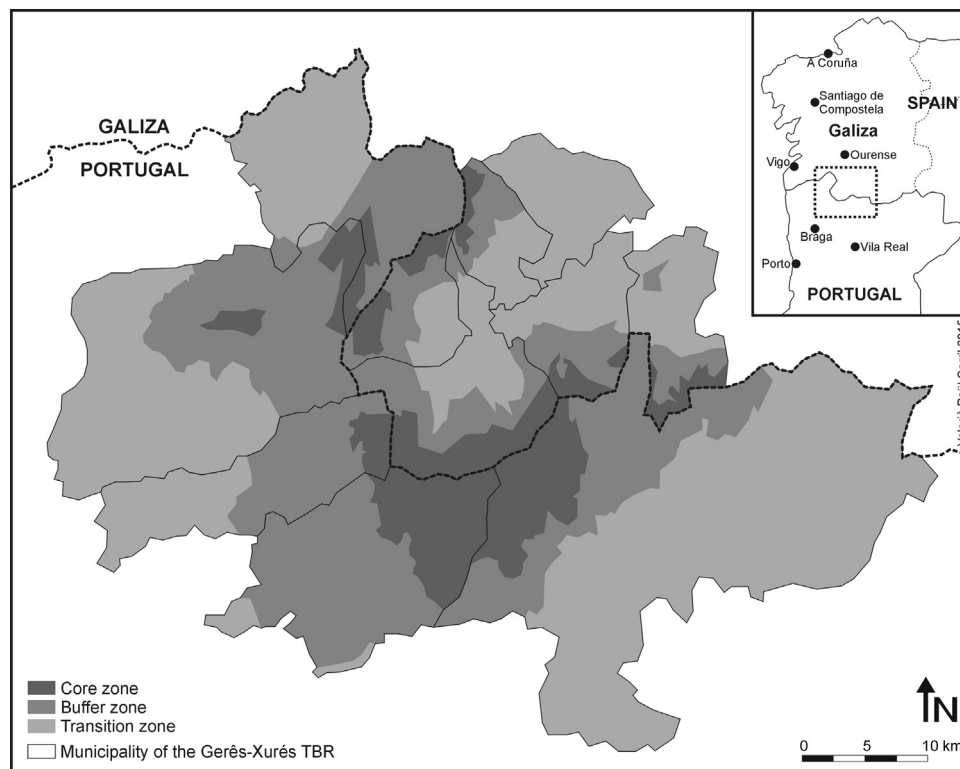


Fig. 3. Gerês-Xurés TBR zoning structure.

political and administrative systems. As stated by Brunner (2006, p. 15), “most protected areas, even transboundary ones, are administered according to the relevant national legislation. Only very rarely are protected areas regulated simultaneously on both sides of the border”. These words, also shared by Depraz (2008), hold true for the case of Gerês-Xurés.

The TBPA framework considers as final steps in the planning process the implementation and monitoring through regular data exchanges. According to our findings, these have been poorly followed in the case-study area. Peak commentators on policy theory such as Hogwood and Gunn (1984) state that perfect implementation is almost always unattainable.

5.3. Joint management structure

From a legal perspective, there are three management bodies for the Gerês-Xurés TBR, overlapping with the Follow-up Commission set in 1997. However, they seem not to be particularly active according to our informants. In addition, a common barrier highlighted in the interviews was the difference in the involvement of the various layers of government between the two sides – i.e., centralism in Portugal vis-à-vis devolved management in Spain; weak local municipalities in Galicia contrasting with powerful municipalities in Portugal. According to several interviewees, the situation has been aggravated by the effects of the GFC post-2007, as now there no longer is a director of the Gerês National Park. The literature on protected areas has shown that they have to be understood as political products (Paül et al., 2015; Depraz, 2008; Zimmerer, 2000) and this is particularly apt in the case of TBPA/TBRs because of their inherent transboundary nature. In this respect, it seems highly pertinent to indicate that, when the TBPA framework argues that a joint management structure might be pertinent, cross-border governance should be taken into account for the articulation of proper policies (Zumbusch and Scherer, 2015; Deppisch, 2012; Kramsch and Hooper, 2004).

In order to overcome the failures herein reported, further progress might be made by means of a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation (EGTC)⁶ (Alcolea, 2014). According to Saalbach (2016) and Nadalutti (2015), EGTCs enable transnational and transboundary regions to speak with one voice and to act legally as a single body beyond the bordering countries. Other TBPA in Europe that are truly progressing, such as the Alpi Marittime-Le Mercantour (Italy and France), have already developed their own EGTC (Trillo-Santamaría and Paül, 2015; Angelini, 2014). This is an interesting opportunity that is only possible thanks to the EU legislation. However, it is obvious that national governments are reluctant to cede powers to international bodies, specifically institutionalized TBPA (Candanedo, 2010).

5.4. Funding

Several interviewees suggested that the availability of funding was not a problem. Indeed, the Gerês-Xurés TBPA was subtly described by some respondents as a construction for attracting funds, particularly EU Interreg ones. These observations support critical statements on the topic by Leibenath et al. (2010) and Büscher (2010c). These findings present a strong case for the EU to rethink how cross-border funds are allocated. Indeed, changes in the management and strategizing of EU cross-border funds have begun to occur in the last few years (Trillo-Santamaría and Paül, 2015).

A particularly crucial problem arises when there is a scarcity of resources, because that may lead to a slowdown in cooperation (Lange, 2009). Although both Spain and Portugal are suffering the impact of the GFC post-2007, the situation seems more severe in Portugal, which, according to some of our interviewees, is highly

⁶ Set by the Regulation (EC) No 1082/2006 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 July 2006 on a European grouping of territorial cooperation.

dependent on EU resources. The absence of a budget devoted to TBR operations reinforces the vision that some biosphere reserves are acting as mere tourism brands (Paül et al., 2015, 2011), a comment that appeared during interviews, contradicting the official understanding of what a biosphere reserve is meant to be (Durand and Vázquez, 2011; Schliep and Stoll-Kleemann, 2010; Depraz, 2008; Maruani and Amit-Cohen, 2007). In fact, the tourism intention of the TBR is evident in the Gerês-Xurés proposal to UNESCO, where it was stated that its goal is to “coordinate environmental conservation with activities in the area, and because it is a transboundary park, they are mainly focussed on tourism” (Reza and Pereira, 2009, p. 11).

6. Conclusions

This research contends that the TBPA framework, outlined in Fig. 2, has been widely applied in the Gerês-Xurés TBR case-study for more than two decades. However, this paper shows that this application has not resulted in a successful TBPA development. This is due to particular conditions existent in the case-study area analyzed here (e.g., the differences between the incumbent layers of government on both sides of the border, and the obvious verification of an implementation gap) but also to reported failures of the TBPA framework itself that have become evident in this work. This verification enables us to ascertain that TBPAs are far from ideal tools. Hence, the TBPA framework can be improved in several ways that are potentially transferable to other locations:

- Local people's participation cannot be seen as a mere public consultation in some steps of the TBPA development process. Their opinions, values and feelings about the TBPA have to be a constant reason for action. This is especially relevant in a cross-border context given its international nature and the lack of a single “local community” as understood in non-transnational protected areas.
- The planning process has to be non-sequential as there is evidence enough to suggest that unexpected steps in the model (even before the initial written agreement) can be more important than the pre-fixed and pre-defined ones determined by the TBPA framework.
- Land-use zoning has to be based on a true understanding of the TBPA as a whole and cannot rely directly or indirectly on the artificial boundary.
- Monitoring and observation should not only be applied to the TBPA planning but to the TBPA functioning as a whole.
- Funding is not a key element for a TBPA to work: if a joint strategy and coordinated work are absent, money can be just expended on one-sided individual projects. In this sense, the funding obsession present in the TBPA framework deflects attention from what should be the real focus of the project.
- The joint TBPA management structure needs benchmarking beyond Oszlanyi's (2001) general indications. In this respect, this paper has made a valuable contribution by suggesting the potential of EGTCs in the EU context. For instance, EGTCs enable EU funds to be secured and managed in a more efficient way and they provide greater autonomy from neighboring states.

This paper presents an improved understanding of TBPAs planning, management and development by offering insights from the emerging field of border studies (Sidaway, 2015). This entails going beyond the traditional literature on TBPAs and TBRs that, like most of the research focussed on land-use policy and management in transborder areas (e.g., Röder et al., 2015; Sheelanere et al., 2013), is now mainly limited to the environmental sciences and spatial planning domains. Hence, this research has explored the opportunities for TBPAs offered by notions such as people approach and

cross-border governance. In this regard, this paper demonstrates how the long-time effects of the administrative, legal, planning, cultural and political systems established by bounded nation-states do not disappear once a TBPA is established, even if it is in place for decades.

In an overview of the results obtained in the more than 50h of conversations, the stakeholders mostly referred to their respective sides of the border when mentioning the “protected area”, “the park”, “the biosphere reserve” or even the “transboundary area/reserve”. This illustrative conclusion from the interviews echoes border scholar Paasi's (2002, p. 200) reflection on most cross-border regions in Europe as still “regions in discourses” or “regions on paper”, but not yet “regions as social practice” with very concrete effects in the daily lives of people”. For the moment, the Gerês-Xurés TBR is part of official documentation and political rhetoric but it has a limited impact on social practices. It is true that some timid steps have been taken, but there is still a long way to go to achieve deeper levels of cooperation and to dissolve the entrenched boundary effects.

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